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**FOREWORD**



There is something frightening about good art and literature. Both defy definition. We use words like “organic,” “dynamic,” or “powerful,” but these hardly scratch the surface. The truth is, art *lives*. Not in the same sense that a tree or flower lives, surrendering motion to put down roots. No, art is alive; it moves, it runs, it *breathes*. Ink on a page, much like paint on a canvas, takes on life as it leaves the creator’s hands, moving beyond the artist to become something of its own. The work, like a child rebelling against his parents, begins to defy our wishes. This terrifies us because, as the work takes its first shaky step from our hands, it takes our secrets and experiences with it, makes them its own, and shares them with others, like a child that has yet to learn what not to say. We feel exposed.

As it grows, that fear turns into affection. Instead of making a mess, it begins to make something beautiful—the creation sub-creates. We watch, amused, as the child turns a cup of tea into a lake full of tiny, carefree sailors, or a lone ladybug into the harbinger of Satan’s armies. It outgrows the circle of our arms and begins to explore on its own, running itself ragged for scraps of schoolyard respect. It begins to long for a stretch of open road, and the further away it runs, the more we wonder what it keeps from us, what secrets it pours out like black liquid. But the road is never completely smooth. It collects scars that bring home the reality that bodies are not *pretty*—but to us, those scars only make it more beautiful, like light catching in the cracks in the glass of a window.

This 90<sup>th</sup> volume of *Ivy Leaves* is populated by such children. They run across the pages through all of life’s experiences. They show us the simple majesty of a mountain sunrise and the exhilaration of taking that first jump to say, “I love you,” as well as the pain that comes when that ring sinks beyond our reach. Like parents looking at our children, we can see ourselves in these stories, and we can hope that they teach others in the same way that they teach us. We can listen close as these stories give voice to the deep part of our souls that screams, “Love me most.”



# TEA TIME

*Rebecca Bowen*

---

It's too bitter to be the drink of a child,  
she tells herself as she prepares her tea.  
Yet she eyes the cup with wonder,  
wondering if she can resist  
the temptation of the sight before her.  
She doesn't see tea leaves, but canoes  
floating freely and safely atop an amber lake  
being rowed by the tiniest carefree sailors that ever were.



## RED SCARE

Charlotte Stapp

---

I arrived at my 9:05 American Literature class on the topmost floor of the Merritt Administration Building, affectionately termed Merritt Mountain, out of breath, but exactly on time. I walked to my seat in the back row, trying to conceal my labored breathing and rosy cheeks from those who had ventured out early enough to take the hike up the steep stairs at a leisurely pace. I dropped my book bag beside the chair and lowered my warm travel mug toward the table. That's when I saw the ladybug. It was crawling directly across my portion of the table, and I stood there paralyzed with my coffee in hand, eyes dilating.

My heart raced, not from the hike or the caffeine, but from terror. Grendel himself crawled toward my chair. I whispered to my neighbor, stammered, really.

"W-Would you?" She looked up at me from under an eyebrow. I pointed at the trudging crustacean. "Move it, please?"

"Right," she said, flicking the monster away with the tip of her finger as if to say, "It's a ladybug. What's wrong with you?"

"Thanks," I said, squeezing into my seat next to her. She glared straight ahead as if I hadn't spoken. I sipped my coffee, realizing that I had just lost her respect. But then again, the ladybug was now eight feet away, so it was worth it. I breathed a sigh of relief and leaned over toward my backpack, pulling out the notebook and pen I would need shortly.

Dr. Wooten began talking about *The Awakening*, perhaps my least favorite reading assignment of the semester. The paragon of southern gentility Dr. Wooten stood before the class, explaining that *The Awakening* follows Edna Pontellier, wife of a wealthy New Orleans businessman and mother of two sons. Edna undergoes an emotional and sexual awakening during which she reforms her identity based on her needs and desires instead of social conventions. This awakening results in alienation from her family, friends, and society, and ultimately concludes with her suicide. I could tell Dr. Wooten wanted us to think of her as a female character of novel strength, but I couldn't forgive Edna for taking the easy way out. Literary scholars praised her as a strong female character, but all I saw in her was weakness and fear. She didn't stay and fight. I was trying very hard to focus on Dr. Wooten's lecture, which was interspersed with stories of grandbabies, when the sound of hundreds of tiny legs brushing together in formation filled my ears. I glanced behind me. My mouth fell agape, then quickly shut so the creatures couldn't fly in. Dozens of ladybugs, maybe hundreds, crawled all around the window frame, inside and out, marking territory, taking over, as I had seen them do before.

As we walked into my grandfather's house where he had lived alone for several years, the first thing I noticed, even as a five-year old, was the smell. Unlike my parents' house in the suburbs of Atlanta, his house sat in the woods. But still it reeked of something unnatural. It wasn't a trash smell, or a dead animal smell. It was uniquely nauseating, but perhaps comparable to the odor of moldy rotten potatoes left to decompose in a closed pantry. I held my breath as long as I could, which for me was a long time, but eventually I did have to breathe the rotten air again. I looked

around the living room as I sat in the spot on the sofa my mom had cleaned off for me. I thought someone had painted the burgundy walls a bright red. But when I looked up at the ceiling, it was red too. Whoever had painted it clearly didn't know what they were doing. There was still white on the ceiling, and some random dots of red had been splattered carelessly. Then the walls moved. And the ceiling moved too. And something inside of me moved in response.

The ladybugs had claimed my grandfather's home for their own. They were the wallpaper that ran throughout the house, tying the colors of the interior design together. They were the carpet, or rather the crunchy hardwood, that reached into every bedroom and bathroom. They were the pictures hanging on every wall for visitors to look at. They were the thick layer of dust that covered absolutely everything. I curled my legs up to my chest, and hid my face behind my knees, hoping they would go away. My mom, however, didn't see the problem. She, like so many others since then, thought my fear was illogical. The house had to be cleaned, and I was forced to participate. A child laborer in filthy conditions, I was given a hand vacuum as my only defense against the throng.

We used the vacuum cleaners to suck both the living and the dead ladybugs off the floor. That was the easy part. My small hand vacuum slurped them off the furniture, out of the corners, and off the book shelves. The smell grew more repulsive as it combined with the heat generated by the multiple vacuums roaring from different rooms like the beasts from Revelation roaming to the corners of the earth, devouring the wicked. The carnage was extensive, but it seemed like their numbers grew as we tried to eradicate them. They crawled out from between the floor boards and up out of the light fixtures, flying frantically around the room trying to escape their fate. Vacuum bags filled, and extension hoses clogged.

Meanwhile they dive bombed us. Ladybugs buried themselves in my hair, clung vengefully to my clothes, and bit me all over. No one had ever told me that they were capable of biting. When they attacked me, the smell grew worse. Nothing can compare to the sickening odor of ladybugs, particularly when it is mixed with the smell of fear. I learned later their stench was a biological defense mechanism, their way of fighting back. If I had not been motivated by the stern glance of my mother, the smell would have deterred me from interfering with the ladybugs in the first place. Nonetheless, the awakened terrorists, clothed deceitfully in what many call a "cute" pattern, descended like the plague of locusts on me.

In American Literature, Edna struggled to assert her sexuality and independence. Family and friends called her erratic and irrational. I know that feeling. While I couldn't support Edna abandoning the fight against gender conventions, I was beginning to understand what drove her "madness." That made me uncomfortable. A ladybug flew close to my ear. My heart raced, and my breath quickened. I felt a panic attack rising in me. Even Dr. Wooten's grandmotherly gaze couldn't placate my fear. But I couldn't get up and walk out. I was alone, yet surrounded, completely trapped in a room where the red walls and splotchy red ceiling moved toward me.

I poked the arm of my condescending neighbor and pointed at the wall behind us. She turned from her diligent note-taking, and looked at the plague creeping into our classroom.

"Holy crap," she whispered. Her alarm slightly relieved my anxiety. I was no longer isolated in my living, red-walled prison. "That's disgusting," she added as she pulled her chair closer to the table and picked back up where she left off in the notes that I would need to copy later. Just like that my companion was gone. No one understood how serious this was. Didn't they know what the beasts were capable of? I felt Edna's isolation, that of one who had reached a level of enlightenment not recognized by society. Disturbed by my sympathy, I reassured myself I still hated *The Awakening*.

When I was ten years old, I occupied the upstairs corner bedroom that featured



two windows that let in plenty of natural light. I often opened my windows to let the fresh breeze circulate through my room. But everything changed when one ladybug appeared on the outside of the screen on my window. It wasn't a big deal since I was still protected from it. To my chagrin, it turned out to be a scout, apparently reporting my weak defenses to the entire army that arrived swiftly and silently in the dead of night.

To this day I have no idea how they got around the tightly fitted screen and into my room, but they did. I woke up to distorted sunlight as it filtered through the curtains of ladybugs, casting an eerie blood-red hue over my bed. Many had crawled along my walls and ceiling, while others maneuvered through the old thick carpet that covered my floor. I jumped up and slammed the windows shut to prevent any more from getting in. I remembered the incident at my grandfather's house, recognizing the need to exterminate them immediately before reinforcements arrived. My mother was home, but she was unsympathetic. My task seemed hopeless. I grabbed the only effective weapon, the vacuum cleaner, and began assaulting them a few at a time. The smell had already followed them into my room, and I gagged at both the odor and the memories it brought.

When I turned on my ceiling fan, the dozens of ladybugs that had congregated on top of it were flung wildly in every direction. I muffled a scream and a curse. I vacuumed the floors, the walls, the windows, and everywhere else I caught a glimpse of the red plague. Exhausted from the war, I closed my door behind me and spent the day avoiding my room. I tried watching *Star Trek: The Next Generation*, but even Captain Picard and First Commander William Riker couldn't eradicate the ladybugs from the dark corners of my thoughts.

I inevitably came back at night and rolled into my bed, pulling the covers up over my head for protection from any angry POWs stuck in my room. The revolting odor still clung to the air, and from my blanket fortress I heard the sound of tiny wings. They were dive bombing my bed, attacking me in my own room where I was most vulnerable. I could feel and hear them pinging off my comforter when they hit. I could hardly breathe between fear and dwindling oxygen levels beneath the heavy blankets. My anxiety increased. I pulled the blankets closer around me, sealing myself off from them. Eventually they called a cease-fire and pulled back to regroup for what I could only assume would be a redoubled effort in the morning. I fell asleep in my fort, wondering whether it would be worse to die of fear or suffocation.

When I woke up, I stayed within the impenetrable walls of my fort and listened for the hum of tiny wings. I heard nothing. I lifted the blankets half an inch and took a deep breath of rotten air. The stench was stronger than ever, but I needed oxygen. I cast off my fortress and prepared for the onslaught, but all was still and silent. I looked around my room to see dots of red here and there. None of them were moving. I equipped the trusty weapon that devoured the carcasses from the battlefield. I couldn't explain how they had all died during the night, but I wasn't complaining. As I eradicated the red death from my room, I thought to myself that if they had attacked me twice, surely someone else had been attacked in a similar way. Yet no one understood. Did people not know that they swarm their way into buildings via windows, smell like rotten moldy potatoes, and bite? When I tried to warn people about the threat that ladybugs pose, I was largely ignored and mocked, leaving me alone in my "irrational" fear. The recurrent reaction was laughter, followed much later by, "Charlotte, look! A ladybug!" and more laughter as I jerked violently away from the location indicated.

So, without a way of escape, and without any truly sympathetic companion, I suffered silently through the class hour on the verge of a panic attack. I listened to the discussion of Edna's cop out and sat in my personal hell while red flames buzzed and flickered around me, tormenting me. For one single class period, Edna had a companion in her suffering and isolation, even if she did abandon her cause. An hour and fifteen minutes droned on like an eternity. I emerged from the classroom haggard, with glazed over

eyes that looked without seeing. The mental and emotional fight had sucked the life out of me like a vacuum.

I walked aimlessly down Merritt Mountain and across the street to my dorm. I fumbled with my keys, dropped them, picked them back up, and tried again. I glanced at the door knob to see a single ladybug watching me. "This isn't the end," I thought to myself. It was just one more battle in an endless war. I had to learn to manage it, or it would defeat me. Edna died to escape her conflict; would I likewise run away and lose myself to fear? I pinched my thumb and pointer finger together, bending my fingernail in to build tension. My fingernail hit the small demon squarely on its round side, catapulting it into a bush. I unlocked the door, stepped inside, closed it behind me, and fell back against it, sliding down the glass until I sat on the floor, hiding my face behind my knees. I took a few slow breaths to calm my racing heart, but then I pushed myself back up and climbed the stairs to my hall.



## PILLOW TALK

*Mitchell Dallas Herring*

---

Sometimes at night I can hear you dreaming.  
You reach out in your sleep,  
and occasionally a murmur escapes  
as you hold out your hand  
over the side of the bed.

One night,  
I could hear you being frightened.  
In a fit, you pushed down the sheets  
and rolled over facing me.

You whispered,  
*How do I get there?* still asleep.

Quietly, I told you, *Simply go.*

Your body moved closer to mine  
as I closed my eyes. I thought  
maybe I could dream with you,  
and in that dream, we did go together.  
I was the person you took  
to wherever it was you thought you couldn't go.



# LOST TO THE HUMAN WORLD

*Charlotte Stapp*

---

Beneath the calm green water of the pond,  
distorted light dances upon a dazzling ring,  
lying on the mossy finger of a fallen branch,  
far more striking than it would have been  
upon the hand of the intended.  
A perfect fit.



## BUZZARDS

*Mitchell Dallas Herring*

---

Mama confronted me with a, “Be careful,” when she found my first love poem. I left it folded up on the counter above the trash can, meaning to throw it out with the food we left for the vultures. I’m sure it read like a nursery rhyme more than a love letter, with terrible end-rhymes and clichéd confessions about my lack of sleep. Mama went through this with my sister.

Ethan Sharp broke Haley’s heart in the middle school hallway. He asked her out at lunch when she let him have her bag of tropical flavored Skittles. By the end of fourth block he had finished the Skittles and broken her heart. “I didn’t mean ‘girlfriend’ like that. I meant, like, a ‘friend’ that’s a girl.”

At home, her wailing synced with the music coming from her stereo speakers: sad girl-with-guitar music, the only thing getting her by. She locked herself in the room for two hours before she let Mama in. Inside, Mama held Haley’s head in her lap on the bed, cooing, “Bug, it’s going to be all right.”

“But he just wanted my Skittles. I’m so much better than Skittles.”

“One day, you’ll find a boy who knows that.”

Mama tried, but no one can soothe the pain of middle school heartbreak. Haley kept crying because “One day,” Mama explained, “doesn’t always mean tomorrow. Sometimes it takes years.”

Haley cried again later when it took longer than that.

For my thirteenth birthday, my grandfather nudged me and asked if I wished for love when I blew out the candles. He’d heard about the poem and asked, “Who’s it about?”

I said, “No one,” retracting my poem’s claim, ashamed I was a boy losing sleep over something other than candy.



# PROM

*Callie Renfrow*

---

The reality that you've never been so imprisoned  
Explodes like a canon in your chest.  
The smell of alcohol swells on the dance floor, and on him.  
You could be the faceless object in the song you're dancing to.  
His object. Blending into a sea of captives.  
Boxed by the one who bought your corsage.



## FAREWELL NOTE

*Annie Churdar*

---

There's a town halfway between my house and yours. I've been making the drive for years now. Passing through in the dead of night. I think one day I'll stop my car in an alley. Turn off the engine. Walk up to one of those rambling southern homes and move right in. The family will walk into their living room to find me the next morning. And they'll forget they ever lived without me.



# AFTER THE FIRE

*Sarah Ward*

---

The Perez family came to stay with us after the house fire. Apparently, they had nowhere else to go. I didn't really understand that because I knew for a fact Mr. Perez had a brother a city over, yet Cory sent them to our house. Cory has always been convincing when he gets an idea in his head. I guess as a youth pastor, it could be useful, what with having to convince dozens of teenagers that things like abstinence and reading the Bible are cool, but, personally, I preferred to steer clear of him. Anyway, Cory told us that the Perezes needed somewhere to stay because their house had gone down in flames. Supposedly they were lucky to have made it out before burning to death or suffocating from smoke inhalation, but I don't consider it very lucky to lose everything you have because your house burns down.

Cory managed to catch us as I was leaving the Wednesday night youth group meeting. By the time I got outside, Cory already had Mom trapped by the car. I caught only snippets of the conversation, but I quickly realized it had something to do with "helping fellow Christians" and "doing the Lord's work," and neither of those expressions sounded like something I'd like. I mean, seems like that should be a two-way street, and lately, since Alex anyway, I hadn't seen anyone else on the road. But Cory was always up to something, plotting as I called it, though everyone else seemed to think he was just coming up with all these great ideas. He was one of those "hip" youth pastors, the type that always tried to be cool. You know the skinny jeans-hipster glasses-Converse-wearing ones that always try to relate to the kids? That's Cory. I think it makes him seem desperate but as far as everyone else is concerned, he's this great, in-touch guy that really gets what kids need from church.

Anyway, before I knew it, Mom and I were trying to figure out where to put the Perezes. We didn't have a guest room of any sort, just the three occupied bedrooms and Alex's. Dad suggested that Jason and I share a room for the duration of the Perezes' stay so that Mr. and Mrs. Perez could have his room while their daughters, Addie and Iris, slept in Alex's room. Obviously Jason and I were less than thrilled with sharing a room. I mean, who puts a seventeen-year-old girl and a fifteen-year-old boy in the same room? Even if it is only supposed to be for a week or two. Jason and I usually go about our business and, honestly, we interact so rarely that I hardly know what to say to him as is, much less how to share a 10'x20' space with him.

Aside from the whole co-ed cramped space problem, there was the plain and simple fact that I didn't really know the Perezes. I had briefly spoken to Addie at the fourth of July cookout last summer right after they moved to town, but that was really only out of obligation to be friendly to a new member of the youth group. I realize certain things are expected of Christians and one of those things is to welcome newcomers to the church so, in an effort to do my duty, I wandered over to where Addie was sitting and asked if she was enjoying herself. "Yeah, I guess," she replied.

"Oh, well, I'm sure it isn't as lively as a real fiesta," I said. I laughed nervously but Addie only cut her eyes at me.



“A *fiesta*? What, just because my last name is Perez, you assume we have to call our parties fiestas?”

“No!” I said. “No! That’s not what I meant. I just meant, like, compared to a real party, this cookout isn’t all that fun, you know?”

Now, I’ll admit, I did sort of assume they had moved to the east coast from Mexico, or maybe somewhere near Mexico, and that they probably spoke fluent Spanish and knew how to make *sopa de garbanzo* (a Mexican soup that has chicken and garbanzos beans in it—my Mom’s friend Norma makes it and it’s wonderful). But I hadn’t meant any of this as an insult. It’s true, I did grow up in an area where ethnic minorities aren’t usually welcomed but personally I had no problem whatsoever with anyone from a different country. Or, I guess, in the Perezes’ case, because apparently they weren’t foreign, from the United States.

When Addie stormed off, I realized, of course, that I had said the wrong thing and maybe come off as insensitive, but skirting the issues isn’t really my strong suit. It’s like nobody talks about Alex; instead, everybody—including Mr. Hipster Cory—stares at the floor like he’s buried there because, “it’s just too hard.” I’ll tell you what’s too hard: walking on egg shells. So like it or not they were coming, and like it or not I pitched in. I helped Mom tidy Jason’s room, and I changed the sheets on every bed in the house, including Alex’s. It’s not that his sheets weren’t clean (he had barely slept there since he left for art school, and he obviously hadn’t slept there at all lately) but Mom thought it would be nice to have fresh ones anyway. I even took down some of his more unnerving artwork like the painting of our dog that almost looks as if the dog is going to climb down and tear out your jugular. Alex was a great artist, but most of his artwork was somehow unsettling.

By the time I got home from school the next day, the Perezes had clearly made themselves at home. I walked into the living room to find Mr. Perez watching Dr. Phil and heard Mrs. Perez animatedly discussing dinner with Mom—something about a gluten allergy—and insisting that Mom let her cook the meal. Dad, as usual, was hiding somewhere. Most likely he was in the game room playing online poker. His interaction with the other online players was as close to human contact as he usually managed anymore. Other than his job of course. Over the past year, he may have failed as a father in a lot of ways, but say what you will, he has always provided for us financially. It would have been nice to see him at one of my dance recitals or helping Jason with his long jump for the new track season, but I couldn’t entirely blame him. It’s hard enough losing a brother, but you know what they say—a *child*. Mom hadn’t really done all that great either.

After realizing that dinner would probably be a while, I decided to deal with my homework. On the way to my room, I passed the den and saw that Iris had pulled out my dollhouse and all of my Barbies. My first instinct was to grab them from her and hide them. It’s not like I play with dolls anymore, but they are mine. I keep them arranged throughout the dollhouse so that if someone were to look into the rooms, it would be like looking into a moment in the life of a normal, perfectly functional family. And here Iris was, changing everything. She had even rearranged my furniture. Despite my first impulse to snatch them from her, I decided it was just rude to take them from her. After all, she had just lost all of her dolls in their house fire, and she was just a kid. It hardly seemed right to take mine away from her too. Besides, I wasn’t using them.

A couple of hours later, Mom came into my room and told me to get ready to go because we were going to Applebee’s for dinner. Mom seemed agitated and, from what I gathered, Mrs. Perez had dismissed all of Mom’s dinner suggestions so Mom finally decided that the four of us would go out for dinner and Mrs. Perez could do as she wished for dinner. When we got home, the house was quiet. It was only 10:30, and I thought that was a bit early for bed, but I supposed the Perezes were probably exhausted from the whole house-burning-down-and-moving-around thing they had done over the past couple

of days. I mean, just sharing a room with Jason was an ordeal. I can't imagine what it would be like to stand around and watch everything you own go up in smoke. Jason and I did our homework as comfortably as possible in our shared room and then cut the lights off for bed. I could hear every shuffle as he tossed and turned on the air mattress in the floor next to my bed. Just as I was about to tell him to cut it out, I heard a snuffle. I listened quietly for a second before I realized that Jason was in fact sobbing. Softly but surely. I rolled over until I could make him out in the dark. "Pst. Jason?"

"What?"

"What's wrong?"

"Nothing."

"Come on, J. What's up?" I wanted to say, *Who sobs in the dark over nothing?* But I didn't.

"You know, just stuff."

I could hear him wrestling with his pillow, tossing around like the sleeping bag had him by the ankle. I couldn't help but kind of laugh. It was like the whole Jacob's Ladder thing, wrestling demons in the dark—or maybe it was angels. Cory was always telling us to be on the lookout for things *unawares*, whatever that meant. "Yeah, Jason, but *what* stuff?"

"Nothing, okay? Go to sleep," he snapped.

"Jeez, sorry. I was just checking!" I rolled back over and turned my fan up so I could block out any sound. For a few minutes, I laid there wondering how often he must cry like this. I decided it must just be the added stress of having to share our space with people we barely knew.

The next morning, Mom insisted on taking Addie and Iris to school with us. As if it wasn't hard enough trying to get there on time when Jason and I both had to get ready in my room (where of course we had to take turns changing while the other left the room) now we had to make sure we dropped Iris off at the elementary school and still got the rest of us to the high school before 8:00 a.m. As usual, I was the first one ready and, consequently, also the designated coffee maker for the day. While I rummaged through the fridge for the creamer, Addie came into the kitchen.

"Oh hey, do you want a cup of coffee? Or some tea or something?" I said.

"Uhm sure, coffee would be fine."

"Cool. Do you want cream and sugar?" I set both on the bar beside her. It's not like I was going to make the cup for her or anything. Coffee is such a personal thing. Everyone has a certain way they make it and just a bit too much sugar or not quite enough cream can completely throw it off. I watched Addie scoop several tablespoons of sugar into her cup and then practically dye the coffee white with the cream. I couldn't help but criticize her approach. So superfluous—no one really needs that much stuff in their coffee. I'll admit, when I was younger I would do the same thing but Alex, always so elaborate with his art yet so minimal in his life, eventually convinced me to drink it black—a habit I had yet to break and, to tell you the truth, probably wouldn't. A pact is a pact, right? No matter how it got that way.

"You know, it's pretty great of your parents to let us stay here," Addie said.

"Uh yeah, yeah I guess so. It was really sort of Cory's idea and you know how once he gets an idea into his head..." I trailed off, not knowing what else to say. I didn't want to make it seem like Cory forced us to house them but, at the same time, I didn't want to pretend like we volunteered to do it either, lying being a sin and all.

"Oh. Well, still, they didn't have to agree."

"True. And I'm sure they don't mind you staying as long as you need to."

"But didn't we run you guys out of your rooms? I know the room I'm in has stuff everywhere. It's definitely not a guest room."

"Well, sort of. I mean, Jason is sleeping on an air mattress in my room so your parents can have his room, but you and Iris are in an extra room."

“Oh. I’m glad,” Addie said. “I just thought, you know, with all the paintings and the sketchbooks lying around, that it was someone’s bedroom.”

“Well, it was someone’s room. It was my brother Alex’s, but he’s gone.”

“Oh, did he leave for college?”

“Yeah, well, he did. But I mean he’s gone-gone.” She blew on her coffee and looked at me over her glasses, so I just put it out there. “You know...dead.” As soon as I said it, my eyes automatically shifted to the floor—I despised watching the “you poor little thing” look that always crossed people’s faces following that revelation.

“Oh, my God! Oh I’m so sorry.”

“It’s fine,” I said, shrugging. Then I shook my head like I was just now waking up—in the *middle* of the conversation. *Fine?* Fine was assuming somebody was from Mexico, not walking into a scene from *Psycho*. I looked around for Mom and Jason, but they were still nowhere to be seen and we were running out of time. When I ran upstairs to try to herd them toward to door, I found Jason upstairs in my room, staring at his book bag. “You know you’re supposed to put it on, right? Like on your back? And then go to school with it. Hint hint,” I said.

“Yeah, yeah, I’m ready,” Jason said, blinking rapidly and shaking his head.

Did Jason always seem this spacey? I wasn’t ever around him long enough to know how he normally behaved so I couldn’t be sure this was abnormal. Still, I tried to reach out, you know, Cory-style. I slowed down and put a hand on his shoulder. “Hey,” I said. “It’s okay to be upset sometimes. Like last night. You can’t help missing him.”

“I know,” Jason barked. “I know, okay?” He shoved by me, muttering, “I just don’t want to talk about it.” And I came this close to blasting him: *Well it’s not like I WANT to talk about it either.* But I bit my tongue. I’d held on to Alex in my own way—pretending as much as possible that nothing had ever happened and he was just away at art school—and Jason probably had his own way of handling things.

“Well, sometimes I do,” Jason continued. “But I never know what to say. How am I supposed to explain what it’s like? To find your own brother that way?”

“You don’t have to *explain*. Just talk. Whatever comes out must be what needs to come out.” I watched as Jason fidgeted with the adjustable straps on his bag. I kind of wished Cory was there to help him. Cory with his too-cool-for-school-glasses and those big, annoying soulful eyes. “There’s coffee in the kitchen.” I almost said Alex-style, the way we used to. I turned to walk downstairs, passing the wall of portraits Alex had painted when he was still just in high school, and heard Jason’s footsteps following.

A few days later, I came home from ballet to find Dad, Jason, Mr. Perez, and Iris all outside throwing a football. Well, Iris was alternating between trying, and failing, to catch the football and spinning around in circles until she was dizzy. Everyone else was smiling and laughing as they struggled nearly as much as Iris. Jason looked so happy. I hadn’t noticed him genuinely smile in the past year. Even more surprisingly, Dad was actually outside, in the sun, willingly interacting with people. If I hadn’t known better, I would have thought I’d hit my head during dance.

The Perezes ended up staying with us for two and a half weeks before the church, under pressure from Cory of course, managed to raise some money to put them up in an apartment until they could figure out what to do about a house. It was almost disconcerting to come home from school to such a quiet house. I’d gotten used to Mr. Perez watching ridiculous talk shows and Mrs. Perez always talking about gluten-free recipes. I had even almost started to like having Addie and Iris around. While they had been at the house, it actually felt warm and like a home again, like how my dollhouse was supposed to look—picturesque snapshots of the perfect, happy family. But without them, we just went back to the broken mess we’d been for the past year. Dad always on the computer, Jason in his room with the door shut doing God-only-

knows-what, and Mom knitting aimlessly, making yet another scarf with matching mittens despite having already given everyone on her Christmas list a set.

Cory came by later that week to thank us and tell us how kind we had been, how we had shown true Christian selflessness, how much he and the church and the Perez family all appreciated our kindness, blah, blah, blah. While Cory sat there yapping away, it occurred to me that, as much as Cory annoyed me and as angry as I had been at him for forcing the Perezes on us, it had been nice to help them out. Not just nice in a “yay me I did a good deed” sort of way but nice. Then I caught up with him mid-sentence.

“...not the same type of thing, but you guys can relate to an unexpected tragedy.”

“Sorry, what?” I asked.

“Oh you know, the thing...with Alex...killing himself?”

“Right. Because, you know, your house burning down and your brother slitting his wrists in a bathtub are definitely the same sort of thing,” I said, going hot all over.

“Vivian Grace!” Mom said.

Cory’s soulful eyes got wide, then real soft. “I’m sorry,” he said. “That isn’t what I meant at all. I only thought you guys would understand something life-altering. I didn’t mean to make you feel like losing material possessions was as bad as losing a loved one. Of course not.” Cory ran his hand across his chest as if he were planning to pledge allegiance or find a heartbeat. I actually felt just a little sorry for him.

“Sorry, I’m being a sensitive teenager,” I said. Later, as Cory was leaving, I thanked him for coming, and I halfway meant it. Maybe he was just trying to help. Maybe that’s all anybody can do.

Wednesday night, before youth group, I stopped by to visit the Perezes in their new apartment to see how things were going. When the church had moved them out of our house, Addie gave me their new address, “just in case,” she said.

“Hey!” Addie answered my knock.

“Hey,” I said, feeling like an overgrown Girl Scout delivering cookies. “I brought Iris some of my Barbie dolls.” Addie was beaming like I’d given her something she’d always wanted. “It’s not like I need them, but I can’t throw them out.” It was weird, but she held out her arms and started laughing, and from nowhere Iris popped up all wide-eyed the way kids do when they see something miraculous. When Iris grabbed my hand, I started laughing, too. “Hey,” I said, “slow down. There’s one more thing in the car. Want to help me get it?” I thought she was going to have a heart attack, she was so excited.

“Is it the Dream House?” she said, dancing around. “Is it?”

I could hardly see. I could hardly speak. “You bet,” I said. “You bet.”



# TRUTH IS BEAUTY

*Becca Naylor*

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My family and I lived in the “mountain house” from the time I was twelve to when I was a freshman in college, the longest we have ever stayed in one residence. It was at this house that I marathoned the *Lord of the Rings* for the first time (after which I convinced myself that Ents lived in my backyard), learned how to apply makeup, and brought home my first boyfriend to meet my parents. In the expansive kitchen my mother showed me how to bake bread and wash dishes without a dishwasher. My father taught me to avoid the copperheads while weeding the flowerbeds and to check my shoes for scorpions before putting them on. It was in my tiny bedroom that I first began to write; I had only to look out one of my three windows to wonder at the sublimity that inspired the Romantic poets, although I would have preferred cable TV, internet, and the proximity of my friends. Instead, though, bears clambered on the front porch when I was alone at home and whippoorwills kept me awake at night. There’s truth in that.



# SMALL TOWN BUSINESS

Noelle Hisnanick

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Olivia Martin sat in her boyfriend's place for used cars—Lovelace Autos—in a chair that was scratchy and smelled like mildew. Her boyfriend was at his desk in the office. Olivia could see him through an open door across the room, but she could see only half of his face. The blue glow of the computer monitor shone in his glasses and accentuated the deep lines in his forehead. The remains of the fast-food lunch she had just brought him littered the desk.

"You need to get some new chairs, Mark," she said. "These are so ugly. They make the place feel cheap."

She flexed her manicured toes—he obviously hadn't heard her. The shabby green chairs reminded her of her family's old house; they had that same musty scent of stagnant dust-filled air. Nothing ever changed about that house. Four years ago, when she'd moved out at the age of eighteen, it still looked as it had when she was eight. Just like every other thing in this or any other small town—the cracked streets, the empty buildings, even the people—it seemed to be destined for nothing but a slow decay.

Olivia picked up an old spring edition of a shiny fashion magazine from a table nearby and flipped through it. She stopped at an ad for a pair of shoes she'd been thinking about getting.

"Mark," she said. He didn't answer. She said it again, "Mark."

"Hm? Yes?" His voice was muffled by the wall that stood between them.

"Aren't these shoes nice?" she asked.

Olivia got up and walked into his office. He didn't look up at her until she slapped the magazine on the desk in front of him. "They're like those sneakers I saw in the mall."

The ad featured a strong looking woman wearing a bright pair of neon athletic shoes. She was running down a long, empty road somewhere in a stretch of countryside so beautiful it seemed otherworldly.

"If I had shoes like those I'd be able to motivate myself to go running like that," Olivia said.

Mark laughed. "Right."

Olivia wasn't very athletic, but, still, she liked the idea of it, running for miles and miles. "Maybe I'll go back to the mall tomorrow and—"

"You don't need any more shoes," Mark said, cutting her off. He was using that tone of voice that she hated—the tone that made her feel very small. It made her think of the frustrated voice her father used when she was little and she'd try to talk to him after he came home from work.

Olivia leaned against the edge of Mark's desk and stared at the backwards Lovelace Autos sign on the outside of the large office window. In smaller letters beneath the company name was: *We help you go places!*

"I'm tired," she said.

Mark's fingers paused on the keyboard. "Then go take a nap."

"But I want to be here with you."

She watched Mark's face for any sign of appreciation. He blinked and kept typing.

She hated to admit it, even to herself, but she really just came to have something to do. The restaurant where she'd been a waitress had closed down two months ago, and she still hadn't found another job. Not that there was anything hiring in town. The only place that had offered her a position was the truck stop near the highway, and that was an awful idea.

The bell over the front door jangled. Mark stood up slowly and went out into the sitting area.

"Good afternoon," she heard him say in that way he always addressed customers—as falsely sweet as the little pink packets of sucralose near the office's coffeepot.

"Hi there," another man responded in a steady, clear voice. Olivia leaned forward to see out into the lobby.

The man was just entering the room and the door had not yet closed behind him. She could only partially see the customer because Mark was in the way, shaking his hand.

"I'm Mark Lovelace," he was saying. "Pleased to meet you."

"Leo, nice to meet you," the other man said.

Leaning forward more, Olivia could see that Leo looked only a few years younger than Mark—maybe twenty-five. And he obviously did some kind of outdoors work. His skin was sun-darkened and his clothes were rough and worn. His dark eyes glittered as if he had been out in the sun so much that the light had got inside them.

Olivia turned back into the office and swept the lunch leftovers into the trash out of sight. She liked that name, Leo—so striking and uncommon. People here didn't have names like that. She stepped into the bathroom and ran her fingers through her hair a couple of times and pulled it back into a messy ponytail. She regretted not finishing cosmetology school; she might have learned some ways of making herself look nice. She could've graduated, if Mark hadn't come along. They met through an online dating site during her first year at the technical college. She had been nineteen and he was twenty-two. When they moved in together she dropped out of school.

As she entered the lobby, she heard Mark fawning, "What can I do for you today, sir?" but Leo was looking at her. He appeared to lose his train of thought for a moment. Maybe she didn't look as bad as she thought she did. Mark glanced impatiently back at Olivia as if he'd forgotten she was still there.

"I'm looking for a sedan," Leo said, focusing back on Mark. "Nothing fancy?"

"What year?" Mark asked.

"Early 2000s."

"We've got that. Any extras, sir? Heated seats, DVD player, satellite radio?"

Leo cut him short. "No, nothing complicated. Just a regular sedan with regular seats and air conditioning. Something reliable."

"All right." Mark said, "I think I have exactly what you're looking for. Got a price range?"

"No more than \$6,000."

Mark raised his eyebrows and Olivia knew his wheels were turning. Mark never let a customer leave without paying more than they wanted to. Early on, she found that clever. Now it was disturbing. He dealt with customers as if they were parts of a machine that he could manipulate. Everything always came back to the money.

Mark clapped his hands together, startling her. "Come on out to the lot and I'll show you what we've got."

Olivia managed to catch Leo's eye again and she smiled at him. He returned the smile quickly, almost bashfully. Olivia came to Mark and put her arm around his waist.

"Sweetheart, I just really need a caramel latte. Do you want me to make a coffee run?"

Mark cleared his throat as if annoyed. "This is my girlfriend," he said to Leo.

"Olivia Martin," Olivia added, frustrated that Mark hadn't even taken the time to

give her name. Leo shook her hand—his grasp was strong and warm. She held his hand for a moment longer than she probably should have.

“Let’s go out and look at those cars,” Mark said, a little louder than was necessary. She had annoyed him—she knew it—and that satisfied her. At least when he was annoyed he wasn’t ignoring her.

“I’ll come out with you,” she said.

Mark unwound her arm from his waist. “There’s no need.”

She went anyway.

It was a radiant fall day that smelled of wood smoke and fallen leaves. The trees that bent over the parking lot were beginning to change. One in particular, a dogwood, was blood red at the top. Fall always made Olivia think about how, when she was little, her dad had raked up leaf piles so she could jump in them. It wasn’t often that her father had condescended to spend a whole afternoon with her, but when the oak trees in the yard carpeted the grass with leaves, something seemed to change in him. She could still see the way he silently raked what seemed to be an ocean of red and gold and brown into an enormous mountain. He never told her that she could jump into them, but he didn’t stop her either. He’d just lean there on his rake, watching her. And as she lay back in the prickly leaves, staring into the clear blue sky, she could feel his gaze, warm and steady like the sun.

Mark and Leo approached a 2004 Mitsubishi sedan with leather upholstery and a price tag that was way above Leo’s budget. Leo gave a short laugh that sounded unimpressed.

“It’s pretty,” he said, “but if I’m going to pay that much, I want something that will last me longer. Do you have any Volkswagens?”

Mark nodded like a bobble-head figure on a dashboard. “Yes, yes, I have some Volkswagens you can look at.”

As they walked towards the other cars, he began what he called *building a rapport with the customer*. “So, friend, are you from around here?”

Leo seemed to be amused at now being Mark’s “friend.” “Why, yes,” he said, “I’ve lived here my whole life.”

Olivia looked at Mark. He had to be just as surprised as she was. They knew, or knew of, pretty much everyone within a twenty-mile radius.

“Really?” she said. “Seems like I’d remember you.”

Leo nodded, like maybe he thought he’d remember her too. “I travel a good bit for work.”

Olivia smiled, letting her eyes dance a little. “Sounds exciting.”

Leo looked at her intently. “What do you mean by that?” he asked.

“Nothing, really,” she said. “Work’s hard to find. Trust me, I’m looking right now.”

“Ah,” Leo said, “I see.”

Meanwhile, Mark stopped at another car and began rattling on about all its great features and how, “Considering all of that, \$8,000 is really a phenomenal price.”

Olivia watched Leo as he listened. She was surprised at herself. She usually didn’t find the out-doorsy type very attractive. But Leo was an exception. He was really just exquisite to look at. Even in profile she could see the intense, vibrant clarity of his gaze. Dark waves of hair blew across his smooth forehead as he stood with his arms crossed calmly across his chest. He reminded her of the stern, brave men she learned about in ancient history in highschool. Like Alexander the Great. Leo was one of those guys who *did* things, who went places, she could tell.

He got into the car and sat down in the driver’s seat. Before doing anything else, he looked back over his shoulder to check the blind spots.

“It’s a good car, friend, it really is,” Mark was saying. Then his phone began to ring. He looked down at it, reading the caller’s name for a moment before answering. “I need to take this,” he said. “Please excuse me.” He began walking back towards the patio behind the office where the reception was a little better.



"It's probably his mom," she said. "She's getting older and is always calling. I think she's just bored most of the time."

Leo started adjusting the driver's seat and side mirrors. "Really?"

"She's quite a talker." Olivia wished Mark would talk to her as much as he did his mother. He would never have left a customer to give her his undivided attention, no matter what it was she had to say. She leaned against the car, near the driver's side door. "Oh my gosh, I really need some coffee. I should just go ahead and get some, shouldn't I?"

Leo stepped out of the car. "And leave a potential buyer here all by himself? You need to learn better salesmanship." He was smiling.

Olivia looked down and smiled, too. "I'm sure I do." The wind scattered leaves across the pavement with a sound that was like rain. It felt like a cold front was coming.

"What do you do?" Olivia asked.

"I'm a landscaper," Leo said.

"Do you like it?"

He looked up into the trees. "Sometimes yes, sometimes no. But it's great on fall days like this."

"It is lovely, isn't it," Olivia said, "when the leaves begin to change?"

Leo reached down to the ground and picked up a leaf, twisting it by its delicate stem. "As much as I hate having to spend so much time keeping these things from covering people's yards, I guess you're right."

Olivia watched the leaf flip back and forth between his two strong fingers. Without thinking, she reached out and took the leaf from his hand, letting their fingers touch as she did so. She heard Mark step out from behind the office.

"Can you hear me now? Yes? Okay, what was it you were saying?"

Leo quickly withdrew his hand.

"I can't believe they're still talking," she said with a forced laugh. Leo looked past her towards Mark.

"So you've always lived here?" she asked, trying to make him look at her again.

"Yes," he said, "born and raised."

Olivia twisted the leaf between her fingers as he had done. "And yet I never met you."

There was a pause as Leo glanced down at his watch, and then back up at her.

"I'm afraid I have to be somewhere in twenty minutes."

Olivia was surprised at how much she didn't want him to leave. She smiled and put on a mock business-like demeanor. "I can show you some more cars if you like." Before he could answer she started walking towards another Volkswagen, a newer model.

She had visited Mark enough to know how to do his job—probably better than he did.

"This," she said, holding out her arms like she was the girl on *Wheel of Fortune*, "is a magnificent example of luxury and efficiency. For the *phenomenal* price of only \$6,000! Don't let this offer pass you by."

Leo laughed a little and shook his head.

"You're not buying it are you?" she asked.

"Nope."

Olivia held his eyes and smiled. "I guess I'm not really made for this."

Mark came walking back towards them from the office.

"Well," he said, drawing out the word so that it noisily filled the clear, autumn air, "I am so sorry about that."

Once he reached them, he clapped his hands together.

"So! Are we ready to look at something else, friend?"

"Wish I could," Leo said, looking at Olivia, "but I've got to run. I have things to do."

"Oh no!" Mark said. "Not so soon."

"I'm afraid so," Leo said, putting out his hand, "but it's been a pleasure."

Mark shook his hand. “Are you sure there’s nothing else you want to look at? Just real quick before you go?”

Leo shook his head while Mark continued. “I have a Volkswagen Jetta, 2006, no frills. Very affordable.”

“No, no, I’m fine,” Leo said.

Olivia wished she had just gone for the coffee and missed watching Mark make a fool of himself.

Mark shrugged.

“Liv,” he said, “go into my office and get one of my cards off of my desk to give to our friend here.”

“Okay,” she said, turning on her heels and heading back towards the office. By the time she was at the door, she was determined to make her own pitch. Inside, she grabbed a pen out of Mark’s drawer before getting one of his business cards. She stared down at the little piece of paper that said *Lovelace Autos, We help you go places!* with Mark’s name, phone number, and email address. She turned it over and wrote her own name on the back along with her cell phone number.

When she went back outside, Leo was already getting into his car and Mark was walking back towards the office. Olivia brushed past Mark and ran towards Leo’s car.

“Hey!” she said, as he put the key in the ignition. He rolled down the window.

“Here’s one of Mark’s cards,” she said, “and if you can’t reach him, I put my number on there too.”

Leo took the card and looked at the back, as if he might be memorizing her number—or wondering what was wrong with her. “All right,” he said, “Sure. I’ll keep that in mind.”

Olivia stepped back as he pulled out of the parking place. Mark was watching from the steps of the office. She began walking back towards him as Leo drove away.

“Well,” Mark said, with his usual wit and insight, “You win some and you lose some.”

The wind scattered thousands of leaves into the air—they looked like yellow stars against the sky, flying away until she could no longer see them. “I guess so,” she said.

When Mark went into the office, leaving the door open, expecting her to follow, Olivia could smell the chairs from where she stood, the age, the routine. The decay.

“You know what,” she said, “I’m going to go get coffee.”

“That’s fine with me,” Mark said.

She waited, wondering what was going through his head. Maybe he really didn’t care at all. Olivia turned away as the door closed behind him. She took a deep breath of the air that had now grown even colder. The wind was picking up again; it pulled at her clothes and tousled her hair. A perfect day for being outside, maybe even for taking a jog. That’s what she’d do, she’d go to the mall and get those shoes. She could feel the bounce of soft soles and energy running all through her. As she headed toward her car, she smiled, thinking of an open stretch of road that led far, far away.



## GONE THE SUN

*Margaret L. Campbell*

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The fading sun danced slowly on your face—  
a patch of light that gleamed like liquid heat  
and formed a sparkling counterpane of lace  
that glinted on the lakeshore by our feet.  
You read until you could no longer see  
the marks upon the page. The sunset died and,  
as you closed the book and looked at me,  
the trees, the shore, the unread pages sighed.  
The twilight bathed the silver lake in fire  
and as the rusty dusk turned into grey  
the night crept on and forced us to retire  
and close the final pages of the day.

And now, although that night is far behind,  
the words you read still echo in my mind.



# AMONG THE STARS

*Sarah Murphy*

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One night, much later,  
We three sat with our backs to a cypress tree,  
Knees tucked and faces colored  
In the milky-white pallor of the moon.  
We stared up at our bright friend,  
Vowing to each other  
That sometime hence  
We would look for this bright moon,  
Find ourselves among the stars,  
And remember.



## MOUNTAIN SUNRISE

*Angelica Hisnanick*

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The gravel trail crunches  
beneath our feet, echoing  
through the sleeping world.  
The warm cabin is far behind us now.  
Our breath makes faint clouds  
in the chilly mountain air—sparkling  
for a moment in the first pale rays  
of light beginning to slant  
through the pines, then vanishing.

Stopping for a moment,  
we gaze across the foothills,  
absorbed in the reverent stillness  
of the mountain's fading beauty—  
feathery branches of birch trees  
sprinkled with yellow,  
stark against fiery maples.  
We don't speak, but abide  
in the land's silence.

Numb with cold and drowsiness,  
you turn as if to go back.  
But then the light comes,  
like a soft breath spreading  
across the hills. As it begins  
to touch the farthest peaks,  
the mist rises from the valleys  
and eternity seems to stretch  
before us, trembling  
in a single moment.



# JUMP

*Margaret L. Campbell*

---

The water felt cool against my body as I swam toward the cliff of dull grey rock that jutted sheerly out of the still lagoon. The June sun beat down on my head and sparkled on the greenish lake water, dazzling my eyes. Ahead of me, my boyfriend grabbed onto the sharp rocky ledge and hoisted himself out of the water, the sun sparkling on his wet skin. I reached the ledge soon after, and he lent me a strong hand as I clambered up on the rock. We stood side by side and looked up at the steep rock face above us that we had to climb; there was barely a handhold for ten feet. I figured that if I could catch hold of some of the roots from a tree that had bravely embedded itself into the rock far above my head, I could use the rough tendrils of the tree's roots to reach the top.

Aaron laid hold of the rock and began to hoist himself up. As I watched the muscles straining in his back, I quickly realized that it was going to be harder than I thought. He was halfway up when he slipped. I caught my breath and turned pale in a moment, but he readjusted his footing and righted himself. He glanced down at me and flashed me a reassuring grin, which I tried to mirror as I gave him a quick thumbs up.

"You got this!" I encouraged. He nodded.

"I know, don't worry."

"I'm not worrying." I was lying, and I bet he knew it.

After a few more minutes of struggling on his part and pure fear on mine, he was at the top of the ledge, his face rather small and far away as he peered back down at me. I began to climb. The rock was worn smooth by the passage of many hands, and my own were still wet with lake water. Nevertheless, I was able to struggle up, foot by foot, until I reached the roots of the tree. Praying that they would hold my weight, I grabbed on to their rough bark and heaved myself up the last stretch to where Aaron was waiting at the top. Once again, his strong hands pulled me up until we stood panting together on the top of the cliff.

I peered back out into the lagoon where the pontoon boat containing Aaron's family floated on the greenish water of the lake. We both waved reassuringly at the boat. The tiny figures waved back at us. I knew Aaron's mom was nervous about letting us go, and frankly so were we, but for some completely unknown and seemingly insane reason, we both wanted to do this. It had seemed like a better idea when we were safely on the boat. We turned our backs to the lake and climbed up the stony path to the rocky ledge, going even higher up above the lake we were about to jump into. At last we found ourselves on the rocky outcrop, looking out over the still surface of the lake, nearly three dozen feet below.

"Wow," I said, my voice shaking a bit. "It looks a lot higher from up here." Aaron nodded. I noticed he was a little pale. He was slightly acrophobic, and I knew that this was probably a lot harder, psychologically, for him than for me. His family in the far distant pontoon shouted up at us, encouraging us to jump.

"You want to go first, or do you want me to?" I asked Aaron.

"I'll go," he answered. He made his way to the edge of the smooth stone and looked down. It was a mistake—I could see he regretted it immediately.

"Come on and jump!" I heard his cousin yell up at him, his voice borne faintly to

us across the water. Aaron gulped. *What if he can't do it?* I thought. I knew that if he backed down, he'd never forgive himself. And yet, it seemed as though his body would not let his will jump. He was poised to dive off, but he stood as if turned to stone. The minutes wore on.

"Come on, you can do it," I heard his dad yell.

"I know, I know!" He yelled back. I could tell he was beginning to get frustrated with himself. My heart was hammering in my chest, partly out of fear for the jump, partly out of fear that he wouldn't jump. I knew he needed something, a push, a surge of courage that would overcome his fear of the task. His family members yelled at him again. He was getting agitated.

"Aaron," I said calmly. He looked at me: in his hazel eyes there was a mixture of fear and frustration.

"What?" he said. He looked at me as though he couldn't see me.

"Aaron," I said again. "I love you."

It was the first time I had ever told him that, even though I had known it for many months now. Aaron's eyes grew wide, and an expression of wonder and joy spread across his face.

"I love you too," he said, smiling a little. He turned back to the rock, planted his feet firmly, and jumped.

I heard his splash below and ran to the edge. I saw his brown-haired head pop up from below the surface and heard him cough and blow. His family cheered from the boat.

"Are you ok?" I yelled. He coughed again before he answered.

"I'm fine!" he yelled back, then grinned. "It's fun!" My heart was pounding, but not with the fear of the jump.

"Okay, ready?" I yelled at Aaron and his family on the pontoon. Their yells of agreement floated back over the water to me.

"One, two, three!" I counted, and jumped out into space.

I expected to hit the water immediately, but time seemed to slow and every noise died except the rushing air past my feet. My eyes were tightly closed, and the world seemed to have shrunk into a tunnel of speed and wind. With a crash, I hit the water. The impact jarred my legs as I went under, and my eyes flew open. I looked up through four or five feet of green water and the sun shining above. I kicked my legs, and my head broke the surface. I took a deep gulp of air, coughing and laughing at the same time. I paddled over to the left, where Aaron floated by the rocky ledge, waiting for me.

"You all right?" he asked. His eyes were shining from the thrill of what we had done. I nodded, unable to suppress the huge grin that I knew was spreading across my face.

"That was the craziest thing I've ever done," I answered. "And the most exciting."

We swam, side-by-side, back to the pontoon and his waiting family. Moments later we sat next to each other on the foredeck of the boat, wrapped in a towel and trying to dry ourselves off in the warm sun. We had not spoken about the words that had been exchanged on the top of the cliff before the jump, but there was a sweetness mixed into our interaction now that hadn't been there before.

"That was quite a leap of faith," Aaron's dad said jokingly.

I smiled back at him.

"You have no idea."



# PARANOIA FROM '93

*Mitchell Dallas Herring*

---

Doe eyes, stop believing  
only the attractive  
makes you feel at home.

Think about our trip  
to the pound. You said,  
“I want every single one!”

I asked, “What about the one  
with three legs?” You replied,  
“I want him most!”

Love yourself the way you love  
mutts in cages, and if you could,  
love me that way too.

Love me most.





# TRANSCEND

*Charlotte Stapp*

---

If I disappeared into the fog,  
would you meet me in the clouds?  
Would we dance along the horizon,  
our silhouettes gliding gracefully and ardently  
against the red and purple hues of the dying day?  
Would you take me by the hand to the edge of the world,  
and there invite me to spend eternity with you?



# CATHEDRAL

*Angelica Hisnanick*

---

The echoes of murmured prayers  
reverberate through the deep silence,  
fluttering like caged birds  
among the vaulted arches  
that enclose a thousand sacred memories.

Stone saints and concrete angels  
cobwebbed within their alcoves  
gaze on us with unseeing eyes  
as we stand by the heavy oak door,  
unsure whether to stay or leave,  
intruders on holy ground.

The black robed friars  
move behind an ephemeral  
cloud of incense, crucifixes  
swaying from their bowed necks,  
as crystal rainbows fall  
from stained glass windows  
and shatter into millions of pieces  
of liquid light upon the floor.

The empty pews seem to gape  
like rows of barren ground,  
and the silver pipes of the organ  
reach upward like outstretched hands  
beseeching blessing, as the light  
of many candles casts a flickering glow  
upon their dusty spires.



## GLASS MOSAICS

*Jonathan Kurtz*

---

“Sarah?” Robert called, pulling on his jacket and wandering in the kitchen. “Are you ready?”

“Waiting on you,” his wife replied absentmindedly from her place at the table, tongue between her teeth as she carefully placed a shard of purple—she’d probably call it mauve but such artistic details were beyond him—into the plaster of the new coaster she was working on. Like her parents, she’d been an art teacher before she’d become a stay-at-home-mom, and even when the kids had still been in the house she’d always been involved in some craft project or another. This latest was a set of glass-mosaic coasters for the living room.

“The shoe’s on the other foot now,” he said with a smile, leaning against the doorframe.

“Just a minute...” She pressed the glass into the plaster and then jumped up. “There! Done.” Leaving the coaster on the table, she hurriedly rinsed her fingers at the sink and darted past him toward the front door, not even stopping to dry her hands as she seized the keys.

“If you’re in such a rush, why’d you start another one?” Robert asked, following her.

“I was up early because I couldn’t sleep, but had to wait for you, so...” She was already in the driver’s seat of their car. “Hurry up! I want to meet my granddaughter.” Her face lit up on the word, smile stretching from ear to ear. Robert felt more than a little excitement himself; today they were going to meet Becca, their new and only granddaughter. Their daughter, Helen, had already given them two grandsons, and that was well and good, but a granddaughter was a little different. Robert and Sarah had meant to be there when Becca was born, but she’d decided to come into the world prematurely while they were on a holiday in the Keys. Days old and already making him crazy. Robert supposed he was just glad that he wouldn’t have to change the diapers anymore. Hopefully.

Sarah chattered on as she pulled the car out and whipped down the road, talking about nothing in particular but filling the silence. Robert listened with half an ear, noticing drying bits of plaster on his wife’s hands. He smiled, reminded of when he’d proposed to her in college, over forty years ago now. When he’d brought out the ring in her studio, she’d had splatters of paint up to her elbows, paint that had promptly transferred to her face—and his—after he’d gone down to one knee. Looking back, it probably hadn’t been the best time or place, but she still smiled every time the story came up so he supposed it had meant something to her, and that was the important thing.

When they finally arrived, Nick, their eldest son, was standing outside, supervising Helen’s two boys as they played something resembling football on the front lawn. Parking the car, they stepped out to greet their son. Nick was telling them a rather in-depth account of Becca’s birth—he had never possessed a good sense of when to leave his teeth together—when Robert noticed movement out of the corner of his eye. Turning, he saw the car beginning to roll backward, steadily picking up speed, and Tim, his grandson, chasing the football across the driveway further down the hill.

Moments later, releasing his confused grandson from his shaking arms, Robert said more than once, “How did I just do that?” He was almost into his sixties now, but he

wasn't weak—working as a physical therapist typically prevented that. Nonetheless, his system was unused to the shock of sprinting downhill and pulling a child out of the path of a runaway car.

"I was going to ask the same thing," said his son, Nick, jogging up with a flushed face. Noticing his heavy breathing, Robert might have let off a quip at his son's sagging physique, a decade removed from the athletic slimness it had been in high school, but he instead turned his attention to his wife, Sarah. Standing at the top of the hill, she put her hands on her hips as she loudly proclaimed that she was certain she'd put the car into park.

"This isn't like her," Nick said, still panting. "I know Mom can be silly sometimes, but she's not usually careless like this..." Robert didn't answer, choosing to let the crunch of the car rolling into the trees on the other side of the street speak for him.

Thankfully, the brush absorbed most of the momentum, and the car suffered only a few dents. Still, Robert felt uneasy as he assured his wife that everything was fine, that it was a common mistake. He watched Sarah closely throughout the rest of that visit, though he was admittedly distracted by his granddaughter's introduction, even if little Becca did look a bit like E.T. But of course he assured his son that she was adorable—that was mandatory. Inwardly, he prayed that the child would grow into her mother's image, because Nick wasn't exactly a looker either. Though he'd been a cute infant. He could remember how he grew more and more awkward looking each year as his hooked nose and overlarge ears came in. He had a measure of their progress too; Sarah had painted a picture of each of their children once a year on their birthday. Lord, it had always been a chore getting them to sit still for that long. He'd dreaded it each year, but he'd still fallen for Sarah's wide-eyed, "Please," every time, though with a sigh and a grumble.

Sarah fussed over the child just as she had their own, and after Robert had the dents punched out of the rear bumper he put the incident out of his mind, choosing instead to focus on the plane tickets to Paris he'd bought her for their fortieth anniversary; she was ecstatic, of course. He wasn't too fond of the city himself—the people smelled and the food was overpriced and everything was just so...*French*—but Sarah wore a huge smile as she ate the croissants, tried—and spat out—escargot, and painted the Sacre Coeur. Robert didn't complain. He was content to sit back and watch the bits of paint work their way up her arms.

The euphoria they'd gained from the trip quickly faded, however, when Sarah came down the stairs one morning while he was making breakfast, rubbing her eyes through the tangle of silver hair surrounding her head.

"Hello, sleepyhead," he said. "You planning on going to church like that?"

He smiled at her, but she just squinted at him. "Don't be ridiculous. It's Saturday."

Robert slid the steaming eggs into a bowl and switched off the burner. "No, it's Sunday," he said. "Yesterday was Saturday. We spent yesterday unpacking, remember?"

"Stop teasing," she snapped. "I know it's Saturday."

The image of the car rolled back into Robert's mind, and he felt his face crinkle along creased worry lines. The eggs were cold before he was able to convince her of the day, and even that took a calendar. When Sarah finally came down the stairs a few moments later with her hair up in a silvery knot and her flower-print Sunday dress flowing behind her, she was short and wouldn't say more than one or two words to him at a time. Robert's eyebrows rose up into the vicinity of his receding hairline at the sight of the orange-red lipstick, though he wasn't sure what to say about the bright streak across her teeth. In fact, he wasn't sure what to say to her at all.

After church, they visited Becca, as they almost always did. And every Sunday she looked less like a wrinkled alien and more like a little doll. She could sit up on her own now, but no matter what she did, she made Sarah smile, and that mattered more than most things as far as Robert was concerned.

Robert tried to put Sarah's forgetfulness from his mind, but continual reminders kept dragging it up, like the time he discovered Sarah's purse in the refrigerator. When he asked her about it, she told him he had no business going through her purse, didn't talk to him for the rest of the day, and then the next acted as if nothing had happened.

What really worried him was that when they gathered at Nick's house for Becca's first birthday, Sarah didn't bring her paints or canvas along. Reluctant as he usually was to cooperate by keeping the child still, he didn't mention it until the day of, but she never said anything to him. Sarah grumbled under her breath when Helen, Nick, and Aaron all stared at her when she came in through the door without a canvas under her arm, asking, "What in the name of peace does everyone want from me? Do I have something on my face?"

She cheered up significantly when Becca uttered her first word, "Cake," a few minutes later as she gave herself a buttercream facial. Robert couldn't help but chuckle at the choice of the word—Nick's waistline certainly explained why she heard it so much—but he kept an eye on his wife even if everyone else seemed to have forgotten how out of character she was behaving.

The creases in his face deepened into ravines, and he started to miss the drying plaster and flecks of color that usually decorated Sarah's hands. Every time he finished working with an injured teenager or an old gentleman with a knee replacement and went home, he hoped to see Sarah sitting out back before her easel, but that never happened anymore. She occasionally continued with her mosaic coaster project, leaving bits of glass strewn about—it always took him a few hours of searching before he was comfortable letting Becca into the house—but even that project, which normally might have taken her a few weeks, stretched out to over a year of scattered bursts of effort. The first few arguments taught him to keep his mouth shut about it, but by the time Becca was two and walking, getting under her cousin's—not to mention everyone else's—feet, it didn't seem to take much to put her in a bad mood. One day, he found her pacing back and forth in the kitchen, throwing open cabinets and muttering to herself, and when he tried to help her find whatever she was looking for, she told him to mind his own business.

"I think your mother is beginning to lose it," he told Nick plainly that weekend, explaining a little of what had been happening. Through the open doorway, he could see Sarah and Christie, Nick's wife, chatting amicably as a two-year-old Becca, now with little blonde ringlets bobbing around her face, ran between them, talking nonstop as she tried to gain one or the other's attention with her dolls and plastic ponies.

Nick slumped onto a stool, bracing his elbows on the island and cradling his can of soda as if it were the strong stuff, reminding Robert of the time he'd caught the boy drinking when he was fifteen and had made him drink the whole case to put him off the stuff. "I was hoping it was just me," he said. "I've kind of been thinking that since Becca was born, but..."

"I hope I'm wrong," Robert continued. "But her family does have a history of Alzheimer's. I'm going to take her to get tested and then we'll..." He trailed off, frowning. Where would he go from there? He shook his head and lifted his drink, pausing when Nick grabbed his arm.

"Dad," he said. "Are you going to be all right?"

He snatched his arm back. "You take care of you," he snapped. "I'm fine."

Through the open doorway, he watched as Sarah lifted Becca into her lap and said, "Look at you—" she paused on the name, "little one! You've grown so much!"

Robert threw back his drink.

Even with her storing her toothbrush in the silverware drawer, dropping her wallet in the freezer, and leaving the tub running one night so that the whole bathroom flooded,

it took Robert six months to convince Sarah to see a doctor, and even then only because he'd found her sobbing into her hands with an unfinished coaster thrown on the ground.

"I can't remember what I was going to do with it!" she had cried. Swallowing the lump in his throat, Robert couldn't think what more he could do than put his arm around her. They went to see the doctor the next week. Unfortunately, it wasn't a simple check-up, and Sarah frequently lost her patience throughout the lengthy procedure, complaining and cursing about being asked the same questions over and over, even if she couldn't tell him what question she was talking about. Robert could remember a time where he might have laughed to hear such ugly words come from her mouth—or, rather, at the stammering and blushing that usually followed—but there was nothing remotely funny about the way she said them now. Instead, he just shook his head and held her arm, afraid to let go.

Robert tried to keep working even after the doctor confirmed the worst, but after buying a new oven and staring at the black streaks left on the wall from when Sarah left a towel on the stove, Robert realized there would never be a much better time to retire.

"Why don't you put her in a home?" Aaron, his youngest son, suggested in undertone while they watched Becca, nearly to Robert's waist now, comb the backyard for Easter eggs. Aaron had never had the greatest sense—he could remember having a few choice conversations about grades throughout high school—and had he still been a teenager, Robert would have cuffed him over the head; as it was, he still nearly kicked him out of the house.

"I have the money," he explained angrily. "And my wife is more important."

Still, he had to admit that, as things went on, taking care of his wife was far more exhausting than his job had ever been. It took her almost three months before she stopped jumping in surprise every time she saw him, asking him why he wasn't at work. He had to keep track of everything she used, lest it wind up in the most unusual places, like the picture frame he found in the microwave. At times, it seemed he couldn't let her out of his sight; she slipped out the back door one day and got lost. It took Robert a panic-stricken four hours of sprinting through the neighborhood to find her taking a nap in their next door neighbor's Jacuzzi, still fully clothed. He wondered at how she didn't seem to tire although his own joints seemed to have entered a perpetual state of grumbling, a fact not helped by their increasingly common arguments that resulted in him spending nights in the living room. After she flooded the bathroom again, he realized he needed to be in the room with her anyway, but, if anything, that was worse. She jolted awake every time they bumped into each other in the night, and she had always been free with her elbows to begin with.

"You can't keep doing this to yourself," Helen told him while they cleaned up the Christmas turkey. A few feet away, Becca tried to make her new Barbie doll stand up on its own. Helen's boys occupied themselves with smacking each other with lightsabers while their father, a businessman with puffy lips that Robert had always thought looked silly on a man, watched in amusement, egging them on. His first mistake, Robert thought, was not joining the fight. He was used to shaking his head at his son-in-law though.

"Doing what?" he asked, feigning ignorance.

"Taking care of Mom like this," Helen said, putting her hands on her hips. Robert felt a grin; she couldn't quite strike the authoritative pose Sarah had mastered. Before, that is. "Look at yourself, Dad! You look like you haven't slept in a week."

"I'm not putting her in a home."

She sighed. "Just consider it. Please. Mom's already struggling to remember my name; I don't want to lose you to a heart attack from stress at the same time! I'll make all the arrangements. Just...please. Think about it."

He was unmoved by the tears in her eyes. "No."

His children's insistence only intensified with time, but Robert had none of it.

He'd said, "In sickness and in health," not, "When it's easy for me." Children these days—even his own—didn't seem to take that part very seriously.

Robert couldn't deny that he was wearing thin, however. He found his attention drifting and sleepiness more common, and, as a result, Sarah started getting into more trouble. One day in early May, he had to apologetically remove her from their neighbor's shower while Mrs. Gerhart covered her boys' eyes, and the smoke alarm went off on another night when she put a cassette-tape in the toaster. He put a lock on the kitchen door after that, putting up with her tantrums every time she tried to turn the knob, which was usually about once every other hour.

After a particularly bad night, he fell asleep on the couch in the afternoon and woke up in a panic. He threw on his jacket and started to step outside to look for Sarah, but stopped when he heard her humming scattered, discordant notes to herself in the office. He let out a pent-up breath and went to see what she was doing. He paused in the doorway; she was making another mosaic coaster at the desk. Robert smiled; this new piece was a mismatched hodgepodge of color with no particular order, as if a unicorn—he'd been watching *My Little Pony* with Becca in the last few weeks, a monstrosity if he'd ever seen one—had thrown up in the plaster, but at least she was making something. She hadn't in months.

"Sarah," he said, stepping in.

She screamed and twisted, throwing the coaster at him. It missed and struck the window over his shoulder, sending a spider web of cracks spreading through the glass. Before Robert could say anything else, Sarah leapt to her feet and ran up the stairs, surprisingly nimble, screaming rape and bloody murder. Robert followed her up, limping on his stiffening knee. He found her in the bedroom, pulling the drawers out of an end table and throwing them at him. One glanced painfully off his shoulder, prompting him to take cover around the corner. When she slammed the door between them, screaming for him to get out of her house, Robert slid down to the floor, running his fingers through the bone-dry ravines carved into his face.

When Helen and Nick arrived, their faces were wetter and stickier than he remembered seeing them since the last time he'd taken a paddle to their rears. They patted his back and sobbed into his shoulders, asking why he didn't cry himself, as if they hadn't noticed as well as he had when the paint had disappeared. His grandchildren looked bewildered, unsure what to make of their parents' grief, and Becca, her golden curls hanging nearly to her waist now, watched with curious eyes and asked what had happened to the window. He told her it was an accident.

"Why don't you fix it?" she asked, sticking a thumb in her mouth. Christie tugged it out.

He tried to smile at her and couldn't. "It only happened today," he told her. "But it still holds its shape, so I don't need to replace it quite yet."

The child stared up at him and nodded as if that were the wisest thing he could have possibly said and asked, "Where's Maw-maw?"

He let her parents explain that.

Helen helped him make the arrangements, and Robert found himself in Beldon Court, taking a tour through the home. The caregivers acted friendly, he had to admit, and the facility itself seemed very comfortable, with lots of sunlit windows, cushioned chairs, and handrails. The simple keypads at the entrances with codes like 4321 didn't seem terribly restrictive, but there was still something...off. Robert, at least at first, decided it was the smell, air freshener and antiseptic cleanser masking the aroma of decay. It struck him like a bad toupee; nobody is fooled, and it seemed worse for the deception. But really, it was the inmates—as he referred to them in his mind—that put Robert off. They looked so empty. One frantic looking woman not much older than him walked up and asked, "Did you feather the children?" as if he was supposed to know what that meant. A man with a bulbous nose slumped in a chair, Jello dribbling down his face as he continually

missed his mouth with the spoon. One of the caretakers stooped to clean him up, cooing softly to him with words that would have been condescending even to Becca. When Robert sat down to discuss his wife with Veronica, his tour guide, a stooped woman with thinning, pure white hair wandered by, muttering savagely about the sons of bitches that had taken everything she owned. Her mantra remained unaltered the fifth time she passed, but Robert excused it. It was hardly fair to hold her to any sort of standard.

The next week, Robert arrived home late the night after getting Sarah settled into Beldon. Dead silent, he trudged into the living room and collapsed into the armchair, his weary bones crying out in relief. He gazed down at the coffee table, where Sarah's mosaic coasters rested in a pile. His spine cracked when he leaned forward and picked them up, sorting through them. He arranged them from newest to oldest. The earlier ones were only a few colors; one was all black, like a slice of obsidian, and another was a soothing assortment of blue and purple. In one, she'd even managed to approximate a lily. However, the further into the timeline Robert got, the more disorganized and ugly they became, with clashing colors and nonsensical patterns.

He picked up the newest one, the one covered in unicorn vomit, and climbed to his feet, deciding that the activity wasn't the healthiest way to prepare for bed. His eyes caught on his reflection in the window, broken and distorted by the jagged lines cutting through it. It was almost pretty with the way the light caught in the cracks, gleaming like bolts of lightning against the darkness outside.





## A LETTER FROM EDWARD, 1898

*Angelica Hisnanick*

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The letter crackles lightly as I unfold it, and I am greeted by the smell of old parchment and dust. *Manila, Dec. 25<sup>th</sup>, 1898*, he wrote in the top right corner. *Dear Parents*. Edward Glasgow began every letter that way. This letter, my favorite of his, is brown and creased; finger prints from hundreds of years ago still line the torn edges. I have read so many letters by Edward that I feel I know his voice: quiet but firm, with a lilting Irish inflection. The way he writes about his adventures in Manila shows that beneath the soldier's exterior he had a poetic soul. I can almost hear the distant echo of footsteps through long corridors as I read about the cathedrals that so deeply fascinated him. I see the suntanned native peoples that populate his tales, hear their voices and their songs; I feel his elation as crowds of people line the streets, cheering on the soldiers and covering their path with flowers.



# INHERITANCE

*Margaret L. Campbell*

---

All you are to me is a fuzzy tape:  
An old man on his knees, playing  
With his daughter's daughter.  
That tape is buried  
Somewhere, unmarked  
Just as you were, for many years  
Until your widow saved the money  
That you hadn't spent to mark  
A place for you where graveyard saplings  
Grew to trees bowed down from memory.



## LOCAL NATIVE

*Taylor Henry*

---

The red clay purpled as the sun descended,  
Every star visible in the expanse of the night.  
The locals hustled to finish the day's work,  
Stirring up the sand that lined the streets.  
The whirs of spin cycles and incandescent light  
Poured out from the nearby laundromat.

A regular came to me, asking for a ride home.  
He lowered the weighted pack—everything he owned.  
Years of hard labor pressed against a bent back.  
A voice weak and raspy left his throat,  
Like tumbleweeds sighing, tired of the wind.  
Sunglasses hid his eyes—a wrinkled face  
Darkened by the brim of a cowboy hat.  
But he was no wrangler, no wild, free spirit.  
His gaze fell on worn, leather boots,  
As his hands held a cane supporting his frame,  
A body haunted by sun-scorched farmlands.

My father would've told the man to get his own ride,  
That he got this way by his own doing.  
I didn't say anything at all.  
He picked up his burdens and limped away—  
Leaving me with sighs in the desert,  
The spinning of machines whirring in my ear.



# CROSSING WHIDBEY FERRY

*Nick Rice*

---

Fifteen hundred people pack together within the bounds of a ferry the size of a football field, and yet hardly anyone says a word. In the car decks, everyone's windows are up, and their heads are down. The passenger decks find people spaced as far apart as they can be, children staring silently out the windows at the water rushing by, adults looking at phones or books in their laps. A few people wander towards the front of the ferry, where they stand quietly in the open air. The wind coming off the water is so crisp and cold that even in the middle of summer no one stays out there for long. Soon, they wander listlessly back inside. There are areas where food was meant to be purchased, but they are all closed. No one uses the vending machines, and the arcade games sit, unoccupied, in the corner, endlessly repeating the same few minutes of trailer footage on mute. For the thirty minutes that you plow together through the open waters, all you hear is that low hum of the engine and the brisk whoosh of the cool ocean breeze. Then, someone sees the island approaching in the distance, and without saying a word, everyone moves together to the lower decks. Drivers that were able to leave their cars return, silently, to their vehicles. Those who stayed in their cars perk up, eyes focused straight ahead. Passengers once so far apart shake out of a kind of slumber, move forward, press tightly together at the front of the ship, but still no one says a word. At the dock, the workers stir, usher you, silently, off the ship. The people spread out once more across the docks, and, suddenly, all at once, everyone begins to talk and laugh, and soon, a new line forms, and fifteen hundred people move silently to their places on the ferry to Whidbey Island.



## WINTER'S BITE

*Taylor Henry*

---

Frost clings to the earth,  
Tighter than faithful shadows,  
Unclothing the trees.



# BEAUTIFUL NIGHTMARE

*Corey Jones*

---

An Icelandic forest,  
Filled with lush green trees in rows as far as the eye can see.  
The elk waits by the river,  
Covered in snow kissed fur, sipping as the water flows aimlessly down the stream.

The crow flies overhead,  
Signifying his flight for warmer weather is at an end,  
Braving whatever Mother Nature will throw his way.

Berries grow on bushes,  
Both red and violet,  
Asking, waiting to be picked.  
There is a soft shadow in the snow,  
An impressionistic image of a boy.  
Young and naive, he lays, waiting for the snowflakes to drift onto his tongue.

His shadow beside him,  
A newly found conviction; he will never be alone.  
As he heads for home, the crow gawks, the elk responds and the snowfall stops.  
The forest once beautiful and bountiful goes up in flames.



## LAST CALL FOR PARADISE

*Annie Churdar*

---

The tires kicked up leaves and gravel as we pulled out. Looked like a bunch of feathers flying out from behind us. I noticed Christoph watching from a window. Wondered if he felt deserted. Wondered if he felt like I did two years before.

For a minute I felt in control. He wasn't the only one who could leave. It's funny how love can turn to acid when it gets cold. You just want to see the other person feel something. We turned out of the driveway, and I focused on the raging speedometer instead.

The convertible shook recklessly over the first few set of bumps. I grabbed for the head rest behind me. Held on for my life. There was a short burst of joy and terror as I imagined being launched out into the night sky, just flying over the side of the car on one of those hairpin turns. The combination of gathering wind and the momentum of the car would probably shoot me far enough out there to clear the mountain's edge. I'd be hovering over those twinkling lights, watching the dots of red, gold, blue blink back and forth as people went about their nightly routines. They'd have no idea I was up there watching. They'd never notice me at all until I crashed through their living room ceiling and smashed their television or whatever they were busy numbing themselves with that evening. I'd be a real hiccup in their nightly routine. Like some giant human bird fallen from the sky.

We took the first turn smoothly and somehow all those kids in the back seat stayed inside the car. Second turn, third, fourth, fifth. Not one body was launched into the sky. But each turn made my pulse pound, and I'm pretty sure it made everyone else's go crazy too. About the sixth turn, everyone was throwing their hands in the air and screaming like it was some wild roller coaster. The headlights cut the black foliage to pieces, and those double gold lines swerved back and forth as we whipped in and out of the right lane. Someone had the bright idea to turn the radio on full blast. And of course that was the fall when Beyoncé ran the radio with "Crazy in Love," so that came on and we all sang at the top of our lungs. It was one of those things we'd do when we were out for a good time. We'd all really get into top 40 pop stuff. Honestly, I think it was more than just a shot at being ironic or something. It was also a sort of relief from the super experimental, weird stuff we normally got into. Top 40 is sort of comforting, you know? It almost makes you feel like you fit in with the rest of the world when you can sing along to the songs that all the other people like. It's a small gesture of peace and understanding. Maybe if we all like the same song, we won't go around killing each other. Maybe Beyoncé is out to save the world after all.

There were never many other cars on the mountain road, especially late at night. But we always drove like there couldn't be any other life form up there except for us. So we'd have to dodge oncoming headlights every now and then, which got us all hyped on adrenaline. I didn't really ever trust the driver or their sobriety, but that's what made it fun.

We finally bounced back into the carefully graveled drive and pulled around the manicured bushes. The headlights drenched the house in gold, making it look even more spectacular and rich than it already was normally. The driver cut the engine,

and I was already hopping over the side of the car. Everyone spilled out after me and dispersed into the crowd that had stayed behind. I wondered where Christoph was. Probably licking his wounds somewhere, hoping I'd find him and apologize for jumping in the passenger seat without telling him.

The world was wide and the stars were out. Even the trees were paying attention to me. They were dropping leaves all over the place so as to not block my view of the constellations. The air was soft and warm, and it all felt just right.

I walked to the back of the house and scanned the pool crowd. The lights were on underwater. It all glowed like the movie I'd seen as a kid where aliens accidentally landed in some obscure pond. A lot of kids were sitting beside the pool with their feet in. A few brave ones were doing flips off the little diving board.

Anyway, none of the faces were his. I checked all of them as if there were even a remote chance Christoph would be out there laughing and joking with everyone. I couldn't actually imagine him in the pool right then with the look he'd given me when I'd hopped in the car.

"You guys seen Christoph anywhere?"

I got a million responses and most of them weren't helpful or even related to my question, but John said he'd seen him in the master bedroom, so I ran up there. The funny thing was, when I got up there, he wasn't in the bedroom at all. He was actually in the bathroom at that point. And there was a whole bunch of noise and flapping coming from in there. I heard a foot slip on the tiled surface and the splatter of the shower turning on almost simultaneously. I walked in and there he was, looking like he'd just lost his balance and grabbed the shower handle as a last effort. There was a steady stream of water coming down around him, pooling at his feet, and sliding down the drain. His clothes were soaked already. It was pretty funny actually. Looked like he'd just jumped in a river.

His face snapped in my direction as I stepped through the doorway, and that's when I noticed the bird. It was above him in the shower going crazy, doing loops and every other circular pattern just out of his reach. But when he looked away from the bird, the craziest thing happened. It was like she noticed he was distracted by me and decided to do something about it. She slowed down all of a sudden and descended toward his shoulder, landed for a minute and just sat there. As soon as he went to grab her, she took off again. But not fast enough. He jumped and pulled her back toward earth. She was under control again.

"What're you doing? Playing bird bath?" I tried to make a joke out of it because he looked really serious and responsible, his usual attitude these days. I wanted to get under his skin.

He struggled to hold the bird in one hand while shutting off the shower with the other. The waterfall stopped instantly. "Some idiot let all the birds out. One of your friends."

"Oh yeah?"

"Yeah. And I had to get them back in the cage." He shook his head, exasperated as usual. "The kid didn't even notice there were birds loose in the house. He just sat there and laughed."

"And so you had to be the adult, eh?" I fooled around with some expensive looking perfume on the bathroom counter, doing my best to not pay him too much attention. I knew he'd keep venting.

"Someone had to make sure there won't be a flock of birds flying around the house when John's parents get home," he said flatly. I was still deeply interested in the perfume.

"I caught most of them right away," he continued, "but this one went wild and flew upstairs. I've been chasing her for the last half hour."

"That just sounds lovely, darling!" It was my best impression of a mindless rich lady. He wasn't amused.



"I'm gonna take her back to the rest of the flock now." He grabbed a monogrammed towel to dry his hair a bit, then straightened the shower curtain and put everything back in place. At the door he paused with his hand on the light switch. "Coming?" he asked me.

We ended up back in the front sitting room with the huge fancy birdcage. It was super elaborate and took up about a fourth of the room. Plus, it was painted with a tiny gold flower pattern to match the trim on all the china plates and dark wood furniture in the room. I always enjoyed the exotic little details all over John's house.

Once the bird was back with her cage-mates, Christoph seemed to switch focus. He'd restored order in the house. Now back to business. We were supposed to be having a talk of some sort. He'd been really adamant about it for the last couple days. There was no avoiding it at this point. He had me cornered. Plus, I was curious if he'd have anything new to say.

He sat down on a small leather ottoman and started working through about fifty conversation starters, just the same as always. His mouth moved silently and his eyes avoided mine. I sort of grinned. It's funny how things don't change too much. I eased into a big velvet club chair and settled in for the long haul.

After a while he started. "Are you happy where you are?"

"Happy where?" I asked. "Where I am right now physically or where I am in life?"

It was that same old 20 Questions routine. There was a pause for him to think.

"Both," he said. "Either."

I tried to think through what he wanted to hear, tried to figure out what he was actually asking. "I'm getting really close to being happy again," I told him. "Last year, I lost focus and really got messed up trying to figure out how to make everyone like me. I think I was trying to be acceptable, you know? But things are a lot better now. I'm back on track again. I don't really care what my parents think either, and it's been better that way."

Another long pause. It was probably the kind of pause that people call "pregnant." He shaped more silent words, a million different things to say. I know that feeling too. Between the both of us, we probably wrote five decent novels that will never be published.

"Are you happy?" I turned the question back at him.

He fidgeted with his hair. Pulled it out of the hair elastic. It all fell down around his bearded chin, longer than I'd ever seen it before. It surprised me. For a minute I didn't recognize him. I hadn't realized it was so long. When was the last time he'd cut it? I searched my brain. The only thing I could come up with was a memory two years ago of him cutting it to match mine.

"I'm closer to happiness than I've ever been," he finally answered.

Another long pause. I wondered if his long hair stood for something. I'd heard of people taking oaths to not cut their hair for different reasons. Waiting for something to change.

"Why do you do what you do?" he asked. "What are you looking for?"

Again, I tried to sort through all the things he could possibly be asking. I imagined he wanted to know why I was at the party, why I was spending time with that crowd, why I was making the art I was making.

"Home," I told him. "I want to find home."

"What does that mean?" There was bitterness in his question. I ignored it.

"It's a feeling." I tried to speak slowly, clearly. Thinking it all through. Tried to be open. "It's not a place or even a person. It's a feeling. It's belonging. And right now I'm exploring. Trying to find it."

The word exploring set him off, I could tell. He looked up immediately. "I've seen people explore before. I've seen them get hurt." He looked away again. "But maybe getting hurt is the only way to learn."

“What are you upset about?”

“I don’t know.”

“You always say ‘I don’t know,’” I pointed out. “Do you think I’m not happy?”

“Not necessarily.”

“Then what’re you upset about?”

He didn’t say anything. He stared at the wall, waiting for an answer to be written there by the hand of God.

“Why did you come tonight?” I asked.

He still didn’t say anything, just looked away with his hair to hide behind. But I knew the answer. He came for me. He was probably worried about me. Maybe my parents had even called him up now that he was a real adult, a college graduate. They probably asked him to talk sense into me, help me get my life straight or something like that. I looked away so he wouldn’t feel pressure. I genuinely wanted him to tell me the truth for once.

“There’s so much wasted potential,” he finally said. “Some things change, some don’t. It’s hard to watch it happen.” I kept quiet so he’d keep talking. “I’m glad I didn’t stay. But I wish we’d all been together. I wish we’d all become better people together.” The pause afterward felt accusing.

“You know, you first taught me about all this,” I said. “You introduced me to everyone. I didn’t have any friends until you met me.”

His face let me know it was true. He’d taken me under his wing, back when I was a freshman and he was a sophomore, introduced me to all kinds of new music and art. I consumed it all. Everything he showed me. I adored him, wanted to be just like him. And we went everywhere together. We practically became known as the same person at school. But eventually I got tired of being his shadow. I wanted to be better than him. Instead of our friendship blossoming into a romance, it began to feel like he was my disapproving, protective father. I wanted to go further, be stronger, be smarter. Everyone made such a big deal about his craftsmanship and inventive spirit. I just wanted to be better. Now I was ahead and it made him uncomfortable.

“You know the story of Icarus?” I asked. His eyes stayed fixed on the wall. “His dad invents these amazing wings to help them escape the labyrinth they’ve been trapped in. Everyone blabs about how Icarus used the wings to fly too close to the sun. They say he wanted too much. He reaches for the pleasure of heaven but the sun melts his wings. Just like his dad said they would.” I paused for effect. He knew the story because he told it to me last year.

“You wanna know the crazy thing?” I continued. “I did a little research into the story. Everyone blames Icarus, but really, his dad was the one who left first. Icarus just followed. His dad taught him to fly, and Icarus just took it to the next level.”

He finally looked up at me with those big blue eyes, looking like a longhaired saint from all the Renaissance paintings we’d studied. I remembered why I’d first loved him. The kindness in those eyes always made me melt. The never ending blue. It was home.

And I had a feeling it could be home again. But home meant being closed in with walls and expectations.

“Icarus was just willing to explore a little further than his dad,” I said “And I think he actually touched heaven before he fell.”

Christoph looked away again. “Maybe we aren’t meant to force our way into heaven like that,” he concluded.

I thought about the birds Christoph had saved that night. Wondered if they hated the ground because they knew they were created for the sky. Wondered if that was why the bravest bird had tried to escape. Wondered if birds and people were all just the same.



**THE BOXER**

*film photography by Annie Churdar*

## CAROLINE RITCHIE

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*Written by Noelle Hisnanick*  
*Photography by Julia Madden Sears*

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Walking into the studio with Caroline Ritchie, I feel like I'm entering a sacred place. To Caroline it is sacred, for her art is inseparable from her faith. Taped on the wall of her workspace are Bible verses and a small picture of Caravaggio's *Paul's Conversion on the Road to Damascus*—reminders to her of the spiritual purpose behind what she creates.

Laying out on the paint-splattered floor and leaning against the wall is her work of the past year: paintings and drawings based on photographs that belonged to her grandmother. There is a portrait on a nearby easel that shows a dark-eyed woman with her hair in big 1940s curls. "She passed away the day after my mom was born so I never knew her," Caroline explains. The painting is entitled *Revealed Revelation* and was a way for her to learn about the grandmother she never met and reveal a memory that might otherwise have been lost.

The other artwork that crowds the space looks like poster-sized vintage snapshots of people from the past. "I'm just bringing their story—which is still important to the Lord—back to life," Caroline says. For her, making art from her grandmother's photographs is just another way to incorporate faith into her work by showing how God can speak through the lives of those who have lived before her. She also talks about how one of her English ancestors was a jester for King George, but that's another story.

Family is an important part of Caroline's art and life. Growing up in a suburb of Atlanta, she found, and continues to find, inspiration as an artist from her older brother who also likes to draw. Her whole family is supportive of her passion for drawing and painting, reminding her not to give up. But she doesn't just get support from her biological family, she also gets encouragement from fellow art students—a group she considers a sort of family to her—with whom she feels a strong sense of "comradery." It has been a vital part of Caroline's creative journey to be surrounded by those who encourage her not to listen to the naysayers who doubt the value of a career in art.







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*“When others challenge her with the question, ‘What can you do with art?’ she tells them that ‘God’s gifted me this way.’”*

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“My grandmother came from a family of fourteen,” Caroline says, explaining the large group of people in a drawing called *A Moment from Yesterday*. Caroline uses a variety of means to replicate the effects of time in her work. To make the pieces look more like the sepia photographs on which they are based, she soaks the paper in coffee and tea. With others, she paints on different fabrics to incorporate the idea of people being woven into a family line while still being unique. Her grandmother’s portrait is painted on an old dress and a zipper runs across the canvas. Some of the pieces also incorporate the idea of the present meeting the past; she puts these drawings in a plexi-glass “skeleton” frame to imply how one’s mind encases a memory or story.

From an early age, Caroline’s heart was drawn to what she could create with a pencil. “I used to try to be a fashion illustrator and have my own company called Caroline’s Designs,” she says, laughing. Still, she knew early on, even as a child, that she wanted to do something with painting and drawing as a career. When others challenge her with the question, “What can you do with art?” she tells them that “God’s gifted me this way.” It is this quiet confidence in God’s purpose for her art that makes her open to many possibilities after Anderson University, including graduate school or teaching. Her “ultimate passion,” though, “is to incorporate ministry with art.” For Caroline, artistic creation always comes back to the fact that through her art she can help and encourage others. “Art,” she says, “is a way that you can minister to people, a vessel to speak through, a way to communicate without words.” Through her art, Caroline is telling a story. She is revealing the story of her family and their spiritual history. A story of love, grief, and joy—one that will speak to those who see her work in a deeply timeless way.



# CAROLINE RITCHIE

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*three graphite, coffee, and tea on paper drawings & two acrylic  
on fabric paintings listed in the order in which they appear*

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**PAGES 59–63**

## **ALSA & VIRGENIA GRAHAM**

*22 x 30 in.*

## **A MOMENT FROM YESTERDAY**

*22 x 30 in.*

## **MAYBELLE**

*20 x 20 in.*

## **REVEALED REVELATION**

*30 x 30 in.*

## **1935**

*22 x 30 in.*























**NOTHING GOLD**

*digital photography by Julia Madden Sears*



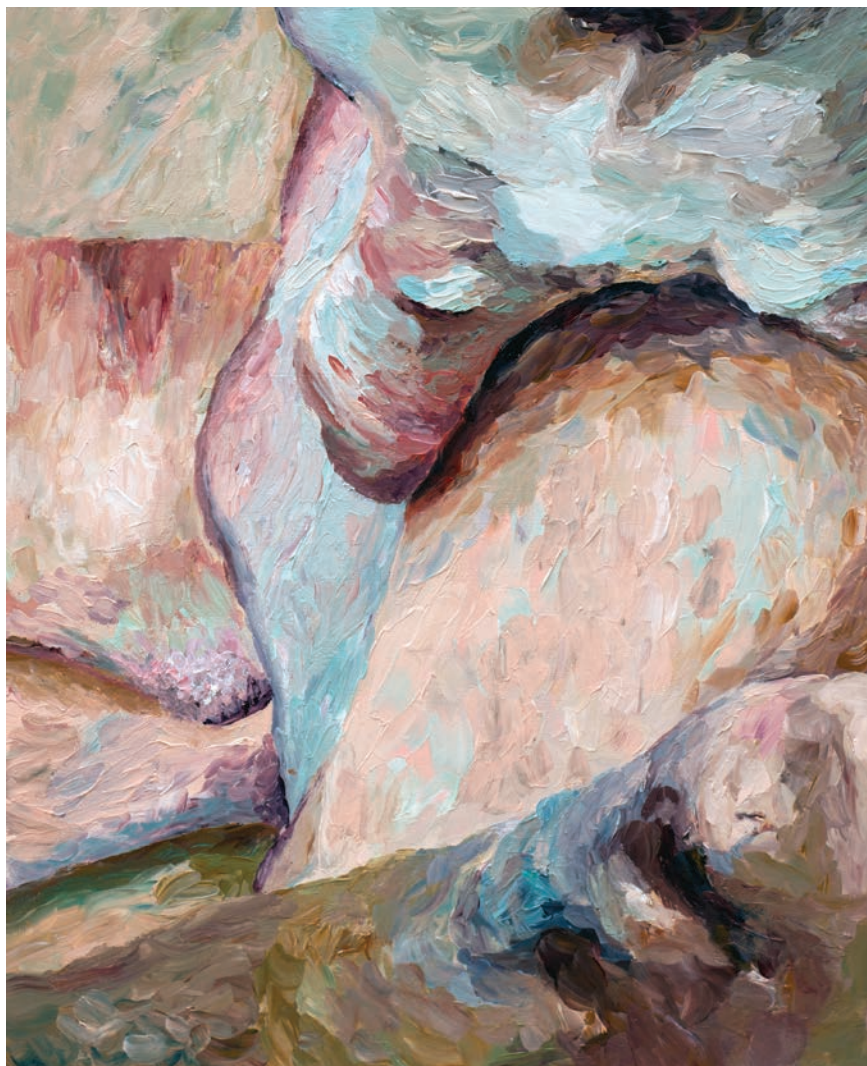


**PAINT CHIPS**

*latex acrylic and mixed-media on wood by Janelle Crocker*







**GRIP**

*acrylic on panel by Lydia Grace Turbeville*

**BETWEEN MY HEAD AND REALITY**

*(L) acrylic & modeling paste on panel by Liz Hewell*



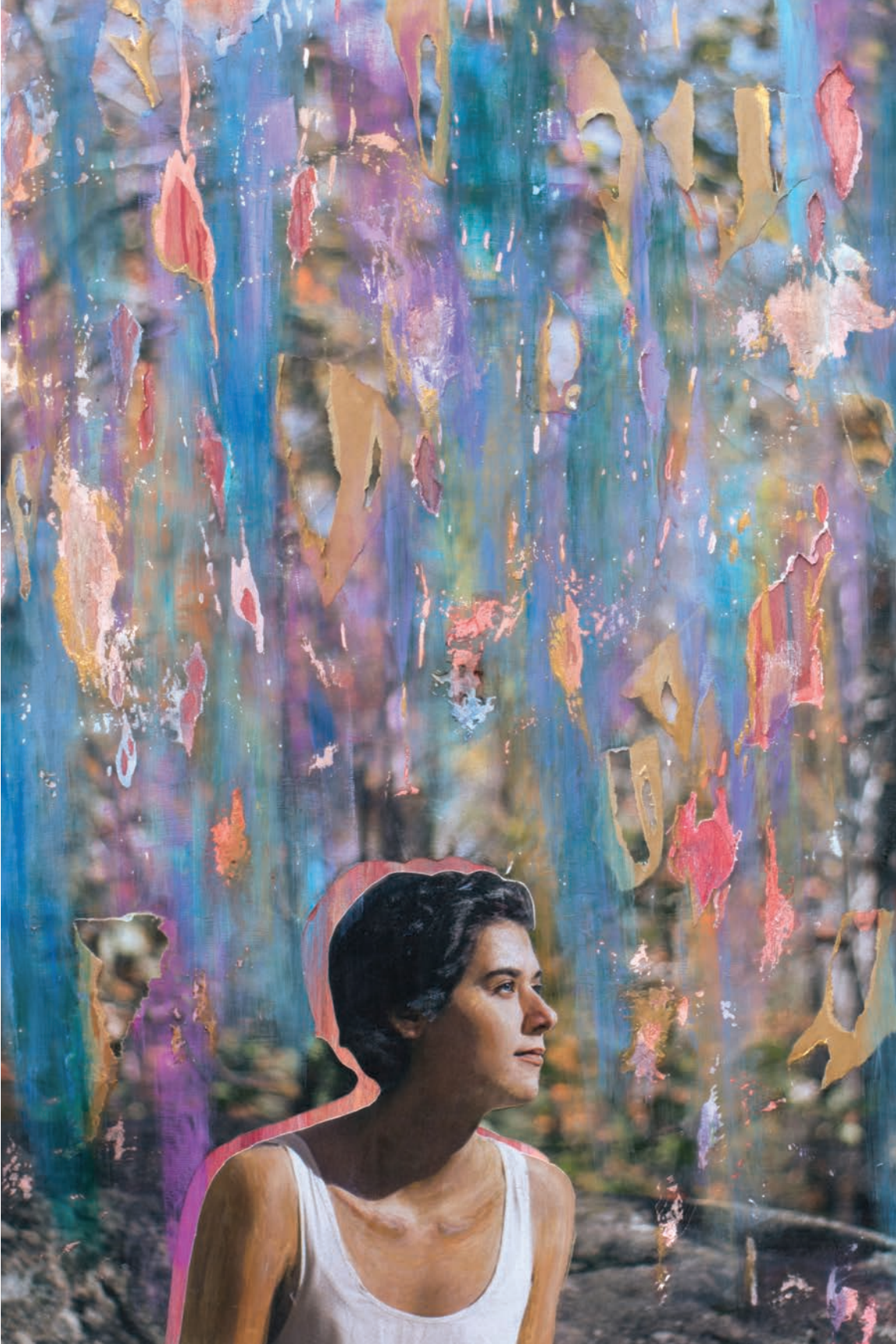
**REFLECTHEAD 1 & 2**

*digital photography by Cameron Ohls*

**UNTITLED**

*(R) acrylic, digital photography & collage on panel by Julia Madden Sears*









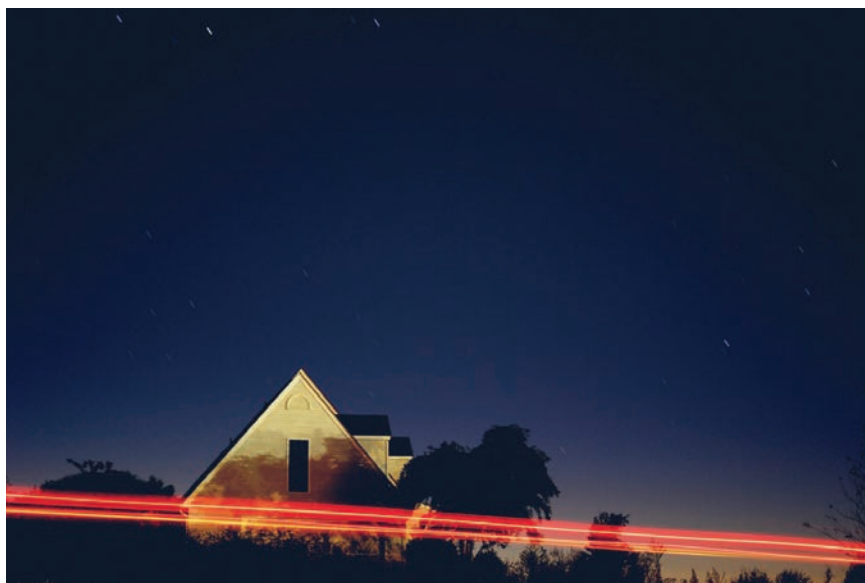


**THE STATE IN BETWEEN**

*acrylic & modeling paste on panel by Liz Hewell*







**IN DISGUISE & NIGHT SHOCK**  
*digital photography by Jared Palomo*

**GRANDMA SANDRA**  
*(L) oil on panel by Hayden Oliver*





**PINK**

*latex acrylic and mixed-media on wood by Janelle Crocker*





**HUMAN MONUMENTS 2**

*film photography by Annie Churdar*



**ANGER: IS IT REAL?**  
*digital drawing by McKenzie Stokes*



**CONFUSION: IS IT REAL?**

*digital drawing by McKenzie Stokes*



## MITCHELL DALLAS HERRING

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*Written by Callie Renfrow & Noelle Hisnanick*

*Photography by Julia Madden Sears*

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It's hard to be in a room with Mitchell Herring without smiling. You can usually find him sitting in a coffee shop, wearing one of his many unique sweaters, writing about anything from a boy cashing in his braces for a leather jacket to a middle-aged woman looking for romance by way of a newspaper ad. For Mitchell, a poet and a writer of fiction and nonfiction, stories are everywhere—to him, nothing is ordinary. The grandson of a Pentecostal preacher, the younger brother to a sister nicknamed Bug, and a perpetual noticer, Mitchell chronicles stories for those who can't yet speak for themselves.

Growing up in an area of South Carolina known as Puddin' Swamp has inspired Mitchell to ground his stories in a strong sense of place. "Shooting Stars and Satellites" is a short story set in "Cobbler," a place based on his hometown. This story is an example of how Mitchell tries to give a voice to ordinary people; Mary-Anne and Mary-Ellen, best friends known as "the Marys," are two characters who don't usually appear, "in the movies," Mitchell says. With their story, he shows the power and inadequacies of friendship as well as the lure and disappointment of conforming to cultural mandates and defining oneself by someone else's standards.

One of Mitchell's major influences, Flannery O'Connor, is also a writer who found her foundation in the Deep South and in the depths of confounding faith. Mitchell, like O'Connor, finds substance in the lives of the fallen and the yearning, the people who, in all their human frailty, make us laugh and then catch us off guard with a deeper truth. For Mitchell, a greeter at Wal-Mart or a teenager in the throes of first love is equally deserving of attention. In fact, you might say that Mitchell's compelling and compassionate world-view consists of this: "I see a story behind that," whatever or whoever *that* might be.

Mitchell encourages other writers to do what he strives to do: "Allow your story to live on its own...allow it to breathe." Of "Shooting Stars and Satellites," Mitchell says that, originally, he wanted the Marys to end







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*“Mitchell’s compelling and compassionate world-view consists of this: ‘I see a story behind that,’ whatever or whoever that might be.”*

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up happy and contented with the deep friendship that they’d found in one another, but his plans changed when he realized that it was *their* story, not his. “Sometimes your characters want more than you think they want,” Mitchell says with a smile. After AU, Mitchell plans to attend graduate school to study literature and writing, but he does not want to use his education to draw attention to himself; instead, he wants to use it to tell the stories of others in a way that is true to the human experience. His goal is to give voice to the lives of ordinary people such as a boy with braces, parents who shake their heads but keep trying, or two friends waiting for love in a small town named Cobbler.









# PICKING WEEDS

Ashley Galloway

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Honoring a body after death is hardly a new idea. Homer, in his epic *The Iliad*, describes in detail the scene in which the Greeks and the Trojans fight for the body of Patroclus, a close friend of Achilles who has died in battle while fighting in Achilles' place. Achilles urges his fellow Greeks to "draw near to the body and mourn Patroclus, in due honor to the dead" (364), and goes on to plan an elaborate funeral as was the custom during the time. There are chariot races and games and sacrifices made in the soldier's honor, and the body of Patroclus is cremated and laid in his tomb.

The book ends with the fallen leader of the Trojan army, Hector, being returned to his people to be honored with a proper burial, but only after he has been horribly dishonored by the Greeks. Achilles drags Hector's body three times around the tomb of Patroclus out of spite, "leaving the body on the ground full length and with its face downward" (387). It is only when Priam, Hector's father and the king of Troy, weeps and prostrates himself before Achilles that Hector's body is surrendered. The disposition of remains carried that much significance; a king would humble himself and surrender his own honor in order to honor a loved one and, in this case, a hero. But, still, a dead man.

How far is too far when it comes to honoring the dead? Growing up in Christian circles, I've seen both extremes when it comes to how we should treat the deceased. On one hand, there are the "body-emphasis" Christians. They obsess over their grave plots facing eastward in anticipation of Christ's return. They're likely to wear a look of obvious discomfort when anyone starts talking about cremation. "Our bodies will be raised again, you know," they say. Yes I do know that, but I don't doubt that the Spirit that raised Christ from the dead can surely call a few scattered ashes back together. What a marvel that will be.

Then there's the "spirit-emphasis" crowd. I'm sure you've seen them. Their catch phrase is "he/she's in a better place." Now, don't get me wrong, it's not as if they recklessly dispose of bodies after the soul has left, but the "shell" of the body has no more value to them. As much as Scripture emphasizes the spirit, I still can't help but think that something's gone a little awry in this philosophy. We are not Gnostics. We are not waiting to escape the material world because it is wicked. Paul writes of the promise of a bodily resurrection in 1 Corinthians 15, but this body will be "imperishable" (vs. 42). The body of the believer is the temple of the Holy Spirit, the very place where He dwells (1 Corinthians 7:19). And if there's still a question as to how important God thinks the physical body is, God came in one. The Creator and King of the world walked the earth in the flesh in the person of Jesus, His ultimate revelation to mankind. Ironically, though, these Christians, like most Christians, like most people, still come to a funeral anticipating a corpse dressed in Sunday best surrounded by floral arrangements. It's the best way we know to pay respects, and so even those who emphasize the spirits value at the expense of the body are compelled to participate in our society's end-of-life practices for the sake of those suffering.

So maybe our contemporary style of honor looks like caskets and carnations, but maybe it doesn't have to. Mary Roach, a journalist who spent a great deal of time immersing herself in the fascinating history of human cadavers, agrees. "Death. It doesn't have to be boring," she writes in the introduction of her book *Stiff*. It doesn't have to be

dressed up in artifice or concealed by masquerade. I borrowed that book from Sarah, a Kinesiology major friend of mine, with whom I regularly have conversations that go something like this: I say I need a break from reading and writing about Theology; I need to relax and just memorize the names of bones for once. She, meanwhile, cries out for relief from weekly exams and wonders wistfully what it might be like to write a “real paper” again. In other words, maybe we have sensed without knowing it that each of our perspectives needs the other—science and theology, flesh and spirit. Last year, as part of her training, Sarah had the privilege of studying in a cadaver lab. She told me stories of how she got to hold a brain or measure a large intestine. “Every theology major needs to see it,” Sarah would say. “I think it’d be good for you.” Sarah, like Roach, knows that death and its evidence are far from boring. She knows that a corpse is more than a hands-on project for nursing majors. It has the potential to lead anyone into spiritual reflection.

I saw my first dead body at age seven when my dad’s Aunt Judy died. Before she passed, she could always be found at the family Thanksgiving reunion at my dad’s Uncle Lynn’s house. These were the only times I saw her, just once a year. We never had any sort of special connection or anything. Quite frankly, I really remember only two things about the woman: she was very sweet to all the children, and she was morbidly obese.

At her visitation, I remember walking through the receiving line with my parents, seeing people I had never seen before, even though I knew I was related to them somehow. Details are too far lost in the fourteen years of more monumental events, but I do recall tears and hugs and flowers...and how much the occasion put me in mind of the weddings I had attended. But the body was the difference. I walked past the family into a different room of the mortuary, and there was Aunt Judy, lying peacefully, clothed with her fancy dress in the plush interior of the casket, her lower half hidden by a closed lid. And just as I remember only two things from Aunt Judy during her life, I remember only two things in her death: her faced was caked with makeup, and she was morbidly thin. She had lost all her weight in the nursing home that past year, my parents said. I couldn’t figure out why her pale powder looked an inch thick, why her bright lipstick looked as if it would never rub off or fade.

The beautiful vulnerability Roach found in dissections and measurements and scientific scrutiny can rarely be found at the mortuary. This is not necessarily a bad thing. We scientific laypersons or surviving loved ones feel the need to cover up, to see a pretty face as the last image because this re-creation or falsification allows us to hold onto what was for one more second and reveal to ourselves how much we care. “One’s own dead are more than cadavers,” Roach says, “they are place holders for the living. They are a focus, a receptacle, for emotions that no longer have one.” Those place holders need to be identifiable. They should exemplify everything that we the living deem as lovely for the physical body. So we cake their make-up, perm their hair, put pearls around their neck. We make them up to be as much like us as we can to diminish the fact that they’re different from us now.

Like Jeff. It would have been easy to assume, looking only at the top half of his body, that he had died peacefully in his sleep. That illusion—that the body is at rest, that the spirit hovers nearby—is part of the service the bereaved pay funeral homes handsomely to provide.

And we wanted that for Jeff. As an only child, my mom considered her cousin Jeff a little brother of sorts, so naturally he was an uncle of sorts for me when I came along. He was my special buddy even back before I could remember. According to my parents, Jeff gave a one-year-old me a toy phone that made obnoxious noises for the sheer joy of

knowing that it would get on my parents' last nerves. He was a jokester like that, but you would've never guessed it when you first met him since he really was rather quiet. The man could fall asleep anywhere at any time (never diagnosed with narcolepsy that I know of...). I still swear that I somehow inherited my love for ice cream and hate for mayonnaise from him.

Jeff was killed the Sunday night before my first day of 8th grade. Mom got the call, and she and Dad told me the news shortly after. Jeff had been on his way to Sunday evening service at church, and a tree had fallen on the cab of his truck. Only milliseconds later and the tree would have landed on the truck's hood. Only milliseconds earlier and the tree would have landed on the truck's bed. A freak accident in the truest sense. Mom left to go tell Jeff's mom what had happened, leaving me home with Dad. I sat in my bed and pulled out my thin green journal with flowers on the front, writing down any thought that came into my mind, hoping that words, even if they weren't audible, could fill the painful silence, silence made painful by absence and by my nagging, magical-thinking sense of responsibility.

Jeff and his wife were going through marriage problems, so my family spent practically every weekend with the two of them and their eight-year-old son Phillip in hopes of providing stability in their rough patch. As much as I loved Jeff, he was taking away my every weekend, and he was taking away my mother with his nightly phone calls to discuss the latest problems with his wife. The night before he was killed, my parents and I ate dinner with Jeff and Phillip at Outback Steakhouse, and then the two of them and my dad went to a car race. I remember waving goodbye to them in the parking lot, thinking to myself that it would be nice if he would go away for just a few weeks.

The casket was open for visitation. The mortician told us that the lower portion of Jeff's body was crushed by the accident. From the waist up, his body was untouched. But then there were his hands. Burned, the coroner said, possibly by the power lines that the tree brought down with it. They were tucked away, concealed by the casket lid. A cadaver's hands, a stranger's hands made available for scientific purposes, might be yellow and swollen, but they would have been on glorious display. No one wanted to see Jeff's burn marks that day.

On a Monday afternoon in November, eight years later, I found myself sitting in my best friend Haley's apartment, feeling that weighty silence that I experienced in my room the night before my first day of 8th grade. Haley's fiancé Nick walked in from his job at Quick Trip Convenience Store, and all I heard for the next few minutes was the clicking of my keys and Nick's occasional snuffle. One of Nick's best friends, Jon, from his home in Massachusetts had passed away over the weekend. He and his friends had ventured out to take pictures at a train trestle around 4:00 Saturday afternoon. Jon and a girl from the group had walked out onto the suspended portion of the tracks, but when a train came into view and the two tried to run, the girl caught her foot on the tracks. Jon ran back and was able to free her foot, pushing her to the body of water below. Then he was struck. Friends watched from the side of the chasm.

Jon died the most honorable of deaths. The girl suffered several injuries from the impact of the water, but came out in stable condition. He is a hero deserving of the highest praise. I learned a couple weeks later that Jon was able to have an open-casket funeral. Like Jeff, Jon's disfigurements were in his lower extremities. His face was perfectly intact. This satisfied something within me that just wanted Jon's family to see his face one last time. They seemed entitled to that at least.

I see that funerals are more for the living than for the dead. There's something satisfying, dare I say comforting, about seeing the dead body of someone you love. Even the most prideful of persons would perhaps, like Priam, risk their own reputations to ensure that they got to see the face of a dear friend one last time. As long as we live in a material world, we'll need a material reminder of those we've lost. It's only natural in

remembering their spirits to honor the bodies in which they resided, whether that means dressing them in pearls or exploring them with scalpels.

When I recently asked my parents why they allowed me to go to Aunt Judy's visitation at such a young age, they said they didn't think twice about it since I had "grown up around death." My mom's father died of lung cancer six weeks before I was born, so I was born into a season of grieving. Mom and my grandmother Nana were always talking about my Papa Rainey, and visiting the grave was a regular Sunday afternoon activity after lunch at Nana's house. Summer or winter, rain or shine, you could probably find my parents, my Nana, and me at Mountain Creek Baptist Church cemetery on any given Sunday around 2:00. I found a picture a while back of me as a baby at the grave, bundled up in a very 90s baby coat with the hood pulled up to block my little ears from the chill, sitting on the gray gravel. I had probably just learned to sit up on my own.

Visiting Papa Rainey's grave was as normal a part of childhood for me as swinging on the swing that Dad put up for me in Nana's backyard or playing Marco Polo with my cousins in my great aunt's pool on hot July days. It's just what we *did*. Charlene, my Nana's firstborn who passed three days after she took her first breath, was buried on the same plot as Papa. She lay in the corner of the allotted space, a small rectangular plot only about three feet long framed by smooth gray stone and a small tombstone with two little lambs atop it and the engraved words "born on earth to blossom in heaven."

I used to say that I wanted to be buried by Papa Rainey, and Nana promised me that I could be. I knew he was a special man from the way my family spoke of him, and being buried beside him seemed to be the closest I could ever come to knowing him. He lived in stories told about him. He was charming and suave, as I learned from Nana's story about the time they first met. He was gentle and patient, as I concluded from Mom recounting his tender "discipline talks" when she had disobeyed. His face, with blue eyes that looked almost like mine, filled an 8x10 frame in Nana's bedroom, but pictures were only a shadow of what had been. His body, concealed by pebbles, was still six feet below me.

What did we do at the grave, you ask? Mostly, we picked weeds. Practically as soon as I began walking, I began pulling up the budding greenery that grew in the corners and on the edges of the gravel, sometimes keeping a yellow dandelion bloom to adorn my hair. Keeping the plot clean was a sign of our respect, a tangible reminder of our relationship with him, a "place holder." Perhaps in our meager modern way, as we pick weeds, we humble ourselves, as Priam did, to honor the body that once strode with us; perhaps, week after week, we honor the spirit that we know now lives with God. But what we mean is this: It's too hard to let go. And this is how it seems: as long as we remember, we don't have to.



# MOMENT

*J.T. Warnock*

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A moment—at sunset—  
dusk and intentions of the sky—  
complete thought and silence—  
exposed naked light—  
everything golden white.





# TIMELESS

*Sarah Murphy*

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A fence of poison ivy and broken trees  
grows behind a cracked "For Sale" sign.  
Bits of half-buried broken glass  
and rusting beer cans  
hide among the brown oak leaves.  
Fragments of light flash off the creek,  
while oyster shells lie baking in the mud.

An old, weathered dock  
with green, barnacled feet  
sits firmly in the brackish water.  
Arms outstretched and bare,  
covered with age spots and carved memories.  
A young girl climbs on his lap,  
sweeping the water with her toes.



# RAINIER

*Margaret L. Campbell*

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Blinking sleepily,  
I breathed in the warm scent of my dark coffee  
and watched the chill waters of the sound  
slip beneath the ferry's foot  
and fall behind us in a creamy wake.  
I could still trace the horizon—  
the tumbling range of mountains  
bounded the sky in jagged, snowcapped ranks.

But suddenly,  
we turned a bend and spread out  
beneath the pale blue of the morning sky  
a lonely mountain stretched from earth to heaven.

The clouds that hid the peaks of other mountains  
crowded in subjection around its feet.  
All things bowed before it,  
trees bowing with the movement of the wind,  
the city crouching down,  
docile as a cat before a lion.





## SHOOTING STARS AND SATELLITES

Mitchell Dallas Herring

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The church had been praying for Mary-Ellen every service. She came home from college to move back in with her mother, just for her mother to pass away the next year. A brain aneurism, it was sudden, unexpected, and inevitable. Mary-Ellen put on some weight, starting with the funeral food, and in no time lost her job at the county Probate Office. No man to speak for her, the church paid her a little something to keep the books on Saturdays. Her mother had left her name in the prayer box. “Mary-Ellen: May the Lord grant her love.”

Her degree was in business, but her goal was to be a housewife. Since Jesus was the only man to ever love her, though, and He was taken by the church, she sat at home as a house-bachelorette watching television shows and munching snacks. But there was still love. Through thick and thin, she had Mary-Anne. The two grew up in Calvary Church’s private school right before it shut down. “The Marys” they called them, “Ellen” and “Anne” lost in the laziness of excusing extra syllables. The two spent recess together in the fenced-in playground behind the church playing house, recruiting boys from the swings to come over and be their husbands.

The playground was a woody little area with the acreage of a large bathroom. It only had to fit eight students at any given time, since enrollment dropped when the big church in the city cashed in on private education. The swings took up most of the space, but just out of reach from them was a picnic table. Here, the Marys lived together with Freddie McElveen and Thomas Green.

“I’ll make the boys dinner before they head out to work,” Mary-Anne said one day.

“You do that and I’ll sweep the porch,” Mary-Ellen chimed in.

Mary-Anne went out of the fence to a tree and tore off a piece of its bark. Mary-Ellen followed and picked up one of the tree limbs. They walked backed into the playground and Mary-Anne gently placed the bark onto the table, sprinkling it with leaves. “Dinner’s served!”

“Aw, man,” Freddie said, “you made spaghetti *again*?” He poked at the leaves with a twig already set out as silverware. Mary-Ellen started brushing the ground with her tree limb.

“But at least it’s leaps and bounds better than Mary-Ellen’s cooking,” Thomas spouted. “That fish she fixed last night made me sick!”

Mary-Ellen, embarrassed about her cooking, swept more fervently at the ground with her tree limb. *It wasn’t that bad, I don’t think.*

“Her fish wasn’t so bad,” Mary-Anne said. “I even kept leftovers because it was so good! Let me get it from the fridge.” She reached down underneath the picnic table. She held out a piece of bark hiding underneath from yesterday. She pretended to take a bite out of it. “See? It’s still good.”

“Whatever you say, weirdo,” Freddie said. “We men have to go to work now.” Thomas and Freddie went to the swing set and started swinging, hoping to make enough to pay the rent that week.

The “Marys” stayed best friends their entire lives, and at forty, every Friday night, they talked on the phone after watching their favorite teen drama, *Angst*.

“Mary-Anne, what did you think about the finale this season?” The show had just finished up that Friday night. The producers ran a huge cliffhanger every year, and that year the lead couple split up.

“I thought the satellite was beautiful! The way it came crashing down behind the car.”

“But do you think Mallory will take him back?”

“I don’t know if he’ll want to go back.”

Mary-Ellen wiped off the cracker crumbs from her lap and grabbed her laptop from beside the recliner. She pulled up the fan-based website she frequented about *Angst*. The forum was blowing up with comments about the choices made this season, particularly Paul’s coldness to an arguing couple in a parking lot. “A real man would have stood up for her,” one commenter said. Another refuted, “But it wasn’t any of his business!”

Mary-Ellen replied, typing, “I would have died if Paul risked his life to save me!!!”

Mary-Anne heard her typing over the phone and said, “You’re already hitting the message boards? What are people saying?”

“Oh, you know, what they usually say, how Mallory deserves better than Paul.”

“Well they’re not wrong, he’s kind of a jerk.”

“No way. Paul is a beautiful angel!”

Mary-Ellen often fantasized about Paul. She dreamed that one day he would show up outside her home, converted to Christianity and off of the drugs that that lady-of-the-evening Mallory obviously led him to take. Mary-Ellen would be a good Christian wife to that sweet young man, and marrying a twenty-two year old would be enough to help her forget she’s forty.

She turned the television off and moved the laptop off of her stomach. She looked at the photos on one wall of people from the *Old Time Religion* and twice as many pictures of Periwinkle, her mother’s cat, on the other. Periwinkle’s pictures covered an entire wall to her right, and in the center of those photos was a single picture of Mary-Ellen age seven. The sleeves of her dress went down to cover her wrist and the dress itself was long enough to cover her ankles. Her shoes were white with a flower clasp at the end, holding her feet in. When they had guests over, they would ask her mother why there was only one photo of Mary-Ellen and so many of the cat. Her mother would say, “Because I love the cat more.” But Mary-Ellen knew she was joking. Still, one time, when she came home from college her freshman year, Mary-Ellen herself asked her mother. It was then her mother pulled out a photo album from under the end table. Inside were pictures of Mary-Ellen no one had ever seen before.

“Why not put these on the walls?” Mary-Ellen asked. “We can take some of that stupid cat down.”

“I don’t know if I want to share these yet.”

But that wasn’t to say Periwinkle wasn’t a beautiful cat. He was, in fact, the envy of Cobbler for a while. “A rare breed,” the pastor said when he visited. “The world is running out of orange cats.” Periwinkle died a month after her mother passed away, they say because of heartbreak, but Mary-Ellen was convinced that cats don’t have hearts—unless maybe it was her mother’s. It seemed like Periwinkle had filled the void after her father left when the church switched over to its contemporary self to keep up with the ongoing trends brought in with the Charismatic movement. He begged her mother to join him, but she wouldn’t let go of her tradition. Mary-Ellen didn’t know the finer details, but her mother told her after the split, “You’re married to Jesus first, baby. Jesus chose you, you choose Him too.” Even though she gave her this advice, her mother became very protective of Mary-Ellen. She was afraid that if Mary-Ellen were ever

confronted with the same choice, she would choose different, that maybe Mary-Ellen wasn't as strong in the Spirit as she.

During that same visit, Mary-Ellen asked her mother why she never remarried. "Good love only comes once, Mary-Ellen, and your daddy was a good love."

"So why isn't he here if his love was so good?"

Her mother paused for a moment, struggling for words to get past the question's hurt. "He was a good love for me, Mary-Ellen, but that doesn't mean I was a good love for him."

Mary-Ellen let down the footstool part of the recliner and switched the phone from one ear to the other. Mary-Anne was ranting about Paul on the television show, saying, "If Ethan had *ever* treated me like that, he would have had another thing coming!"

Ethan was Mary-Anne's only boyfriend. They dated for a year and a half directly after Mary-Anne's only successful crash diet. It was the "ice cream diet," which did not really involve ice cream much at all. It actually had almost nothing to do with anything at all, and that was the point. Ethan broke up with her when she gained the weight back, all five pounds. Mary-Anne still blames it on that weight gain. Although that was nineteen years ago, she dangled that one relationship over Mary-Ellen's head, because she believed that failing was better than nothing.

"I would have knocked his teeth out!" She continued, and Mary-Ellen could hear her crumpling up a soda can. "I would have crushed his face in if he ever had talked to me like that!"

After a few more empty threats to Ethan, Mary-Ellen asked to get off the phone. She had to be up in the morning to run the books at the church, at least that was the excuse she gave Mary-Anne.

An older member of the church, Ms. Margo who was sixty and unmarried herself, once told Mary-Ellen that the Lord told her that the love of her life hadn't given up searching for her yet. Ms. Margo was convinced the Lord even had a man out there for herself. She testified in church that God had plans for their beloved bookkeeper, because, "Man is not meant to be alone, honey."

So, Mary-Ellen interpreted that prophecy to mean God's mate for her was trying to find her through any means he could. She had already spent a lifetime waiting in a bookshop like the girls on the television, so she resorted to something more "adult": personal ads.

On the kitchen counter was *The Parcel*, the county newspaper, dated a week ago. A heart was drawn around a personal ad from a "Country Gentlemen" requesting someone, "Under 43. Please be familiar with fish tackles and baking sweets."

Mary-Ellen replied to the address, sending a letter written in calligraphy she picked up writing the front of the church bulletin. Her reply, of course, listed every baked sweet she had ever prepared for the church bake sales. Before her father left them when she was in eighth grade, he taught her every fish lure the supermarket had to offer. But most important, she said, was her unending love for Jesus, a love he must reciprocate, "for this to work."

He replied. His name was Dale, he was forty-four and in a committed relationship with the Lord, but not taken. He liked the fact that she knew about bait and was even more impressed with the cakes she'd baked. They exchanged phone numbers, and for the first few nights they talked on the phone until the early morning. The night before last, they were up until 3 AM discussing different hair products they used.

She was lying on the bed holding the phone against her ear when Dale said, "I'm not going to lie to you, Mary-Ellen. I'm bald."

"I don't mind. Most good men are."

They both laughed and Dale said something about it not being funny, and in the middle of laughing he asked, "So what do you look like?"

Mary-Ellen loosened her grip of the phone and it fell onto her bed sheet. She picked it back up, but barely. She teased, "Like heaven."

"No, seriously, what do you look like?"

She got off the bed, standing up straight. She looked into the mirror at her stomach, pushing it in with her palm. She turned to her side, pushing it in deeper. "Like a woman."

"Mary, I told you I'm bald! Give me a little something."

Mary-Ellen took her index finger and her middle finger, widening them up like a pair of scissors. She pinched the part of her stomach folding over her pajama pants between them, as if to cut it off. Her hands couldn't slice through any of it, though, and all of her fat was still there when she let it go. "My mama said my eyes were the prettiest part about me. Most men like brown-eyed girls."

"Are you close with your mama?"

That conversation lasted until 4.

But that night was the night she said she would meet up with him after her show ended, meeting at a restaurant halfway between Cobbler and the city. She had another hour to get ready; they weren't meeting until 8:30. Dale didn't get off work until 7:30 himself. He said he was in construction, but that he did more than hold a sign.

Mary-Ellen went into her bedroom and looked at the clothes she had laid out: a black dress, a pearl necklace, black flats, and spandex. Around age 28, a few years after her mother past, her weight peaked, and the spandex was all she could count on to control her surplus. Twelve years later and she was the same size, although sometimes smaller when the spandex was freshly dried. She took off her pajamas and slid her legs into the elastic, covering her thighs and everything else that, she told herself, most people were indifferent to. She looked in the mirror when she was done. Her body was covered in the blackness of her best-kept secret, this modern corset. Everyone at church commented that she had lost a lot of weight, and Ms. Margo in particular let her know how much of a catch she was. She forgot to wear it to church one Sunday, and she felt convicted to go home and put it back on. The church pew didn't feel right without support.

Mary-Ellen put her hands to her waist to measure her stomach, trying to pull her fat back even more. This was the "hand rule," a concept she became familiar with the moment she entered high school. In ninth grade, Mary-Anne established this rule when they both wanted to lose some weight before they started dating *real* men. The hand rule dictated that a woman wasn't datable until her stomach didn't go beyond her hands when held at the waist. The Marys believed that when a girl could wrap her hands around her stomach, that's when she would fall in love. They picked this idea up from Mary-Anne's cousins living in the city. "If you want to marry a real man, you're gonna have to look like what he wants." Mary-Anne asked what a real man wanted. Her cousins gave her a magazine about television stars called *Celebs*.

Even in adulthood Mary-Ellen subscribed to that magazine. A current issue sat on her bedside table with a cover photo of the actor who played Paul on *Angst*. Paul looked at her while she scratched the side of her stomach, wanting so badly for her fingers to reach her belly button. She met his gaze and started crying. Mary-Ellen couldn't even reach past her love handle. The tears started coming harder when she put a second hand behind the first, and even with another arm's length and the help of her spandex, she couldn't touch her navel.

When the phone rang, she forgot about Paul. She ran to her bedside table to pick up the phone, and it was Dale. He'd just got off work, and, "I tell you, Mary-Ellen, I can't wait until the night to talk to you. During the day, all I can think about is your voice."

"I like your voice, too."

"Have you been crying, sweetie?"

"I just miss my mama tonight," she lied.

They talked for a while about something heavy, when Dale didn't plan to talk

about anything at all.

“Mary-Ellen, I just want to be upfront about something.”

“What is it, Dale?”

“I just want you to know, I don’t know if I can be involved with anything heavy right now. If you’re still grieving over your loss, I don’t know if I can help you with that.”

“I promise it’s not like this all the time.”

They were silent for a moment when Dale finally ended the phone call. “I’ll meet you at the restaurant, all right, Mary-Ellen? I’ll catch you there.”

Mary-Anne’s cousins gave them mostly things the church considered contraband at the time, like *Celebs* and a stereo that the girls would take into the woods at night during high school. The boys at school didn’t want anything to do with them outside of playing house in elementary school, so they filled that domestic void with the charming voices of boys on the radio. Mary-Anne herself fell in love with a radio host who came on every Friday night saying, “You’re listening to 1530, The Polkataligo.” He would then play the same round of folk music each time. It was a wonder they didn’t take him off the air.

One time, Mary-Anne claimed, some of her cousins from the city invited her to a party where the mysterious radio host was DJing. Her mom let her go visit that weekend and she went out.

“He was so hot, Mary-Ellen, let me tell you, he was so dapper!”

“Dapper? What’s hot about dapper?”

“I don’t know, Mary-Ellen. He was a sophisticated kind of hot. Like a *real* man!”

But the truth was, he was sixteen and he was playing records his mom bought him for Christmas. He thought he was “edgy” because he had his own pirate radio station. The party itself was at a low-key coffee shop with the same number of patrons as an ice cream parlor that sold only ice without the cream. He had terrible acne that had dermatologists scrambling for answers; nothing they prescribed worked well enough. His name was Nathaniel, and he really hated it if you called him “Nathan” or “Nate” because, “If I wanted to be called that my mom would have named me that.”

But it didn’t matter because he had a voice. “He was something special,” Mary-Anne claimed, “and he looked like he belonged on the cover of *Celebs*.”

“So his voice really won you over?”

“Sometimes you hear someone and you’re in love.”

Mary-Ellen suffered the same fate, falling in love with the voice of the band Starship. “Nothing’s Gonna Stop Us Now” was topping the charts and Mary-Ellen’s heart. In her mind, Mickey Thomas would come from behind the trees singing it to her and she would sing Grace Slick’s part and everything would be perfect like Eden.

But that didn’t happen. Instead, Mary-Anne would fill in, and the two would sing duets, loud and bold, laughing every time. The weekend after Nathaniel, both of them listened to the song in silence. It was the summer of 1987. They laid down on the blanket on that Friday night, ignoring the pounding heat thunder in the background and wondering why Mary-Anne’s mom hadn’t called them in yet in case of rain. The sky was cloudy and dark, it was 7 at night, and they had revival in the morning. Mary-Ellen’s dress that her mother made covered her ankles and her wrists, but it couldn’t guard her ears and heart from the voice of lead singer Mickey Thomas. Mary-Ellen asked,

“Do you think anything could stop us?”

“What do you mean? Stop us from doing what?”

“From anything.”

“Like what?”

“Like...what would you say if I told you I wanted to marry Mickey Thomas? What’s stopping me from doing that?”



Mary-Anne sat up and played with the grass beside the blanket. She looked into the woods. They were as dark as possible without the sun actually being down. Fireflies flew between the trees, and just beyond the trees was the marsh that the Pocatatego River ran through. Her eyes were fixed on something beyond even that, looking somewhere beyond where she was. "I don't know."

"And what about Nathaniel? What's stopping you from getting him?"

Mary-Anne looked down at her dress. Her mother started letting her wear things that went up to her knees, which was a gift like white elephants. She could see her thighs when she lay down. She smoothed her skirt down to cover them, but for some reason seeing them made her calves look weird too even though it was difficult for calves to be "weird." She lay down on her side and held her hand on her waist. "I don't know, Mary-Ellen."

"What about this?" Mary-Anne turned to see Mary-Ellen holding her hand at her side, stretching her fingertips to try to touch the front of her stomach.

Mary-Anne clutched her own side in response. "There is that."

And "that" never left. Mary-Ellen hung up the phone with Dale and grabbed her pearls before starting out the door. She passed by the mirror, warning herself not to look, but she caught a glimpse of her "little" black dress on her way out. In the car, Mary-Ellen turned the radio to her favorite 80s classic station. The radio host announced a meteor shower that night, starting around 10:00. He recommended finding somewhere out in the country where the city lights wouldn't mess up the view. Even though she was nervous, Mary-Ellen felt confident that a meteor shower had to be a sign from God that this was her night. A meteor shower was much more romantic than a silly satellite on *Angst*. Finally, something *Celebs* would be proud of.

The drive didn't take long, and she was fifteen minutes early, in fact. *Fixin's and Mixin's Grill and Bar, Open 'Til Late*, the sign read. The neon "Open" sign hung above a menu on the outside. "Friday Nights: Fried Chicken and Waffles," Mary-Ellen read. "Lord, this really is my night." She walked in and asked the host for a table. "Two," she said pulling her dress down in the front. The server initially sat her in the middle of the restaurant, but she asked for a seat by the window. She wanted them to watch the stars fall while they fell in love. She also wanted to be on the lookout for when he pulled up.

Mary-Ellen looked around the bar, noticing that it had once been a service station. She looked outside and saw where the concrete in front had holes where gas pumps once stood. The outside of it had been remodeled, but the inside was still the same. It would be really difficult to disguise a service station as a restaurant without starting completely over.

*I really hope Dale is a good love for me*, Mary-Ellen thought now leaning against the window. *Our love is going to be worthy of film*. Everyone in the restaurant was clearing out, the dinner parties that had lasted too long. The only people still eating were young couples because, for them, the real night hadn't begun yet. At 8:45, Mary-Ellen was the only customer in the place over thirty.

She spun the ice cubes in her glass around with her straw, and at one point she looked up and thought she saw him. She thought she saw a man in the parking lot underneath a streetlight wearing a hat. The hat made it difficult to tell if he was bald. She got up to head outside, just in case, but by the time she got to the doors he was gone and a truck was driving away.

At 9:00, she picked up her cell phone and called Mary-Anne. "What are you doing tonight?"

"I'm still sitting at home."

Mary-Ellen explained to Mary-Anne the terrible thing she had done, answering a personal ad in the newspaper, talking with a construction worker named Dale,

and now being stood up. She told her this without urgency, without drama, as if it were an old familiar tune. Mary-Anne said, "Wow, he's a jerk."

Mary-Ellen nodded. "I know, and now I'm alone on chicken and waffles night."  
"Chicken and waffles? Let me slide some slippers on."

Mary-Anne showed up at 9:15 in her pajamas and slippers. She slid into the chair in front of Mary-Ellen, and they both ordered the chicken double fried.

"I could have sworn I saw him pull up," Mary-Ellen said.

"Well if he did, he's a jerk. You can't leave a beautiful woman waiting. I swear, if Ethan would have stood me up..."

They dined and talked about *Angst* and the rumors for next season. There's no way any one on the message board was buying television's dream couple splitting up for good, even though the way Paul left Mallory hanging on the telephone was "a sign from God they just shouldn't be together," as Mary-Anne put it.

"Exactly," Mary-Ellen said. "He belongs with me."

Mary-Anne laughed.

Mary-Ellen wiped greasy fingers on a thin napkin and dabbed the corners of her mouth. "But really, Mary-Anne, what's stopping a woman like me from getting a guy like him?"

"Twenty years, to start off with."

"But other than that?"

Mary-Anne looked at her empty plate for a moment, as if she might be able to divine an answer from traces of syrup. She shook her head. "I don't know."

Mary-Ellen shook her head, too, as she reached for her purse. But from the corner of her eye, she saw a young couple. Standing in the parking lot as if they didn't know whether to come or go, they looked through the window as if searching for something. The boy was no older than twenty-two, six-foot three, skinny, and dapper. He wore a white button up. The girl was petite and wearing thick-rimmed glasses. Her dress was a floral print and strapless. Her collarbone was completely visible, and seeing it made Mary-Ellen grab at her own.

After a moment, the girl eased herself into the boy's chest. He wrapped his arms around her and the moment he did, the meteor shower started. It was like watching a scene from a television show.

The girl sighed, and Mary-Ellen thought she heard her whisper, "It's beautiful."



# CRACKS

*Virginia Harris*

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Opening the barn door had the same effect as looking through an old photo album. Specks of dust floated in the air, illuminated by the light flooding through the cracks and gaps in the roof. Maria watched herself, forty-five years ago, climbing up the rickety ladder, swinging from the rope tied around one of the ceiling beams into a large pile of hay. She heard the laughter of her little brother and sisters, quickly following her lead. Even now the barn had the same, musty smell of livestock and farm equipment. Once they had grown too old for games, the building had become something of a storage space. Furniture distressed by too many beverages without coasters and too few proper cleanings was strewn across the ground, weighed down by trinkets and broken flower vases and even a typewriter. A dark, cobwebbed corner was home to mattress-bare springs and a cracked headboard.

Maria pulled her work gloves from the back pocket of her elastic-waisted khaki shorts. She stretched them over her naked knuckles and began collecting her treasures: a dresser that, if painted white, would go nicely with the pink that she had chosen for the walls; a floral lampshade, a vanity mirror, and two porcelain dolls, once named Chessa and Lorraine, now lying cracked underneath the weight of the mattress. Maria began to whistle as she took another moment to look around the abandoned barn. She saw herself, forty-five years ago, playing house in the corner, cooking imaginary meals for an imaginary husband. And she saw two porcelain dolls, one on each hip.



## CALICO

*Yvonne Didway*

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Dear You,  
 I hope your day is going well.  
 Mine is fine, I suppose.  
 I saw you today,  
 Looking for something under your house,  
 I hope you find it soon.  
 I appreciate you reading my letter,  
 It really does mean a lot.  
 I'm sure by now you are wondering who I am.  
 Honestly, I'm not even sure.

I love to laugh, just as anyone would.  
 My skin burns too easily,  
 Wearing clothes is uncomfortable—  
 With or without the burn.  
 I like music—the old kind,  
 when the record pops and crackles.  
 Chocolate is good, but dark is best.  
 My friends drink creamer and sugar.  
 I drink coffee. Deep roasted.

You probably think I don't have friends,  
 Due to this letter to you.  
 But in fact I do. I have lots of friends.  
 None are loyal.  
 Their laughs are obnoxious.  
 No one actually gets each other's jokes.  
 They try to talk philosophical,  
 And define the "meaning of life."

I hate the cold—the deep ache in the air.  
 It just frizzes my calico hair.  
 I'd rather have crisp skin in the summer.

Thank you for taking the time to read my ramble,  
 No one nowadays takes the time to just listen.  
 It's just nice to be real with someone—no façade.

—Anonymous

P.S. I'm sorry I killed your cat.



# FRENCH PRESSED

*Virginia Harris*

---

There's vulnerability in coffee shops:  
Found in the strong smells of espresso,  
Wafting through the clatter of mugs against wooden tables,  
Found in threads of vintage furniture,  
Creaking and squeaking from the long-neglected sofa springs,  
Found in the haze of conversation.  
Telling stories, verbalizing feelings easier now,  
With an acoustic soundtrack present,  
Secrets pour out like black liquid, steaming in new vessels -  
Hot to taste, bitterly burning,  
Warming you from your core to your extremities.





## LIKE AN HOURGLASS

Taylor Kaiser

---

Coy walked into the waiting room as Stephanie and her mom were called into the back from the check-in/check-out desk. It was cold. Stephanie's best friend Courtney sat down in the chair next to Coy. Courtney was a graduate student at LSU. She was tall, black, and very pretty. She pulled out a script to study lines for an upcoming audition. A soap opera was playing on the small TV mounted to the ceiling. He could hear the high-pitched noise that tube televisions make through the heated dialogue that was only just audible. It was somewhere on the spectrum between a ring and a buzz. Coy remembered watching this soap opera with his mother on days he was too sick to go to school when he was younger. Some of the actors were the same. He had recently read an article about the careers of soap opera actors. The article referenced a few of the actors from this particular show. It talked about how many of the actors that make it onto soap operas have life-long careers and then it listed a few names of those who had died while still playing roles, including a quick blurb about their accomplishments. It was always either soap operas or *The Price is Right*. They always reminded him of being sick as a kid. Bob Barker was dead now too.

Coy looked to his right at the closed door that his girlfriend and future mother-in-law had disappeared behind. An advertisement for shampoo was playing above him and Courtney put her hand on Coy's bouncing knee without looking up from her script. He hated when people asked him to stop bouncing his knees. After they did, it was all he could think about.

But now he was trying not to think about what the doctor was saying to Stephanie. She had been back there a long time—longer, at least, than it took to tell someone everything was fine, that it had just been a fluke, that it shouldn't happen again. He thought instead of when he had gone in to buy the engagement ring that had been hiding at the back corner of his sock drawer for the past few months. The jeweler's store was cold too, but it was different from the cold he was sitting in now. In the store, the air was cold but the lights in the waist-height displays gave off a warmth, as if drawing you in toward their diamond-studded contents. He was shaking in the store like he was now, but it was different then. *Then* he was about to make the most important purchase of his life, one that gave life and promise to his future. The shaking now was from the cold. The air felt thin, as if the oxygen was being rationed. The TV was still making the flatline ringing. Coy was shivering and the receptionist at the counter was typing with inch-long acrylic nails.

An old man who had reached, or was nearing, his nineties hobbled into the waiting room and piled himself on a corner seat while the younger woman who was with him signed papers at the counter. The man walked slowly, with a cane, and was wearing a neatly pressed suit and expensive shoes. The woman was in her mid-thirties and looked like Salma Hayek. She walked over to a seat adjacent to the old man's and sat down without looking at him. She was dressed very nicely as well. She wore a purple suit jacket, a tight knee-length skirt to match, and very high heels. She had a gaudy gold necklace around her neck, designer sunglasses perched on top of her head, and smacking gum in her mouth.

Coy watched the old man try to get up out of his chair. He halfway rolled to his right, jutting his left leg outward and tried to push his body up away from the armrest. The woman with him stood and helped him to his feet, though she did not rush to do so. Once he was upright and stabilized by his heavily polished cane, he scowled and waved the woman off of him. He made his way to the water fountain under the TV in front of Coy, Selma close behind him.

Coy found himself angry at the man's old age and condition. The patient that he saw leaving the office as they were arriving was old too, at least seventy, and wheezing like Darth Vader with a 15% charge. Stephanie did not belong in this place. She was twenty-three years old. She didn't smoke. She didn't drink too much. She went to church on Sunday mornings. She worked at a soup kitchen every Thursday night, and she had a 4.0. She was the rare kind of person who truly put others before herself. That's what caught Coy's attention about her in the first place. The first time he met Stephanie, he had been stuck on the side of the road for probably forty-five minutes. In the rain. Truck battery dead. Coy had been trying to get in touch with his mother to get her to come jump him off, but the storm had weakened the already dismal cell phone reception of rural Baldwin County, Alabama. Coy had resolved, bitterly, to walk through the rain to the nearest gas station and solicit someone's help when he saw headlights behind him and heard the friendly double-beep of a horn. Stephanie, in her bright red rain boots and rain jacket, pulled over to help. She insisted *she* hook up the cables she had pulled from her trunk—something he was glad for since he only half-way knew how to jump a car off anyway. She also insisted that he stay out of the rain. "You've been through enough already," she said. After they got his truck started, Coy insisted that she let him take her to lunch to make up for her trouble.

The old man had made it to the water fountain and the woman opened her large purse and pulled out a transparent-blue pill organizer with the abbreviation for each day of the week on the top of each section. She opened the *Tue* and emptied the contents into the man's open palm. He raised the three pills to his mouth, but she intercepted the action and removed the large blue one from his hand. He took the *two* pills with water from the fountain and stood up, water dribbling from the side of his mouth. Ms. Hayek glanced around the room to see if anyone saw what she had done, then popped the blue one into her mouth casually as if it were a fresh piece of gum and swallowed, no water needed. As she did this, Coy saw a ring on her left hand, clutching a diamond that was easily five times the size of the one he'd gotten Stephanie. The man smiled and wagged his finger at her. She produced a smile that disappeared the moment she turned her back to him and walked back to her seat. The man spanked her as she walked away and she rolled her eyes, annoyed.

*Oh*, Coy thought, so it's all about the perks. He watched the man struggle to sit back down. At that man's age, any death would be described as *natural*, and soon his wife would be *very* rich.

A second soap opera and half an episode of *Let's Make a Deal* later, Coy was still listening to the old man talk to his absent wife.

"I remember when Steve Conroy lived on Water Street—this was before all the trash moved in to that part of town. And would you believe..."

"Mmm," his wife would reply without looking up from her phone.

"And then Johnny told me that they have him working with the blacks..."

Coy looked over at Courtney after he heard that one, but Courtney was still unwaveringly concentrating on her script. But the man seemed intent on getting a rise out of his wife.

"I heard what Shirley said to you," he said. "No wonder you were so upset!"

And that did it. The woman was all over him, swearing at such a rate and decibel that her husband's hearing aids began to whistle and screech.

The old guy grinned while he adjusted his hearing aids. Coy shook his head. Selma began inspecting her nails. *How can they stand it?*

A woman in scrubs eventually opened the door and called, “Mr. Sibley?”

Mr. Sibley and Salma stood up, after some maneuvering, and walked into the back. Again Coy was left with the cold, the TV, and the silent Courtney.

A few more sick old people checked in at the desk and sat down in the waiting room. Coy thought back to the first phone call he had received after it happened. It was a Friday about a month ago and he’d been working the bar at the restaurant where he worked since noon because he didn’t have class that day. The call was from Stephanie’s mother. She was in hysterics and told him that Stephanie had gotten into a wreck. It wasn’t a very serious wreck, and she seemed fine. She was on her way back to her dorm after grabbing a few groceries at the store. At a back-road intersection, the light turned green, and the next thing she remembered, her car was in the ditch, totaled. But it was old anyway. Coy’s work was only about five minutes down the road and he beat Stephanie’s mom to the scene of the wreck—she was coming from just across the state line, about a 45-minute drive. The Bluetooth radio that Coy had given her for Christmas last year was still playing inside the car. “Wouldn’t it be Nice” by the Beach Boys, he remembered. But she didn’t remember. She didn’t remember anything about what happened. And yet they knew she hadn’t been drinking. Maybe a seizure. That’s what the doctors said. Maybe. They’d have to see. Rule some things out.

Courtney put down the script. “She’s been back there a long time.”

“Yeah, maybe the MRI narrowed it down.” Coy slapped at his knee as if he’d settled something.

“They said that it could be from not eating right.” He nodded. “Or epilepsy.”

“I’ve always told her that she needs to pay more attention to nutrition.”

Courtney had been a part of every health-dieting trend that had surfaced for the previous six years. She had tried to convince the two of them to commit to the Paleo diet. Right, cave dwellers. Stephanie had cracked up at that. Coy, the cave man.

“I’m telling you, I read just the other day that if you eat gluten it can make you seven times more likely to have brain disorders!”

Coy shook his head and half-laughed. He humored Courtney but her pseudoscience was the last thing he wanted to talk about right now—especially if it meant Stephanie had a brain disorder.

“Seriously though, it’s probably nothing. It’s going to end up being nothing,” she said, smiling.

Coy turned around to look out the window, judging the weather, the world.

“We should be on the road right now,” he said.

“Yeah,” Courtney sighed.

Stephanie and Coy were supposed to be road-tripping to see Coy’s father in California. Stephanie had always wanted to go to California and Coy’s dad told them that they had a place to stay if they wanted to drive out. Coy had played-up being excited to see his father and wanting Stephanie to finally meet him. These things would’ve been nice, but the real highpoint of the trip was supposed to be when Coy pulled over and proposed to her as soon as they crossed the state line. He figured a side-of-the-road proposal would be fitting, considering that is where they first met.

Coy ran his finger around the silhouette of the ring in his jeans pocket. Over and over again. He and Stephanie should be in Arizona by now, a few hours away from his proposal. He wondered if it was selfish to even consider proposing now. Maybe he should just hold off until everything settled down. If it turned out to be something bad, if the doctor diagnosed her with a disease or something, would it even be appropriate to propose? It would be what Stephanie would want. She had been dropping some not-so-subtle hints over the past few months that she would be just fine with a

spring wedding. That it would be, “A-okay,” with her. And him too. He wanted to marry her—more than anything. He wanted all the married things with her. He wanted to have three full sets of dinnerware and an extra toaster after the wedding and he wanted to look at her exasperatedly and say, “What are we supposed to do with these?” He couldn’t wait to make mistakes with her. Maybe they would turn out to be over-spenders and live above their means. They might dig themselves into a hole of debt and have to pick-up second and third jobs on the side to surface again. He could accidentally fall for a financial scheme that a work buddy forwarded him. They could see the Grand Canyon.

Whatever it was, good, bad, or indifferent, they could handle it, more than handle it, make it good. Yeah. As soon as she walked out of the wooden door to his right, no matter what, till death do us part, he’d get down on one knee right there.

Besides, she’d be just fine. He felt a little warmer, like his body had just regained homeostasis. She’d be fine. She was probably going to be *just* fine. Like Courtney said, it’s going to end up being nothing. Poor eating habits. She just wasn’t taking in enough calories or something—that was it.

When the door did open and Stephanie and her mom did walk out, the picture was all crazy. Her mom’s face was splotchy, and she was crying. It didn’t make sense. Stephanie was pale, too pale and unsteady. She looked stunned, maybe paralyzed. She smiled, but it was only on one side and trembly.

Brain tumor. Six months.

Bob Barker was standing next to a flailing woman who had just won a set of pots and pans on the TV. The woman behind the counter typed information into the computer. A woman walked into the office, through the automatic-opening door.

“Ooowee, it’s chilly in here,” she said, looking over her shoulder to a wrinkled man leaning over a walker.

Coy shivered and nodded. And looked away.



## DIRT-FILLED SCARS

*Jonathan Kurtz*

---

When my little brother, Jared, pulled the back of my collar away from my neck, cold air rushed down into my snow jacket, raising goose-bumps on my skin just in time to meet the ball of slush he dropped in the opening. Swearing as best a thirteen year-old knows how (and I, having just spent two years in a public middle school, knew quite well), I cringed and tried to push my chest forward so that the snowball would fall out the back of my jacket, but it adhered to my skin and rolled down my spine as if it were the skeletal finger of the Reaper himself. Giggling madly, my brother took off across the snow, well aware he had only seconds before I would be on him. Of course I would give chase; I'm the oldest brother, so I naturally had an ingrained need to assert my dominance. Still swearing, I crunched my way through the snow after him, bending over to craft my weapon of vengeance.

Unless you've spent a few years in a northern area, you're probably prone to a common misconception about snowballs. Many southern natives I've talked to assume that every time it snows in the north, we go out and have snowball fights. The problem with this is that most winter storms don't produce snow suitable to the activity; it's too dry. Snow in the south—in the rare event that it falls—tends to be wet and heavy because it's already melting and is usually gone within a day or less. In the north, where the evidence of a single snowstorm can remain for weeks at a time, the snow is typically dry and powdery—it doesn't stick together. Any snowball crafted from it will crumble or turn into a dust cloud when you fling it. Still, there's a simple trick to compensate for this.

Chasing after my brother, I flung my gloves to the side and packed snow together in my bare palms, letting the heat of my skin melt it just enough to stick. Hands stinging, I hurled the ball at Jared's back. Unsurprisingly—snowballs are not particularly accurate weapons, and I do not have the best aim—it flew over his shoulder. He ducked, pausing just long enough for me to catch up and shove his face down into a snowdrift. The natural order reestablished, I dashed back to my snow fort and started molding snowballs rapid-fire. Alex, my youngest brother, would be joining forces with Jared soon, and retribution would be swift.

Crouching behind my wall of ice and snow, wintery missiles whizzing overhead, a patch of skin on my neck began to burn and itch. My fingertips, too. Though I should probably have been concerned, I chose to ignore it. My brothers had not given up their assault, so I could hardly throw in the towel. It was unthinkable to suggest they might be winning.

Hours later, when we trudged inside and shed our snow gear with sore arms and red faces, the itching had still not gone away. I figured it was nothing serious, but I was still curious.

"Is there something on my neck?" I asked my mother, wrapping my numb hands around the steaming mug of hot chocolate she had just handed me. "It burns a little."

Biting her lip, my mother leaned forward to look. I knew it wasn't good when her eyes narrowed. "Looks like hives," she told me, and I froze. "You might have Raynaud's. Like me."

I did not recognize the word, but I knew what she meant. I knew that although

my mother had lived in Pennsylvania all her life, she bundled up heavily in any weather below sixty degrees. I knew that she sometimes got hives on her ears and neck, and blood blisters on the tips of her toes or fingers.

Even the scientific community does not entirely understand the Raynaud's phenomenon, but it is essentially a genetic condition that causes sudden reduction in blood flow to the extremities in reaction to cold or stress. This happens because the nervous system more or less panics, causing capillaries and blood vessels to constrict, cutting off circulation. Basically, it's accelerated frostbite, and can be rather painful. This is only one aspect, as Raynaud's can affect different people in a variety of ways. When my mother gets cold, for instance, blood stops flowing to her hands and feet. Sometimes the capillaries in her toes burst, causing painful blood blisters, and occasionally she breaks out in hives. These are traits that I, running my frighteningly blue fingers over the prickling bumps on my neck, realized I shared.

"You're allergic to the cold," was my mother's simpler explanation.

This did not strike me as inconvenient as you might expect. After all, Raynaud's is a genetic condition, not a transmittable disease. I'd had it all my life and just not realized it. Of course, now every time I stepped out the door my mother would take extra nagging rights, insisting I wear a thick jacket, gloves, and maybe even a hat or a scarf, but it would only be more of the same, not anything new. If my mother's symptoms were any indication, Raynaud's gets worse with age, but I was only thirteen and not especially bothered.

Quite the opposite, actually. Everyone in my family has a competitive streak, but as the eldest of three brothers (I even competed with my older sister, to a degree), I had a certain status to maintain. This was not helped in the least by the fact that Jared and Alex were constantly trying to outdo me, so I had to show them who was better on a daily basis. Learning that I had Raynaud's only gave me more ammunition for this never-ending competition; you think you're tough? Well, I have Raynaud's. Anything under fifty degrees gives me pins and needles, and anything under forty makes me feel like I'm laying down in a bed of sharp nails. Pain is nothing.

It was just another thing for me to hurl back at them. Have a snowball to the face. My pain tolerance is higher than yours. It all amounted to much the same thing.

It wasn't just at home either.

"You have Raynaud's?" my friends at school would ask. "What's that?" I would happily explain, meaningfully removing my gloves as I kicked the snow under my feet. Their mouths always dropped open as I did this, and they would say, "That sucks! How do you deal with that?"

Oh, you know. I'm just tough as nails. No big deal.

There are moments in friendships, at least among guys, when someone talks about a scar or a particular injury they've experienced. It might just be a little white line down the back of their hand, but they'll make sure everyone in the group sees it, and they'll tell you the story of how it came to be. Once he's finished, somebody else has a scar whose tale they want to impart. The next thing you know, everybody is lifting up their shirts and pulling up their pant legs, trying to outdo each other with their scars and injuries. It's like a game of, "Who's dealt with the most pain?"

To me, the Raynaud's was just another scar to show off. You think that hurt? Well, look at what I deal with every day.

My mother put me to shame, though. Winters became difficult, more for her than for me. Curling into a ball, she'd form a cocoon of blankets next to the woodstove—the heating unit we used because split wood and the sweat required to get it that way were cheaper than pure electric heating. Knowing how she felt, I kept the fire roaring, adding logs so often that it became the norm for my hands to be cracked and bleeding three months out of the year, the moisture in my skin leached by the flames. It didn't help.



My mother, even in three or four blankets, still shivered as her body struggled to push blood to her extremities, and it was not rare to see her limping, her toes so consumed by blood blisters that it was painful for her to walk.

Finally, enough was enough, and shortly before my sixteenth birthday, we relocated to Rock Hill, South Carolina, where we were told the winters were mild and short. Playing hockey with our new neighbors in the cul-de-sac in shorts and t-shirts immediately after opening Christmas presents made my parents nod and say they'd made the right decision. But even in the south, my mother continued to have trouble, trouble I began to share. I started wearing thicker socks when I found a patch of blood blisters on my big toe and began keeping my jacket on when the hives on my neck began making regular appearances. Although the winters were shorter, I listened to my mother when she told me I should wear gloves and two pairs of socks. Instead of stepping out to enjoy the snow, I ignored the fleeting sheets of white that occasionally appeared on the ground. Winter wind slapped my face with gloves made out of needles, and sweaters were my only armor. You can't fight the weather, so the only thing I could do was brag.

So I did. Southerners were even more impressed than my friends up north. Equating the north and cold in their minds, they were shocked that someone who's "allergic to the cold" lived there as long as I did. One of my classmates at the small, Christian school I had started attending, a girl named Cathy, even tried to make me wear her hat when it was windy. In a small, strange way, I was almost pleased by the pain, as if it gave me a right to think I was a stronger, better man.

I felt much the same way when I participated in the US Marine Corps Mud Run in my sophomore year of high school. I never understood why someone thought hosting a four-mile obstacle course—mud pits being a recurring obstacle—with Marines every few feet "encouraging" you to move faster would be a meaningful charity to raise money for military widows, but I didn't stop to ask about it. Slogging through pits of mud with my brother, a classmate named Terry, and Terry's dad, I ignored the twinging pains in my stomach. Mud dripping down our legs, we approached a ten-foot sheer wall—the most dreaded obstacle in the run—talking between breaths about how the four of us were going to climb over it. Terry mentioned he had blisters forming on his feet, but I was too busy to care. Forming a pyramid, we pushed Terry, as the heaviest, up first. Together, Jared and I pushed Terry's father up. When it came time to throw my brother (who was thankfully still smaller than me at the time), I couldn't ignore the fact that I'd had my gall bladder taken out only a week before and still had stitches in my gut to prove it. The cuts burned as I took my brother's mud-encrusted feet in my hands and lifted him high enough for Terry and his dad to grab. Now I was on my own. My first jump, all I got was a scraped face. The second, I had to let out a grunt of pain when they caught my hands, stretching out my torso and dragging my stitches over the edge of the rough wooden planks. I had very little pity for Terry for the remaining two miles, even when his limp slowed him to a crawl. I wanted to tell him to suck it up—look at what I was dealing with.

I didn't have the same advantage after the surgeons put my shoulder back together in college. It came as a surprise to me that I had torn several tendons out of the socket during my years of high school basketball and that repeated dislocations every time I twisted my arm wrong weren't normal. The repair involved a lot of drilling and scraping of the bone, not to mention watching a giant needle push itself into the socket. Waking up with the pain meds worn off and my arm somehow out of the sling was the single most painful experience of my life, but I couldn't brag about it. My sister's new boyfriend, a veteran cop injured in the line of duty, could make it sound like a light scratch.

"This is Joe," my sister, Brittany, said one day. "Joe, this is my brother, Jon."

"Hi," I said, looking up at him. I say "looking up" because at six feet five inches and

easily 250 pounds, he was a monster of a man. Despite all of that, my eyes focused on the twisted patch of scar tissue at the base of his throat.

"How's it going?" he asked, with a lopsided smile and a handshake that was half crushing, half limp. He laughed and made some sort of corny joke about how Britt said I was the smart one.

"What's up with his throat?" I asked my sister after he'd left. I didn't recognize the term "trach scar." Brittany quickly remedied my ignorance, telling me that Joe had been fed through a tube inserted through that spot during his month long coma, the result of going through a windshield with enough momentum to fly another sixty feet before hitting the ground. The nerve damage from that and surgery complications had robbed him of most of his sense of coordination. "What's wrong?" my sister asked when I sat down suddenly.

"Nothing," I told her. "I'm fine."

But I wasn't. It didn't matter how much pain my shoulder was in or how bad my Raynaud's got, I could never compete with Joe. I felt the sting of that loss far more than I ever had ice on my spine, and I had to wonder why I was so bothered. Maybe growing up with two brothers and a father that, as a handyman, frequently disregarded hammer-smashed thumbs and saw-blade nicks, I had this inner need to ascribe to some sort of manliness. Rub some dirt in it. But make sure you also make it clear that you can rub in a lot more than anyone else.

I believed Joe had rubbed in far more dirt than anyone else I knew. I believed that until Christmas break when I met up with Cathy, the girl who used to try to make me wear her hat when it was windy. Going to colleges states apart had made it difficult for us to talk, and we wanted to catch up. We drove into Charlotte during New Years; I wasn't especially interested in celebrating in the city or drinking in the bars or anything to that effect, but I was curious about what the city was like during this holiday, so that's where we decided to go.

Sitting down to watch the people, I asked Cathy how school was going. From the little I'd heard, she been having a rough time.

"Things are going great!" she exclaimed, swaying back and forth in her seat to the music, a huge smile on her face. Then again, I couldn't think of many instances of her face without one. "My grades are picking up, and Ryan and I are celebrating our second anniversary in a few months." I smiled and let her talk. At one point, she chatted with a stranger about *Doctor Who* for a full forty minutes, and I wondered if it ever occurred to her that the guy was trying to take her home.

A few minutes after the stroke of midnight, she turned to me and said, "You know, you're lucky. School has been really easy for you."

"I wouldn't say that," I told her, chuckling. Even if it was only my competitiveness that pushed me to do so well, I worked hard for my grades and wasn't about to let someone say otherwise.

"Well, you don't seem to be having issues. You still have that 4.0, right?" I nodded, and she shook her head, nearly falling from her seat. "I lost that sophomore year. That was tough."

"I've heard that. You never really told me what happened." She avoided my eyes. "Though I guess it's not any of my business."

"Well, I was raped." Her straw slurped at the empty glass, and I stared at her.

"That fall semester. That's why I failed those classes. I couldn't focus on anything."

"Didn't you tell anybody?" She had my full attention now.

She shrugged. "I didn't want anyone to worry. It was my problem. I'm fine now."

"Yeah, now," I said. "But you should have told someone, Cathy! No one would think less of you, and you'd have had some support!"

“Maybe you think so,” she said doubtfully. “I guess I did tell Terry, though.” I recalled the boy I’d pushed over the ten-foot wall years before. “He helped a lot. You know he moved in with his boyfriend, right?”

“Terry is gay?”

“You didn’t know that? Didn’t you notice that he was always having trouble with the school? His family even tried to have him exorcised. He’s had it rough.”

I stared at her, seeing all the dirt she’d rubbed in, while I thought about the boy I’d shaken my head at because he’d fallen behind in a race, lugging wounds I hadn’t taken the time to notice.

She slurped at the ice again. “But we’re okay. We’re both happy now.”

Months later, wearing a tuxedo with my brothers, I followed Joe up the side of the church to stand at the altar, shoulder to shoulder. Looking at his unsteady walk, I wondered what it would be like to be as powerful a man as he must have been, and then have that robbed from you in an instant. I’d had a small experience with that when I injured my shoulder, but I still couldn’t imagine not being able to run anymore. I take pride in my ability to move. I imagined most men did.

I glanced at the trach scar as Joe slid a ring onto Brittany’s finger, knowing that it was the only scar I could see, but that hardly meant it was the only one. I looked around at my sister’s wedding guests, wondering at the scars I couldn’t see. Mine suddenly felt very small.

Sitting at my desk now, my roommate asks, “What are those spots on your neck?” I explain Raynaud’s to him.

“Wow,” he says. “That must really suck. Especially when you lived up North.”

“Not really,” I tell him. “I’ve never known it to be any other way.”



# CALL OF THE WILD

*Allyson Vaughn*

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When I read it for the third time, I got sent to the principal's office for howling in the halls. I was convinced that the sled dogs in the story were wolves. I loved that book. It belonged to my grandfather, my uncle, and my brother before me, and it smells like dust and vanilla. On page 32 there's a small rip from where another kid tore it out of my hand. There are sentences disappearing where my fingers and everyone else's held the pages too tight. The day of the howl, my knees shook in the plastic chair outside the principal's office while my mom told him they could keep me. The night before, I'd tried to sleep in the doghouse. The day after, to give me other interests and show me where my ancestors came from, my mom took me to the Cherokee Museum. I wanted moccasins, so we went to the gift shop and there was a man with a pet white wolf. When I saw it, I remembered how to become a wolf. So I pushed my hand into the wolf's face. My mother screamed. I think she worried that I'd always throw myself at dangerous things.



## LIVING WATER

*Margaret L. Campbell*

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*“They have set aside their black tin  
boxes scratched and dented, spattered  
with drops of pink and blue...”*

—Ted Kooser

The colors bloom across my page as I caress  
the dry pigment with my water-heavy brush  
and guide it slowly across the thirsty paper.  
The colors dance—they have a rebellious mind  
and often stray from the path I had intended.  
Sometimes, I add a little water and steer  
them back into their proper place. Not always.  
Occasionally their antics create a scene  
more beautiful than what I had in mind—  
my creation sub-creates.  
I pull back my heavy hand and watch  
watercolors forming waves that curl  
the pigments in a self-creating spiral.

Now I pick my smallest brush and touch  
the hard, black surface of the pigment cake.  
I hold it poised above the page, so close  
my breath dries the damp colors. Like a heron’s beak  
my brush darts and fixes a black pupil in a sailor’s eye  
so he too can see the beauty of the waves  
that danced on their own across my page.



# LAUGHTER

*Taylor Henry*

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Cold mountain water  
Runs over the warm rocks like  
Watermelon juice.





## BE, BEING, BEN

Anna Irish

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“A girl likes to be crossed a little in love now and then. It is something to think of.”  
—*Pride and Prejudice*, Jane Austen

I was seventeen when I met Ben.

It’s funny how I say met—like we bumped into each other at a party or we were introduced through mutual friends. But in reality what I mean is that I was seventeen when I accepted his friend request on Facebook, the same age that Bella was when she met Edward, the hot-as-heck vampire who wanted to drink her blood. Seventeen.

However, Ben didn’t want to drink my blood; he just wanted to take me to prom. He had started chatting with me over Facebook messenger during my senior year, and it was around the end of winter when we starting talking—when the days were starting to lengthen again and the cold didn’t linger quite as long in the air in the mornings. I could feel the beginning of the warmth of spring and the heat from the fever for high school graduation that this new season had brought with it.

But going to my senior prom was a must. It was my rite of passage and a part of everyone’s life that no high school career is complete without. Bella and Edward went to prom, and so must my Edward and I.

*Dear Jesus, I prayed, not that I’m pretending to know better than You here, but I’m fairly positive that this/he is my destiny.*

So we talked over Facebook for a while. From there, he took it to a deeper level and asked for my number—over Facebook.

*Heck, yeah.*

Ben was different from most of the guys I knew in high school, so the first time I saw him created a vivid memory in my mind. He was tall, blond, a country boy, and best of all, I hadn’t known him for most of my life as I had every single other male of my acquaintance. He didn’t know about my mortifying middle school years. He didn’t know my parents’ first names. As for him, I didn’t know where he had been born. I didn’t know how many girls he had dated. I hadn’t even seen his dad before. It was great. So much to learn. So much possibility.

As the days grew warmer, prom grew closer.

*Hay.* He would text me daily. Hourly, if I forgot to reply.

I wasn’t sure if he didn’t know how to spell “hey,” or whether he was just being ironic. But I decided that since he probably couldn’t define irony, much less use it, it had to be the former. Besides, I didn’t much care for “hey,” spelt correctly or not. I could always hear my mom’s teacher voice reminding me that “hey was for horses.”

*Hi.* I would respond.

*What are you up to?*

Between school, homework, basketball, and working, I was always doing something.

*What about you? What are you up to?*

In retrospect, I'm baffled about why I even bothered to ask. Either he was "watching TV" or doing "nothing." I had a fifty-fifty shot at guessing how he was passing the time.

But he was a football player—not to mention I found him gorgeous. So, what other qualifications did he need?

After we texted consistently about nothing for two months, the inevitable happened. We found ourselves in the same place at the same time. Because we had spent so long hiding behind technology, when it came down to it, we didn't have a clue about how to communicate face to face. So we chose to do the mature thing and ignored each other. That entire afternoon we managed to go without exchanging more than handful of words.

But it didn't matter because I was still seventeen.

That evening I received a message.

*Hay.*

We followed texting etiquette and found out what each other was up to, and then he wanted to know if he could ask me a question. I closed my eyes. Finally, the question I had been waiting for.

*Would you want to go to prom with me?*

Would I ever.

My prayers were answered. Jesus approved.

Some girls get asked to prom with flowers. Others get asked to prom at football games. Some get their cars covered in Post-it notes.

I got asked over a text message.

A text message that I "locked" so it would never ever be removed from the inbox of my heart-covered Blackberry.

The day of prom was really hot. It was April—that time of year that's supposed to still be spring, but because it's South Carolina it never is. I had skipped my afternoon classes and instead spent several hours downtown getting my hair done. The salon was cool, serene, two things that my mind was not. That day was the culmination of all my high school dreams, but the knot in my stomach kept suggesting that it might not be everything I hoped it would be.

My Jane Austen curls were pinned in place with a million bobby pins. My makeup was finished. My navy blue dress was floor-length with a full skirt and a heavily sequined bodice. I slipped my feet into my sparkly Toms.

Because this—all of it—was what I had always wanted.

We rode with another couple to prom, partly because we were all good friends, and partly because Ben had failed his driver's test three times.

But you know what they say, beauty is truth, not necessarily intelligence.

At dinner I ate more than he did—the lineman for our football team. He just didn't like the taste. "And the lemonade was funny too," he whined as I cleaned my plate.

We danced. But it wasn't like Edward and Bella did at their prom. That final scene where the beautiful vampire competently leads and she simply has to follow. It was more like *I* led, and then a couple songs later he left to go stand by the wall with my friend's date and talk about sports. Two shrinking violets.

I felt the need to go entertain him. So I left the dance floor and went to sit beside him at our table. He and Thomas were joking about something, and Thomas was almost doubled over with laughter. "The incident," they called it. Thomas left in search of his date Elise, and I saw my window of opportunity.

"Are you going to tell me what this 'incident' is or not?" I asked him, shamelessly nosy. I was certain that there must be more to this boy than football, and I was going to find it.

He smirked. *Yup, he was attractive—and he knew it.*

My friend had come up to me earlier, grabbing my arm and whispering in my ear, “Anna, Ben looks so good tonight. Two girls were just asking me who the really hot blond guy was.”

That was my date. No big deal. He probably couldn’t spell tuxedo, but he definitely looked fantastic in one.

So I propped one elbow on the table and waited for him to tell me in that smoldering way of his about the mysterious event that he and Thomas had been referencing all night.

“You have to promise not to freak out.” He leaned forward, pausing for confirmation from me, still smirking.

I couldn’t help but laugh. “Yeah, okay, whatever. I promise.”

“So, Thomas and I were playing disc golf the other day at the park, and he got really thirsty.” He leaned back, stretching his arm across the back of the chair. “Well, he didn’t have a water bottle, and he asked if he could have some of my Gatorade. I said no. Then Stephen told me that I should go pee in the water bottle and give it to him. So I ran off into the woods and peed in the water bottle. And then I gave it to him to drink.”

“And he drank it?” I was as calm as death, as calm as any young woman would be who had discovered in her hero such a penchant.

“Yeah! And I tried to cool it off in the creek, but it was still hot and everything!”

He was rocking with silent laughter. And I laughed too. Because that’s what you do when you’re seventeen and your date is cute.

As great as this was, I wanted a subject change.

I had read *Twilight*, but I also knew *The Chronicles of Narnia* by heart. When ‘A Tale of Two Cities’ Sydney Carton went to the guillotine, I felt as if I had lost a friend. I was well acquainted with Bach, Vivaldi, and all of the other classic composers. I drank hot tea with the dedication of a grandmother. I felt the beauty that lives in music, art, drama, and words were some of the most exquisite forms of beauty that existed. And such beauty was to me like oxygen. I was certain that there was some part of everyone that valued such outlets too, that there was some part of Ben that appreciated the deeper things of life. I pulled my feet up under the navy folds of my ball gown and sat cross-legged.

“So what’s your family like?”

He described his entire family in about half of the words I would have used to explain my dad alone. He ended with, “And my brother’s hoping to get drafted.”

“Oh, really?” I took a sip of my lemonade. Single-handedly having to carry the conversation was stressful, and it was making my mouth dry. “Into the army?”

His eyes bulged like they were about to explode from their sockets—the way people’s do in cartoons.

“Oh my gosh!” I corrected myself before he could say anything. “For baseball! Of course, of course.” He looked speechless, so I babbled for a few minutes before I excused myself to go to the bathroom and mentally slap myself. Placing my hands on either side of the sink, I stared bleakly at my reflection.

*That boy thinks I’m an idiot.*

A few weeks after prom, someone told me that she’d heard someone else say that I was “really good with Ben.”

“Good with him”? What is he? A small child? Or an injured puppy?

But it was in that offhanded remark that I began to understand that try as I might, our brains—and lives—were just on completely different wavelengths. Maybe God hadn’t ordained our relationship, but rather just allowed it.

Prom is just a time when adolescents who don’t know a thing about love wear long dresses and tuxes and pretend to live in an era when people actually danced and

when adulthood wasn't statistically reached at twenty-seven. When I look back and contemplate the significance of prom, I realize there wasn't any. At the time, however, it was the only thing that mattered in my life. Well, that and Ben.

I was so blind at seventeen.

And a year later with my co-worker Brandon.

And three years later with Wyatt, the frat boy who I met at church.

Scrolling through my Facebook news feed now, I breeze past pictures of Ben, but sometimes I scroll back up again, and cringe. *What was I thinking?* It makes me want to ground *myself*. He's twenty-four now, still living at home with his parents, and working at our local grocery store as a stocker. *Maybe it was the tight football pants that cut off the circulation to his brain.*

Then again, maybe *I* was the one who was unbelievably stupid—and even still am. Despite my seventeen-year-old promise to myself to never do that again, I did it again—but in my nineteen-year-old way, and then in my twenty-one-year-old way, and one day I'll do it in my eighty-six-year-old way. Past, present, and future. But—all of this is precisely what constitutes the entire beauty of living, this constantly growing collection of experiences we're allowed to have, this assortment of moments that give us something to think of, something to see more deeply into—over time.



## SHARPENING MINDS

*Ashley Galloway*

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My high school English teacher's pencil usually lodged behind his ear, safely shaded beneath a canopy of thin, grey hair. Professor Woodward. The epitomized intimidator of students, always accompanied by his number 2 pencil, the trophy of his scholasticism. His white lab coat, his overdramatized diction, his adoration of Charles Dickens. I swear he never knew my name though there were only sixteen of us in the class. To my other teachers, I was Ashley Galloway, hard-working, straight-A student. But to Dr. Woodward, I was pencil point. He would point that little yellow magic wand in hopes of conjuring an eloquently crafted answer inside his "scholars," as he called us. Some spoke his language. I did not. Down the row he would go... John Mark, Audrey, Nolan... pencil point.

On a lucky day, I might have been "you" or "next." If the pencil was recently sharpened, the lead tip might as well have been a lead bullet, puncturing my ego, deflating it. Rarely was the softer, pink end ever pointed my way, although at times I wished it had been to erase the look of terror and idiocy that I surely wore on my face. *I can't understand the plot of Heart of Darkness, Dr. Woodward, much less analyze its motifs.* English had always been, was supposed to be, "my thing." But fortunately, my senior English professor dodged the flame of a reputation ignited by my own pride. He was untouched by the bias that most teachers, I believe, either purposefully ignored or obliviously didn't see. With Professor Woodward, I earned my grade. Thank God he was more concerned with sharpening his pencil than remembering my name.



# FOOTRACE

*Christian Bare*

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He smiles only at recess,  
every day running himself ragged  
for scraps of schoolyard respect  
and cheers from girls on the monkey bars.  
The wind grabs at his lucky Nike shirt,  
though nothing holds him back.





## CAGED

*Emily Dyer*

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Huddling underneath the laundry basket,  
I peered through the tiny slats in its plastic side.  
The figure of my mother was bent like a lifeless  
branch in the storm of my father's booming voice.  
From my shelter, I saw him kick her  
while his thick fingers pinned her arms.  
Just as my father's eyes caught mine, I ran  
barefoot over the shag carpet, through the half-open  
back door, and across the lawn, the tall grass  
whipping my pale legs.  
The white ties of my summer dress streamed behind,  
kite strings rippling in the wind.  
The pounding of my heart seemed to shake  
my whole body as my knees hit the soil  
by the edge of the barbed wire fence.  
On the other side, I saw my neighbor's field,  
sprinkled with dandelions.  
I was one of them, with my face to the sun,  
in the midst of a thousand swaying heads of yellow.



# A SUBURBAN LEGEND

*Coleman Topalu*

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“Did I ever tell ya about the time my big bro won that Jalapeño pepper eatin’ contest?” Terry glanced up from his soda and smiled at me expectantly. I watched a puddle of carbonation pool in the corners of his fat lips. “C’mon, don’t leave me hangin’ here,” he insisted, reaching across the table and giving my shoulders a hearty shake. “Y’know I have.” Of course I’d heard the story. Terry loved his older brother more than anything in the whole wide world, and his favorite way of showing it was by weaving all kinds of tall tales about his adventures. Last week it had been a fence-painting competition, and the week before that, he’d won a blue ribbon at a honey badger wrangling festival. The stories were always unusual, but always Terry insisted they were true. “You ain’t no fun,” Terry muttered, raising his cup to suck down some more soda pop. “If you keep looking at me like that, even I’m gonna start havin’ doubts.” Terry crushed the empty Styrofoam cup and tossed it overhand towards a nearby trash can. It missed terribly. Terry stifled an incoming belch and propped his feet up. “I hope you realize the gravity of that statement right there.”

Growing up, most of the kids in the neighborhood assumed Terry’s older brother was just a myth. No one, not even the oldest among us, could remember meeting him or seeing him around the neighborhood. The lucky few of us invited inside of Terry’s house testified before kid court that there were no pictures of him anywhere. Even the refrigerator doors were bare. Terry was adamant, however, that his older brother did indeed exist. And not only did he exist, but he was cool too. The absolute coolest. Every week, he had a new story to tell about how his beloved older brother, through nothing but raw grit and sheer force of will, had managed to save the earth from certain destruction.

In elementary school, the stories were especially far-fetched, with most of them revolving around how Terry’s older brother could single handedly beat this or pound that into a bloody pulp with both of his hands tied behind his back. Terry was a natural-born storyteller, and for as hare-brained as his stories were, all us kids adored them. It became routine for us to gather around Terry on the playground and trade our desserts back and forth while he preached the good news about his brother’s general awesomeness. It didn’t take long before we started to revere this strange, never-seen, never-heard phantom man. He became the thing that you checked for in the deepest recesses of your closet. He became the strange noises you hear at night that most adults just dismiss as your house “settling.” If the trees creaked and the leaves fell when there was no wind, then it meant Terry’s older brother was closing in on you. If a toy disappeared or someone’s pet vanished into the woods without a trace, it only stood to reason that Terry’s older brother must have come to pay the neighborhood a visit and taken the lost treasure with him on his adventures. Halloween became an especially exciting time. Terry’s older brother loved Halloween apparently, and if you had the guts to wander into the woods alone with a fat sack of candy, he might just show himself and trade your stash of junk food for something cool, like a pack of Marlboro Reds or an old *Playboy* magazine.

Before long, Terry had fashioned his own little fan club, though our elementary school teachers probably saw it as more of a cult. There were a handful of skeptics,

of course, especially among the older kids, though most of them secretly believed him anyway. If I were to hazard a guess, I'd say they believed because they were scared of what might happen to them if by chance Terry's older brother turned out to be the real deal. Terry's older brother was a lot like Santa in this way. This inherent fear and respect we all shared of him didn't stop the braver skeptics from asking the hard hitting questions, though. "Why don't ya ever tell us his name?" "Whaddya mean he just 'went away' one day? Don't ya know where he is? How d'ya know so much about him and not know where he is?" Instead of fielding these questions one at a time and concocting elaborate answers, Terry just ignored them. This always surprised me, because we all knew he was capable of cooking up some kind of excuse. Instead, he responded to all of their questions with the same answer, and always with the same doofy grin that was just as annoying as it was endearing. "That's a secret!"

Things continued on like this for a while, and after he had told enough tall-tales to fill up the school library twice over, fate decided that Terry's enthusiasm needed to be culled. Or maybe the government finally caught on to just how much Terry was blabbing about their top secret agent and they needed Terry silenced before he shared any classified intelligence. Whatever the reason, everything came to an abrupt and violent end when Terry decided to break into the principal's office one afternoon and hijack the school's intercom system so that he could tell the whole school everything we ever wanted to know about who his older brother was, what made him so awesome, and why we should all revere him as the god-king-emperor of the universe that he is. Soon after this little escapade, the hammer came down and Terry was muzzled for the duration of his elementary school career.

In middle school, Terry still had plenty of stories to tell, but his audience was steadily shrinking. We were growing up and becoming big fat jaded adults who no longer appreciated his older brother's diverse and constantly evolving repertoire of gadgets, gizmos, and wrestling moves. A few of the younger kids clung to his stories, but as Terry watched his audience shrink week after week, I think it started to take a toll on his enthusiasm. It never was extinguished completely, though. From this point forward, his stories evolved and became somewhat more realistic, though not by much. Instead of saving the earth from alien invaders or snapping terrorists' necks in half, his older brother's talents became more domesticated. He became an indomitable athlete who could run faster, climb higher, and kick a ball harder than even the state record holders. These stories were appealing for a time, but quickly lost all their credibility when Terry was asked by his classmates to produce some kind of proof of his brother's incredible talent. "If your bro is so crazy fast, let's see a track medal or something." Had Terry simply claimed that his brother took all of his medals and trophies with him when he moved out, he might have been able to hold onto his tiny audience for a little while longer. Terry was a story teller, though, not a tactician. When he came to school a few days later and tried to pass off a bar of soap he had carved into the shape of a medal as proof of his brother's exploits, the cult of Terry's older brother dissolved completely. The soap medal quickly followed it.

After ten long years and hundreds of stories, people were finally sick of Terry and they were sick of hearing about his imaginary sibling. Terry slipped into obscurity and soon became the subject of everyone's jokes. But even in the face of daily ridicule and extra-curricular harassment, Terry continued to insist that his brother was out there somewhere, watching everyone and working hard to make the human race look good. It could almost bring a tear to your eye, his loyalty to his imaginary brother. It was also very creepy, which was probably why most girls went out of their way to cross the street whenever he wandered by. Even at eighteen years old, nothing had changed.

"You better take your feet off the table, Terry," I cautioned him.  
 "Nurses won't like that."

Still slouched, Terry turned his head. “Nurses? Todd, I don’t see no nurses, man. Besides, they won’t toss me out. Nurses are just helpers, like Santa’s elves. It’s the doctors who you gotta worry about. They’re the ones with enough green in the bank to move mountains.” Terry raised his fat fingers high and started making imaginary calculations in the air. “They make, like, sixty-figures or somethin’.”

I said, “You clearly don’t have a registered nurse for a mother.” Terry wedged himself deeper into the gut of his chair.

I’ve been told before I am a bit of a nag. I won’t deny this. I’ll be the first to admit the only part of me that has any real substance is my overgrown conscience. It can be a real burden sometimes, but considering how Terry was born into this world without one, I like to believe playing the worrywart helps balance him out a little bit. Terry let his eyes swim in their sockets for a bit before opening his mouth again. They looked baggier than usual. He clearly hadn’t been sleeping well. He had gotten a lot heavier over the last few months, too.

“Whatcha think, Ted?” he asked, addressing the empty chair next to me. “Todd got a stick up his behind or what?” The table started to rumble a bit. Ted emerged from underneath the empty chair with a loud bang, his thick head striking the table as he rose. A half-eaten candy bar was hanging from his lower lip. Ever since he was a small kid, Ted had been nursing an insatiable appetite for junk food. He did not believe in the five-second rule, and he did not care where his candy was when he found it. Ted stared blankly back at him, his eyes crossed and his lower jaw slowly munching away. His upper body was very still. Not even his eyeballs twitched. Down below, however, his legs had started swaying with enough force to make the table bounce up and down every time they made a full rotation. After nearly a full minute of silence passed, he swallowed his chocolate and loosed his caramel and peanut butter laden tongue from the back of his throat.

“I wanna hear the one about the boogey man,” Ted answered, clapping his hands, eyes wide with anticipation. “The story about the Jalapeño pepper eating competition, I mean. No, the one about how he and the boogey man teamed up to take down the abominable snowman!” Ted folded his hands into his lap and waited for Terry’s reply. From behind his glazed eyes, his brain seemed to heave. A sentence that complex had probably tuckered him out. My buddy Ted was a very simple guy. He was naïve to a fault and only when he really applied himself could his train of thought hope to eclipse a max speed of two and a half thoughts a minute. During our youth, Ted had been our neighborhood’s walking freak show. Inviting him into your home was akin to setting it ablaze and then asking yourself why you never bothered to invest in any kind of insurance. His humble brain was utterly incapable of drawing inspiration from complex ideas like violence or anger, and it was even worse at coordinating motor skills. But it did afford Ted a disposition that was as pure and sweet as the day he was born, and I think it was his naiveté, his childlike fascination with all things great and magical, that had kept Ted pinned to Terry’s side for so long. He was probably the only person in the whole world other than me who still enjoyed listening to Terry spin his wild yarns.

Before Terry could pry himself out of his chair and get the big talk flowing, the door to the cafeteria opened and in wandered a heavysset woman. The smell of her make-up and hair spray seized upon the lesser smells littering the cafeteria’s atmosphere until we could all taste a mascara sandwich sticking against the roof of our mouths. This was a familiar sensation for all of us, and I can only guess that after years of living with the woman, Terry had simply built up a tolerance for his mother’s unique odor. She waddled over to the table where we were sitting and came to a wheezing halt beside Terry. She had the same tired eyes and beefy disposition as her son, though she was leading Terry by about three chins. They spoke briefly and then his mother turned her attention to us. I remember exchanging some nervous glances with Ted before Terry

and his mother led us outside of the hospital cafeteria and into a nearby elevator. The four of us stepped inside and began our ascent. Ted insisted that he be the one to press the buttons.

All I knew for sure was that Terry's older brother was in the hospital, and that his parents didn't want Terry to be all by himself tonight. The sad truth of the matter began to settle into the fibers of my knit cap and pick at my brain: I was about to meet the man who had, whether he realized it himself or not, defined my childhood. The elevator came to a slow stop and I followed Ted and Terry outside. His mother didn't follow us. As soon as my leg was out the door, she coughed loudly and her pudgy finger slammed the button for the parking deck. By the time we got to the door at the end of the hall, we were all alone. Terry reached into his back pocket and started fishing around for his wallet, eventually pulling out a small white key card. The card's laminated finish was caked with his greasy fingerprints. Terry slid the card through the door's magnetic lock without a word. It didn't take. Terry bit his lip and tried a few more times. Beside me, Ted started to fidget and bounce up and down. He had probably never seen a lock like this before. He ate this kind of stuff up just like candy off the floor. Everything with a flashing light or a clicking device was a toy to him. Before he could pester Terry into letting him play with the card, the lock finally opened. Terry opened the door just wide enough for the three of us to slip through, and then he quickly closed it behind us.

The hospital room was densely packed with all kinds of machines, drips, charts, and surgical equipment. Everything reeked of sanitizing agent, that really strong, industrial grade stuff they could probably use for exorcisms. In the corner, I saw a dialysis machine, just like the kind we had read about in health class a few weeks earlier. I could feel warmth radiating from it as we passed. At the very back of the room was a large hospital bed. Most of it was veiled behind a mint-green drape. Beyond the veil, I spied a tiny shadow reclining against a heap of pillows. Ted recoiled a little bit when he heard the wheezing of an oxygen tank, and then timidly crammed his six foot, three inch frame into my shadow. I could feel the sweat of his palms bleeding through my shirt and making it stick fast to my back. An empty stool stood a few feet away from the bed. Taking Ted's hand in mine, I eased him into it.

"You should go get a seat for yourself, Todd," Terry said to me, staring down the veil as he spoke. His tone was alien. There was no humor in his voice. I quietly did as I was told. Terry started looking for a chair of his own. He managed to pick out the biggest, comfiest looking seat in the room, a big old leather chair with one of those spinning axis. I raised my head once he was settled in. Never before had I seen Terry look so crestfallen. He pinched his fingers together and started to roll his wrist back and forth, silently commanding us to scoot a little closer to the veil. I did as he asked, but it took a little work to get Ted to follow my lead. The three of us sat there, our noses inches away from the mint veil, steeling our nerves.

"Would you like to see him?" Terry asked us, eventually. He peeled himself off his leather throne and began to tug at the string that held the drape. When the veil had been pulled all the way back, he turned his head to look at us. The way he was chewing on his lower lip made me think that he was frustrated, but the way his eyes were beaming told me he was actually bursting with pride.

Tiny. So, so tiny. For the next few minutes, all my brain could do was rattle off all the synonyms for "tiny" that it knew. I don't really know what I was expecting to find waiting for me behind that mint veil, but it certainly wasn't "tiny." Maybe big, or thick, or macho, but not tiny. Tiny was so far removed from my list of expectations that I couldn't help but want to burst out laughing. But I didn't. Instead, I turned to Terry, bewildered, but also desperate to appear sympathetic. He nodded at me, smiled, and then reached out his hand and began to scratch the tiny, shaved head reclining against the pillow.

Ninety pounds, I thought. Maybe, if he had eaten a big breakfast and was wearing his hospital gown. Terry's older brother was small. Smaller than any man his age ought to be. I wanted to follow Terry's lead and reach out my own hands to brush his brother's hollow cheeks, and I would have, had I been able to trust that I wouldn't accidentally rip a hole through them. Usually when you look at a sick man, you feel bad for him. You slow down, you mind your manners, and you stand vigil for him, usually out of pity. But I didn't feel any pity for the tiny man lying comatose on the bed. On the contrary, the more I stared at him, the harder it became to suppress the warm, bubbly feelings that were building inside of my own cheeks. Never before had I seen someone quite like this man. My mother had once told me that when someone slips into a coma or suffers from a stroke, the resulting shock can cause their faces to remain twisted in pain until death. This man's thin lips weren't twisted in agony, though. His eyes were tightly closed and he remained perfectly still, but despite the tubes in his neck and drips in his arm, he was smiling.

"He's always been a real monster, this brother of mine," Terry said reverently. "This man's swallowed up enough radiation over the years to kill a man three times his size. No matter how brutal his treatments, or how painful, my big brother never took the easy way out." Terry took his older brother's tiny hand in his own and gently gripped it, squeezing it softly and massaging the inside of his palm with his thumb. Ted and I watched them, fascinated. Terry's older brother never stirred. The only noise at all coming from his side of the bed was the low roar of his oxygen tank. Behind us, a heart monitor chimed to a weak, irregular heartbeat. "Did you know I was able to scoop him out of his bed and carry him around on my shoulders by the time I was just six years old?" Ted and I shook our heads. "That was something," he said. Terry turned to us grinning and held up his hands, his fingers wrapped tightly around two imaginary legs hanging from his broad shoulders.

"Off to the kitchen, little bro, and on the double! It's Friday afternoon!" Terry threw his voice a few octaves lower and quickly explained to us through the use of elaborate gestures that Friday afternoons meant that "Mom was bringing in the goods": his older brother's favorite flavor of ice cream, raspberry sorbet. He added that it wasn't often that he could spend a night at the house, but whenever he had the strength, it was always the highlight of Terry's week. I could have sworn Terry's older brother shifted a little bit at the mention of the sorbet. For the next half an hour, Terry hardly took his eyes of his older brother. Every once in a while he would raise his gaze, as if he wanted to say something to us, but he never did. I started counting the tiles of the floor. Ted took the tiles on the ceiling. At around the fifty-eighth tile count, I heard the sound of the veil being closed. I looked up to see Terry hunched over in his leather chair, massaging his eyes vigorously with his palms. More than anything in the world, I wanted to say something that would put a smile on Terry's face. I wanted to tell him something original and compelling, something he'd remember for the rest of his life, but all I could do in the end was echo what he had told us earlier.

"He's a real monster, isn't he, Terry?"

Terry's hands stopped moving. He lowered them to reveal an unsteady smile.

"What have I been telling you guys? My big brother's something else."

Ted, who had up until this point remained totally passive, reached out to his friend and pulled him from his chair, burying Terry inside of the lining of his jacket. I don't know if Ted understood everything that was going on, but he was sensitive enough to recognize his friend was slipping into a bad place. Terry just kinda hung in Ted's arms for a while, steadily burying himself deeper and deeper. He pressed his face tightly against Ted's broad chest. After Terry finally broke away, we put all the chairs and stools back where we found them and followed him out the door.

"Ted," I remember saying, "Why don't you buy Terry a soda from that vending machine down the hall right there? We'll meet you in the cafeteria." Ted nodded eagerly



and started rummaging through his pockets for some loose change. Before Terry could ask me why, Ted was already off and running. By the time we reached the cafeteria, Ted was already waiting for us. He had gone the extra mile and brought with him not just one soda, but three. Terry found a seat and it wasn't long before his feet were resting on the table again. Ted and I settled back into our own seats. "Why'd you two insist on dragging me back down here?" Terry asked, taking his soda in hand and popping the cap with his teeth. "You gonna tell me, or am I gonna have to guess?"

"Ted and I just want to spend a little bit more time with you tonight, that's all, Terry. Why don't you sit back and let us tell you a story for a change? Mix it up a little." I wrung my hands together for a bit, doing my best to filter out the best ideas as they came to me. "How about Ted and I tell you about the legend of the world's greatest storyteller?" Terry paused for a moment, mid sip. He let his soda can hang on his lips for a bit. Then he cracked a smile.

"Y'know," he said, crushing the freshly emptied can in his fat fingers, "for a bunch of amateurs, that ain't a bad premise."





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**GRATITUDE**



It takes a village, so the saying goes, and the publication of this 90th edition of *Ivy Leaves Journal of Literature and Art* can attest to that. Work such as this could never be done in isolation, and we, the editors, would like to thank the people who make it possible. First, we thank Dr. Teresa Jones, whose guidance, expertise, and, shall we say, persuasive encouragement pushed us to accomplish this feat—to go a little deeper, to work a little harder. We also wish to offer our gratitude to the various English professors who not only gave up portions of their limited class time so that we could tell students about *Ivy Leaves*, but also encourage and help students to develop their writing skills, without which this journal would not exist. And, of course, we give our thanks to the many students who put in the hard work and effort required to create poetry, fiction, and nonfiction, to say nothing of the courage needed to subject it to the evaluation of others. Without you, we would not even have a place to start: thank you.

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