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Acknowledgements

The Oakwood editorial board would like to thank the South Dakota State University Students' Association for its continued financial support. We also wish to express our appreciation for the support of the SDSU Department of English Studies, especially Dr. Kathleen Donovan and Dr. Jason McEntee, as well as the College of Arts and Sciences. Special thanks to the Brookings Book Company for its sponsorship of the Doug Cockrell Award for Outstanding Writing.

We would also like to extend heartfelt gratitude to our advisors, Steve Wingate and Christine Stewart-Nunez. Without their guidance and dedication to detail, Oakwood would not be possible. A sincere thank you as well to Billy Boyd for his assistance in the early stages of Oakwood 2012, and to Randy Clark, his design class, and the SDSU Art Department.
Doug Cockrell Award for Outstanding Writing

Poetry
Naming Hurricanes

Fiction
The Daughter of Dagon

Creative Non-fiction
Saturday Night Cinderella

Doug Cockrell (1953-2012) co-founded Oakwood with Dave Evans. He graduated from Redfield-High School in 1971 and then from South Dakota State University in 1975 with a bachelor of arts in English Secondary Education. He taught freshman English Composition in Arkansas and English at Brookings High School. He was an avid reader; an accomplished poet; loved music and playing the guitar; enjoyed football and was a long-time Cubs fan.

The Doug Cockrell Award for Outstanding Writing is sponsored by Brookings Book Company.

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Refrigerator Fragments
Noelle Vainikka.

Be bold
Harmonize with the forbidden
Love shall dance forever
Summer runs with passion
Time will keep us together
Dissolve a fragile emotion
Why take beautiful hidden treasure?
If reality is a struggle, fight death
Make gentle butterfly metaphors
Delicate journey thrown wild
Drink in creativity
Soft whisper lost to heaven
Be strong or leave
Young stranger in the forest
He who can juggle music
Until now, we only thought pleasure
Show courage
Get kissed
"Yield up enough sacrifices an' savage knick-knacks an' harbourage in
the taown when they wanted it, an' they'd let well enough alone. Wudn't
bother no strangers as might bear tales aoutside—that is, without they
got pryin'. All in the band of the faithful—Order o' Dagon—an' the
children shud never die, but go back to the Mother Hydra an' Father
Dagon what we all come from onct—lä! lä! Cthulhu fštagn! Ph'nglui
mgh'nafh Cthulhu R'lyeh wgah-nagl fštagn—"

H.P. Lovecraft
The Shadow Over Innsmouth

Milt chews at his lower lip as he waits in the bedroom in the
train-car suite. High Priest Hastur mentioned he would arrive
with The Daughter in the next few hours. Milt is responsible for
accommodating her. He purchased pink carnations in a purple
plastic vase, which he set on the hide-away table, hoping to bring a
bit of color to the blue walled room. He pulls back a corner of the
blanket on the top bunk, after organizing his own "bed" on the seat
by folding his own blanket and setting a pillow on top of it. It was
all he could think to do while he waits for the call. He brought very
little with him along on this trek, just the phone in his hand and
the clothes on his back. The High Priest instructed him to "dress
normally," so he hopes that jeans with a busted out knee, a ratty pair
of black Sketchers, and a faded Tool t-shirt will be good enough.

Each footstep outside the room sends his heart racing with nervous
adrenaline. Any one of those footsteps could be her. He checks his
track-phone again. The scuffed screen shows only a few minutes have
passed since he last checked. They are late. He anxiously bobs his
leg, watching the people outside his window scurry back and forth,
readying for departure with luggage in tow. His phone suddenly jolts
to life in his hands. He fumbles with it before putting it against his
ear, "H-Hello?"
“My son, close the blinds. We are here and ready for you.” It was the High Priest’s nasally and deep voice.

He pulls the blinds closed, as instructed, in their bedroom to block any chance that anyone would see The Daughter. Milt slides the door to his room open and nervously checks the hallway. The High Priest must have paid a large sum of money; there is no one in the hall, not even an attendant or a lost passenger wandering the royal blue carpeting. The lights have been dimmed since the last time he poked his head out. He pulls a small piece of dead skin from his lower lip free with his teeth. In the low light and eerie silence of the sleeping car, a sense of foreboding forces his hands to grip the door.

The squeaking of the wheels first sends a shudder through his body followed by the soft voice of the High Priest murmuring to Her. His jaw slackens and his grip tightens on the doorframe. He watches her breathe out a cloud of smoke as she removes a cigarette from her pale lips. Her pupils stretch out horizontally like a goat’s eye and are surrounded like black islands in a sea of pure blue. Her upper torso is fragile and sickly from malnourishment; Milt can easily count her ribs, but the awkwardness of staring at her flat chest shifts his gaze toward her face. Her black hair is like a grease spot growing from her bleached skin and resting just over her shoulder. She wears a pretty, daffodil-yellow sundress and a thick blanket cocoons her legs. Her thumb taps at the cigarette in her hand and ash sprinkles onto the blue carpeting. She puts it to her lips and glowers at Milt. She is horrifying but beautiful, why he couldn’t say. He cannot draw himself from the doorway. The Daughter of Dagon sneers at him, curling her lips to expose her jagged, shark-like teeth.

“Stop staring.”

Milt pulls himself from the door into the hallway and bows before her. As he does, she removes the blanket encasing her legs. The Daughter rolls it onto her lap and he notices them for the first time. Eight tentacles peel away from each other leaving transparent, gossamer webbing between them. They are color of dead algae; a putrid green with a milky underside adorned with quarter-sized suction cups. Each four-foot long tendril stretches out then curls in a different direction.

“I present the honorable Daedra, the Daughter of Dagon,” the High Priest says as he wheels her forward. Daedra rolls her eyes. Milt gawks at her despite her scathing demeanor. The smoke rolls out in a jagged line before transposing into a thick cloud in front of her.

“T-The room is ready,” Milt steps against the wall to allow her to pass. Daedra haughtily takes control of the chair from the High Priest and wheels herself inside. She won’t look at Milt, but he can’t take his eyes off of her. The High Priest smiles warmly at him after she slides into the room.

“Be strong, my son,” he says, setting his hand on Milt’s shoulder. The touch causes Milt to jerk to attention and pulls him back into reality. “Her spirit is strong. You need only get her to the next destination.”

Hastur’s hand is heavy, the back of it covered with moss-colored scales. Luckily his white soutane covers the majority of changes the Father had bestowed. The air pushes through the gills in Hastur’s neck just above his collar; the sound is rasping and deliberate. He tilts his head down to get a better look at the boy, the smile still smoldering on his sickly lips. Milt wonders if Hastur always looked like this or if it was the blessing of Dagon that turned him into creature that stood beside him, holding his shoulder like a reassuring father. Hastur’s eyes are positioned to the side of his head, and have taken on fish-like qualities; his pupils are triangular and the rest of his eyes are filled with a radiant, golden color. The blessing of Dagon usually mutates the followers in such a manner: gills split their necks, fish-eyes, scales spread like an infection, and claws replace fingers. Even though the change was considered a glorious metamorphosis, Milt is relieved to find his fingers and toes are still small pink digits when he awakes every morning. Milt unconsciously flexes his fingers against the denim of his jeans.

“I know you have not began your change, boy, but you are a vital asset to us. It would be difficult to transport The Daughter otherwise. Do not listen to the others, my son.” His bony fingertips nearly
pierce through Milt’s shirt. “You remaining untouched by the Deep Father is a blessing in its own way.”

Milt nods, but remains silent with a small smile on his face. Hastur pats his shoulder and gives the boy a gentle push back to the door with a throaty chuckle. Hastur was always kind to him; his own parents treated him as a pariah when he hadn’t shown signs of the Touch.

Milt stands at the doorway. The Daughter sits by the window and drags at her cigarette. She lets the ashes fall to the carpet and keeps her eyes on the people shuffling around outside. Milt slides the door closed behind him and stands with his back to it. He remains silent, entranced by how her appendages sway like seaweed in an unseen current.

“C-Can I get you anything, Daughter?” Milt wads up the bottom of his shirt in his hands.

Daedra snuffs her cigarette out on the table beside her with a heavy sigh, “Don’t call me that. That’s such a stupid title.”

He winces. Strong in spirit? That seemed lacking. Would she be like this the whole trip? “What should I call you then?”

“I dunno, by my fucking name? Daedra, or better yet, Dee. Dee makes me sound like less of a nerd-bait fantasy.”

Milt smiles, relaxing his shoulders, and dares to take a step closer to her, “My name is Milt. I will do anything I can to make this trip more comfortable for you.”

Dee stays silent, even after the train jerks forward. The rhythmic motion of the train makes Milt’s head bob while his focus remains on Dee. He can’t take his eyes off of her, but her seething gaze is affixed outside the window, watching the New England landscape pass by. A possible three days of silence doesn’t sit well with Milt.

Milt smiles awkwardly, “So, uh, you come here often?”

Dee turns her attention toward him with a sneer, “What the hell do you mean by that? Are you looking at me? Can you see me? I have fucking tentacles.”

His smile melts away and he freezes in panic; his eyes dart the floor, “I-I’m sorry! I just thought it would make you laugh.

I-I’m sorry …”

“Well, that’s a stupid way to go about it. Christ, you’re the one that supposed to keep me company? Really? I’m glad I can …” She puts her pale fingers over her thin lips to keep her words from slipping out but not from concealing the monstrous smile that lurks underneath them, “Whoops. Almost ruined the surprise.”

“Huh? Surprise?” He furrows his eyebrows, “What do you mean?”

“Hastur didn’t tell you?” Her jagged teeth catch on the cracks in her lips like a hammer-claw catching a nail. When Milt shakes his head, she grins, “Well, I get to eat you.” She bites into her lip and droplets of black ichor well up like oil.

Milt looks down at his folded hands while the color drains from his face. Eat him? Was that his place within the Order? A snack for a goddess? Even as morsels went, he didn’t feel worthy of it.

Dee revels in the discomfort her remark inflicts on the poor boy, and lets out a sandpaper laugh, “Oh relax. I’m just fucking with you. I mean, I am a monster, but I’m not that terrible. Look at me. How am I really going to do anything?” She holds out her hands while her tentacles roll out in the same motion. “I’m stuck in this chair.”

Milt uncertainly chuckles, “Y-Yeah, I guess …”

“Oh, Jesus, lighten up,” Dee lowers her appendages and looks back out the window with a satisfied smirk. “Why’d you end up in this mess anyway? You look pretty normal aside from a shitty taste in music.” Her eyes flickered over his shirt.

“Oh, um, my parents are in the Order. We’ve been in this for generations. I think it was my great grandparents that first joined. But, my dad and mom—”

A tentacle rolls, making the motion like she’s heard this story thousands of times, “Got suckered in with the promises of wealth and prosperity. How fucking typical. I’m guessing they’re all … fishy, eh?”

Milt shrugs. The Deep Father had touched his parents. He was the exception, the pariah, “Yeah, but, that’s how your Father works, doesn’t he?”
One tentacle lashes out against the window with a loud thwap that makes Milt cringe again.

"Don’t talk about that thing like it’s _my_ fa.” Her tentacle is latched by the suckers to the window and a dark storm gathers on her face. She tries to yank it off several times, but only manages to embarrass herself further when she can’t pull it free.

“H-Here, I can help.” Milt says as he stands and moves toward the window. Dee stays silent, neither objecting nor accepting his help verbally. Milt licks his lips, running his tongue over the freshly picked skin. He touches her tentacle. It’s sticky like an old flytrap. Milt runs his thumb along the smooth flesh and onto the pearl underside. He manages to jimmy his fingers underneath each sucker, which releases it from the glass with a pop.

Milt sheepishly smiles and looks over to a glowering Dee. He nervously sings out, “Lolly-lolly-lollypop.” And pulls off the last sucker with the same pop as all the others, “Ba-dum-da-dum.” He felt his fingertips stinging from whatever substances coated her lower half; he went into their little bathroom to wash his hands.

“Cute,” she huffs and coils her tentacles back to her chair. As the water runs over his hands, he can feel the burning subside. When he returns into the main room, Dee’s arms are crossed and her cerulean eyes fixate on him.

“W-What?”

Dee smiles, drinking in his discomfort, “No, really, why are you still in this? You have two legs. You don’t seem like you’re completely out of your gourd yet, so … why don’t you leave? I’m guessing no one really gives a shit about you. Except maybe Hastur, but he always has a soft spot for … eccentrics?”

Milt blinks. Was this some kind of test or was she toying with him again? “Why … W-Why would I want to go? All I’ve ever known is the Order. I-I want to help it succeed.”

“By spreading us like a plague, huh?”

“ … Huh?”

“Well, that’s why we’re going to Seattle, right? New port. New water supply. New place to …” Dee lets out a heavy sigh, flicking her thumbnail. “To call in Dagon.”

Goosebumps rise to attention on his arms. The Father. Something he had only felt as a presence in dreams. It seemed they even excluded him from being a part of something greater.

“What’s he like?” Milt sits across from her with his elbow props on the armrest. “I’ve never been able to see him since … you know.” He motions to his smooth neck. “No gills.”

“How should I know? How does a fucking giant slithering pile of teeth, tentacles, and eyes have a goddamn personality?” She sucks her lower lip clean, “It’s not like I swim around with him and talk about Wes Anderson movies.”

Milt smiles politely. He’s not sure who that is. “What do you do then?”

“Shower the peons with my glorious presence.” Flick, flick, flick of her thumbnail fills the silence between their conversation. “I show up and rally the troops. That’s about it. I drive them mad, get pushed into a tank, and then periodically get shipped around by some poor shmuck that doesn’t really know what he’s getting into.”

His smile fades as he watches the progression of Dee’s expression. The sharpness in her eyes dulls to a butter-knife’s edge, and as the cruelty in her smirk smolders into nothing, he stammers “He … it’s not that bad. You’re bringing hope into people’s lives. You’re like a … swimming angel. You let them know that _people_ aren’t alone and there’s something out there watching them and protecting them.”

“Do you think this is a joke?” The fire in her eyes rekindles into a blaze and her lip curls back to show her jagged teeth, “This is my life. Do you know how much it hurts me being out of the ocean? I’m slowly withering away and you call me a fucking beacon of hope?”

Milt thinks briefly of keeping her in the cramped shower in the small bathroom behind him, “That’s not what I mean!”

“Get out!”

“But I’m supposed to help you!” Milt stands, approaching her with pleading hands.

Dee shrieks at him, “Get out, you fucker! Get out!”

Milt obeys and scrambles out of their room, making sure to close the door as quietly as he can behind him.

19 Department: Oakwood

Published by Open PRAIRIE: Open Public Research Access Institutional Repository and Information Exchange, 2012
There he is. There he is, oh thank-God he's alive. God? No. No God would allow this to exist, to thrive, to be. Who could I thank for this? Goodness, maybe.

Roger hastily looks back out the window as the boy fumbles to lock the door behind him. The boy looks upset. Good. Good. Good. This would make it easier to sway him.

Roger remembers his similar situation twenty years ago. Pushing into his mid-thirties, he's unkempt and frazzled down to his psyche. His blonde hair, dull, long, and unclean, is pulled back into a ponytail. Dark circles cling to the undersides of his eyes like sagging hammocks. Patchy chunks of a scraggly beard cover his gaunt face; he hadn't had the time to shave since he found the train a few days ago. He was looking for it for so long. He had spent the better part of three days dodging attendants and hiding in the sightseeing cart, empty rooms, and public bathroom stalls. He hardly slept, afraid of being discovered by anyone.

No. No, the Daughter won't be able to move without her chair, he reassures himself as the boy dejectedly walks from the door toward the dining cart. Roger glances the opposite direction for anyone else, and then follows the boy. He pulls at the collar of the pea coat he stole from the train station. Some poor soul was too engrossed in his newspaper to see that Roger had taken it. It covers up his stained, button-up blue shirt he took from the homeless shelter a few months back and the array of smells it carried. The floor feels electric with each step. The boy walks evenly: no unusual slouching, no bulges in his neck, no clawed fingertips, no scales. He is just like I was. Just like me. Still human. Still sane. That's how she liked them.

They pass through the threshold into the dining cart. It is mid-afternoon; the lunch crowd has cleared and the dinner rush had yet to come. All the shades are pulled open to let in the sunlight, which warms the white tablecloths and burgundy vinyl seats. The boy seats himself in a booth with his back to Roger. Roger watches the boy by the entrance while a waitress with a kind smile gives him a menu. He pretends to find himself interested in the “SPECIALS OF THE DAY” whiteboard propped up on the host's podium. Yes, Chowder. Yes, yes. Chowder. He might be shaking too much to really look engrossed. But it seems to be enough for the waitress to not come bother him. He listens to the two exchange small talk about the weather and the beautiful scenery before she heads back into the kitchen area to leave him alone with the menu. Roger looks behind him again. No one. Good. Good. Good.

Striding quickly with a menu from the host's stand, Roger deposits himself in the seat across from him. The boy sets down his menu, his eyes wide. His face is red, blotchy like he might have begun to cry if Roger hadn't shown up and exchanged confusion for his sadness. Roger sets his elbows on the table and leans toward him. The boy sits up straight, trying to get as far away from Roger without standing up.

“Excuse me, um ...” he takes a glimpse around the dining cart and sees no one else there.

“Shut up. Shut up and listen.” Roger rasps in a hoarse whisper as he reaches across the table and grips the boy's hand. Good. Good. Good. No claws. No scales. No slime. Roger runs his trembling thumb over the boy's smooth hand excitedly. “You have to leave. You have to get off this train.”

“What?” The boy gawks at the haggard face across from him.

“You have to get out of here. You must not stay with ...” The thought of that monstrous abomination with the cruel smile makes him ill. His stomach turns thinking of her name and what she stood for. “With her.”

The boy hesitates, then his eyes harden. “I don't know what you're talking about.” He tugs his hand away from Roger.

“No, no, no, no, no. You have to understand. I know who you are and know what she is. Oh, yes.” Roger pauses to look behind them, and then look at waitress in the kitchen. She is still talking. Good. Good. Good. “You're part of the Order, but you can't be in there. You can't be here.” He taps his fingernail against the table twice. The boy tilts his head. He isn't following or refuses to believe.

“I'm sorry, I ...”
“No!” Roger barks at him, which causes the waitress to turn back to the table. He swallows, hastily speaking, “If you don’t leave here, you will die.” His haunted eyes bore into the boy’s. “Get out now, boy!”

Roger picks himself up and skitters out of the dining cart without looking back while the waitress returns, carrying two glasses of ice water. Oh, no. He must not be there to complete the ritual. Roger wheezes as he ducks in the bathroom to catch his bearings in one of the stalls. The waitress nearly came and spoke to him. Then she would have found out who he was. She might have brought him before Her. No, no, no. He couldn’t let the boy fall victim to the Order. Oh, no. He couldn’t let that happen. And he couldn’t let the ritual be completed. Oh, no. He couldn’t.

He runs his finger against the blade hidden in the inner pocket of his coat; a butcher’s knife he pilfered some weeks ago from a restaurant outside of Innsmouth. It is still sharp enough to make his fingertip bleed a sliver of red. Good. Good. Good.

***

Milt takes the time to mull over what the stranger had told him. Each crunch into the fried chicken strips gives him time to think about what he had said. Get out now. You will die. But, where could he go, exactly? Even if he did want to leave, the train wasn’t going to stop until it reached Seattle. Milt sighs, taking some comfort in the creamy honey Dijon mustard the waitress brought out with his chicken strips; it masks the heavy amount of salt caked in the batter. He dips eight fries into the small dipping cup and sighs. Uncertainty chews at his mind as he picks batter out of his teeth with a finger.

After Milt finishes his small meal and his lips dry from salt, he heads back to the room with a to-go box of chicken strips for Dee. He unlocks the door and peers inside. Dee hasn’t moved (how could she?); her eyes remain fixed out the window while her fingers drum on the armrest of her wheelchair. Milt clears his throat, and she turns her attention to him.

For an instant, he is certain that she knows about the stranger and his warning; somehow through the scent of deep-fat-fried chicken and Dijon, she smells the truth like it clings to his lips and sticks to his face like crumbs.

“Where have you been?” she asks. Milt retrieves a serving tray from the cabinets above the couch, along with an assortment of plastic-ware and a napkin. He sets the Styrofoam box on the tray, opens it to release the scent of deep-fat-fried chicken into the room.

“I just went to get some food, that’s all,” Milt offers the tray to her. Dee looks at it with her eyebrows raised, torn between interest and disgust. Two tentacles flip over, sucker-side up. Milt sets the tray down on them and she draws it to herself. “That’s not too bad.”

“Yeah, I’m glad my body can be used like a TV tray. I’m fucking stellar at parties.”

Milt isn’t sure if he should laugh, so he takes his place across from her. Dee picks up a chicken piece with her index finger and thumb like it is contaminated. She opens her mouth and tears off a chunk with her pointed little teeth. She snaps her jaws in order to chew up the little piece of crunchy chicken properly, and then swallows.

Milt watches her. “I’m really sorry I offended you earlier. I really didn’t know it was something so painful to talk about. I thought you did this because it made you happy.”

“I’ve just always done this. Train rides. Clueless helpers. Sometimes I get a crappy book or a DVD player though, so it’s not a total waste of time, I guess.” She rips off another piece of chicken and gnashes it in her teeth.

Milt waits until her throat move, indicating she swallowed the meat. “How long have you been doing this?”

Dee smirks. “I’ve always done this.”

He shifts uncomfortably on the couch across from her. Maybe that guy was right? It was a possibility that she was lying to him. Or even worse, the Order was. Milt didn’t like to think like that. His family had been in the Order for generations. But, maybe this is what was meant for him? To do whatever for the Order to strengthen it, even if meant giving up himself. But what would that do exactly? What affect would his death give? He isn’t anyone special. He watches Dee as she approaches him using her tentacles to help pull herself along.
“Anyway, it’s okay. I guess I can be kind of a bitch about things.”
She offers the tray of chicken fingers back to him, only one of them eaten. “These are pretty fucking terrible.”

Milt plucks them from her tentacles as she extends the tray to him, and says quietly, “They were better with the Dijon honey sauce.” He sets the tray on the table; he will throw them out later.

Dee lifts her shoulders in a casual shrug. She’s close enough now that her tentacles brush against his shoes. “Whatever. So, what’s eating you now?”

He moves his heels against the edge of the couch.

Dee’s grin spreads across her face. “C’mon now, aren’t we pals? Chums? Amigos? Or, you could just tell me because I’m basically your god.”

“Gck!” Milt looks up at her. “I’m ... I’m sorry, I just feel like I’m having some doubts, but I don’t know if it’s just ... the Order’s plan for me and I should just ... accept it.”

“Like what?” A tentacle sets on his knee like a concerned friend’s hand; the weight of it and the intense ammonia stench that comes with it makes Milt’s stomach roll. One touch brings a new level of horror and discomfort.

He is drowning in the ocean of her eyes and he can only come up to the surface to sputter out, “I ... I think the Order wants me dead. I think you’re going to kill me and I don’t understand why or what it would do.”

“And?” He feels another tentacle settle on his other knee.

Milt smiles faintly. Her grip on his knees tightens, “And I ... I wish there was another way. I wish there was something else that I could do other than die to ... to further our cause? I wish I could understand.”

“It’s only a way to ... ” She levels her eyes at him. She stares into his eyes, and Milt only gives her a small, timid smile. Dee sighs with a deadpan tone. “Goddamnit, you take all the fun out of this ...”

Milt leans forward, closing the small gap between them.

Dee’s head snaps toward the door. Her tentacles lash away from his knees as she lets out a hiss. “You didn’t lock the fucking door!”

Roger watches the boy go back to the room with the monster. Oh, the stupid boy. No, no, no! He was supposed to leave! What was he thinking? He wasn’t! He wasn’t thinking! No. No, it meant he had to take care of the boy. Take care of the boy and Her. Another lamb could not be led to the slaughter. No. No, not another one of the human race should be a meal for that witch. That beast. That monster.

His slides his finger over the blade again; it is still sharp. Good. Good. Good!

Roger stands there for a moment, stupefied to see the Daughter sitting there with a snarl on her lips. She hasn’t aged a day. Not a single day since the last time he saw her. Her teeth pin her lower lip down, as if to suppress a growing wicked smirk.

“Oh,” she says, letting out a girlish giggle, “it’s you. My little runaway ... ” She unfolds her tentacles, all of them unfurl toward him.

Roger’s eyes go wide. No, no, no. She’s only trying to trick you. End her. End her before she ends you! Roger bolts at her, screaming, and flailing his knife. Milt, seeing he isn’t the target of this scraggly stranger’s attack, acts quickly. He jumps up from his seat and body-checks Roger into the wall with his full weight. The crazed man, his rage so intently focused on the grinning girl in her chair, didn’t see the boy. Roger slams against the wall with Milt on top of him. Roger groans, the boy’s elbow is in his ribs, pushing the remaining air out of him. Roger turns a venomous glance up at Milt. The two wrestle on the floor in the small area of the train-car suite. Roger thrusts his hand against Milt’s throat.

“No! No! No! Don’t you see?! Don’t you see her! She’s a monster!”

Roger shrieks at Milt as he claws at the hand on his throat. “You’ll just feed her like all the others! Like cattle! Just feed her and die! That’s all she wants you for! That’s all!”

Tentacles slither around Roger’s ankles and she drags herself toward him. Her wheelchair squeaks while she moves forward. Roger bellows, a mixture of terror and loathing, kicking his legs in an attempt to free
himself. His grip weakens around Milt’s throat, which gives Milt the opportunity to grapple for the knife in Roger’s hand.

Roger’s frenetic gaze turns back to Milt; his eyes hold a rabid look of betrayal and fury, “What are you doing? She’ll kill you! She was going to kill me! What? What are you doing?”

Milt ignores him and focuses on disabling the man that looks like he may turn the knife against him at any moment. Milt punches rapidly and blindly downward with one hand in hopes of hurting Roger enough to stop his screaming and flailing. With his other hand, Milt tries to twist the butcher knife away from Roger. He feels his fist connect with flesh several times and Roger’s frenzied cries replaced with shouts of pain. He continues to ignore anything this man says. Roger swings the blade toward Milt, successfully slicing the boy’s arm deep enough so his blood runs down his arm.

One punch to Roger’s nose makes him drop the knife to the royal blue carpet speckled with off-purple dots from their blood. Roger clutches his nose and tries to defend himself by curling up. Dee’s tentacles wrap tightly up the length of Roger’s legs. Milt faintly hears her breath quicken with excitement as he picks up the knife. He stops punching Roger and stares down at the crumpled, defeated man underneath him who is sputtering gibberish about Her and how Milt is going to be killed.

“We … ” Dee breathes her words out, “We can’t let my little runaway get away again, Milt. Don’t let him get back up … ”

Panic cinches its hold on Roger when he hears Dee speak again. Roger lets out a shriek and finds his strength again to start kicking his legs; Dee corrects him, tightening her grasp on him and forcing his legs to remain straight. Milt’s hand clutching the knife begins to tremble. Roger’s wide eyes fill with tears as the horror that haunted his dreams for years has him in her clutches for the second time.

Roger shakes his head frantically, trying to push Milt off of him with both arms to escape. Blood steadily runs down his lips and sprays onto Milt’s face as he shouts, “Get off of me! No! No! No! She can’t have me! Let me go! Let me—”

Milt thrusts the knife into Roger’s side all the way to the handle. Roger’s breath catches and he stops struggling. Milt’s eyes fixate on Roger’s face as it burns into mind. A vacant look of terror enters Roger’s eyes; an inevitability that he thought he once avoided has now come to a bitter fruition. Milt stumbles to his feet and to Dee’s side. He can’t take his eyes away from the man on the floor.

“Milt,” she says with a euphoric whisper, “help me down.”

The stranger’s brown eyes remain on the Daughter’s terrible visage and loathsome form. Milt pulls his gaze away from Roger to see the sweet smile of the Daughter. She holds out her arms out to him, her hands grasp empty air for him. Milt feels his heart swell at her fury, but the feeling diminishes with the sound of pained whimpering below him. Milt leans in to pick Dee up in his shaking arms. His heart lodges in his throat being this close to her. She smells like ammonia and chicken fingers, but it’s the sweetest smell he has ever breathed in.

Dee’s tentacles spread out like a starfish, which pushes her away from Milt. “Set me down on him.”

“What? Are you sure?” He looks at Roger, who is trapped in a state of whimpering horror on the floor.

He hears a loud snap from somewhere underneath her algae-colored tentacles. She grins. “Oh, God, oh God, no … ” groans Roger, feebly staring up at the lilaceous beak amongst the pearlescent tendrils with rose-colored suckers. Milt lowers her down onto Roger’s torso. Her tentacles embrace him, like a hug, clutching tightly to his body. Milt hears a wet squish as Dee’s beak bites through Roger’s skin. Dee bites her bottom lip, breaking the skin again, and her eyes roll upward. Roger writhes underneath her, shrieking.

“Oh, shut up … ” she murmurs lazily and slaps a tentacle over his mouth. “You’re ruining this. I missed you.”

Milt stands beside Dee while she feeds on Roger. Dee’s hands caress her stomach while the rhythmic wet snapping sounds out beneath her. He still finds himself unable to look away from her, even as she consumes the man beneath her and ichor trickles down her chin.
Daedra turns her gaze up at Milt. “Hey ... what the fuck are you still doing here?” Her voice is lazy and distant. “Get out of here, you dumb kid ... ”

“B-But, I ... I thought I could help you ... ”

“Don’t kid yourself ... Mmm ... !” she closes her eyes and a muffled crunch of bone follows. The heavy smell of copper and ammonia fill the small space, “The only way you’re gonna help me is this.” She points down to Roger below her. “This is what I am. And this is all you’d become. So. Get. Out.”

Milt finds his footing and backs away from the carnage, the blood narrowly missing his Sketchers. His heart slowly sinks down into his stomach. Roger’s shrieks dull to a low whine under her control; his eyes gloss and shut halfway in a trance. Daedra begins to shift her tentacles in order to ball up Roger for easier consumption. The ammonia makes Milt’s eyes water. Yeah, it’s the ammonia.

Daedra ignores the door sliding open and shut. She didn’t see Milt make his hasty retreat from the cart. Milt sits in the sightseeing car, trembling while he watches the countryside pass him by. The ammonia.

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In the train station, Milt is one of the first passengers to get off. During his stay in the sightseeing cart, he pilfered an unattended red raincoat two sizes too big for him. He sits on a bench in the spacious marble station and pulls the hood up to hide his face.

He watches all the people file out, hug their relatives, and fumble their way toward taxis and awaiting cars. He waits. He waits hours before the station clears out, until there is only a few stragglers and a hobo sleeping on a bench. He never sees Daedra come out. Instead, he sees a High Priest, much like Hastur in dress and general misshape, with his scaled arm around a boy of fifteen. The boy looks bewildered, but eagerly hanging off of each word from the priest’s lips.

“You wait in there, my son,” Milt hears him say. “I will call when I have the Daughter with me.”

The boy gives him a confident nod and broad smile. “I won’t let you down, sir.”

The Priest slaps him on the shoulder in response with a grin of his own. “There’s a good lad!”

Milt watches the boy get on the train and minutes later, the Priest follows him, but breaks in the opposite direction. The Priest never comes out with the Daughter. The only person that leaves is the Priest after an extended stay inside the car. The train is going to leave in a few hours after refueling and general clean up. Milt bites the skin from his top lip free and tastes a little blood with it. He suckles it while the thought of boarding the train again rolls over and over in his mind. The Father works in such mysterious ways, he thinks as he rises from the bench.
Brass Bodies
Curτ Scheafer

Brass bodies filled with explosive energy. One kick sets off a fiery tantrum. Round, slender bodies adorned with lead crowns, a green band wraps around its taper.

Lead crowns thrown with soaring vengeance down a spiraling dark, narrow tunnel. Anguish propels them toward landscapes of dust-filled air and mud-brick buildings. Collisions shedding plumes of dust. Red splatters paint mud-brick walls.

Forlorn fury resonates—
BANG – BANG – BANG!

Departed lead heads let brass bodies bask in peace. Subtle dust clouds flow through streets.


Brass bodies landed on silty earth, scattered amongst fellow brass. Their bodies glow in completion.
Feelings of Missing
Suzie Vander Vorste

The absence of you in my life aches
a neon vacancy sign hangs in places
you should be. I pace inside memories—
waking to sizzling sounds of you frying
eggs and bacon. After school, seeing
you place unemployment sorrows in a whiskey
glass; shattering photograph whipped
across the room before storming out, banging door
shut. Looking forward to ham and cheese
sandwiches at the café during visitation “dates;”
purple marker lines cross out calendar days,
I’m stunned you didn’t show.

I imagine, rewind and replay scenes:
you in a rat-infested hostel, fleeing
phantoms with cocaine coursing, crawling over
pain under your skin, blacking-out.

Dead. Despite continuously repeating
“He’s gone.” I feel the part of a fool
when a man at the grocery store fakes
my mind to see you, resemblance exact.

The absence of you in my life aches.
A Night of Cold Weather
Brittney Canales

The curtains in our kitchen danced to the summer breeze that blew into our windows. Eighty-degree weather in San Antonio, Texas was a miracle, heck it was a blessing. That particular night, we were due to have a cold front come our way. Considering this state only has two seasons (summer and hot summer) I couldn't be happier; I didn't have to turn on the AC tonight, the darn thing hardly worked anyway.

The kitchen held the aroma of the freshly baked chocolate chip cookies. My family made it a tradition to make them every Thursday night, but only if my brother and I stayed on task with school work and brought home good report cards. The enticing scent floated through the dining room and into the living room where my nine-year-old brother and I sat eating excess cookie dough.

I sat on the couch, my legs under me, programming my new cell phone I received yesterday as a birthday gift. My brother sat at the foot of the couch watching, with great intensity, the new episode of Spongebob.

"Beth! Brian!" My parents called for us from the kitchen. We pulled away from our distractions (unwillingly) to drag our feet to the meeting. Upon entering the room, I was hit with a gust of wind causing a shiver to run down my back. I pulled my sweater closer around my body and took one of the two open seats. My family sat facing one another; my Mom and Dad facing my brother and I. My chair had a leg that was an inch shorter than the others and I immediately scolded myself for grabbing that one; it's usually pawned off on my kid brother. It was awfully quiet for the few seconds we sat there. I rocked my chair back and forth on the uneven legs, dearly anticipating some sort of news.

"What's going on Mom?" I asked.

My mother glanced at my father and their unspoken conversation seemed to last forever. Oh my God they're getting a divorce, was the first thing that ran through my head. I felt a twinge pull at my heart, and my stomach tightened.
“Beth … Brian, Mommy has breast cancer,” my father told us. At that point, the temperature in the room dropped a few degrees. Everything seemed to freeze and the only sound came from the howling dog next door.

I abruptly stopped rocking my chair and looked from my father, who couldn’t of had those words come out of his mouth, to my mother who sat looking at me with a pitied look on her face. My palms began to sweat and I was completely sure my esophagus was swelling.

“W-w-what?” I shrieked.

“Honey, it’s okay, we’ve just——

“No! No, Mom! How could it be okay?!” I jumped up and glared down at her. The warmth of my tears poured down my cheeks. I felt my stomach spasm as if something were trying to claw its way out.

Brian sat silently in his chair, his head down against his chest. I heard him sniffle as his hand came up to wipe at his eyes. His Pokemon shirt was already stained from his fallen tears. Our Pomeranian, Dakota, sauntered over to his feet and sat looking up at him. She nuzzled his leg until he picked her up and hugged her to his chest. She licked his cheek as he proceeded to whimper.

Mom looked at the two of us and said calmly, “Kids, we don’t really have too much information right now. We only went to the doctor yesterday and they think they found something. They’re … uh … pretty positive they’ve detected cancer. We have another appointment Saturday morning with Dr. Jenny to find out more information and to start making a plan to help Mommy get better.”

I sat back down on the chair and stared at my mom. I felt extremely dizzy and wasn’t sure if it was related to my lack of iron, since I’m an anemic, or if I just needed to throw up. The two of us sat there and stared at each other for what seemed like an eternity. Thoughts ran through my head: horrible, nasty thoughts of me not having my mother in my life anymore, her not being at my graduation, my wedding, to see my children. It was too overwhelming for me to hold it together any longer. I threw my hands over my face and burst into tears.

“Oh Honey!” my mother cried as she got up and walked toward me. She knelt at my feet with careful ease and took me in her arms. I threw my arms around her and buried my face into her neck. It felt as if my cries were uncontrollable, as they played in sync with my body’s spasms. I looked over at where my brother sat and saw my dad holding him on his lap, the dog nowhere in sight. Brian looked at me from around Dad’s arms that held him. I reached my hand out and he grabbed it. We all sat that way for twenty minutes. We just held each other and rocked back and forth listening to the ticking of the clock that was perched on the kitchen wall behind us. Every now and then, there would be a burst of tears from someone and that was enough to get us all going again. After a time had passed, I had puffy eyes, a runny nose and a broken heart. I felt exhausted and knew that I would cry myself to sleep tonight.

“Why don’t we all get some sleep and we can talk more about this in the morning? We can even make pancakes if you want,” my mother said with careful words. My brother and I nodded and walked out of the kitchen toward our rooms, still holding each other’s hands. Pancakes won’t fix this, I thought, not this time.

When we came to his room, I turned to stare into Brian’s bloodshot eyes.

“I think it’s going to be okay, but we’ll stick together and if you need anything, you know my room is next door.” I assured him with the conversation that I felt I was responsible for, seeing as I was his big sister (only by four years). For a quick second, I thought back to all the times he would wake me in the middle of the night asking to sleep in my room due to nightmares.

He nodded and wrapped his arms around me. I hugged him back and kissed the top of his head. When he let me go, I walked toward the door at the end of his room that led to mine. I pulled open the door and stepped inside, carefully closing it behind me. My mother had always told me that my room was special; unlike the rest of the house, it was hotter in the winter and colder in the summer. Plus, it was the biggest room in the house. Why I got it, and not my
parents, I don’t understand. I felt like I could be anybody I wanted
in my room; it was private and in the very back of the house. But at
that moment, I felt more alone than I had ever felt, privacy held no
consolation at this time. I ran to my queen sized bed and leaped in,
burying my head in my pillow and entangling myself in the dolphin
comforter I had gotten two Christmas’s ago.

I played back the conversation of the night and realized how real
this was. How could this be happening to my family? What had we
done? Our church congregation always said not to piss off God (and
I’m paraphrasing here), but what had we done?

I was half asleep when I heard the door creak open. Footsteps
lightly greeted my ears as I turned over to discover someone walking
into the room. It was dark and the dim moonlight shining through
the window did not play across their face to help me distinguish who
it was, but I knew it was mother; she had the lightest footsteps of
anyone in the family. She climbed into bed with me and arranged the
covers so we were both snuggled under them. A took a little while for
my eyes to adjust to the dark, but when they did, I found her face.

My mother’s eyes were puffy and tear streaked.

"Promise everything is going to be okay."

"I promise Honey, I’m not going anywhere."

We laid together for the rest of the night holding each other silently

The TWO sides of ME I take to Work (I)
Belva Weston
Recipe of a Cure
Chilee Nleya

Maybe if I eat something,
drive through McDonalds:
small fry and a cheeseburger,
bubbly Sprite on the side.
Greasy 2 am pizza still sits
heavy in my belly, but
this will drive me through the day.

Maybe if I take it easy,
don't push too hard:
leave work early to sneak a nap,
watch Friends as I lesson plan.
One-page journals suck my time;
I stare at a single sentence
unable to make it connect.

Maybe if I think ahead,
prepare before the night begins:
line my eyes, brighten my cheeks,
red lips, big hair.
Tight shirts, not too low,
jeans and boots make my legs look long.
If I look the part,

I won't spend the day
replaying how I felt
when nobody looked my way,
regretting how 7 & 7s
made me crude, mean,
feeling gross when some boy
says my tits look big.

Maybe if I stay home
make linguini with a friend:
rent bad comedies, laughing,
at the other night's mistakes.
Wake up early, steam through paid hours.
Then I focus on my
reading and writing.
After it all, it makes no sense.
Why do I put myself through it
every weekend and holiday break?
The Tiny Sock
David Alden Herbener

IT's origins are mysterious, perhaps evil. Peering into the near empty sock drawer—I see IT's malevolent smile in the white fabric—already plotting the slip on the ice, the misplaced essay, the nothing argument about coffee beans with the girlfriend. IT turns my right foot's little toe purple then abandons my heel halfway between Starbucks and my car. When my left foot went through the puddle's ice, IT smirked, bunched up in the toe of my black Chuck Taylor. IT looks just like the other Adidas ankle socks but left my only pen in the dirty jeans; IT studied the chapter on Catherine the Great instead of Louis XIV; IT covered the ground in black ice and pushed the accelerator instead of the brakes; IT forgot my wallet on the library's table; IT sent that dirty text to Mom instead of Maria.

IT grew passive near the end of the day, aiming for the laundry Pile; but I remembered and smugly threw it away.

Two weeks later, resurrected, IT cut off circulation to my left big toe and I cursed IT as I trudged through knee deep snow.
An Awkward Two Seconds of Frozen Nerd
Bobby Benedict

I spaced out for a second again.

I'm just sort of glazed over, thinking hard about not messing up the next beat or making sure that I don't forget to say something funny when the time comes, but I am Antarctica and global warming has ceased, all the glaciers have stopped moving, and the penguins halted their march around in my brain. Like when a record skips.

The room is full of eyes that glow in the residual light coming from stage lights. It's as if the band and I are some rampaging SUV that's about to plow a herd of deer. Sardines crammed shoulder to shoulder in a hot basement of a building in a bad part of downtown Anchorage, Alaska. Me freezing up on drums, the biggest inconvenience. Even through the blinding glare of light coming from my set, I can see the discontent that hangs in the air if I stay like this for another second.

My arms are tied to the air; hanging, marionette style, I'm waiting for the puppet master to relinquish control. Even if I'm the puppet master, my body disagrees with my brain all the time. It's like when I fall down the stairs because I think too hard about going down them. Can I even blink?

Something catches my eye. It's the frontman, Nathan. He has a half smile of "What the hell are you doing?" His guitar is getting ready to swing down like a big rock star, but he wears a collared shirt and jeans that aren't torn. He might have combed his hair; he tried to make his mom proud while at the same time attempting to be punk rock, two things that mix just as good as oil and water.

The drummer has the duty to be cool without looking like he cares. I failed. Trendy wristband I just bought, wore my contacts, spiked my hair. I can't spin my stick or do any drum solos, but I can make faces, which is what I did all night. I thought it was a good idea at the time. I thought I was cool and it showed, a gleam in my eye like porcelain.

I was as cool as a toilet.

Our keyboardist pulls a Linda Blair head-spin to stare me down with a gaze so close to turning me to stone that I thought her hair was made of snakes. I thought it was weird she looked back. Becca never looks around much; she just stares at her hands like I stare at nothing. She was a sweet girl, used to be a cheerleader. She loved the environment and believed that Ralph Waldo Emerson was one of the greatest people to have lived. She was a strange girl because on top of that she was part of a weird garage punk band full of sweaty unattractive guys.

I make eye contact with all three of the band, even Rob, the bassist. No one cares about the bassist.

The record is back to playing. Try to play it off as a gimmick, a way to draw people's attention. I don't think it was that obvious. It probably wasn't; I'm just over thinking things. Stick meets cymbal, I started playing again, with a thundering crash you hope to hear when you start back into a song: the secret to get the power is to hit the bass drum at the same time. We start back on our merry way in our gig, getting through the jitters of our screw up, my screw up.

I hope I don't space out for a second again.
The Freshman 15
David Alden Herbener

August 31, 2011

Today I teach my first class ... Dr. Jameson told us that we should keep a teaching journal to keep us sane. Thanks for the vote of confidence. I have never stood in front of a classroom and taught, but today it is completely sink or swim. Here goes.

Went well! I have no idea how I am going to remember all their names from both classes, but whatever. One day down ... something like 40 more to go! This TA thing is gonna suck ... our 4 year age difference seems impossibly small. I told them to call me Richard, it seems less formal.

September 2, 2011

Easy enough day ... they just wrote the whole time. Only remember 2 of the 50 names, cuz they were the attractive ones. I can say that right? I guess this is only a journal. Not like the whole department is gonna read it. My two girls that actually showered and dressed for class: Angie and Jennifer (who said “Stellar” today). Seriously? Who still says Stellar?

September 19, 2011

So, it’s officially the 4th week of school, and I have almost 50 name down. My first class is still the quiet one. I picked up a red dry-erase marker and it begged to be thrown at the wall of boys in the back, but I’m sure they wouldn’t even wake up.

My second class, though ... there are still Seth and Michael, I can never remember who is who. They both have that slightly-overweight build, a boyish face, short curly hair and some lingering face acne. I think they have the same backpack too. I wish one would start wearing a hat so I know who is who.

September 21, 2011

Class today went well ... except Michael was gone, and again, I totally got him confused with Seth. Still, I know I have seen that t-shirt on Michael (with the Dharma logo from the TV Show Lost), but Seth was wearing it. I noted it because the ex got me the same one for Christmas last year, and I thought it would help differentiate the two. Perhaps they both have it.

***

September 30, 2011

Seth started moving around the room, and I lose him sometimes. I don’t know what it is about him ... he has changed since the semester started. The freshman 15 must be hitting him hard. He sits between Angie and Nevaeh now. Neveah twirls her pen in her fingers like Boris from GoldenEye. I know this journal is supposed to focus on classroom dynamics and the material’s effectiveness, but there is something about Seth. He said “Stellar” today. He seems to emulate his classmates ... he is a strange kid, and I feel uneasy around him. But, weirdly, all the rest of the students seem to love him. WTF?

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October 5, 2011

I haven’t had to call out names for a week or so, since I finally memorized faces. Today I noticed Randy was here because I heard him singing his favorite song: Blake Shelton’s “Hillbilly Bone.” I didn’t even look when I took roll! I started class, and I was halfway through the discussion when, with my back turned, I called on Randy before I noticed Mr. Cowboy wasn’t there. I had a weird moment of confusion, I paused and scanned the seats until my gaze fell on Seth. He wasn’t paying attention to me, he was turned around in his seat chatting with Jae Ho, my Korean student. It was the first time I was truly tongue-tied and lost complete track of what we were discussing. Weird ...
October 12, 2011

Christina (an older TA) told me to expect dwindling numbers, and the rest of the Teaching Assistants are seeing it too, but this is ridiculous. I honestly thought I would lose a few, but five students haven’t been around for more than a week, and I have 3 others that aren’t here today. Seth sat in the front of the classroom, and smiled at me. It was freaky. That grin has definitely gotten more lopsided since the semester began.

When Nevaeh used to twirl her pen, I found it amusing. But in Seth’s sausage-link fingers it was disquieting.

I sent an email to all of the no-shows, and have since received one bad from Rachelle and one from Sam. So it might be all in my head. I still haven’t heard or seen Jennifer for a while; it’s rather disheartening.

October 14, 2011

Seth was wearing Andy’s sweat-stained Green Bay Packers hat today. Somehow I knew Andy was gonna miss class. I was right … no Andy …

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October 24, 2011

I saw Seth in McDonalds last night hanging out with Jessica. Seriously, how does he get these girls to hang out with him? He must have put on like 25lbs this semester! But they were sitting there, laughing. He disgustingly crammed fries into his flabby, stupid face.

Oh, and only 10 people in class today. They all sat in a group around him, like disciples in awe of their master. He just sat and smirked in the center, sipping on an obscenely large Monster … he looked like a ridiculous character from a Dr. Seuss book that cautions against obesity.

Christina told me not to be so upset with him, since he does answer all the questions correctly. It’s like he’s super smart, but his eyes are all creepy, they’re sunken into his face, and I can’t stand looking into those black fissures. I wanna know why Jessica was gone today. She hasn’t missed a day yet. I’m gonna email her and see if something is up.

October 26, 2011

Got a message this morning from Seth. He had to run home because his mother was ill or something made up like that. Class went really well, except that only 11 students showed up. Jessica was there, thank God. She seemed extremely happy, and led the discussion on advertising.

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November 2, 2011

I understand its Homecoming week, but come on! My first class of the day I had 20 students, a decent turn out, but the second section … there were only 8! On top of that, Seth pulled out his phone today and there was a dangly swinging from it. A Dangly! When he saw me looking at it, he hid it rather well, but I swear it was just like Angie’s. I told Kyle last weekend that I think he is … absorbing his classmates, and that sounds even more ridiculous on paper than it did after several beers. But honest to God, ever since Michael disappeared and the Lost shirt …

November 4, 2011

Friday of Homecoming. My roommate has cracked the keg already, and I just have to make it through these classes and I’m golden.

5 students. 5.

Fuck it. If they don’t wanna come … not my problem.

November 6, 2011

I saw him this weekend. The fat ass is following me, I swear to God. My roommates and I were at the tailgating ground inhaling a case of Bud Light goodness and a platter of jello-shots, and I was drunk, yes, but I wasn’t that drunk. Honest.

Seth was in the crowd. I could see his head, all misshapen with a new moronic buzz cut. I quickly noticed a gaggle of girls enveloped him, and he was showing off his new piercing … left ear, cartilage.

No joke. I only know one other guy in the whole world with his cartilage pierced … and well, he doesn’t come to my class anymore. Suddenly Seth turned around, as if he knew I was there, and by some
curse of the cosmos, the drunken crowd shifted so I was standing in the open, with maybe 30 feet of open grass and beer cans between us. He smiled with those awful crooked teeth and sauntered towards me. I flipped out. I swung around, ducked between my friends, and fled. I had no idea where I was going, and I ran into so many people my blue Homecoming shirt was soaked in beer. I found myself next to a line for the Port-o-Potties, and I carefully peered around me for Seth. A wave of relief washed over me.

20 minutes later ... he found me! I was on the opposite end of the fucking tailgating area and he found me! I felt a tap on the shoulder and when I turned, his face was dangerously close to mine, and I smelled him. It was the first time I had been in such close contact with him, and his toxic fumes, like horrible body odor and stale McDonald's fried food nearly knocked me over.

I talked to him. I had to. It was the worst 5 minutes of my life. Seth's breath smelled like spoiled milk and a public bathroom. Thankfully, my roommate's girlfriend was puking, so I was able to extricate myself. But, every time I looked over my shoulder on the way out, he was still watching me.

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November 7, 2011

It was just him today. I walked in late (I have been dreading this class, ever since the weekend) and it was just Seth. Front and center. I glanced at my watch, commented on the lack of students, and said we would have a free day and left as quickly as I entered.

I went and talked to Dr. Jameson, something I should have done ages ago. He said he would come to class with me on Wednesday ... I was totally freaked out.

November 9, 2011

Dr. Jameson got there early. Or, at least he said he would. All I know for sure is Seth had a familiar blazer on when I got to the classroom.

“Hello Ricky,” he said calmly, a hungry grin spread across his face. “Looks like it's just me and you today.”

I left. This is too much. As I nearly sprinted from the building, I looked over my shoulder, and there he stood. The second story of the Health Sciences building, waving from the window.

I am sitting in my office right now. I smell his presence sliding around the door cracks. My door is locked, he is just outside.

I can't get out.

I can't get out.
Cowboy Haikus
Sheryl Kurylo

I. Recipe for Cowboy Coffee
Boil water in pail
Dump coffee grounds in yer cup
Stir it up then drink

II. Just Like Shane
Outlaw saunters in
Strugglin' locals need hero
Town drives stranger out

III. In the Valley
Chuck drives the wagon
Makes 'em biscuits n' gravy
Moonshine burns his throat

IV. For Them Ole Dogs
Cowboys sure love 'em
Burrs in fur and muddy paws
Best friend and pardner

V. Dry
High noon, dusty trail
Tumbleweed blows by and by
Get a move on horse

VI. Pearl Snaps
This ain't no flannel
Snaps decorate Cody's shirt
Gussy up fer town

VII. At the Rodeo
Stetsons and Wranglers
Infamous eight-second ride
Crowd roars as bull bucks.

Peggy's Pasture
Ashley M Plummer
Ignorance
Rebecca Shields

I hate cowboy boots with a three piece suit—
giant belt buckles and Wrangler jeans;
the clash of country and city makes me cringe.

Cowboy hats, black with brown suede tassels
atop “fashionable” farmer’s heads
represented as a symbol of Midwestern class.

I hate hick’s-speak grammar obviously weak—
double negatives slaughtering
language and spreading ignorant stereotypes.

The black leaves deposited into the mouth
slur words with the dip jutting
forward, breath rank and unsettling.

I hate country music and its attempt to be artistic—
constant complaints over some meaningless problem
depicted by the strum of a banjo, the whine of a violin.

The Toby Keiths of the world who
attack vital American rights
and silence those with the strongest voice.

I hate cowboy boots with a three piece suit—
giant belt buckles and Wrangler jeans;
the clash of country and city makes me cringe.
Irish Dogwood Tree
Jenna Dennert

The dawn breaks softly over the horizon, gentle rays of light illuminating the windswept countryside. Within the sparsely wooded forest, a dogwood tree stands sentinel by a fork in the winding road. The world of greenery bursts into life about her—to the left the foxglove chatters aimlessly about a compliment a wandering traveler bestowed upon it—foxglove is a very vain flower, you see. Above his head to the right a great oak tree towers, its age younger than the dogwood's despite its massive size. The grass is vibrant, ready to grow another quarter of an inch or so today—it needs not fear being cut, for nature is left to grow unfettered by humans. The sky is clear, but to the dogwood chat means nothing—rain pops up entirely too quickly to predict the weather.

On this particular midsummer's day, the dogwood was thrown into a state of melancholy—this not being the first time the tree's spirits were down, the oak decided to let it pass unheeded. If the weather remains fine, and we get some visitors to admire our beauty, perhaps that will lift the Dogwood's spirits, thought the oak to himself. For this oak was of a placid nature—nothing ever much troubled him. But as the day went on, even the oak could not remain unmoved. Even when a human sapling came and played beneath the dogwood's shady blossoms, the tree remained unresponsive. What ails you? queried the oak. You should not have a care in the world on a day as fine as this.

Silence. At first the oak thought the dogwood would not even answer, but after a stretch the dogwood replied, Have you any sad memories of life, tall and mighty oak? The oak thought long and hard. After contemplating he replied, Not particularly—there was never any drought to live through, or any storm that injured my boughs. The playful crook by the willow cheers me, and being able to watch the animals and humans grow is a source of great joy.

It is lucky for you then—and with that, the dogwood fell silent.
and hide between my boughs, falling asleep within the shade I cast. I
sheltered that boy from the sun, rain, and wind, but could not save him.
For one night as the family was asleep, a group of men dressed identically
rode upon horses and seized the cottage, throwing the family out of doors.
Against the father's protests they tied him up—the boy couldn't bear to see
his father treated badly. He rushed up to stop the men, and was knocked
aside. Never again did he get up—his mother's screams still echo in my
memory, terrible in her despair. They burned down the cottage that night
for good measure—I desperately wanted to die, to be burned up in flames
with the little boy sapling, to have to feel any more pain. The rain
came along soon and extinguished the flames, but not soon enough—the
cottage was nothing more than a smoldering ruin now.

My despair knew no bounds—why were the humans doing this to one
another? The sights I saw within the following year alone were horrific—
innocent lives were destroyed. Violence and bloodshed left its mark upon
everything—much of nature was destroyed. But I lived. I felt the pain
of the hunted, I watch them die, and there never is a release from the
knowledge. Cursed as I am, I live to an extraordinary age—true, what
was lost has now been covered over with a fresh coat of life—the trees
have returned, the animals have come out of hiding, and the humans
seem at peace. But what of the past? What of the lives lost? What of the
suffering? Do they remember—that is what bothers me. To know is pain—
to not know is even worse.

The oak was stunned. The dogwood turned back to her inward
memories. And although the brook still babbled joyfully down the
banks, and the foxglove admired itself in the pool's reflection, the fork
in the road in the forest was silent.

**Viceroy**

Jessica Slama

Butterflies chase love with reckless abandonment. Cloudless
yellow papyrus wings pull translucent bodies tumbling through
my garden sky.

Viceroy's, Monarch imitators, float with wings tracing slow motion air
circles. Deliberate beats show love in costumes, orange and black.

The vast hue of blue is brightened by yellow and orange sky carousels
whilst sunning on my weathered wooden bench.

Butterflies, charged with hormone seeping passion, live each day
as their last, slurping nectar, teasing out mates. My eyes trace these
fevered lovebugs, flittering.

Human lovers stroll past in decades. The Twenties walk in a half-step,
ambling, ignoring everything but their sunshine moment.

Thirties race across the green, hands twined, swinging laughing,
hiccupping two and three year old wobblers on chubby legs.

Mid-seventies amble through rheumatism, purple-veined hands clasping,
relishing each hydrangea, rose-hued spirea, one body walking.

The aged wooden bench, an extension of myself, is covered in moss.
People stroll past me but not the butterflies. They see life,
youth hidden here.

Glittering wings deposit flying dust, coating my eyelashes, shifting my
mind. I see myself flittering wildly, hands clasped with my lover.

Eyes open to butterflies, yellow skittering, orange gallant. I'm called to
rise, reject my bench-bound cocooned identity with wings waving.

They call me up and away before being carried on an August breeze,
yellow and bold, orange, imitators of kings.

My monarchesque lover costume shines, a master of love, vibrant,
ready to float.
Snowy Morning
Rebecca Shields

A winter birch stands guard
over a blank, open landscape—
icy, barren branches
expand into the sky, threatening
those who dare break the silence.

Fresh powder blankets the ground
the air, crisp at sunrise
is still, quiet
as an opaque haze lingers
blurring the image of serenity.

As the sun rises, slow
painting the sky
a new day brings new possibility—
the snow a fresh canvas
awaits its first visitor.

The tree remains still
an overwhelming presence
resisting the breeze—
unwilling to rest
unwilling to move.

Dilapidated Domicile
Cole Behrends
Sulkings of an Abandoned Barn
Sheryl Kurylo

Paint chips off weathered boards, clustering in snowy scarlet mounds.
Faded by time, shingles sink and slide down gentle slope.
Dirt-beaten sides implode: a story of the land falls into itself.
Screeching windows ache, Dust-laden ledges pried open after ages of solitude.
Four walls, not standing but leaning, support each other—held shaky for the blustering season ahead.

Ask Not
Adam Fleischhacker

We have reached the breaking point; we cannot sustain ourselves without intervention from an outside resource. The spirit of exploration, the dream of transcendence, and the impassioned pursuit of truth have all been squandered to “make life easier.” Consider the following: we need not think about how to feed ourselves, because we have fast food. We need not consider our bearings, because the GPS illuminates the path (most of the time). We need not appreciate mathematics, because our calculators crunch the numbers. Indeed, even the internet has become a stand-in for raw discovery. Remove any of these surrogates, and behold, a confident figure of the modern world shall become weak, almost helpless. A service-oriented society has contributed to anti-intellectualism and its own demise by generating a “learned helplessness” amongst Americans.

What does “learned helplessness” mean, anyway? The American Psychological Association defines learned helplessness as: “Lack of motivation and failure to act after exposure to unpleasant events or stimuli over which the individual has no control […] Individuals learn that they cannot control their environment, and this may lead them to fail to make use of any control options that are available.” Breaking it down, we discover that an implied or felt sense of lost control leads to stagnation of interest or action. The “victim” gives up. More importantly, he/she gives up, despite being capable of solving the situation at hand.

What are we talking about? What are we giving up? The answer echoes in your head every time you think, “oh, I cannot do anything about it.” The “it” in question might be political, educational, relational, or emotional; the key to recognizing our own stagnation rests in our doubts. Do we doubt we can independently choose what to wear, where we are going, or whom we can influence? If ignorance is bliss, then why are we so depressed, anxious, bored, or otherwise lost — adrift in someone else’s universe? We are bombarded daily by advertisements that tell us what to buy, news media that tell us
to vote for, and gadgets and services that remove us from “having to do it ourselves.” Our out-of-control environment includes all of these elements. All we do is sit back and watch. Harsh words perhaps, but medicine tends to be bitter.

We give these elements of our environment authoritative intellectual control. Not only have we relinquished control to the ubiquitous “they” or “them,” but also, we trust them. When the advertisement tells us to buy Wrangler blue jeans because of their “five-star” quality, or the mudslinger tells us not to vote for so-and-so because he/she blindly raises taxes, or the GPS on the dash tells us to “turn right,” we quietly agree. ABC News reports that GPS, especially, might damage our geographical awareness, whether local or abroad. Maybe we doubt there is time or reason to question their intent. Maybe we doubt we can find our own contrary evidence. Maybe we doubt we can find the Korean restaurant by our own compass. Undoubtedly, the end result is the same: we stop thinking about it as soon as the moment passes. Thought has left the building, leaving us grasping for further assistance; “please, save us from our high-calorie habits! Save us from global warming! Save us from that which we cannot understand!”

This mind-numbing paralysis prevents us from recognizing our intellectual role in society. We stand by, helpless, believing that the strings that pull and direct our world are beyond our control. Discouraged, we fail to grow, to act, and to learn. From this root of despair, a new myth emerges: service by society. When we place all trust in our “authoritative environment,” we wind up expecting support from it. During the voting season, why bother to research the political history of, for example, Senator John Thune? Surely the commercials, playing dismal music and showing disheartening images of the man, have our best interests at heart …

For that matter, why bother to vote? Surely there are others out there who know the right choice—there is no need to waste time fighting the tide. Why read a book? Why test our own hypotheses? Why seek truth? Again, we delegate and entrust these intellectual bulwarks to “society,” as if society were some “great mother.” The same can be said of government, community, and the world. This notion is terribly false! These constructs are not some blurry, remote thing! We are “society.” Government is you and it is me. The world of humanity consists of individual humans, most of them as intelligent (and foolish) as you or I. Peggy Noonan illustrates the potential gravity of this false delegation of intellectual authority: these folks, these men and women in seats of government, might cry aloud at our dubious requirement of them! Shall we expect them to scoff at our orders, proclaiming at once their humanity? Or might we drive them mad and drunk with indulgent authority, instead proclaiming their power over matters beyond the realm of the State? In truth, we should expect nothing less. Matters of the heart, of spirit, and of truth belong to all of us—not just those to whom we give official entitlement.

Why have we adjusted to living on crutches? Can we not think and act of our own accord? Oh, but society gives us so much! Houses are built, food miraculously regenerates at supermarkets, and schools provide our children with the knowledge they need to stake a life in this world, right? It may seem so. Society is becoming distorted and blurry. It appears to many as an omnipotent source. They have handed over the keys of reality, in exchange for a couch, a paycheck, and enough toys to secure them through tough times. Gone are the days where a sharp mind kept one alive through drought and scarcity; gone are the fireside ponderings over the vast universe; gone are the terrific marches in the streets for truth and justice! The moonlit jungle of noise, politics, and opinion is too dark, thick, and frightening; we have let our mental machetes dull and rust, leaving the intellectual hacking to someone else. It is safer and easier that way. We pay our taxes, vote when we feel like it, and send lunch money with our kids; what more can we offer to our great society?

It is time to wake up and smell the steaming pile of falsehood. It is time to remove the rose-colored glasses. It is time to read up, gear up, and reconsider our intellectual and societal responsibilities. Society cannot function without each and every one of us! Where would schools be without dedicated teachers? Where would our food come from without carefully planned distribution from farms and ranches?
How would our nation secure itself without individual servicemen and women? How can we possibly depend on a future into which we contribute nothing? Jean-Jacques Rousseau gives us caution; his two hundred year old message is unwavering: The survival of our nation depends, ever so completely, on us expressly acting and committing to its affairs.

Be warned then, ever so severely: if we believe that our legislation and national security are being sufficiently handled by some “remote government,” then we have doomed ourselves. Without thoughtful and direct intervention, we need only put a price tag on our bodies, our lives, and our freedom. Price tags … imagine that. What is our price? Are we sufficiently comforted by rhetoric from our politicians? Have empty promises become our daily bread? Have goods and materials become our salvation? Open your caffeine-deprived eyes and see the finely spun filament that is yours—grasp it firmly … fee the vibrations … widen your gaze and look upon the fragile web to which you belong. Break any part of it, and the whole thing falls to shambles. Our relationship to society is reciprocal! We cannot depend upon society to answer our questions, explore our boundaries, or raise our children! The quest for truth, the license to our minds, and the intellectual torch has been handed to each of us—it is our birthright as bastions of humanity.

If we continue to believe that intellectual change is impossible, despite all evidence to the contrary, then society will fail. This begs the question: why do we believe that change is impossible? The note behavioral psychologist, B. F. Skinner, hinted that free will is not an innate quality. Instead, it is a product of occurrences throughout a person’s life; a life in which the individual feels that his/her choices and desires become rewarding experiences in the end. In other word if nothing good comes from trying—even once or twice—then there is no reason to continue the behavior. Wait a minute … Does that mean we choose to believe we are better off allowing other “entities” to think for us because … we need a pat on the back?

A good friend of mine considered another chilling possibility: “[we] talk about unpleasant events, but a lot of people seem to like it this way. They get upset when their quick and easy solutions [do not] work.” Perhaps some folks do enjoy life fed to them on a spoon. Once caught in our own cyclical sloth trap, we lose sight of the bars, the same way many of us forget we are wearing glasses. We forget that the services we seek, whether to clothe us, or feed us, or direct us, require our submission. Once enslaved, we can enjoy the bliss that comes from not having to devour truth, despite the eerie clawing of chalkboards in the back of our minds. Our “free” will to transcend and conquer the dark forces of idleness and folly has been quietly squashed by selfishness and fear—fear of an unknown end. If Bill writes his legislator, concerning an unjust law, he has done his part. If Wendy discovers how Rome fell, and warns her fellow citizens not to follow the same destructive path, she has done her part. If Cathy reads fables to her children, teaching them to live honorably and seek truth, she has done her part. If Carl researches proper children’s programs (on sites such as www.CommonSenseMedia.com), ensuring his kids are not subjected to brain-rotting media, he has done his part. Change is inevitable; what change will you make in the next five minutes, the next hour, or the next year?

We have been duped into believing the myth, “service by society.” Who did the duping? We did. By taking a back seat to responsible citizenship, we enslave ourselves, our intellect, and our free will. Worse yet, by handing over the keys of authority to media, the government, and our own communities, we place undue stress on a society that depends completely on each and every one of us. If we remain idle, mute, and paralyzed, then society is condemned to fail. We are not helpless, but we do need to kick ourselves off the proverbial couch every now and again. The “easy life” gives us bland food, bad directions, and empty pockets. The “easy life” only serves to destroy the intellectual spirit; the quenchless thirst for meaning and understanding.

Straighten up, take a deep breath, and look upon the earth with fresh eyes.

Hunger for knowledge, thirst for truth, and take hold of something real for the first time.
Refusing Pink
Christa Leuning

Thursday, 1:36AM
a conversation
stemming from a picture posted
on Facebook over
whether a volleyball is pink or bubblegum.

You girls should seriously get your eyes checked
suggests its owner.
Because the volleyball is most definitely not pink;
Indeed bubblegum and white.

It is sad, he says,
that a college-aged person does not know
the basic colors of life.
He tells us I will pray for you,
as if we are the ones who need to atone.
What is our sin?

He's wondering why
God gave us such shallow minds
and bad color perception.

To this I take offense, especially since
perception is not spelled
"p-r-e-c-e-p-t-i-o-n".
He brings
Conception, Construction, and Liposuction
into the mix.
Where is this going? I asked. What is the relevance
of these things?
He has no answer.

The things I have learned from this
are very clear:
Pink does not equal bubblegum,
Facebook does not equal
intelligent conversation,
and owning a pink volleyball
does not equal being effeminate,
and whether male or female
all are one.
Period.
Chilee Nleya

Inside heat bends me over myself, growing hotter, swelter keeps me awake. Flames spasm throughout my body, searching for something to cling to. Climbing up to my belly, expanding so my pants sit tighter and my chest swells sore. It surrounds my mind and devours patience so sprinklers erupt unexplainably. Spitting ambers back out as they dance away, leaving sharp pangs, splits in the framework. Feasting upon the groundwork, burning through the walls, disintegrating. The roof deteriorates weak without support. Dancing flames stain—red and furious.

Seven
Morgan Erickson

They stared me down, as I did them. The sun magnified their clean brightness, yellow in color, almost blinding to the eye. Screams of laughter escaped from the mouths of oblivious children as they swarmed towards the dull blues and dark reds of the playground. Monkey bars: such an innocent label for something that is so beastly, something that I needed to conquer.

The boys crowded behind me.
“You can’t do it!” they cried. “You’re nothing but a little girl.”

Ben Sonichson had passed the test; he had just jumped to bar seven when I had only dared on grabbing the sixth. What made seven so special that the boys whooped and cheered in its declaration? Celebration came to them as easily as peek-a-boo to a baby.

Ben, with his daring blue eyes and smooth dark hair, was the worst. The wind became my only company, playing with the tangled mess that my mother had always said was so beautiful. My hair was just another thing they found to criticize.

I clenched my hands into fists as my palms burned with anger. I wanted to prove otherwise, despite the comforts of my mother. Mothers are supposed to say those things. I enjoyed these lies when I wanted to ignore the truth.

Screams intensified behind me, animalistic. The monkey bars appeared further and further. Number seven began to laugh at me, mocking me. Where was I to go from here?

“She’s not going to do it,” cried one as my fists slowly unclenched.

“Told you she was a wimp,” said another as I opened my hands.

Number seven. I needed to feel it in my grasp, more than I have ever needed anything. Knees bending, arms swinging, eyes keeping one thing in sight. My feet lifted from the ground, never to return as my body took a mind of its own. My gaze remained. Its appearance never changed yet it was different from those other bars, too simple to capture my attention.
The warm air brushed my face as number seven came closer and closer. It encompassed the playground, swallowing it whole. My hands sought to find its comfort. Seven, smooth, bright, powerful and soon to be mine.

My hands reached it, held it, felt it, the smooth surface of number seven. I smiled. The sun magnified me in all my glory.

Then nothing but air, my hands reaching. Seven grew distant, abandoning me, leaving the control of my grasp. The wind, that once greeted me so kindly, stabbed me as reality came closer and closer.

A crashing pain surged through my body; tiny pinches from jagged rocks prickling between my fingers. My senses slowly regained their strength as laughter filled the air. They were laughing with pleasure from the spectacle of misery. My breath was lost and unable to find me, while the pain intensified at my discovery. Silence, as screams were held behind the barrier of clenched teeth. I wondered which pain was worse.

"I win, stupid girl," Ben snarled, as seven remained his and not my own.

His words, an unwanted odor, deserved no reply. Everyone followed the calling of the bells, running ahead as I remained behind. Defeat—a poison that took control of me.

I remembered a joke my doctor had once told me.

"What should the cowgirl do when she falls off her horse?" he had asked me.

"I don't know," I had squeaked.

"Giddy on up!" he had exclaimed, as the sting of the needle pierced warm flesh.

Silence.

"What a tough little girl," he then said.

Comfort from the words of a doctor. Unlike my mother's they were certain to be true.

Click. Pebbles chattered and danced beneath me. The sun shone brighter, offering its warmth to my face. The yellows looked duller, and seven looked smaller, the beams turning away to reveal their trueness. They were smudged, dull, and dirty. Many children swinging on them with their sticky, unwashed hands. I ran towards the doors of our school, not caring what awaited me as I moved forward. I didn’t look back. I wouldn’t look back.

I would show them, no.
I had shown myself.
Willows Wanting
Jessica Slama

I'm laced with oval love leaves. Wind whorls willow branch tendrils about my face and weave in my hair. Branches drift with the Saturday garden breeze, alternating between shrouding and uncovering my face and torso.

Through a gap in the summer green fronds, I see a family in a tree across from me. They hug each other, posing for photos, while their tree leaves fade to yellow and drop into the mulch encircling the base. Hands cling to flesh instead of cracked wood, tree skin.

I sit forward as leaf-fingers trail my shoulders and back. Willow tree branch tendrils wrap around me with the wind, and I lean forward to see the family tree opposite me, now being taken by a newly wedded couple, united in love.

Their visages gleam in the garden light as the garden rejoices with a tinny of leaf and petal rustles, welcoming the visitors. The bride, in her pearled gown, is made more brilliant by petals, while her groom's suit refracts the greens and fall browns.

My willow draws me to it, tickling my arms with its thin, oval leaves, but when it reaches for my face, I push its leaf-fingers away. Off me. They return, and I shift on my bench, starting to move, leave my willow arms.

These trees are giving trees, but they are wanting, breathing through lenticels, boughs swaying in the breeze, arms yielding, but firm with tensile strength. I'm hidden, sliding away from the frond fingers, into the sunlight, towards the lovers to be a part of something human, natural.
Eden
Jessica Frederick

It felt like the edge of the universe, really. Maybe fifty years ago, you could have seen this amount of untouched nature farther south. In the main states, though, production farms covered anything not already consisting of the ever-expanding cities or government owned facilities. People did not want to live up in Alaska, a land still mostly untamed.

Except for Dr. Narcissus, that is. As the foremost scientist in the field of bio-engineering, he had been winning awards since he was a young man. Later, as a man in his late eighties, he lived in seclusion in the northern parts of Alaska. Hardly a place I would assume an old man to live, but the scientist types were a different breed of people altogether.

For the previous week, he had been missing. I say missing loosely, because those he kept in contact with lived in the main states. He spoke with companies through reports, usually with propositions and updates on projects. His lack of communication the last week, coupled with his age, concerned my employers. Thus, they instructed me to fly all the way north to check on him, like I had nothing better to do.

My rental vehicle pulled into the long driveway of Dr. Narcissus’s home and I glanced around. A large, manicured lawn rolled up to a square, white house. Orderly and practical. I parked my vehicle in front of the home and got out. The air was clear, much clearer than home in California, and incredibly crisp. I resisted breathing the unadulterated air deeply and approached the front door.

I knocked heavily and waited. After a few seconds, I knocked again but no response. Testing the door knob, I found it unlocked and let myself in.

“Doctor?” I called into the house, standing halfway outside and halfway inside the entryway. I do not know why I felt so cautious. I was nervous for differing reasons than I felt I should have been. After hearing no answer, I stepped inside and closed the door, peering around.

A mewl alerted me to a small feline sitting underneath a cabinet, peering at me with bright orange eyes. Recognizing the cat from pictures, I bent over to study her more closely. Morrigan, the cat’s name, was the first successful bio-android to act and grow just like its real feline counterparts.

“You!” a voice shouted, pulling my attention from the fake cat. I straightened, startled, and stared at the man standing down the hallway with a boney finger pointed directly at me. He started forward, trudging with effort. A neglected scruffy white beard and stark white hair betrayed his age if his movement did not. “What are you doing in my house?”

“I’m here for The Orders,” I stated, my heart steadying back to a normal beat.

“That company want something? I don’t have anything.” He appeared obstinate, finally reaching me and jabbing me with his finger. “You haven’t contacted anyone in over a week,” I explained, brushing his finger away from its prodding. “My company was concerned and sent me to check on you.”

“I am not dying, silly child,” he muttered, as if I was the one who came up with these wild assumptions. “Who are you?”

“Michael,” I replied shortly. The old man was fine. I could return home and give my report. And possibly include that the man was becoming senile in his old age.

“Want to see something interesting, Michael?” the man asked with an odd twinkle in his eye. I stared at him, but did not sigh or act with disdain. I did not want to see whatever it was, but he was an important man. It would be to my benefit to humor him. “Come this way, boy. I’ve been working on something amazing for the past five days.”

I followed the old man through his house and past a laboratory. I trailed behind him into a glass room attached to the back of his home. Inside brimmed with all manner of plants—a variety of flowers, trees with reaching branches, and bright green, cool grass. A shallow pond reflected the sunlight in the middle of the garden.
The small alcove appeared beautiful, but it felt wrong. The grass was too bright. The flowers seemed glossy. The pond was perfectly clear despite its stagnancy.

"None of it's real," I stated, crouching to feel the grass. It felt soft and giving under my fingers, but strangely velvety instead of the prickly grass I had grown up playing soccer on. I reached over and touched a flower, and although it bent freely between my fingers, the petals felt smooth like glass.

"What is real, boy?" Dr. Narcissus huffed, walking himself over to the pond. "If not something you can touch and enjoy?"

The elder man hunched over and dipped his forefinger into the water, causing smooth ripples to glide outwards before the water settled once again. I glanced around, trying to appear interested, but knew the man could see through the act.

"Tomorrow I will start on the final piece of this garden," the doctor stated, straightening with much deliberation. "I am getting old. I think I will make something to appreciate the garden."

The man worked endlessly for the entirety of the next day, toiling in a manner I had never seen a man of his age ever work before. He insisted I stay, however, and I milled about his workplace. Most of his laboratory consisted of computers and machines to help him. I did, however, see a pistol resting on a shelf next to some ammo. I could not picture the man ever pausing from his work to use it to defend himself though.

Dr. Narcissus only stopped to rest once, when I brought him a sandwich I made from his kitchen. There had not been much else to make from the meager supplies. When I asked him about it, he did not appear to care. He only muttered about wasted food.

I awoke the day after, adamant to tell the doctor I was to return home. I had my own work that did not include babysitting to get back to. However, as I strolled into the laboratory after packing my case, I came face to face with a young girl I had never seen before.

"Ah, Michael!" Dr. Narcissus called from his desk at the back of the room. "This is Eden, the last piece of my garden. She's the best and latest android technology."

For an android, Eden looked remarkably human. Unlike the obviously fake plants in the garden, I would have believed Eden to be a normal person if the doctor had not told me otherwise. She looked up at me with clear blue eyes, staring as if she could see into my soul. I inwardly scoffed at myself. Only those who had souls could see into them. I was not a particularly religious man, but I knew the difference between a human and a machine.

"Nice to meet you, sir. My name is Eden," the girl greeted me with a brilliant smile curling the edges of her lips. I frowned. The smile looked so real and genuine. Too realistic, just like the rest of her. Her smile faded and her expression became confused.

"Is something wrong?"

"Huh?" I asked, raising an eyebrow.

*I greeted you properly and you frowned," she explained, folding her arms with one hand on her chin in a thoughtful manner. How could an android function in a thoughtful manner? "Did I do something wrong?"

"You did it perfectly," Dr. Narcissus assured her, placing a hand on her shoulder. "This man is just a cynic. He cannot see anything beyond what his mind thinks he should see."

"Even if it is right there?" Eden asked, tilting her head.

"I can see what is right there," I muttered to myself. I also folded my arms more out of sternness than confusion.

"I believe you," Eden promised, smiling again. Like her eyes, her smile was dazzling and honest. Nothing behind it. No hidden meanings or agendas. It disarmed me.

"I don't need you to believe me," I replied curtly before looking back at the doctor. "So, she is the last bit of your garden. Are you planning on selling it?"

"I did not create my garden to be sold," the doctor huffed, scowling like an old man might. Old men scowl a lot while complaining about the younger generation's impertinence. I wonder if I would scowl at my younger self also. "There is more to the universe than just money."

"You don't sound like a proper American, going on like that," I noted out loud, but he just shrugged his hunched shoulders and
walked towards the garden. The girl watched Dr. Narcissus and then turned to look at me, as if I was the specimen to be studied. “Yes?” “American?” The question was implied. She did not know what an American was, which contradicted the fact that she seemed to know as much as any young adult.

“You didn’t program her to know what an American was?” I asked the doctor as I followed behind him and Eden trailed me. The older man entered the garden and limped over to a bench by the entrance, gingerly setting himself on the seat. Every second, he appeared frailer.

“She has no concept or understanding of outside nations,” Dr. Narcissus explained as the girl strolled along the edge of the garden, although I could tell she was still listening to our conversation. “She does not need to know. She’s meant to stay here, within the garden, and enjoy it.”

A beautiful bird stuck within a gilded cage. A knowledgeable, question-filled beautiful bird. I watched her, taking note of her long auburn hair and simple white dress. She bent over and whispered to each flower she passed and sang to each tree.

“I will get us something to eat,” I stated. The air in the garden was undeniably fresh, but it suddenly felt stuffy and constricting. I felt uncomfortable around the android who looked like a human. However, making something of the scanty resources in the kitchen hardly took long enough and I was back in the garden, watching the girl as she sat beside Narcissus. She chatted easily with him as the old man picked at the food.

“The delphiniums are my favorite,” she noted, pointing at the star-shaped flowers of light blue near the pond.

“They are extinct now, in the outside world,” Dr. Narcissus explained. “I am glad you enjoy them.”

“Is everything?” Eden appeared authentically disconcerted at the knowledge that her precious flowers were extinct, instead of proud she owned the most realistic replicas.

“The apple trees above us are not,” the doctor replied, gesturing to two fruit trees framing the entrance to the garden from the laboratory. “But only for production. Most of the plants here existed years ago, but are now dead due to climate changes and overpopulation.”

Eden reached up and grasped one of the scarlet apples. She was just about to snap one off when Dr. Narcissus reached out with a quickness that surprised both me and the girl. He seized her arm and prevented her from pulling the fruit off, red in the face from the exertion.

“Stop! You are to take care of the garden, not destroy it!” he shouted. Eden stared speechlessly at him with wide eyes before letting go of the fruit.

“I’m—I don’t—I thought eating the apples was something to do,” she stammered, frowning in bewilderment. “I do not know where these ideas came from. I am sorry.”

“Humans eat apples,” Dr. Narcissus explained, letting go of her arm and breathing a bit deeply. “You do not. Not these ones. Do not harm anything in the garden.”

“I’m very sorry,” she repeated, looking for all intent and purposes devastated.

“I am going to go lay down and rest,” the doctor murmured before heaving himself off the bench. Before disappearing into the laboratory, he turned back just slightly. “Do not leave the garden, Eden.” Eden stared at the spot he left for several moments before turning her eyes to me.

“Can you tell me what this ‘American’ is?” she asked.

I sat beside her, sighing. Already I had lost my chance to tell the doctor I was leaving. Maybe I should just leave. He did not seem like he would mind too much. But the girl looked at me so frankly and curiously, I did not have the heart to just ignore her, android or not.

“An American is a citizen of the United States of America,” I explained, leaning back against the bench. She leaned closer, attentive.

“What is that?” Her curiosity was addictive. She asked questions about America, the states, the world, and everyone in it. She asked about places, people, and things. She asked what it was like to see them. I showed her pictures on my phone, of everything from the sprawling city of New York to the frigid lands of ice in the Antarctic. Hours passed until the garden was lit by only moonlight and starlight.
“What about the stars? Space? Are there people out there?” Her questions tended to tumble out of her lips as she thought of them, as if she was afraid she would forget before she asked.

“If you mean humans, there are humans living in various space colonies and three separate habitable planets.” At least, that is what the last news report had said when I had bothered to check. That was three days ago, but it felt like ages. At the edge of the universe in the state called Alaska, did time move slower?

“What about other things?” She fiddled with a leaf hanging over the edge of the bench, something I noticed she did a lot.

“We haven’t come across anything else.” I yawned and glanced at my phone. It was past midnight and if I wanted to leave tomorrow, I needed to get up early enough to go to the airport. I stood up and the girl looked at me, baffled. “Humans need to sleep at night to regain energy.”

“Oh.” She looked around and then back up at me. “How does one do that?”

“We lie down and close our eyes.” I smiled, amused as she immediately laid her head down on the edge of the bench. “I do not think you need to but… ”

“Ah, you smiled,” she pointed out, smiling back at me while still laying on the bench. I froze, realizing she was correct, and looked away. A flush colored my cheeks and I coughed.

“Goodnight, Eden,” I stated, turning and walking out of the garden without looking back. However, I did hear her reply.

“Goodnight, Michael!”

The next morning, I woke to Eden’s bright blue eyes staring down at me. I started, shocked for a moment, and sat up quickly. She looked worried, fidgeting with the ends of her white dress.

“It’s the doctor.” I followed her to Dr. Narcissus’s bedroom and immediately knew what the trouble was. The old bastard lay still and silent, tucked under his blankets as if asleep. And perhaps he was, if sleeping was forever. “He won’t wake or move.”

“He’s dead,” I sighed, reaching down and touching the man’s pale face. At least the old man looked peaceful. He was cold, which meant he had probably died sometime during the night. Eden’s eyes flickered between him and I, still confused, but I did not know how to clarify. “He’s extinct, forever.”

“Like the flowers,” she stated, clasping her hands together. “Will someone make a copy of him someplace?”

“You can’t make a copy of a human.” I began dialing numbers on my phone. I would need to report this to both the local authorities and my boss. Neither would be happy, but I was not concerned. He had obviously died of old age or something that came with it.

“But he made a copy of the flowers,” she reasoned, shaking her head. “That is what they are, Eden,” I sighed, waiting for my phone to connect. I wanted to call my boss first, for clarification on how I should proceed. “Copies and nothing more. You are probably the only original thing in there, unless he fashioned you after someone.”

My phone connected and I asked for my boss. Eden disappeared from the room, but I hardly noticed as I recounted the past few days to the head manager and then his boss. She then told me to wait there while they called the local police. I hung up and looked down at the old man. One person could cause the entire scientific world to go into an uproar with the doctor’s experiments, especially if they ever got a hold of Eden.

Thinking of Eden, I walked back through the house, into the laboratory, and then spotted her standing under one of the apple trees, staring off into the distance.

“Other people are coming to take care of Dr. Narcissus’s body,” I told her and she jerked her head to look at me in surprise.

“What about me?” she asked, calming back down.

“I don’t know,” I answered honestly. Would she stay here, in the garden, like the doctor had intended? Or would she be taken in for examination? Either life seemed horrible, if she had been human. But she was not human and I felt irritated that I was sympathetic over whether she tended the garden alone or scientists took her apart.
"What do I do? Do I stay here?" Eden picked at the end of her dress again, looking back into space. "I know I should stay here. I was created to stay here. But I feel like ... I feel like I want to see some of the things we talked about. Other people, other places. But I don’t want to know what happens if I leave? The garden will fall into ruin, won’t it? I am supposed to take care of it."

She was shaking and trembling deeply. As if sensing her instability, she wrapped her arms around herself. Again I felt a stab of sympathy and again I pushed it away. Her programming dictated that she stay in the garden and even if she left, she would probably forever dwell on the act of leaving it. However, knowing of the outside world was something she seemed to desire. But she was an android, and an android could not desire.

“He made me for a reason ... I can’t go back on that reason," she continued, placing a hand on the glossy bark of one of the fake apple trees to steady her shaking. If anything, the tree shook with her. "What do I choose? No, yes, maybe. What do I choose? I am bound here, but desire to see real things."

I stared at Eden, unable to keep up my apathy any longer. How cruel Dr. Narcissus was to create this creature that was made to appreciate him and the garden while also giving her the ability to desire to learn so much more. To find her own identity instead of having it defined for her.

I walked into the laboratory, searching for the object I had seen on my second day. Finding it, I returned to the garden. Eden was reaching up, rubbing her hand over one of the ruby apples hanging on a lower branch. I raised my hand, but paused in wonder. Tears were streaming down her cheeks. The old bastard had even given her tears to express sorrow.

I pulled the trigger. As she fell, the hand that gripped the apple clenched and the scarlet synthetic fruit snapped off in a spray of sparks. Time slowed and her auburn hair flowed behind her like broken wings. A smile I could not decipher, whether sad or thankful, graced her lips just before she landed on the soft grass. The doctor had also given her blood, which bled from her body and pooled beneath her lifeless body. I checked my mind. She had never been anything but lifeless. Or perhaps she had life, if life was made from desires and faith. And her life, although cruelly dictated by the whims of a man who created her, had been full of both.
Pickle Poem
Amanda Boerger

We have pickled ourselves, lover.
We have bathed in sour words
and changed our flavor
for good.
We are in a pickle, lover.
We float lazy as gourds
in a sea of green stink,
waiting to be stabbed by forks.
You’ll Get it One Day, Kid
Kelsey Heier

My father sat me down in the snow and bent down on one knee to lace up my sister’s skates. The crisp white of the hand-me-downs had faded into the color of sand on a summer day; permanent creases in all the right spots allowed my foot to snuggle in without complaint. The Riedell brass emblem has been gone for years, leaving two tiny indents along a mass of smoothness that formed the heel. The laces were fraying at the tips; the plastic piece around the ends fell off years ago. He pulled hard; my toes hugged too tight. Dad stood me up, zipping my coat up to my nose and pulling my hat down to my eyebrows. He tucked my mittens into my sleeves and gave a small chuckle, showing his burnished teeth, the bottom ones slightly overlapping over each other.

“Okay, Keis!” He said, putting his hockey gloves on. “You’re all set and ready!” He glided on the ice, his skates carving it with every stroke. Lapping around our pond, his left skate crossed over the right around the curves. The Easton hockey stick he held in both hands parallel to the ice, swinging back and forth as his shoulders bobbed and weaved with each powerful stroke. My older brother shot a puck towards him and it cracked in the still air against Dad’s stick. I looked down at the skates, now sinking into the snow, and it was hard for me to tell where the snow started and my skates ended. I tried to lift my foot, but the snow cemented me. Panicking, I tried to pull up my other foot, but that one was trapped in a mesh of snow, too! I tried to slide forward but it wouldn’t budge. I tried to wiggle my foot out of the wretched skate that wasn’t even mine, but the laces were too tight. I couldn’t even yell out for help; when I tried it came out a muffled cough. My eyes burned with tears as I watched Dad and Shane skate across our pond, not paying attention to me. It seemed like forever until Shane noticed.

“Kels!” Shane skated over to me, his cheeks rosy and dry from bitter cold and uncaring wind, stopping so fast ice shards sprayed up. He wore a Santa Claus hat and navy blue sweatshirt—the old kind that doesn’t come with a hood—that had holes cut out for the thumbs. Our dog had mangled the bottom of it. Grabbing the tips of my mittens, he urged me onto the ice, but my feet were planted down. “Come on!” He said with a yank that pulled off my hat. “It’s just like walking, trust me!” He teased, dancing as if he and the ice were old friends being reunited after a long summer. Turning up towards me, he skated away backwards, pulling his hockey stick out of the snow bank it was in.

Holding my breath, I raised my foot with reluctance off the ice, my small frame shaking. Time stood still, my arms stretched out to the sides, searching for something to steady my balance on. A gust of wind stirred up, swirling from back behind, and then engulfing my body, foot still in the air. My brain reminded me to put it down to gain back my balance but another gust sprang up throwing snow in my face, trapping me in a whirlwind. I wobbled to and fro on my stable foot, but the wind kept pushing me until my balance broke. In a silent moment I was falling, arms flailing around my sides, my hat splitting from the top of my head, the skates that weren’t really mine at eye level. I was on my back. The wind died down and stayed there.

Breaking the silence was a soft chuckle. Dad skated up behind me, grabbing underneath my armpits, and hoisted me back into standing position.

“You’ll get it one day, kid.” Grinning, he kissed the top of my head.
Frankfort Square Pond
Sheryl Kurylo

Bubbles gasp their gentle pop, spewed from the whiskered mouth of fish below.

Tadpoles flicker in short, murky glory.

These creatures—beings sustained—for an icy quarter beneath a frozen surface.

A chilly reminder of life’s cyclicalities.

At ponds edge, where wave meets stone, a rainbow pool—the glisten of buoyant oils.

Encircling pavement leads bustling lives back to busy places.

Floating atop, at the shore, mushy green goop, tinged brown, surrounds a sign: No Fishing.
Anchoring Fear
Haley Bradshaw

This sensation of such a large body of water contained in this kidney-shaped pool compared to a bathtub is beyond me. Looking down with my child-sized eyes, the bottom seems endless, as if the broad, concrete bottom is all an illusion. The warm water surrounds me, waiting to suck me under.

Two circular vents, sit at the bottom side by side. Lines run the distance across these dinner-plate sized vents like lattice work. Small squares left uncovered leave my big imagination wondering. I dream of multi colored mermaids with shiny sequins lining their long tails doing front flips in the water, slippery dolphins creating closed circles around my tiny feet, and the worst image of all, a shark’s sharp fin breaking the calmness of the still water. I push the last frightening thought away.

I turn my attention to the sun-soaked water that licks the tiles with a sound similar to a fresh California orange being juiced on a Sunday morning. Every drop dries with contact on the upper half of the mosaic wall, dissipating into the heat. The man-made waves slap and skim the tiles. A constant rhythm. As I cling to the rough, stone wall, I try capturing the waves attacking the sides in my hands. Cracks and crevices, the pale blue water endlessly slips through; it never forgives my hands for not being a solid container.

After a while, my hands hold the texture of a wrinkled grape. Sunscreen makes my hands smooth, but with first contact with water, it feels as if a snail has slowly made its slimy mark, weaving and sliding through even the smallest wrinkles and curved lines.

Countdown for takeoff has finally arrived. I allow the detachment of one hand and then the other from the death grip gluing me to the ledge. A broad hand seeks my little stomach underneath the transparent water. This hand is worn from the wear and tear of seventy years. Leather skin, brown as a roasted almond from endless summers spent in a lush, Belgian garden. I turn my head as my sun soaked hair flops into my face and see my grandfather’s face. His eyes encouraging and his smile contagious, waiting for my body’s actions, my beating heart’s courage, and my hands’ single action of paddling. I take a deep breath, calming the group of butterflies causing gentle chaos in my sunburned stomach, and extend my right arm first and then the left.

The wide hand holds what little weight my body exerts on the smooth water as I kick my short legs. All eyes are on me.

I fear falling.
I fear drowning.
My grandfather’s hand slips from beneath my stomach; inch by inch I slowly drift farther away from his tall figure, my vision obscured by the vast amount of water embracing me.

I am on my own, kicking my legs, paddling my hands, and the cool water drift by me. My body stays afloat like a fisherman’s bobber, bouncing up and down on the gentle waves. It is almost flying. I feel light as the wind, buoyant as a beach ball, and as if I am one of the million water droplets gently flowing around me. I find myself fighting the urge to rest my constantly moving hands.

Then I realize,
I am finally swimming.
Tell Me
Sarah Rumil

Don't tell me it's too hard,
that I can't make it;
the journey is too much.
Tell me the journey will be long
and difficult,
but I can make it;
I will endure.

Don't tell me to give up,
to stop trying
and stop dreaming;
to be "realistic."
Tell me to keep going,
that eventually I will succeed;
Despite the challenges,
I can make my dreams come true.

Don't tell me it is hopeless,
that nothing can be done.
Tell me to have hope,
I can do anything.
I can change the world,
do great things, go far;
impossible is nothing.
Tell me that you believe in me.

Baking in the Moonlight
Amanda Rosse

He looked like cream cheese felt, smooth,
pale from the soft light of the moon, features
perfect, as if a pastry chef carved
his face from a thick, creamy substance:
nose, Grecian and regal,
lips, pouting, modelesque.
Blue eyes shimmer, catching the black light.

Stars dance as their silhouettes cast
Shadows, out into the midnight sky.
She felt the supple sheen of
red rose petals, his scent.
Sapphire orbs penetrate
bright silver iris, hers. Heads move forward—
mouths touching, viscous honey.
She tasted the sugary mixture,
kiss deepening, bringing them further
down into a garden of night blooming
cereus. Long, thin white petals tickle
their napes. Fingers lose sense where one
begins and other ends.

Cinnamon pigtail buns quiver in fear, mind
plummeting back to earth. His icy stare
scared her. Sticky cup in hand, hazelnut
crème latte poured from her grasp
down to his khaki pants. Crowded coffee shop
bustle shields her shriek of apology to
her dream lover.
Skinlessness
Catherine Schmidt

Somewhere in between
the weaving of cotton-threaded sheets,
the matched naked bodies
lie spooned to each other.
In the bliss that follows,
the breathlessness, the exhilaration,
the praising of something
akin to a higher power,
but chemically rooted in the brain.
The mingling of scents. Tomorrow,
his redolence will linger in her hair,
and he will smell her fragrance on his hands.
On the premise of loneliness,
of affection, of wanting,
they will give and taste of each other.
All in the name of oneness,
the search for skinlessness,
in between cotton-threaded sheets.

Demon's Pride
Jamie Wagner-Lutter

Tiny pointed horns poked out of a mop of jet-black hair as Pride waited, eyes squeezed shut under little hands as he listened carefully for any movement. “Ready or not, here I come!” the boy cried, opening his eyes and immediately taking off, wings flapping in excitement. He’d told the other children he could find all six of them in ten minutes. Hell was a big place with a lot of hiding places, especially since they had wandered out into the Barrens away from the city, but Pride knew he could do it. Stopping to listen for clues, the quick drumming of a child’s heart gave away his first victim as Pride homed in on the sound. Creeping forward soundlessly on bare feet, he pounced without warning and landed smugly on the little girl.

“I found you first, so you have to be my slave for a week,” he gloated before taking off running again to find the next one.

Six children sat around Pride, the same look of awe on all their faces as they watched the last few granules of sand run from the timer.

“Told you I could do it. A Pride demon never goes back on his word,” the little boy boasted to the other six. “I can do anything I want to do. I could even take out my own soul right now!”

“Could not,” a little girl running around in just her underwear challenged, thin arms crossing over her flat chest. “Only adult demons can take out their souls and live.”

“Yeah, there’s no way you could do that. You’re only seven,” a rotund little boy munching on some form of dried meat chirped in, as if seven were young when the rest of the children were around the same age as Pride.

“Shut up Lust, Gluttony. What do you two know? You’re just a pervert and a fatty. Why don’t you just go hang out with the lesser sins?”

There was complete silence for several moments as the six children of the other major sins gaped at the child of pride. For one of them to be insulted so … All of the demons of the Seven Deadly Sins, and there were many, mixed with each other because they were higher-ranked demons, stronger than the lesser sins such as Theft, Vanity
and Arrogance. As soon as Gluttony and Lust snapped out of their shock they both moved to attack Pride; Envy, Wrath, and Greed quick to join in the scrabble while Sloth merely watched, uncaring of the outcome. The battle quickly degraded into dirty fighting; biting, pinching, pulling of hair and tails, and wing-ripping until they were all breathless and bloodied.

Catching his breath, the membranes of his wings tattered and torn and little claws bloody with someone else's pain, Pride got to his feet and brushed himself off. Chin held high he scowled down at the other six who were still too worn out to move. "I'll prove I can do it," he informed them haughtily. "I'll go get a vessel right now. So don't move!" With that he scampered off; trailing droplets of blood from his wings, seemingly oblivious to the pain.

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Jerking awake, Zane's hands found his wings with ease, relaxing to find them whole and untouched. Just a dream ... A memory. It had been nearly fifty years since he had gone by the name Pride. Unlike humans, demons chose their own names. To save themselves the embarrassment of something extremely outlandish they weren't allowed to name themselves until they hit puberty, and oftentimes until then just went by their sin or perhaps a nickname given by their parents.

Running his hand through his hair, fingers lightly brushing horns that now curled back over his skull, Zane tried to reorient himself from the past. A quiet, familiar moan sounded and disturbed his thoughts, body instinctively tensing for what was to come as he bared his teeth in a menacing snarl. Waiting, prepared for the struggle to come. It took him several moments to remember what had happened over the past few days. He was free, no longer a plaything for the damned heavenly being. At that thought a slow smile curved his lips as he sat up from the bed and glanced down at the little 'nest' on the floor to see if his prey was conscious. There the now-fallen angel lay, his mighty wings gone, torn from his body by his own people. Still unconscious, though.

It served Ariel right to be banished, Zane thought smugly. Angels were supposed to be ultimate, pure beings. Capturing a demon and keeping him around as a toy to be used whenever was hardly pure. The memories of his first night with the angel still made Zane's blood boil. He'd been held captive with angelic cuffs, the holy metal sapping away his strength and leaving him pathetically weak, but he'd still struggled for his freedom. It had been the joy Ariel had held that truly pissed Zane off. The angel had known he was a Pride demon, had known with the metal in constant contact with his skin that he was nearly as weak as a human and therefore would be easy to keep contained.

Ariel had reveled in Zane's inability to fight back, had soaked in the foul-mouthed, violent attitude of a demon, and had laughed. Not out of cruelty, but true joy that he'd finally gotten his hands on Zane. The youngest demon to take out his soul, one of the youngest generals of the Devil's army. He was a well-known demon and Ariel had apparently been watching him for a long time, waiting for his chance. Zane had lost track of how long he'd been confined in this room, a part of an abandoned factory of some sort according to Ariel. Months (he assumed) he could have been out in the city messing with and tormenting the humans, and he's been stuck in here.

He loved the human plane; it was such an odd place now that he could parade around without his wings, tail, or horns hidden away with magic and all he got were odd looks and sometimes compliments for his 'costume.' He couldn't have done so thirty years ago when he'd first been allowed up to the human plane.

Zane would never admit it out loud, had yet to admit it to himself, but Ariel and tormented him not only physically, but mentally. He had been spending brief hours with Zane at night and then leaving, only to return when the sun fell. Even for a demon, only three or four hours of social contact a day and none of that spent conversing became hard on the mind. Not that Ariel didn't try and speak with him, but Zane was hardly about to carry on a conversation with the being that was holding him captive and using free range of his body against his will. The past few months had been a true hell.
It was Zane's turn now. Zane was a demon of pride, yet his pride had been all but destroyed by the 'tender' hands of Ariel. It wasn't enough that Ariel had been banished from heaven; Zane had to regain his pride and he would in the one way that demons knew how, an eye for an eye. But first he had to make sure the angel didn't die on him.

Zane had never seen a fallen angel so he wasn't sure if they became mortal or not once they'd been banished. They certainly appeared to heal slower. It had already been two days since he'd regained his freedom, five days since Ariel had been banished. Every time Zane changed the angel's bandages the two wounds on his back appeared just as inflamed and raw as they'd been two days ago, and Ariel constantly slipped in and out of raging fevers. Maybe if the angel hadn't waited to release him ...

Bleeding and half-dead, Ariel had refused to relinquish his prize when he'd been cast back to the human plane after his punishment. Three days Zane spent trying to coax and convince Ariel to free him. He'd finally given up and had tried to chew off his own arm, had gotten a good fourth of the way there before Ariel realized he was being serious and finally freed him. His shoulder was still a touch tender but had otherwise healed over nicely. Now if only Ariel's wounds would heal that quickly.

Normally Zane wouldn't give a rat's ass if an angel died but this one had to wait till after his vengeance had been exacted. Everything would go back to as it should be once he'd had his revenge. He'd return to tormenting the humans and causing a ruckus; back to climbing the ranks to become the devil. At least that's what he told himself.

Getting off the bed, he slipped across the room on bare feet and picked up the rocking horse, fingers gliding over the smooth stone. His soul was his once more; Ariel couldn't hold that against him any longer. The grief he'd gotten from Alexander, Samantha, Delilah, Thomas, Stephano, and Dalton; the six other Deadly Sins, for what he'd chosen to hide his soul in. Zane snorted. They'd all thought it was so amazing when he'd placed his soul in the vessel. It was a good hiding place. Who would expect a demon to hide his soul in a toy?

Rummaging about his room looking for something suitable as a vessel for his soul, Pride's gaze halted on a miniature rocking horse carved from obsidian. Picking it up, little fingers running over the cold smoothness of the toy, he grinned. It was perfect. Cold, black as his soul, and made of rock. Rock was nearly indestructible, right? Close enough.

Returning to his friends, Pride was pleased to see them all still there, waiting. Glancing down at the soon-to-be vessel in his hands he realized he wasn't entirely sure how to do this. It couldn't be too hard, could it? Frowning, he looked up at the group, kicking his foot out a moment later. “Anyone know how to remove your soul?” he questioned, the words a low mutter as he tried to ignore the smarting of his pride at having to ask. He was almost somewhat pleased when everyone looked at each other and shook their heads, unsure. If no one else knew then it didn't count against him.

“Well then I'll just have to try different ways to find out.” he decided aloud, not about to give up on this. He'd said he would, after all. So he would. Simple as that. Licking his lips, Pride cradled the stone horse to his breast and closed his eyes, ready to try anything and prove the other children wrong, that he could take out his own soul right now.

Laying flat on his back, body drenched in sweat from the effort it had taken, Pride stared up into the dark abyss blindly. Beside him lay the rocking horse, giving off a faint glow that slowly dimmed and faded away in a matter of seconds. His entire body shook with tremors of despair, feeling so empty, emotionless, as if he'd cut out a part of himself. He was unaware of the other children running over to him and sitting him up, grinning and apologizing for their disbelief, amazed at what he'd managed to do.

Gaze slowly falling to the ground, he snatched up the vessel when he caught sight of it and once more cradled it carefully to his chest, almost immediately feeling better once it was pressed up against him. It hurt, not having his soul. He hadn't expected that. Finally taking notice of the other children Pride made a face and pushed them
away, getting to his feet a touch unsteadily and lifting his chin up high. "See, I told you I could do it. Nothing to it. Next," he declared, smirking, "I’ll become the Devil when I get older and stronger."

***

Rubbing his chest at the memory, chills broke out across Zane’s arms. Oh how he’d suffered for being such a little fool. Little had they known as children it wasn’t the removal of the soul that often killed demons but the overwhelming sense of depression and loss that came after. He’d been forced to carry around the stone horse everywhere with him, unable to handle the pain and mental anguish it caused to be away from a part of himself.

There had also been advantages to having his soul transferred while he was so young. With his soul tucked safely away he could be a lot more reckless with his body, which had let him train and play harder than the other children could. So long as the soul was safe, the body could be destroyed without the demon dying. It was why they took out and hid their souls when they became adults; once they were allowed on the human plane they had to watch out for patrolling angels that were all too happy to destroy them. With their souls hidden, their bodies could be completely demolished and they would simply rematerialize in hell without a scratch. It was convenient. ‘Die,’ shake yourself off, and return back to the human plane to continue causing trouble. Some demons grew afraid of the angels and simply hid away in Hell, but Zane always went back up right away.

Then again … according to Ariel, it had been the first sight of Zane hiding his soul in the human plane as a child that had mesmerized the angel and started his obsession with Zane. Casting a glare down at the pitiful creature on the ground, Zane refused to admit it was partially his own fault. It didn’t matter that it was practically unheard of for a child to take out their own soul, and especially for one to be let out on the human plane to hide said soul. Zane, Pride back then, had been determined to complete the process. You couldn’t keep your soul just sitting around vulnerable. You had to hide it somewhere no one would look, or somewhere everyone saw every day and thought nothing of it. So after several extensive hours of bickering with the Devil, his request had been granted to allow him into the human plane for a few hours to hide his soul.

He’d hid the vessel in an antique shop, knowing it would be sold and traded among the humans over the years, hidden anew with each new owner. He’d been a genius as a child, Zane decided with a grin as he reached out and placed the vessel back on the stand it had been sitting on, watching it rock for a few seconds before he turned back to the bed and stretched out on it again, yawning and closing his eyes. There wasn’t much to do but sleep until Ariel was healed, so sleep he would.
I dreamed I saved a demon girl
wicked red, tall as my waist, with spiky
wings. In my arms, alone, she looked angelic;
she snarled at anyone else and stabbed a black
dagger into thighs. My parents, friends shrieked,
their eyebrows melting into hairlines.
In her red, oval hurricanes she calmed me.
When she moved in, we covered the windows,
she hung stalactites and bats beside Brad
Pitt and Edward Norton. She taught me to eat
raw beef but refused to try lima beans.
On our 6-month anniversary she lit sulphur
candles, and she screeched at my Korn CD
until I replaced it with *Nsync. She fell asleep
cradled in my arm with her tail twisted
around my bicep down to the wrist …

When I awoke, blanket still coiled
around my arm, I thought of her. My crimson
angel hidden in demon clothes; a tear
slid down to my lonely bed.
Fall
Lora Buckles

Twinges of loneliness at the edges; even my furniture has abandoned me. Dingy walls reflect sunlight beaming from the naked window. A tree, tall and oaken, peers in.

He knows his bright green leaves will soon fall; the morning cooler every day. He argues with the wind—who is more powerful?

His branches are thick, anchored to his stout trunk; he grips the ground with his deep roots.

As leaves begin to turn radiant yellows, oranges, reds, limbs droop—unwilling to release dancing leaves.

The first leaves fall gradually; daring, rash leaves ready for the adventure of letting go, ready to explore what the world beyond the tree’s limbs has for them.

Naming Hurricanes
Noelle Vainikka

Quiet and warm, with a glimpse of blue sky or stars, surrounded by swirling thunderstorms: the eyewall.

Hurricane Isabel; a trendsetter named ahead of the curve. With glimpse of a number-one name, Isabel, the most common baby name; surrounded by swirling popularity, Isabel, Isabelle, Isabella, storming public schools with redundant class lists. A hurricane of Isabels: Isabel K, Isabel C, Isabel B, and Isabel J demanding nicknames Izzy, Bella, and Belle. With glimpse of light and movement, surrounded by swirling similarities, the eyewall. Hurricane Katrina.
Fred, Fred Bonehead
Chelsey Johnson

A tube attached through his trachea, he coughs.
Mucus gushes from the tube. He wheezes,
“Don’t make my mistakes.”

An oxygen tank clanks behind him, life’s baggage compressed into the cylinder. Invisible among eight brothers. Left to embrace a bottle and kiss a cigarette. Lines carved through yellow leather skin. A greasy coiled beard like emery doth in a sink. Why did my Uncle choose this life? Everyone taunts “Fred Fred Bonehead.” I did too, before I found his picture: sandy brown hair, modest coffee-colored eyes, bulging biceps contrast the Uncle I know. Alone in a drought-stricken wheat field. Crows circle, squawking a mocking song. “Loser!” “Failure!” Hissing in his head. Eight birds blaming him for their troubles. Wheat wilted with his dreams. His confidence vanished with the faded color.

One overall strap dangles. Posture of a defeated soldier. Straw hat held at his side. One hand raised to the sky declaring surrender.

A Gradual Fade
Suzie Vander Vorste

Brakes screech and metal grinds to a stop outside my window. A beat-up white Ford pick-up lurches to a stop beside the curb heaped with feet of white snow from last week’s back-to-back storms. Pushing myself up from the plush beige carpet of my bedroom floor, I propel myself at top speed away from the Crayola markers and my Lisa Frank coloring book with starry-eyed kittens to race down the stairway. It’s time. My bare feet slap across stingingly cold, diamond patterned linoleum floor. I see you climbing the steps of the red wooden porch through the mesh of the screen door. Puffs of air appear, clouds hung in darkening frosty air. As fast as my feet pound across the floor, the door still opens before I can cross the entire kitchen, and your steely arms swoop me up in just after I leap in the air. I feel the cold of your brown Harley Davidson leather jacket against the flesh of my check as I press into the hug and breathe in the faint hint of cigarette smoke trapped in the material. I feel your body shift, left, right, as you use your feet to pull off work boots by the door, continuing to hold me to your chest. Clutching your frame, you carry me across the kitchen floor, past supper dishes stacked in the metal sink to the living room. With one arm wrapped around my frame, you reach out toward a black remote held together with duct tape. Your rough fingers close around it, and the TV clicks on.

“Do you want your blankie, Snooky?” I hear your smooth voice ask. I nod my head yes against your arm. You grasp a pink and white blanket with tiny kittens printed on the white spaces and wrap the blanket around us, around the ends of my ice cold toes to warm my feet, and we both settle down onto the plaid couch before the television set. Your body relaxes, a sigh of fatigue let go after a long day in the Black Hills State Mines. Lured and left drowsy from the warmth of the blanket, I lull to sleep to the rhythmic beat of your heart and static voices from the TV.

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My pink and teal Pocahontas backpack rhythmically slaps against my back as my legs pump faster down a gray concrete sidewalk. I dodge cracks, propelling over them, away from the tan, brick schoolhouse after the final bell of the day. I lurch to a stop at the stop sign, looking right and left and right again. Already I see the view of my apartment’s balcony strewn with towels and jeans drying in the sun, but I look down at the street one more time, void of cars. Resuming my mission, I pound my feet against the hard ground, zipping across the street, through the door, and up brown flights of stairs. I open the door to my mother’s body bent over opened envelopes strewn across the kitchen table, her head heavily resting in her hand.

“Is … Daddy … home?” I ask between puffs of breath, my lungs stretching, expanding to catch air. Rising, my mother comes over and pulls my body to hers in a hug. I feel the excitement seep out of my body like air hissing out of a balloon. “No honey, not today … Why don’t you take your shoes off and go start your homework. I’ll get you when dinner is ready, okay?” I feel her kiss on the top of my head. Slowly I move to take my shoes off, looking to my mother’s face and her tired smile face before I go to my room. Later, following my mother to the supper table, I notice only two spots set for supper, but I do not ask why like I did the last three nights.

Restless from sitting around the house after the mines laid you off, you come and go at random. Mom thinks you are with Randy so I spend my time imagining you on the back of your Harley rumbling down the highway. I think of the time you tried to take me for a ride on Randy’s shiny black two-seat Harley at his house, the terror I felt when the bike tilted to go around corners, how my tears brought about an abrupt return to the house. However, I see you at home on your bike in my daydreams, the warm sun beating down on your shoulders in your leather vest. I imagine you pulling off the road when you and Randy see a hiking trail to stretch your legs while walking amongst the pine trees that blanket the Hills. Ready for the road again, today, I think, today you will get on your bike and drive home.***

I clutch the envelope in my hand so hard the corner by the stamp begins to crumple. We haven’t spoken since my mother remarried yet every birthday a card appears in the mailbox like a shooting star I know where to find. Just when I begin to feel my life, the dynamics between my mother and stepfather, and the new grade in school starts to make sense again, a small piece of mail marked with your slanted, looped scrawl throws everything off balance. My heart in my chest begins to clench from the tension between my excitement to hear from you and the annoyance that you have bugged into my life again. Slowly, I run my finger under the flap to break the seal and pull out this year’s card. I can’t help but to think the small yellow card with a teddy bear clutching a bouquet in its paw under a cursive, pink “Happy Birthday” doesn’t match with the interests of a girl in her junior year of high school.

You say you have been staying in Arizona with a “friend” named Sheryl, a woman I immediately imagine with golden skin tanned by desert air with short, frosted blonde hair in a tight shirt with oversized, black sunglasses. For now you have fallen in love with the warm weather, but I know you will have a different address written in the left hand corner of next year’s card.

As always you end the card with “I love you Snooky. Dad.”

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My body floats down a dark, narrow alleyway with my gaze fixed ahead, and I know at this moment I wouldn’t see my purple Converse shoes if I peered down. Without looking up, I feel the dark navy blue of night seeping into the sky as early evening slips from dusk to night above me. The sides of the alleyway shift left and right, into and out of focus, my body gliding forward without its normal sense of center. Rounding a corner, I find myself at the edge of a street market at noon while the small, white hot sun high in the sky pounds down on a mass of Asian people crowded in the narrow space. My focus bounces back and forth before settling on your frame near a parked black Vespa. I see you rummaging in a backpack balanced on the seat before shoving items back in your bag and heading towards the
market. I call out your name, but you continue to walk into the street market, beginning to mingle into the mass of people. Spurred into motion, I race to catch up with, fixing my eyesight on your back as you bob back and forth, your body shifting to get by people as you move deeper into the crowd. Each step I move towards you, the gap between us grows, as if you are taking two steps when I move one, until I no longer can trace your figure moving through the crowd. Bodies of people blur together as I whip my head back and forth, unable to find you, calling out your name only to discover my words come out silent, disappeared along with the sound of the market.

Drowsy, I slowly sit up, my hand shooting up to my forehead, the tips of my fingers snaking through disheveled hair. The dead of night, I glance over to my clock, not surprised to find the sharp, red numbers hurt my eyes. Weary, I pause before settling back into mauve sheets, longing for a break in the chain of bitter dreams that has sunk into my life, leaving me with dark, shadowed eyes to carry all day.

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My fingers trace the cold, hard edges of eagle feathers on the Harley Davidson crest on your dark, grey granite marker. My mind looks for you but eventually settles of your dust-caked backpack sitting in the bottom of my closet, returned from Cambodia shortly before the funeral. Initially your bag sat in the middle of my room while I swished back and forth on various tasks, the ends of my blue jeans hit the sides of the bag, the clink of dishes and roommates making dinner in the kitchen sounding in the background. Near midnight, the house silent, I drug the bag into the living room under direct light, finally prying the zipper down with chilled fingers feeling like a small child playing with someone’s belongings I shouldn’t be touching, expecting a figure to appear over my shoulder at any moment full of reprimands. Even with the entire contents of your bag displayed across the floor, even after I have taken the step to shake the bag out, I find myself returning to your bag with the expectation your trademark Harley Davidson hat will be laying at the bottom of the backpack, but the hat isn’t there no matter how hard I look.
When Young Chase the Moon
Adam Wayne Wehrkamp

When young wearing new, loose-laced Nikes, breaks dewdrops clinging to mown grass, he's chasing the moon rising above thick shouldered pines bordering old, gray Jensen's yard.

When a boy runs through your backyard at the edge of night, sun low in a deepening sky and cicadas' love song wobbling in your ears to announce the month is June, he's chasing the moon, the sliver of smiling silver, a crack in the face of the sky.

He chases the moon, ripe and flush, tender and ignorant, dew soaking through his new Nikes, cicadas mating all around him. Old, gray Jensen watches, metastasized, breathing through a dull, gray oxygen tank, and the moon hangs just above the pines 386,000 miles away.

Reflections on a Window
Benjamin Lillegard

Smokey outlines blur reality, and I can't seem to focus.
It's always there, just over my shoulder but when I turn to see, nothing.

Faces fading in and back out to black. Eyes hollow and skin pulled tight.

Distances are hard to predict, waving in to tease me, then dropping back out of reach.

Who are these beautiful people walking past me? Which reality is really mine? How can I trust them when they can't trust themselves?

People, hiding from their echo afraid of what they might see.

The truth ... I see the truth. I'll show you your worst nightmare.

I'll pull you into my world and make you see what you drag behind you in chains.

Your own ghost is waiting to see you.
Audacity Enabler
Kayla Aalbers

Bottles. Tall skyscraper bottles. Smaller one-level crystal bottles. Bottles of red and blue, green and pink, mainly crystal clear with amber enabler mixed throughout. Two, mixed value of red to eliminate the blue to the brown, mixed, set in the heat of this honesty, towering over the crowd. The bright-eyed, youth encompassed under the spell feel the permanent injury of this time is the crazy person sprinting toward hurt.

Thrown fists, legs swiftly moving, hands grasping tightly, the mob of screaming people throws itself toward the door. Escaping, those very first few make it out, the rest, melded together in a sea of colors, reminiscent of the towers of bottles, topple over, smashing on the floor, crimson red ever-present blood, and liquid audacity that enabled the fight and destruction of the bar. The people and bottles forever lost to the storm.

Purple Haze
Fatima Malik
It's Been a While, Hasn't It?
Devanshu Narang

Color fades to an overkill orange. Fall brings the onset of winter, one harsh enough this year, that I cannot help but feel the electricity in the air instead of embalming myself in this fleeting warmth. What calms some souls is the same sound of rustling leaves that faintly whispers to me, "they're all living in the moment; what's wrong with you?" I just don't have the time, I say to myself. These colors mean as much to me as the words of a raging lunatic screaming “Accept Jesus as Lord!” on the corner of the street. There is no god, you fool. And there is no 'now,' you stupid fall.

Your argument is biased, and void, because even you live for the 'now', as you slowly effervesce into the gaping cold abysmal void winter has in store. You live for the 'now' because right now you're beautiful. Now, you've captured hearts and have been captured in screen-shots to be adored and missed at the first front of frost. You've been romanticized in hearts that associate the beginning of a young love with you. You are paramount in your existence, making even the cynics to stop and smell the roses, which you're choking in your grip. There is a strange attraction us mere mortals are drawn to, the attraction of withering decay; the draw of enjoying the fall of life, if not death itself. The same way we enjoy watching two cars collide, but we don't want to imagine how badly mangled the once gorgeous blond remains in the passenger seat. You cruel, cruel mistress. You harbinger of death.

I see through your veil. I see past the surface you're scratching off in the madness of your departure, clinging on to a tired tottered tree as a rusty red leaf, screeching like a banshee about your remaining presence. I don't hate you. I honestly don't; and there exists no possible care or cure you would have if I didn't or did.

All I can hear, through your archaic proponents like Keats and Frost, is "appreciate me." I do. I do the same way as I do spring, summer or even winter if I may. My Decembers are as beautiful as your Augusts; my Januaries are as quiet as your Septembers are loud. You are inevitable, hence I acknowledge you. That is all you're going to get through, acknowledgment and hate mail.

Do know, that you are wretched. You are the worst kind. At least the others don't make promises. At least, the others won't twist my arm to show me that they have something they know that I don't. You are, the fools' gold. You are, the season of perpetual pain, counting the number of old souls you're going to have winter snatch from the living. You shameless villain, making winter do your dirty work. You treacherous orange menace.

I am the child of the year. I am alive amongst the rest of them, as I am with you. I brave them as I brave you, but I loathe you. Not because you kill, but you don't take the blame because everyone thinks you're too pretty to have done it. The winter is what is going to slap the toll on its forehead.

I'll go collect your victims for now and prepare those young hearts for the next time you come around, because they would be in tatters. I'll shut the door on you, pull down my blinds and my curtains and avoid your heartlessness. All my life, all our lives, we have been preached to find beauty in dissonance. You are a dissonant beauty, I confess, but nothing more. You're another false promise, another deadly disguise of Grim, and I will not love you. I will not, love you.

Autumn wins you best by this, its mute appeal to sympathy for its decay.
Robert Browning Hamilton
Silent Tense
Catherine Grandorff

Silence (n.) the relative or total lack of audible sound. Silence may also refer to any absence of communication, even in media other than speech.

That first day, no one showed up for English lessons. Maybe it was the weather. Maybe no one knew that they’d begun again, but with a different teacher now. Whatever the case, I sat alone among empty chairs in my makeshift classroom. They taunted me with space unfilled, questions unasked, lessons unspoken—a promise unfulfilled. I didn’t even turn on the lights in the moments I waited praying someone to walk through the door that didn’t fit its frame. Eventually, I gave up, threw my typed lesson plan about present tense and prompts for personal introductions into the plastic lined trash can before exiting without a word.

***

Winter heightened my awareness in a way that warmer months could not. My senses teetered on the sharp, chilled edges of a dotted South Dakota highway line, leaping at the last moment to the next frozen splotch of paint with no time to look backwards or forwards but just jump. I headed north, again, mile by miserable mile, and I could feel the wind splicing my silver sedan as I inched onward. Flakes sailed by my crusted windshield, like miniature icebergs trying to sink my four-wheeled ship. The nicks and clicks they made as they hit my steel sides seemed to echo in the cabin of my car, resonating in the cavern of my brain behind my windshield and wide-eyed stare.

But it wasn’t only the weather that had me nervous. When I eventually arrived at my desired dairy farm location, I faced unknown faces of unknown students with the blurred hope to “learn English.” Some figured that meant flattening their vowels, mimicking the way my chapped lips moved, or imitating how my tongue hit my teeth and words tumbled out. Others would grasp yellow legal pads filled with handwritten vocab words and translations: a make-shift personal dictionary with no particular order.

Instructions had been vague: teach. Who, how, even what: words punctuated, with question marks and followed by silence. The diffuse direction made me dizzier than the swirling white dots outside my door. I wondered what my Latino students would make of these Midwest winters and such quiet cacophony. I wondered more what they would make of me. They’d liked the last teacher a lot. I’d been told. You could tell, because they talked. I hoped that they would talk to me. I’d been warned, between sharp inhalations and measured explanations, that extracting spoken exchanges would be a challenge. In either language. Typically, I was told, the students preferred to remain in linguistic limbo, like a dawn that refuses to break. Perhaps it was because they lacked the tools, or the light, to construct sentences or significance, they settled for a different language altogether:

Silence.
And who was I to impose a sound?

***

Millions claim the United States as home, yet few tread the ground of their ancestors, and so they reach to other lands for identity—shopping Black Friday for discounted Kiss Me I’m Irish shirts, disconnected by time and distance from the unfriendly or unlivable landscapes that refused to yield potatoes or tolerance for our predecessors. Those tattered and tired opted for unknown streets or uncharted territories. To snatch such a glimmer required a swirl of days on gray seas, uncountable as stars or echoes of the quiet waves extending around a dot of steel carrying industrial cargo crammed next to huddles of sweaty dreams.

Nowadays, ships have given way to sandals; borders are clear, not water, though just as fluid, changing hands and location every few generations and swirling up when kicked aside. And corn—or the money of corn—rather than a dearth of potatoes fosters a desperation to embark. Most who come are men, straining for a whisper of opportunity amid screams of dehydration and shadows of silos. Sometimes their wives and their daughters join, but for them the danger is different and more terrible, the price often higher and not

https://openprairie.sdstate.edu/oakwood/vol4/iss2/1
paid in pesos or dollars. The coyotes and Coyotes lurk and dogs and Dogs search and seize at junctions masked by snakewood, ash trees, and the songs of crows. Those women who continue on bury themselves in the belly of the impossible idea of a new trajectory, grasping at the rudder when they can.

***

My service-learning class had drawn straws, essentially, to see who would be teaching English where. This assignment that I had ended up with was fifteen miles away, at Hilltop Dairy, where migrant workers could come once a week to pick up useful vocabulary and practice the sharp consonants and staccato rhythms of English. Fifteen miles doesn't sound like much, but in that wintry mix that I'd just inched through at ten miles an hour, fifteen miles can seem like a cross-country trek. When I slammed the car door, the outside seemed to swallow the sound whole, so that I wasn't even quite sure if I'd shut it at all. I scurried into the front door of the big white building that looked like a barn. It certainly smelled like one.

But it wasn't. Perhaps that was just as well. A barn for a classroom would have made teaching all the more difficult with lessons and lectures consumed in the sounds of animals and whipping winds.

I wiped my boots on the well-used welcome mat. Maybe at one point it had actually said “Welcome,” but only specks of the decoration remained. It would have been weird anyway, I thought, if each of the letters had been present and pronounced. The quiet doorway, the sharpness of manure, the blue shadows on white walls clashed with each other and against my senses. They did not seem to spell welcome in any language.

From around a hinged corner, a woman’s voice asked, “Ho-say? Alfonso? Is that you?” She emerged a moment later from what we would later know as the office, eyebrows raising at the realization that I definitely wasn’t José or Alfonso. She looked perplexed, taken aback by my presence with books and clipboards.

“Sorry. It’s just me.”

A blank stare, a furrowed brow. She opened her mouth to form an unspoken protest, looking at my props.

“The new English teacher.”

The wrinkle between her eyes disappeared, replaced by smooth relief. “Oh! Of course!” I couldn’t place her rounded accent, but her pale skin seemed at home in a place with so much snow.

“I thought you wouldn’t be coming, donchaknow. This weather is just ter-ri-ble!” She ushered me into her office. I looked around, and shrugged my eyebrows. I’d tried to call to cancel, but couldn’t get through.

“We’ve set aside some space upstairs. We’re working on getting a computer, but there’s no computer yet. Will that be a problem?” the owner asks me as she shifts through manila envelopes stuffed with numbers and labels that have no relation to our conversation.

I shook my head. No.

“Oh good. Wouldja like to see?” She proceeded up the wooden staircase. There were signs in English and Spanish to Wipe Your Feet. *Limpie sus pies, por favor.*

We entered a green carpeted room with a large round table. Sticky notes decorated all the furniture and fixtures. *Table. Wall. Chair.*

There were only a few chairs. “Are there many students?”

“Depends,” she replied with a shrug. “Numbers fluctuate.”

I had figured as much before I’d asked. While others in our class would be tutoring with a steady group of elementary kids or mentoring troubled bilingual teens, we would work with laborers. Full grown adults with jobs and responsibilities and a supposition that communicating might be a good idea if they could only find the time to learn the words.

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“I never thought it was like this.”

I could see two holding spaces beyond a steel carousel with stalls for muck-covered cows. Slowly, one by one, they entered into the not-so-merry-go-round, their faces pointed inwards. A blue-clad woman worker with small, feminine hands attached milking machines to their utters and disconnected only after the cows had spent their allotted time in the carousel. I was impressed by her gloved hands and blue cotton covered arms, moving with such grace
compared to the clunky steel carousel and awkward mechanical milker. Her organic movements breathed a humanity into a detached process so opposite of what I had envisioned where my pink-capped skim-in-plastic-jug came from. I blink away, push warm air from my lungs into my hands. Rubbing them together, I turned back to my heated classroom separated from the milking area by glass and opportunity.

Noticing my furrowed brows and mistaking it for curiosity, the woman from the office spoke up. “Would you like a close-up tour of the dairy?”

The smell crept from behind fiberglass windows. I couldn’t imagine it up close.

But before I knew why, I was suiting up and heading out. In my newly acquired rubber boots, I almost bumped into a woman trying to clean the filth-caked floor of the foyer between the office and the milking station. The owner flicked a brisk hello to blue clad Maria. She might as well have said Don’t miss a spot or nothing at all.

“Hola.” The word evaporated with her breath in the cold of the mechanized milking area. Above a paper mask and a white name tag embroidered with neat blue threaded letters, brown eyes blinked at me in response. They returned to machines and udders as efficient hands moved in a concert of work. The momentary closure, the pressing of eyelash to cheektop, the lifting of heavy eyelid, the following furrow: that blink told me more about this place, this reality, than the dairy owner’s statistics about production amounts or land specs. It echoed off urine-iced floors and screamed duty into my raw, cold-tipped ears. What events, what twist of fate or snap decision or insistent relative or definitive moment placed her in the path of such an encounter?

We progressed. Or did we regress? I couldn’t tell.

The door shut behind us, and the chill stabbed at my body again. What would Maria, who I’d passed without a word, have to say about the cold and the colder?

***

Carlos was not a regular, which was probably a good thing, since his English was far superior to his classmates. Nevertheless, he’d come to my lesson one day. How to deal with banks that think you’re stupid because you’re Latino. After saying the phrase in Spanish, I had asked the day’s class of Latino men to, “Repeat after me, ‘I would like to send a money order.’”

Hiding his eyes beneath the shadow of his characteristic John Deere cap, José raised his hand. “What about cheques?” He scribbled the air with an imaginary pen.

I was about to answer José’s quiet question, when suddenly from the other side of the table, “Excuse me, profesora,” Carlos chimed. “Yes?”

“I had a question about some lyrics I heard on the radio yesterday. I wrote them down when I got home. Can you explain to me what it is they mean?”

He pulled a folded piece of notebook paper from his shirt pocket. “They are by a band—R.E.M. What does R.E.M. mean?”

I paused. This seemed, indeed, beyond the scope of banks and cheques.

Luckily, another of my college classmates had joined me that day. So I cashed in. “Uh—Melissa, could you take over?”

Melissa continued with our stock phrases, conducting choruses of conjugation and concentration. Carlos and I went to another corner to study R.E.M.

***

After three weeks of leading English lessons at the dairy, I had to ask. “Why do the women never come to the lessons?”

The owner stopped typing whatever she was working on, and looked at me over narrow spectacles. “They probably can’t afford it,” she replied before returning to her Macintosh.

I snorted. “They’re free!”

She rolled her chair away from the computer this time so that she could face me.

“Well, yes, but they’d have to take the hour off from work. I don’t pay them for that time, y’know.”
I knew I was pushing my luck, but I continued. “I’ve got plenty of men filling the seats these days though. They don’t get paid either, I assume.”

She sighed, and with an exasperated look told me simply, “For them, it’s lost drinking money. For those gals, it’s lost diaper money. Now if you’d excuse me.”

I didn’t. But I left her office to fume elsewhere.

***

At night, I watch the evening news. Sometimes they talk about immigration: borderlines, rivers, walls, INS and getting “illegals” OUT. I press MUTE. I see words like “alien” and “anchor baby” flash across the television screen, cradled by red, white, and blue borders. I wonder if the newscaster’s voice is as shrill as the words that glare and stain my living room in Technicolor rhetoric. I chink of Marfa pushing a mop at the dairy. She probably pushed one at home, too, not so unlike my mother would in her own rural South Dakota home. So different, these picture side by side, from the dark dots moving across the dangerous cactus-studded desert of my television screen.

***

We tried to iron out words wrinkled in tricky R.E.M. phrases. Losing my religion, I explained, was a Southern phrase.

“It means being at the end of one’s rope.”

His eyes spoke a quizzical look. I shook my head, realizing that I had described the poetic lyrics with another, equally confounding collection of words.

I paused. He sat across from me, thick hands folded, kindly letting me think for a moment, search the recesses of my own vocabulary for an appropriate translation.

“Being angry. When you’ve had enough,” I sighed.

Almost without missing a beat, Carlos asked, “Are you losing your religion with me?”

“No Carlos. Not with you,” I responded in earnest.

***

I decided to focus on some advanced language techniques with Carlos, which amounted to “shooting the breeze” as we say in the Dakotas.

“I like your pin,” he said, gesturing with interest. “What does it mean?”

I looked down. Go run. Go lead. Go GRRL.

How to explain this feminist sentiment to a man from arguably the most machista country in the world?

I decided to change the subject.

“You’re very observant, Carlos. What is it you do again?”

He looked down and smiled. Or maybe it was a grimace.

“Here I tend the pigs. In México I had—how do you say?—white collar job.”

The teacher in me noticed that he was picking up on idioms and nodded. The student in me felt a perplexity crinkle my brow. This definitely wasn’t the quiet student I had expected. A white collar farmhand fond of the most blurry points of language—those phrases that have no translation or only one that will have to do.

“Why leave there, then?” I asked, trying to sort through the gray.

Again the downward smile-grimace. “It is complicated. No—not complicated. Different.” He paused this time, thinking in silence for a few beats.

“I miss my family. My wife, my two daughters. But you see I had to leave—the pay here, it is so much better.”

“Hard times?” I said, offering at once a new phrase and a prompt. Perhaps it was unnecessary. He was doing fine on his own.

“Something like that.” He paused again. I could see him molding the translations in his mind, searching for how to transform the silence between us into words that sounded like understanding.

“You see, my wife, she wants to be accountant. I think that’s good. I think that it is better for a marriage—for the world—if men and women can both be happy with what they do. So I say go. Follow your dreams. Is that right?”

I nodded. Such a mantra seemed like it had been carried out of one of my Women’s Studies books. I let myself enjoy the surprise of it without spoken response.

“But her parents said that not okay. Before they helped us. But not
when my wife says she wants education and I say why not? They think that's no good. So they decide no help with the ... cuentas?"

"Bills." I offered shortly, wanting my voice to be anything but an obstacle.

"Yes. Bills. Or with our daughters. So I come here, make more money so she can go to school, so my daughters can go to school too, if they want." He shrugs, but as though he stands back from an imaginary painting, evaluating a rendition of a dream: girls in graduation robes there, standing in front of him, sailing uncharted, calm waters.

"I don't like working with pigs," he clarifies, wrinkling his nose. "But I support my wife. I want her to be happy. It's better that way. I think that good." He nods, an assertion.

I smiled, and glanced at my pin again. I took off the pin, and folded it into Carlos's rough, tanned hand. Maybe he'd mail the pin to his daughters. Maybe they'd take English lessons someday.

A quiet moment held us, content not to shiver nor speak. Carlos smiled, and I could have sworn I saw his daughters waving from the corners of his curved chapped lips.

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**Lucky Strike**

Curt Scheafer

Smell of sulfur rises off a struck match, smoke stirs off the cigarette's tip.

I inhale cadmium, cyanide, carbon monoxide.

Nicotine courses to cure the craving.

Bar noises play the night's melody, people shuffle, providing the beat.

Biergarten tracks echo off cobblestone.

I take it all in one puff at a time.

Unseen artists doing their best, implanting daggers and shards of glass.

Scythe in hand already swinging, I'm another drag closer to the grave.

Smoke escapes in thin gray clouds, trailing off into the darkened night.

I'm warned as I pocket my pack, *Rauchen kann tödlich sein.*
Run
Kelly Herrmann

I hear each foot pound the ground.
Cars rush past.
Wind provokes the leaves.
Pound the ground.
The nearby stream slashes and curls.
Wind provokes the leaves, they crash and crunch.
The nearby stream slashes and curls.
Sweet dewy air, they crash and crunch.
Shirt saturated with sweat.

Sweet dewy air combines with the locker room odor. 
Shirt saturated with sweat, dry sticky mouth.

Burning my lungs, my left knee aches.
A drop of salty sweat.
Dead orange leaves.

My left knee aches.
The cherry-red STOP sign.
Dead orange leaves, fall softly.
The cherry red STOP sign.
I hear each foot fall softly.
Cars rush past.
Sleep
Catherine Schmidt

In her slow breaths I see
the Tasmanian devil tamed,
the whirlwind roped by its tail.
Her continuous movement,
while fluid and confident, is halted.
She would shudder to know
I am watching, memorizing;
her lashes low, crystalline eyes veiled,
the lines of her nose, jaw line and cheeks.
In uncommon silence, she reposes.
No furrowed brows, only peace.
She is beautiful when she sleeps.

Overhanging Trees
Brittney Canales
Africa—Buying Cloth
Megan Schiferl

Africans like color, like patterns, like bright. Markets in Ougadougou are filled with vendors who grab my arms breathe cocoa filled breath down my neck touch my shoulder. I brush the hand off my covered shoulder violently. Twice, I turn around to accost this persistent seller and nearly hit our guide.

“Let’s get out of here” he barks. A clipped turn on the heel sends him back away from the narrow corridors, dankly dim booths full of white teeth and white eyes.

He strides across the road, ignoring oncoming armies of blue-smoke spewing motorbikes, transports for men, women, families of five.

I look, longing, at the bolt of cloth: blues, browns, and shimmery gold convalesce like the savannah at sunset. I leave the booth, leave my money in my pockets. Sweaty folds of dirty bills, stuffed deep, faraway from prying fingers.

“Never show them the big bills” our guide taught us. Make them think you don’t have much. What do we have?

Untitled
Chilee Nleya

In the first grade, kids bring a sack lunch every day. The average Canadian kid carries a ham sandwich on white; the adventurous eat theirs with mustard and cheese. One kid’s lunch box cools carrot sticks, an orange juice box and his top commodity—personal sized Doritos, a blue razzberry fruit roll up or a packet of sour gushers. Every day, the lunch bell rings and our teacher wraps up her lesson and jets out of the classroom for her hour of freedom, leaving us to eat in our classrooms in the hands of the lunchtime supervisors. I stand up with the rest of my classmates and we herd to the back of the classroom to our backpacks. I make it past my crowd of peers, layers of winter coats, snow pants, mittens, scarves and hats hanging in my nook and pull out my purple backpack. Inside is the only item this first grader needs to carry between school and home: my navy blue lunch box. I haul it out of my backpack and carry it back to my desk on the far right side of the classroom.

Students return to their desks and they open their lunch bags to peer in on their goodies. To my left, longhaired Stephan pulls out his turkey on white Wonderbread and, disappointedly, a packet of baby carrots and ranch. In front of me, Ryan, who has a small gold hoop hanging from his right earlobe that I have admired all school year, takes out a cheese sandwich on wheat and a bag of barbeque chips from his Power Ranger lunch box. Around me the other students grow louder, chatting and hollering across the room. The snack market opens with first graders talking over each other trying to solidify a deal.

Hazel-eyed Alex calls out: “Joey! Trade you my grapes for your Snickers!” Joey wastes no time considering Alex’s proposition; disbelief fills the room at this pathetic attempt at a trade and poor Alex shrinks back into his seat as realization hits of his tired negotiation skills. Joey stands up from his chair, his round face pans the room; occasionally dimples appear hungrily when his dark eyes spy a prospective worthy
of his Snickers bar. Joey starts walking up and down the rows of desks with the students who have the best snacks, while the others—hoping to get lucky—display their packets of ramen noodles or chocolate-dipped granola bars.

Joey stops at Widad’s desk eyeing her Starburst; Widad looks up through her long, black bangs considering Joey and the Snickers bar he dangles in front of her. Her brown eyes trail between her fruity snack and the caramel peanut treat in Joey’s dark hands. Joey opens his mouth to make an offer only getting as far as her name, “Widad”—before Widad takes the lead.

“I’ll give you three for half your bar,” she barks. Widad doesn’t waste the opportunity, instead she pursues both snacks—this is not her first round in the trading ring.

Joey thoughtfully considers before agreeing to anything; he takes a moment to inspect the Starburst packet on Widad’s seventies green desk. Joey then looks at Widad’s face and nods, concreting their agreement. He tears open the dark brown wrapping and breaks the bar in half, handing one half to Widad without a word. Widad smiles widely, tears her bright yellow packet open, spills the rainbow-colored contents into her Sailor Moon lunch box, and then hands three of the fruity chews to Joey.

Joey returns to his desk in the second row, already chewing a lemon Starburst in his mouth while opening a lime-flavored candy in his hands. He walks past desks on either side of him filled with first graders peering at both the chocolate bar and Starbursts in his hands as they chew on the straws of their juice boxes. It was not unusual to witness, during some desperate weeks, someone acquiring a week’s worth of chocolate milk for a single Reese’s peanut butter cup. And then there was August, who was willing to trade his entire lunch every time someone had a bag of Cheetos.

The room hums with students relishing in their unstructured lunch hour. I sit in my desk listening to a group of girls giggling in the back corner talking about a boy who asked to use one of their erasers:

“He totally likes you!” One whispers.

“Reeceally?”

“There was totally some eraser left on the top of his pencil”

“And Kylie told me Mark told her … ”

My pink and purple glasses slide down my nose as I start to inspect the day’s lunch. Quietly, I pull out the Tupperware and berry punch juice box as I reflect on the previous day’s episode of *Arthur*, the anteater from the animated children’s TV show. The episode was about bullying and poor Arthur withstood four-eye insults being hurled at him; I felt a strong connection to Arthur, seeing that I was one of three girls in the class who wears glasses. Silently celebrating Arthur’s fearlessness, I pop open my Tupperware container, paying no attention to the food inside: a leg of baked chicken with a tomato and onion sauce on top of white rice. The chicken is a grayish-beige color, the wrinkly skin speckled with black pepper. I am bringing it up to my mouth, wondering how long it would take me to save for contacts, when I hear a loud, shrill squeal:

“Ewwwwwwwwww!” I look to my left in search of the commotion. Half the class is looking in my direction. Two rows behind me I hear Mark and Elizabeth laughing cruelly, the green-eyed beauties ruled our grade.

“GROSS! What are you eating??!!!” A non-descript small blonde girl calls out.

“That looks disgusting.”

“I can’t believe she would eat that.”

Each student pipes in a line or two. My first instinct is to look behind me. Certainly they weren’t looking at me—they hardly have all year; but when I peek to the right of me, I see nothing but a wall covered in apples and motivational posters. I turn back to my left and the entire class is staring at me. I sit there, shocked still, clutching the wrinkly leg in my small fist hoping I was still daydreaming.

Luckily for me, my classmates were not people of many words and they knew they achieved their goal; as quickly as the situation started up it died completely. Sitting there with all eyes on me for those twenty-five seconds was enough to keep me from talking to them for another year; the extra attention made me keenly aware of my lunches for the rest of the first grade. I attempted to hide during
lunch hours—not an easy task when the lunchroom is a classroom filled with twenty desks. Sometimes when I knew my lunch looked especially hideous or irregular—messy barbeque chicken baked with carrots and onions, or my mother’s go-to quick meal, kidney beans cooked with onions and tomatoes eaten on rice—I would wait until everybody went outside for recess before I got to the main portion of my meal. On more serious occasions I would not eat at all.

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The disgust I felt towards my food versus everybody else’s did not stop at school. After that experience I grew to hate all the food my mom cooked. I begged her for something ‘normal.’

“Can we have meatloaf and potatoes tomorrow?” I asked while poking at my food. The night’s meal was a common one in our house, it was served at least three times a week because it was my father’s favorite African meal: sudza, a white cornmeal cooked until it was a thick, soft, sticky consistency. Sudza is always eaten with a side or two: mbida, a general term for vegetable, and usually a meat. Tonight, my mom made chunks of beef boiled in water, tomatoes, beef bouillon and onions.

“This is a good meal, Chilee,” my mom replies.

“We always have sudza, it’s so gross,” I whine.

“This is what I grew up eating, what your family eats back in Zimbabwe.”

I grumble back incoherently, frustrated from hearing the same argument.

“This is good for you. It’s healthy,” my mom tries to convince me.

“You can’t have McDonald’s every day. Imagine what you would grow up looking like!”

“But it tastes good,” my older sister chips in.

“It’s too much money and will make you big! You girls just want to eat all that junk because all your friends do.” My mom clumps some sudza between her first two fingers and her thumb then pinches some beef into it; she soups some stew into the bite before bringing it to her mouth.

I continue just poking at it with my finger. The nights we eat sudza, all we need for setting the table is a plate and a water cup—no silverware necessary. The entire meal is eaten with our hands.

“Do you want to be big like some of the people you see in Boni’s class, Chilee?” my mom asks me, referring to my sister’s fifth grade classmates.

“I just want normal food. This tastes like nothing!” I am starting to get bored of the food, and the conversation.

“In Africa, the kids never complain to have a big meal like this … ” my mom continues.

My father is wordless as he eats his meal and works through three beers at the dinner table. Empty red Budweiser cans multiply as my mother’s high, accented voice runs on and I listen absentely, nibbling on the beef stew but leaving the Mbida, okra tonight, untouched. We sit around a brown table, purchased from a garage sale, in our dining area. My father sits to the left of me facing the TV that he mutes and watches with subtitles on. My mother is to the left of me and my sister, across. My back is to the TV because if not, I would sit at the table all evening without complaint with a full plate in front of me.

After the meal everyone else transitions to the living room, my parents sit on the brown and dark orange floral couch while my sister sits the floor. I sit with my back to them, my legs dangling aimlessly as they laugh watching Spin City or Will & Grace. I glare down at my okra; peeled and chopped okra looks like a plant vomited. Its slimy texture leaves a strange film in my mouth that never seems to go away. Okra, cooked like this, continues to be a food I want absolutely nothing to do with. I sat there, silently rebelling night after night, refusing to eat anything my mom made for me.

***

My defenses were already up to my mom’s cooking, but some days I’d come home from school completely oblivious to the horrors she was creating for dinner that evening. The apartment building we lived in was like a mini United Nations; families from all over the world
cooked their homeland’s cuisines creating a conglomeration of scents that would collectively stink up the building. We lived on the tenth floor of the ten-story gray building by the University of Saskatchewan in the family housing complex, so every apartment in our building had at least one kid in it. Most of the families in the building moved to Canada so that one or both parents could get a Masters degree or a Ph. D. The building was hideous; the grey exterior always looked dirty, permanent watermarks stained the sides like the building spent all day crying. My elementary school was only four blocks away, so we walked home after school bundled up with only our eyes exposed to the harsh prairie winter, and we could see the apartment standing erect—dirty, gray contrasting the bright, white winter sky.

We would waddle into the building’s mailbox room and start peeling off layers and kicking snow off our boots onto an already soaked black rug. The rug led through another door into the lobby area where the chipped green elevator and a forever changing scent awaited us. The elevator was loud and slow so a slew of students caught up to us, all of them too lazy to take the grim, concrete stairwells on the ends of each side of the building. Some days the smell was worse than others: Indian tiki masala and Pakistani karhi combining with Chinese sweet and sour pork. People from Iran, Ghana, the Philippines, South Korea, Tanzania, Japan and Sri Lanka all made meals that transported them back home and the odors swept across the building.

When the elevator finally opened, some kids opted to just use the stairs because of the unpleasant aroma cultivating inside. My neighbor, Chiso, and I always held our noses all the way up to the tenth floor; we usually felt relief when we finally escaped the hot stew of stink that bred in the elevator but some days we stepped into something much worse.

“Your mom is making them AGAIN?” Disgust rings through Chiso’s words.

Slowly, we walk down the hallway; the white walls and puke orange carpets surround us accompanied by a strong bitter smell.

Chiso smiles widely at me as he enters his apartment and I grimace back; my stomach tightening, anticipating the night’s meal. I open our apartment door entering straight into our dining room. I turn into our tiny kitchen and lift the lid off the silver pot on the stovetop, inside are my mum’s unforgivable blackened caterpillars. The small creatures were being fried to be consumed by my mother’s wrongly strayed stomach. I shake my head with disgust—they look like live caterpillars that have been rolled in soot. They encompass the number one characteristic I avoid in my cuisine: looking the same on my plate as they did when they were alive. I take in the little rolls that pull tight then bulge out when they travel grossly. I make out the little nubs for legs they use to propel them forward in their little caterpillar lives until the evil African lady decided they were food. These were clearly not an option for my dinner—ever—and I hollered out to my mom so she knew.

“What’s actually for dinner tonight?” I yell from the kitchen.

My mom comes around the corner and says, “You and your sister get sudza tonight.”

I replace the lid on the pot and stick my tongue out in disgust making sure my mother notices. My stomach loosens as I walk out of the kitchen to the room my sister and I share, and pull out a copy of The Boxcar Children. As a fourth grader, even sudza was an acceptable alternative for dinner to caterpillars, and I think my mom knew that. By that time, what was important to me was that nobody ever discovered my family consumed the wormy insects that deserve the opportunity to turn into beautiful, unappetizing butterflies.

***

“Chilee, I can’t wait for your mom to cook for us!” my friend Heather announces as seven of us drive the fifteen minutes west of Rapid City to my mom’s house in Summerset, South Dakota.

“I really don’t know if you guys will like it that much. It doesn’t have all that much flavor,” I reply. Since living in Canada and the United States, this is the first time I’m having non-African friends over for a traditional meal. A handful of my friends from my
university live close enough to town that I have been to their parents’ homes for grill-outs and taco bars, the usual American cuisine; but this was their first time they were coming to my mom’s house and she was cooking us lunch.

We drive down the streets of the cookie-cutter neighborhood, each house looking identical to the one beside it. I point out the only thing that differentiates our home from everyone else’s. “See, ours is the only one that doesn’t have a white garage door, that’s how I know where I live!” We pull into the driveway, and somehow my mother is on the outside on the doorstep before we open our car doors.

“Hello! It’s so nice to have you all at our house! Did you drive safe? You guys got here pretty fast,” my mother says as she ushers us into the house.

“Go ahead and sit down, I have lunch all ready for you. Chilee, come up and give me a hand.” I follow my mom up the stairs into our kitchen. I smelled the beef stew the moment we walked into the house; it was sitting in a big pot on the stovetop beside pots of kale and sudza.

“It smells so good!” I can hear my friends saying down the stairs, “I am so excited. I have never had anything like this before! What did Chilee say it was called again?”

“Sudan! No? Oh, it’s the one with a click sound in it right?”

My mom is smiling at me as we spoon servings onto plates.

“Thanks for making this today, Mom,” I smile back.

“It’s okay. I never thought your friends would ever want to eat something like this,” she replies, heaping piles onto a single plate.

“That’s probably enough,” I stop her. “Yeah, they said they were sick of hearing me talk about how much I missed sudza since I couldn’t have it anymore. It’s cool to share it with them … convince them I am actually African,” I finish, laughing.

“Well, I am glad I don’t have to try and convince you to eat this anymore. You were so difficult when you were little,” my mom says as she pulls water bottles out of the refrigerator.

“I just had to miss it to appreciate it, I suppose.” I sneak a bite from the pot of stew. “Come on, we’re all starving.” I lead my mom down the stairs to my laughing friends sitting around the table.

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What’s in a Handkerchief?

Brianna Kunf

Once white smooth threads of cotton hemmed tightly together in a delicate tissue were now frayed at the seams, soiled with oil and secrets. Grasped in her small, frail hands as tears fell from her eyes to the cloth, she recalled waving it in the windy summer air as he boarded the train with hopes that the little white flag would serve as a symbol of her surrender to change his mind. She acted the fool, no fair doe-eyed Desdemona, but rather a villainess, Iago with a mischievous glimmer in her eye, a smile wicked that played upon her lips, placing the tattered tissue with the scent of another lover in her Othello’s hands herself, spawning the green beast of envy. Staring at the dainty stained fabric with sparks of hatred dancing in her glossy eyes, she let the handkerchief slip from her fingers to the frigid, hard floor. The eyes of a golden-winged bird from the ironed-on emblem stared back from below, the threads forever sealed with beads of moist droplets dripped from a lover’s brow.
Barcelona mornings drip swallows soaring, gray seamless sky, stretching—up, beyond concrete courtyard outside the white linen-wrapped bed we called Universe. For a moment, feathers trumped tightropes as we imagined blank canvas days filled with smatters of gold spray-painted performers, overstuffed olives, blue Picassos—unpainted moments exchanged for cloud-lit limbs entangled in sheets, shielded by columns of hospitable steel, eternity.
The Tourists
Lauren Smith

How sublime it feels—
for muscles to tighten, hands to quake, heart to thud. My hands and knees inch across Dún Aonghasa’s cold surface—
limestone that damned the Aran Islands from trees and crops. My fingers curl over the abrupt end of endless rock. I creep, slink, and slither closer. Thick Irish air caught in my lungs, I peer over the cliff’s edge.

Three-hundred feet down, ocean waves boom and lash against the rocky cliffs of Inis Mór. I dare to hold out my camera, tempting the hungry whitecaps of the Atlantic.

This ancient fort lures thousands of tourists—retired couples, soul-searchers, writers, honeymooners, students—from Spain, France, America. They wander around me, cameras in hand, brochures in pockets, foreign words dancing from their lips.

Nearby, a family grins at their Nikon lens, another carefree memory to frame in scrapbooks with ribbon and colored cardstock. They pose near the cliff’s edge, enticing the churning, rolling, shattering waves below—waters that once swallowed men with one shameless slap against fishing boats—a skull cracked against jagged ocean floor, lungs filled with saltwater, muscles drained of power.
My pixie dust train trails as I float along 6th Street in my sneakers. This main drag of road leads to rendezvous hotspots for princes, princesses, and midnight lovers. I stumble, mark my shoes with pumpkin innards and stop—some lay smashed in, some shattered. Creamy yellow and orange tears adhere to asphalt. Carriages of metal and exhaust leave treads of green and black grease on smooth pumpkin flesh. Yellow-orange skin impregnates tire niches as they revolve, trampling the dust and grease-coated pumpkin remnants.

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I catch my pale reflection in a Ford sedan’s tinted window as it rumbles on the asphalt. I remember Spain, where I once saw my tanned reflection in a Peugeot coupe’s windows. The foreign miniature motor vehicles whizzed along the narrow and winding cobbled streets, paying no heed to pedestrians, carriages lacking horses.

In Madrid, Belen and I shop for a bridesmaid dress for her brother’s wedding. We peer through windows, the displays either catching our stares or not. We keep moving until I halt. In the corner of a ten-foot window display stands a floor-length gown, red and sparkling, inviting with glitter infused netting covering the princess-cut skirt. I stare and wish I was the bridesmaid or maid destined for this dress. Belen sees my intent, stops and decides we should check this place out.

This boutique was the fourth of our day. Dresses clouded every corner. Rose pink silks, canary yellow satins, polyester creams. The taffeta urges them to bulge out of every crevice, expanding the importance of the dress by a ballooning in size. Although the room is large, the fabric everywhere suffocates. I sit on a coffee brown ottoman in front of three ceiling high mirrors while Belen hums. Her hands whip through the racks and corners of fabrics. She wrinkles her brows as she works through the racks of serious business.
I smile at her before I turn to my window dress. My eyes are reflected in the mirrors, and Belen follows my gaze, leaps to the window, tugs the dress off the mannequin body and pulls it on. Ooh, this one was made in America, just like you. I don't think red would be appropriate though. “Yeah, red is pretty flashy. I probably wouldn't pick it either,” I mumble. She chooses a demure, form-fitting brown, and with her choice, we walk out.

Outside of a discotec in Puebla de la Calzada in Extremadura, I stand on a curb above a tire-worn cobbled street next to Belen, my Spanish friend, all confidence. Belen grasped my arm and nearly dragged me here. When will you be here again? You must try this. Everyone goes to the discotec here. “Belen, I don't dance, and I really don't like crowds.” My words are lost in the breeze as the night air tussles my hair. Follow my lead, Americanita, and you will dance like me.

Her eyes alight with excitement; she tugs my arm again. I scan the crowds of people compacting the streets, dancing, wobbling and laughing. I purse my lips. I wish I was Cinderella before the ball, not luring. Before I'm the princess, there's no pressure on how to look, act. I can just be on the sidelines, not noticed, notable or shining.

It's one a.m. here, but no one young goes in until at least two or later when all of the forty-five to sixty-year-olds clear out of the clubs and go to bed. The sky is pinpricked black, a blanket doused in white light. Stars are clear and enhance the glow, the haze from curvy streetlamps brightening the faces in the streets. The necks of the lights are highly arched, unbelievable proportions, silver, yearning for Dr. Seuss's world, not mine.

People swells obscure the street surface, leaving patches of darkness at their feet, representing where the ground should be. Amongst he laughs and chortles, eyes sneak revolving glances, seeing who's who, before entering the dimly lit den. Belen and I feel the music vibrations, see the pulsing disco lights from our space outside. She grasps my arm, giving me a quick squeeze. I breathe. We walk in. We join the deafening music vibrations and the throngs of people reverberating, indistinguishable from the mixture of rainbow, pulsing black and white disco lights.

A compact snaps shut. A Cinderella is confident in her touched-up foundation, illuminated by glass and the pale, shadowed lighting. Feet tap-tap onward, thin heel spines avoiding the dips and crevices in the aged street and parallel sidewalk. She steps with her princess group, all swaying dress fabrics, smoothing the wrinkles real and imagined, until there are only sparkles and fabric dreams left on the surfaces. A giggle escapes from her American lips, and it is echoed by the rest of the troop, close at her heels.

Fit, fabric and color combinations draw in night lovers with the hopes of a deeper connection with a prince through the midnight foray. Dresses, painfully plucked of every hue, hug hips and shimmer beneath lamp lighting. The rustling chatter echoes the Cinderella tongues and calms nerves about the coming dance.

This Midwestern cement holds in secrets with the grooves made by bicycles and cars that have shared this space for years. The yellow lamp lighting reveals the cracks and worn patches from multitudes of past foot traffic. Along this road, taffeta crumpled like paper, as steps hurry, Cinderellas circle, walking to rendezvous with princes in pubs.

Cheap Jim's Tap lagers slosh their faces, down their hatches and up with grotesque charms and debonair grins. Their faux princely eyes reflect the dim greenish lighting from this knightly appearing pub, as the college-aged maids flutter in the doorway and hug each other. They aim towards the safety of the wall but are shoved towards the bar, which hosts a myriad of flushed male faces.

The wall holds security; the princes have to choose their partner. Guests move through doors and urge the ladies to move closer to the slick top of the bar, closer to the stools with floor scratching sounds from heels and metal stool feet sliding. A stool tips up on three pegs, then settles on four as its prince stands up and advances towards the brave princess, sends her a grin, invites her in with one sleek flick of the wrist.
With a swish, her dress and body are whipped around the bar, back to his station, occupied by the two, now in close conversation. The princesses filter in and out with princely invites and dismissals. Princes line the walls and streets not only in my Midwestern corner but also in my Spanish puebla. Their eyes follow every turn of the toe, flick of the hair, smile and sashay. I shy away, work at melding with the red worn brick wall, the cotton threads of my shirt clinging to the rough rock and mortar, but my companion pulls me away, urges I walk like a supermodel. Belen demonstrates the walk for me, instructs me to press my back against the cobbled wall, make it straight, hold my head high, relax my shoulders, push off with as much force as a swimmer springing for a race, and walk off. We turn, arm in arm, and I smile to ease my nerves. I stumble into a princely stare.

In Caceres, Spain, approximately 6 km from the Portugal border, rests the Church of Santa Maria, which has a peculiar guard. San Pedro de Alcantara, a priest who’s now a saint, stands in bronze just to the left of the heavy, dark wood double doors. His feet are bare, and his toes are burnished. Legend has it that if you kiss his toes, you will receive luck in life. I didn’t hear that legend:

Belen told me, as I stood in awe of the church, that if I kissed his toes, I would become lucky in love and romance. Go on, kiss his toes. Everyone does who passes them. It may help you out in your future. If I was thinking about kissing his toes, I didn’t want to now. But I did. Upon Belen’s urgings, and with my stomach knotting, I stumbled up to the statue, raised on a cement plinth.

With my lips level to his right big toe, I hesitantly planted one with both my eyes closed, wishing for a lover. In that moment, I made a choice in that kiss. I committed with both lips and feet planted squarely on stone. It was time for me to move, jump, to be Cinderella choosing the ball, brilliant.

As the Spaniard discotec non-prince approaches, he sees I am no Spanish woman, and he starts talking. I never felt more American than at that moment, when he advanced, slowly flirting in his silky Castilian that I don’t understand. I reply with, “Solo tengo dieciséis años. Soy estudiante, y soy Americana.” He stopped his advance and replied with a startled air and dully gleaming eyes. You have the body of a woman. As soon as his lips stopped moving, we left for the safety of the dark discotec and the familiarity of friends standing near the bar, central to the dance floor. His head turned with his tracking gaze, eyes following our steps into the club darkness.

Salt and pepper-cobbled bricks are held together by flaking gray cement. Stones are rounded off at their ends from work done by autos and padding feet. There’s a rounded bulge in the center of the road that looks newer, less touched than the rest of the road and that cars avoid, maneuvering the sliver of space left for two cars to pass by each other without scraping their passing neighbor.

Passerby car riders in Fords give a glance over each other through the transparent window frames of their neighbors, see the Cinderellas walking and standing out of the dark taverns side by side gathering air and cool breezes, and honk. They shoot jeers out windows coupled with cat calls. The same windows reflect shimmering faces painted with excitement, highlighted by dark jeans and pumps.

Our floor is dizzying with lights reflecting off the surface with blurred body shapes, and we step and turn to the music, cacophonous. It’s crowded, bodies pressing in to every corner. My back is pressed against the Spanish club wall; it feels smoother here than on the outside; it doesn’t tug me. My borrowed brown, sequined blouse doesn’t cling to the stone and mortar mix, as it did on the outside. My camiseta is coated with burnt umber brown disks, moving in synchrony with each turn of my body and brush from my neighbors, forced intimacy.
I was being pushed towards the massive center of the room by the crowd and the floor itself. The dirt filled in the creases between the craggy stones, sinking in, tipping towards the very center of the dance floor, where the island bar resides. My neighbors are getting closer with every chorus.

Shakira’s “Hips Don’t Lie” comes on with rousing supportive bouts of the chorus and Spanish lines, my neighbors asking me to fill them in with the English to Spanish stanza translations. With panic in my eyes and the acrid smell of salty sweat in my nose, I turn to Ernesto, my English speaking Spaniard with emerald eyes. He asks if I want to move out for some air; I nod my assent, and he weaves me, holding my arm, as we squeeze through the crowd to a backdoor stone patio with jasmine plants blooming.

We move underneath the brass glow of archway lights, and I stop to inhale the scene with jasmine-tinged air. Ernesto plucks a single white bloom, offers it to me, and nimbly perches it behind my left ear. The sharp scent, cool air, and his closeness send shivers down my body, goose bumps up my arms and neck through the cotton, sending my sequins dancing as I rub my arms. I turn my eyes to the arched brass lamps hanging above us.

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The light poles are high over buildings neighboring the streets by ten feet or more. Garish, partly silver colored, partly aged wood with thick metallic bands circling the base, these lights lead Cinderellas to their rendezvous hotspots, castles. They stand in the scene background leaving lemon hazy halos, light just bright enough to guide traveling princesses. This college-gear antique street acts as a conveyer-belt system to transfer college-aged maids in and out of the dance with polo-coated, Hollister-jean covered, fast-food grease smelling princes.

This road feels lost in time on every other night besides weekends. McDonald’s and Nick’s Hamburger Shop napkins and paper bags, coated in tire track stains, show another picture of a college sphere, a modern, small town.

Cinderellas circle in and out of bar after bar, ball after ball this Saturday night with a parade of giggles. Pumps pat the road, nimbly step over hole pock-marks, along the edges of this well-traveled street. Some princesses find princes for the night at their balls, complete with dancing, although faster than the traditional ballroom waltz and fox trot. After dancing, some of the couples stay together for the night, the magic worn off by the morning. Other princesses flee with last call, their clocks sounding their personal midnight. Their magic lingers. Their one-time beau linger as princes in memories.

I dart my eyes from the Spanish bronzed lamps to the gray flagstone diamond plaza stones at my feet-holding me up. I tilt my chin, lift my eyes to Ernesto’s unwavering stare. He slides his hand from behind my ear, where he placed the flor, white plume. He breathes a whisper. You are very pretty; his hand resting on my cheek. My skin fires, my new blush adding to the rouge Belen applied to my adolescent cheeks. She made me Cinderella tonight, lending me her slinky brown, silky sequined laced top. She did my makeup, making me appear less young, less innocent, less Cinderella before the ball.

I peer into his emerald eyes, and for a moment I feel as Cinderella felt when her prince held her dancing, bliss. My clock struck midnight in the midst of my fairytale instant. I stepped backwards, let his hand drop from my cheek, his fingers leaving warm trails, tingles on my skin. I flew back to my fairy godmother Belen, hastened to my secluded reality.

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I run, trip over a street pumpkin and am time-warped to fairytales trapped in cement and sliding down rain gutters. I look down at my faded jeans, now bearing a hole from my street side stumble, brush the dirt and fairy dust off my zip-up hoodie, and step over the smashed pumpkins.

I walk down this road holding magic in Saturday nights, lacking luster the remainder of the week. This road is pebbled with promises of magic and princes. I see trash littering the gutters and the empty