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Megan Baule
My father told me to take care of myself. No one else would.

I was beautiful
when I still slept,
before the world filled a bathtub
where whales kiss my fingertips
with velvet teeth, gulping
pomegranate seeds that corrupt the tongue.

I laid bare the music
in my cheekbones. Music baiting
a rifle scope, primordial love drumming
my pen, a beat arousing
words written by no one
before poetry:

before beauty
was a cow carcass,
calf’s legs surging
from her stomach, eaten
by coyotes from the spine.

Death jitter bugs the poet
to Build Me Up Buttercup
in a bomb shelter where winter lives
the reflection of opal mirrors,
lifting the veil.

When I find the words,
they will be mud and grass
hugging toes, or a map
in wrinkled cotton. I will drop
my hem to lake water, whisper
to Perch who blinks
an empty mouth.

A queen of sins, flicking my dress
off my foot to a wooden floor,
forgotten. Now I am myself,
sapphire dark.
Love tattooed.
Sunflower

Dan Nguyen

Perched near the jungle
gym I look down, forehead wet,
and fall, arms stretched out,
fingers exploding

as I crash into brown sugar
sea. My sole buries itself
and in one shining burst
I bloom.

Far off I hear cars,
a metal circus surging.
Popcorn exhaust lifting pillows
of smoke into the air

above a slide that I now find
myself sitting on again.
Its brightness drained—
a bitter sunflower

with withering petals
and broken ladder rungs
like half eaten
cigarettes.

My eyes trace melon
bricks of an old building
nearby. Paint lines
soften on the asphalt.

Somewhere far off I hear sharp
cries from cicada; I sigh
and match their song,
drawing them closer.

I let the sand swallow me
from the toes and grow
cold as the sun sinks
into the silverying skyline.
Lights in a Huddle

Sumin Lee

Breaking through the coal-black night, a road vanishes from my sight. Like a child peeping into the deep well, I fall in the unknown darkness.

Never, ever go near the well. My grandmother set me free on my oath. I can climb up riding the well-bucket. My oath always changed into a persuasion.

Death marks with a red X along the road, deer's calm eyes as if she intended to kill herself; bloodstained tracks under glaring headlights, sharpened nerve-like thorns break out in a rash.

A long way off, lights in a huddle like luminarias; I grasp a wheel like a thick nylon well-rope. A snow-covered village bears a severe winter. Passing through its entrance, I am no longer a child.
my grandma, who didn't believe in capitals

Sheryl Kurylo

Sunday afternoon she stands at the stove making the pierogies my father loves. Flour and butter mix with eggs forming the dough that envelopes potato, cheese, mushrooms, and sauerkraut. "They're from the old country" she dutifully reminds me, smacking my small hands away as I grab at them.

Clouds overtake the blue in her eyes as though a storm is moving in. The old country where she lived in a concentration camp; fed rations of water and bread, it would have been easier to let go. The home she fled after the war ended; family divided and lost at the hands of the nazis. A journey to the new world. The clouds can no longer hold. Drops fall down her wrinkled face, sizzling in the hot pan.
American Lights

Amber Easton

My pack of lights
in a yellow box
I left on the porch mantle.

As I walked up the steps
to the red-shuttered house,
Grandpa shook his head at me.

Our lives: three hours apart,
seven decades in age,
linked by shredded tobacco leaves.

His ice blue eyes looked disappointed:
"You shouldn't smoke those."
I wander past him, head down

Upstairs I flushed them
watching the tubes spin
shaking my head, "never again."

I strutted home that cold,
December day inhaling
my own words, his.

Two years later
his lung cancer
enveloped me

at his grave site;
he had known
I knew.

A Silver Pearl

Lori Jacobson

Every day during the summer months at precisely 3:15 P.M., the old man would pull his weary bones up and out of his brown, naugahyde recliner, shuffle across the linoleum puce-flecked and, with a shaky hand, flick open the screen door. Then he would gingerly step out on to his manicured lawn. He reached the red chair with the shell-shaped back by 3:17.

The old man would wait until 3:15 because that was when the sun had crawled far enough across the sky to sit behind the giant willow tree and cast the perfect shadow on the shell-backed chair. He could have easily moved the chair to a new position in order to take advantage of the shade earlier in the day, but that was not his way. He did not alter this routine in the least, unless it was a particularly warm day—and only then if his daughter-in-law had made a pitcher of lemonade. If so, he would pour himself a glass on the way out. Drizzle, sprinkles, raindrops, or ninety percent humidity did not stop him. Whether his shirt was wet and sticky from the sky or his own sweat, the old man sat in that red metal chair.

The chair itself was really nothing special. Made in the 1970s, it was originally white. The old man purchased it ten years ago from a yard sale he passed by on the way to the grocery store. He didn't really need it, but since his wife's passing earlier that year, he was prone to moments of impulsiveness, even if they amounted to nothing more exciting than buying a used lawn chair.

After unloading the chair from the back of his rust-riddled pickup, he set it in the garage, then fumbled around in his storage cabinet and pulled out a can of standard, barn red spray paint. After listening to the clacking of the mixing ball inside of the spray can, he decided it was thoroughly mixed. With deliberate strokes, he transformed the sterile white into a brilliant red. "Much better," he muttered to no one.
Meaning to throw the empty can in the trash, the old man moved, instead, to his workbench. The stool legs screeched on the concrete floor as he slid it out from under the bench. As if painting the chair had inspired him, he set to work on carving a scrap of pine. He had no particular design in mind, but his fingers moved across the surface, shaping the wood of their own accord. Silently he carved, letting his hands freely feel the wood, coaxing it to reveal its figure. Memories scrolled across his mind's eye, and all the while his fingers diligently worked.

His father taught him to carve, to work with wood. His memory swirled around their first project. It was a tiny replica of the hay wagon his father used nearly every day on the family farm. He carved two horses—one a quarter horse, the other a paint—to pull the wagon, detailing their manes with bits of his own hair clipped from the top of this head where it would be least noticeable until it grew back. Two little figures perched on top the wagon seat, one clearly larger than the other, representing father and son. He painted the slats of the wagon side walls a vibrant red. It rested on two perfectly round black wheels that actually turned. The old man as a child played with it nearly every day, but he treated it with a reverence atypical of a child. The wagon sat on his mantle today, still in exquisite form, with only a scratch or two of paint missing here and there.

After a day of drying, he moved the chair from the dingy garage and set it in the shade of his favorite willow tree. He turned the chair to the north, so that he was able to see if someone, perhaps his son and daughter-in-law, were coming down his gravel road. He enjoyed having visitors, but he enjoyed his solitude just as much. He was never bothered by the many days that might pass between visits from his son and his family, or a friendly neighbor checking on him, or even rarer, a wandering soul who took a wrong turn and found their tires crunching over the gravel, winding their way up to his home.

When the old man brought the chair out back to set by his favorite tree, a white willow, he surveyed the gravel road, trying to pick a spot that not only provided shade but a view of the road. As he looked at that road, a stirring memory came to mind. It had occurred during an ugly time in the otherwise serene county. One night the old man, then a young teen, had been pumping water for the few livestock wandering the farm when a puzzling scene came marching down the oak-lined way. At first he didn't understand what the white hoods and robes signified, but they were ominous and frightening. He raced towards the barn to get his pa, but his father had already caught sight of them out of one of the barn's grimy windows and met his son halfway, shotgun in hand. "Go to the house and stay inside with Ma no matter what!" He hollered to the boy. Trying to suppress the bubbling hysteria in his chest, the boy didn't question, he just ran to the house.

The group of five carried a wooden cross. They halted their march as the father strode out into the center of the dirt road, shotgun in hand. From inside the house, perched by the kitchen window, the boy and his mother were unable to hear the conversation on the road. Clinging to each other, they watched the men in white lay the cross on the gravel, pour gasoline over it and light the roughly-hewn wooden symbol on fire. The reddish-orange flames burst forth, snapping and licking at the air. Entranced by the flame, the son hadn't noticed his father's disappearance from the scene, but his mother did. She began panicking in short, hitching breaths, tears streaming down her rosy cheeks. Soon though, the father came back into sight at the wheel of the old Model T pickup. It lumbered up the steep ditch straight towards the group. As it reached the road, the men backed away in disbelief. The father drove the Model T right across the burning structure, snapping wood and scattering ashy sparks. Then he stopped the pickup and, without any words, ceremoniously released a gunshot into the air. The men quickly ran through the ditches and fled down the road.

Moments later, the young teen found himself helping his father douse what was left of any smoky flames and clean up the mess. His father spoke: "I think they were headed to the Dickerson's," and said nothing more the entire evening as he sat on the porch, shotgun in hand.

So there the chair sat as each season passed, only moving when the old man's son would push it back, mow across the worn patch beneath it, and set it back into position with the legs of the chair fitting neatly back into the groves pressed permanently into the soil. Throughout the year the chair carried some kind of weight. In the spring, summer, and fall, the chair would bear the weight of the old man. During the winter, the shell-backed chair usually held a pile of snowflakes. The chair stood vigil with the willow tree, day and night.

The old man planted the white willow tree fifty-some years
ago for his new bride. She loved to listen to the wind swishing around in the silvery leaves, and told him that ancient poets prized willows just for that musical quality to provide inspiration for their poetry. He didn't know about that. He had his own reason for planting the willow. His old face was now as gnarled and furrowed as that old tree's bark, and the red chair stood as a bright contrasting memory. Now that she was gone, he needed them to help ease his soul.

His adult life began long ago in a foreign country. The Marines had given him much. They offered self-discipline and structure to an unsure individual. They provided a mission, a higher purpose: to serve himself, others, and his country. His new wife, teary-eyed, yet proud, stood next to his parents as they said their goodbyes the day before his ship left dock. His mother cried softly for her only son. His father stood stoically. The soldier left the next day with his father's words still vibrating in his chest, "Always do what's right, son." He loved and honored his wife as best he could, but the war had changed him. He wasn't the same hopeful, passionate man she had eloped with just before he went overseas. Everyone comes back different.

His unit moved around often, yet it seemed the landscape never changed. Tall, dry grasses flowed into rolling hills. The dry, biling winters transitioned into dry, blistering summers. Excitement presented itself often, yet true entertainment was rare. He met many people, fellow soldiers and Korean countrymen during his 18-month tour. One meeting in particular became a burning beacon in his heart and mind for the next fifty years.

Her name Joo-Eun, which meant "silver pearl." Her family traveled from unit to unit providing services—laundry and boot repair and such—just trying to eke out a living after the North Koreans had destroyed their farm. They camped by the soldier's unit for a week, and although he knew her name, he learned very little else through her broken English. He felt foolish asking them to wash his clothes, but he felt sorry for them, wished to help them, and wanted to get closer to Joo-Eun. He glanced her way many times, only to see her staring back momentarily with black, liquid eyes before averting them behind a curtain of black, silken hair. At the end of the week, the Korean family, wishing to thank the soldiers, put on an acrobatic show. The sun, high and bright, matched the mood of the soldiers. It had been a quiet week, a good

week. The family brought a welcome distraction. And although the soldiers knew a tempest always swirled around them, they learned to take each day as it played. Tomorrow would be different, but today still felt good.

Joo-Eun's family, camped just outside the perimeter, took their time pulling out their silk, crimson tunics, each one displaying a different dragon, hand-embroidered in gold thread. These were their most prized possessions and they took great care of them. After dressing, the family prayed quietly before facing the assembly of soldiers who were smiling as they sat on the yellow, dusty ground. The show began with Joo-Eun and her sisters tumbling in exciting criss-cross patterns. Her juggling brothers soon came forward, flaming torches dancing through the air as they tossed them with ease. After an hour of their amazing feats, the family ended the show with a spectacular pyramid. The three brothers stood abreast, arms up, while two of the sisters flipped up and locked hands with them. Joo-Eun climbed up last, gingerly scaling the human wall and when she reaching the top, she placed each hand on her sisters' shoulders, straightened her spine, and completed the pyramid with a perfect handstand. The soldiers, thrilled, whistled and clapped robustly.

Joo-Eun planned to hold her position through the applause, as she always did, and then curl into a ball, flipping at the last minute and landing cat-like upon the ground. But something was different this time. As she maintained the handstand through the cheering, instead of curling up, her small frame jerked and she fell forward, landing with a horrible thump flat on her back. The soldiers, who were prepared for such things, hit the ground and scrambled for cover. The family stood frozen in disbelief, not knowing just what happened. During the pandemonium, some of the men crawled forward, pulling the brother and sisters down, while other armed soldiers fired round after round of ammunition into the tall grasses. In a matter of moments, all was silent, yet no one moved. That is, no one except the young soldier, who crawled on his elbows, desperate to reach Joo-Eun. He sat up, pulling her tiny body into his arms, and watched as the blossoming stain darkened her tunic. She opened her silvery eyes and looked up at him, smiling. He stared back, gingerly holding her while his heart shattered into a thousand pieces. Grasping at her neck, Joo-Eun jerked her hand away and then, with her final strength, pressed her hand into his. Black lashes fluttered against
porcelain skin as she exhaled her final breath. MPs recovered
the sniper's body the next morning.

Knowing what must be done and with slow and laborious
breaths, the old man set down his book and strained shakily
to get out of the recliner. Painfully he moved towards the phone.
With an unsteady hand he brought the receiver to his ear.
"Hello Son!" He forced exuberance. "Oh, I'm fine, just fine. Say,
I was wondering if you and that beautiful bride of yours might
come over for some lemonade this afternoon."

The old man waited in his chair for the sound of the Pontiac's
tires rolling their way up the gravel road. He met his son and
daughter-in-law with an easy grin. "Come on back. This old
willow is gifting us with his shade!"

The wife leaned toward her husband, grasping his elbow
and whispering, "Go on back, he looks a little pale; I'll make
the lemonade and be out in few minutes."

The son looked deeply into her shining face and mumbled
his assent. He hands trembled slightly as he felt an invisible
weight suddenly draping his shoulders. Pausing for a moment,
the son stared at his father, sitting there in that damned chair,
holding a cardboard box and grinning like a fool. As if in a
hurry, he glanced at his watch. Ten after three. And even
though the willow tree cast a long shadow blocking the
afternoon sun, it appeared to him that his father had a certain
glow about him. An unexplainable light. The son blinked and it
was gone.

The old man called, "Come, pull up a chair, I've something
for you."

He rallied, "Okay, Dad. What have ya got?" He slid a lawn
chair beside his father and dropped into it.

"You know that carving on the mantle with the chunk of
charred wood in the back?"

"Yeah," the son swallowed hard, "the wagon your dad
carved for you?"

"Yes, that's the one. Make sure you take it home with you
today. I'm trying to clean out some clutter and you might just
aswell have it collecting dust at your house instead of mine."

The son knew the cleaning story was a lie, but he played
along, "Sure, thanks, Dad. I always loved looking at it while you
told me the story. No matter how many times I heard it, I never
tired of listening."

The old man sat, smiling serenely, and pulled out a delicate
necklace with a tiny silver pearl on the chain. "This I got this
during the war," the son could feel the warmth of his father's
hand on his own, "I never quite got around to giving it to your
mother. I thought Margarite might like it. Course it's not worth
much, but it she might like it just the same."

"Thanks, Dad." He opened his hand, peered at the tiny silver
pearl, and furrowed his brow. "She'll like it very much. I'll go get
her so you can give it to her yourself."

"No son, I want you to give it to her. She's your jewel right?"

"Uh, yeah," replied the son worriedly, still staring at the pearl.

"Then you need to give it to her. That would be the right
thing to do."

"I'll take it to her now and check on that lemonade. Boy, we
could use a little breeze today; it feels like an inferno out here."

"Oh, it's not so bad, I've felt worse."

The old man watched his son go all the way into the house.
Leaning his head back, he let out a deep sigh and closed his
eyes. A breeze blew up from the river bottom and the willow
shimmered as the air swirled through its silvery leaves, and the
chair let out a small creak as it bore the weight of the man.
Kicking, thrashing, slurred in speech. Throwing vases toward his feet.

Raising voices, but not the child. Dulled down senses to put it mild.

Clenched fists fly through the air into her face, tousled hair.

Swelling, bleeding, teeth are bared. Little eyes watching, deep with despair.

Swearing, screaming, sick with rage. Grabs the bottle, downs that plague.

Starts the car, ends the fight. Dawn is breaking; no more night.

Moaning, sobbing, on the floor. Little eyes watching, there's still more.

Stomach sickness, heaving sighs, pulls the trigger, there she lies.

Stunned with grief, numb from pain. Watching as red, the carpet stains.

Little feet move, little eyes cry, curled up beside her, as the warmth dies.
Clear.
Electricity,
and my bedroom sealed off
by someone heavy. Heat
leaks from under the door
and moistens my toes.
My silver thirteen inch TV spits
static at me as I whiten my hands
on the wall.

Footsteps,
constant and hollow.
I lie on my bed,
enveloped by my protectors
as a black breath
pops through the neighborhood.

Someone forgets, the door unlatches
as she,
back bruised, eyes like water,
pressed upon by her
protectors, fought
for herself and not me.

I never understood that
until now. I have always felt
the pain of her loss.

But what pain did she feel?
And was she screaming?

Her hands were hardened
by dishwater hot as a Sunday sermon.
Lye soap sank into cracked fingers
and men’s overalls, soaking out manure and oil.
Boiling jar lids, she canned
away her girlhood in rhubarb preserves
as a baby cried to be nursed.
Sounds of children scuffled through an open window;
she raised a wet dish-toweled hand to push
back an off-white curtain, yelled;
"John, let your brother up! You rip
those jeans and so help me!"

Drying supper dishes, she heard the radio
mutter news to her husband in the parlor.
Creaking over floor boards to the nursery,
she lowered herself into a rocking chair,
her baby nuzzling as she held her breast
to his mouth. Murky candle light,
like dusty soil blown through walls, settled
down over her hands as they rocked a hush-a-bye.
Chelsey McCuen

**Ghazal After Reading Emerson’s Plea**

for Poets to Declare: “It is in me and shall out!”

Sara Olivier

I tried; pinned my soul to the table to exact my words as my eager fist thrust the blade deep to extract my words.

The rust of my mother’s watering tin wets stale dirt where her naked hands, embedding each seed, impact my words.

Vibrations of cards shuffling between my grandmother’s lacquered nails and her kitchen counter, late at night, attract my words.

The heat from my sister’s open palm glides over her grinding hips. On a dirty dance floor she subtracts my words.

My daughter’s unseen fingers probing the soft boundaries from my belly fat to backbone abstract my words.

Colored glass filters light and stains my aunt’s fingers pale blue as they push Our Father through the piano to distract my words.

Emerson, each time I cut myself for introspection, other hands clot the wound and—for—my words.
The Great Women of Butte, Montana

Laurelle Adkins

After traveling for two days in our large family vehicle, a joyful sight greets me as we cross the Continental Divide on I-90: Butte, Montana. This little mining city cradled in the mountains possesses a cherished history as well as a tall tale or two. Among numerous other attributes, Butte runs as a common thread in the lives of my great-grandma, grandma, step-grandma, and mother, weaving together to create the tapestry of my family history.

After descending to what I call the bottom of a cereal bowl, an almost claustrophobic feeling for a truly "Big Sky" South Dakota girl, my family always drove straight to my eighty-some year old great-grandma's powder blue trailer where we would stay for the duration of our visit, making memories and finding adventure. Climbing up the Astroturf covered front steps, we would meet Sammy, Great-Grandma DoDee's faithful salt-and-pepper colored dog, barking and jumping at our arrival. Across the living room from the door sat her floor T., like nothing I had seen before, and in the mornings we would watch The Price is Right with Bob Barker, her favorite show. I loved shuffling my feet over the velvety kitchen carpet, a remnant from another era, and avoiding the floor vents, unfamiliar hazardous metal holes that would entrap me if the protective grating gave way. My brother and I found great amusement in the connected guest rooms and bathroom; the doorways became secret passages for two imaginative children. Her back yard housed many games, and at night, I had the best view of the luminous Lady of the Rockies, a statue of the Virgin Mary "dedicated to all women—especially to mothers," and the "Big M" as we call it, a white, capital letter "M" that shines bright atop a hill on the edge of town.

But a few years ago Grandma DoDee became ill and sold that rectangular box positioned just so upon the earth. Aside from the house and the memories it contains, I remember little of my great-grandmother, as I was young for almost the entirety of the time I knew her, but I specifically remember her stubbornness and independence. She possessed this gumption and a spiffy fire attitude; she would not give up until she physically could not go any further, and she died at a ripe old age. I can see that same attitude in her offspring and theirs, an heirloom of self-determination.

The family heirloom passed to my Grandma Karen, DoDee's daughter. What would be a difficult existence began in Butte, and she remained there until she married, had my mother, and divorced. She and my mother then led a life filled with a new family and moving vehicles. Of all the time I spent with my grandma, Butte mostly acted as the stage from which we would play our roles in the production called life, since she traveled from rainy Washington to be with us at Great-Grandma DoDee's house.

After a collapsed lung landed her in the hospital, Grandma Karen stopped smoking, but the damage had already been done. I vaguely remember sitting in the little blue trailer hearing her speak of the spots found on her lungs and the wait for the doctor's diagnosis. The family heirloom of strength combined with a stubbornness to live led her to fight, but eventually the cancer won. She died less than two weeks after we said our last goodbyes on Christmas Eve in her simple home.

Her life and my memories of her inspire me; sophistication and a quiet strength radiated from her. Great works of art, though simply craft hobbies to her, decorate numerous rooms in my home. Her love for nature and elegance permeates her work, and I continue to enjoy and learn from this affection. Even through her mistakes I have gained knowledge for my life; because of her addiction to cigarettes, her life ended too soon, and in her memory I have vowed to never touch them. Her sad ending moved me to cut my long brown hair and donate it to Locks of Love so that others suffering from disease could find beauty even in the ugliest places. Although my Grandma Karen exists now only in memory, every time I travel to Butte, I look to her final resting place, the "Big M," and know that she is home.

Of all the women who greatly impacted by life, my Step-Grandma Joyce almost certainly does not play a large
role, but her impact bears mentioning. Joyce married my grandpa, and they had two children: my beloved aunt and uncle. Sickness possessed her for the later part of her life—

I do not recall her making an appearance outside of her room through most of our visits—and although we barely kept company with her, I will never forget the last time I saw her. My mother, brother, and I had walked into my grandparent's house on Massachusetts Avenue, taking in the smell that can only be described as "grandpa's house," sneaking candy from the dish that sat on the entryway table, and going to her bedroom right off the living room. My mom entered her room first; I followed, and upon seeing me, Joyce crossed herself and stared at me in amazement. Despite the seeming insignificance of this meeting, I will never forget how it brought her joy to see me, a step-granddaughter she barely knew.

All of these women took their turn at the potter's wheel and molded my mother into the beautiful woman she has become. Born and somewhat raised in Butte, she grew to appreciate the town and its traditions and has gone on to share them with her family. One lighthearted tradition involves the local cuisine; it has become a running joke that my mother would eat every meal at Pork Chop John's or Joe's Pasty Shop, both infamous for their delicious recipes, if we allowed her. Even when my relatives visited for my high school graduation, one suitcase was dedicated to pork chop sandwiches and the meat and potato pies known as a miner's "letter from 'home.'" As I now write about the foods to which my mother has introduced me, I find myself craving my own letter from home.

Although much of my mother's life was not spent in Butte, I know that it holds a special place in her heart. She has shared that love with me, and I feel that, even as her roots run into the soil beneath those mountains, joining the roots of the women that went before her, my roots reach across this prairie where I took root to also take hold at the bottom of the jagged-edged cereal bowl, under their Big Sky country.

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The Art of Walking

Kari Eliason

The art of walking isn't hard to fail
We learn as toddlers to stumble and fall
Take two steps and lose it all

Children step and run on rocks and grass
Textures make them trip and slip
The art of walking isn't hard to fail

As girls grow older they learn fashion and shoes
The heels—kitten or stiletto—bring new complications
Take two steps and lose it all

The wedding march begins. Glide
Down the aisle with all eyes on you
The art of walking isn't hard to fail

Years move on and so does age
Bodies break down, requiring three legs instead of two
Take two steps and lose it all

Moving hesitantly across the grass
Toward the mountain of dirt
The art of walking isn't hard to fail
Take two steps and lose it all
Babysitting Baseball

Amber Easton

On Grandpa's couch the T.V. sings that old-fashion baseball song.

Holding my half-pint hand—Grandpa: two foot prints of cleats,

sand-brown bruised mitt under arm, a white ball, fresh in its box.

I, dragging an oversized bat, my cap on backwards, N.Y. in white oversized t-shirt, Yankee blue; Grandpa in his Braves red.

Take me up to the ball plate A shiny new skin on the tee.

The bat, heavier then me—I swing, the crowd cheers HOMERUN! Grandpa smiles as I drift asleep.

Family Heirloom

Chezarae Huntsinger

From my turquoise coffee cup juts my pinky finger in all its crooked glory. I strain to push it straight. No, I say, it wasn't broken, there's nothing wrong.

I used to wish it normal until that early morning breakfast.

I poured his coffee, bending in my sky blue dress to kiss his balding head. He sipped it shaking, spilling on his Sunday tie, his blue eyes smiling and his pinky finger: crooked, jutting from his cracked, gray "World's Best Grandpa" mug.
John Wayne v. Starbucks

Kathleen Grode

7 A.M: My father enters a trendy café in a hunting vest, a trading ship on a foreign coast.

I'd like a cup of coffee please, he states, confident, your darkest daily roast.

Whole milk or skim? Whipped cream on it? The overconfident barista guides—

Mochas are the special today:
Chocolate spice and Peppermint on the side.

Just coffee, please, he quickly replies, The Army, manly kind.

You said that, right, the girl responds, but I need to know, what kind?

John Wayne style, he answers, trying a new form of attack.

I don't think we have that flavor here, she steps away, but I'll check in back…

Nothing in it, plain! he persists, five-dollar bill in hand:

Fresh-ground, traditional, classic, original, convinced she'll understand.

A cappuccino, then, she guesses, relieved, clutching the syrup at her side.

Don't you sell just coffee here? my dad demands, a wild look in his eye.

That's all we sell, the barista yells, and tea and scones and bread.

He glowers at her, defeated, and says, I'll have a muffin instead.
Every day at 5:00 A.M., the rhythmic beeping of Merel's alarm clock woke her. She promptly climbéd out of bed, and methodically brushed her teeth; twenty strokes on the upper and lower left side, twenty on the right, and twelve across the front. She took a fourteen-minute shower, combed and blow-dried her iron-grey hair, then pressed her royal blue polo and a pair of khaki pants with six passes of the iron on each pant leg.

At 6:30 A.M., Monday through Friday, Merel arrived at the Student Union. She walked to the back room to fill her cart, and then proceeded to set out the salt, pepper and baskets of napkins: the napkin baskets in the center of the table, the salt and pepper shakers next to the basket on the far side, salt on the left, pepper on the right. By 7:00 A.M., the entire Student Union was perfect, all the way from Java City to the extreme back of the main hall near the kitchen. As Merel finished, the smell of eggs and bacon began to drift in from the Home Zone and—for just one moment every day—silence and order reigned.

At approximately 7:02 the first students began to drift in to catch breakfast before an 8:00 A.M. class or to refuel after an early morning practice session. The Union doors creaked open and slammed shut, snowy boots stamped white footprints onto the mats, then squeaked and dripped their way across the previously pristine floor. An occasional needle of early-morning laughter pierced through the dull roar of sleepy murmurings and toothy yawns.

In the back of the Union near the booths, Merel flinched. She knew what would happen next, the same thing she had watched five times a week for twenty-three years, for approximately three thousand five days of her life. She almost turned away to find some sort of business to do elsewhere, but defeated hope held her feet in place. Sure enough, the first group of students with trays sat down at one of the round tables near a brick pillar, and a shaggy blonde student with an "SDSU Football" hoodie plucked the basket of napkins from the center of the table, took a pile out and set them down near his plate, then backhanded the basket onto the table behind him.

Meanwhile, the petite redhead in moose pajamas and mukluks, sitting across from the football player salted her omelet heavily, then shoved the salt and pepper shakers down to the far end of the table, where they balanced so precariously that Merel had to restrain herself from hurrying over and placing them loving back in the correct spot: in the center of the table, next to the (currently displaced) basket of napkins, the salt on the left, pepper on the right.

By 7:42 A.M. the Union was, in Merel's opinion, in complete shambles. She'd been working steadily wiping tray, but even with her back to the main room, she could sense the mismatched salt and pepper shakers and almost hear the empty napkin baskets calling to her from the floor. Finally, she couldn't stand the disorder any longer. She began her rounds through the Union, from Java City past the fireplaces to the back of the main hall. She picked up the little wicker baskets, restocked the napkins, put the baskets back in the center of the table and meticulously re-paired the scattered salt and pepper shakers, placing them to the far side of the napkin baskets, the salt on the left, pepper on the right.

As she reached the last table at the back of the main hall, Merel turned around to appreciate her work. As she did, the booted feet of the second breakfast crowd shook the entryways like an impending avalanche. Some had just finished 8:00 A.M. classes; some were out to snatch a quick bagel and latte before their 9:00 a.m. lectures, and some just liked getting up early. Even as Merel turned to finish her last table before the wave hit, a group of girls with cappuccinos and muffins crowded around it.

"So I just almost died on my way across Medary, as if having physical geography at 8:00 a.m. wasn't enough to kill me," on platinum blonde said to the sweat-panted and hooded girl sitting beside her.

"OMG! I've totally almost gotten hit there like, at least seven times," the girl exclaimed, grabbing the basket of napkins and setting it on the floor next to their table.

"Yeah, but I was like, really in danger of death this time, ...
because this huge truck was going like seventy-five…"

"Hey!"

A burly guy in a long-sleeved Abercrombie shirt poked the blonde in the back, interrupting her story.

"You using your salt? 'Cause someone stole ours. Thanks.""

Merel watched as the soldier-like set was split up. Who knew when she'd have another opportunity to fix them? To make everything right again?

And so it went all day, as it always had: after the second breakfasters came the early lunch group, the noon lunch group, the late lunchers, then the early afternoon coffee crowd. Just as Merel finished organizing their leavings (noting that two pepper shakers and a napkin basket were M.I.A.), the 5:00 dinner crowd exploded into the hall, followed by the regular dinner folks…and so on until 9:00 P.M. when Jack's Places closed and it was time to stack the little baskets on top of one another and settle the salt and pepper shakers in for the night.

Every morning, every day, every night, no matter which shift Merel worked, the Student Union was a never-ending cycle of chaos and disarray. Just once, Merel had promised herself for fifteen years, just once she would see the Union an eye of calm and order in the center of the hurricane-like campus.

One Thursday night Merel was slow to gather the shakers. She stacked them as neatly as ever, white on white, brown on brown, and pushed them into their bin in the appropriately labeled cabinet. But that night something was different. Something in Merel's routine had shifted, just slightly enough to make her come back in from her car and double check the Union's patterned carpet for messing pepper shakers.

That night, Merel couldn't sleep. She turned one way, and then flipped to the other. She readjusted the sheets eight times, pulled her comforter on, and off again six times, all the while considering salt shakers and flimsy tan napkins.

Suddenly, at 3:00 A.M., Merel rose. As if finally asleep and dreaming, she dressed in a clean uniform, climbed in her Honda and drove to the Student Union. As she got out of her car and walked through the doors, flakes of snow, as round and subtle as grains of salt, filled her footprints. Inside, only the dim emergency night lights were on. Merel wiped her feet methodically on the doormat, but her damp-soled sneakers still squealed on the clean floor, and the noise was so unexpected that she nearly fainted from the echoes. And yet, even in the surreal glare of pale neon light, with the squeaks of her illicit presence reverberating back from the vaulted ceiling, Merel was resolute. She unlocked the kitchen, walked directly to her cabinet, and loaded her little cart with the salt and pepper bins, and with the wicker baskets full of paper napkins.

With extreme care and deliberation, Merel walked her round from Java City past the fireplaces to the back of the main hall. She gently placed a basket in the precise center of every table; set a salt and pepper shaker next to the basket on the far side, salt on the left, pepper on the right, exactly two finger-widths apart. Additionally, she pushed every chair in around each table, six chairs to a table. Each chair 1.5 feet from the next. It took her until 5:00 A.M.

When she finished, Merel locked the kitchen, then returned to sit in one of the oversized armchairs near the fireplace and surveyed her kingdom of exactitude. Everything was as she had visualized it for fifteen years: orderly, meticulous, and absolutely silent.

Merel sat in her chair, gazing, until 6:05 A.M., at which point she rose, drove home and called in her resignation.
Making Coffee

Dallas Sargent

A barely risen sun shoves
light across an imperfect horizon,
hunchbacked, looking like a blade
of summer grass bent by westerlies.
Outside appears a crow collecting
berries and twigs between harsh caws
from its mate hiding in an empty
tree in wait. The protector bird
tries to mash the berries into pulp
and deliver its rich nutrients to satisfy
the bird. Minerals soon enter the blood
stream and the crow awakens,
leaps from the tree and falls
through the air like a parabola.
Private Conversation

Keith Brumley

There are times
When I talk with horses.
Breath, frozen in the air,
Streams from their muzzles like smoke.
Against the backdrop of snow
These creatures look benign.
Pointed ears and quiet eyes betray their secrets.
Whispering,
An older mare tells me of her life,
Of wolves and hawks who sing to her,
Exacting tribute.
"Last year they demanded
My foal," she says. "I cried until the pain left."

Watering Holes

Billy Boyd

Dewy. Damp. The air thick—
Fog rests on the savanna.

A lone elephant lumbers
Near pools of rippling water.

He meanders near twin termite towers
Tall and muddy as mist clings to earth.

Wet morning smells pierce,
Saturating senses, on phantom winds.

Beside water, reed, and timber drift
Verdant shrubs sit to drink humidity.

Grey morning hangs.
Sun not yet scorches the dew.

Distant clouds blanket
Nature's worry and fear.

One faces East in silent prayer.
The other consumes without care.

What they may devour
Returns earth back to earth.
A couple of days ago I decided to get away from the turbid hustle and bustle of blue collar life. The depth of my wallet could not sustain a prolonged journey to some far off place where dryads and fawns frolicked with pixies, and brownies fluttered about in a wanton dance just to amuse me. No, fairyland would have to wait, so I chose the next best thing. I packed my fishing pole and tackle box then headed to the nearest pond. It was just about noon when I reached the spot. I should have been there earlier, but since I had the day off, I decided I wanted to drink all of the liquid sleep I could manage. I felt refreshed and, dare I say, jovial. As if reflecting my mood, the sun was washing the scenery with a beautiful radiance and the wind blew eddies, keeping the incessant insects at bay. A foreign smile crept to my face. I had today and tomorrow off of work, and nature reacted to my joy with a beauty only she could give.

Upon the purchase of my fishing license, I gave up the surety of live bait and took a vow to quest for the best lure. Today I felt like a jig. It had a white bottom and a dark top with a twisty tail jiggling at its extremity. I put a small resplendent white jig head with charcoal dots for eyes through the rubber body, making sure that the pale side was down and the hook was through the bleak anterior. Earlier that day I had purchased a braided, fifteen pound test line which had the width of less than a four pound nylon line. The slim line diameter allowed for a smooth long cast even with the minuscule weight of the jig, and the hefty test ensured the integrity of my line from the urgent pull driven from the largest of fish.

I was set and ready to go. This was the fifth time I had been to these ponds. There were two different ponds. Prior to this moment I had fished at the larger of the two ponds, but I always kept a keen eye on this spot in particular: it was nestled in an alcove with a perfect structure to give even the most fastidious fish a good place for cover. I found a spot low enough that I could touch the turgid face of the water. The three foot high embankment to my left was only a few feet away, to my immediate right there were trees leaning over the surface of the pool, and just beyond that the wind caused the facade to ripple. This spot was cut off from the bluster to the effect of stillness.

Here I decided to test my mettle, so I put my pole together, pulled back the bale, and let fly. With a light whir the jig sailed to end with an imperceptible splash. I started to reel, cranking the lever at a medium tempo so as not to get caught in the understory but not too fast as to seem unnatural to any observing fish. To my immediate surprise, I felt a powerful yank on my line; the pull was so strong that it made the drag whine with a high-pitched squeal. My rod violently quivered, jerking this way and that. It was all I could do to keep reeling. I could feel the potent fight coursing up the line, through the rod to my hand, and through my arm to my mind where I glimpsed... desperation. The drag was set too low; my line was pulling away at an alarming speed. In the midst of this epic struggle I had to try to put the tension higher on the drag and yet maintain a sure grip on the rod. As I fumbled with the rod in my left hand and tried to twist the drag to the next level of rigor, the fish broke the surface. Time seemed to slow as the fish pulled with a strength that only survival could muster. I stood transfixed as I watched the water churn and splash under the herculean pull. I noticed a dark green back and a silvery underside with light green lines along the fish's broad side. The fish's head cocked northward against my line; its southern gill opened, exposing the fleshy red filaments hidden by scaly cover. Under the duress of the pull, the fish ascended out of the water as if it were not held in check by gravity. Gravity won out, but rather than fighting the inevitable pull the fish used gravity as it flipped its broad tail out of the water and reversed its original tug in an opposite yet equal strain against my line, furiously smashing through the agitated water and diving deep and away, swimming in a seemingly drunken and chaotic rumba. Once the fish dove under, I managed to constrict the drag to a considerably higher degree. Under scrutiny, I discerned that the fish was a largemouth bass, and a good sized one at that. The bass's effort renewed under the

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new tension. It pulled and pulled, becoming more and more desperate as I relentlessly reeled the bass toward the shore.

As I pulled the bass on shore, it stopped struggling for a moment, almost resigning to the fact that its struggle was in vain. In that moment I saw the size of the beast: it was about two of my feet long and from the tip of my middle finger to the bottom of my wrist wide. Then it smacked the ground with its tail trying to get back to the water. If I had been any less quick the monster would have succeeded. Rushing to the fish, I reached down and heaved it up to a point so that we could see eye to eye. The behemoth stopped to gaze into my orbs; I stared back and thought I saw a stoicism that could only be found under the absolute of death, as if the fish was left in wonder at the end. Then I looked to its maw and noted the stuck jig hanging right under the top lip of its teeth filled orifice. With a gentle hand, I reached to dislodge the hook. Broke from my gaze and realizing its pain, the giant lurched. I squeezed the huge body firmly knowing that if I let go, the vast animal would injure itself more. On the second effort I pulled the hook free. Holding the immense bass at arms length, I studied its bulk and at the same time took a moment to reflect on the heroic struggle. I noted other wounds decorating its scaly profile. This fish knew battle; it had survived many skirmishes and wore the scars with indifference. Life had been a struggle, and to worry and preen over the scars given by merit would be disastrous indeed. The true dignity of this fish was that it still lived even under the constant threat of survival. There was no pride. What was pride in the face of life? Pride was nothing but a construct of ego and indulgence. In its world, pride would have meant death, so it struggled on to preserve the single idea that life was worth living.

As I inspected the fish my respect grew. How could I let a warrior such as this be my dinner or even mount it upon my wall? It seemed disrespectful to covet such a thing, my vanity be damned. Sensibility directed me to the only recourse: I let it go. I watched as it started to float belly up, then righted itself and hurriedly swim off. No, fairyland would have been a grave mistake compared to the glory of this day. I cocked back the bale and let fly.

It takes days to undress
the wounds that caterpillars
hide inside their fragile cocoons.
If they discover the world too
soon, then they'll never float
from their freedom-filled balloons.

They'll never express their loss
of their fathers or their struggling
disbelief in golden gods.
They'll never feel the warmth
of the summer's rising sun or
the insight gained from a fading fall day.

Tucked into their dream trapped slumber
until spring, they'll sing to awake
from the depths of their seasonal sleep.
Anxiously they await the birth
of a clean breeze to shake their old skins,
so they may fly freely through the sun's burning heat.
The wind blows through the grass
Yet I hear nothing

I have encountered wildlife
With a cold reception
This is their place
It belongs to them

Distant buffalo await my approach
They will be ready
The bird chirps
Breaking the unrelenting silence

Soft mist
Sun, grace us with your presence
I beg of you

Where am I?
I am not welcomed

The deer ran off with a scamper

I see everything
Yet I hear nothing.
The Changing Sand

Megan Buysse

I looked down to discover what wonderful terrain my feet were falling in love with. To my surprise, I could not see my toes. I wiggled them slightly to make sure my body was still intact. To my delight, a chill ran through my spine as pink and white grains of sand escaped between my toes. The sand took me captive. I ran, rolled, and tumbled up and down the huge mounds of colored sand.

The sand dunes appeared to go on forever in a straight line. Just beyond their limits, the dry deserted looked angry with envy. I ventured to the Walls of China in Mungo National Park which lies in the middle of New South Wales, Australia. I participated in a photography class which ended up not being just an ordinary photography class but a life changing one. The culture, the people, and the landscape I saw inspired me. I went across the world, over an ocean, up into the Outback, and discovered my place in the world.

The sand dunes where I made this epiphany are a part of Mungo National Park. According to the NSW Nature website in an article "Mungo National Park," the park lies in a part of the Willandra Lakes World Heritage Area; the lakes, however, dried up around 14,000 years ago, leaving a crescent-shaped dune which the locals named the Walls of China. They are pillars of hard, pressed sand with soft sand dunes on the other side. The best time to visit the dunes is during the winter at sunset. This way, the sun does not scorch the skin and the sunset makes the dunes glitter from golden, to pink, purple, green, and finally blue as the sun hides behind the Outback's harsh desert. In this ruthless desert, the way mankind views history changed. According to Smith, while digging in the calloused desert, Jim Bowler discovered two skeletal remains, "Mungo Man and Mungo Woman," in 1969. They are dated back about 40,000 years, which is the earliest date in which human remains have been found on Earth (Smith). This means the Aborigine people first existed on Earth.

To the Aboriginal people of the area, history and historical figures, such as Mungo Man and Mungo Woman, define life. Their culture lies within the cracked dirt and has an emotional impact on the people. I have never heard such conviction as in the voices of the Aboriginal people, which reflect the pain and triumphs of a people's culture lost to the desert. I happened to be near one Aborigine when he peered into a picture of his murdered family. When he closed his dark colored eyes, my skin started to crawl, tears came to my eyes, and I could almost hear the screams coming from the mothers watching their children being murdered before them. When he opened his eyes again, he smiled and looked at me and said, "This is my family, they were taken from this very land, and I am all that remains." I could feel his anguish in the slump of his shoulders, the way he hung his head, and how his knuckles clenched tightly as if just being near his homeland ripped his heart out.

I ventured to Australia with my soul empty and alone. My heart felt like I was standing in an empty room just waiting, longing for something to appear. I left with my soul filled with culture and friends that my heart can never forget. When I try to describe the people I met there, no words could ever give justice to the true impact they had on me. They opened my eyes to the world. They taught me to keep my chin up when trouble comes my way. I now feel physically, emotionally, and mentally stronger, ready to face any challenge.

My class of twenty girls and one boy were privileged to be escorted by a true Aborigine, Peter Peterson. He resembled the black night in the Outback. When Peter strolled through the Bush, he would be lost to the darkness only to appear when the campfire cast an eerie glow upon his figure. Through examples and stories of the spirits, Peter showed me how to respect myself, my friends, my family, and my hardships. He taught me how to connect with others without words. I still remember his glistening eyes when he talked of his friends and family and the respect he showed them. He altered my perspective through his examples such that I am certain I have a visible scar.

Peter and my classmates touched my buried spirit from within and gave it life. We spent twenty-six days together
traveling through bushes and sand, desert and mountaintops, rainforests and oceans, plains and trains, and traveled into each other's hearts. Being thrown into many struggles such as scarce food, cold weather, blisters, few showers really made us bond together. For a week straight we roamed the countryside away from civilization. We faced challenges head on and won. I cannot remember a time when I have smiled for a month straight or slept in freezing weather and woke up happy because I was having an adventure with twenty-one strangers. They helped me grow emotionally. They helped me discover myself.

Even though the people I met there were exceptional, the land itself had the most impact. Out of all the places I roamed, The Walls of China has the most significance to me. The Walls of China stand tall and proud on the flat Outback. When I stood on the edges of the ridge, I felt like I was facing judgment against the pillars. Would they let me pass them to the soft sand that lay beyond or would I be too encompassed with the sheer power of the formed sand? My thoughts raced with the spirits Peter instructed us not to disturb. Did I hurt their land? Did I step where I was not allowed? If so, what would be my penalty? But I passed with ease to the sand dunes. I can still smell the clean, crisp air, feel the soft sand between my toes, see the rolling waves of sand only inches away from the cracked dried desert, hear the cool wind blowing through my hair, and taste the dried scroggen (trail mix) I had eaten earlier.

As I passed the pillars, I discovered that everything I loved about Australia made me care about my home across the ocean. My love for home actually started when I looked up after sunset at the stars. I had always pictured myself living in a suburb of a big city with tons of options. I never dreamed of living in a rural community with a wide open range with only natural beauty surrounding me. I realized I could never see the stars in the city. How could I live without the stars? Then I started to think of the other aspects of rural life I could not live without: the clean air, the freedom to venture out, no traffic, and most of all, the peace I feel from listening to the wind blow. I knew then and there my place in the world had changed.

When I looked at the same sky again, it looked completely different. I could not find the Big Dipper and Orion’s Belt; instead the Southern Cross shone brilliantly overhead. At least I had the moon, but even that appeared to be different. The moon appeared patched with darkness and craters like

Someone had defaced the moon and now it glared down at me. There on that sand dune, with the moon peering down at me, I discovered where I belonged.

I will never be able to explain what happened out in the Outback, and maybe that is the way it is supposed to be. We all need to find our own way, our own place in the world. My realization just happened to occur at one of the most amazing places I have ever been: on a sand dune, across the ocean, and under a sky of different stars. Somehow, grains of sand changed my life.

Works Cited


The Prairie is My Garden

Kari Eliason

Wildflowers in gold, azure and rose
Pepper the prairie hill
Where Mother and daughters mold
Scissored flowers against their will.

Dishes washed, clothes drying
Cows graze, grass mowed;
Mother and daughters will soon bring
Flowers to brighten the little home.

Shielding eyes from the sun,
Scanning the unending,
Unlimited horizon
Asking silently, is he there?

Her gaze past the vast grasses following
Chestnut and Dapple pull the plow,
Their movements break the earth, upturning
Rich nutrients for seeds to grow.

Skies change colors,
Blue to red and orange,
What's the time she wonders.
"I'm not ready yet.
I want just one more flower."

Follow the Row

Emily Jepsen

Run into the towers of green; they isolate me from the safety of the farm. Hiding in the endless rows, I hold my breath.

I strain through the moonless night to see beyond two rows.

Sprinting from the seekers, velcro covered plants grab my bare legs.

Stop. Croaks of bullfrogs echo through the maze.
Chest heaving, August air settles on my tingling neck.
Wait, fingers twitch, sweat trickles, with only one row to follow to find home.

https://openprairie.sdstate.edu/oakwood/vol3/iss3/1
Spring to fall

Jace Williams

Open like a tiger lily in the sun,
Black bright seen in the jealous sun.

Wait for doubting, easy butterflies
To drink our nectar, feel the warm sun.

Your pale green eyes, free spring petals,
Open for light's heat in the sun.

Violets blush clear to your breasts,
Quick breaths, Maypops, seek a fatal sun.

Morning's come, red poppies close,
Cold dew covers flowers below the sun.

Jace, no less frail flowers known,
how Mimosas die in each new sun.

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Back to English

Amber Jensen

In Spanish, my name begins with a refreshing escape of air that opens the mouth like someone savoring the warm bubbles of a whirlpool or the firm kneading of fingers on tense muscles. Ambar. It doesn't trail off unrecognizably like it does in English. Amber. The final syllable stretches open and lingers there until it is cut off by a quick flap of the tongue against the roof of the mouth. A foreign tongue teaches me that my name is different; I am different, in another language.

At the end of June, about twenty students from South Dakota State University waited in the main terminal of Oaxaca's International airport. The zippers of our fat suitcases struggled to contain the souvenirs we lugged home for family and friends: jewelry, rugs, blankets, t-shirts, and carefully packed bottles of Mezcal. We thought of them as symbols of Mexican life. If anything, they symbolized our lives in Mexico.

Like the others, I was ready to return home. Over the last four weeks I had touched the surface of another culture and heard Spanish words I didn't remember learning slip from my mouth. Experiencing myself in another language had changed me. I was already planning a return trip to Mexico, but at the same time, I was ready for the street dances, baseball games, and beer of a South Dakota summer. I had not yet boarded the plane, but already, I felt like myself again—leaving Mexico behind, returning to South Dakota with new stories.

"Ambar," the soft opening vowel and stretched sounds drew me back to Oaxaca. "Ambar!" I turned to see Diego's profile, a dark outline of him in the doorway against the bright sunlight outside, and immediately felt embarrassed. I had told him not to come.

Diego was a little older than me. He was a waiter at a bar and, like many of the waiters, he had paid special attention to my friends and me over the past few weeks. I had seen him around town—in the centro, at the shopping center, and on the street near our school. When he offered to help my friends and I babysit children whose parents attended an informative meeting about health and safety issues, the way he played soccer with the children and the way he forced his mouth to form English words to communicate with my friends convinced me I could trust him. Afterwards, I agreed to go with him to his friend's restaurant, where he taught me that good tequila is for sipping not shooting, and he told me about his dream to move to the United States.

We had become friends—temporary friends. At that time and in that poverty-stricken part of Mexico, email wasn't readily available. Mail was only marginally reliable. The option of maintaining our friendship hadn't crossed my mind. So, on the last night of my trip to Oaxaca when he told me he wanted to see me off at the airport, I told him that wouldn't be necessary.

But there he was. My friends giggled as he came toward me. Our teacher arched an eyebrow. My face turned red.

"Ambar, my picture, for you," he said, his breath still agitated from the urgency of his trip to the airport. The thick palm he extended toward me cradled a black-and-white, passport-sized photo.

For some reason I didn't want to accept the picture, but not knowing what else to do, I blushed and took it from his hand. Later, my sister would discover the picture and run from my room laughing, waving the tiny image of him—his serious eyes staring out from beneath thick eyebrows—in front of me. "Your Mexican boyfriend!" she exclaimed. I would again feel embarrassed, even a little ashamed of the fact that, boyfriend or not, he had hoped for a long-lasting connection, a link to the United States, while I had refused.

1. "Algún día, voy a los estados unidos," Diego promised, taking a seat. He was dressed nicely in lightly-colored linen pants and a button down shirt; he was freshly shaven and smelled of cologne. He was sure he could get to Chicago, where his cousin lived, and from there find me in South Dakota. I didn't know what to say. Like the other members of my group, I wore sandals and sweat pants and looked hung over. Diego looked at me hopefully, grinned, and tried to make conversation. I smiled back but responded minimally to his questions; my mind was drifting back, remembering Oaxaca,
but at the same time looking forward, anticipating home.

Finally, a muffled voice announced something over the loudspeaker that only our teacher understood, and we all stood. I grabbed the handle of my large, rolling suitcase. Diego gave me a quick hug that I half-heartedly returned.

"Adios. Que te vaya bien."

"Okay, bye," I said, waving slightly as I walked away.

We pulled our suitcases outside and walked across sweltering cement toward a flight of stairs on wheels positioned in front of a small airplane's door. We felt like VIPs boarding a private plane, leaving our suitcases at the bottom of the stairs.

I couldn't help but glance back, and when I did, there was Diego, still lingering in the doorway. Though I couldn't see his face, his expectant posture—stiff back and shoulders, head held high—reminded me of my dog waiting at the end of the sidewalk for me to come home, and I wondered what he thought life in the United States was like. Your life wouldn't be any better, I thought, wishing I could go back and tell him.

I boarded the plane and crammed myself into a seat by the window, but I didn't look back. I was afraid I would still see Diego, his ideas of what my country was, his ideas of me and who I was. I was afraid to think about his dreams, my reality.

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The Duty of the Grove

Lori Jacobson

With trees to help hold water, farmers like Issa Aminatou of Keita, in Niger can grow more food and weather droughts. (National Geographic, Sept., 2008)

Her feet solid on hard-packed soil,
Braided bangle-wrapped arms lift as

Heavy grains rain from Issa's bowl,
Bits of stalk juju dance in the air.

Issa has a coat of dust;
The rain gifts someone else.

Slung on his mother's back,
Kadu's stretched-out toes slumber too.

Sunken sockets stare,
Ribs protrude and moan.

Clay bowls wobble empty,
Thin rails of children wait.

Precious trees wrestle for survival,
Holding vigil and raindrops.

Gradually Kadu thrives,
Gradually the village thrives too.
Guatemala

Chezarae Huntsinger

There I sat, in a van full of strangers. The smell of sweaty bodies indicated the seven hour trip we'd undergone. The whole ride had been a series of superficial questions: Where are you from? What do you study? Do you have any pets? No one brave enough to dig any further. The driver announced, "Solamente, veinte minutos hasta Xela." A sigh of relief flowed throughout the vehicle. I knew we all at least shared one thing—our knowledge of Spanish told us that we had only twenty more minutes of sticky vinyl seats and tacky Latin music.

My body had gotten used to the bumpy ride from the unpaved roads scaling up the mountain, but my neck had been aching unmercifully for the past hour. The metal interior I used as a head rest and the blend of panic and excitement had kept me from sleeping. In twenty minutes I would arrive with people I'd met briefly on the plane ride at my month-long home in a country I knew very little about. I kept reminding myself that I was brave enough to do this and I would never forget this experience. But what I took away from this trip can't be summed up in "an experience".

After my third night there, I was convinced I had made a mistake. My "mother," Celeste, spoke too quickly, my four year old "sister," Estephani, wouldn't stop digging through my things, and the dog barked all night long. After a supper of tamales, instant coffee, and conversation filled with broken phrases, misplaced adjectives, and verbs in the wrong tense, I was emotionally and physically exhausted. I decided to retire to my room for the night.

During my college education, posters of study abroad trips had come and gone. Travel Africa and explore Mount Kilimanjaro! Study French under the Eiffel Tower! Take in a bull fight as you take in Spain and its culture! I had been interested in all of the adventures to exciting places, the foreign languages, and the amazing customs and histories, but there was no way I could go. Not me. I'm shy and petrified of meeting new people. I'm self conscious and worry constantly. I'd talked myself out of every adventure that came my way until this trip. I couldn't live my life in this safe bubble forever, in a world that consists only of my family, boyfriend, and a small group of close friends. I knew other experiences existed outside of my safe, small-town life. I knew Guatemala could teach me something I'd never get here in my bubble. That something pushed me to the meeting, forced me onto the plane, and landed me here, in this small, damp room where my soaked jeans lay beside me on my bed.

The rain hadn't stopped since we arrived. I'd only been to Spanish class twice, but after six hours of cold, damp denim rubbing at my thighs, verb drills, and endless cups of instant coffee to warm up, I had had enough. With no contact with my classmates from America, I was stuck here with this family that I couldn't even communicate with.

I had been placed in a teenager's room with pink walls and teddy bears. I concluded that she must have a fascination with calendars, as I counted five on the wall, none from the current year. But the bible verses on the walls are what intrigued me the most. Six posters of pastoral scenes—waterfalls, trees, flowers—but all the words were foreign, and my pocket dictionary didn't prove to be much help. After thirty minutes of staring at unfamiliar words, I gave up as I heard Estephani turn on cartoons. I wandered into the living room. Her giggles let me know that I'd forgotten to wear shoes again. I plopped down on the rough, floral sofa. The white calla lily coming from the immense fake plant tickled my ear as I sat. I scooted closer to the little girl and noticed that the cartoon on the television was Disney's "The Emperor's New Groove." Finally something familiar. As I sat there, I strained my ears for recognizable words. I was able to pick out hombre, ropa, casa, but nothing that made meaning. Estephani giggled at the jokes, but I was lost in a world of o's and o's and rolling r's. Fifteen minutes of this left my brain in a mangled mess; I just needed a hot shower and sleep. After gathering my shower supplies—lavender body wash, shower, shampoo and conditioner—I walked down the hall to the bathroom. I sat down my items and used the toilet, conscious to dispose of paper in the waste basket. I pushed the seashell curtain aside, revealing the cracked tile and

https://openprairie.sdstate.edu/oakwood/vol3/iss3/1
broken window covered with a dirty plastic shopping bag and masking tape. A twist of the knob sent a trickle of water from the spout and mysteriously dimmed the lights in the whole house. The hot water felt good. I looked up and remembered that my shower had been deemed the "widow-maker" because of the dangerous electrical wiring. I noticed a beetle crawling between the plastic and glass of the window, and I began to cry.

My Guatemalan Spanish teacher was only five years older than me. Her name was Carmen. She was twenty-six and in her last year of school, studying to become an architect. Her long hair was identical to mine, except for the striking difference in color. A couple of inches taller than most Guatemalan women, she could look me in the eyes.

In our room on the top floor of the school I could look out at the rain. Carmen was trying her hardest to get me talking about anything. She asked me about politics, boys, clothes, school, friends. I didn't have much to say. My Spanish wasn't great and my mind was back home where it was summer and eighty degrees, where my mom cooked normal meals like hamburgers and spaghetti without salsa, where I could hop in my car to change pants if I was wearing jeans soaked up to the back pockets. I really did try, but I couldn't focus. I wanted to go home.

Carmen noticed me shivering and gave up with the lesson. She explained that she needed una plancha and ran out of the room. I sat there, fiddling with my pen, drawing raindrops down the side of my notebook. I could hear her footsteps running up the stairs. She flew open the swinging doors, drenched from the rain and carrying an iron. She offered me a traditional hand-woven blanket and asked, "Would you take off your pants?"

I didn't understand. My clothes weren't wrinkly, they were wet. Soaked actually. Because I didn't have the words to express this, I simply asked, "Why?" Although I couldn't understand, I'm sure she explained that the heat and steam would help dry them as she demonstrated tying the blanket around her waist. She gave it to me and turned around to give me privacy. Although hesitant, I managed to make the switch and handed her my jeans. She laid them on the table and looked up smiling. "Me confía" she said, reassuring me that I could trust her.

As I stood there in my new skirt watching my teacher run the iron laboriously over and over my jeans, I began to understand her. And when she looked up and saw the gratitude in my face, I believe she could understand me.

"Tomorrow," she said, "we will spend class shoe shopping at the mall."

I had heard of Baviera from my teacher. They served American hamburgers with pickles and ketchup, real coffee, and liquados (my new favorite fruit drink). A week of the same routine was getting to me: breakfast, walk to class in the rain, walk back in the rain for lunch, nap, homework, supper, sleep. I did not sign up and pay thousands of dollars to find myself miserable and lonely. After breakfast that day, I told Celeste, "Voy a comer a Baviera con otros estudiantes." She asked who I was going to eat with. I didn't know. I really wasn't comfortable with anyone yet, but I knew that needed to change.

At instant coffee break time at the school, I took a deep breath and announced, "Hey, I was thinking that if anyone wanted to, we could go to Baviera for lunch?" I'm sure I turned red, as I was afraid of the no's and the excuses. If no one could come, I knew Celeste wouldn't have prepared lunch for me; I'd have to eat alone. As I imagined, most everyone could not go.

"My mom's making soup," or "I don't have any money," or "Maybe some other time, I'm tired."

Okay, I thought, I can do this. I'll just eat by myself, but I didn't even know where Baviera was. Just then Kristina popped her head out of her classroom. "Did you say you wanted to go out to eat for lunch?"

"Umm, yeah, I was thinking Baviera."

"Oh yeah, sure, that sounds great. I've been wanting to eat there."

All the tension in my body melted away, and as we began our walk out the door, Eric asked where we were headed and decided to join us for lunch, too. He turned to me and asked, "So how's your trip been so far?" And I unveiled.

My eyes scanned the terrain for the nearest rock. I needed to sit. My legs burned, and I could feel the sweat running down my back. We'd been hiking for nearly two hours, and my head ached from the intense physical strain. Our first weekend excursion had so far been less of a vacation and more of a work out. I planted myself next to a small tree surrounded by blooming bird of paradise flowers. I examined the plant: pointy yellow and blue petals, red leaves and stem. How incredibly unique. I was amazed at the structure and beauty. Careful
not to disrupt nature, I simply took a picture, picked up my backpack, and continued on the hike. I didn’t mind walking alone—the scenery was stunning, and I was also having trouble climbing and conversing simultaneously—but about ten yards into my solo hike, I spotted Kelly leaning against a giant mossy tree.

“Hey, ya tired?” I asked.

“Well kinda, but mostly I noticed you weren’t behind me anymore.” Just wanted to make sure you weren’t alone when you made it to the top.”

“Hey thanks. Are we almost there?”

“Yes, I think we only have about twenty yards left?”

Thank God. My feet were burning and my lungs felt as if they might explode. Together Kelly and I hiked the rest of the way, and after catching our breath and waiting for a few stragglers, we took it all in.

The crater at the top had become a lake filled with ancient magical tales and legends. Fog lay thick, and the air was heavy and smelled of must. The scene was hazy as the cloud blurred our view. We all sat there listening to the guide’s stories of spirituality and mysticism, when instantly, the fog disappeared. Our sight changed from a white, gloomy wall to a massive lake surrounded by mountains of immense trees and vegetation. We stood at the top of Volcano Chikabal, stunned by the natural beauty. We looked at one another, a random group of kids from South Dakota at the peak of Chikabal, experiencing this moment together.

The taxi took us to the top of the hill. Carmen turned to the back seat and asked, “Have you ever eaten rellenos de platano?”

I knew platanos looked like bananas, but I’d heard they didn’t taste the same. “No,” I replied, “pero, quiero tartarlos,” I was anxious to try them and to meet her family. We stopped at a worn out fence covered in overgrown weeds. I thanked the driver, stepped out of the taxi, and Carmen opened the creaky gray gate. Arm in arm, we followed the trail of red amaryllis flowers to her front door. The house was squat and long, the windows barred, and a freshly hung load of laundry dripped from a clothes line above my head. As we stepped inside the door, we were immediately greeted by two-cheek kisses and warm hugs. The entryway smelled of dampness and sweet perfume. She introduced me to her family, all women: her mother, two aunts, and grandmother. They bombarded me with questions and compliments, “¡Que linda!” “¿Cuántos años tienes?” “¡Me gusta mucho tu pelo!” “How do you say your name?”

“Cheza RAH ee, oh que bonita.” I smiled; I knew their names probably sounded strange coming out of my mouth as well.

From there, they lead me to the kitchen. The intricate tile work on the floor created a chipping, worn masterpiece of yellows, oranges, and reds. The grandmother placed the platanos in boiling water, and Carmen handed me a cup of instant coffee and a pineapple pastry. The sweet, steamy liquid warmed my body all the way down. I sipped the coffee and answered questions, describing my family and home until the platanos were ready. Carmen explained how to flatten the pulp in order for the frijoles to fit inside; she folded it over and set the frijole-platano turnover on the yellow serving plate by the stove to be fried later. “Tu turno.”

“Me?” I’d certainly mess it up, but I could tell she wanted me to learn.

I scooped a plop of the yellow mush in my left hand and flattened it. Carmen plopped a spoonful of the cinnamon-sugar beans on top, and I slowly folded it over. As I sealed the edges, the insides oozed out the other side. Carmen giggled. “Oh no, mi amor.” She positioned my hands so that they correctly cupped the warm platano pulp and guided them gently over. “Perfecto.” She smiled. I proceeded to finish one on my own. It looked a bit sad and lumpy, but the women all laughed and clapped in acceptance. “¡Exitó! ¡Exitó!”

“Yes,” I thought to myself, “definitely a success.”

“Cheers,” we all raised our glasses, “to vino y queso, y buenós amigos!” After sucking down the last bit of wine in our glasses, we ordered another pitcher. We had become regulars; it was our spot. The environment was dark, yet inviting. The rock walls were lined with wine bottles of every kind. The only light came from the dim purple grape fixture beside our table and a small lamp the bartenders used to play cards. As I sat on my wooden bar stool listening to stories of twenty-first birthday binges and underage run-ins with cops, I poured myself another glass and popped a square of potent yellow cheese in my mouth. That glass slowly revealed all of my well-kept drinking stories. Embarrassing details spewed out of my mouth as I paraded around the room demonstrating my every move. I’d never told these stories to anyone before.
The guys laughed, and I laughed, uncontrollably at times, unable to catch my breath. I found myself leaning on Eric, tired from all the gut-burning laughter.

“Hey Ben, it’s your turn, tell us something from your young and stupid days. We know you’ve got good stories. Just let ‘em out. Just let the wine talk for ya."

“I’ve got nothin’. Whenever I’m drinking, can’t remember a thing. ‘Cept for my bible verses.”

“What?”

“Yeah, don’t think I’ll ever forget ‘em. Every time I get to drinking, I always remember my bible verses. Wanna hear?”

“I guess.”

“Sure.”

“Why not?”

“‘Kay, here’s one from John. John 15:15. Henceforth…” he cleared his throat and quickly delivered the rest. “Henceforth, I call you not servants; for the servant knoweth not what the Lord doeth; but I have called you friends; for all things…”

As I sat there listening to Ben recite from John, Eric turned to me and whispered, “Hey.”

“Hey what?”

“I’ve been thinking, bout when we go back home”

“Yeah?”

“Well, I was just thinking, things are going to be different aren’t they?”

I wasn’t exactly sure what he meant, or what made him ask that question, but just then I realized how much I had actually changed.

We’d packed our bags and taken pictures with our host families, and now we were all gathered at the Spanish school, watching the driver load the van. I hauled my wheel-less, gigantic, red suitcase over to the curb where Kelly was sitting.

“So, what’s the first thing you’re going to do when you get home?” she asked.

“I’m gonna have my mom cook me some barbequed ribs with baked potatoes and green bean casserole, mmm… I can’t wait!”

“I’m getting sushi the minute I get off the plane.” Michelle sat resting on the other side of me, her tired head landed on my shoulder. As we sat there salivating over American food, the driver came around the van, “¿Listos?”

I stood up, taking in everything one last time. The school, with its chipping white paint and massive orange trumpet vine growing up the side; the cheery, toothless women selling her hand-woven fabric and purses by the doorway; the internet café where we found comfort in the English speaking owner who helped us navigate through Spanish hotmail and a foreign keyboard; the clothing store that Carmen and I frequented when we tired of verb conjugations and vocabulary words; my classmates, my friends, all piling into the van, chatting eagerly, excited to see their families, eat American food, and sleep in their own beds. I noticed Kristina’s “little brother” crying behind a bush, wishing she didn’t have to leave as I grabbed my purse and ducked my head to climb in.

The afternoon sun beaming through the open window warmed my face as I plopped down next to Kelly. I looked out and saw the clouds breaking over the lush green mountains and immense volcanoes in the distance when the driver turned on the radio. Everyone cheered as we recognized Dónde Está Corazón from every store, restaurant, and household since we’d arrived. I remembered waking up several mornings to Celeste cranking up the volume when Enrique’s voice came on. Everyone began to bounce to the rhythm and sing along as we pulled away from the school. As I began to sing, I was suddenly overcome with emotion, a mix of joy and anxiety, excitement and apprehension. The thought of it all ending—the waking up to a skyline of mountains and roosters crowing, the staying after class to talk to Carmen about her boyfriend, the early mornings with instant coffee and the long nights with wine and cheese, everyone singing and laughing together—it all forced me to realize what I’d truly gained and what I was leaving behind. And there in that hot, vinyl seat, listening to Latin music, I began to cry.
I can’t have done this again! she thought. I waited practically my whole life to come here. Paris—the city of love, possible romantic adventures around every corner—and I’m lost. Again! I can’t even read a map! She shifted her weight and leaned against the railing. At least no one will be looking for me, she sighed, defeated.

As she stood taking in the beautiful tree-lined river with its ferries and quaint cafés, she began to think about the past year. It felt like yesterday, the scene seared in her brain. She had come home from a late shift at McDonald’s and told her parents she was moving to Germany. Her dad was excited and her mom was in denial. She hoped it would never happen, but she knew her daughter too well to think she wouldn’t follow through with her plan. Seven months later, before turning the corner that would lead her to her plane and a new life (at least for a year), Lizzy glanced down the escalator’s tunnel to see her mother and younger sisters crying. Her dad, with a giant smile plastered on his face, waved vigorously and repeatedly commanded her to have fun. She was clueless and naïve; she had no idea how different her life would be. Pigeons began to dance around her feet as Lizzy slowly crept out of her daydream. “Maybe if I face this café and turn the map this way...” she murmured to herself as she mindlessly gave the map yet another turn.

Earlier that year, while on vacation in the Czech Republic, her host mom, Joy, had attempted to teach her to read a map. They were on their way to dinner and Lizzy became distracted by chanting in the streets. She could hear the music and bizarre words but didn’t know it was a Hare Krishna parade until the orange robes came into view. By the time the processional had passed, Joy and her host brother were
gone. She wandered for a bit and then Toby finally found her.
It was after this incident that Joy decided a crash course in
map reading would be appropriate. She handed Lizzy a map
and told her “to lead on... For three days Lizzy led them in the
wrong direction. At one point they even ended up in a dark
alley surrounded by pot-smoking bohemians. By the end of the
trip everyone was frustrated.
Lizzy was still deep in thought, struggling to remember her
host mom’s advice on map reading, when her map suddenly
vanished. She stared, open-mouthed, at the cocoa eyes
watching her. He was about a foot taller than her with chestnut
colored skin and brown hair bordering on black. What in
the world? He took my map! She thought indignantly. She
attempted to speak, but words failed her and her instincts
weren’t telling her what to feel.
He uttered something in a language she assumed was
French. She responded with: “Tut mir leid aber ich spreche kein
Französisch. Können Sie Deutsch?”
Maybe I’ll get lucky. He has to speak something other than
French, she thought and watched him nervously.
He frowned at the German words but tried again. Lizzy
could tell he was greeting her, perhaps asking her if she was
lost, but she still couldn’t understand his gibberish. He repeated
his words, frowned, laid his hand on his chest and said “Italia.”
Finally! She thought, at least one word I can understand.
In a last hope he might know a little English she smiled at him
and proceeded with, “I’m sorry. I don’t speak Italian either.”
She saw the frustration building on his face, his brows almost
touching, mouth turned down, and eyes narrowed. She bit her
lower lip and stared at her dirty Nikes. She screamed inside.
How is it possible we speak four languages between the two of
us and none are in common! She turned toward him, tucking a
stray piece of red hair behind her ear and smiled.
“I’m from the United States,” she said, laying her hand on her
chest. “Lizzy.”
“Lizzy?” His head tilted to the side.
She laughed, “Elizabeth... Lizzy. ¿Cl?’”
She began twirling a piece of copper hair around her index
finger and stared at a dark smudge on her sneaker.
“¡Ah Cl! (Elizabeth)” he exclaimed. “Fernando.” He pointed at
his chest and smiled, ducking down a little to look into her face.
She flushed but forced her jade eyes to match his.
“Fair-nando?” She tried the foreign name, not getting it to
sound quite like he did. He nodded his head approvingly but
said nothing more.
Why did this happen? She began fidgeting with the Black
Hills gold ring on her finger. I live eighteen years of an invisible
existence in America only to come to Europe and have men drooling all over me. She played with the zipper on her
grey Gap hoodie. Europe was everything she had hoped. It
was exciting, exotic, and entertaining—everything she had
planned on it being. What she hadn’t planned on was the
attention. She was an outcast in middle school and invisible in
high school. She never understood why. She knew she
wasn’t Audrey Hepburn, but she wasn’t completely
unfortunate-looking either. She assumed it was because
she was smart and did well at most things she tried. No one
understood; she wasn’t trying to be a suck up or show off. She
needed the attention only good grades and high sports scores
could give her, that’s why she tried so hard. But Europe was
der different. She never had to earn attention here, it was handed
to her. She thought of others’ explanations. They don’t know
me—isn’t that how my host mom explained it? Gotta take a
chance before she’s gone?
She felt a hand on her arm, nudging her back to reality. She
looked up, her freckled forehead furrowing in confusion. He
was pointing at the Eiffel Tower, motioning for them to walk
in its direction. She noted his striking appearance, standing
there smiling, in a black turtleneck and dark jeans. Dimples
appeared when he smiled.
“No. I’m broke.” She stated flatly then made the universal
gesture for money and shrugged.
He excitedly exclaimed something in French and grabbed
her arm. He wanted to pull her to him, to the tower, but she
pulled away.
“Oh no! That’s okay. I’d rather not.” Her eyes had grown large.
She shrank back against the railing like a scared animal.
He smiled slyly, not willing to give up on his newest endeavor.
He turned the map so she could see it and placed his finger on
the Louvre. He shrugged and raised his eyebrows.
It’s at least in a public place, she thought to herself. It would
be fun to get to follow him around. Look at him, Lizzy! He’s
perfect! She shook her head slowly.
“Um no...that’s okay;” she whispered, staring at his chest.
No one will ever believe the way men reacted to me
here, she thought. Lizzy vividly remembered the first time she realized that she was no longer invisible. She was in Munich, standing on a platform waiting for her train. She knew a man kept moving toward her; the platform wasn’t crowded but she thought nothing of his presence and continued to stare into space.

“Hi. How are you?” He had begun. She smiled and said fine. The conversation continued with small talk only to be interjected with, “Would you like to come with me,home I mean. I’d like to get to know you.” She was positive she had misunderstood despite the fact he was speaking in English. She managed to escape from his persistent invitations by jumping into a train car right as the doors were closing, leaving him frowning on the platform. She rushed in her house and retold the story to her host mom only to be laughed at and told, “Welcome to Europe!” After that first incident, scary as it was, it became all too easy and fun to attract the opposite sex. She, of course, was a tease. It never went beyond the smiles and advances—until now.

Fernando was nudging her, analyzing her profile. It took her a minute to realize what he was doing. “Oh, no thank you. I don’t smoke,” she shook her head and blushed a deeper shade of red. His eyes moved over her body. He smiled, amused, and offered again. She shook her head and looked away. I wish I smoked... she lamented silently.

He asked her another question, rubbed his black sweater against his stomach, and pointed at a café about ten feet from the bridge. I am hungry... what would it hurt? He’s at least not lost, Lizzy thought. Fernando voiced his question again, extended his arm toward the café, and nodded expectantly. She smiled coyly, mimicked his gesture and stepped away from the railing. For once in her life she wasn’t worried, not even about how they would carry on a conversation. He’s cute, I’m single, and in a few weeks I’ll be invisible again, she thought. Now’s the time to get all the attention I can.

She grinned at her justification and asked her escort for a cigarette. She tried to recall how her brother had taught her to inhale so she wouldn’t cough. She inhaled slowly, held it long enough to feel the nicotine’s effect, and then cleared her lungs in one long exhale. It felt natural, even if it had been three years ago that she had smoked her first and last cigarette. She looked toward the restaurant and allowed him to lead her. She wanted to be his: she had to become whatever it was he wanted.

Lizzy’s eyes had to adjust to the smoky, dimly lit café. A waitress greeted them and, after examining Fernando, seated them at a window. Lizzy looked out the window and continued to puff on her cigarette, imagining scenes from old movies. She felt like Audrey today. She inhaled deeply and glanced at Fernando. What am I doing? While the waitress flirted with her “date,” Lizzy continued to stare out the window. A gorgeous brunette wearing high-heel, knee-high boots stroked by on a man’s arm. The woman’s long brown coat swung around her thin, bare legs as she giggled and hurried along with her companion. The man, over a foot taller than his companion, pushed his gray hat down over his long, dark waves. He grinned and whispered something in her ear before leaning in and kissing the petite nymph he was escorting. If only, Lizzy thought and watched them scurry out of view.

Their order arrived; Lizzy tore a piece of baguette from the loaf and began spreading Brie over it. She glanced up and saw Fernando smiling at her, the candle light playing shadows across his face. He looked even more attractive bathed in the soft glow. His eyes seemed to pierce the thick air between them as he asked what she thought of the food. She couldn’t explain how she knew what he was asking. Maybe it was in his caressing tone, his caring eyes. The waitress set a bottle of wine between them and disappeared.

They shared the bottle of wine, then another, while they munched on their hors d’oeuvres. You can always count on good cheese and bread, Lizzy thought and took another drink of wine. She gazed at Fernando, finally allowing her eyes to trail over his frame. Her cheeks grew warm as she admitted his attractiveness. He caught her eyes lingering on his chest and smiled. Her heart raced, she fumbled with the knife and then dropped her bread on her lap. He whispered something in her ear, which she couldn’t understand, then took her hand and kissed it. He exuded confidence.

Two more pop songs played in the background then a new, more romantic track began. Lizzy listened as a song closely resembling her Amélie soundtrack wafted through the speakers. Content to merely exist in the moment, neither spoke, neither cared what was happening. She occasionally felt Fernando’s foot play along her shin, but she pretended not to notice. Is this what I want? Lizzy was still lost in Paris, but at least now she was with someone else. Her feelings shifted; panic pricked her spine, but she dismissed it. I want this. I need
this, reverberated through her foggy mind. She finished her fifth glass of wine and grinned as every muscle in her body relaxed further. She knew she had no ability to make good judgments at this point and that’s exactly what she wanted.

The night’s conversation blurred into a series of glances, gestures, and smiles. Lizzy didn’t know how her legs were supporting her as she swaggered down the sidewalk. On occasion she lost her footing, but Fernando was always there to catch her. At some point they left the well-lit quay and wandered down a dimly lit side street. The sign said Rue Pelee; Lizzy tried to pronounce the name only to explode with laughter. Fernando watched her for a moment then wrapped an arm around her waist and kissed her. She froze. He released her body slowly and then continued down the street. Lizzy took a moment to catch her breath and then hurried after him.

They stopped in front of a large green door. Lizzy leaned against the brick wall and watched Fernando fumble with his keys. They fell to the concrete with a dull clunk and Lizzy burst into laughter as Fernando swayed, grabbed the railing to catch his balance, and finally managed to bend down and scoop his keys up quickly. As he jigged the key into the lock, Lizzy’s heart began to race. She knew her actions were dangerous, but she couldn’t stop herself. She’d been alone for so long, always feeling lost, but now Fernando was here, her salvation even if only for a brief while. She watched him walk into the dark apartment. She heard a click, then the apartment was illuminated by a lamp. Fernando turned toward Lizzy. She stood hesitantly on the threshold of his apartment, her body only halfway inside the door. His brow furrowed, he raised his shoulders and turned his hands palm-sides up. Lizzy glanced over the apartment, taking in the small, Formica kitchen table, the old couch with a red blanket thrown over it, and to the left a door—undoubtedly his bedroom from the partial desk that was in view. Lizzy glanced up the street from where they had come and then stepped into the apartment, shaking. Fernando met her where she was. He slowly pressed her against the wall, mouths touching, bodies intertwining. She melted into him, never noting that his right arm released her long enough to push the door gently, quietly, shut.
Crying, Heaven, Glamorous

Chris Williams

Drip drop
The sky opens up
Rain drops take a suicidal leap
Off of their clouds to splatter down on tin roofs
A pitter patter sound that fills our hearts with comfort
The sky is crying, bawling, sobbing
For all of the people that inhabit the ground below
They are all too naïve
To really see
What is right in front of me
Show me the happiness
Dark and dreary clouds in the night
Crash bang a gunshot of thunder rumbles around the world
Rattling the ribcages of the hopeless
The flash photography of lightning in the sky
Paints a picture that says a thousand words of awe
As everybody stops talking and sees the world for what it is
Bright lights
Open eyes
Shrunken pupils
And now we can see for that split-second
We can all see the truth
Heaven, nirvana, the afterlife that we are currently living
It is there, here
I can see it
Bright as day
Clear as crystal
The world that was cold and gray is now shining bright
Glorious, glamorous, and gorgeous
Then it is gone
But now we know it is there

Now we want to find this beautiful place
And the clouds still cry for us
They can see this wonderland paradise from up above
They see all and we are blind
And so they weep
Rain, rain go away
Come again another day
Show me life and let me listen
In your tears my hopes glisten

https://openprairie.sdstate.edu/oakwood/vol3/iss3/1
Iraq

Kyle Johnson

The air conditioners in the tents keep the stifling heat of the night from cooking everyone, but the days are worse. Nature turns the thermostat on high; sweat stings the eyes as it showers the body. Sand races with the wind, pelting, sticking to the paste that was once my skin. I know the only place worse is not of this earth, and yet this is home, at least for now.

With the 0630 alarms going off, morning has come just like the 354 days before it, with me waking, hoping, and wishing I was home. The iron fist of reality hits, and all my happy thoughts fade with the dreams of the night before. I pull out my most professional suit: a beautiful digital pattern with matching hat and complementary boots.

I exit the shanty of a tent I call home and walk across the stone floor of Sania, population four hundred and some. I get to the trucks where all fifteen of my brothers are reluctantly getting ready. I jump in my turret, throw my guns up, make sure I have enough ammo for the day, and get the rest of my gear ready for the mission.

The mission is simple, one I can do in my sleep, taking the colonel up to the local sheik’s house for a meet and greet. My first stop is one I always make before leaving the wire, the perfect place to relieve stress, the test-fire pit. The humvee sways back and forth; the empty shells ring like tiny bells as they hit the top of the truck. The machine gun makes the unforgettable sound ggggow ggggow as it spits stingers of death flying towards a patient mound of dirt. The sheik’s house is just up the road. It’s become a second home to me. Riding down the driveway, I see the same sets of clothes I always see running towards me, only each time there’s a different kid inside them.

The mission goes the same as it always does. I sit there bored, staring through my sights down the barrel of my gun at the same dreary picture. My mind floods with images of home and old memories. Finally, the sun’s in the west, and it’s time to go home to a tent made of nothing but tarps and sticks that, by the end of a mission, looks and feels like a six-million-dollar house.

My nights usually include little to no sleep, but for once I am going to go to bed early. I crawl into my rack; I’m almost to anywhere else but here when a faint whistle sends a shirl down my body. My eyes almost pop from my head as I listen, as it gets louder and stronger. “Krunk!” One word rises above the rest, “INCOMING!” A thundering stampede heads for the bunker as a whirlwind of bodies almost sends the door soaring into the tent across the way. With every incoming whistle, my heart pumps harder and faster, trying to shatter the bars and escape the prison in which it’s held. Steel rain pours down from the heavens, hidden by a blanket of darkness; I cringe with every approaching round, not knowing where, who, or what it may hit. The squawk of the radio breaks the deafening sound of death; alive with anger the radio yells at us, “Head to the trucks.” The explosions stop as the wings of Hermies on my boots carry me to our waiting chariots. A cry pierces the night air: “Medic.” The sound tortures my ears with every scream. It starts to rain again. This time I have no where to run; I’m stuck on the top of the vehicle with a machine gun in my hands. A painful ringing beats my eardrums; frozen with shock I watch debris sail towards me. I drop the gun as I leap off the top, running for the bunker before my legs hit the ground. Safe in my concrete fortress, I ask my driver, “Are you okay?” With his bottom lip quivering and with a slight tremble in his voice, he replies, “I think so.”

I sit there thanking God I’m still alive, hoping the end to this tragic nightmare has finally come, at least for tonight. I wait tentatively for the sweet sound of the “All clear” to echo over the base, letting me return to what’s left of my early night. As I sit wanting to leave this stifling cave which was once my protective sanctuary, I begin to remember all the simple things I used to take for granted and all the decisions I have made in my life. Wondering if they were the right ones, I start to reflect on those choices I’ve made. Good or bad, they have made me who I am today.
Little Addictions

Kathleen Grode

Obsession's verse grows longer but the chorus stays the same: My faceless roulette-wheel lover, diamond studs and pinstriped suit; O, move your finger, pull the trigger, murder my shame.

He plays poker with our lives, with my diamond ring, his name. Hides aces and a pistol to deal spades to men he can't outshoot. Obsession's verse grows longer, but the chorus stays the same.

He just assumed I'd love him; I assumed he felt the same: He dealt his Queen a Joker, and love becomes a crap shoot. Now move your finger, pull the trigger, murder my shame.

Our lives keep repeating; we play game after game: I say I'll leave him, leave him; words are never absolute. Obsession's verse drags longer, but the chorus stays the same.

I can't survive smoky dens, hotel rooms, while he aims, blames: Whatever might come after can't be worse than these pursuits Just move your finger, pull the trigger, murder my shame.

Forever is a moment in a bullet and a game —before and after funnel to the moment when he shoots— Life's verses speed on faster to the chorus death detains: He moves his finger on the trigger until only shame remains.
Rage Defined

Missy Chicoine

What defines Rage indeed?

A tea kettle whistling in a high pitched scream?
A piercing stare from cold, discontented eyes that fail to dream?
The sound of deafening thunder cracking upward in the sky?
A hateful strangers unwanted touch in an innocent, sensitive thigh?
An ugly flame of fire exploding as a feverish burst of air?
The crashing wave that destroys with no concern, lack of care?
An overfilled balloon that erupts in an angry dare?
The strangler of two vengeful hands on warm innocent air?
The evil hum of bees swarming around an unsuspecting soul?
The stench of decayed, murdered bodies thrown in a six foot hole?

What defines Rage indeed?
Could it possibly be Humanity?

I got id

Dan Nguyen

We were paper warriors chained by a circle of fans—our friends spit like savages, kicking sand to lend support, hoping to be entertained.

You put your head down like prayer and charged shoulder first into my gut. The crowd exploded as I raised my fists to cut you down like contrails in the air.

The sound of teeth scraping concrete, flies hungry overhead. The still crowd flew into frenzy as I dug the grill of my shoe into the zeros of your eyes. The cries from our parents couldn't stop me from taking what was mine: the sound of branches breaking.
I stood in the living room watching the news. People looting, fighting and destroying each other flooded the T.V. screen. The newscaster, with his faux serious tone, narrated the happenings:

"Once again, you’re looking at downtown Omaha. This is within a week of the impending asteroid making contact within the city limits."

Omaha. Why Omaha? In the movies wasn’t it always a decadent town like Los Angeles? Maybe Omaha is just as decadent, only smaller. I furrowed my brow at the tagline the media had created for this epic event: "War on Chaos." It was less than a month ago when the news was broadcasted via the Emergency Broadcast System. The newsrooms must have gotten as excited as an acne-plagued fifteen-year-old at junior prom. Since then, it’s been non-stop news. SpongeBob SquarePants, music videos, and soap operas have all been replaced with newscasters, satellite images, footage of Omaha, and scientists with computer animated charts. A story to end all stories! Humans are destined to go way of the dinosaurs.

I was in "Chuck's Island," a bar outside of Casper, Wyoming, when it was announced. I had bought a scotch on the rocks and picked some song on the jukebox when about halfway through the barkeep shut it off.

“What the hell, man?” I stopped tapping my foot and looked over my shoulder. The five people in the bar swarmed around the T.V. as the bartender turned up the volume. A satellite image of an asteroid with a long blue and white tail was shown with that dopey newscaster voice explaining the situation.

"...Scientists are predicting that the asteroid will make its impact in four weeks, making contact in Omaha, Nebraska.
color; I didn't pick it. I don't even know how to describe it. Aside from holding a shit-ton of Cheetos and Fritos, it had kind of this weird tannish/brownish color. The best part is its shag carpet. Shag carpet...some things never go out of style.

I turned on the television in front of me, and turned it to one of the four channels I got. The T.V. was an old one that I've had since I was a kid. My parents were going to get rid of it when they bought a new one, so I brought it to my place. It sat on a couple of milk crates that I stole from my old job at a dairy. I made my way past the T.V. and went to the bedroom I could here the news as I walked around my place. Interviews from the poor folks in Omaha came out like sap from the television. People who had no way to leave town, poor and out of luck, sobbed fat tears, hiding their faces behind their worn hands and fearing the impact that they were forced to watch first hand.

I paced the length of my trailer, my kitchen to my bedroom. I really didn't know what to do with myself. The initial instinct was to pack. Pack for where? And what to pack? Surely, big possessions were out of the question. I might be able to bring a few records with me, but the whole vinyl collection? I had photo albums that had to come. Shirts, pants, underwear, socks. Maybe books? How long will take things to get back to normal? Will we need stuff to hunt and fish? Plant things? Should I bring a shovel? Will growing things even be possible? I looked through the cupboards in my kitchen and started placing cans and any other food I could find on my olive green stove top. The news had footage of the chaos that was already spreading out across the cities. I watched the riots on T.V. All trying to get a huge loot. All trying to make a quick getaway for the coast.

What would one do if they only had a month to live? Sky dive? Travel? Spend time with loved ones? Nah, people kicked traditional answers to the side. Instead, they choose fighting over and stealing useless appliances. Ones that, if they got the chance to use, will be of no service in helping their situation. It made me sick. They moved in groups; one guy would be followed by a large group of others, he would find away to entirely break out the window fronts of a store, and then it was every man for himself. Usually the guy who initially broke out the store front would be trampled underfoot. T.V.s, stereos, computers, DVD players, ipods, these were the necessities. What was more bizarre is they also showed people at grocery
stores, and most were actually paying for their food, people pushing two or three carts just filled with cans.

I peeked out my window. A few of my neighbors had already tried to make it out of town. I watched as a single mother of two held tightly to her kids hands and ushered them to her station wagon. She didn’t bring anything; where she was heading? Someone must have everything or nothing already figured out for her. Another one of my neighbors, Lily, was calmly walking back to her place with her mail in one hand and leafing through it with another. Her curly red hair kept blowing and getting in her green eyes. I had met her once or twice before, once while she was brushing off her car. I was getting off from my overnight job at the plant she was just about to go to her job. She was brushing the snow off her small pickup and she had to stand up on her toes to get the windshield. She saw me across the street and said “Enough snow for ya?” I smiled and kept walking, I could feel her eyes on me. I would turn back and her awkward smile would return, and her struggle with the snow got worse. She was only saved by my act of kindness when I brushed off her car for her.

Later that week, the snow had been too thick and most of the roads were closed. She knocked on the screen door and had made lasagna.

“Hey Lance, I made some food and I figured I owed you for helping me clean off my car.”

I invited her in and we had dinner that night. “It’s always more fun to be snowed in with somebody than alone, don’t you think?” she asked.

Usually on a night like that, I wouldn’t be able to make to the bar and would have stayed home and drank myself into a stupor.

I had fallen asleep early and had that dream again when she woke me up. I have this dream, it’s not always exactly the same. I’m at this amusement park that’s in the middle of nowhere. It’s just in the middle of this big field. Of course, the big feature is the rollercoaster and I’m always with this nameless face. The face changes from time to time, but it’s always a lady and we are suppose to be together. We go on the rollercoaster, and the minute I turn my back to see where my date is at, everyone is gone. Not just her, but everyone that was at the park. I race around looking for someone, anyone, but can never find a single person. The park starts to look rattier and older, and the weather gets cold. The dream was stopped this time by someone knocking on my door.

I rubbed the sleep out of my eyes and walked down the hall. Lily stood at the door.

“Hey, Lance,” Her eyes were puffy. “I saw your light on and was wondering if you wanted to watch Deep Impact?”

I smiled and invited her in. She held up the DVD in her hand, and I looked at her with an odd smile, wondering if was serious. She pushed it towards me and I took it from her. She moved in and took off her jacket.

“I kind of want to know what it’s gonna be like and all. Isn’t this the one with Ben Affleck?”

I turned back and smiled, “That’s Armageddon.”

“You nerd, Lance! Do you like that movie? I bet you do. Where’s the movie poster? You gotta have it somewhere.”

She looked down the halls with mock fascination. “Oh, come on! Everyone saw that movie! It was the thing to see that summer!” I defended my tastes in film adamantly.

Lily made a raspberry noise. “Give me Deep Impact any day.”

“Do you want a drink?” I offered.

She looked up at me with her sparkling green eyes, which had formed crow’s feet way too early, and smiled, “Of course.”

I went into the kitchen and started to fill glasses with ice and scotch. I called out to her. “What’s your plans? Flee the country? Run to California?”

I heard her get up and walk around the living room, surveying her surroundings.

“I tried to book a flight to Spain. But flights are already booked. I have some family that lives in the yellow zone. It’s really futile to even try to leave for a couple days. The cars are already stalled on the interstate,” she said and hummed a song to herself.

“Why Spain?” My curiosity came out as I handed her a glass.

“Why Spain?” My curiosity came out as I handed her a glass.

“I don’t know. I always wanted to go there.” She took a sip of her drink. “Jesus, Lance. What is this?” She gave me a sly smile, “Are you tryin’ to get me drunk?”

“Do you want something else?” I asked nervously.

“No, this is fine.” She took another baby sip. “What about you, what are you doing?”

“I don’t really know yet. I kind of have no where to go. I was thinking of going to California,” I was in the midst of my plans and she stopped me.

“No where to go? What about family?”

“My parents were all that I ever had and they’re gone,” I told
her. They had passed away coming back from a New Year’s Party five years ago. They never had much to leave me, and I didn’t have much either.

“I was going to try to see my family too, but they are way too far away, on the east coast. My car won’t make it and by the time one them gets here to pick me up, we may find ourselves in the red zone.”

She played with a piece of her hair. “You’re going to California?”

“That was my plan.” I took a long swallow of my drink.

“Well, I don’t have anywhere to go. Would you mind me coming along?” She tilted her head to the side and gazed at me.

We knew we wouldn’t even begin to really move until a couple weeks had past. People were in a rush to get out of town. Lily had to talk me out of leaving right away.

“We won’t be able to travel faster than a snail’s pace unless we wait,” she explained. “Let’s just wait a little bit, before we leave.”

So we decided on a week before the rock hit, which gave us ample time to prepare for moving day.

Although the labels weren’t there, it felt as if we were dating. Most of the time was spent at my place watching news coverage. Each day it was the same thing. We spent a lot of time watching movies or talking. We found board games I rarely played to pass the time. Our jobs had kind of let both of us go since everyone’s concerns were elsewhere. The town was desolate. We got closer to our deadline and every place was boarded up. Main Street was abandoned. Cars left and forgotten, trash overturned, and even in our small town, building store fronts were knocked out and boarded up. The boards were ripped out and only to be boarded up again. Chuck’s Island was one of the few places a guy and a gal could still get a drink.

Lily and I walked downtown a couple days before we left. Walking side by side but across the street from each other, we surveyed the street, looking for anything that might be of use to us for our trip. The damage between us was quite large, and there was nothing of helpful there. Mostly things people had lost in their loot and wasn’t valuable enough to go back for. Cans of beer that had popped open were all over the street, magazines, bullets; someone had broken into the novelty shop and the sidewalk was littered with Chinese finger traps, whoopee cushions, and x-ray specs. I wonder what he was planning for.

The night before we left we discussed our moves. The plan was to leave mid-morning. We would drive through Wyoming and stop for lunch somewhere in Colorado for food. We would then snake our way through the dry climate of New Mexico and Arizona and make our way to Southern California. We lay on my bed that night, planning.

“Where will we stay?” She cocked her head to the side, she was wearing one of my button-up flannel shirts and not much more else.

“Wherever, the plan is just to get out of harm’s way.”

I propped myself up on the head board, I lit a cigarette and handed it to her to share with me. She took it in between her fingers.

“Are you sure it will be okay? Shouldn’t we at least try to find a hotel room or something?” She put her hands on my bare leg. I sat in my boxers, rubbing my hairy belly.

“I can’t imagine we can get a room, Lily. We just need to get out of the orange zone for now.”

“First thing when we come to a town is find a place to sleep. First town we see in California,” I reassured her. She always had to prod me with questions. She could never just take my word for it. At one point I thought, it was kind of cute, but now it was just more annoying than anything.

I had the dream again that night. Lily was the nameless face that night. It looked like her, but I kept calling her something else. We rode the rollercoaster and then she was gone. I would find her at several places, though. Once at the game where you pop the balloons with darts, and another time getting a funnel cake from a giant stuffed bear. But almost as quickly as she was found, she would giggle and disappear. I was awakened by Lily grabbing my arm.

We left on a Saturday, three days before the predicted impact. That’s when the roads were finally back to normal. We had been driving for a couple hours when we stopped at a truck stop to eat. The place had been deserted. There were no windows barricaded, and the door had already been broken through. We discovered on the inside that the cashier’s till had been taken, the whole thing, not just the money inside. We were in a hurry, so we quickly turned on the burners and made ourselves a small meal.

We sat in the empty diner, eating our meager dinner of toast...
and an egg, and black coffee.

"I wonder who owns this place," Lily surveyed the surroundings.

"Some guy named Mack," I pointed to the menu, which clearly showed "Mack's Grub." I took a drink of my coffee and could feel it spill down my chin.

"Lance, you're like an animal, you know that?" She grimaced as I quickly ate, my meal almost completely gone, and hers was still half on her plate.

"What? I'm hungry," I defended my lack of manners, paying very little attention to her sickly stare, with toast crumbs and egg hanging off my face.

Lily sighed and looked out the window. She pointed to the sky.

"Boy, you can really see it now!" She marveled at the white dot in the sky. I sat back in the booth and looked up.

"Yeah. It's less than three days now." I peeked out the window and quickly drank more coffee. Lily reached across the table and pushed her fingers in between mine.

"Do you know where we are going?" She squeezed my hand.

"The Yellow Zone." I pulled my hand away from her warm grasp.

"The Yellow Zone? Where in the Yellow Zone?" She frowned and moved her still half-full plate to the side.

"We've already talked about this a million times. Come on, this place is deserted. Free gas. Maybe they have beer." I stood up and started to walk away.

"Shouldn't we leave some money? What if someone comes back?" Lily stood up and chased after me.

"Deserted, Lily. Who gives a shit?" I stepped out of the small diner into the quick prairie wind and called back to her.

"They'll all be dead soon anyways."

I surveyed the gravel parking lot and saw a few cars still standing. Gas pumps were most certainly empty. Siphoning gas from parked cars was a necessity, since transporting gas became damn near impossible, I moved the car next to one of those Lincoln Continentals that you always see old people driving. I went into the shop, looking for a piece of hose. Lily stayed in the car, sulking; she must be upset about something. She always seemed upset the last week. I think we had just spent too much time together, and now I thought we were going to be stuck with each other for awhile. I went inside the gas station and couldn't see anyone. The T.V. was on, but it was just fuzz, and I couldn't see a sign of anyone. I looked around the back room and in between the shelves. I stopped and looked at the selection of beer, and grabbed the first thing that came to my eyes. I didn't wait a second; I quickly pulled the tab and guzzled down half the beer. I turned around and saw a display of motor oil with funnels and pieces of clear plastic hose. I grabbed the hose.

"Hello?" I called out. My voice was met with the sound of T.V. static. "Hello? Anyone here, we just need some snacks...some beer, and gas," I had picked up a basket and started loading up.

Beej jerky, Doritos, pork rinds, candy... What would Lily want? Doesn't she like chocolate? Girls love chocolate. I stopped in front of the candy bars. Snickers...she would love a Snickers bar. I grabbed the entire box and dumped it into my basket. I also found a greeting card with a puppy on it, and there were some petunias in a pot left by who ever owned this place. I grabbed the flower pot and strolled back out to the car.

Smiling, I saw Lily give me a weird look. A smile appeared on her face as I got closer. I opened her door and handed her the gifts.

Taking the piece of clear hose, I went to the opening of the gas tank on the Lincoln. I shoved the hose down the portal and started to suck. The fumes hit me strongly, and made me dizzy. I took a breathe of fresh air, and tried again. I could hear the gas making its way up the hose. I took another breath of fresh air, and sucked again. An oily sting shocked my mouth and quickly I put the other end in my car's gas hole. I spit and went to the basket of goodies to get a beer to rinse out my mouth. I heard a gun cock.

"Just where the fuck do you think you're going with my flowers?"

I turned around and saw an older man with a rifle pointed at me. He had gray hair and was slightly bigger.

"You think you can just leave here with all that stuff and not pay?" He started to stagger towards me.

"Sure got lots of crap in here. You would think you would at least have grabbed some canned corn or fruit or somethin'. Since they won't be able to grow it after the space rock hits." I started to step away.

"Can I just go? Do you want money? Do you want your stuff back?" I started to step away.

"Money ain't no good. I see you got a girl. What's her name? She can stay."
He looked past my shoulder. He started to walk past me with his rifle pointed in the air, making cat calls and disgusting remarks. With an unopened beer can in my hand, I quickly hurled it at the back of his head. It didn’t knock him out, but he fell to his knees, his pants sagging down, that dumb straw hat falling off and caught by the wind, never to return. I tackled him, punched him hard, and wasn’t satisfied until his nose spurted blood out. The thick, red liquid stuck to my hands.

“What did you do that for?” He sniffled like a baby, “I wasn’t gonna do anything. Honest! The gun ain’t even loaded.”

I got up, rubbing my bloody sore hands. I picked up the rifle, and he was telling the truth, the gun was not loaded. I threw it to the side and got in the car.

“You ain’t gonna leave me here alone are ya?” I heard him call out. He lifted his upper body and looked at our car, “Hey! Take me with you!” He quickly lifted himself to his feet and sprinted after us till the edge of gravel parking lot.

I got in the car and started to pull away. Lily, not bothered by the event, looked through the basket.

“Why didn’t you get any real food? Snickers? ... I hate Snickers...” She picked through the bag of food.

“Christ, Lance! Even that old fat fool back there knew to get something better than all this crappy junk food!”

I took the basket out of her hands and placed it in the back. “If you don’t like it don’t eat it.”

She does what she always does: she got this pouty little lip on her face and looked off into space, on the verge of crying. I sighed.

“Look, Lily. I’m sorry. I wasn’t thinking at all when I got that stuff. I guess I was just thinking of snacks to eat while we are driving.”

I saw her nod, still pouting. “Okay,” she said quietly. I reached back into the basket and pulled out the card I got her.

“I got you a card while I was in there.”

Her small hands took it from my fingers and she surveyed it. “This is a get well card, Lance.”

Nothing ever goes as planned.

We parked the car in an open field at night. We were somewhere near Denver that night. We left a car window down with the radio on as we got a small sleeping area ready outside the vehicle.

“Government leaders are asking people to try and remain rational. Although looting has gone down, there is still a fear of resurgence after the asteroid strikes.”

Outside of Albuquerque is where one could finally start to see people again. We were on the outside of the Orange zone and were traveling the border of the Yellow zone somewhat. People were still far and few between, but occasionally you would see a small family or group of people standing along side of the road.

We actually stayed at a camping site in Flagstaff the night second night we were on the road. The camping site next to us has a married couple with a few kids. The mom was constantly trying to keep order amongst the kids; her blonde hair frazzled, pulling the kids into the camper, only having to chase after them again. Her brown eyes looked sad and exhausted, and her jeans and brown blouse had been worn out. Her husband was of little help, smoking cigarettes and rubbing his head through the thinning brown hair. He wore black slacks and a white t-shirt. He had a body that made him look like a walking coat hanger, every article of clothing was way too big for him.

At one point he came over and talked to me. Lily was off doing
her own thing; we hadn't really been talking a lot during the trip. He kind of paced up to me haphazardly.

"Do you got a cigarette?" The man was stressed and disheveled, definitely someone on the brink of losing it.

"God, the kids, ya know? Who would of thought. It's so damn hard. Damn hard. You hear about how hard it is beforehand, but its friggin' hard. So noisy and always moving around. Even at times like this, they can't behave. Gloria, my wife, I don't know how she does it."

The man introduced himself as Ed and he talked a lot.

"I never wanted kids this early, ya know? It was an accident. She was born Catholic and in order to keep peace in the family I married her. I loved her, but I didn't think it would alter my life so much."

He tightly gripped the little amount of brown hair on his head.

"I never got to travel. School took me forever. I had to cut down to less than part-time. I had to stop school. I wanted to tour Europe, see France, Italy, maybe England. Now I can't do any of it." He stared off into space. "I'm a victim of circumstance."

Lily came back through his meandering and pulled me back to our campsite. I didn't feel bad leaving him, as I couldn't get a word in anyways. She had gotten some wood and started the fire by herself.

"Lance, come and sit with me for a while. It's lonely."

We sat by the fire and looked at the stars. We only had another night of stars.

"There's only one day left until it hits," I remarked as we gazed up at the sky.

"Yeah," she replied.

"We should leave early tomorrow," I suggested

"Yeah, okay." She rested her head on my shoulder. "Let's get some sleep. Tomorrow is the big day."

We woke up early and started towards California. The last days were filled with chatter on the air waves about the possibilities that lay before us tomorrow. Lily had been picking through the basket of snacks all morning. There was nothing to talk about really. Lily and I had kind of said everything there was to say.

The radio blared, "We are just minutes away from the final contact with the asteroid. We have footage of Omaha right now, courtesy of the local stations surveying the area. The town is supposedly vacant. You may experience radio interference for quite sometime, but stay tuned to our station to listen to further details."

I pulled the car over to the side of the road and turned up the radio. Lily's hand tucked itself inside of mine, squeezing tightly.

"What are we going to do, Lance?"

"I don't know."

I think that's the story of my life. I don't know what my plan is. I could hear the radio still droning on and on.

"This is it, ladies and gentleman within minutes the asteroid should be dropping down on the city of Omaha. I came and sat with Lily and held her hand, she had this nervous look on her face, staring at the radio dial."

"Oh, This is it." The radio host paused, "This is definitely it. The asteroid can be seen moving into the atmosphere. It appears... Wait, wait."

Lily reached over and squeezed my hand tightly. There was a long pause on the air.

"What the hell? Speak up, man," I protested at the DJ. Lily shh-ed me.

"Ladies and gentlemen, this just in from the National Aeronautic and Space Administration. The asteroid WILL NOT be making contact. Seconds ago, the asteroid made what scientists call a 'bullet hole' where a projectile enters and leaves earth's atmosphere..."

I shut off the radio.

Lily picked up the basket of goodies we gotten at the gas station.

"Well at least that's over with."

I swung my legs out my car door and sat looking across the desert.

"Lance, how many Snickers bars did you need?"

I rested my head on the headrest of my seat and didn't answer.

"I hate Snickers. Yuck." Snickers were my favorite. I listened to the howl of desert wind, kicking up sand and pounding my face. A vulture sat on a Joshua tree, and took flight, diving and dipping in the open desert sky and flying off into the horizon, alone.
The Lonely Path

Evan Papousek

Sittin' in this room
In a prison called a city
A cowboy forced from home
Can't hear the whisper of the wind
Nor the cattle callin' or the horses runnin'
All I hear is the sound of people
The roarin' of cars, an screamin' tires
I miss the lonely trails
Chasin' cattle, hell I even miss the pain
They say stick it out
You'll make it through somehow
Yet every chance I get
I look west, and once again
I'm on a pony, on a lonely trail
With nothing but the sound, wind
Suddenly Surrounded

Bradley Iverson

A huge dark cloud lurks in the room,
It creeps up all around me.
Suddenly it pushes all the air from my chest
Like a thousand-pound anvil and I cannot breathe.
My legs feel heavy like lead pipes;
I tell myself to just move my feet one at a time.
And keep moving my feet,
One at a time.
As I walk into the room, so comfortable and known,
I recognize the familiar scribbles on a note.
My surroundings begin to melt away like hot caramel on ice cream,
And the writing blurs in a kaleidoscope of soft colors.
It feels like crud that forms on the shower head
After the water turns off and nothing remains but the dripping.
Emotions explode like a baseball bat shattering a windshield,
And my control crumbles into those little pieces of glass.
Death Comes to Battle

Amber Easton

Thick air, humid months steal breath, leaving only enough to inhale a stale cigarette.

Sand paper air whips what little skin bared: ears, face, hands.

Floating closer, he comes. Danger leaks from his mouth. His cloak hidden eyes, no remorse.

A spike of ice slaps the back—hair stands at attention, Lightning sparks, the sky cracks.

Crying out, dust falls from lips coughs of thunder.

Full battle rattle stained in burgundy brown ACU, barren ground of sandy tundra catches a soldier.

An Unkindness of Ravens

Dallas Sargent

to the woman perched in the coffee shop that september night when everything submerged in copper; whose black shoes echoed bullets off pictureless walls when she went to her corner table; whose dark eyes staring in the window reflected ravens perched on telephone wires, not staring back; whose hours passed in silence except the sound of her watch recoiling around her wrist, sending the time hands southward:

this poem is for you.
Military Wife, 1962
Allison Crisler

She stood in the kitchen, baby on her hip. The girls played outside the little house on the base, marking up the sidewalk with pink quartz pebbles. Her belly was just beginning to swell again, and Bobby still in diapers.

Nothing whatsoever happened then. No one knocked at the door; the phone never rang. She just wandered into the living room and switched on the television, baby on the hip, belly beginning to swell.

The television flickered a moment. She twisted the knob. And there it was.

A somber-looking man with a side part bobbed his head and intoned, “A tragic accident at Ladd Air Force Base in Fairbanks today, when an Air Force flight show went terribly wrong. The show ended early after one of the jets made an emergency crash landing. Its pilot and co-pilot were killed instantly. No spectators were injured. Officials have not yet determined the cause of the crash, but they have identified the deceased as Captain Harold Crisler and Second Lieutenant Edward Seay.”

The girls played out on the sidewalk, never had to move for any officer with his head bowed calmly, striding up to the front door.

The telephone never rang. The baby tugged at her blouse and squirmed on her hip.

She stared at the television, stared at the man with the side part as he began to talk about a burglary in Juneau, and clutched the baby a little tighter.
A Long Night in an Empty House

Sumin Lee

Like a bleak scene after a festival, falls into a deep sleep.
With two suitcases in a canvas fabric, I move to a new house.

By the railroad tracks stands the house in beige.
The thick grasses, untrimmed trees in the front yard endure the long absence of residents.

Through the broken window, sunlight out the vacant room.
The strange sound from clearing my throat makes an echo.
Silence mingled with the summer heat fills in the unfurnished space.

A thunderous sound of a night train passes by, rattling windows,
someone enters without knocking.
He slams the door, strides across the kitchen, looking for something. Heart pounding, I stand paralyzed, holding my breath.

No place to hide in this empty house.
Sitting on the bed, I wait for morning.
The moon shines dimly, but warmly.
Motorcycles disappear somewhere over the darkness down the block.

A Final Viewing

Sara Olivier

I did not like your peculiar smile, but you must have known what the funeral parlor would become decades later. This December, third grade girls jingle bell rock where your body laid. Soft carpet cushioning the wheels of your casket was stripped; now glossy black shoes tatterap the hardwod floor. Bodies leap and hug the air before a row of mirrors covering the sober wallpaper. Ponytails swing under the same lights that accented your pale skin: how it masked the ugly muscles that failed you. And finally, slippers feet, like the unnatural pink they painted your cheek, spin through the space where I saw you last. They dance and truly smile; reflections in the mirror that should have been yours.
Howling Tin Woman

Megan Boule

You are an autumn twilight,
bloodless heart stone,
love stilled, frozen in a harvest moon.
The only colors: your dress blue uniform
and a rainbow of striped candy.

I have become a tin woman,
staring at the howling dark.
The what ifs that whispered
down my spine are yellow roads
turning to itching sand, not brick.
City bricks are not emerald,
not glittered slippers made of ruby. The story lied.

I listen to the rainstorm tap
unbreakable code on tin.
You were a cedar chest
filled with unworn baby clothes.
Now, home is an empty coal room.

This story is a hand-me-down
jacket with patched elbows and a torn lining.
I reread unsent letters,
but I have no address for folded
stars where finches perch
under the rainbow.

Brookings Haiku

Sumin Lee

Calling after Midnight
A square-shaped hesitation in my hand;
The letter that cannot be delivered to you.

A Stranger
Unaccountable loneliness;
To live among people who can be happy without me.

Homesick
A seagull at the parking lot;
Rolling green waves in a corn field.
Together, their steely skin collides cold beneath the bedspread—two machines twisting their gears violently concerned only with the mechanics.

Their bodies clang together sending grinding tones—cold dissonant notes into the air like washing machines bumping against dryers—concerned with finishing.

They uncouple, leaving nothing together. Naked frames rise rigid onto the cold floor and clothe their sprocketed machines in the silence of not being concerned.
The Man—Woman with Borderline Personality

Disorder Says Hello—Goodbye to the Post—Modern Spiritual Therapist and Her—His Paradoxical Injunction
(After the Dominant Culture Celebrates Easter, of Course)

Keith Brumley

It is a sad predicament
When love and hate are one.
When passion overcomes us
And reason is undone.

Confusion clouds our 'ceptions
Unholy it may be,
In truth it bears false witness
To facts you cannot see.

The first fact is I love you.
The second is I won't.

The third is that I need you.
The fourth is that I don't.
I cannot stand to be with you!
To be apart is close to death!
It throws my thoughts off kilter!
It takes away my breath!
The Bible says for me alone
That Christ was hung upon
A wooden cross where he then died.
And rose on the third day's dawn.

This I believe with all my heart
But I cannot think it true.
So I'll behave just as I please
And damn you as I do.

And now, fair lover here and gone
I hope you know just why.

We cannot help but screw things up
And hang them out to dry.
It's after all, just politics
Foucault so primly taught.
So trust the process here and now
As we all self-destruct
Dolly the sheep would have loved
to wear a blue blazer

Mitch LeClair
So it’s confused the living shit out of me that anyone could shag to our music, um, but people do, apparently. “Paranoid Android”. This girl comes up to me; she bangs to “Paranoid Android”. How?—Thom Yorke

To begin, what is the point of your latest project?—
the polyester asks, pushing the red button.

The hidden handles of coffee cash cans
are buried in my land, safe from the taking
and craze of the interested State.

I’m sorry, Sir—real answers only—
the poets’ smoke starts to dry his eyes.

You bear false witness and cannot plant beans.
The lines in my head and on your toes are perfect
how they start. Inches taller, inches farther.

So, the classic way is made in vain?—
the confused one scribbles away his patience.

Maybe if I could last forever,
but even the Khan will fall,
surrounded by an artificial animal.

They won’t get this shit—what do you want?
the grind of his teeth gets harder and louder.

We is a crime, rusty axe mind. It has severed
what is left of His right hand
and divided all of you.

Opportunities on the Red Planet

Lori Jacobson

No mushroom-bodied, tentacle-waving, leathery hides—
No green-skinned, bug-eyed, bobble-headed probers;
Just sandy water-and-ice scarp stairsteps.

No “Iliudium Pu-36 Explosive Space Modulators”—
No merciless earth-invaders seeking fertile land and babes;
Just Victoria’s Crater and some broken-down landrovers.

No beetle-pinning, cassowary-classifying Darwins—
No chad-hanging, stem-selling, voters;
Just ice-clouds wafting above ancient volcanoes.

No yakity-yaking, blaring-faced booby-boxes—
No pompadour-wearing, ciggy-smoking rebels;
Just dust-and-carbon streaked rocks.

No people-segregating, culture-stomping terrorists—
No high-holy, gospel-spewing fundraisers;
Just swelling-andshrinking polar caps.

No Picasso-analyzing, Starbucks-drinking, ex-hippies—
No gas-guzzling, lipstick-schmearing soccer moms;
Just salmon-pink-skies under a pearlescent sun.

No chatter—
No clatter;
Just
Before all of this, I thought I was special. I had plans, big plans. I thought I was going places. I thought my life was headed somewhere incredible. Before all of this, I was strawberry-kiwi. Now, here I lay and here I stay. This cold sidewalk square is my eternal resting place. I am its broken-hearted, discolored prisoner. My destiny is to be a perpetual bystander. I watch others live and breathe while I merely exist. There is deep sorrow in me, but I am not allowed the privilege of crying. So, I wipe my unshed tears and do the only thing I can: I gaze up at the sky.

My tales are unfinished stories. Any encounter is transient and fleeting. My life is the equivalent of opening a book to the seventh chapter and reading a few brief paragraphs. I watch both full and empty souls come and go. I never know how their stories end; I only borrow their moments in time.

Some days are better than others. On good days, I can feel the warm sun smiling at me and I hear the trees sigh. I watch tiny red shoes skip happily off into the distance, while two old pairs of loafers shuffle gently next to each other. Squeaky, worn-in tennis shoes quickly dart by. Four carefree paws dash clumsily from tree to tree, basking in the silence. On days like this, I am almost at peace with my humble sidewalk square. When night falls, an orchestra of crickets sings me a lullaby. The wise stars wink at the earth and say we know, we understand.

Bad days are impossible to forget. They start with the kinds of mornings that last all afternoon. Clouds bury the sun while the dreary sky weeps. The howling wind pushes forward, chasing something that cannot be caught. On these days, I see sad hearts and lost souls. Heavy boots stumble by; boots that have been long lost at the bottom of a bottle. Insecure heels that are much too tall stink of Prozac as they hurry past. Flip-flop, flip-flop, flip-flop. Noisy sandals get lost in the crowd, another social causality. My spirit breaks for the broken ones. At night, the crickets are still and the stars hide behind the moon.

Now I am much older and wiser. I realize that I am not special. My destiny holds nothing spectacular, and I am not going anywhere fantastic. Like the shoes, I am here to experience both heartache and joy. Like the shoes, I may never know my spot in the universe. It is a beautiful kind of lonely being frozen in time.
I was setting stage lights for my high school's spring play one afternoon and was up in the rafters moving housings and changing bulbs when I was lucky enough to almost trip over something. I thought maybe I had left out an old box of burnt-out light bulbs, because it was right there in the middle of the catwalk. There isn't much light when you're walking around inside a ceiling, so I had to feel about in order to find out what it was that was in my way. My hand closed around something smooth, cool, and vaguely disc-shaped. It was still nearly invisible to me in the dim illumination of the catwalk lights, so I picked it up. It was like a huge thick quarter, but with no imprint and no marking of any kind, so far as I could tell. It was really heavy—heavier than lead—and I could feel in the shadows at least three or four stacks of the discs. Since I could only carry one with me out of the catwalk, I headed for the light booth at the back of the theater (where the light was only marginally better) to examine it.

It was a metallic disc, kind of silver in color, with a kind of industrial sheen to it that made it seem both very old and very fresh at the same time. Its flat surface was totally unmarked, and very smooth. For one frightening moment I thought that maybe I had picked up some asbestos or something scary like that, but what kind of asbestos comes in neatly crafted Frisbees?

Then again, what kind of catwalk has four stacks of heavy metallic discs piled in the middle of it?

I tried to see if I could tell what kind of metal or substance the disc was made of, but I'm not much for appraisals of any kind, much less any form of metallurgy. I really wanted to find some more light so that I could see more of its details, and figure out just what it was, but the thought of lugging this...
hulking mass down the stairs through the boiler room and into the well-lit hallway outside the gym was more trouble than I cared to go to.

The only thing I had ever before found in that catwalk was a big plastic bag of fake snow. Not many people knew about the catwalks, and nobody used that area of the school except those associated with the theater department. Mr. Kelley, the theater director at the high school, rarely even came up here, and it was kind of my domain. I changed the lights, moved them around for shows, and kept the cast out during practices. It wasn’t the most exciting place and was even kind of creepy sometimes, but it fit me better than a football helmet would have and I enjoyed helping with the productions.

Finding the discs made me feel like I had been included in some kind of super-cool conspiracy. As I turned the disc over, I began to fantasize that the discs were some kind of neural computer that someone from the future had left there for me to find today, at this specific date, at this specific time. I would put these discs into my backpack and carry them to the bus station, where a guy in sunglasses and a trench coat would be waiting for me to say, “Hello, Jason. I’ve been expecting you.” Then he would give me a speech about my destiny, about how he had been sent back to help me become the man the world needed. Then he would explain how I could download the information in the discs to my brain. From the discs, I would learn martial arts, and then start a secret agency to defeat the people whose nefarious ends involved enslaving humanity. At seventeen, I would become the leader of the free world because of this strangely-found disc.

I began to examine its edges, which were not smooth like the flat surfaces, but rather coated in a thin black powder, like dark sawdust on a fresh piece of cut lumber. Along the edge on one side, there was a strange symbol of three digits that I didn’t recognize. I traced my hand over it, sending the black coating into the air, which made me cough. I didn’t recognize the symbols. They seemed to be characters from some other kind of language, and the markings seemed to indicate that the discs had some value. Maybe they were some kind of foreign money.

Or maybe the discs were from another world. Maybe the catwalk was a point where two worlds intersected, and because I spent so much time up there the oppressed people in that other world needed to send their precious metals to me so I could protect them. I would put the discs in my backpack and hide them in my closet, until one night I would awake to an inter-dimensional portal opening in the middle of my bedroom and a beautiful girl exactly my age, with long black hair and shining green eyes, would pass through. She would throw her arms around me and thank me for saving their rebellion. She would tell me that they had need of my skills to be free of their subjugators, and I would have to make the difficult moral choice to remain here, with my family and friends, or abandon it all and follow her through the portal. She would cry when I told her that I had to stay, that I had my own destiny to follow. She would tell me she had always loved me, and kiss me deeply, sorrowfully stepping through the portal with a dainty wave of her perfect hand. I would smile ruggedly, accept my fate, and go back to sleep.

My arms were getting tired from holding the disc, and I began to wonder about how so many of them got up there. There were probably twenty or thirty of them on the catwalk. To get them up there meant at least ten trips by an absurdly strong individual, or fewer by a group. But it was unlikely that a team of hulking people hauling steel-gray discs that each probably weighed more than the entire contents of my school locker seemed rather conspicuous, especially in a school. Somebody would have noticed a team of people moving in and out of the auditorium catwalks. They definitely would have heard them. And somebody probably would have noticed someone not associated with the theater department making a dozen trips in and out of the doorway that led to the light booth. And the pile of metallic discs weren’t there last night—I was up there during dress rehearsal.

I moved the disc to a more comfortable position on my lap, sending another puff of the sooty powder into the stale air of the booth, and for the first time really appreciated just how massive the thing was. It wasn’t all that big, but good Lord was it heavy. It must have been made of an incredibly dense material. I was used to carrying forty-pound bags of softener salt down the stairs for my mom once a week, and those bags had nothing on the disc. I began to worry about the weight of the discs breaking the catwalk and crashing through the ceiling of the auditorium to the rows of chairs below.

What if it happened on Thursday night during the first performance of the play? What if the catwalk supports suddenly gave way, sending the entire length of the catwalk
through the ceiling and down onto the people below? A substantial number of people would be crushed and (this was my first thought, God help me) the play would be ruined. It would be a disaster and all the local news stations would send vans to interview the survivors; the ones who saw it happen, well, their viewpoint of the tragedy would be invaluable, and no one would have a better vantage than me.

I imagined hearing the first catwalk support breaking, a sharp clean sound, and becoming supernaturally aware that something tragic was about to happen. The second support would break, and I would become lucidly clear of what I had to do. The third, fourth, fifth, and sixth supports (if that's how many supports a catwalk has—I didn't know) would snap simultaneously and I would surge forward over the switchboard in front of me, through the window of the light booth, and slide down the ladder like a free-runner. Then, leaping over the crowd by skillfully balancing my feet on the backs of the auditorium chairs, I would race to the center of the auditorium, feeling some unknown power pulse through my arms, and, with the awe of five-hundred audience members (some of whom were fellow students who rather enjoyed ridiculing me during the school day) I would catch the catwalk and hold it above my head, thus saving those in its descent. The auditorium would be filled with nothing but the creaking sound of the catwalk as I held it aloft.

There would be repercussions of my heroism, of course. There would be questions about the nature of my strength and inquiries about what happened with the catwalk. There would be national media coverage, and I wouldn't have to go to school for a couple days while the mania and paranoia blew over. And during my interment at home with the police mounting a twenty-four hour watch to protect me from those who feared me, a man dressed all in black would pass through the walls of my house and cryptically say, "We knew you were one of us."

"One of whom?" I would reply, intensely interested. "One of a new awakening for mankind. You are not alone, Jason. It was we who placed the weighted disks on the catwalk to make it fall, and you have done well in your first task." He would speak in an ominous tone and in a deep voice "But why?"

"We are searching the world for those with...special powers. Our search has led us to you, Jason. You are to become a member of our secret organization."

He would go on to explain the nature and responsibility of my tremendous powers, and I would be given pass codes to a secret underground base in the city where I would meet others like me. They would ask me to join their league, and together we would fight against those like us who would use their power for evil. I would rise to prominence among their ranks, and lead my new friends in championing the cause of freedom for all the world.

I didn't know how long I had been sitting in the light booth, and I was getting tired of holding the disc. I probably should have been done with changing the lights by now, so I decided to take the disc back to the pile and tell Mr. Kelley later about what I had found. He'd know what to do.

I spun the disc on my lap, sending another cloud of that thin black powder into the stagnant air of the light booth. I tried not to breathe it in, but I still coughed a little bit as some of it caught in my throat. I stood up to go when I noticed something.

The three digits along the edge of the disc were now upside down from the way I was holding them before, and I saw that they weren't actually three unrecognizable symbols from an mysterious language—just the opposite. They were numerals. Totally recognizable numerals appearing in every math book I'd ever looked at. Numbers that any first grader could recognize. There were three of them, and these three numbers, together on the edge of the disc, sent my heart down into my guts ten times harder than that catwalk could ever fall onto the seats below.

The numbers appeared 238 right side up. And thanks to last week's chemistry lecture, I knew straight away what I had been holding in my naked hand for the past... how long? Ten? Twenty? Thirty minutes? I knew what the black dust was, and why the discs were so heavy.

Someone had brought radioactive U-238 uranium into the auditorium at my high school. And I had been unlucky enough to almost trip over it. I cursed my bad luck, whoever left it there, and myself. Terrified, I dropped the disc on the floor of the light booth and fled the auditorium.
We all have two voyeur eyes
searching for vulgarity inside
a crowd of swaying corn stalks.

(Everyone comes uprooted
when they catch word of fortune and fame
through a winded speaker’s whisper.)

I watched one dance with
his opposite pollinated sex.
I watched them both spread the idea
and allow the wind to the rest.

Mother calls
"Supper."
My body resists
but again
"Supper."
The nauseating aroma
makes me heave,
but I suppress the urge.
I sit.
The burger drips with oil, topped
with softening, sickening cheese,
smashed between two mounds of carbs.
Flimsy French fries doused
with grease and lies.
The calories taunt
"watch me contort your thighs
and distort your ass
so it bulges over your belt
two large lumps of lard fighting their way out of your jeans."
"A wholesome supper," Mother says,
"Eat up."
At the touch of tongue it grabs hold.
it crawls, scurries through My body
attacking My legs, My thighs
My face
No,
it’s My temple to control;
I will not partake
in this crime,
Supper.
It must go
Sorry, Pluto

Jay Albertston

Silently spinning in the cosmic form
Away from you, it’s so much colder.

Runty and sluggish plague my name.
Divided and distant, there is no change.

Xeres, Orcus, and Quahor: Celestial bodies
Dealt with and banished so harshly.

The exact tick of the clock, we march.
You, Smiling; broken spirits orbiting,

Pointy nose so high in air
Donning your own favorable label—

Pride cometh before the fall
With nothing to soften the blow.

In the Sun

Sheryl Kurylo

He bends me;
my body carefully situated
around his frame.
Massaging my arm, he speaks
but needs no words.
We gaze at the birds,
chirps chime
through French doors, and he sings
his own song back at theirs.
Thankful that I filled
the feeders one more time, he looks
up at me, the green sparkle in his eyes
illuminated. By the rays of light blazing
through the window pane
we bathe in the warm sun:
My cat and I.
Tuna and Ice Cream at 11 P.M.

Keely Delaney

I am a woman seeking a man between the ages of birth and death. The young man behind the register has sandy blonde hair that falls over his green eyes like a visor, and dimples I could fit my index fingertip inside. He clears his throat, Nice night. He concentrates on bagging my tuna in spring water and Blue Bunny Chocolate Seduction, but seems flattered by my attention, a slight flush on his blemish-free cheek. Yeah, who knew it would be this warm in October. I watch his student ID card sway on its blue and gold lanyard next to the car key for the VW that mommy and addy bought. You shop here often? I check myself as I check him out as he checks me out. I wonder if he has taken math yet because the difference is substantial. Oh, yes, the donut holes are pure heaven. He claims to be interested in history, and grins with the carelessness of someone who hasn’t much of his own.

Lurking Love Scent

Sumin Lee

Steamy air waving on the melting asphalt lined with cars from the last summer vacation. As if promised, we don’t say a word. Waiting for the light to change, I saw the faded banner for Herb Festival suspend at a light. As if intended, I make a left turn. Disappearing beyond mountains, the sun throws its shadow on the empty parking lot. A popcorn machine beside the ticket box makes a noisy sound, shedding a salty flavor. Through the small round hole, a dozing boy hands out tickets. Everything moves toward its ending, To find the entrance of the herb garden, We walk up to a hill in a cool breeze. I know he’s looking for a word. Pushing through a dead hedge in front of us, hundreds of herbs are planted in a row: Rosemarys, Chamomile, Lavender, Mint Dyed golden from the sunset, the garden scents breathtakingly sweet fragrance. Such a sweet air, such a beautiful summer evening. In our bare feet, we take a walk holding hands. We know it becomes the last our good day.

https://openprairie.sdstate.edu/oakwood/vol3/iss3/1
A Dinner for Disaster

Chris Williams

Please cut up portions of your selfishness
Because there is enough to go around
May I have a heaping plate of jealousy
I can taste the lie that seems so profound
I hope you choke upon this meal
I hope the irony is real
I would not kiss those lips to save a single breath
If you drop down on the floor
I would only ask for more
I would not break my hand down on your chest to
hear another beat
You are such a deviant who differs from the different
You hate the thought of trying but you are still so persistent
Have you found a place to keep your greed
You have built this case of thievery
When will you burn down what you have done
You know not of what is truly wrong
You know not of what is to come
You always tend to lose after you have won
Bring me the thrill
Bring me the guilt of your kill
Bring me your will
You will just keep coming back when you are riding this windmill
Stop waiting
To stop hating
Stop blaming
What is saving

The Last String

Evan Papousek

He come outta the bunk house
Like many a time afore
Quiet an rested he walks to the pen
Rope in hand
An a trusty eye of horse flesh
He ropes his string
That'll soon be his last
Many miles he rode
All the suffering untold
The horses he rode
And the cattle he sold
All his life he been livin a dream
All to see another spring
With a new string
Now comes his last
The chill of early spring
With a rope in his hand
He goes for his last string
How a Boy
found Poetry

Stephen Snyder

A girl with brick-colored eyes and a dumbo left ear broke his heart.
After four months of romance in the seventh grade, their lunch period dinners were over.

Eager to win her back, the boy devised a plan: he'd write her poetry—filled with desire and longing and panting and pleading and the shedding of heroic tears.

These words, he was sure, would tempt her like the sweetest fruit plucked from the elusive garden and the forgotten tree.

Ten years later, the boy is still writing poetry.

Meanwhile, the girl, with brick-colored eyes, married an officer in the army who hates Tennyson and Whitman, or anyone else without a gun and strong shoe polish that smells like licorice.

And the boy is writing poetry.
Honey Mortar

Megan Baule

Nighttime fills my head, forces letters onto paper. I fold sunlight in each dark envelope. You tuck my words into a flak pocket, troweling dreams, mortaring sand castles.

My eyes, windows I forget to close, have seen too many 5 A.M.'s. Dirty floors wait for washing, sticky with slow-dripped sunlight sweetening chamomile. Impossible promises. Bitter earth coats my tongue.

Bees build paper houses, buzzing intolerable obsession, party hop flowers, pollen drunk.

My heavy eyes dream hollow earth, bone splintered paper, the wind's restless rummaging, lost in the half-life of diamond, Love.

While dirty floors wait for washing, crystallized sun sweetens chamomile. Pollen drunk, I mortar houses of unsent letters with honey.

fading out

J.M. Koehler

trapped, he began to drink the briny water encompassing his tiny island, attempting to satiate the liquid lust that sprung up inside of him with each salty drink.

the small sips provided temporary solace before evaporating away into a parched nothingness that left the man thirstier than before. he knew drinking the sand would have done as much good as the slow poison water had.
today snow
became rain.
clouds
regifted:
unfrozen
drops of pearls
patter the ground
at a speed
equal to
my heartbeats.