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"Good Old Fluffy," John Schmidt

Creative Non-fiction:
"Between Messages," Stephanie Carlson

Art:
"Drawing 1," Marc Wagner

Doug Cockrell (1953-2012) co-founded Oakwood with Dave Evans in 1976. He graduated from Redfield High School in 1971 and then from South Dakota State University in 1975 with a bachelor of arts in English Secondary Education. He taught freshman English Composition in Arkansas and English at Brookings High School. He was an avid reader, an accomplished poet, loved music and playing the guitar, enjoyed football and was a long-time Cubs Fan.

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

ANITA BAHR AWARD FOR OUTSTANDING CONTRIBUTOR

Matthew Gruchow

Anita Bahr has been a long-time supporter of South Dakota State University's English Department, and especially Oakwood. Thanks to her contribution in 2012, Oakwood will continue to provide an excellent opportunity for young SDSU artists to publish their pieces in this journal.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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We would also like to extend heartfelt gratitude to our advisor, Steve Wingate. Without his guidance and dedication to detail, Oakwood would not be possible. A sincere thanks goes to Randy Clark, his design class, and the SDSU Art Department, who created the beautiful design of this edition.
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Writer's Block
Sheryl Kurylo

writer's block n. 1. Psychological inhibition preventing advancement of work. 2. Loss of ability to produce new work. brain lock / stuck / sans light bulb / without a plan / blinking cursor / drawing a blank / fiddling with pen / internet surfing / inspiration for cleaning / hair-twirling split ends / reason to wash laundry / prescription for a nap / not meeting the deadline / stuck on square one / future phone call from angry editor / blank page aftershock.

See also: reason for this piece.
Remedying the Misdiagnosed
Amanda Boerger

I was fighting an invisible force,
like walking against a strong wind,
or being bound by many clear rubber bands,
but still stretching limbs in every direction, rebelling.

On the day I chose to quit taking my medication
I saw bats and dark shadows.
I loathed myself and I chose not to shower.
I was shaken like a child in my bed until I escaped
into a dream world worst than the first
with boiling bathtubs and burning eggs.

In the morning, my face bore all I wished to hide,
like a sheer curtain over a window with a light on inside.

A Void
Sheryl Kurylo

On an intergalactic journey
to the center of Jupiter’s eye
the craft dodged asteroids and moons.
   Having fallen within range
      of supernova center
          holotropic vacuum force
             reached hole-heartedly,
               snatched the passers-by.
It swallowed,
   ate them whole,
      gave caution to the meteor belt.
Deep Sea Fishing
Jamie Nagy

Write something amazing.
I scan my Moleskine scribbles for a glimmer.

I hop on my boat, head out to sea
My engine's churn takes me away
from vendor stands and make-shift jet ski rentals.

I reach for my poetic tools and fix my eyes
on the fisherman's chair at the helm:

Invention work, prompts, Pentel blue ink, yellow WalMart spiral notebook
fixed form, free verse, juxtaposition, laddering, scootering, leaping,
trochaic meter, and of course, iambic pentameter.

I cast my fishing pole into the opaque ocean.
No bites, sunshine hours—then, a blue marlin,
shimmering fin shows in the deep blue sea,

I muscle the line in, but the prized fish wants to
show its mettle. I free the line—swims to the farthest point
He bargains, then tires again.

Marlin to me: “Sorry, Charlie.” I say, “Give me a break.”
He: “You bit off more than you can chew.”

“Back to square one,”
I press in, bid advice from an experienced angler
slowly, the resistant glimmering fin,
pulled in—I win.
First Snow of the Season
Jessica Slama

It is a crisp 50 degree sunshine blest mid-October day, as I wander in my tree Wonderland, the sort of day where you wished for a sleek panoramic camera to capture every moment between eye blinks, filling in those pieces of missing.

The Maple leaves were a mix of burnished purple and brown, most appearing to be made of velvet, while others were bright red and orange with yellow speckles, holding crisp finger-like edges curling. I check the leaf-moisture remaining, gauge the oncoming speed of winter.

As I walk in my sunset colored Arboretum, a gust of wind catches leaves at my feet, spins them and fades; they fall around me. I catch one, crinkled, yellow-orange and slowly squeeze until my palm holds fish food flakes, open and release tiny squares into the swirl of wind remnants.

I peer upwards through the aged trees, my face open to the world, limbs spreading around me as the sky drops snow petals. One crystallized snowflake lands on my left cheek, stays for a moment, melts mirroring a stray tear, starting my own salted drops.

The grass, cool, is partially soft and brittle in other areas. I move nimbly to avoid pine needles peppering my arboretum ground, as my feet numb with wet and browned leaves around me, their life-colors fading with the first snow. I lower my face.
Untitled | Olivia Schafer
**Pioneer**

Erik Howe

I look back
and see an untraveled path.
I sit and take off my knapsack,
it's just me and the wilderness.

What a journey it's been to get here
on this warm, snowy mountain.
Not a sound did I hear—
no birds,
no squirrels.

The only footprints I see are mine
... what an experience...
To think, it's only a quarter after nine;
it's only begun.

Ten miles to go
over hills and lakes,
through trees, snow.

If only I could get this into a picture frame.

**Wind**

Derek Skillingstad

It's cold.
and the wind has blown
all of the autumn-colored leaves
away from the autumn-looking trees.

I dropped my cigarette
onto the sidewalk,
exhaled my last thought of you
into the breeze.

The wind carried
our love away with the leaves.
She-Wolf

Jessica Frederick

You call me monster;
I yearn for the thrill of the kill, a predator—
part woman, part beast, part something I should not be.
You hunt for me with hatred; you feel that my desire is a sin,
but I cannot rip these pieces out of me without bleeding
for they are my eyes, my sound, my breath.

You prey on the soft lambs you have grown.
I devour the weak-minded slaughterers with my guile.
Yet, you call me monster when I turn your lambs
into wolves that speak for themselves.
They form packs to hunt down their transgressors;
they howl at the moon and mind not the blood.

You call me monster, but I have watched
with these golden eyes, your stagnate world.
I have made your lambs hungry for this flesh of mine.
Once they taste, they cannot return to witless shadows;
they will crave, they will seek, they will hunt,
and they will tear this world to pieces.
Runaway
Matthew Gruchow

There's a way a place sucks down your shoes, entombs them in the muck of time, and the familiar—and fear.

So you stand—stiff and upright as a barn that rots from within, your chin to chest beneath chill rain hollowed except for a desire to flee and a plea for a sun that doesn't hide its warmth.

There's no use in shaking fists at God, or to bemoan the Hand that affixed you firm in earth. After all, where would you wander to? Do other horizons spread a warmer glow? Would distant lands receive a prodigal more sweetly than your home?

No, sins mired your sun long ago, you track your past like spring mud on your shoes, and your feet would sink wherever you went, and the hand that presses down your soul is none other than your own.

You unravel your own life until it is a threadbare blanket that leaves you cold.
Bridge Makers
David Alden Herbener

A breeze ruffles my hair, but I don’t immediately open my eyes. My nostrils flare, drinking in the cool draft for several minutes; a faint smell of baked bread conjures a starkly different image than my now-open eyes provide. A blue sky, covered with strips of cotton swabs, hangs overhead; a cool breeze on my face brings the sweet smell of freshly baked bread; after another deep breath, I look to my feet, and see my threadbare Chuck Taylors, with a sliver of a white sock emerging from my right foot. Below them, I stand on a thin peninsula of rock, barely wide enough for my thin feet, small pebbles crumble as I shift my weight, falling from the side, down, down, down. Like the Grand Canyon, only, well, Grander. Although I fear falling, my body does not tense up, rather each of my senses gropes wildly as I peer over the edge and mechanically spit. The small drop of me is sucked into the darkness; it sways slightly with brief changes in air pressure as the deep swallows it.

Rotating on the balls of my feet, my eyes trace the peninsula of rock back to the near wall of this canyon, a fair fifty yards, and step carefully along the razor-thin back to its foundation. A wooded ridge rises up a short distance away, but near the canyon’s edge, I find a massive stock of bricks and mortar—I pick up a red-brown brick, and the soft material rubs off between my fingers, leaving a chalky substance on my hands. Contemplating its purpose, I rotate it from hand to hand and approach the canyon wall. The sheer drop below me seems endless; unthinking, I hurl the brick far over the expanse, watching as it tumbles out of existence. A smile splits my face at my own destructive nature.

As the brick disappears into the blackness, I think about how peaceful the fall must be. Slowly spinning downwards, the light above shrinking quickly until the canyon above is only a sliver of heaven. Would it meet anyone or anything in that endless fall, make friends with some falling pebbles? Or, would it be cold and dark, and painfully lonely?

Shaking my head, I return to the pile and crouch down to stir the white paste with a thin paint stick emerging from it. The material is thick and workable. I slather a fist-sized glob along the length of a brick and squish it to another; a dull squelching sound brings a large grin to my face.

Delighted, I build a tower of bricks that morphs into a small castle, complete with thick, reinforced ramparts. After a few minutes, I stand up, already bored with my own work. As I absentmindedly peel drying mortar from my fingertips, I approach the rim of the canyon, and notice a similar peninsula about 100 yards away. I walk over aimlessly, taking off my shirt to tan my back in the warm sun.

When I reach it, I notice its base began like mine, yet someone had widened it with brick and mortar. I consider the handiwork, the first few yards are shoddily done; there is excess mortar in solidified blobs among the bricks, uneven spacing, and even a few missing bricks from the pattern. I poke one that looked especially unstable, and it escapes its hold and falls downwards. I stand up, and begin to walk along the increasingly sturdy path until I reach the end of the rock peninsula. From there, a solid pattern of bricks extends off towards the opposite side of the canyon. “Huh... how are they staying up?” I murmur aloud. I lie down on my stomach and look over the edge to see the path hanging on nothingness.

I, tentatively, take a step out onto the bricks and feel them surprisingly solid beneath me. Soon, I am confidently striding out over a thin patchwork
of rustic orange and white towards the shape of
a human, on hands and knees, in the distance. A
woman sits, methodically working to extend her
bridge. When I get close, she sits up on her haunches
and smiles widely at me. “Hiya!”

“Uh, hello.” I sit down a couple yards from her,
looking at a pile of bricks and a large tub of mortar
between us.

“The name’s Candy.” She dusts her hands off on
her pants, and offers her right one to me.
I reach across the materials, shake it, and mumble
“Garreth.” I can feel dried mortar beneath my palm.
“Been wondering when you’d wander over.
How’s your bridge coming along, Garreth?”
She smiles lopsidedly and her clear green eyes
flicker almost imperceptively to the left, towards
my own rock peninsula.
I stare at her, shortly, and then the bricks pull my
eyes away. “I haven’t... uh, I haven’t started yet.”
I feel the blood rising in my neck, and my back
begins to perspire slightly. “Are we supposed to
be building?”
She absentmindedly pushes a lock of caramel
colored hair over her left ear. “Well, isn’t that why
we’re here?” A small glob of mortar clumped some
hair together, but she seems not to notice.
I say nothing, feeling embarrassed and confused.
“Well, let me show you what I been doin’ over
here.” She smiles broadly, stands up, and motions
me forward. When I step carefully around the bricks
and mortar, I notice she is thin and attractive, and
smells like Granny Smith apples. My mouth starts
to water.

“It’s best if you slather about this much mortar
on each brick,” she says as she spades a golf-ball
sized glob onto a brick, “so you don’t get too much
leftover.” She presses the combo against the path
she has already made, and reaches above and below,
pressing it close and level to the rest of her path.

She finishes it off by scraping excess mortar away
from the surface. “That’s about all there is to it,” she
flashes white teeth. “You wanna try?”

I shrug and grab the material, spreading the paste
carefully along the chalky brick, then press it softly
against the base. Candy makes a delighted warble,
and I stand up to admire the work. “Why doesn’t it
all fall out beneath us?” I tentatively tap the newest
bricks with my toe and notice mortar on the side of
my left shoe.

“Well, cuz that’s not how it works.” She sets her
hand on the pile of bricks and looks off in the
distance. “How about we get you rolling on
your bridge, huh?”

All day, Candy helps me with my own expansion;
I can’t bring myself to ask her why, and she never
offers an answer. She makes it very clear I would
hate myself if I don’t have a good base around the
original peninsula, like she has. “I spent the whole
first day losin’ bricks over the side, droppin’ whole
buckets of mortar, and I even almost fell!” Her laugh
shakes her whole body, “No, it’s best if you just
build up your foundation.”

I learn fast that the mortar dries extremely quickly
once it’s in place, but if built poorly, the bricks
will fall from their neighbors. By sundown, my
back aches and I feel exhausted. I lie down on a
softish pile of sand near the edge of the canyon, say
goodnight to Candy, and slip into a deep sleep.
I dream of walking through an apple orchard,
but whenever I reach for it the fruit slips from
my fingertips.

“When They arrive in a few weeks, we must show
Them our finished bridges. I think we might get to
be creative at the end, as there’s a large warehouse
on the other side.” I like listening to Candy’s voice;
it has a clear ringing sound and it rises and falls
dramatically with her emotions. "I want Them to be impressed by my bridge, but I haven't decided how to make it creative yet." She begins naming ideas, each one more fantastic than the last, and again I want to stop her and ask why we are building. The words stick in my throat, and instead I silently imagine Candy's craziest idea: constructing the bridge like the spine of a dragon, complete with moving wings.

After a noon break, I insist Candy return to her bridge to work, and I proceed alone, distracting myself with my own creative expansions. After a few hours of work, my back needs a break and I sit down in a shady spot near the ridge, watching the birds fly overhead. The afternoon passes quickly and quietly, and when evening comes, I meander over to bid Candy goodnight, and return to my spot beneath a large oak tree.

After a week, I make significant progress, but lose many afternoons to aimless daydreams about doing anything but building my pointless bridge—most often leaving the canyon, or times spent with Candy. Occasionally, I join her for breaks on the ridge or sometimes on her brick path. About eight or nine days after I started, we are sitting out on her bridge, which is close to three quarters of the way across the canyon. I am absentmindedly dropping pieces of broken bricks into the darkness below. My legs dangle over the edge; Candy's back presses against mine, and she hums an unfamiliar tune.

"Looks like Mia's just about to the end over there. How she works so fast is beyond me. But then again, she and Kyle made their paths so close together, how can they help but get done faster?"

I follow her eyes and see a pair of people off in the distance. I understand what Candy means, the two paths left their own peninsulas, diagonally aim towards each other, then together continue across the expanse mere yards apart. "Why don't they just combine?"

"Can't," she sighs and lays her head on my shoulder. "There is a barrier, if you put a brick across this, well, invisible line, the mortar won't dry and it will always fall."

"Together, but apart."

She nods, and her hair fans across my face. I say nothing, but continue dropping my shards of brick over the edge and kicking my legs in time with her renewed humming.

"Do you need help on your bridge today?" Candy speaks quietly and her body seems slightly tense against mine.

"I think I'll be all right." I pluck a small chunk of brick off the path and rub its red chalk deep into my palms.

"Good luck..." I stand up and, as I walk away, I no longer hear her hums. Only the course scraping of a mortar spade against a brick.

I wake up at midday and look at the clouds. I realize I haven't eaten since I appeared above this canyon, and begin to notice how the clouds look like ice cream scoops. Although I'm not hungry, this sucks up several hours; resting against a tree, finding food in the sky. Eventually, I paste in a few yards of bricks, but give up shortly afterwards. After meticulously peeling mortar from my spade, I settle in by the ridge.

Near nightfall, Candy comes over and shares the small cherry tree trunk with me and tells me how Mia and Kyle reached the opposite wall, and began to repave certain weaker sections in the middle.

"I think once I get across, I'll refinish the entire beginning, surrounding my peninsula," she muses. I nod, my eyes half-open. There is a short pause before she begins talking about a bird that had flown around her that day, which she named Eddie.
I begin to drift off into sleep, wondering who names a bird Eddie. When I wake up a few hours later, she had gone, leaving a blanket tucked around my shoulders.

At noon, I walk out to the edge of my bridge with an armful of bricks. After setting them down haphazardly behind me, I paste three bricks in, all precisely placed, and then decide to reorganize the mess behind me.

By 2:00, Mia and Candy join me, and discuss their bridges sitting delicately on my brick piles. For some reason, this annoys me.

“We are gonna paint ours when we finish redoing the bricks,” Mia states in a slightly nasally voice. “Kyle found some great colors in the storage building on the other side. I told him to bring them to our bridges. Have you been there to see?” I glance back at the two. Although I am here, Mia chooses to speak only to Candy. I look over the expanse to the opposite canyon wall, and, sighing, gauge I am finally more than halfway.

“Since They will be here in about two weeks, we figure we have more than enough time to paint it. Kyle’s got this fabulous pattern worked out.” She giggles through her nose. “Have you anything special planned for Them?” This question is directed at me, and I catch her eyes flick across the open air before me.

I shrug and turn my back on them to work on the bridge. After a while, the two leave to get back to work. I spend the afternoon slapping bricks angrily into place, spitting insults at Mia, and wishing I could mortar her permanently under my path. “I’d be the only one with another person as part of my bridge...”

The next day I realize I must redo an entire afternoon’s work since yesterday I put it together so poorly. It makes me hate Mia even more.

Candy and I spend the noon hour together, and when she leaves, I spend the afternoon hours working and watching a small chipmunk who likes to steal my spade. He and I become fast friends.

One day, Candy invites me to look at her completed bridge, then around to everyone else’s completed bridges—I want to stomp holes in each of them. Almost everyone has begun painting their walkways, and some have even widened their bridges over eight feet. Zack introduces us to an elaborate series of steps he has developed to give a uniquely hilly feel to his bridge, and Laura displays some artistic arches that introduce her walkway from each canyon wall. Bile slowly creeps up my throat, and soon I excuse myself and vomit over the edge of the canyon wall.

I watch my sick disappear into the darkness and then walk back to my bridge without saying goodbye.

Two days before They arrive, I wake up with the sun and look across the divide. I have slimmed the width of my bridge to about two feet, and I still have less than a quarter of the way to go. I promise myself I will work around the clock—I can finish this in time to slap some paint on before they show up.

By noon, I am ready to pass out. I am exhausted and I have made only a small dent in the gap; I even start putting more mortar between bricks and slim the width even more. Candy comes over, and helps by bringing materials to me, but the bridge is so narrow at this point, she can’t help with the building process. By nightfall, it is too dark to work, and I spend the night working by feel. I sleep on my bridge for a few hours; I had built a small wall on each side so I wouldn’t roll off. I sleep restlessly.

https://openprairie.sdstate.edu/oakwood/vol4/iss3/1
dreaming of a massive mutated version of my chipmunk that chases me down a long hallway that keeps spinning, throwing me from one wall to another.

When the sun comes up, tears start to mix with my mortar as I frantically slap bricks together. By midmorning, I have closed the gap to about thirty yards.

"Morning, Garreth." Candy has her hair in glossy curls; a small yellow sundress shows off her long legs.

"Morning," I cough over my shoulder. She stands a few yards back, and a slight wrinkle in her face reminds me I haven’t cleaned myself in three days.

"Good luck... finishin' up."

I can hear her toes scratching the red brick beneath her. I imagine her thin fingers delicately smoothing the invisible wrinkles from her dress, and I curse my red kneecaps and mortar caked hair.

"Thanks," I swallow hard. "They’re coming at six, right?"

"Yeah." She lays a hand lightly on my shoulder. "If you need any help, let... let me know." I nod and listen to her footsteps recede.

I look back and mumble, "Not in that dress."

By 6 p.m., I am about fifteen yards away. The other twelve builders are standing on the far side before the gate in the far ridge, waiting for Them. When They walk through the gate, I can see the tall top hats the men wear and the spikey tiaras on the women. Overlarge sunglasses hide all but thin, pursed lips, and each wears three-foot platform shoes; in their midnight blue and black suits they tower over the small group of builders, who suddenly look childishly colorful.

They start on the far side of the canyon and work towards my bridge. I notice they never go out on the bridges, only survey them, occasionally with small binoculars. When they reach Candy’s bridge, now looking like a purple and green snake, with appropriate curves in the path, I pick up a brick and it breaks in my hands. A shard stabs me and a small drop of blood grows in my palm. I swear quietly and sit down on the edge of my incomplete bridge. I rub the blood around in circles, turning the red dust into a sludge that stings the wound.

When They arrive where my bridge should have ended, the woman with the tallest tiara sneers and pulls a small pistol from her waist. I don’t see the bullet hit me in the chest; but I find Candy’s terrified eyes as my body tips and falls from the bridge. Down into the darkness, small droplets of blood spread out from my chest before me, obscuring the light from the sky above.

The disintegrating house is one of dreams broken, determination gone awry, love hard won. Words left unsaid collect and weigh the crumbling house down, uprooting it from the uneven ground.

Faded shingles peel away, unmasking the true, ancient structure of the forgotten home, each shingle representing a young boy’s desire dissolving with the seasons. Torn pieces fall and hit the worn roof over the porch like hail, but no one is home to listen. Words left unsaid drop to the floor below. Peeling paint on the wood siding reveals a multitude of color: prairie gold, clay red, sky blue. The deteriorating shades share the warmth of color with the dark outside world. The boy’s calloused heart waits to be undone. Opaque windows mark the impressions of nonbelievers—those who had no faith in the worth of the young boy’s life, myself included.

Depression absorbed the boy’s life at age twenty. His mind, one of cumulonimbus clouds, would move in any direction the wind took him, not staying stable for any amount of time. Gusts of rain pelted him with demands out of his reach and feelings of unworthiness suffocated the air around him.

Autumn-colored grass holds the deteriorating house steady, its roots deep from years of wisdom, each blade sharing stories of times long ago. The young boy searches for advice in his monotonous-colored life, leaning, not stable in this unforgiving world. A thin string of wooden stakes surround the house—a translucent string of unfulfilled wishes.

A mailbox protrudes from the overgrown lawn; he thinks he sticks out in the crowd like a sore thumb. The metal mailbox is stripped of any color, right down to the core of itself. He has no confidence, determination, or motivation left. The white reflects what little rays escape the prison of darkness within the clouds, a sweet surrender to this desolate, deserted, and isolated place he calls home—his weary body—as his voice becomes lost in an opinionated world. What path can he take? Will he take the path trailing behind the deserted house or the one before it? Will he take a step back and remain helpless or take a step forward and do something with his life?

The house has since crumbled. But the foundation is still there. The boy tried to rid himself of life, attempting the unmentionable. Faded shingles turn into forgotten desires reminding him of his failures. Stained windows turn into masked emotions pressing on his face. Rain droplets turn into unbelievers pelting him with their disappointments.

Once the cumulonimbus clouds clear from his head, he will be able to think again. He will silence the wind, and what is left of the withered house—his self—will stand strong against the oppressors. The painted sky will turn into lighter shades of purple and pink. Rays of sunshine will peek through the now transparent clouds. No dense air or feelings of unworthiness will fill the air. The house will look broken on the outside, yet the boy will be repairing himself on the inside. The still standing door of the house will creak open and this time it will be heard.
Sutiner One
Nikki Mann

Nothing had been unpacked. Like heaps of leaves, raked up in the middle of October, colorfully diverse mounds of Barbies, Star Wars action figures, jeans, and outfits, piled up in both newly decorated rooms. I remembered the time Jaden and I went to the store with her birthday money one year and she spent hours picking out the perfect doll to add to her collection. There it was; the plastic beauty with its head sticking out of a heap of junk. The smell of bleach and paint emanated from both the blue and pink painted rooms. Danny and I spent many days in those rooms, hanging Star Wars posters, pirate party pack decorations, and caution tape for Joey, and PowerPuff Girl wall decals and pink and purple Chinese lanterns for Jaden. The décor needed to be perfect for our kids.

Before we were finished unloading, Danny and I looked at each other with fear in our eyes. His right hand was shaking a bit, probably from carrying Joey’s bed up the stairs, and sweat beaded up on his forehead. He was ready for a break; little did he know, a break was years away.

The four of us stood at the window, watching the 2000 Chevy Blazer drive away, an empty cart trailing behind as a left arm waved out the driver’s side and a right arm waved out the passenger’s. I looked at my husband, my life partner, and I saw fear in his eyes, a look he revealed to no one else. He didn’t know how to be a dad; I did not know how to be a mom.

My mind drifted back to our anniversary the year before. Danny and I went to Sioux Falls and spent the evening in a hotel room. This hotel was not anything special, but it was clean; the sheets were bleached and everything was in its place. We planned on going to a movie, but we decided to walk around the town instead. In the bathroom, I put on eyeliner and mascara, and Danny watched “How It’s Made” on the big screen TV. When I told him I was ready, he looked at me and said, “Wow, Nik. You look great.” We walked for hours that night, holding hands, looking at the stars. We had been told we wouldn’t be able to bear children, so we were beginning to get used to it just being he and I. He squeezed my hand; I looked at him. He smiled a half smile and I asked him what he was thinking, he said, “I’m really glad we are in this together. You really were made for me.” I smiled back and squeezed his hand.

“Well,” I began, moving away from the window and looking at Danny and the kids, “I suppose we better get started unpacking, huh?”

Making sure he was heard first, Joey shouted, “OO, OO, can we do my room first, please, please, please? I really wanna show you my awesome stuff Grammy gave me!”

Joey had a hard time saying his r’s. We all thought it was cute; to be perfectly honest, we all even egged him on to repeat phrases with lots of r’s. His parents, however, never took any notice of the speech impediment, even though it was necessary for him to correct it to succeed in school. They never were that great of parents. Joe and Loni both used heroin for many years, and after losing their kids three times already, we collectively decided it was time to step in as a family and take care of the kids ourselves.

Joey shook the floor with his bouncing up and down. I thought I heard the neighbors bang on the floor because of all the noise and excitement. Danny calmly took Joey by the shoulder and walked with him away from the window, toward his new room.

“Alright, alright,” Danny said with newfound
patience. “Let’s take a look here at how we’re going to do this.”

“What about my room, Aunt Nikki?” Jaden asked. “Can I go in my room and play with my toys?” Jaden tugged on my t-shirt and started hopping out of the living room toward the other end of the house. She passed the kitchen and peeked in, then continued hopping down the hall.

“Of course, Jadey. Let me go check on the boys and get them started, then I’ll be in there to help you set your room up.” I looked down the hall and saw Jaden’s small face peering out behind the door. I winked at her and walked toward Danny.

I took his hand in mine and squeezed it. He looked at me, smiled, and kissed my forehead. Then he tackled Joey on the bed and started tickling him like crazy. Jaden ran down the hall at the sound of her brother’s shriek, and we all jumped in, twisting together in a tight knot that no one would ever be able to untie.
He’s Going to Ole Miss

Jamie Nagy

I leave my son with a backpack and a dorm room.
In the campus bookstore, parents take a look.
I’ll take my Ole Miss earrings home.

“Ole Miss.” in gun metal and Southern script
hangs from the center of my new loop earrings’ hooks;
I leave my son with a backpack and a dorm room.

Their cafeteria, the Grove, Fraternity Row, grits
A final “period” in my southern script earrings. I try not to look.
I’ll take my Ole Miss earrings home.

Finality and beginning in this “period”—for me, and for Nick.
In 18 years at home, I didn’t really teach him to cook;
I leave my son with backpack and a dorm room.

When I wear my Ole Miss earrings, people ask me, “How’s Nick?”
Last time I saw my baby (ten weeks ago), we shared a look.
I’ll take my Ole Miss earrings home.

He will be home for Christmas break—tick-tock-tick
Move-in-daze came and went. I’m still a little shook.
I leave my son with a backpack and a dorm room.
I’ll take my Ole Miss earrings home.
Abandoned
Kyla Larsen

Alyson knocks and opens the door. She had gotten a call earlier to come over to her friend Jenna's apartment. As she walks in, she sees Jenna cuddled in Dillon's arms crying. There are tissues all around her, and Dillon is trying to comfort her. Jenna has these big, green, stunning eyes even when they are red and puffy from crying. Dillon is her boyfriend and always there for her no matter what. He is a great guy, someone Alyson wishes she could have.

"Hey honey, are you okay? What happened?" Alyson asks as she kneels down beside Jenna and puts a hand on her knee.

"It's gone. I don't know where it went. It was the only thing I had to remember them by, and now it's gone." Jenna starts sobbing again and puts her face into Dillon's shoulder. Dillon comforts her by wrapping his arms even tighter around her.

"Jenna, we will find out what happened to it and get it back," Dillon says sounding determined, "You don't have to worry. We can start looking right now."

Alyson knows exactly what is missing. The diamond necklace that belonged to her great-great grandmother. It is the only family heirloom that was left after Jenna's parents were killed in a burglary. The necklace wasn't stolen during the break in because it was being shined at the jewelers. Jenna thought it was gone until the jeweler called about it.

"When was the last time you remember seeing your necklace? What do you think happened to it?" Alyson asks.

"I remember seeing it a few days ago because I was thinking about Mom and Dad. I took it out of its drawer in my closet and looked at it for awhile. Then I put it back... I haven't taken it out since then, but when I got back from my trip to my aunt's this morning, I was feeling a little down, and so I opened the drawer and it was gone. I don't understand what happened. No one knew it was there. I haven't even told the two of you before now. I had Dillon check in on my apartment while I was on my trip, but he didn't notice anything," Jenna buries her face into Dillon's chest and cries more. "I don't know what happened," she sobbed.

I know Jenna is gone. Dillon is most likely watching the apartment, and he may be on a leash, but he isn't as strong willed as he thinks. One move and he will be mine, at least for the night. I arrive at the apartment and knock on the door.

Dillon opens the door, "Hey, Jenna is gone remember?"

I push Dillon back into the apartment and shut the door behind me. He's completely unaware of what's going on until his back is against the counter with my lips pressed against his. He stops wondering what is happening and gives in. I knew he would. I knew he wouldn't be able to resist me. He may be Jenna's, but he has desires she won't fulfill and I'm here. I'm willing. We move to the bedroom, and I take his clothes off on the way. In the bedroom I tease him, taking my own off, slowly. He has to wait. I won't let him tear them off like he wants to, but he can't restrain himself anymore, and his hands are all over me. Jenna won't do this and he is relishing in the moment, not thinking about the consequences. After he's done, he quickly falls asleep. I pick up my clothes, go to the bathroom, and leave soon after. I'm not going to stay and confuse him with what happened. This isn't going to be a relationship. He is Jenna's and he knows that.
"I'll go check with the pawn shops and jewelry stores to see if they have had anyone bring it in," Alyson tells Jenna, and then she leaves the apartment. Dillon stares after her wondering if she is really going to go to the pawn shops, but he doesn't say anything.

Jenna finally gets up and decides to stop crying and do something about her missing heirloom. She walks to the bathroom to wash her face; she notices some of her stuff is moved around, but figures it was just Dillon when he had been there the day before. After she finishes freshening up, she walks to Dillon and wraps her arms around him. He is always there for her, and she is so thankful for that. Dillon picks her up off the ground in their embrace but he feels distant. He is guilty about what happened. He just doesn't want to tell Jenna. He doesn't want to hurt her more than she already is today.

Where should I put it? I knew distracting Dillon to get the necklace was the perfect plan. He should probably get used to being taken advantage of, I mean it will happen a lot to him. I need to find a place to sell it, get some money, something. I can't just keep it, someone will notice and ask. Justin, Justin will give me money for it and get even more for himself. You know, I don't even really care about the money. I just want to make her suffer, to feel the pain others have to go through in life. Sure her parents were killed, but she has the good life, she has the perfect life. She has a job she will be at the top in less than a year and she will be making more money than she will know what to do with, she is one of the most beautiful girls I have ever seen, and she has the perfect boyfriend. Well, as far as she knows she has the perfect boyfriend. I know differently, as does he now. But she needs to feel some pain. Her life has been too good for too long.

I call Justin and meet him downtown. He is a pretty good guy, on the outside. He is the kind of person you can make a deal with, and you won't feel bad about it because he seems like such a well put together person. I met him at the Ritz club downtown last year when a couple of business men were trying to get out of something they regretted. Rich people can go to Justin without looking suspicious. He is waiting at a little bistro for me with a cup of coffee for himself, and a cappuccino for me. I can always count on him for a drink, day or night.

Justin looks at the necklace, tells me what it's worth, what he will give me, and what he will probably get for it. He is pretty straightforward with business and wants to make as much money as he can. This is fine with me because, like I said, I'm not worried about the money, and he needs to make a living. I agree to the deal and the necklace and money change hands. It doesn't matter that we are in the middle of a bistro. We don't fit the profiles of drug dealers or thieves. I sit and talk to Justin for awhile before we walk out and go our separate ways. Justin walks off to his next meeting I'm sure, and I go back to my apartment and put the money in my safe.

A knock on the door tells Jenna that Alyson is outside waiting for her. The necklace hasn't been found yet and Alyson wants to take Jenna out on a girls night to take her mind off of it. Jenna opens the door and Alyson is standing in a seductive pose around the door frame looking at Jenna with an enticing stare. Jenna laughs and Alyson playfully pushes her further into her apartment.

"Hey, I was trying out my new look on you and I didn't get very successful results!"

Jenna looks Alyson up and down and says, "Oh,
I’m sorry baby, I just wanted to see how aggressive
you’d get with me.”

Alyson and Jenna both laugh. They mess around
with each other and always have fun.

“What are you wearing?” Alyson asks Jenna with
a disapproving look.

“Not all of us have a little black dress for every
night of the week. Some of us only have one,
from a few years ago, when being modest was in
style,” Jenna says sarcastically sticking her tongue
out at Alyson.

“No, no, no, no. I am not going out with someone
dressed like my grandmother. Either we go buy you
something else right now, or we go to my house and
you wear one of my many little black dresses. All of
which are sexy and in style this year.”

Alyson leads the way out of the apartment to her
car, and they drive across town joking about Jenna’s
dress the whole way. Alyson pulls into her parking
garage and starts towards her apartment. Jenna
stops a few steps away from the car and asks with a
sad expression, “Is it really a grandma dress?”

Alyson turns and laughs.

“It’s not funny! I wore this dress on my first date
with Dillon. What if that was why he didn’t call me
back right away. I mean we are together now, but
what if that’s why?”

Alyson just smiles and laughs more while Jenna
stomps past her into the apartment building. They
walk up the two flights of stairs to Alyson’s door,
and Jenna leads the way. She walks to the wardrobe
and swings the doors open. Colorful clothes flood
the ground as Jenna yelps and steps backwards.

“Sorry...” Jenna says with her puppy dog eyes.

“That’s fine, I didn’t warn you of my overflowing
wardrobe beforehand. But we will be able to find
you something in this mess of clothes. Most of
the ones on the floor are every day clothes. I have
my special outing clothes hanging up because, of
course, that is when I need to look my best,” Alyson
responds with a wink to Jenna.

She then trudges through her clothes that had
spilled out onto the floor and picks two dresses
out for Jenna to try on. The first is a short, black,
backless dress with a deep V in the front. Jenna
looks good in it, but it doesn’t really fit her
personality. The next dress she tries on is a deep red,
strapless, empire waist dress that flows out to just
above the knees. Jenna says she is worried about
the skirt flying up while dancing or from the wind
outside so Alyson takes it back and then gets on the
floor and starts digging around under her bed.

“I was going to wait to give you this until your
birthday, but I feel that tonight is an appropriate
occasion,” Alyson says as she stands up and hands a
shopping bag to Jenna.

Jenna opens the bag and sees a neatly folded dress
inside. She slips it on and falls in love with it. Unlike
Alyson’s black, plunging V with no extra fabric to
breathe, this is a light pink dress overlain with black
lace, and a sweetheart neckline. It is flirty with an
edge of vintage, a style Jenna loves.

“Oh my gosh! Thank you so much, Alyson. It’s
beautiful, I love it!” Jenna exclaims as she jumps up
and gives Alyson a hug.

Alyson smiles, “It’s nothing Jenna, I mean, like
I said earlier, I can’t go out with someone who
dresses like a grandma.” Jenna jokingly pushes
Alyson away.

Alyson calls a cab to take them downtown. The
driver seems interested in the two women so Alyson
flirts with him the whole way downtown. She even
convinces him to accept a kiss for payment when
they arrive at the Ritzz. The Ritzz is a “high class”
club; business people come here to get drunk in
a classy way but still have fun flirting and dirty
dancing with other successful people. Alyson takes
Jenna’s arm and struts straight to the dance floor.
Other dancers engulf them immediately with more than one man coming up to them in seconds. Jenna is with Dillon and tells the men no, but Alyson grinds on whomever asks her. She does what feels good, but she also cares about Jenna and stays facing her the whole time while dancing. After a few songs, Alyson gets the man who was dancing with her, Brad, to buy them both drinks. As soon as he comes back with them, Alyson tells him thanks and then ignores him, putting all of her attention on Jenna. Brad quickly storms away to the other side of the club.

"Are you having fun?" Alyson yells over the music.

"Yeah, it's okay. I think it would be better if I was drunk, or if Dillon was here. I'm starting to worry about the necklace again."

"Drunk it is!" Alyson says playfully. She turns to the bar and orders two more.

Jenna is a lightweight and it starts to show before her second drink is half gone. She drags Alyson back onto the dance floor and starts spinning in circles before stumbling onto the floor. Alyson knew Jenna got like this but didn't expect it would happen so quickly. She helps Jenna to the bathroom where it's quieter and as soon as Alyson plops her down on one of the couches sitting in there, Jenna looks at her with tears filling her eyes.

"I just can't believe it's gone! That necklace was my most valuable possession; I would give up anything to get it back. I would give up my job, the promotion, my apartment, my clothes, my dog..."

"You don't have a dog."

"If I had a dog, I would give her up to get that necklace back," Jenna states matter-of-factly. Alyson just smiles sadly and helps Jenna outside and into a cab. They go back to Jenna's apartment and Alyson stays to help her change into pajamas, drink water, and get into bed. Alyson starts walking out of Jenna's room when she rolls over and says, "Alyson, will you stay with me tonight? I don't want to be alone."

"Of course."

Alyson borrows some of Jenna's clothes and gets into bed with her. They snuggle close together and Alyson puts her arm around Jenna.

I stay with Jenna. I don't leave her and I don't know why. My parents left me. They left me on the doorstep of an orphanage, not even a nice orphanage. They didn't want me, they didn't care about me. They left me. Jenna's parents loved her. They gave her anything and everything she wanted. I despise her for that. She thinks she knows what it's like to feel abandoned, but she has no idea. She will never know what it feels like to be abandoned by the two people who should love you the most. I know. I should just leave her now, helpless and drunk in the middle of the night. Leave her to deal with her own problems. Leave her to figure out what is really going on with Dillon, but I won't. She can't know how I really am. If this friendship ever ends it has to be from me, not her. She doesn't get to do the abandoning. Not to me.

The next morning Alyson wakes up to an empty bed, but she could smell food cooking. She walks out into the kitchen and Jenna smiles widely at her. "Good morning!" she says in a sing song voice.

Alyson returns the greeting and sits at the kitchen counter to watch Jenna finish cooking bacon, eggs, and pancakes. A pitcher of orange juice sits on the counter with two glasses nearby; Alyson helps herself and takes a big drink.

Jenna serves breakfast and sits down next to Alyson at the counter. They talk about random topics before Alyson says she should call a cab.
“No don’t do that, Dillon is coming over, and he can just give you a ride back,” Jenna tells Alyson. “I wouldn’t want to make him do that, besides he drove here to see you, not to give me a ride back home,” Alyson says as they hear a knock on the door.

Jenna opens the door and gives Dillon a big hug. She then asks him, “Dillon, would you be so kind as to give Aly a ride home?”

“Yeah, I can do that,” Dillon shrugs.

“Thanks,” Jenna gives him a kiss on the cheek.

Alyson gathers her stuff from the night before and follows Dillon down to the garage where his car is parked. She doesn’t want to be alone with him. Especially now.

We are alone again. I know I shouldn’t, but I want to. Dillon still wouldn’t resist the temptation, but I swore only once. Once to steal the necklace. Jenna can’t find out Dillon is cheating on her... but we are alone.

Dillon opens the door for me and I get into the passenger seat of his car. We leave the parking garage and drive across town. All I can think of is taking him upstairs with me. Having him again. I put my hand on his leg as he’s driving. He looks at me, and his eyes tell he wants the same thing. We can’t get to my apartment fast enough. Clothes are on the floor before the door is even shut. We go to my bedroom and he is tearing at my skin. He is rough and I can’t get enough of him, but this time when we finish, he, not me, must get up, find his clothes, and leave. I don’t want to keep doing this, we will get caught, but I don’t want to stop either.

Dillon drives back to Jenna’s smirking. Jenna is waiting for him in the kitchen.

“What took you so long?”

“Sorry, Jenna, the traffic was really bad on the way back,” Dillon responds quickly.

“Okay, so what would you like to do today?” Dillon thinks of Alyson; he wants to hold her in his arms and be completely satisfied. Jenna notices his distant look and decides it is time to talk.

“You haven’t been yourself lately. I know there are a lot of big changes going on. I’m going to get a promotion, I’ve gone on a few big business trips, and I haven’t been happy about losing the necklace, but what’s wrong?” Jenna asks Dillon.

Dillon thinks how this is the perfect opportunity to break up with Jenna and be with Alyson, the perfect time to tell her that he cheated on her, that he feels horrible about it, that he knows he should be with Alyson. He tells her.

“I think you should leave. And you probably shouldn’t come back,” Jenna points at the door.

Dillon leaves the apartment, and immediately Jenna cries. Dillon seemed distant, but she had never thought Alyson would do something like this to her. Alyson is her best friend. After four hours on the couch, she calls Alyson.

Okay, I am totally done with Dillon. Why would I want someone like him anyways? He was Jenna’s first, and not only that, he cheated. I can’t be with someone I know cheated. Especially someone who cheated on someone he loved. No. I am done with Dillon.

Knocking on the door disturbs my thoughts. I look to see who it is. Dillon. What is he doing here? He was supposed to go back to Jenna’s. I let him in, and he picks me up and spins me around.

“I have to tell you something,” he pushed some hair out of my eyes. “I broke up with Jenna today. What is he doing here? He was supposed to go back to Jenna’s. I let him in, and he picks me up and spins me around.

“I have to tell you something,” he pushed some hair out of my eyes. “I broke up with Jenna today. We don’t have to hide what we are doing anymore. I told her about us, and now we are free to be together,” Dillon smiled so gorgeously that I
almost forgot what I had just been thinking.

“No. How could you tell her about us? I’m her best friend. You can’t cheat on someone with their best friend, that ruins everything! We are not free to be together. I don’t ever want to be with you. You should leave. Now.”

“But, but Alyson…”

“No. This is over!”

Dillon leaves with his head hanging. I can’t believe he did this. Maybe, maybe I can save it; I just have to act like I don’t know what Jenna is talking about when she confronts me. And she will confront me. I’m her best friend. She will believe me when I tell her I never did anything with Dillon and that he’s a jerk for trying to make such an excuse. Keep the blame on Dillon, and off me.

I just need to calm down, wait for the call, get distracted. Justin is a good distraction. I call him and beg him to come entertain me.

Justin arrives within the hour, and I am completely distracted. I don’t want to leave the bedroom when my phone starts ringing, but it’s probably Jenna, and I can’t miss that.

“Alyson, you’re leaving this very real person, who’s ready for you again, to answer a call?” Justin tugs at my elbow as I climb out of the bed.

“You’re such a tease,” I slap his chest. “Now just be quiet for this,” I walk, naked, to find my phone.

“Hello?”

“Hey, Alyson, it’s Jenna. Can we talk?”

“Sure, what’s up, hun?”

“Can I come over? I would rather talk to you about this in person. It is kind of hard to say.”

“Of course you can. I’ll be here.”

“Okay, thanks.”

“Yep, see you soon,” I say soothingly before I hang up the phone.

I walk back to the bedroom and tell Justin he has to leave. I’m sitting on the edge of my bed putting socks back on when he slides over and starts to nibble on my ear and kiss my neck. It’s tempting to let him stay, but Jenna will be here any minute. Then again, if Jenna sees I have company, she will be more likely to believe me. I give in to Justin for a little longer, and then it really is time to put some clothes back on.

I’m in the kitchen making hot chocolate when Jenna knocks. I tell Justin that’s his cue to leave, and he walks out as Jenna walks in. I see her double take, and her face lights up a bit.

“Hey, Jenna. Do you want a cup of cocoa?”

“Sure, thanks.”

We sit down on the couch and I ask her what’s wrong.

“Dillon broke up with me today. He said it was because he knew he was supposed to be with you and that he had cheated on me with you. I’m sorry for asking you about this, but I really need to know if it’s true, and I knew you would come to me and ask if you were in my position, and I feel really bad about sounding like I’m accusing you of this, and...”

“Jenna, Dillon never cheated on you with me. I don’t know why he would say that. I would never do that. You’re my best friend,” I tell Jenna as soothingly as I can muster.

Jenna looks carefully at me, searching my face. Suddenly, her face relaxes, and she gives me a hug.

“I’m sorry, I should’ve never doubted you.”

“It’s okay, Jenna, I understand. I would be questioning, too. I don’t know what Dillon was thinking. He’s a jerk for what he did to you. I promise nothing has, and nothing ever will happen between us.”

“Thanks, Aly.”

Now I just need to figure out a way to make her never want to talk to him again, to never go back to him if he comes groveling back to her. I need to figure out something about the necklace, too. Maybe
I can convince her that Dillon must have taken the necklace when she asked him to check on her apartment, or at least allude to it. Actually, I feel like she won’t even think about her necklace until all of this blows over, and then it will seem a lost cause. Yes. I won’t say anything about it. I put my arms around Jenna, hugging her. She needs sympathy, compassion, something I don’t actually feel but I can pretend.

“Well, since I know I still have you, who was that I just saw leaving?” Jenna asks me, trying to change the mood of our conversation.

“That was Justin. I’ve known him for awhile, but I’ve never had that kind of relationship with him before. There might be something there. I think I might try to actually keep him.” I hadn’t thought about this, but it felt true. Justin is a really nice guy, and he treats me well whenever I’m with him. I don’t know how long we would last together, but I think I actually want to find out. This is a first.

“Well, he is pretty attractive and seemed to be a little disappointed he had to leave,” Jenna teases. I smile. I may not actually care about Jenna anymore, but I enjoy her company. We talk for a while longer and then she leaves. She has another business trip to go on in the morning, which will take her mind off everything that has happened today.
The Right Wing
Amanda Boerger

I can sit and write for you as you are taken to another land by thought
and I shall think only of you.
How I enjoy to act as a voyeur,
how I enjoy to watch the places where you itch
and the sites where your skin bears traces where crows have stepped
sometimes in the sun, sometimes in the shadows.
And how I long to touch you
but slap one hand with the other in resistance
because this longing is too beautiful, and I am wise
enough to know it is easier to write of love
like it is a good thing when one is in it, but does not have it.

Part of me dies tomorrow
and it is probably the right wing
which has long been in disrepair.

You are not fooling me, it is I you.
I have chosen ignorance. I am well-witted to this exploitation
but I am too tired to pack my things
and make any sort of grand escape.
You lion, you beast.
You are too stupid to know guilt. I shan’t waste my breath.
Marooned
David Alden Herbener

a sink full of dishes
spills onto the linoleum, the illusion of
friendship swept away by thick cloud.
it stole in, clung to the walls, the green
crumb-filled sofa, the dusty lamps. it swallowed
my baked beans, knocked my Medieval Times mug
to the floor, a spider crack at lance point. it steps on the sticky
syrup spots. the roommate reeking rotten leftovers mixes with the scent
of hot dog and boiled ramen; it wafts a path down the hallway
and swirls up, dampening my thoughts. it settles,
hiding in the sunlight; but alone in my room,
the blackness rises. thursday night’s poker is interrupted
by thick burnt popcorn. toilet paper tubes,
white wisps still clinging to the cardboard,
collect in corners—the lack of replacements
is lost on his big dumb head. go
buy us some
more.
11 muscles to frown: to scowl at the waitress who brought a Jack & Coke instead of a whiskey sour.

72 muscles to yell: "This ain’t mine; why don’t you stroll back into the kitchen and try again."

15 muscles to laugh: the whole table howls as her soft lips contort.

56 muscles to slap: her anguish explodes, reddens his pale cheek.

200 muscles to step away: knocking over the Jack & Coke on top of the napkin.

49 muscles to cry: for emotions to flow in rivers, smearing mascara over her cheek’s embankment.

72 muscles to utter: I’m sorry.
In a Crowded Movie Theater

Amanda Pierce

In a crowded movie theater
you never know what you’ll see:
four middle-aged ladies drinking box wine
at a midnight premiere for teenage girls.

You never know what you’ll hear.
Words that’d make your Grandma blush
at a midnight premiere for teenage girls.
Makes you wonder what happened to society’s class.

Words that’d make your Grandma blush
spoken loud and clear in PG-13 rated movies.
It makes you wonder what happened to society’s class
with this graphic language kidnapping our youth’s innocence.

Speaking loud and clear at a PG-13 rated movie,
four middle-aged women drink box wine.
Using graphic language, kidnapping our youth’s innocence,
in a crowded movie theater.
I wish I were around when the last human here died.... It would give me some solace; because, to be quite honest with you, I don’t know where anyone else is.

I feel horribly alone and I grow tired of searching this horrid earth for men like myself. Men that caused the war that sent bombs in to the air, which broke Florida off the main land and isolated millions of people to starve and be prisoners at sea; men that commanded death squads to look for people to kill just to kill after the bombs dropped. I outlived it all; somehow. I was born in 1987, in a country somewhat thriving with a great economy and intense culture. If only those people had known what would happen just fifty years later, and then another fifty years after that.

Around fifteen years ago, raiders roam to look for women to rape and men to brainwash into joining them, now all that remains are their skeletons. They ran out of food, ammo and will. I remember walking up to a group of raiders, one simply shot himself in the head to avoid conflict; the others ran away. I found their bodies a few days later. That was the last time I saw other live humans.

Time is wearing on me because, now that I don’t have to protect myself from other people, I’ve become a victim of my own thoughts and memories which cause the most pain I’ve ever experienced. I really only have to sleep, eating doesn’t do much for me, and it doesn’t matter what kind of water I drink because I still get hydrated and not sick. So, without having to focus on those banal aspects of life, I walk. While I walk I think about my life pre-war and my life post-war and my life now and what I’ve become.
where we lived. I was in a convenience store calling out their names and just freaking out. I threw my rifle down and got on my knees and screamed for what felt like fifteen minutes in one straight breath. I then fell to the ground and just slept for a few hours. I woke up covered in tears and snot and anger, brushed it off and decided I must roam and find life, if it's out there.

So, since the moment of my breakdown, which has been about fifty years, I've been walking around the Midwest and I honestly don't know where I am. I've lost all sense of direction and I just roam, searching for life.

I've gotten into several fights in the fifty years I've roamed. I've taken many lives that tried to take mine, and I feel horrible about it. I probably killed someone who actually had a wife to find or a son looking for his father. I guess I haven't been too peaceful either. I could have easily tried to reform civilization with these people right? Did I have to shoot them? Questions like those are in my mind day after week after month after year. Gnawing at my brain, telling me I could have done something differently, and reminding me of what happened. Thoughts are my worst enemy.

I've settled down by a nice brown lake. I've built a shanty and I have some nice things from my house here, some pictures and mementos I grabbed when I left the house fifty years ago. I sadly couldn't get Fluffy, though. It's okay, I have something different to rest on.

Most nights I stare into the lake, and stare into the green hue of the moonlight's reflection, and I think. I try to take control of my mind and I can't. I cannot deal with this thing in my skull. I try to understand how and why I'm still alive. I just live with it. I deal with it, every day of my life, and it is wretched. I remain optimistic though, because maybe life is still out there and maybe aliens will come or something.
Fur | Seth Harwood
Suzy Q.
Curt Scheafer

Charging handle glides smoothly in its track. Bolt compresses buffer, spring locking in place. Magazine slides in. Flick—the switch bolt flies forward, chambers a round. Sling coils around my arm; butt stock rests against my shoulder—M-16, part of my body.

Roll out the gate secured to Suzy Q. Bumps on highway rock me. Suzy Q. never lets go. She's a new appendage, arms now servants to weaponry. Cheek stains the stock with sweat, eyes now spotters. Berms conceal enemies from us. Suzy Q. whispers to me: finger and trigger, one in the same.
Pieces of Him
Emily Meyer

I gaze into the salon mirror. An unusually dark color of hair—not the typical dirty-dishwater blond—bounces back today. But black would be better. His black—dark, bold, and unchanging, unlike my brown and blond tresses, which travel from one hue to another as they wish. I take in the shape of my face and color of my locks. My father’s image jumps from within the mirror, veiling my own. His square face and severe jawline resonate in my reflection. His thick, shadowy eyebrows plaster themselves above my eyes. I blink, and so does he. My fingers curl around the arms of the hard salon chair at realizing the resemblance. Simultaneously a hand weaves through my locks and clusters of my hair lift up before disappearing with the slice of a scissor. I glance down just in time to follow a piece of my hair as it glides through space and lands on the ground. More wisps of hair circle around my feet, scattering the way his did that day. I float down to meet them as my mind drifts back five years.

Light reflected off the side of my father’s head left bare from a razor’s shave before surgery, his
remaining locks outcropped in all directions. "I can cut it," Val, a friend, offered. Her small hands, matching her petite structure, caressed the top of my father’s head with a smile to hide sad eyes and she used small talk to distract us from our tears. Swift movements of her hands removed what remained of the black, now disordered hair, each slice of her scissor harvesting pieces of my father, his smile, strength, speech. His will to live.

Val gathered the pieces of his hair and a few short weeks later we gathered ourselves to return home from the hospital without my father. That night, Val opened her salon door for us. "Just for this special circumstance," she explained when my mother asked. She guided us to our chairs. "I need a cut and color," Mom murmured. Val turned to me, scissor in hand. "How did it happen?" she asked. My ears funneled in the sound of her light, feathery voice. How did it happen? My brain tried to comprehend, calling in all of its forces, but it only pushed the sounds back out in meaningless jabber.

"I wasn’t there," I said. She embraced my hair as my mind embraced the numbness of itself. I observed the foreignness which surrounded me. My mother, looking extra-terrestrial with her head wrapped in chemically-filled tinfoil, stared vacantly into her new life. Outside the window, the town smiled. The afternoon sun kissed my skin, but my pores couldn’t absorb its warmth. My eyelids lowered and my lips silently counted to ten, hoping for a resurrection. One, two, three...

Logic and reason don’t play well with grief.

I opened my eyes to see my dirty dishwater locks fall at Val’s command, piece by piece. Hair sprayed across the tile floor as pieces drifted from my head, carrying on their backs my smile, my youth, my previous life.

Suddenly the sound of scissors cease and my vision, along with the chair, turns, scattering my memories. I sit up straight in the salon chair and attempt to inhale. My throat tightens, clenching back tears. Normal, please, normal, I beg of myself. My eyes focus again on the salon mirror. I force a smile. His smile. I notice once again the shape of my face, my jaw, my father. He remains, living with each breath I take, speaking with each movement of my lips, guiding me through love and loss, black and blonde.
The Dance

Jamie Nagy

Now the couples waltz across the piece of art.
They tip on their toes and dip their torsos,
pink and yellow dresses on orange canvas
pressed against black and white tuxedos.
And if the dance is elegant and the night holds promise,
then the dresses are negligees of women undone.

Or say the dance is a wedding dance where only newlyweds shine,
then the dresses are flannel nightgowns passively yawning
fingered only gently in the small of their backs for the polite dance.
Or if the dance is a dance that mixes guests into new partners
and the dancers' eyes light up with sparked interest and rise,
then the dresses are calculating cocktail dresses with false
naivete who tease with cleavage and hips on the dance floor.

Or if the dance is a charade for the couple on the verge
where only that couple knows and hides sadness but truth,
then the dresses are costumes covering too many hurts,
arguments, broken glass, a hole in the wall, promises of only more—
friends dancing in their beautiful costumes too tonight, suspect
nothing.
Endings and Entrances

Madelin Mack

Straps snap on my skin, sequins catch on my tights as I pull the leotard over my sweat-slick torso. I discarded my pointe shoes in my wake. They lay on the tile, ribbons tangled like thoughts, limply pointing the way to ten costumes, too much make-up, candy I have no appetite for, and the flowers—“Good Luck! Love, Mom, Dad & all” “Congrats! We’re proud of you!” “Break a leg!”

Later on, there will be more flowers, bigger arrangements—“Deepest Sympathy” “Sending Our Prayers” “Heartfelt Condolences.” I’ll exchange my lipstick and fishnets for a golden cross and knee-length skirt, trade my slick b� for hair tumbling naturally past my shoulders, proof that I’ve grown from the bowl-cut Grandpa gave me as a child as I perched on top of several phonebooks in the big barber chair, watching my hair fall to the ground where my dad would sweep it up while Grandpa updates him on the goings-on in the extended family.

My Grandpa, “Old Clipper.” He picked the right time to go, they said, considering everyone’s here for the recital already, and the funeral isn’t far away.

Grandpa loved that we danced, Miranda and I. On the mirror at the barbershop he stuck a copy of each one of our dance pictures. We hung in our sparkles and feathers right next to cousins holding footballs and cousins in graduation caps—Grandpa’s brag board.

Here, I stare at my feet, speckled with glitter, stray sequins, so pretty and pointed in the pictures. Those are the hardest things to sweep up and throw away, I imagine—glitter and hair.

The other girls flutter around me as my solo approaches, a flock of brightly colored birds—adjusting bobby pins, chirping about my costume—miniature versions of the church ladies crowding my grandmother, making sure she doesn’t need anything. Women flock to the grieving. As the girls give me little squeezes and wish me luck, I teeter in place, my vision still spinning from the fouettés and piqués of the last number, and wish I had chosen a costume with more substance.

I feel naked, raw, peppered with grief—little bullets like buckshot from every direction.

They start talking about their own senior recitals, of course, of song and costume ideas—though most of them have two years left. A painful mixture of jealousy and grief bubbles inside my chest. My eyes threaten to fill with tears once more as I listen to their excitement. I tilt my chin to a staring contest with the fluorescents above, begging them to clear my sight—unsuccessfully. My battle-weary body sighs in response to my thoughts. It’s as if I have to exert physical effort to hold my muscles onto my bones, and my glitter-specked toes are so swollen and callused they look like long-expired baby carrots, far too ugly to wear such pretty costumes, such delicate shoes.

Miranda, my “little” sister, nearing six feet tall and wearing a tutu as if it were created specifically with her in mind, glances at me from her pristine changing area, lipstick in hand. She raises her left eyebrow at my tears. Her flawless composure only unhinges me further as she approaches me, her mouth in a flat line that looks somewhat like a sympathetic smile, dimple and all. She lets one mile-long arm circle my torso in a half-hug, bony elbow
sticking out like the wing of a baby bird. Usually, Miranda at most tolerates my hugs, but she chooses right now to initiate one. Now, I can’t look at her without thinking of next year, the year after that—her onstage, me in the audience. I fight the anger, the metallic envy in the back of my throat. This is not her ending.

“You ok?” she asks, patting my back somewhat awkwardly and arching her body away from me to avoid the sweat rolling off every inch of my skin.

At her quiet question, the iron taste dissipates. I swallow, suddenly ashamed of myself for my pettiness, and respond, “This sucks.”

Her cheek resting on the top of my head tells me she knows, though she doesn’t say so. She remembers the pictures stuck on the mirror at the shop. She autographed his programs every year just like I did—“So I won’t have to ask for an autograph when you’re famous,” Grandpa always said. I wonder what happened to all those programs with our childish attempts at fancy signatures scrawled over the covers. I’m sure Grandpa and Grandma didn’t throw them away. They’re somewhere, still, probably spread like dandelion seeds—in the glove box of the car with insurance papers and Kleenex, in a stack of papers on the desk in the dining room with all the Christmas cards from 2005. I’ll have to look sometime. I let my forehead fall onto my sister’s sharp collarbone. Comfort isn’t always soft, I guess.

I’m ripped from my ponderings and ushered backstage with a speed that leaves me breathless. The music fades, the lights dim, and, before I can even work up some butterflies in my tummy, someone urges: “Go.” So, I do.

Onstage, I can feel my family waiting for me, sitting quietly in their rows. Earlier in the day, my mom placed her carefully penned ‘reserved’ signs on the left side of the second tier—signs to be replaced with extended family members’ bodies for the performance—football cousins, basketball cousins, their little sisters, my little sister, Great Aunt Rita, Grandma.

I sink to my knees, my starting pose, and try not to think of rosaries and church pews. From somewhere on the left side of the second tier, a whistle rings out, a clear single note from someone who loves me.

Later, we’ll grieve together. Now, I dance alone.
A Different View | Brittney Canales

https://openprairie.sdstate.edu/oakwood/vol4/iss3/1
Neverland Pleas

Jessica Slama

Take me away Peter.

Fly me where you are, where spirits never depart, where lost children sprites chase pirates, feet thud, green stained skin crush marshy blades. Permanent giggles drift atop navy waves holding murderous mermaids, over the din of imaginary food fights, piles of mashed potato leaves grazing smile cracked cheeks.

Take me away Peter.

Lead me where I can see my lost boy brother chasing princess Tiger Lily, playing tag with post-adolescent Nebraska girls in baby pink lip gloss and Hollister perfumes. I hear echoes of his laugh, catch his shadow slipping into Neverland, where he never has to wear clothes, one thing he preferred not to do, holding his natural state, free.

Take me away Peter.

Guide me where young and old cement their youth, leaving families for promises of pirate ship adventures and fairy quests. Take me where I can be Wendy, wrapped in his wiry rib-cracking hugs, make everyone take their medicine, cradle each lost boy crying, as I do in every dream.

Take me away, Peter.
Between Messages
Stephanie Carlson

“What?” Annoyed, I lean in to read the message again. I have been trying to talk to my sister for the past week, but Jeanne is “just too busy” for even a five minute phone call. Yet, she finds the time to send this Facebook message at what, 11:50 p.m.? “You’ve got to be kidding,” I mutter under my breath.

So, Jeanne has managed to figure out my daughter is a Democrat. Big deal, so am I. Well, maybe more of a closet-Democrat. Announcing I’m a Democrat in the blood red state of South Dakota would be like riding into the Buffalo Chip campground at the Sturgis rally on a Suzuki. She doesn’t seem to understand, after all this time and despite our mother’s best efforts, not everyone who grew up in that house is a Republican. “Correction, an Uber-Republican,” I chuckle to myself. Jeanne seems to be upset that Romney won’t be the next President and apparently something my tree-hugging, liberal daughter, Ally, posted on Facebook rubbed Jeanne the wrong way. I can only hope that tattling on my twenty-three year old daughter will make her feel better.

It’s early, too early for this nonsense. I stayed up way past my bedtime last night to hear Obama’s acceptance speech. I raise my cup of coffee to congratulate an invisible President Obama sitting across the table from me: “Worth it.” Thank goodness, my son is still asleep and doesn’t hear me having this conversation with myself. I’m pretty sure he’s figured out he descends from a long line of crazy, but why push it? I’ve told Adam about my family. He knows their names and he has heard the funny stories about them—only the funny stories.

I have been extremely careful about not telling him the other ones. They’re just a little too soul-crushing if you know what I mean. He also knows I am estranged from my family, but he doesn’t know why I have no idea how to even begin that conversation.

“Trust me, Jeanne; this isn’t the worst thing that could come out about the family,” I say out loud, as if she can hear me through the computer screen. That’s probably the only thing I am sure of after seventeen years. Kudos to my mother, though. She has somehow managed to keep the reason behind our falling-out from my sisters, my brother, and the rest of the world. “We’re good at keeping secrets in this family, aren’t we, Mom?” Invisible Mom has taken over invisible President Obama’s place at the table.

To say my family is dysfunctional would be an understatement. We’re not the kind of family that puts the “fun in dysfunctional.” No, we are not that kind. We’re the kind of dysfunctional that lands one in the emergency room for “exhaustion”—code for emotional breakdown—which, of course, leads to a prescription for Paxil and several years of painful therapy. “Yep, that’s us,” I remind myself. I wish my family situation was more complicated, but it’s not. It’s actually quite simple.

I can still see the look on my mother’s face. Most of my visit to the emergency room was a blur, but I remember that moment. The doctor, frustrated I’m sure, steps out of the exam room for a minute. He and I have been doing the “no, I’m not going to voluntarily commit myself” dance for the last hour. At least, I’ve managed to convince him I’m not suicidal. Mom is between me and the door, demanding to know “just what the hell is going on.” Focusing on a floor tile, I tell her. It comes out in broken sentences, everything except a name. I can’t say it. My lips won’t move to form his name. The room is filled with an awkward silence. I rush
on, explaining that I just want her to understand that I am not crazy or weak. She is staring at me like I’m a complete stranger speaking in a foreign language. It will take a few more minutes before she says anything. When she finally does speak, it is only to insist that my therapist is putting ideas in my head. “None of your sisters have said anything like this,” she says skeptically, as if a second opinion is required. “What is everyone going to think, if this gets out?” I am clinging to the fringes of sanity and my mom is keeping herself busy with damage control. Why am I surprised at her reaction? This is what she does best; she always controls the situation because perception is reality, right? As I watch her spin the truth, I have no idea the worst is still to come and only years later, will I realize that she never asks who.

“No matter what, just don’t leave before they do.” It has only been a few weeks since my trip to the hospital and I am pleading with my best friend to come to the birthday party I have planned for my daughter. It was supposed to be just a family event, but Mom has called to tell me she and he are coming to the party and we are all going to discuss my little revelation. You don’t have to be a rocket scientist to figure out how that conversation will end. Ally is so excited about her party and it is too late to cancel without disappointing her. I know there won’t be a scene, if there are witnesses. “Please,” I beg.

He is shouting. No, screaming would be much more accurate. I can’t help but wonder how many doors were slammed before he was calm enough to pick up the phone? My mother, apparently not to be out-maneuvered at my daughter’s birthday, has called my ex-husband and he is not happy. Never having to speak to my mother again was supposed to be one of the perks of getting divorced. The room is spinning as I repeat his words, “She called their attorney.” I already know the answer, but that doesn’t stop me from asking him why—if she would tell him that. His voice becomes slow, monotonous; he sounds like he’s in a tin can. Every word is bouncing off the inside of my head. I think I am going to be sick.

“Be careful what you say because you have no proof,” she cautions me. Does she know that I know she called their attorney? I question my mother, “Who are we talking about because,” as I remind her, “I don’t recall naming anyone.” I am desperate for her to say his name, to acknowledge that she’s known all along. “You know very well who we’re talking about,” she snaps. We could go back-and-forth like this for hours, but I have grown weary of the game. “How long have you known?” I blurt out in frustration. This time the silence is suffocating. Someone hit the pause button and time is frozen in that instant, suspended... and waiting. “This family is shit,” she finally says. “Yes, it is,” I agree and hang up, only vaguely aware that I have dropped to my knees.

Those were our last words to one another seventeen years ago. Until Jeanne found me, I haven’t had contact with anyone in the family. Not by choice, mind you. When my mother declares someone persona non grata, no one else inside the family is allowed to speak to that person—or else. My mother is not the type of person you question. Or disobey.

Jeanne and I have only spoken once, shortly after making contact through Facebook a couple of months ago. We talked and laughed, catching each other up, for over three hours—Mom’s third marriage, births of nieces and nephews, deaths, her second divorce, and remarriage. I already knew about most of it, but I let her tell me anyway. I’m just so happy to be talking to her again. She hints at wanting to know why I left, confiding “Mom hasn’t said anything about that, to anyone.” Really? I have
a hard time believing that, but Jeanne insists she doesn’t know. I tell her, “it’s better that you don’t know because nothing good would come of it.” Besides, he’s dead. No point in even bringing it up.
We make plans to spend a weekend together soon—me and her, her daughters, and our baby sister, Donna. At the end of the conversation, she says, almost as an afterthought, “I haven’t told Mom I found you. She doesn’t need to know.” I see. We’re all still keeping secrets.

The Sunday before the election, Donna calls to tell me “she knows.” I am not exactly sure how Mom found out—something about my brother’s wife creeping on my niece’s Facebook page. It doesn’t matter how she found out or who told her. I lose count of how many times Donna reassures me “she’s really happy that we’ve all reconnected.” Uh-huh. Sure. Who are you trying to convince, Donna, me, or yourself? Mom isn’t the least bit happy that we’re all talking again, not after she’s worked so hard to keep us separated. The spell is broken. Everything must go back to the way it was before. Oh, well. I tip my hat to invisible Mom as she prepares to leave. “Well played,” I think, as she evaporates. The size of my sigh that follows surprises even me. Exhaling slowly, I begin my reply to Jeanne’s message.

“Maybe next time....”
Olive Tapenade

Sheryl Kurylo

At the island in my mother's kitchen, she flipped through the yellowing box exploding with index cards, covered in mixed splatters from culinary delights past. Her pupils dilated when she came upon it. A brown ring and smudged marker told me it was time to learn a family recipe. We would make stuffed olives, passed down from grandmothers with more prefixes than I could follow. The recipe came from Italy; my female ancestors holed up in the kitchen pre-holiday for the rigorous preparation.

My mother extracted ingredients from the cupboard and fridge; she snatched up measuring devices and knives, veal and pork, parmesan-reggiano and pecarino-romano, eggs and breadcrumbs, and the jars of olives—green, pimento-in, queen sized.

After removing the red center, I spiral cut each, mounding them to my left where she mixed a meat concoction that made this vegetarian stomach churn and gurgle each time she shoved my hand in to check texture.

Gauging each olive, she rolled a perfect oval swirled the spiral around stuffing it, then washed it with egg before a breadcrumb bath. The olives met their fryer fate.

A splatter leapt out of the pot, splashed onto paper edge, and sunk to translucence. The next morning, replacing the recipe card I inspected each splotch, wondering which one was my mother's.
Run Wharhol | Seth Harwood
A wooden billboard displays the words WELCOME on the edge of a forest in Oregon. A boy named Chance meanders through the trees on a Thursday afternoon. He is a boy of nine years who has a particular fascination for the woods and loves to explore in the outdoors. From a young age, he has loved going camping with his family. But his biggest delight has always been the month of June. For three weeks of the summer, his family stays at his grandparents' cabin on Lake Wahanay. The house is only a ten minute walk from the water and has miles of winding and well-worn trails to traverse.

For the first time, his parents have allowed him to wander the forest alone. His only requirements are that he must carry his long range radio, stay on the designated paths, and return before sunset. After some rigorous training from the Nature Wardens and numerous merit badges, his parents feel safe in knowing that their child is old enough to know proper techniques for exploring the wild.

His explorations have mostly been short for the first few days as they were spent getting settled and doing household chores. Today is the first day that Chance gets to explore. After a quick hug from his mother and a supply check, he travels down one of the many trails leading toward the lake. This path leads him to a clearing where one of the many creeks that feed into the lake winds through the wood. Ignoring the STAY ON PATH sign, he sidles through a few evergreens and sits on a large stone with his wilderness manual. He checks to see if he can correctly guess the variety of trees and shrubs that sway with the warm breeze of late spring.

Satisfied that he has correctly identified the tree in question as a Brewer Spruce, he lays back to soak in the sunlight and enjoy the fresh air for a few moments.

This is his utopia among the trees and wildlife. His life-long ambition of becoming a park ranger grows with every passing summer. His home in Beaverton has a few parks where he can enjoy the natural world but they don't compare to the woods near the family cabin. Besides the occasional squirrel scurrying up a tree or a lost deer bounding through the city limits, there are hardly any wild animals there. So, when he hears a rustling of branches behind him, his initial reaction is to investigate.

Very few of the more dangerous inhabitants of the Oregon forests are ever seen in this park so he feels safe in his curiosity.

Just in his periphery, he sees a bush shake from something other than the breeze. He knows he must be quiet in order to catch what is moving about the trees. He creeps through the wood, taking care to avoid any fallen branches that could alert his prey. Gradually, he slinks closer to the curious fauna. Another shrub moves ever so slightly and he sees a fluff of fur move behind a branch. He thinks it may be a rabbit.

"Whatcha doing?" a voice inquires.

"AHHHHH!" Chance yelps, startled by the unexpected sound.

"AHHHHH!" the other voice screams. A young boy, near to Chance's age, looks back in horror.

"What'd ya do that for?"

"You scared me! I was trying to catch this bunny and now you scared it away. Thanks a lot." Chance scowls at him and turns away, moving back to the creek.

"Sorry..." the other boy says with a frown, "I didn't mean to."

"Whatever," Chance mumbles.
"My name's Aiden, Aiden Delaney," the boy says cheerily. "What’s yours?"
"Chance Carter."
"Pleasure to make your acquaintance, Chance," the boy says with a smile.
Chance turns back to give him an odd look and a small nod before turning back to his rock.
"I haven’t seen any other kids out this way in forever. Whatcha doing here?"
Puzzled by the other boy’s demeanor and choice of words, Chance looks up at Aiden who follows him back to his rock. "My grandparents have a cabin out here and my family visits every summer."
"Oh. Well, I’ve never seen you before."
"Now ya have," Chance snarls.
"My family lives here year round. My step dad works for the park, though I dunno what he actually does. You sure you’ve been here before?"
"Yes, every summer my family stays here for a few weeks." Chance says over his shoulder; he has returned to searching the bushes for wildlife.
"Oh, if ya say so," Aiden pauses. "Whatcha doin' out here all by yourself?"
"Just exploring. This is the first summer I got to go out on my own. I love this place."
"Really? I think it’s kinda boring. I’d much rather live in a city. I mean it’s pretty and stuff, I just don’t have a lot of friends to hang out with."
"Boring? I’d kill to live out here. I live in Beaverton. It’s okay, I guess, there just isn’t much there I like." Chance’s agitation is slowly wearing off. "So, you say your dad works for the park?"
"Yeah. He does a lot of stuff. He rides around on a cart through the campgrounds and checks on people if they need help. Or at least, that’s what my mom said. We don’t talk much, I guess. He’s been good to my mom, but..." Aiden pauses for a moment. "He does some informational stuff, too."
"Cool. Does he get to work with any animals or is it just maintenance stuff?"
"I dunno. He just does stuff for the park sometimes. I think they have a picture of him in one of the advertisements for Lake Wahanay. That’s cool, I guess."
"So, what are you doing out here?"
"Well, I was looking for my airplane I lost a while back, but I don’t think I’ll ever find it."
"What’s it look like?"
"It’s a green bomber plane. It was my step dad’s when he was younger," Aiden’s voice hitches.
"He gave it to me for my birthday. I told him I put it in a safe place but I lied. I took it out here to play around, but I don’t remember where it got to. I have the worst luck. He’s gonna be so ticked off."
"Well, where’d ya last have it?"
"Somewhere around my secret spot, I think. I dunno, I think I left it by a tree, but I had to rush home so I left it there. I haven’t been able to find it since."
"Secret spot, eh? Where’s that at?"
"If I tell you that, I’ll have to kill you," Aiden points at Chase’s chest.
"What?"
"Just kiddin’. I’ll show you, you just have to promise not to tell anyone."
"Who am I gonna tell?" Chance asks with a raised eyebrow.
Aiden thinks for a moment before shrugging and nodding toward the direction of his secret spot. The two meander through the trees. Chance feels a bit worried, as they have gone off the trail a ways, but decides his guide has lived here long enough, he must know his way around. They follow the creek up a few hills before reaching a fork in the stream. At that point, the flow splits around a mound of earth from a larger stream. They hop over the water and begin following the other creek that weaves its way through another part of the forest. The way
seems fairly linear and has enough landmarks that Chance makes mental notes of each as he was taught to do.

The creek weaves through the wood and leads to another small clearing. The water joins another stream before flowing off a small cliff into a deep pool. The water’s movement has cut deep into the earth here and gathers in a small pond at the bottom of the waterfall. In all of his years staying at Lake Wahanay, Chase had never seen this place; this little oasis awes him. Crystalline water flows into the large pool down a rocky wall covered in green moss. The trees circle the pond, creating a thick canopy that blocks out most of the direct sunlight except for a few spots that shine and flicker on the moving water.

"Pretty neat, ain’t it?" Aiden says at Chance’s agape expression.

"Yeah... How’d you find this place?"

"Just kinda stumbled on it. My parents let me wander out here when I want. My mom works at the grocery store a few miles away and I hardly see my stepdad this time of year. He’s too busy with work. And when he is home, he just drinks a lot. Sometimes, I’m not sure if he even knows I’m there."

"This looks like a great place to swim,” Chance grins, trying to change the subject.

"Oh no, I can’t swim. No one ever taught me."

"You live near a lake... and you don’t know how to swim?"

"I used to be able to, I guess. I just had a bad experience once."

"What happened?"

"I don’t know, I just don’t like being in the water, okay? I don’t wanna talk about it." Aiden kicked a rock viciously into the pool. "There are plenty of other fun things to do besides swimming, anyway."

"Geez, okay... no swimming."

The two boys become fast friends as they joke and explore the surrounding area for the next few hours. Figuring the journey there took them about half an hour, Chance says goodbye to his new friend in the evening ahead of the sunset. He’d get a worrying call on his walkie-talkie and a firm berating when he got home if he didn’t get back in time for dinner. Aiden stays behind for a bit to look again for his lost airplane, but they agree to meet back there the next day. And they do.

For the next few days, right after 1 p.m., the two boys meet at Aiden’s secret spot to explore. Chance brings his fishing pole one day to see if he can catch any trout or other fish that swim in the shallow waters. Chance offers to teach Aiden how to fish, but he declines. He simply enjoys the company. However, Aiden does know the best places that Chance can find bait. After a bit of a mishap, the two settle back down at the side of the pond; they had stumbled upon a not too friendly hornets’ nest that did not take kindly to the boys’ curiosity. By the water’s edge, Chance first notices a splotch of bruising that peeks out above Aiden’s shirt on his neck.

"You okay there?” Chance asks, pointing to the bruised area.

“What? Oh...” Aiden goes quiet for a moment. "How’d that happen?"

“I dunno, I just get... clumsy sometimes,” he laughs shallowly.

Chance wants to ask more but senses that he may upset his friend, so he remains silent. The subject is dropped and not spoken of again, but Chase’s eyes often drift to the bruise when Aiden is not paying attention. They continue their explorations of the surrounding area. Every day, Chance waves goodbye to his friend to head home just in time to make it to dinner each night. Their daily playtime
continues for a few more days until Tuesday of the next week. Chance waits around at the secret spot for a few hours alone, as Aiden does not show. It’s not until later that afternoon that Aiden meanders into sight.

“Where were you?”

“I’m sorry... I got lost, I guess. I went looking for my plane again. I have to find it soon or...”

“How’d you get lost? You live here don’t ya?”

“I dunno, my head’s been weird lately,”

Aiden shrugs.

“Okay...” Chance knows there is more to his friend’s story, but again, doesn’t pressure him. The two remain quiet for a while longer.

“Still haven’t found it?” Chance asks.

“No... my stepdad is gonna be so pissed. You wanna help me look again?”

The two set off into the surrounding area, combing through the bushes. Chance spots a shiny object in the brush but it’s just an old beer can. They continue their search up to the water’s edge where the pond flows into another creek that winds off deeper into the wood. A small fleck of something shiny below the surface catches Chance’s eye.

“Wait! I think I see something!” Chance hollers.

“Better not be another can. Where is it?”

“Right there...” Chance keeps his eye on it and points to the small triangular point that juts out above the muddy bottom of the creek. Aiden bends forward to get a closer look when Chance notices something in the reflection of the water. The calm water bounces sunlight up and shows a small drop of blood had begun to run down the side of his friend’s face. Startled, he looked up at Aiden. The blood spilled a tiny drop on his friend’s shirt and ran down his cheek.

“Aiden, you’re bleeding!”

“What?! Where?!?”

Chance reaches for his friend’s face but Aiden pulls away fast. Aiden runs his hand over his cheek, searching for a cut. Chance runs over to his backpack for a cloth.

“Okay, you scared me for a second there. I’m not really bleeding am I...?” Aiden laughs.

“What...? No, I just saw...” Chance gawks at his friend. The clear red line of blood had vanished. He again reaches for another look but Aiden steps beyond his grasp. “I swear to you, I just saw blood.”

“That’s really weird, Chance. I don’t know what game you are playing but I don’t think I like it....”

“I’m not playing a game, I know what I—”

“Maybe it was just the light. It’s getting kinda dark out.... Wait! What time is it?!”

“Just after five thirty, why?”

“Crap! I have to get home. I said I’d be back after an hour. My stepdad is gonna kill me....” Aiden mutters to himself as he runs off.

“But you forgot your... plane.” Still flabbergasted by what just occurred, Chance looks back to the object in the water. He takes off his shoes and socks, rolls up his cargo pants, and wades into the shallow creek. The water isn’t too deep where the silvery glow shines, so Chance slowly moves through the mud as to not stir up too much of it and cloud his view. He reaches down to retrieve the item but it doesn’t budge. He reaches his other hand down to get a better grip and begins to pull again, shifting it back and forth in the mire. Slowly, the object moves out of the muck and a small propeller emerges from the bottom. The movement in the water stirs up more mud and distorts the light. Another pull and the plane breaks from the grasp of the pond. Chance figures this must be Aiden’s missing toy. He plans to take it to his friend’s house tomorrow; it’s too late now.

He wades back out of the water and shakes off the mud from his feet, wiping them off with his socks. With his shoes back on and the plane sufficiently
de-mudded, he begins his trek back home for the night. The water has distorted the paint around the center of the toy but the silver tips remain glossy. The wheels have rusted and the left engine is missing a propeller, but for the most part, it appears to be intact. Chance can’t wait to return the toy to his friend. His mind goes back to the strange image he saw that day. Perhaps the forest light was just playing tricks.

The next morning, Chance finishes up a few of his daily chores and grabs his backpack for the day. He tells his mom that he’ll be back in time for lunch. He sets off to the area where the employees of the park stay, figuring it’ll be easy to find Aiden’s home. The main cabins and resort lodge are located in a separate area, with a fork on the way into the park. The one on the left leads to the public area while the right to an area meant for staff. He had to go there a few years back after he slipped on one of the boat docks, and hit his arm on the side as he fell in the water. His mother quickly carried him over to the ranger station, adamant that he had broken something. It turned out to just be a bruised wrist.

The road leads to a few buildings including a ranger station and a small cabin. A little farther, one larger house peeks out above the trees. A short dirt road diverts from the pavement towards it, so Aiden figures that this must be his friend’s home. He follows the road up to the front of the house that has an old, dirty Chevy in the driveway. Once he gets to the house, he heads up the stairs of the front stoop. Even if the occupants aren’t exactly who he’s looking for, he thinks they’ll be able to direct him to the right place. At the top of the steps, he knocks three times. A moment passes before Chance hears movement inside and the door creaks open.

“Can I help you?” a man in dirt-covered jeans and a stained tank top mumbles. Chance catches a whiff of alcohol on his breath.

“Umm, are you Mr. Delaney?” Chance asks cautiously.

“Yes I am.”

“Is your son home?”

“What? I’m off duty, kid. I can’t help—”

“Oh, I’m sorry, I don’t need anything. I just came here to give this back.” Chance throws off a shoulder strap of his backpack and reaches in to grab the plane. “We found this but I wasn’t able to get it out of the creek before he left. Your son, I mean. Umm, so here,” he says, handing it to the man.

“My son? How did...” The man inquires, his cheeks paled slightly.

“We found it yesterday, but he was late, so he had to run home before I dug it out. I’m really sorry about that, too. We were goofing around and lost track of time....”

The man stood still, gazing intensely at Chance for a few moments. “Like I said, I’m off duty. Now scram.” The man pulls the door closed.

“Where is Aiden? He says he’s usually here this time of day. I was hoping I could—”

Before he could finish, the door slams shut. Chance stares at the spot where Mr. Delaney’s face had been for a moment, trying to understand his reaction. He figures Aiden’s dad is just a mean drunk. Shouldering his backpack, Chase retraces his steps down the road. At the very least, Aiden wouldn’t have to worry about the plane anymore. He arrives home a little after noon and has lunch with his parents. After helping with the dishes and taking out the trash, he heads off to the trails again to meet with his friend. He finds Aiden sitting by the pond staring into its depths.

“Hey, I found your dad’s plane.”

Aiden stands quietly.

“Are you okay?” Chance wonders if perhaps
returning the broken and rusted plane was not such a good idea. "I went by your house and dropped it off there. Did something happen?"

And still, his friend says nothing. Maybe, he's just spacing out, Chance thinks. He reaches to grab his friends shoulder when he notices the stream of blood from the day before had reappeared on his friend's face. A second crimson stream had crept down the back of his neck. Startled, Chance pulls back and stares, making sure that he doesn't look away. If he kept his eyes fixed on them, maybe they wouldn't disappear this time.

"I went home..." Aiden whispers. "They were fighting about something. I tried to get them to stop but they couldn't hear me. Why couldn't they—"

"Aiden, you're bleeding, and I'm not kidding this time." Chance reaches again for his friend but Aiden lurches away from his grasp.

"They couldn't hear me. It was like I wasn't even there. How—" His voice is slow, and Aiden's eyes gaze away from Chase.

"Aiden, we need to get you to the hospital. You could be seriously injured—"

"NO! THEY WOULDN'T JUST IGNORE ME! I DIDN'T MEAN TO LOSE THE PLANE. I HAVE TO GO FIND IT—" Aiden shrieks, suddenly looking at Chase. Without warning, Aiden wildly turns, running off in the opposite direction of the campgrounds.

"WAIT!" Chance screams, tearing after his friend.

Chance follows as fast as he can but Aiden's feet carry him faster into the wilderness than he can manage. Chance does his best to follow his friend into woods they had not yet explored but somewhere, Aiden disappears. With every passing second, Chance's worry grows that he may not be able to find him. He begins to panic, but does his best to not fully give in to the fear. He reaches for his backpack and grabs the radio in hopes that he could reach the rangers and get help. But on each station,
grabs for his friend but he is too late and Aiden vanishes in the splash. Chance wakes from sleep with a scream.

Day breaks outside his window and Chance stares at the ceiling. He’s had enough waiting around. His parents will be mad, he knows, but he must help. He grabs his backpack and sneaks out of the house; he sprints down the worn path to their secret spot to see if he can find the search party. Upon arriving, his heart skips a beat as he sees several police officers and rangers carrying a large white bag towards a rescue vehicle.

"NO, NO, NO!" Chance screams.

"Kid, what are you doing here?! You have to go home," a ranger yells.

"HE CAN'T BE DEAD. HE JUST CAN'T—"

An officer grabs him and holds Chance down while he claws and kicks, trying to get to his friend. Chance struggles violently before collapsing on the ground, sobbing. A few minutes later, his parents arrive; they console him, but it still takes about an hour before he can talk to the authorities.

"Chance, how did you know about the body?"

"What? Is that not Aiden? I went to his house yesterday and talked to his dad. After that, I came out here to find him and he was bleeding. I thought he might be hurt but he didn’t respond to me and ran off and—" The tears that had been assuaged for a few moments flooded back.

"Son, that boy you say you were talking to disappeared several years ago. No one has been able to locate him. He’s been gone for three years."

"What... NO! I just saw him yesterday. I talked to his dad and I saw him. Aiden’s my age and we went—" He gasps for a breath in between sobs. "We went fishing and we caught bugs together, and—" Chance’s sobs mumble the rest of his words. "We aren’t sure yet, but we think the bones that we found in the creek were his. The size fits his age group."

"You’re lying, that can’t be him, then. I just saw him, I swear!"

His mother cradles him again, trying to calm him down. His cries subside and his parents lead him home. Exhausted from the day, Chance collapses in his bed, refusing to eat supper that night. His body drifts into a state of dreamless slumber. For the next week, Chance does little outside of his daily chores. He sits in his room and stares out the window all day for the remainder of the trip. Eventually, the family decides to head back to Beaverton earlier than planned.

Two weeks after leaving Lake Wahanay, a news report displays pictures of the body accompanying the title Child Found. Reports had come back conclusively that the bones belonged to a boy named Aiden, who had gone missing three years ago. A fractured skull from an impact and various breaks indicated that the death was not caused by drowning. The stepfather had been taken into custody for questioning but he refused to talk. The next day, he was found with a bullet wound to the head and a scribbled, barely legible note. Aiden’s mother later confessed that her husband was an abuser but she was out of town when Aiden disappeared. Her alibi was founded and allegations against her were dropped once the stepfather was found dead.

All this information floods over Chance, but he no longer cries. A part of him still wonders if the body that they found is actually Aiden. The other part feels at peace. He still misses his friend, but he knows that now he could maybe move on. That night, he dreams he is back at the pond with his friend. The two sit in silence and enjoy the fresh air for what feels like hours. Not a word is spoken until Aiden turns his head to his friend and smiles.

"Thank you."
Lilith

Jessica Frederick

I was born blinded,
always groping, grasping,
reaching for the thing I could not see
but I could feel.
They said it was divine retribution,
a sinner in all but name.
They said it was all divine plan,
a heretic without the Miracle's love.
They said He punished the tempter—even a mother forsook her child.

I blindly stumbled into a cave
occupied by a bound and starving man.
I set him free, the dark betrayer.
The devil gave me sight
and laughed at me.
I witnessed a world with a demon's eyes
and I followed him.

My demon eyes saw only tyrants and the feeble;
they feared my eyes just as I abhorred theirs.
"Are we going to hell?"
I would follow this devil who gave me sight
no matter how horrible the visions.
The tyrants panicked under my gaze—
these demon eyes promised difference, change.
They feared my madness, my freedom.
"Child, this is hell."
He laughed at me again and I grasped my freedom.
I touched the feeble and they became demons;
I freed their temptation—the darkness of their hearts.
And the tyrants cried in alarm.
"She always smiles the most beautifully
Before she strikes."
Soulbound (Dreamcatcher)

Tyler Ekern

I feel two sides
pulling on each other,
sparking me insane.

This prison is my own;
I feel rapping at my door,
hands pull down my skin,
clawing at my sanity—
she haunts me—

jolt awake.
I scream
but nothing will come out.
What is happening to me?
My body is changing, not my own.

I rattle and shake,
eyes fully open.
And then it stops,
and I fall back asleep.
Tears fall from my eyes
and I am calm.

I breathe deeply, though
my soul is stolen.
She has taken it;
we are soul mates,
our roses intertwined for eternity.
We have become one;
we are soul bound,
fingers to each other's lips.
We cry together, building love
in our dreams.
My Repeat Superman
Amanda Rosse

Eminem’s rap, your anthem. I watch as
you smack fingers against
hard table surface, whipping
your head back, forth, plaid
hat bill you always wear
bobbing along with the beat
as you say to me, lyrics memorized
repeating over and over,
“I can’t be your superman.”

You push your car’s black hood
against my mini white rear, walk
towards my already broken door, stand
next to my small frame,
your hands rubbing my shoulders
lingering with soft affection,
comforting me after another car
wrecked; I remember you
saying over and over,
“I can’t be your superman.”

My head buzzes from bubblegum vodka
shoved down my throat over and over,
sending you message after message of
wrong choices; street
dancing, bra baring, man
teasing, grinding strangers.

I called you threatened and afraid,
heard you say you’d fuck him up, leaping
towards my rescue. I forgot,
you can’t be my Super Man.
Too bad; you already are.
Easily Attached
Suzie Vander Vorste

Feelings. Such a sticky word,
coated as thickly as pancake syrup
and just as hard to shake off,
attaching itself to your hand like
amber cords of a spider web
linking fingers together—
nothing to idly pick up and explore.
Without an awareness that it’ll seep,
expand, a dot on the leg of your blue jeans,
a clump entangled in your hair, growing
to smudges on the table, a tiny pool
next to a glass plate, needing elbow
grease and firm pressure to scrub clean.

Feelings.
A notion to brush off quickly
before it latches onto your jacket, carried along
for a ride, an invading parasite, its roots interweaving
lines of friendship and more than,
leeching on hopes, sucking warm sun
from idealized sunsets. A potential
weed that will spread, erode, overpower
existing vibrant plants, corrupt
soil, overtake set spaces and spill
over set boundaries, creating a situation that
will care for poisons to kill.

Feelings. Prickly emotions to tame and harder
to fasten down. Yet lasso
them immediately with a resilient cord as cowboys
would entrap a rogue bronco, binding
rope around its neck, pull
with thick leather-gloved hands, strain
muscles against leg-kicking, temper-flared
upsets, force rebellions to calm,
cease. Corral this horse
back to manageable, needed
lines, fenced within
a cage and pray such beasts
keep eyes down and
do not look towards the green
grass that glistens outside.
Colonel Sanders Delivers the News

Curt Scheafer

a slender, scrawny boy, blinded by
white walls and flickering fluorescent lights,
folds his hands and bows his head. paper
rolled across the examining table
crinkles with every breath. flame
covered boxers—only barrier
between skin and cackling paper.

a young soldier chit-chats with his sergeant,
assaulted by desert grit. whistles descend,
screaming a deadly battle cry. the sergeant
grabs his collar and hurls him to the ground.
walls rattle as smoke bellows from buildings
down the road. A weaker whistle howls above,
he folds his hands over his head, waiting...

a slender, scrawny boy flinches as the door
clangs against the doorframe. a doctor
with pure white hair, mustache, goatee, and horn-rimmed glasses drums a manila folder against
his leg. the boy gulps down a grenade
while fidgeting with flames. Dr. Col Sanders
slid out a form: Sign in block 13, son.
Tension
Matthew Gruchow

My faith is stitched with gossamer threads,
with mornings when prayers rose
like the smoke of frankincense and myrrh,
then turned sour like unripe plums.
Doubts—a din that holds sleep at bay.

I’ve been told I’m with Christ at Golgotha,
Redeemer and redeemed hanging
in the dying desert sun.

No.

I’m the camel squeezing through the needle’s eye;
the prodigal in love with the mire.

My faith, once a lion,
backed into a high school locker and bullied,
Holiness an algebraic equation of knowing and unknowing.
My sins like beads that clack and click on God’s abacus.

I’ve become a temple and an empty tomb.

I’m a headstone whose epitaph was etched,
then chiseled clean, and carved again to read,
“Let’s face it, no one really knows the man
who lies here.”

My eyes closed—kneeling before Host and Wine—
mind and heart taut as harp strings.
anatomy

Kayla Ramey

i think i miss you.
in fact i know i do.
the way your shoulder blades
jut from your back
and how your jeans hang
from your hipbones.
i study you
when you’re not looking.
i do believe
i learn more
from you
than from
my textbooks.

tick tock

Kayla Ramey

too many times
i find myself watching
the hands of the clock.
i count along with it
in anticipation of you.
i worry about you
and the brightness
of your eyes.
i am tired of waiting
but we still have so far to go.
You, My Stone
Rebecca Erickson

I never wanted you to be
a stepping stone on my well-worn
path. The stones—faded gray, some
boulders with jagged edges
like knives, others pebbles, or skipping rocks,
smooth like stones in a river, all
permanent and unyielding, beautiful
and simple. Then you, deep set and final
on my path. Your presence
guides me around this dilapidated route
through this wayward forest.

But oh, how I wished for more. Wished for
soft spoken stories that wrap around us
like an orchid on the brink of bloom. Longed
for the subtle pulse of the poem
that keeps us on the right route—
two songs, one soft and hesitant, the other
piercing through flesh in its boldness, joining
in a cacophony of sweet sound.
Hungered for the shared passion
for words that may injure or heal; words
that may direct us if we lose our
way, or swallow us like a tornado.

And yet, as I walk this wonderful
but ordinary path, I see it coming to an
end. Nowhere to turn
beyond the decaying stones and dying plants.
And as I stand on this final stone,
hesitant on which way to go,
a shudder runs through my body.
Cornucopia
Jessica Slama

Cornucopia love abounds fruits in rose petal promises,
shared vows and children picking yellow-
purple mother flowers.

Our softness is lotioned summer skin, spiced dew, cashmere;
your flower gift caresses my cedar desk, moves to stay with
my sunset-patched satchel for a newer day.

The petals' colors fade in wrinkles, time erasing teenager's blush,
brown and veined, while your cracked gift crumbles,
leaves memory children running through sunflowers and brome.

Our knotted, blue-toned hands touch palm to
petal, while our graying eyes graze our land,
dusty promises and flaking smiles.

Embers
Matthew Gruchow

We lie side-by-side in bed
like matchsticks
with sulfur too soiled to spark.

The flint of naked flesh
fails to flare

as though hidden lips pursed
and blew us out
like twin torches—
extinguished.

Yet, just then
we reach—
kindling nursed by ember hands.
Home and Away
Jamie Nagy

Home Games
After all these years, I realized my heart
was propped by your pressed suit,
comments on the radio, your winning ways.

I should've guarded myself with another love besides
you, your team, your kids. Now I’m scuffed.
You fasten belt, cufflinks, tie clip—stylish touches
another scoreboard waits for you tonight.

It's not your fault (is it?) I lost myself.
Barbell of winning on your shoulders,
me, knocking out squats with the kids on my back,
with my ballet shoes pointed.

You escape—a nap hours before the game,
then leave with a silent strained face.
We practice piano, do homework, eat dinner,
grab the toy bag, money for treats, gather tickets,
get TJ from basketball practice, Natalie’s friend
who wants to come, pre-game broadcast on the way.

I sit in my seat. I cheer, track stats
to give accurate report when your dad calls
even though you told me, “Are you kidding?
We don’t even hear cheerleaders during the game.”

Away Games
How lonely to marry both a husband and his mistress.

A drawer, now empty
of his Oral B and Old Spice
waits for its belongings to
return, to be filled again.

Right side of their bed, best
left empty until he and his things
return. She wonders where
his toothbrush is now, at 10:49 p.m.

She, in her comfort clothes
each night while he’s gone
—distracts her body
with jersey knit, holey t-shirts.
She knows he has two wives.

His passion for the other and its demands
leave her with an empty stomach.

But his mistress promises
positive press, trophies and titles,
better-than-sex cake, higher
rankings, and whispers of moves
up his ladder. In her, he deposits
his desire for success.

Your wins once filled my belly. But now, I’m hungry.
She Used To Dress Nice
Devanshu Narang

I wake up to her stray hairs
colliding against the curtains.
I jump out to my apocalypse.
The bed creak is hushed by her breath,
it’s louder than ever this time.

I hold her face with both hands,
looking for an excuse to keep her—
a sign of a bruise or a scar
“He doesn’t treat me like you did…”
“Yet.”

It’s not the same person I came with;
the backseat of her car smells funny.
She glances into the rearview mirror,
asks me what I am doing here.
“Remembering.”

She runs her hand on my bare chest;
nothing hurts anymore, not even her.
“I need to go back; you know I’m not yours”
“Stay another year.” I want to see this through to the end.

A certain dismissal remains constant,
her stoicism in full effect.
She doesn’t know yet
that is exactly what I love about her,
how she’s reduced to a shell of herself.

“I don’t think about you too often.”
“I’ve tried not to think about you.”
She marauds the room in silence,
drenched in sweat and regret;
the occasional drop is a sign of her leaving.

“Why do you sound so different?”
Does she even know that’s not me?
I stand aghast at the thought
that it’s not just her who’s changed—
Even I, I don’t love her anymore.

She emanates a trail of pale light,
footprints lined with gold and white.
The depressed clay feels like her touch,
cold and calculated, one worse than other.
Good bye dear. I’ll wake up tomorrow instead.
Girls Will be Girls  |  Charles Elmore
Binding

Matthew Gruchow

The Chinese once bound their daughters
feet with cotton bands soaked
in blood and herbs,
so taut they bent
and
snapped
toddler
bones
until they were thought beautiful—
hobbled Golden Lotus feet;
sensual mutilation
performed while mothers
watched.

In such many ways we bind
a man’s heart with tourniquets
soaked in shame and guilt,
until he bites his lip against
the howl of pain—
his soul turns septic,
folds in on itself,
like the tiny toes of Lotus Feet
while the world
watches.

And we call the grotesque beautiful,
see his crippled state reflected
in the faces and feet
around him.

Who can unloose a man
from cords like these,
with knots that would
snap a samurai’s blade?
Freedon Fry
Sheryl Kurylo

He sizzles
in bubbling oil.
He dives in
clean-cut, smooth,
off-white—emerges
from olives crackling
amber, golden
crisp. He sparkles
under iridescent lights.

Tanned suit dressed
in salt lends
bite of sea, texture of brine.
Snatched by metal scoop,
he tumbles into paper carton.

Cradled in glossed scarlet
with yellow pinstripes,
his friends pile atop.
The mound bursts
from glistening coffer.
A grease ring creeps
down exposed white edge.

Into paper packet,
fingers plunge,
jamming fries into mouth.
He watches
a pointed tongue
run circles
to lick off grease, remaining
salt molecules.

Lips smack,
stomach filled—
he delights
tastebuds worldwide.
Freeze
Leah Alsaker

I shift my weight from foot to foot, trying to keep my classmates in my range of vision among the mass of people surrounding me in this Washington, D.C. subway. A lilting jazz melody reaches my ears, and I glance at a keyboardist in the center of the station, his fingers jumping across the keys as if burnt by their touch. I nod—the movement stitches the piece together, hesitation would only unravel it.

My gaze moves on, taking in particles of information. The tracks, seemingly endless, melt into the darkness. Steel bars crisscross the tunnel like empty picture frames. But the noises—the beeping of machinery, the chattering voices of my classmates and hundreds of strangers—meld together, clashing against my ears like two octaves of piano keys held down.

An automated voice comes on the loudspeaker. "Please board the subway quickly. If a door closes on a purse, limb, or any other object, it will not open, and the subway will start. The doors will close in twenty seconds. Thank you."

I feel the ground vibrate beneath my feet as the yellow glow of approaching headlights rush into the tunnel—thunder before lightning. A subway speeds into the station, screeching to a halt.

The doors open with a hiss, and people swarm out of the subway while the crowd on the platform struggles into the outflow. I feel fleeting pressure on my hands, arms, and back as people brush past me, widening the gap between my classmates and I.

I start to shuffle along, but somehow in the midst of the swarming crowd two panda bears on a metro D.C. ticket lying on the ground, nearly defaced with mud, catch me. I linger with one leg planted on the platform and one hovering over the entrance of the train when the doors hiss. One step would rejoin me with my classmates, but before I can take it, I remember the loudspeaker announcement. If a door closes on a purse, limb... My body freezes with indecision.

The moment suspends itself like a drawn out note.

A jolt snaps through my body as a hand snatches me backwards, my feet following half a second behind. I turn to see Mrs. Davidson, my English teacher, wave at my classmates before they speed away with a whoosh. Tears fill my eyes, obscuring my vision. I tip my head and turn my body away from Mrs. Davidson, running my hand across my eyes.

Click. Click. Mrs. Davidson texts the other chaperones. For a minute, I feel amazement and gratitude combine into a harmonic chord of awe. This woman got between me and a subway. I open my mouth to thank her, only to quickly close it again.

Guilt floods in. Conflicting notes destroy the harmony and replace it with discord. I broke the most important rule—"don't get cut off from the group." I broke from the crowd around me, shuffling, pausing instead of striding; I could have avoided this if I had emulated them.

"Mrs. Davidson, I'm sorry. I should have got on the subway. This is my fault."

She smiles at me, "No, it's not your fault. We'll just wait until the next subway. It will be fine."

Mrs. Davidson asks me something about the keyboardist, as my attention turns to hear the well of the beginning of a song. I study his fingers for the first time. Even though they stretch like acrobats to form elaborate chords, they must occasionally pause. I realize the keyboardist could advance without pausing, but doing so would replace
harmonic notes with dissonant ones. Sometimes slowing down, not moving forward, stitches the world together.

I turn my head back towards Mrs. Davidson, opening my mouth again. "Thanks for stopping me. If you hadn’t—I mean... I am glad you did."

Mrs. Davidson chuckles, "Anytime you want to stop in front of a subway... Well, try not to do it too often."

The ground once again rumbles and headlights flood the cavern. This time, Mrs. Davidson and I board. As I peer out the window at the metallic world rushing by, I take a deep breath, letting the air rest in my lungs before slowly releasing it again, smiling to myself.
'04 Pontiac GTO

Curt Scheafer

Crumpled steel disfigured—
  altered into rejection.
Ignored sex appeal
  beneath a crumpled hood.
Cracks etch
  a broken heart
  upon her glass.
Scuffed Yellow-Jacket paint
wraps a beaten frame,
camouflaging the GTO’s
flowing lines.

Churning of the engine
  beckons the growl of
    8 cylinders—American
    Muscle—every boy’s dream.
A gentle tap of the throttle
  fuels her raspy growl.
Exhaust clouds my garage’s
  stale air. Fantasies of Amelia
drift around my empty parking lot.

Rims
  hoods
  bumpers
fenders
  bolts
fall into place, one at a time.
An American Dream—reborn.
The Top Shelf
Kelsey Backus

Sixth grade seems so long ago now from the wise old age of twenty (only a month away from that ever elusive twenty-first birthday). Things have changed so much yet there's a part of me that has always been there and always will be: my competitive nature.

In Middl e-of-Nowhere, South Dakota, my elementary school participated in the AR reading program, a curriculum that awarded points to students when they read a book and took a computer test to prove it. A score of seven out of ten was enough to earn points toward prizes that waited on glass shelves in a locked cabinet just outside the principal's office. Every day I arrived on school bus number seven and walked into the lobby. There, on my left, were those beautiful shelves, beckoning to me. Even at age eleven I knew that the mind was capable of reaching much more than my physically outstretched arm ever could and so I picked up Gone With the Wind by Margaret Mitchell. It was worth a whopping ninety points, the most of all the books in Mrs. Tornow's library.

I had overheard one of the boys in my class talking about the legendary Gone With the Wind one day in class. He knew the small font 1000 paged book was worth ninety points while the other books were worth twenty-five at the most. His solution: take the quiz over and over again, without reading the book, and get lucky and guess all ten questions correctly. He never did.

Motivated by his failure and my desire to reach the top level of those glass shelves before anyone else in my class, I checked out Margaret Mitchell’s Gone With the Wind and set to work. One day the massive book was sitting on top of my desk and Dylan, the boy I'd heard talking about the book earlier, looked at me with wide eyes and asked, “You're actually gonna read that?”

Now, I was the only girl to play two-hand-touch football with boys every day at recess back then and yet I couldn’t say a word to them. I had even caught the football and did a reverse spin move around a boy a grade above me into the sandpit that marked our end-zone that year. All the boys oohed, partially to praise me and partially to make fun of the older boy. I could play sports with them and not be the least bit intimidated. But, when he spoke to me, all I could manage was a blush before I had to look away.

Scarlett O’Hara was not beautiful, but men seldom realized it when caught by her charm as the Tarleton twins were.

Since I first read that line I have worked so hard to come up with a character like Scarlett O’Hara. I fell in love with her in sixth grade with that one simple sentence. It was honest and pure. In one line I understood how flawed a person can be and still be adored. It was so painstakingly obvious how much Margaret Mitchell loved Scarlett. No wonder she couldn’t put her away until 1021 pages had passed.

It's terribly cliché for me to say that I desperately longed to be Scarlett O'Hara of Tara, but I only felt awkward in sixth grade. Yet I had no desire to be a “lady.” Sure, I wanted to be considered beautiful but, with each pimple that blossomed on my face, I felt it couldn’t be. But maybe, like Scarlett, I could trick people into thinking I was beautiful. I wanted to walk into a room and have all eyes drawn to me. I wanted my antics to be loveable and my laugh to heal a broken heart.

To this day, Gone With the Wind is the only book I have ever read twice. It isn’t that other books aren’t
worthy of a re-reading; I have a number of books on my shelves that I look forward to reading again eventually. What keeps me from them is my list of books that I want to read for the first time. Of course, my “to-read” list grows longer and longer with each passing day, making those “re-reads” less and less likely to take place. Somehow, *Gone With the Wind* beat the odds and my love for it grew.

As I read about Scarlett’s journey through the confederacy in the midst of the American Civil War, I saw myself in the corner of Mr. O’Connell’s sixth grade classroom beside the bookshelves full of stories for the sixth grade reader. Certainly, *Gone With the Wind* would not have been found there, but that couldn’t keep it from me and my competitive nature.

When I sat down at the computer in the elementary library after finishing page 1021, I felt terribly nervous. How could I possibly answer ten questions about such a gargantuan book? How could the beauty and power of *Gone With the Wind* be summed up in ten simple questions? As I took the test, a few of my classmates gathered around, trying to see if I would earn the coveted ninety AR points.

After I clicked on the “Submit Answer” button for the final question, I waited for the verdict, and I felt Dylan saunter up behind me, only adding to my nerves. Finally, a new screen appeared on the computer: “You answered 10 out of 10 questions correctly and earned 90 points.”

“No way!” Dylan said. “Wanna take that test for me, Kelsey?”

I entered a state of complete inner turmoil. I desperately wanted Dylan to like me, to think I was cool, but I knew that taking the test for him would be cheating, something inconceivable to me at eleven years old.

“No,” I told him, and, for the first time, I managed to smile when I was face to face with a boy. To my surprise, he smiled back at me, and I was Scarlett O’Hara and Dylan was Rhett Butler. He was falling for me while I played hard to get. At the middle school dance he would ask me to dance with him while the other boys, like the Tarleton twins, would look on and wish it was they, and not the detestable Rhett, who had secured a dance with me.

Of course, that didn’t happen. But I WAS the first of my class to claim a prize from the top glass shelf, a green candleholder in the shape of a flower that the principal herself handed to me.

I had forgotten about that candleholder until now. Presumably, it was replaced on my dresser by a trophy won at one basketball competition or another. Maybe I threw it away or maybe it’s in storage in my closet somewhere. At one point I must have looked at it acquiring dust on my dresser and said to myself, “Frankly, my dear, I don’t give a damn.”