



Elements

2016

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2016

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1st Place Lois C. Bruner Nonfiction Award

Porcelain Pieces

Justin Kim

The house is brown, mottled, and nestled away in a cul-de-sac. It is the impish, adopted brother among the rows and rows of white, gleaming houses of the north suburbs of Chicago. The backyard slopes downward to Lake Eleanor, and a disease-stricken crabapple tree hunches over our dilapidated canoe like an ashamed Quasimodo. Clusters of greenish-yellow crabapples droop obscenely from its branches, and the grass is littered with rotting crabapple corpses.

“They look like poop balls,” I say, wrinkling my nose.

My sister is already walking away, her white headphones in, scrolling through tracks on her iPod mini.

“They look like poop balls,” I say louder, flaring my nostrils.

She sits down in a sea of crabapple fecal matter.

I keep a small, black journal. It is an important journal, like the ones important writers scribble into when they’re conversing with their barista. I imagine that their chicken scratch words germinate and blossom into books about Life or Meaning or Hope. I print my name neatly in the upper right corner of the first page. I am careful to not have my *s* bleed into my *t*. I carefully close the journal, and then lift the cover slightly so I can peek to the side and make sure it hasn’t smudged in the process. Satisfied, I put it in my desk drawer. Tomorrow I shall write important things.

My grandma has Japanese porcelain dolls populating curio cabinets throughout the house. There’s two in the dining area, one in her study, and another two in the living room. Their pale, corpse-like bodies are decorated with crimson kimonos. Sometimes they shift out of place.

“Things will just *settle*, ya know?” My dad explains to me through a mouthful of chips during an episode of *Ancient Aliens*.

I shrug, unconvinced. “Sure.”

My grandma does not share my fears—she tends to them and says that they remind her of Japan. She is too short to reach the top shelves of the cabinets, and she has to stand on her slippered tip-toes to correct the dolls with her fingertips. I sometimes expect her to recoil down screaming, a fountain of blood erupting from a severed finger—the doll on the top shelf cackles maniacally with blood flowing down its chin. Or sometimes I imagine her being thrown into the ceiling by an invisible force, signaling the beginning of our battle with demonic forces from hell.

“They get their power from the *dolls*,” I would explain slowly, as if talking to a stupid child.

The exorcist would shake his head and speak dismissively in Latin. The movie ends with the dolls tearing him limb from limb.

My sister and I are sprinting through the house, skidding around corners with wet socks and hurling a blue mini-nerf football at each other. My sister runs ahead of me, propelled by her casual disregard for rules and conventions, her long black hair trailing behind her smirking face. I am fueled by a barely contained rage, threatening to burst into a full-fledged temper tantrum. She had teased me for not knowing the capital of Arkansas. I wield the blue lump of foam with the intent to kill. It bounces off of white stucco walls and polished wood cabinets. It sails past a painting of a samurai and hits the dog’s head with a soft thud. We slip and dodge through stacks of newspapers and orthodontics books, careen far too close to the piano, and jump like action movie stars over sickly green furniture covered in opaque plastic. I aim for the back of her head but keep missing. I hope that she slips and falls.

We are riding the Shinkansen, travelling towards Kyoto. The cars are clean, filled with Japanese businessmen and an old French lady from Paris. She is conversing with my mother, and their broken English mixes together into a soft melody as the high-rises silently blur past the windows. It is nothing like the Metra, where couples argue viciously, gesticulating wildly under garish yellow lights, and a bearded man who smells like stale urine tries to sell me “fresh” beers. I sneak looks at my grandpa as I’m eating my bento box. He looks haggard and pale, and he’s constantly running his fingers through his grey hair. His shoulders are slumped forward, and he looks tiny in his green jacket—nothing like the man who dealt out scathing witticisms with extreme prejudice, and then would imperceptibly turn towards me with a quick wink, or the vigorous workaholic who declared that he wanted to die working in his office. I wonder where he is keeping grandma’s ashes. I worry that they will spill.

I’m starting to tire out, and my barely existing throwing arm is failing me more and more. I nearly hit the shark jaw my sister would daringly poke and watch the droplet of blood form on her finger with fascination. My next throw sends the nerf football sailing upwards against my will; the ball ends up cartwheeling off an oblong floor-to-ceiling lamp that only the most pretentious artist would have displayed in their studio apartment. My sister races down the foyer, hopping over the napping dog. My throw veers left and I already know I’ve just broken the porcelain teapot. It spins off the table, the painted blue flowers embellishing its smooth white surface blurring into an ugly smear before exploding

into uneven, jagged shards. The dog, bleary-eyed from his nap, rises and pads away from the scene of the catastrophe. My sister and I are motionless, terror having injected ice cold water into our veins. I can see in my sister's wide eyes the plan of blaming me starting to form as my own mind races to pin this on her.

I'm trying to find him, playing a perverse game of Where's Waldo. Find the Japanese guy in the sea of stuffy old white men. A sea of smiling faces seated at a bourgeois banquet dinner. My aunt, a jovial woman who insists on referring to herself as "the fat *imo*" sidles up next to me, a disarming smile on her face.

"You find him?" she asks.

"Nope." I hunch closer to the picture, biting my lip in frustration. I can't pick out the faces in the black and white photo; they're incorporeal, fuzzy, barely there, already gone.

She puts her hand on my shoulder. "Took me 15 minutes," she laughs.

After the funeral is over I'm hiding in the corner of the room by the pictures. My dad spots me as he's taking down the banquet photo.

"Did you find him?"

"Yeah," I lie.

What is your family's story? I stare at the blinking cursor on the empty word page. I check the assignment sheet to see how long this has to be. 2-3 pages. Shit. I don't know where to start. I peck out a couple of sentences.

My family's story is complicated. I don't know where to start. This assignment is a complete waste of my time. How fun. Thank you.

I delete everything. I wonder if a pretentious metacommentary will work.

Any attempt to encapsulate a broad scope of human experience within a single, cohesive narrative is, quite frankly, an absolute fallacy. What follows is a grotesque attempt to warp inexpressible experiences to the perverse guidelines of this assignment.

No. I delete everything. I try and remember what makes a compelling story. Interesting conflict? A well-crafted climax? Narrative cohesion? Don't leave loose ends?

I open my school email account and hit compose.

Mr. Hurtig,

I do not feel comfortable sharing my family's story with you or anyone else in the class. Is there an alternate assignment I can do? If not, I'll take the zero.

Thanks.

I keep a small, black journal. It is an important journal, like the ones writers carry around to parse their thoughts. I imagine that if I write down what jumps into my head everything will make more sense, and that my desperate, disparate thoughts just need time to marinate into sensible stories. My handwriting is sloppy and crooked as my hand is unable to keep up with the speed of the anxieties racing through my mind. I leave the journal on my desk, on my bed, on the kitchen table, on top of the grandfather clock, wedged between the couch cushions, even by the bathroom sink. Tomorrow I'll pace around the house, looking for it in its usual haunts so I can fill more of its pages with confused, meandering ink.

Whenever grandma is in a good mood, she bakes. This means she rarely bakes, but when she does, she seems twenty years younger, urging us all to have one more bite. Sometimes it's triple fudge brownies that fill the kitchen with its aromatic siren call. At other times she serves the whole family thick squares of steaming cornbread. On occasions rarer still, she'll bake an impressive white cake topped with a colorful accoutrement of strawberries, kiwis, and blueberries. The whole family relishes these unexpected gifts, and nights that seem to just be the end of another day turn into all of us laughing at the ridiculous, slapstick antics of Japanese gameshow television and trading memorable family stories, such as when my grandpa was held at gunpoint by a junkie looking to score some drugs who didn't know the difference between an orthodontics office and a dental one. Almost every day I try and ask my grandma if she will be making anything, and most of the time she grunts in the negative, pushing her horn rimmed glasses up her nose. But on those rare occasions, she breaks out into a wide, toothy smile and says she has just the thing in mind.

There is a red Honda on the median of the highway. Our light blue sedan is crawling along in a swarm of other sedans, pickups, soccer mom SUVs, and 18 wheelers. I can barely see the Honda from where we currently are—a massive flatbed carrying cars is blocking my view. All I can see are the flashing red and blue lights, the trunk of the Honda, and the occasional glimpses of men in uniforms ambling about, talking into their radios.

“What's happening?” I whine, my nose pressed against the window. I just want to get home to play Pokémon Gold on my Game Boy Color, a necessary life-saving activity which I am banned from doing when my parents drag me to church on Sunday.

“I don't know,” my mom murmurs. I look over and see that she has her face smooshed up against her window too.

“Must be a pretty bad accident,” my dad observes.

We slowly inch further along to the sound of Earth, Wind & Fire. The flatbed lurches forward, and I’m able to see the entire scene. It looks like someone jammed 3/4ths of the red sedan into a giant blender. The trunk end of the car is in pristine condition, but the rest of the car is a complete mash of compacted metal. The roof of the car has been completely crushed in, and the doors are reduced to gleaming, paint stripped corrugated metal. Emergency personnel are milling around the car, waiting for something. I wonder if there’s a person in the car, but I don’t want to ask.

I am on my hands and knees on the cold tile floor, trying to pick up the dozens of porcelain shards. I pick up the larger pieces first—the top quarter of the spout, half of the lid, the broken handle. I pile them neatly together; an amalgamation of vaguely teapot-shaped pieces taking on a sadly incoherent whole. I stupidly wonder if I could put the teapot back together, but there are tiny porcelain pieces, porcelain dust really, that I know I cannot possibly place. I notice my sister inching slowly away from the crime scene, and my dad is suddenly there, pulling me up and dusting me off. I try not to look him in the face but when I do I can see he’s not angry. He is holding the deadly nerf ball—it’s just a toy in his large, calloused hands. He stretches it out to me, and I meekly take it from his fingers, my eyes burning.

To my utter confusion, he is smiling. “Just don’t tell grandma.”

I see my sister’s mouth unhinge in the corner of my eye.

“Or your mother,” he quickly adds.

It’s the same nightmare, my steady dream-world companion as year after year peels away. I’m running through a marsh, and my legs sink into the black muck with every step I take. I’m always escaping from something—it’s either a pack of dogs or an unknown specter. Suddenly I’m transported to the cul-de-sac; the cold wind sweeping off of Lake Eleanor makes my skin feel thin and brittle, like the ancient packing paper we find stuffed inside grandma’s innumerable and non-descript cardboard boxes. My mom’s blue Hyundai is idling in the street, and my mom and dad are frantically motioning for me to get in the car. Sometimes I don’t even make it inside the car, and icy grey hands with long fingers drag me away. In other instances I make it inside, but the same disembodied hands grope, rap, and scratch at the windows, no matter how fast we drive.

One morning I ask my family what the dreams could possibly mean over breakfast.

“It means no one loves you,” my sister says, pouring herself another glass of orange juice.

I’m standing on the balcony overlooking the backyard and the lake, my body wracked with

violent shivers under the grey night sky. My toes are completely numb—I am wearing slippers while standing in the inch of snow covering the balcony floor and the railing. My oversized Western Illinois University sweatshirt envelops my upper body like a poor man’s snuggie, providing only the ridiculous spectacle and none of the warmth of the real thing. The lake itself is frozen over, and a thick drape of untouched snow muffles the landscape. The crabapple tree still hunches in its usual spot like a reject Christmas tree, twisted and misshapen unlike the glamorous artificial one downstairs that we’ve dressed up in lights and gaudy ornaments. I try to visually locate the desiccated remains of the buried canoe, and I suddenly realize that I’ve never actually been boating on the lake. I want to run downstairs and make plans with my parents for the spring to visit the tiny island in the middle of the water. And I know I can, and I should, even though it’s 3 am, because that’s how my parents roll. But I also know that I can’t. My dad is still trying to find all of the important documents my grandma hid around the house in the last two paranoid and Alzheimer stricken years of her life, and my mom is wetting my grandpa’s mouth with a sponge as he lies dying. I decide I can wait another year. Or maybe two. Or maybe I should just keep it, a vague future hope I can look forward to at our empty holiday tables.

“I wanna go to Pita Inn,” I tell my mom.

My dad sighs in utter defeat. He hates Mediterranean food, and gives his cover story that it “just doesn’t sit with him right.”

“Why?” my mom asks. “None at Western?”

“All the university serves is dry pizza and slop that hardens into grey chunks. I guess there’s a place that just opened this year called Mediterranean Grill but it’s viscerally repulsive.”

My dad, inconspicuously shuffling towards the fridge, nods in silent agreement.

“Well, why don’t we go somewhere we all can eat?” My mom is playing the diplomat but I’m having none of it.

“But I wanna go.” I’m slightly disturbed by my accurate and unintentional 5 year old impression but I am too hangry to let it go.

My dad waves a plastic container of leftover spaghetti in defeat, saying “I’ll just eat this.”

I find a small, black journal in a musty box in the garage labeled “Justin stuff.” In the upper right corner of the first page I find my own name printed neatly. I flip through the rest of it, finding only slanted cursive scrawl dirty with smudge marks, water damage, and orange flecks of who-in-the-hell-knows-what. It rambles, conflates sentences, confuses words, and has way too many commas. It almost seems to be random ink marks vandalizing the journal’s off-white pages. I consider keeping it, going back and poring over every crossed t and looped l to decipher its meaning. I throw it in the trash on my way out.

My dad and I are waiting for the guy with the crazy hair to appear and talk about aliens. Right now a fat goateed man is enlightening us on the fact that UFOs can go underwater, and that there are entire facilities of aliens living on the ocean floor. He is an insufficient substitute. My dad and I are chortling behind glasses of Cherry Coke, and occasionally burst into fits of outright laughter during particularly inspired segments. We check on grandpa during commercial breaks; we already gave him morphine and wetted his lips with a small sponge. Mom and fat *imo* are out buying more sponges and food. My dad and I are back at our seats waiting for crazy hair guy. He doesn't make his entrance and we make bets that he'll show up near the end of the show. We check on grandpa during the next commercial break. He is dead.

2nd Place Lois C. Bruner Nonfiction Award

Piece by Piece or All at Once

Alyson Eagan

My stepdad destroyed our house, but it wasn't great when we bought it, it smelled of cat pee everywhere. The previous owners had a lot of cats who were apparently not potty-trained. The piss soaked through the carpet and into the wood floors, leaving the place filled with an impossible-to-rid ammonia odor.

With only three rooms upstairs, my parents had to create their bedroom in a corner of the living room. They had no door, just a sheet that was occasionally ripped down and replaced. My brother, sister, and I each got a small room upstairs with no closet. Across from my room was the bathroom, right at the top of the rickety wooden stairs. When the tornado sirens sounded, my brother and I laughed hysterically that the house would blow away like it were made of cardboard. If I was quiet in my room I could hear what everyone in the house was doing at once.

...

"What are you doing?" My mom and stepdad are standing in front of the pathetic house. They look like forty-year-old orphans who never mentally matured past age twelve, wearing big t-shirts, hiding their belly fat. Mom is wearing her favorite Sesame Street shirt. My stepdad wears a dirty Carhartt tee.

"Saying bye to Madison and Kyle," I say, coldly staring at them. I can't help it, but the longer I live away from them, the less I can empathize; the more I want to push and push further away from them.

"Oh, ok. Asshole," they say, and I realize they expect me to say goodbye to them, too. "Oh, yeah," I think. I didn't come from school to visit them, I came to see my grandparents and my brother and sister.

They both look horrible and gross. Like, when I accidentally look at my makeup-less, unwashed, hungover face in a little magnified makeup mirror: they look like that, but from far away. My mom has a cold sore on her upper lip that looks twice the size of any cold sore I've ever seen. It looks infected or something. I stare at them like I have never looked at anyone before; a stare of disgust, disappointment, and hatred.

"Ew. You have herpes," I say to my mom.

She laughs and says it's a cold sore. Why is she laughing?

...

I'm fifteen and I just want to take a shower. My stepdad has lately been yelling about the fact that he pays the water bill, not us kids. We are supposed to limit our showers to five minutes. I have my shower things in-hand, I am so close. Then, my stepdad's ogre-senses kick in, and he begins to stomp around in the living room like a villainous fairy tale character who might huff and puff and blow the whole house down.

I can hear my stepdad yelling at my mom, "What is she doing?"

"She's taking a shower, Bill," my mom says in a shrill voice.

“The fuck she is. This is my house.” Bill’s favorite thing to say is “this is my house.”

It makes me furious that we aren’t allowed to claim ownership of the house we live in together. I am fifteen and fighting for freedom; a particular type of furiousness.

“Alyson!” my stepdad booms, “Get your ass in here. Now!” Always extra boom on the “Alyson” and the “now!”

This is how my stepdad summons us kids.

“What are you doing?” The interrogation begins.

“Taking a shower,” I say, feebly.

“No you ain’t. This is my house.”

“This is not just your house. This is my house, too.” Although I am scared, I am unable to hold my tongue.

“Comere!” He says “come here” as one word and in the form of a low growl.

He yanks me by the collar of my t-shirt and it starts to rip. I think about the pajama pants he ripped the last time he grabbed me this hard. He pulls me up to his face so he can spit while he yells about his power.

“Fuck you,” I say. I am scared, but I have pride.

He smacks me hard across the face. This shocks me for a moment.

“I’m your dad. We play by my rules! Understand?”

There are tears streaming down my face as I say, “My real dad wouldn’t hit me.”

This sets something bad off inside of him. He pulls tighter on my t-shirt and hanks me around, the sleeves tears more. With all his strength he plunges me to the floor, the same way one might plunge a football into the grass. I land directly on my chin and everything goes black for a second. My jaw feels broken.

“Get up! Get the fuck up!” he yells, and begins kicking me with his steel-toed work boots.

I can’t move.

“Get up! Don’t just lay there like a retard! What’s wrong with you?” my mom screams, the first time she’s said anything this whole time. She’s been standing on the sidelines just watching.

I lay on the floor, my eyes blurred with tears. My chin throbs. My parents are yelling at me, telling me this is my fault. Nothing makes sense.

“Get the fuck out of my house!”

My stepdad picks me up and shoves me into the front door, but every time I begin to turn the handle my mom intervenes and says, “No, you’re not going anywhere.”

It’s hard to tell if they’re fighting over me, but I’m a human ragdoll and one of them wants me tossed out while the other wants me to submit.

I won’t soon forget this. The betrayal on my mom’s part, the misplaced blame.

...

It’s a Monday and I’m calling my mom. I like routine and I usually call my family on Sundays. I call my mom to tell her good news. Things are going good, I’m doing well in school. I bring up my brother, Kyle. I say that I talked to him on Sunday and that he sounded like he was doing good, better.

My mom starts to say, “Well, something happened. I don’t know if I should tell you about it.” She repeats a variation of this a few times.

I am starting to get worried. She says something like, “It’s not a big deal.” And, again, “I don’t know if I should tell you. It’s not a big deal.”

“You may as well tell me now,” I say, although I know already that I would rather not hear it.

“Your brother came down stairs last night screaming bloody murder. It was, like, 2 in the morning. He was yelling, ‘Take me to the ER! I need to go to the fucking ER!’”

My stomach begins to lurch and sink, the same way that it had when my mom called me about Kyle crashing his car last fall. I want to throw my body on the floor, but I remain still, and I say nothing while my mom continues.

“He was freaking the fuck out, Alyson. He had a syringe sticking out of his leg, blood everywhere, and he was screaming that there was a worm inside of him.”

I don't think my body can react any more violently, but my stomach continues to throw itself around inside of me. My face is red, and I know I will be unable to sleep tonight. I still say nothing, I know the story isn't over.

“We went to the ER and the nurse asked, ‘Have you been to Africa?’ and he said ‘No’ and she told him it wasn't possible that he had a parasite, and you can't feel parasites moving inside of you. She asked him if he did any drugs and he said no. Then, it came out that he had shot up Adderall because he was out of Xanax. The nurse said that shooting up Adderall is the same as doing meth, and that a side effect can be the feeling of bugs moving under your skin. She asked why he had a syringe sticking out of his leg and he said because he was trying to pin down the worm.”

I had nothing to say. I was so disappointed and sick. I thought I might pass out or vomit or both.

“He argued with the nurse for an hour, Alyson. Before he finally agreed that maybe he didn't have a parasite.”

“Oh my god,” I said, finally, “Why don't you do something?”

...

I hold my belly in the mirror. I've got a good grip on all of the fat, squeezing it with both hands, moving it like dough. I turn to the side, it looks bulgy. “I look pregnant,” I think. I've been thinking this since I was a kid, always wondering how girls had naturally flat stomachs. “Maybe I eat too much Wendy's,” I think, and I vow to never eat it again. I have a fear of becoming fat and not knowing it, but more importantly I have a fear of becoming my mom.

I remember vividly crying in my grandparent's car once when I was seven or eight, “I don't want to be like her. I never ever want to be like Mom. If I ever act like her I'm going to kill myself.”

My grandpa gasped. My grandma hushed me. They told me not to talk like that. I was embarrassed, and I shut up.

My mom was mean. She was a bitch. She used to break down and scream at me and my brother and sister at the top of her lungs, “I hate you! I fucking hate all of you! I wish you were never born!” I remember these conversations taking place on the drive to school in the morning. At home, I would sit in my room and cry, and write in my journal about how much I wished my mom would die, always feeling guilty later and then crying about the picture of her death.

...

At least there are walls in the kitchen now. They are painted. For a year we had to stare at drywall to cook our ramen noodles. My stepdad had scrawled all over the drywall in pencil. He wrote “Linda is a whore” (Linda is my mom). He wrote, “Ho”. He scribbled meaningless numbers and names.

My stepdad has a problem. He can't help but to get himself into meth and crack. He smokes cigarettes and drinks constantly, I used to think that was the problem, before I knew about meth and crack. He's supposedly bipolar. My mom claims that for a few years he was taking his medication and was “normal.” I don't remember those years.

In high school I began to search through my parent's room. I always found hydrocodone. Always. In fact, I am positive that if I went through their things today I would find some. I would grab a couple, if I was feeling particularly angst-y. A few times I took one, even though they made me feel nothing but sick. I took them in spite of my parents. I thought, “Ha, take that.”

My mom always held hydrocodone in her purse for my stepdad. She held onto them so that

she knew how many he was taking and they argued if she wouldn't give him enough. Once, he started hitting her because they went missing. I listened from my room and felt sickeningly guilty; I had taken some. Not that I would run downstairs and throw myself in front of her over it. Not after the time I lay on the living room floor being kicked by him while my mom yelled at me, as if I were at fault. It was my mom's fault she was being beaten. She never listened when my siblings and I told her to leave him.

The last time I went through my stepdads' drawers I was a senior in high school. I opened the top drawer, the one with different pills. A sandwich baggie sat on top of the junk-mess. I grabbed the baggie. There was something white inside, but it wasn't cocaine. It was cloudy, dirty white, and it was solid. The shape of it scared me. It wasn't a circle or anything identifiable. I knew I was holding something bad. My heart dropped and my face got hot. I felt too overwhelmed and began to cry. I knew my stepdad was into drugs, but seeing it like that made it too real. Part of me wanted to throw the shit out. Part of me wanted to try it, like I had the hydros. But I put it back. I googled pictures of heroin and crack until I found out it had to have been crack. I never mentioned it to my parents.

...

My brother Kyle is eighteen, three years younger than me. When I was a senior in high school we smoked weed together out on our roof. We felt bad and cool, but we weren't bad, we were just having fun. I want the Kyle from that time to come back to me.

"I have to tell you something, but you can't tell anybody," Kyle says. Kyle says this to me a lot.

"Ok," I say, swallowing hard.

"I started selling coke." He looks at me, eager for a reaction.

I don't know what to say. I can't lecture him because I can't bear the, "You sound like mom!" I can't be another mom. He has to be able to tell me what's going on.

"Why?" I say. The words trapped in my mouth feel sticky and bitter.

"Just to make some money. There are a lot of junkies around here who buy from me."

"You haven't done any of it have you?"

"No."

"Good."

"Well, I tried it once, yeah."

Kyle is always torn between lying to me and confiding in me.

"You did coke?" I ask, again.

"Yeah, just a few times."

Now, it's a few times. The kid can't give a straight answer. This conversation takes place between Kyle and I often. It happened with pain pills, morphine, and eventually heroin. Of course my parents catch on. My stepdad knows a fellow druggie when he sees one. Yet, my parents lack of intervention makes me feel as if I'm holding the weight of all of this.

...

I miss when Kyle was selling weed and I had to tell him to be careful. I miss stoner Kyle. Summer break is when it all went to shit. Really, his addiction issues started years before, but they didn't start to come out until last summer.

Last summer I was back home from college. It didn't take long for me to miss dorm life. At home I had to listen to my stepdad and mom fight. I had to pick up piles of dog shit from the hallway every day, and step around puddles of dog piss on my way to the bathroom. Worst of all, I couldn't talk to my brother.

Whenever I entered his room he was fucked up; drunk as hell, half-sleeping, on thirty Xanax and shooting up morphine. Tears would spring to my eyes, and I would have to leave. Kyle was still clinging to the way we used to hang out and he would ask, "Where are you going?" But I had to leave him. I

couldn't lecture him, couldn't stop him, he wouldn't hear any advice. I couldn't watch him like that.

...

It's my parents fault Kyle is so fucked up. It's my parents fault. It has to be someone's fault and how can it be Kyle's? He's been through so much.

I talk about Kyle a lot because I feel like it's my fault, too. I blame our father and stepdad and mom.

My boyfriend says, "Alyson, you went through the same stuff, and you're not like that."

We went through the same stuff, and we didn't. Kyle was treated differently. Kyle was never told "no" and he was allowed to do anything he wanted independently because he was a boy and that's how my stepdad was raised. I, however, was given a 7:00 pm curfew and frequently grounded for minor offenses, like being home a minute after curfew. It didn't seem fair, but as my stepdad loved to say, "Life ain't fair!" If I'd been treated like Kyle was, like a "boy" would I be shooting up heroin in my bedroom?

Kyle is expected to be tough and when he says, "Leave me alone. I can handle it myself." My parents believe him, it's what they want to hear. If it were me, a poor weak-willed woman, they would send me to the hospital.

...

When I was eighteen my parents admitted me to the ER. Something had been knocked loose in my mind. Someone had given me a drug that I wouldn't've taken knowingly. I stayed in the psych ward for twelve days. Right up 'til Christmas Eve.

I woke up a lot in the middle of the night burning. Literally on fire, in my mind. Glass in my skin. Horrid whispers in my ears. Bad things were happening inside of me and all around me. I stared out the window, and I saw shadows of people walking around on the roof. I could hear my family in my head, each of them yelling their own advice. The loudest voice was the one telling me not to burn. It must have been the medicine. In the mornings I shivered, the heater did not work and I could see each breath. But in the night hallucinations were harsh and hot.

I was staring at a ceiling, specifically at an overhead light. Those ugly yellow-green hospital ones. I was shifting back and forth on the hospital bed, in some sort of discomfort. The light looked about the length of my body. I knew it was going to explode and injure me. I knew it, but it never happened. I thought I should switch to the other bed, which was unoccupied. That one's safer, I thought. When they came in and saw that I was utilizing both beds they let me know it was not allowed. They also let me know it was not allowed to run down the hallway. Or to leave, because I was "voluntary." When, in reality, I had signed the form in my mom's maiden name. I refused to admit who I was upon entrance. Not until the 6th day I was there, did I sign the correct paperwork which made it legal for them to keep me.

I remember my stepdad crying and saying it was his fault, and wondering why, why would it be his fault?

...

My parents are coming for family day at college. I worry the whole morning. My head hurts. My stomach hurts. I hold my fat in the mirror as I often do. I think, "God I look like my mom," and I put clothes on that won't outline my stomach. I dread their visit. I don't know what we will do, and I feel guilty for describing them as "forty-year-old orphans who never mentally matured past age twelve."

"Hey, fruit loop!" says my stepdad. He's always called me that, because I'm weird like a fruit loop?

"Hey guys," I say. We hug, awkwardly.

My stepdad pulls out a set of false teeth he just got to replace his gaps.

"Ew!" I yell, and he puts them in and smiles. His teeth do look better.

They take me out for lunch, buy me some groceries, and meet me later for dinner. It all goes rather pleasantly. They leave early the next morning.

“Yeah, we’re going to check something off our bucket list!” says my mom.

“What’s that?” I ask.

They are going to Good’s Furniture in Kewanee, IL. It really speaks to their character, that they have it on their bucket list to see a damn furniture store. I don’t understand where their priorities lie, but I know not in the right places.

“They have a glass elevator. Remember seeing the commercials when you were little?” says my mom.

“No,” I say, “Well, you guys have fun at your little furniture store.”

My mom laughs. She laughs as a reaction to most everything. They both look the way I described them. They look lost, like orphans, but they look happy to see me doing ok. Maybe it’s finally sinking in that I’ve grown up, because they both look on the verge of tears.

...

I take Ibuprofen a lot. I feel bad a lot. My head and my stomach and my mind feel constantly sick. I smoke weed and sometimes that makes me feel worse. And sometimes it makes me feel better. It’s everyone’s fault and no one’s fault. I told my mom not to tell me about Kyle anymore, good or bad. I feel guilty, but it will soon enough turn into a headache, something I can take Ibuprofen for.

3rd Place Lois C. Bruner Nonfiction Award

Fortunate Son

Jared Worley

An article written by Air Force Technical Sergeant Todd Wivell on the Ellsworth Air Force Base website published on April 24, 2007, outlines the newly released “Airman’s Creed.” General T. Michael Moseley is quoted in saying “Our new Airman’s Creed reminds us all of the incredible combat heritage we have as Airmen. We’re a combatant Air Force; our mission is to fly, fight and win our nation’s wars. We should embrace the notion that the Air Force is a combatant organization” (<http://www.ellsworth.af.mil/news/story.asp?id=123050271>). This creed was repeatedly drilled into me when I arrived at Basic Military Training at Lackland Air Force Base, San Antonio, Texas on August 12, 2008. It was a part of everything I did; I lived it and I breathed it. I did push-ups reciting it at the top of my lungs, I screamed it bright and early every morning before every PT session, I said it so much I probably mumbled it in my sleep. Every day was a constant reminder of who and what I was becoming.

I am an American Airman.

I am a Warrior.

I have answered my Nation’s call.

I remember reciting these first lines over and over again until it became second nature to start repeating it whenever questioned to do so. I remember to a ‘T’ how to do my job that I did for almost a year and a half at Andrews Air Force Base, Maryland. I am not a combat veteran; I am not going to stand here before you and tell you tales of how I cheated death; I do not suffer from post-traumatic stress disorder. I do get anxious amongst crowds; I do constantly scan my surroundings and make sure my back is not to the door of any room. It comes with the training; the constant reminder of the threat that looms around every corner. I came nowhere near combat; I sat in a controlled room for twelve hours a day listening to nothing but radio static until an aircraft called out over his radio. I listened to so much static that even today I can’t listen to the radio in my car because of it. So no I am not a warrior. I have been out of the military for almost six years, and static still makes my skin crawl like a giant spider feeding its way to my brain.

It drove my parents insane to be in the car with me when I moved back in with them and my younger sister when I first came home.

“You need to get a job, I don’t want you lying around this house day in and day out,” my mom would say to me as I lied strewn across the couch. After three days, I had enough.

“I’ll get a job, just give me some time to readjust,” I replied. Adjust to what? Adjust to the fact that now I wasn’t being told what to do, when to do it, how to do it? Adjust to the quiet peacefulness of birds singing in the trees, the occasional pickup passing our house, and the screams of the fans at the high school football games on Friday nights? Quite possibly, but something was missing. I haven’t answered my nation’s call.

I am an American Airman.

My mission is to Fly, Fight, and Win.

I am faithful to a Proud Heritage,
A Tradition of Honor,
And a Legacy of Valor.

When I was a toddler, my dad joined the Army just six days before my first birthday. After basic training and advanced individual training, he received orders to Camp Casey, South Korea twelve miles from the border with North Korea. Because of the location, my mom and I were not allowed to travel with him; he'd spend the next twelve months overseas in what turned out to be a very lonely trip for both him and my mom. Before my dad, my grandfather served in the Air Force during the first Korean conflict of the 1950s as a pilot and in aircraft maintenance. Before my grandfather, my great great uncle served in the Second Infantry Division in World War II. He landed with the second wave on Omaha Beach on June 6, 1944 and fought in the Battle of the Bulge. Years later, when I was just about to enter middle school, my mom researched our family history. We came to find out that in every war the United States has ever been a part of that there has been at least one male who fought from my dad's side of the family. I am faithful to a proud heritage, a tradition of honor, and a legacy of valor.

I am an American Airman.

Guardian of Freedom and Justice,
My Nation's Sword and Shield,
Its Sentry and Avenger.

I defend my Country with my Life.

Most of the things I did for my job at Andrews Air Force Base is classified Top Secret, so I cannot tell you anything other than what I have already told you. For six months after I got out, I searched high and low for work. I was willing to work anywhere, do anything, just to get me out of that house with my parents. We've all been there at some point in our lives. In February 2011 I got a job at Dot Foods, Incorporated in Mount Sterling, Illinois about twenty minutes from where I lived. Warehouse work is not for the weak or faint of heart; it requires physical strength and mental grit. In the summer, the warehouse can reach up to one hundred and forty degrees or more. Pile on the constant lifting of fifty pounds or more selecting customer food orders, the strain of meeting production standards, and you have yourself a good old fashioned manual labor meets industrial revolution job. It may remind you of another job I have had before this. The military is not for the weak or faint of heart; less than one per cent of the country is eligible to join the military. I will defend my country with my life.

I am an American Airman.

Wingman, Leader, Warrior.

I will never leave an Airman behind,

I will never falter,

And I will not fail.

My job at Dot Foods only lasted until that November of 2011; I don't mind manual labor, but that place was something else. By Spring of 2012, I had decided that I would give my hand at college. Initially, I had decided to give it one year and see how it went; partly because I didn't know what I wanted to study, mostly because I didn't even know if college was right for me. In August of 2012, I officially entered Western Illinois University as a freshman Psychology major at twenty-two years old. My very first class on the Monday classes started was introduction to human communication, and instantly I felt a sense of alienation. Why? It could have been that I was almost twenty-three; could have been that I did not know anyone in my class; it could have been anything, but looking back now, I have accepted the reason of being almost twenty-three and with military experience. My favorite class that first semester was my college composition class; the professor pushed me to be a much better writer than I was when I had started. The military's way of writing is different; short, brief, and to the point. After discovering

all of the math that was needed for a degree in Psychology, I decided to switch majors to my second passion: English. I had always loved writing papers and reading, so it only seemed natural that I get my degree in English. I still felt alienated from the kids in my classes; while they were discussing partying all weekend, I was sitting at home with nothing to do. I had my days of fun in the Air Force and I was over that scene when I got out.

Here I am three years later, on the eve of graduation, and I can't help but look back on the last three years and what they've meant to me. I haven't partied every weekend, I haven't gone to football games or basketball games, and I haven't done the "college experience." I've disciplined myself to be who I am today; I am vice president of my local Sigma Tau Delta chapter, I've edited nonfiction stories for the Western Illinois University Veteran Resource Center and Department of English and Journalism's publication *Veterans' Voices: Stories of Combat and Peace*, I've written and edited stories for the Sigma Tau Delta newsletter *The Mirror and the Lamp*, I've published a poem in *Veteran's Voices*, I've presented at the WIU Undergraduate Research Day, and now I am writing my experience out before you, hoping and wishing you'll understand that I am an American Airman and I will never leave a brother or sister-in-arms behind. But I will falter and I will fail from time to time and that's okay. Failing is a human condition in which we respond only by continuing to move forward. I am an American Airman, I am a veteran, and I will fly, fight, and win.

1st Place Cordell Award in Fiction

Solitude

Kateline Deushane

Del was sitting in a parking space

Or to be more specific she was sitting in one of those lawn chairs that you buy from the dollar store that seem old and used even when new. The space was a wonderful spot, really it was. The car beside her blocked the sun, the stench from the garbage didn't carry over this far, and she could see everything even down the road where the waves gleamed like expensive gems against the neck of the beach.

Somewhere down there was her mother. Before she left, she'd stood in front of Del with her ripped towel folded neatly under her arm, her flip-flops a bright smear against the dark of the pavement, and her skin as white and tragic as the shell of a cracked egg, and she'd asked Del if she wanted to go down to the beach with her.

Del had never really enjoyed going to the beach. In fact, she'd always kind of hated it. Her memories of it were twisted, a place in which every one of its enjoyments was an attempt at trying to steal you away—the water pulling at your body dragging you further from the shore, the sand swallowing your footsteps and making each one more difficult and the people so desperate to be content with the theft that their smiles were all that was left of their face, nothing but white teeth, bloodless gums, and lips stretched so far that they cracked over their own happiness.

So, she'd told her mother no. She did not want to go to the beach.

Now, sitting in the parking lot, she couldn't stop looking at the fucking beach. She could see people mingling about and she knew that her mother would be down there by now, the only spot of stillness. Every time Del closed her eyes, she could see her; limbs unfolded like a pair of pale petals, hair spread around her face like vines ready to entangle anything within reach, and her mouth the macabre amusement of a Venus Fly Trap snapping at any young flies that would wander close enough. Even the beat of her heart would be like a plant, roots uncurling to encase all of her limbs so that each sensation and each touch would gain as much nutrients as it could from the world and people around her.

Del decided that the day was too hot to be sitting out in the smoldering parking lot, so she packed up her chair, leaving it leaning against the stairs of the apartment complex before climbing to her floor six flights above.

The view was dizzying.

The railing didn't feel solid beneath her hands. It made her feel like she was standing on a bridge, creaking and shuttering, the ground tilting, her feet sliding, the waves as hungry as starved sharks, leaping to the water's edge to reach her. It felt inevitable.

Then, as she was looking down, thinking about falling, there was a boy standing next to her, saying her name. She recognized him, but only just. He was the kind of person whose own looks conspire to make them forgettable. Not ugly, not handsome, not pale, not dark, but simple brown hair and brown eyes. It was as if each of his features were beginning to unmake themselves, beginning to fade back into the Earth. The only thing that set him apart was his magnificent height, but even that was forgettable for his form was so tall that it wavered with every shift as if it was nothing more than a trick of the light.

“Del?”

She wrenched her arm away from his hold, “What?”

“You okay?”

“I’m fine,”

She was still looking down at the pavement, but he leaned in front of her, blocking her view and for a moment she couldn’t see him, the sun at his back burnt away his image. For a moment the sight made her think of her father and how sometimes late at night he’d sneak into her room and kiss her forehead and tell her that he loved her before retreating back to the doorway where for a moment his form in the hallway light would look so black and empty, so small and pathetic that she’d have to turn away. Then...

The moment passed and the boy was himself again.

“Are you sure you’re okay?”

“Yeah,”

When her mother came home from the beach, she wasn’t alone. Her boy was beautiful. He didn’t seem to belong in their kitchen, beneath the bare bulb, which usually turned everything sickly and yellow, but when touching him made him glow. His movements were effortless, the limbs sliding as if the air offered no resistance, as if he lived naturally in the air and had only recently decided to see life from below. Del could see why her mother had picked him.

Later, Del could hear their movements in the other room, the boy’s rough breath broken only by her mother’s moans which really sounded more like sobs. Each one sounded more broken than the last, becoming more and more hitched until the last one erupted into a shuddering cry like that of a hurt child that overcomes the initial shock and fully realizes the extent of their pain.

The quiet that came after was sometimes worse, Del could feel her body tense as the minutes passed, dreading the moment when the two emerged. The boy was always first, tugging at his shirt, zipping up his pants, and leaning against the counter with a smile. He tried so hard, but he always seemed to look to Del like someone who had fallen and hadn’t gotten up yet. Her mother though always looked fucking great. She was a new plant, growing up between the outstretched fingers of the boy trying to find the strength to push himself off the ground, her leaves green and vibrant and still rustling in a breeze that had already passed.

Then her mother would make something, fingers brushing along the stove top to see if it was hot yet, throwing her head back to laugh at something the boy had said, asking Del questions about what she did for the day, if anything special had happened. Del answered each of these questions easily, automatically, giving the kind of answers that you would give strangers in an elevator when they asked the same kind of questions. She never once told her mother about the calls she got from her father.

When her father called, the line was always scratchy as if it had torn and broken itself across the distance in which it had to travel.

Del didn’t care though. Just hearing his voice was enough for her. She would hold the phone close to her head and she wouldn’t imagine the mountains or the rivers that divided them. Instead, she would imagine the few times that he was home and they would go down to the arcade by the beach. He would nudge her shoulder and laugh as they played ski ball together. The sounds and lights from the one machine had been like a carnival to Del.

He would ask her how she was doing and she would tell him everything. She would tell him how hard it was here without him, how her mother seemed to be seeing a new boy each day, and she would tell him that she missed him. God, how she missed him. The words came easily and she would mean each one, but they were never important to her, not like his words were.

When he described his life for her, it seemed like a dream, some place that she could visit if she just closed her eyes.

She wanted to hear all of it.

He would tell her about the mountains that seemed to glow blue in the moonlight and the nights that seemed to be pinned down only by the stars and about the forests that when the wind brushed through them made the same sound as the waves at the beach. He made it seem magical and Del would always wait for the day when he would tell her that she could come to see it too, that he was going to take her away from her life here where the only dream like thing were the fires on the beach at night, sparked up from people that had nothing to shield them but the sand and the surf. Del would watch them from her window, the people gathered around, hands held out to gather warmth. They looked like witches casting a curse and sometimes as she stood and watched them she swore she could hear their words, whispered against her neck.

Each time her father didn't ask though, Del thought of the witches and their curse. Was this what her curse would be, to be stuck here? But, no, she convinced herself that it wasn't like that. The only reason that her father didn't ask was because it wasn't the right time, that he wanted her to come when his world was the most beautiful.

Del never stopped imagining what it would look like when he did finally ask her.

Her mother's new boy was different than all the others. He had an age to him that the other boy's didn't have, and the way he shone underneath the light while still brilliant was more subdued as if the light was coming from within him instead of simply reflecting off the gold of his skin.

At first, despite his differences, Del thought he would be like all the others. Her mother would sleep with him and that would be that. He'd be gone within a few hours, but, no, they didn't disappear into her mother's room together.

They stayed in the kitchen talking.

It seemed like they talked for hours.

After that he was a regular at the household.

He would be there all the time.

He was there morning.

He was there at night.

He was there even when her mother wasn't.

Del thought it would pass. She was certain. Her mother would move on to someone else sooner or later. She always did.

Then Del came home one night to find the two of them singing. She stood there watching them for a while. It'd been a long time since she'd heard her mother sing. The last time had been when Del had been sick from school and her mother had sat at the edge of her bed and sang her to sleep just like she used to do when Del was a kid. Del had loved the way her mother's voice had sounded, a single note rising and falling in the darkness behind her eyes, and Del had loved how the last feeling she'd had before fully drifting to sleep was the feel of her father's hand against her arm as he stood with his other arm wrapped around his mother's shoulders listening to her sing.

But now it was her mother and the man, so close to one another. They clung to each other like a pair of vines that had grown so close and have forgotten that they were ever meant to be separate, and the way they moved, so gentle and slight, swaying only with each other's movements as if nothing could loosen the hold they had on each other.

The man was singing, a song that was clear and bright like a hummingbird zipping through the garden, and her mother's voice rose up to meet him so light and sweet like drops of sugar water on a

flower petal.

Del wanted to rip them apart. She wanted to yell and scream until she couldn't hear their music anymore. She wanted to tell them that this wasn't supposed to happen, that none of this was supposed to have happened.

But, she stayed silent and it was still the man and her mother leaning against each other, it was still the man's neck that her mother had her arms wrapped around, and she was still smiling up at him as if she was thanking the sun for its warmth.

And her father was still hundreds of miles away.

When her father called the next day, Del told him all about the man.

She could hear the way her voice shook like an old window against the wind. It sounded like she was going to shatter at any moment, like she could do nothing more to stop the wind and the rain from pouring forth. For a moment she closed her eyes trying to steady herself, but every time she closed her eyes she kept seeing the man and her mother leave, heading toward the beach and leaving her all alone.

Del didn't know why she cared.

She didn't want to be here anyway.

"What's he done?" Her father asked. He could hear the way her voice shook too.

"Nothing, but—"

"Than what's the matter, Del? Your mother has to move on too. I'm just glad she's finally taking it seriously."

"But,"

"Del, you should be happy for her."

She closed her eyes again, but again the picture of her mother and the man entered her mind. It had been like a dream. The ocean set lazily in front of them like a blue gem that they need only reach out for, their hands interlocked, and her mother's yellow flip-flops all but glowing as if even the sun was guiding her steps.

Why were her parents the only ones who got to dream?

The static buzzing from the line sounded like the ocean, a false promise from empty air. Del had never wanted so badly to get away from the ocean, to get away from her mother.

"Can I live there? With you?"

"Del," Her father sighed her name. The last time he had heard her say her name like that had been the night he left. She'd asked him then as well if she could come with him. At least then he'd held her for a moment as she cried, but now she was alone and the tears felt colder than ever before.

"We've talked about this. It's so far away and we don't have the space. I'm sorry, Hun."

"Yeah, yeah," She answered quickly. Her fingers clenched against the phone so tightly that she could hear the plastic creak, "I get it. Sorry I asked."

"Del, don't be like that."

Beneath his words, drifting up like smoke from a fire she could hear their voice, the sound of his new wife and his new kids. Every time she heard them during one of their conversations, Del could never stop imagining them. His new wife so pretty and pure, never yelling as Del's mother often had, and his new kids that looked nothing like Del or her father with their green eyes and hair so dark that it was waves of black and dark blue like the ocean at night. It had never mattered that they didn't look like her dad though. Del had seen all the pictures they had posted on line. Her dad hoisting them up above his shoulders, giving them bunny ears in all of their pictures, and grimacing in the face of their cheers when he let them win at some video game. No, he loved them even though they weren't his own.

"Del," Her father said, his voice a whisper, "I love you,"

He'd said the same thing the night he left.

Her father hadn't called since he'd told her he loved her and Del hadn't felt like calling him back. She could still hear the sound of his other family in the background, still see the image of him leaving. Had he ever planned to come back for her?

And, her mother was even more engrossed into the man she'd brought home. Each day it seemed harder for Del to tell the difference between the two of them, the way her mother wrapped her hands around him when he was in the room like a vine reaching for something to pull it upward, completely entangling the thing they grabbed. Soon there would be no need for anyone else.

Del started to feel like a ghost, one that her parents had inherited but were now trying to escape from. She wondered what would happen to her when they finally did escape. Would she even notice their absence? After all, it couldn't be much worse than this.

Del was back in the parking lot.

She was sitting in the lawn chair, staring up at the night sky. It was cloudy tonight and all she could make out above her was an orange tinted darkness. It reminded her of the jack-o lanterns that she saw littering people's porches after Halloween. All rotten and dark, a smile still twisting their faces even though the only place left for it was the dump. Just another thing that hadn't known it was meant to be forgotten.

"Del?"

She squinted against the darkness until her eyes landed on the boy, the one that had leaned too close to her on the railing, the one who had reminded her of her father. Del considered throwing the beer she'd been drinking at him but reconsidered. It would be such a waste, and after all the trouble she'd gone to getting it, sneaking past her mother and her boyfriend, lying when her mother had looked up for a moment to ask where she was going. So, taking another drink Del turned back to the sky, watching the night rot.

"Del?" He was still there, moving closer, and Del squinted up at him again. He didn't look any more memorable than he had the other night. Still simple and wooden like a face carved into the bark of a tree, no definition to its edges, but without the light making his form waver, he at least looked more solid. Del couldn't help but wonder how much he saw from that height? Did the world seem simpler, less cruel? God, for his sake she hoped so.

"What do you want?"

"Are you alright?"

"Why do you care?" She looked back toward the sky. The moon was slipping between the clouds now, its light dim and exhausted as if it had been struggling against the clouds for days, for years even, and had only now been able to break free. Too bad the clouds were moving back in.

"I don't know. I guess I just do." He shrugged, rubbing a hand at the back of his neck. He sighed; once more reminding her of her father and she flinched before she could stop herself. If he noticed, then he didn't say anything, for which she was thankful. "You are my neighbor after all."

She looked back up at the apartment. Her mother and her man had long since gone to bed. When her mother had finally slept with the man, her sounds had changed. She wasn't the child that had discovered their own brokenness, but the angel that discovered they could fly. Her sounds like the beating of wings in the air, her cries like she was discovering the sky for the first time.

She was happy now, truly happy now. Del could see it in the way she moved, so alike the boys she'd brought home in the past, untethered by anything as foolish as gravity. Del should be happy for her. That's what her father had said, but how could she be when it meant she was left all alone on the

ground.

“Hey,” Del looked up at the boy, but he wasn’t looking at her but down at the beach. “You wanna go to the beach.”

“It’s the middle of the night,”

“I know, but I was heading down there anyway. It’s quiet,” He looked back toward his own apartment. Del could see the light on there, shadows moving angrily against the light as if trying to reach for it and put it out. “Helps me sleep.”

“I don’t really like the beach,” Del told him.

“Come on,” He smiled at her and finally Del found something about him that was worth memorizing. “What could you have to lose?”

Del looked at him and then down at the beach. She’d always thought of it as a place that was always trying to steal you ways. The sand, the waves, the people; all of them conspiring together, but the boy was right. She didn’t have anything left to lose.

When they got to the beach, Del’s eyes immediately went to the fire that was burning in the distance. She could still conjure up the image of witches that she always thought about when she saw these people down on the beach, but closer up they looked exactly like what they were—people. Some of them were simply cold and trying to get warm, but others further down the beach were laughing and drinking around their fires, music softly cooing to the night as if in a serenade.

“You act like you’ve never been to the beach before,” The boy laughed looking down at her as she stared at the people.

“Never at night,” She turned toward the waves, taking off her shoes so that she could feel the water brush against her feet. The waves were endless and dark, but so gentle as they washed against her bare skin as if they knew how she felt about them but was determined to change her mind.

“Hm,” He moved a little closer to her. She could feel his warmth even before he touched her. “Why not?”

She leaned against him. His fingers were so warm like her father’s had been when she was younger and he would hold her hand as she walked to school. Del hadn’t realized how cold she’d gotten over the past few years. “Because my parents wouldn’t let me. They thought it was too dangerous to go alone.”

“I guess that’s true,” He leaned down and scraped up glob of sand, throwing it into the water. She couldn’t hear when it hit over the sounds of the waves. “But you’re not alone.”

She looked up at him, “True,”

“Besides,” He laughed bending down to pick up another glob of sand, “Who wants to go anywhere alone. It’s boring.”

“And lonely,”

He started to laugh, but then must have heard the seriousness in her voice or seen the shimmer of light off the tears in her eyes—foolish, foolish tears. When he touched her, his hands were gritty with sand, but she could still feel their warmth pouring into her. Compared to his warmth, she felt like ice.

“Del, are you sure you’re alright?”

Why’d he have to be so nice?

Why couldn’t he just kiss her like other guys would have?

“I’m feel so alone.”

“But you’re not,” He said, his voice was so quiet that it could have been one of the waves brushing her skin, “You’re not. I’m here.”

“No, you’re not,” She pushed him away. God, she was a fool, crying in front of someone she

didn't really know. Maybe that was why everybody ended up leaving her "You're just a stranger!"

"Hey! I am not just a stranger," He grabbed her arms and she jerked in surprise, but then he smiled, his face brighter than the light from the moon or the stars beginning to glimmer against the clouds, "I'm your neighbor."

Despite herself she laughed.

"And," He leaned down closer to her so that she could look him in the eyes. His eyes were still brown, nothing changed them, but like the rest of them they were oh so warm. "I'm not leaving... at least not right now. Can't you just... enjoy my company while I'm here?"

She kissed him.

She wasn't sure when exactly she had made the decision to do so. It had seemed like one moment he was smiling down at her with that stupid smile that seemed to have stolen the stars from the sky and the next moment she was kissing him, and he was kissing her back (because no guy was that nice not to kiss her back) and he was so warm, so goddamn warm that each touch made her shudder as if she had caught on fire.

He kept saying her name as if he was afraid she was the one who was going to leave and he was the one that needed to call her back, but she wasn't going anywhere.

In fact, she couldn't pull him as close as she actually wanted. She wanted him close enough to eclipse all the images inside her head of her mother and her man, of her father and his children. She didn't want to see them leaving her anymore, like everyone seemed to be leaving her. She wanted to be the one that left, the one that turned her back on them, and for a single moment when she closed her eyes and her body was shuddering against the searing heat of the boy's skin, she wasn't alone.

She wasn't alone.

2nd Place Cordell Larner Award in Fiction

Say...Love

Jocelyn James

Very much liking Daddy's smile wasn't enough. The glow of it illuminating the screen. His deep brown skin, surrounding the whiteness of his teeth. The way his eyes balanced strength and subtlety. Hard features and bone structures. Big lips and bold nose. The weird juxtaposition of words, telling Daddy I very very much liked it when that wasn't enough, when that wasn't honest.

"Say love."

"I love it Daddy."

"Me too Baby."

This is the part where I love Daddy. Drift into him and return in too late in time for the traditional love story. I'll die with cats and stories. Stories about Daddy and cats that meow when I try to create new ones. Cats that keep me lonely guarding doors, allowing no men friends but him. They'd remind me of my solitude in his absence. Empty arms as Daddy embraces his children, his woman, his life. Empty arms once Daddy has outgrown me, like a once new pair of jeans that just didn't fit anymore. You like them, you even love them, but now you must pass them to someone else; typically someone younger, smaller, lesser than you.

"There has just been an idea of myself and I how I see my future Daddy.

As far as marriage and kids and family and so forth..."

"You just cancel all that out Daddy."

"I'm just so focused on you that I can see myself not seeing anyone else..."

"I realize one day you will need more. When that time comes, when you need a 'normal' relationship, I want you to tell Daddy. OK?"

"Even then, I won't walk away. You'd still love."

"*Leave. You'll feel like you're taking something from me, making me unhappy and you'll leave doing what's 'best' for me."

It took Daddy a few minutes to reply to the green chat bubble. I imagined him staring at the screen, searching for words.

"Pay attention.... I won't walk away, unless this is no longer where you want to be. When you are ready for 'normal' a real bf, marriage, children, simply say so."

Daddy suggest, that even then, even when he is not the only man in my life, when more than our three things (God, family, school) are distractions, that he will be there. He won't walk away, he won't leave. I won't believe that so easily.

When I met Daddy, I promised a friend back at school I would give him a chance. Light skinned, 6'4, athletic build. Boyfriend was only 3 years older than me. He was focused. Paper perfect he had a 3.7

gpa, started on the football team, rented his own apartment and owned a silver Challenger. His apartment was clean and maintained, nicer than most student apartments I'd seen.

He spoiled me, sending random gifts and surprises. Black wedges that made me stand at least 5 inches higher, a pretty asymmetrical red dress with a deep v cut, 4 bundles of virgin Brazilian wavy. Boyfriend gave me nice things. And I gave him unreal promises. I told myself once we got closer, got back to school, things would be different. I'd start to care, I'd embrace him, be normal. Daddy had a main, she lived with him. She had history with him. Kids with Daddy. Years of Daddy. And I needed years of someone, someone to give me conventional love. So I shielded boyfriend from the dots existing between Daddy and me. I promised him dots. I thought dots and Daddy and boyfriend could all coexist. But Daddy doesn't share. With boyfriend, I was to tell Daddy everything and never mention boyfriend unless asked. When Daddy said,

"He is there and I am here..."

I offered to make arrangements with Daddy, he could regulate how often I see him, what he is able to get from me...

But Daddy doesn't share. Even though he said would, for me he would, he couldn't. When I was three hours away from Daddy, I traveled to boyfriend's house. I spent the night at boyfriend's house. And Daddy couldn't.

"One day when you are ready, you will meet a boy, a good boy, most likely a preacher, who will make you his wife."

Daddy wouldn't share his views on politics, race or religion. He'd say they were too extreme. He'd say I wouldn't understand. He'd say he didn't want to argue or debate. About a week ago, white words popped up on my iPhone screen.

"By midnight I want every password to every social media account you own. Are you ready for that?"

Following his demand, I offered up my privacy.

By the following morning Daddy had read every message sent to me through Facebook messenger.

"Has Pastor James Hurston in any way been too flirty, too touchy or just too much in any way?"

"Just answer yes or no Baby."

"Yes Daddy."

"You think he wants to fuck you?"

"If given the opportunity."

Days later Daddy had posted a video about a Rockford pastor being in a young girl's inbox. The pastor was thirsty, offering her money, more suggestive than a pastor should be. Daddy held the camera the same way he did when we video called. He shared the same background of his black suede car seats, lighting sneaking in through the windows.

"Even if a man can preach his ass off, have the perfect sermon and make you feel good, that does not mean he is the man for you to follow. Be careful and use your own wisdom. Follow God and use your own wisdom."

Daddy would tell me he was picking his girls up for church, reminding me of their arrival when they got home. But Daddy never went.

“My Baby is going to marry a short, chubby, jolly, high yellow preacher lol.”

“I don’t like short people, chubby people, jolly people or preacher people lol.”

“I like Daddy.”

“We complete each other Baby. We wont leave. We.....each other.”

Daddy had given me the dots one evening before bed. It was after a video call. After we both had stared at each other’s images. Smiling silently like two school kids trying not to be caught. Everyone was asleep, his children, his woman, his world. We had to be silent.

“Goodnight... I.....”

I asked Daddy what he meant and he said I knew. And I knew.

Months ago, before he shared those dots with me, I was given a command. The white letters in green background read:

“I am your Master, Daddy, Dom, not your boyfriend. DO NOT fall in love with me.”

“I like Daddy best.”

For a 19 year old pre-k, I liked Daddy better. Daddy was more innocent, less of a reminder of the world we prepared to indulge in. I always found something sexy in calling my man daddy. But Daddy wasn’t my “man.” He was a man, that ruled my universe but lived elsewhere. I was not allowed to fall in love. Weeks later Daddy told me:

“If I fuck you, make love to you --- raw --- you will fall in love.”

I could feel myself slowly drifting downward as he typed these words. I imagined this was how a crew on a sinking ship would feel. Grabbing for items, looking for lifeboats. A scene from The Titanic pops into my mind. “Women and children,” said the middle aged man gasping the strings connected to wooden lifeboat. People scurried around him, piling atop of each other. I was female and child and now I was falling.

“Shhh... You love me...”

It was after we first physically met and fucked. Just a month after he told me not to fall in love. When these words invaded my screen, I felt like I knew Daddy. As if the air he breathed was a calm and mellow breeze. Like Daddy had shaded my world a new hue, while letting his colors burst. Reds and yellows and blues all bleeding into white words, all lingering in summer’s cool air. I inhaled Daddy. Lived the words he said. I followed his rules, met his demands. Not because I was forced, not because I was scared but because the gentle, squally wind against my spine felt so sweet. Heavenly hurt, love taps that stung but didn’t bruise. Hurt for pleasure and hurt for discipline. I did love Daddy, but even weeks

since he told me these words, neither of us could say it.

“Do you count the dots?”

“I count those dots every second I breathe.”

Every second, every minute, every hour, every day. Those little green flickering dots had complete dominion. Like a drug, I craved them, watched them, waiting for words to appear. Waiting for Daddy. His thoughts, his mind, his truths to be laid out in front of me. To be an exhibit, allowing me to cautiously examine. “Do not touch the art work” “Do not fall in the love with the displayed piece.” Ignoring the warning signs, I surpassed the threshold and crossed the line.

“I love you Daddy.”

Hours had passed and he hadn't replied. He hadn't said anything back. I needed him to respond, I needed Daddy to speak. He was silent while I said words meaning worlds to me. He sat lifeless while I breathed my love into him. The love he denied and danced around. He brushed my words aside, probably in the arms of woman he truly loved.

I started to feel like the iceberg was crashing into me. My ship was sinking. “Women and children,” I heard a voice call. My color started to dull as I drowned and was pulled under. My face was covered with black and filth and loneliness. Daddy was silent when I confessed my love. He probably too busy distributing himself among his children and his woman. His love had to be spread and there wasn't enough for me. This was end, this was it. Daddy was started to fade as I regretted replacing the dots.

“Sorry, I fell asleep.”

3rd Place Cordell Larner Award in Fiction

Lorelei

Jon Naskrent

August 22nd, 2012

Lorelei,

I landed yesterday. I'd tell you what Germany's like but I'm jet-lagged to hell and haven't done much yet. Jens picked me up at the airport. It was great to see him again—he even hugged me. We drove over to Waltrop and I fell asleep on the ride over but I learned a few things since Waltrop is a few hours away from Berlin. Did you know that on the autobahn (that's either a fancy German word for highway or maybe just the actual name of the highway, I haven't figured that out yet) there's a lane where there's no speed limit? Sounds like your dream come true. All the cars just speed through, one after the other, like raindrops falling from the sky. I think it's terrifying.

When we finally got to Jens' place we ordered some Turkish food. Jens tells me it's kind of their version of Chinese food and there's take-out places in every city. His English has gotten a lot worse since he visited us, sometimes it's hard to understand him. He looks at me worried a lot. We watched TV for a while before Jens eventually remembered that I don't actually speak German. I think next the time I travel to another country I'm going to take a real shot at learning the language.

I'd write more but I'm just beat.

I wish you were here.

Love,
Mason

August 24th, 2012

Lorelei,

Me and Jens went out last night. I didn't really want to and I don't think he really even wanted to but I think he felt obligated for us to go. He kept talking up all these different places, all the way over in Dortmund which is a city that's pretty close but still pretty far and we had to take all sorts of trains to get over to it. I get that he's trying to show me a nice time but I don't think he realizes that even back over in the States I'm usually just staying in on Fridays anyway.

I didn't really have fun last night. I was still a little jet-lagged and being full of beer and getting hungover definitely didn't help anything. Writing this letter is hurting my head even more. I've decided to write the rest of it in list-form so I can sleep.

1. German beer is really, really, good.
2. I don't like trains. You spend so much time waiting for them to take you someplace else. Why didn't you just use the time you spent waiting for the train just going to the place you wanted to be anyway?
3. Trains are even more boring when you can't understand anything and you're staring stressfully at the stop-listings and you're trying to figure out if hauptbahnhof is where you're trying to go or where you are. Note to self: figure out what hauptbahnhof means.
4. Sometimes in Germany they bottle tequila and beer together and they don't tell you until they've already given you the bottle.

5. These beers are also four euros and you don't question it because you don't know the price for anything yet.
6. German music is cool.
7. I am definitely, definitely, definitely not in the position to hit on or be hit on by girls.
...I miss you.

Love,
Mason

August 30th, 2012

Lorelei,

I try to squeeze these letters in whenever I can. I know there's only been two so far but it gets difficult. There's just so much going on and I don't know how to process it all.

Today we decided to head over to Jens' parents for a barbeque. Jens invited some of his friends so we went to pick them up. One of them, Tim, got into the passenger seat with a full bottle of beer that he'd been drinking and I told him he had to finish it before we drove anywhere. He didn't understand and I explained that it was because of the laws, that it was dangerous to drink and drive. Tim was confused. He asked what was dangerous about it if he wasn't driving. I said I didn't know and that's just how the law worked.

Everyone except for Jens laughed at me for a while after that. Apparently in Germany you can drink beer in the car as long as you're not driving. I tried to explain to them that it wasn't safe, that there was no way to tell if the driver hadn't been drinking, too, that there was no way to enforce it and then there'd be drunk people on the road and there's no speed limits, there's no speed limits and they just let people drink in their car and it's not safe and people die. They didn't listen. They just laughed and drank their beers and you know what? at some point I had one, too. In a car. Drinking.

I'm pretty sure they think I'm crazy or some prude or something.

I learned a new word today: pröst. It means cheers.

I have to go. I'll write soon.

Love,
Mason

September 7th, 2012

Lorelei,

Today I was looking at a picture of when we were on the beach down in Georgia back when I was helping you move. I really like that one. You're wearing this blue bikini and this big, stupid sun-hat that's wider than most dinner trays. I have on my red swim trunks. We're standing in the sand, not like the sand down in Florida, not that white, pretty sand, but the crappy stuff, the sand made out of seashells and rocks and dead fish bones. We're arm-in-arm. Yours barely fits around me and I have you pulled close. You're giving me this big kiss on my cheek. The ocean is behind us and I think I remember that day the surf was just massive, always trying to throw us back to the shore. It wound up stealing your hat.

Question: do you think if a seagull found the hat, he would wear it? I think he would.

Next question: if the surf in Georgia was pulling us back to shore was it telling us to stay home?

I asked Jens about the autobahn. He says that's the name for that particular stretch of highway but it's also just the word used to describe highways. I still think you'd like it. I hate it. It reminds me of you.

Love,
Mason

September 11th, 2012

Lorelei,

I've been here for about three weeks now. I'm getting comfortable and my routine is pretty consistent.

In the morning I wake up and wander down to the bakery beneath our apartment. They have all sorts of pastries and bagels and breads but I have no idea what any of their names are so I just point at them. After me and Jens eat we do something with our day. Most days this involves going to his parents', where we sit in the backyard and swim in the pool and eat barbeque. After that we go out at night with his friends (and I guess at this point they're becoming my friends too). Jens usually turns in pretty early, around two or so. He always looks at me sadly when he does this. I like to stay out late, until four or five, usually with Julia and Tim.

Last night we were talking about the autobahn. I was trying to explain why it was dangerous, that having no speed limit just means that there are all these flying metal death-traps speeding down the highway putting all sorts of people in danger, that people would just try to go as fast as they can for the thrill of it, that they'll race and try to beat each other to where they're going. Julia told me that the statistics say the autobahn is actually safer than ordinary highways. I don't think I believe her.

Tim and Julia started talking about their families. I went home after that.

Oh. New phrase for the day: ich vermisse dich. It means "I miss you." I've actually known that one since I landed; I've just been thinking it a lot.

Love,
Mason

September 13th, 2012

Lorelei,

I met a girl last night. Her name is Charlotte.

We were at Tim's partying. His place is pretty big and there were tons of people. I was quiet, just trying to stay out of the way. This girl caught my eye. She has this big, bushy, blonde hair, sort of like Hermione's. I really like her cheeks. They remind me of pillows.

Tim introduced us, I think he saw me looking at her and tried his hardest to get us together. Her English was crazy good. She studied abroad in India for a year and had been taking English since grade three.

We didn't really hit it off at first. Like I said, I wasn't feeling very sociable. She said some pretty funny stuff and I just didn't really say much back. She ended up walking away.

I saw Jens talking to a girl. She was leaning in close to him, but he kept leaning away. When he saw me looking he turned away from her.

Later, the party was getting big. It was about three in the morning. I was having another conversation with Julia and Tim, this time we were talking about gun laws. They really couldn't believe that we could just own guns. I tried explaining it to them but they weren't having any of it. Life tip: when you're talking to German people, don't bring up Hitler. They hate that guy.

Anyway, I was going to the kitchen and I saw Charlotte. She was sitting on a chair, holding her foot—it was bleeding. I asked her if she was okay and she told me she just cut her foot on a broken beer

bottle. I wound up carrying her to the bathroom. I don't know much medically, but I'm still first aid certified back from when I was a lifeguard, that summer down in Georgia. I couldn't find any hydrogen peroxide to disinfect the cut—it went pretty deep—so I found some vodka in the kitchen. Her hand squeezed into my shoulder and left marks as I cleaned out her wound.

I couldn't find any gauze, either. I cut a towel into a few strips and tied it tight against the cut to stop the bleeding. I let her know that the wound would probably scar unless we could properly disinfect it. While I worked she told me about India, about how people there walk in the streets, that you can hardly drive anywhere without hitting anybody, that everyone packs into the streets like it was where they were supposed to live. I told her that in America people typically stay out of the streets unless they were driving or just walking across. I also told her sometimes there's big, terrible accidents and sometimes people get hurt. I asked her how she felt about the autobahn and she told me that when she goes as fast as she can she feels like she's flying, like she's finally free and she can go anywhere she needs to and nobody can chase or catch her.

After the towel was tied and her foot was at least kind of clean I washed my hands. Charlotte asked if I would go home with her to make sure the bandages were okay and take care of her. When we got back to her place I properly washed and disinfected her foot and rebandaged it. Then we talked and kissed until the sky turned purple and then eventually orange.

I leave for the States in two weeks. This morning I made her pancakes for breakfast. She loved them. I'm confused. This is the part where you're supposed to show up and tell me what to do. You were always good at that.

Love,
Mason

September 18th, 2012

Lorelei,

Today Charlotte and I drove on the autobahn. I almost feel guilty for ditching Jens for a few days but I suspect he's relieved to have me out of his hair for a while. I think I've been making him feel worse. I told Charlotte I didn't want to go. She asked why. I couldn't tell her.

I'm going to say this: I get it. I get why you like it and I get why Charlotte likes it. I get it. The trees blur past your window and you can't see anything and the wind blows into the car and you hear everything, you hear the birds and the other cars and the sounds of construction on the other side of the road and the music, it all mixes into one big song, I get it. I get the swirls. I get them, I get the tree trunks and the asphalt and the other cars and the road signs, all pooling into this big painting, like the artist was trying to paint sixteen different scenes at once and wound up inventing a new color—I get it.

But I still don't like it.

Eventually we stopped at a gas station and I got out of the car and wouldn't get back in. Charlotte asked me what was wrong. I told her nothing. She asked me if I was upset with her. I said no.

That night we spent together, the first one, we talked about everything. Charlotte told me she has two sisters and a brother, all younger than her. Their names are Jasmin, Lisa, and Max. She told me Lisa is really smart and likes to read books, that Max loves airplanes, that Jasmin loves France and wants to live there when she's grown up. Charlotte asked if I had any siblings. I told her no, I don't.

What I should have said is: yes, I have a sister. Her name is Lorelei. Sometimes I call her Ror. She is twenty years old. She is a biology major and has a weird fascination with plants. She likes bad country music and loves to swim in the morning before she goes to class. I should have said that she lives in Georgia and she loves peaches. I should have told the story about how when we were kids we

would fight over whether we watched Cartoon Network or Nickelodeon in the mornings and usually wound up watching both. I should have said that one night she drove home from a party and maybe she was drunk or maybe she wasn't but that night she didn't get home. I should have said that I wasn't supposed to go on this trip alone. I should have said that I write her letters and they just sit in my suitcase because I don't know where to send them. I should have said all of this and more and talked about her all night, but instead I am standing at the gas station saying: I have no siblings. I have no siblings. I am an only child.

September 27th, 2012

Ror,

Jens, Charlotte, Tim, and Julia saw me off today.

Jens gave me something for you. It's a necklace. Silver, I think. The pendant is a pomegranate tree. I'm going to put it in this letter; I hope you get it.

Tim and Julia gave me a quick hug. I spent basically the past month with them and Jens so I think they felt more obligated to see me off than anything. They told me if they ever came to America they'd visit. I actually believe them.

Charlotte cried. I didn't think she would but she did. Her cheeks look like marshmallow when she cries. We only had two weeks together. How do you know how you feel about someone after two weeks? You and Jens had months and you guys never figured it out. We only had two weeks. She said she'll try to visit me in the States if she can.

Eventually I told her about you. She says she wishes she could meet you and that she wonders how you'd like her. I think you two would have been friends.

Jens and I never talked, but I could tell with his hug he misses you.

I enclosed a photo of Jens for you. Also one of me and Charlotte.

I don't know what I'm going to do with these letters. I don't know why I wrote them. It just felt right. You were supposed to be here with me, you know? I hope wherever you are, they somehow get to you.

I hope you know that we miss you.

Love,
Mas

1st Place Cordell Larner Award in Poetry

Not Good Enough

Jon Naskrent

Never had to mow he grumbles,
pulling the cord to the lawnmower.
The engine revs & hums
like the train when it passes
on the tracks, in the backyard,
the house run-down, the paint faded,
the steps on the front porch sagging,
the key to the shed lost to some previous tenant,
the furnace breaking
every winter.
The blades whirr & purr and cut away the first green of this Spring.
It reminds him of his first shave;
God, it killed him, trimming
those first red hairs.
He didn't have a father and needed to talk to someone muscular
so he called Grandpa, who answered, laughing,
thirteen year-olds don't need to shave.
He remembers, at thirteen,
feeding Olivia sweet potatoes.
One Father's Day she gave him a card
and a kiss
and that's probably when the first hair grew.
As a kid he didn't have to mow the lawn
at the homeless shelter, in Seattle, and in Macomb
the landlord took care of it. Now he does.
The blades die; out of fuel. A few yards to his left
he notices
a patch he missed.
Not good enough he tells himself,
the Lord, his father, Grandpa, the house,
the lawnmower, the damned train.

1st Place Cordell Larner Award in Poetry

Home

Jon Naskrent

What do you know of home? The lord asks me.
I am carefully wrapping plates in thin newspaper cushions
and putting them gently into boxes. Don't push me on this I answer.
What do you know of it? he asks again.
It is everything. It is the cupboard where Martin
hid his chocolate bars for bonfires.
It is John and Arija making pancakes on Saturday morning
confronting the Betty Crocker cookbook despite having done it
every week for three months. It is Patrick doing the dishes
in the sink, rubbing the rough-side of the sponge over
the mold that'd begun to grow in the pot I'd cooked the soup in
yesterday evening. It is Danielle, on the floor, watching me
restring the guitar, the thin steel cutting into my stone-callouses.
Here, we have everything you could want the lord comments
as I push the mop against the dirt and grime that's collected on the floor,
washing it away and dipping it into
the grey, gross water. It is everything I tell him,
lifting another load into the back of the trailer
to take with me someplace else.

1st Place Cordell Larner Award in Poetry

There's no place for us

Jon Naskrent

I don't like admit I Japanese she tells me.
After World War Two they no teach us
how be American. I been here
many year. I can tell you good guy.
I can tell your mother good mother.
This country God first. It good.
The university all academic.
No one worry about people,
good people. So good.
There no place for us
so we stay here
and no one teach us
how be American
she tells me.

2nd Place Cordell Larner Award in Poetry

Easy

Jocelyn James

Laughter and good fucking,
You only saw the Sunday Morning in me, and not the Monday night.
Couldn't stand to notice the beauty of my kids reciting bible verses and humming songs of heart break.
Nah, I was only Sunday Morning to you,,
Limited to the tension formed when skins melted into one another,
The sound of my lavender skirt dropping,
All the eagerness to get you home,
The red lights shining in my eyes, as you hand me that drink,
Your friends smile and give you dap, You da man,
As I am stripped naked of everything,
My babies, my two degrees, the pride in my father's eyes.
You da man,
For I am stuck,
Stuck being a Sunday Morning,
A ho, whore, thotianna, Lionell Richie type of fool,
I was only easy to you,
Just like a Sunday Morning.

2nd Place Cordnell Larner Award in Poetry

Lionell Richie Type a Fools

Jocelyn James

Mama's titties be bouncin'
As strange men with strange parts poke the inside of her,
Third legs or something they had.
While she just be kissing,
Kissing them and tasting their legs.

So many men found in my house,
With eggs and bacon on their plates,
Loose belts and untied shoes,
Holding their heads high and
Not looking me in my eyes.

So many men,
I don't even try to remember their names,
They just Sunday Mornings to me.

2nd Place Cordell Larner Award in Poetry

Church

Jocelyn James

You were always empty until Sunday morning,
Standing outside your door,
Hearing long cries and sounds of torture.
I thought he was killing you.
Eating your insides or something.
Doing strange things with strange bodies,
Lying empty and homeless and black.
Black roses sat on your bed,
Till Sunday morning came and you put on your Sunday dress.

3rd Place Cordell Larner in Poetry

Across the water

Katherine Garon

Windblown clouds of smoke roll heavy over the bay
drawn out across the rippling mirror before us
to coalesce ash-grey with predawn mist
like the exhalation of a prayer in winter,
and the swirl of breath between your lips.
Scent of cinders, saltwater spray,
cigarette hanging loosely between your fingertips.
Flickers of cherry-red fire burst from windows,
reaching like pleading hands to the sky
the embers of their prayers carried on the breeze.
Indifferent streaks of sunlight smile down
from the pastel winter sunrise we had come to see.

I remember you always in that way.
Your smoke-grey casket, cherry-red roses, and you,
smiling faintly like a winter sunrise,
like a house ablaze just across the water.

3rd Place Cordell Larner in Poetry

Graveyard

Katherine Garon

Remnants of last autumn's leaves crackled
like old bones beneath your feet,
as you led us wandering down disused paths.
Strolling past sunset, past nightfall,
past ancient flickering streetlights,
casting phantoms beneath our feet.

You directed our march past the headstones
weaving around overgrown plots.
From between the folds of its funeral shroud
the half-moon smiled down on us,
wrapped tight in our dark coats and scarves,
a caricature of a funeral procession.

Suddenly you stopped.
Shouted.
Wickedly delighted,
we scattered; crows
flying among rows of worn stones
until, chests heaving, we collapsed
at the base of a tree.

Laying in the damp grass,
lingering with the ghosts of our laughter,
until daylight graced the sky,
consigning our happiness
to epitaphs.

Birth

Malcom O'Donnell

Blood strewn everywhere and two limp legs
Unable to bear her own weight
This miracle turns into a battle for self preservation
A thing so romanticized morphs into nothing
more than hard, manual work
The stench is overwhelming and beast overwhelmed

Two weeks later, overcome by grief
Browned wool and resting in a mound of shit
The beast shuts its eyes and breaths
Angry, he kicks the childless mother
The child a pile of blood and wool
She shuts her eyes, rolls over and lies still
A systemic infection, a sterile explanation

Table for a Family of Three

Raqueal Henry

I remember Momma made dinner for Daddy and me —It was on a chilly Sunday night, the seasons were changing around that time so I don't exactly remember what month it was, but it was somewhere in between the ending of summer and the beginning of fall. Anyway, I remember this day so clearly because it was the first time me, Momma, and Daddy sat down and ate a family meal. I was still young, eleven to be precise —so Momma wouldn't allow me to cook on the stove. Instead, she let me set up the dinner table and I was super excited. I felt like a big girl and besides I wanted to help Momma because she was sick, the doctor said she had stage four Lung Cancer and there was nothing that could be done about it— “but what do they know? They're all a bunch of liars to me, I've seen doctors save people all of the time on the TV. Cancer Treatments of America, they gave out false hope because their tactics weren't helping Momma at all, more like killing her in my opinion”. I said inside my head as I continued to set the table.

I looked up at Momma, who was sweating hard, I could tell she was overworked but, she always kept going because that was Momma. She always had this sweet yet stinky smell to her, like roasted almond coffee mixed with cigarettes or honey roasted peanuts mixed in with Fanta strawberry soda. These strange smells connected me with her in such a unique way, and I loved it because it was a part of her. Daddy smelled like Cigarettes and outside, which is not a good mixture of smells but I would always say to him, “Ewwwww you stank! Get away from me!” And Daddy would laugh and try to kiss me. Then would both laugh.

The aroma that came from the food was heavy, and it traveled throughout the entire standard sized complex building. The smell from the garlic bread reminded me of black paper, it made my nose itch. As Momma poured sugar, and two packs of Kool-Aid in a big pink pitcher, I could feel some of the grains pop on my face (That's how close I was). The sweet smell of sugar mixed in with the sound of the spoon hitting the sides, as it also scratched the bottom of the pitcher. Momma dumped in Cherry Kool-Aid, but where I'm from people just call the flavor 'red'.

“Here girl, taste this. Lemme know it it's sweet 'nough.” Momma said in a lazy voice.

“Taste like Sweet Cherry Red.” I said as I smacked my lips, trying to get every taste of sugar I could possibly get. The Kool-Aid was so sweet it left a sticky, red ring around my lips. Momma laughed, because I was always giving something a new title, and I looked like a fool with red stains on, and around my lips. Like some crazed woman who applied her lipstick on wrong.

Finally, dinner was ready, and I was so happy because we were about to eat as a family. Don't get me wrong, Momma always cooked but it was always just us two, sometimes she would just cook and leave me to eat by myself. Sometimes my granny would accompany me along with my granddaddy and I appreciated it but, it wasn't the same as eating dinner with Momma and Daddy. It was my lucky day! Anyway, Momma told us to sit down at the dinner table, it was a round, circle like table and she loved it because she said we can all see each other faces. I didn't really care either way, I was happy that the three of us was in the same space, let alone at the same table. Momma cooked spaghetti, a few boxes of garlic bread, baked potatoes and a salad, which I think was a caesar salad. For dessert, she made chocolate cake, it was fat and sloppy, Momma said, “that's how you know, it's gon' be da bomb.”

Momma and Daddy drank wine, and I had a glass of Sweet Cherry Red Kool-Aid. The Kool-Aid was extremely sweet and sugary, just how I like it—besides that's how it was supposed to be. I thought we were fancy because when Momma made the spaghetti she separated the sauce from the noodles and

the sauce was on top instead of it being cooked together. I thought that was simply amazing.

We prayed over our food and then started to eat, I tasted the bake potatoes and I could feel the happiness form in my face. It was so warm and it melted in my mouth, the butter and salt made it taste even better and I added more salt to make it saltier, my body had a twinge as the salt overwhelmed my taste buds. It was so soft, like almost-mashed-potatoes and I found myself eating three of them. The spaghetti was kind of spicy and I could really taste the tomato sauce which was rich in flavor with mushrooms and other spices I didn't know. I remember this because Momma used the Prego chunky mushroom sauce, she sent me to the store to buy it that day. Of course the garlic bread was good, soft, and "garlicky" as I called it. Most of the food was soft because Momma couldn't eat anything tough or hard. She told me that everything tasted the same to her anyway because of her 'treatment', she only ate so that me and Daddy didn't worry about her. Instead she opened a can of Vanilla Insure and stuck a straw in it and slowly sipped on it.

I didn't eat the salad, I told Momma all salads taste the same, which they do but she knew I was lying because I had already eaten three baked potatoes and two servings of spaghetti—but you know I had to make room for desert! I was not missing out on Momma's chocolate cake. I loved her cake, and when I ate it I would get very hyper and the result would be me getting a spanking and sent to bed—so she stopped making it for a while. The spankings stopped too, isn't that weird?

Any who, I made room and tried to stuff two huge pieces of cake down my throat, Momma yelled and I ignored her, Daddy laughed and she yelled at him. I laughed because I was happy, for once I felt complete. I was full, in mind, body, and spirit. After dinner I helped Momma clean up the kitchen, Daddy was already asleep, he didn't really like doing kitchen duties. Momma ran me some bath water and I bathe with the door wide open yelling at Momma to 'come here' every two minutes. I always made Momma sit in the bathroom and talk to me while I washed up—even when I was on the toilet. It was a protection thing.

As I sat in the tub, I didn't know what to say to Momma. She looked sad and felt worse. I could tell she put all of her energy into fixing dinner. I hesitated for a bit, but I conjured up some words to say.

"Momma, I know you don't feel good, but the doctors' will make you feel better."

"Yeah...they will Raqueal." Momma whispered. Her voice was unsure, but her face had a faint look of hope.

Momma sat there for a while, her back facing me. While she looked outside of the open bathroom door. It was steamy and relaxing, so we both let our minds wonder off to other places. After a while we floated back into reality. She looked at me and smiled, I smiled back. I took her hand into mine, and asked if we could stay it the moment just a little while longer. She agreed.

When I was finished I put on my PJs and Momma tucked me in, she rarely did that. I told her that I want to have more family dinners, every night. She said she did too. Who would've thought that night would be the first, and last night we'd eat dinner as a family?

Dinner's Ready

Tyler Cieck

The sun-cracked trees whispered my name
“Come out”
Shaking through my homework
And finally
Through the front door

Robby and Michael and David
Waiting for me outside
And with them
Pointless ramblings
And with those
Aimless amblings

Carving through the smell of a brand new autumn
Fighting over the Big Sticks
Becoming the rustle, the snapping
Like flightless, woodland birds
Without need for the sky

Falling to the ground
Dirt pushing past our lips
Resting on our tongues
Us crazed, filthy boys

I don't know who saw it first
Silently pulsing
A rabbit

No one could tell what had injured it—
it could not tell us—
“What it wants”
They made it my duty
To detach

Tangled in apprehension
“Candy ass”
Candy ass
My father's eyes screaming out of the trees

I lift up my foot

I felt the animal's body cave beneath the weight of my leg. I do not remember if it shrieked; I do not remember any sound, actually. I do not remember if my friends had cheered. I do not remember if they had gone silent. The animal, which had barely been moving previously, gave no indication that it was gone. I left my foot on top of its body for a few moments. I heard feet shuffling in the grass behind me. They were finding new sticks to break. They were finding new ways to play. I stayed back, stoic and pensive.

A pumpkin sky, cradled in our shadows
Wandered home
Washed my hands
Sat at the table

Nostalgia

Malcom O'Donnell

His old hands shake roughly
Tears flow from his eyes
Twenty years later
A love which had never ended

For nearly an hour
He retold stories of his life
A life that began with death
Death a frequent visitor

A story of his father
A man who he had never seen cry
Who he would never see cry again
His father's eyes likely the same as his son's now

He was the last child between them
Twenty years later
His father's confession struck him
Those twenty years had changed no feelings

His father's hands shook as he spoke
The same hands which dug the grave of his beloved
Hands like his now shaking son's
Weathered from years of life and loss
Telling a similar story

I Wish Somebody Told Me

Paige Lloyd

You're beautiful.
You'll always be my baby.
I love you.

The words I long to hear are never heard.
The hugs I reached for...never returned.
I love you.
I wish somebody told me.
I wish that someone was you.

Three words with the slip of the tongue.
Easy. Even if it was a lie, I'd pray every night for you to love me.
Feed me lies from your mouth until I become full off the love I never knew.
Until my mind consumes every ounce of partial truth
Mixed with the fabricated concoctions you mix
I'll eat up the lies you spit.

Never emitting the words from your mouth
Unless I said them first.
That always hurt...
"Men can't show emotion."
Lies.
The day I was born into your life, a simple Polaroid caught the light in your eyes.
I'm your baby girl.
That moment you held me, I knew.
Opened my eyes to the world.
My world was you.

Daddy, I love you.
I know you do too, speak what you feel
For I'll never know.

I love yous turn to maybes and maybes turn to knots
So my stomach aches from a never ending pain
I can't escape.

I wish somebody told me.
The three words I longed to hear.
I wish that someone was you.

A Home Cooked Meal

Raqueal Henry

Grandma's Hands did all the work in the kitchen.
Let me tell you what she used to make.
Chicken; Fired, baked, or grilled
Good seasoning served on a glass plate
somedays with a side of fries.
Other days, Mashed potatoes with gravy.

Mustard Greens, with Pinto Beans
And Hot-Water Corn Bread.
Baked Mac and Cheese and Carmel cake
To top it off.

She used to give it to me hot
So I could chow down.
I was never picky, always simple
Like the steps it took to make it.

Now, it's your turn.
Cook it on a Sunday Morning
While I'm laid back in my Lazy Boy.
Serve it to me
When the day is easy
And I can reminisce
On Grandma's hands
Battered in flour.
And covered in grease
With a smile on her face, and love in her heart.
Cook it on a Sunday Morning
While I'm laid back in my Lazy Boy.
And serve it to me when the day is easy.
So I can reminisce
On Grandma's Hands.

Tractor Troubles

Jefferson Gordon

“So, Oliver,” Mike said, “have you ever driven a stick?”

I nodded.

“Recently, I mean.”

I shrugged. “It’s been a few decades.”

“Well, I’m sure you’ll figure it out.” Mike grinned. “It’s a lot simpler than Thursday’s server problem, I’ll tell ya that!”

I smiled back. Although, I’d found that problem more an exercise in tedium than in programming knowledge.

Mike unlocked the shed doors and swung them wide open. To me, the implements within looked like an armory out of a fantasy novel, a host of strange and exotic weapons for which I could scarcely guess their purpose. And there, in the center of it all, lay the monster of a machine which I planned to spend the day trying to tame.

“Ain’t she a beauty?” Mike asked.

“Yeah,” I supposed. If you’re into that kinda thing.

“A fairly recent model: The John Deere 6150D. Had it built special for all types of work around the farm.”

“Sounds fancy,” I said with what I felt was an appropriate amount of awe.

“Don’t worry. All you’ll be doing today is mowing the cover crops. Nice and simple, like mowing a lawn!”

I nodded. “Sure, I’ve done that before.”

“Good to hear! Now, let’s get you onto this tractor and I can show you the ropes.

—

Within a half-hour, I was getting the hang of the things. Once I got past the stick shift and the reverse-gas pedal that was the clutch (hold down to stop, release to go—do not try to press it part-way to adjust speed, Mike had been very clear, bad for the engine or some such) it was really quite simple.

And quite boring.

I had thought this little excursion would be a nice way to get my mind off of things, connect with a coworker, maybe even learn a new skill while I was at it. But instead I found myself just sitting up there, alone save for the whispers of the cool autumn breeze. And the occasional tumbleweed.

One such weed was currently tumbling down a row of sprouts, keeping almost perfectly centered as if it were walking an aisle. Just like Luke.

I chuckled, realizing my mind had immediately jumped to my eldest child’s graduation ceremony, the one which was now furthest away, temporally speaking. But then, he was the only one who actually walked. My first daughter, Shannon, had needed an extra semester after skipping a few too many classes, and my second, Jessie, almost locked herself in her room when I tried insisting she go and be on stage in front of so many people.

Eventually, the tumbleweed reached the end of its aisle and graduated from sight. All alone, again.

Luke’s departure had been the least noticeable. There was a chasm between him and the rest of the family. He had plenty of friends, Jessie told me once after viewing her brother’s Facebook profile, but whenever he visited, he always seemed to sequester himself in a corner of the townhouse and play

some online role-playing game on his laptop. A far cry from the pen and paper affair we had when I was in college.

Phone calls with Luke were always the shortest. “How’s it going?” “Fine.” “How’s school?” “Good.” “Meet any cute girls?” “Eh, maybe.”

The “Fine” and “Good” had continued right up to when I found out Luke had lost his scholarship and could no longer afford his education, moving into a nearby apartment complex while he tried to settle his mountain of debt without even the credentials to start a real career. Well actually, the “Fine” and “Good” kept coming, but I just didn’t trust them anymore.

Shannon’s departure was much more noticeable. She’d always been the life of the household. Although, that often meant starting fights with her little sister. Each of them swore they still had red marks where they’d clawed each other’s skin in their youth.

But then she became friends with a boy from school, Eric, and the two of them decided to move to the other side of the country to find their own paths through life. Now it looked like those paths were about to converge down an aisle much like the one Shannon had missed out on at graduation, but with infinitely less diplomas and more saying “I do.”

After Shannon’s departure, the house had grown quiet. Jessie took up her brother’s mantle as resident shut-in and locked herself in her room doing who-knows-what on her computer. I hoped it was nothing illegal. Well, more illegal than streaming movies and downloading songs like her elder siblings had.

Jessie had left with the least fanfare, earning herself a decent scholarship so I didn’t even have to help pay her tuition! A good thing, since I didn’t have any money to spare after the house was foreclosed on and I had to declare bankruptcy.

Still, despite the quietness with which she left, I’d felt Jessie’s departure the most. There was simply a different atmosphere about an empty house. I didn’t anyone to loan the car, anyone to pick up after, anyone to cook dinner for—other than myself.

Coming home was like the first night spent sleeping in an empty bed after the divorce. I shook my head and forced the tractor through a patch of mud. Not going down that road. It still had footprints from my last visit.

The sun was nearing the top of its arc across the sky. I took a sip from my water bottle, but what I really wanted right then was a nice can of—

No. No Coke. No soda of any kind. Had to stick to water unless I wanted the gout in my foot to start acting up again. More than it already was, that is, as I pressed the sole of my boot against the clutch for a turn.

Wait. Mike said not to do that. Force of habit, I guess. Picked up from countless twelve-plus hour drives across the country. Bringing Jessie and Luke home for holidays, visiting siblings out on the East Coast, taking business trips to Vegas and Atlanta, and soon helping Shannon move back across the country, as she and Eric had finally gotten sick of Montana’s fifty weeks of winter.

I winced as a bump in the field rocked the tractor. Swore I could hear the bones in my hip grinding against one another.

I was getting too old for this.

A sad thought to have, not even being sixty just yet. Not for another couple of months. Soon enough, I’d be retiring. And then what?

I listened to the machine beneath me chew through plants as I mused over possibilities.

I supposed there’d be more time to read. But I already went through books like a chain smoker went through packs, finishing in a day a product which my favorite authors took months to release. Jessie and I used to race each other through the Harry Potter books as they came out, back when she was in

middle school. She managed to finish one of them in just two weeks. I'd finished in that first weekend, not counting Friday.

Jessie always supported my attempts to write my own book. But she was the one studying English and writing, where I'd chosen math and computers. Even though I'd read five times the number of books she had—minimum—I still had half as much an idea how to write them. Sure, I could think up a dozen stories, but the journey between imagining it and getting it on the damn page was like climbing a mountain.

Hell, in a few years, I wouldn't even be able to ask a coworker if I could help out around the farm. I wouldn't have coworkers. Just me and a small ranch house. Hopefully somewhere near the beach. Hopefully with a dog. I missed having a dog.

God, today felt like a bad country song. An old man on a tractor. Wife's gone. Dog's gone. Kids have moved out. Now all that's left is that old man tilling his fields, refusing to give up just because he's old and tired and has to do all the work himself.

I should write that song.

If I knew any more about song writing than I did book writing.

Besides, it wasn't my tractor. Wasn't my field.

By that was my lunch coming to greet me.

"How're ya doing?" Mike asked over the engine's growl.

"Just fine," I said, patting the hood. "Runs easy like Sunday morning."

I kicked myself for naming one of Laura's favorite songs. I wondered if it was still one of her favorites. If her second marriage was going better than ours had.

Mike let out a bark of laughter. "Good to hear! But it's almost afternoon, so I figured I'd give you a break."

I put the machine in park, turned off the engine, and hopped down, trying to ignore my knees' complaints. Mike handed me a brown paper bag with a golden "M" on the side and a grease stain growing along the bottom.

"Thanks," I said, taking it.

Mike invited me to eat inside, in his kitchen. His ranch house—not unlike the one I dreamed of retiring in—felt a lot like my apartment. Empty. But unlike mine, I knew that Mike's family was just out at church. They'd be home soon enough. Mike had stayed home to finish work, otherwise he'd be there with them.

I usually stayed home because church didn't quite agree with me at the moment. I was sure I'd start going again. Eventually.

Speaking of Mike's work, he said he still had more to do, and left me to eat lunch by myself. I unwrapped my burger and inspected its contents. No onions. Good.

The clock read noon when I was finished. I reached for my phone. I stopped myself. I couldn't call her. Sunday at noon. That was when we'd talk. I'd tell her how my life was going and complain about children who never called. Mom would laugh and tell me how my siblings were doing.

Of course, that was before her fall. Before her funeral.

So instead, I crumpled up my trash and threw it in the garbage can under the sink.

"Mike!" I called. "I'm ready to finish mowing."

A muffled "I hear ya" answered back.

I stepped back outside, through the kitchen door, when my phone started vibrating. I paused, checked the caller ID. I hoped it wasn't another company calling to tell me how much I owed them.

It read: "Jessie"

I hit "Accept"

“Hi Dad!”

“Hello,” I said. “You need something?”

“Not really. Just figured I should call and see how you were doing.”

I raised an eyebrow, as if she could actually see me. “And what sparked this sudden interest.”

“Well,” Jessie said, “you told me you used to always call grandma around this time, and I figured I should try and touch base with you at least once a week anyway, so...”

“... Thanks,” I said. I’m not sure she knew how much I meant it.

“It’s nothing!”

We talked for a good ten minutes. Only a third as long as my Sunday calls usually went, but I appreciated it none the less.

“Hey,” Mike said. “Just came out to check on you. Noticed I didn’t hear the tractor. Is everything okay?”

I laughed. “Yeah, Mike, everything’s fine. Anyway, let’s get back to work. The day’s still young!”

Fallen

Jeramie Okoh

Look at me, lying there,
Unable to believe.
All it took was just one
To make me want to leave.

Didn't I know better?
Than to spend every night
Fighting away my angels.
When I should have listened.

Over the broken beer bottles,
I heard her voice.
Under that intoxication,
I followed without choice.

I found your approval
At the bottom of the sea?
Now I can hear my angels,
And they say you weren't for me.

Sick

Hailey Laughlin

Poor health and worse decisions
illuminated
on white sheets
in a white hallway
under white lights.

Small, fragile, pale.
Just another paper gown
undistinguishable
from the rest.

Men and women pretend
and eventually come to believe
they are something more
than a victim.

Dying slowly of hopeful nostalgia,
a false and twisted idol,
murdering them.

Ivory Lines

Hailey Laughlin

Ghostly fingers fashion ivory lines,
her crimson eyes affixed on such.
Cracked and mangled, lips part
in staggering anticipation.
Entombed in an opiate prison,
she finds refuge with demons.

Friendship is a Mighty Oak

Jillian Terrell

Friendship is a mighty oak
starting out as just a small acorn
planted haphazardly by chance
fed by sunlight and rain drops
until no one can question its
Strength
and its
Endurance

To Settle On My Cheeks

Hailey Laughlin

Just past dawn, the sun stands
it's amber rays reaching
through blossoming trees
and across dew covered grass
to settle on my sunken cheeks.

Gracefully twirling
in her new black dress,
her tiny bronze freckles turn towards the sky
and then to our mother.
“Do you think she likes her wings?”

Rhetoric of Love

Chris Bell

Susan Trainor stood in her kitchen eating a slice of unfrosted yellow cake (Now Made with REAL Vanilla Pudding!!) She looked at the calendar on the wall even though she didn't need reminding that it was April 25th. It should have been her 15th wedding anniversary to Philip Alexander Trainor.

She cut another square of cake, giving it a perfunctory examination before she crammed it all into her mouth. Spraying yellow crumbs across the counter she sobbed, "Made with real tears." The clump stuck to the roof of her mouth making it difficult to swallow. She brushed a hand across her face and got some milk from the refrigerator. Most days it was a trial to breathe, to live alone knowing that where Philip was she could never be. Swallowing the milk, she worried the word "widow" around on her tongue, opened her mouth to verbalize what was now her reality and just as quickly clamped her mouth shut with a sharp click of her teeth. She refused to utter the word that would bring about a permanence and solidity to her plight that she was not yet ready to accept.

She covered the remainder of the cake with tinfoil, inhaling unwanted air as she wished for something different, something more. She wanted to feel the illusory sensation of God's love that her family had dedicated their lives to as missionaries. A God she vociferously denied the night she received the phone call from the headquarters of Baptist Missionaries Midwest informing Susan that her beloved husband Philip had been called home to his Heavenly rest. The phone fell from her nerveless fingers and clattered to the floor and she soon followed. The neighbors heard her hysterical weeping and found her curled in a fetal position on the couch.

That was a little over a year ago, yet Susan felt as if she was still swimming in an abyss. She never really cared for the climate—environmental or otherwise when it came to being the only daughter of Baptist missionaries with their zeal to bring the Word to the unsaved masses. She never expected to meet someone as she floated along in the ethereal flow of her limited existence in the sand choked villages with names she could barely pronounce in a desert with its unrelenting sun and heat. At first she took great pains to stake her claim in the gritty earth, to make her presence felt among the natives and missionaries alike. She never yearned to achieve the exalted state of grace pushed like a narcotic among her brethren. Prayer meetings left her feeling unfulfilled and she always felt awkward kneeling on the wooden planks covered with threadbare carpet to kneel before a makeshift Christ and ask Him to forgive her for things she had no control over for sins that had been passed down from generation to generation like a pox ridden quilt. At sunset, her and a few of the other teens would sit around in a circle and watch the sun set and shiver at the impending chill to follow. She'd forgotten her jacket one evening and as they sat around exasperated, bemoaning the desert's maddening aloofness, Susan spoke up, telling the group that she could understand why ancient men had visions of burning bushes that spoke and bread falling from the sky.

"Ah, sister! Ignorance is bliss; ours is not to question the ways of the Lord." A smartly dressed boy stood up and walked over to Susan who was shivering in the dusk. He knelt beside her and offered her his coat with a wink and a mischievous grin playing at the corners of his mouth. "I'm Phil Trainor, born again heathen." The group broke into spontaneous laughter and dispersed soon after, leaving the two of them alone to sit and ponder the stars and their place in the universe. Philip walked her back to the Quonset huts that served as a home away from home and told her he'd see her tomorrow at school.

Susan tempered her enthusiasm as she made her way to the other end of the compound where the church/school was located. She told herself not to get too attached. Friends and acquaintances had a

way of slipping through her tremulous grasp just as a solid foundation for a relationship had been established. Susan was usually one of the first to arrive and she sat in the next to last row of tables. She spread her bag and uniform jacket across the table, saving a spot for Eva who would innocently rub Susan's leg while pushing a pencil in and out of her loosely woven French braid. Somehow Eva felt her inability to ingratiate herself with the others who carried themselves with an overinflated sense of self and undeserved entitlement. Once class began and the teacher began lecturing about quadratic equations or factoring, Susan would gaze serenely into Eva's dark brown eyes and run her index finger up and down Eva's forearm whispering the few words of Spanish she could remember. For shock value Susan would utter a vulgarity between clenched teeth and watch Eva squirm, her leg pressing harder against Susan's. That morning Susan leaned against Eva and nipped her playfully on the earlobe. Eva squealed playfully and scooted away from her. Her pencil fell to the floor and rolled behind them. Susan swiveled in her chair to retrieve it and came face to face with Phillip. He was holding the pencil out, pencil first.

"I believe this belongs to you," he said, the same smile on his face. He wagged his eyebrows at her as she plucked it from his hand.

"I believe you would be correct, eraser first even, a true gentleman." She felt the hot rush of blood to her cheeks as she turned back around. She lost count of how many times she knocked her pencil to the floor.

The shrill ring of the phone interrupted her reverie. The caller ID indicated it was Susan's mother. Ever since Phillip's death her mother called on their anniversary to check and see how she was doing. She would ask if Susan would like for her and her father to come over or perhaps meet for lunch. She declined any and all offers much to her mother's chagrin. "How long are you going to isolate yourself, Susan? This isn't healthy. You're still a beautiful young woman. You've got your whole life ahead of you."

"Jesus, Mom, I'm a 35-year-old widow! What kind of life do I have without Phillip? He was the one real and true thing in my life and now he's fucking gone! I'll never see him again...never."

She could hear her mother relaying a censored version of their conversation to her father. She gripped the phone in her hand, resisting the urge to hang up. Her eyes were drawn to the calendar again. A fat manatee lolled in a small lagoon with other manatees in the background.

"I really wish you wouldn't take the Lord's name in vain, Susan."

"He's not my Lord, mom." Susan hung up before her mother could begin proselytizing. She lifted the calendar from the wall and began flipping through the months. On their first wedding anniversary Phillip and Susan had gone to Florida for a week. After visiting Sea World they decided to adopt a manatee named Banjo. Every year after that they would go down to visit, take pictures, feed him, they both begged for the chance to swim with him but that wasn't allowed. The calendar was put together by the staff with each month featuring Banjo in the different environments down there. A small tag indicated he was an adoptee and Phillip would always tell Banjo on the last day of their visit to be a good boy and not lord it over the others that he had human parents. They would then take one last "family" photo with a Santa hat on Banjo's oblong head to send out to both sides of the family for Christmas. Everyone enjoyed it at first. Unfortunately, the luster soon wore off for Phillip's mother who cornered them at their last Christmas dinner together and demanded to know when she would become a grandma. It was an issue they had deftly skirted in the past much to his parent's consternation. It had become the elephant in the room and Ruth Trainor's patience was growing thin.

"It's the least the two of you could do. Phillip you've set yourself down a path contrary to the Lord's will. You were born for a life of service, not indulging the whims of your wife who has obviously blinded you." Phillip restrained Susan and ushered her from the room as his mother looked on with a

haughty expression. Phillip returned and told his mother in no uncertain terms that he was his own man and if they couldn't accept his decisions then that would be something they would have to work out with their own conscience. He respected their beliefs but he would not stand by and let his wife be insulted while those that slung their arrows hid behind their mantle of piety and self-righteousness. Susan sat uncomfortably in the living room surrounded by Phillip's family who would look from her to the ebb and flow of bitter recriminations emanating from the next room. Phillip strode calmly out of the kitchen, shutting the door on his mother's muffled weeping and walked straight to Susan. Without saying a word, he held his hand out toward her. Susan thought her heart would beat its way out of her chest as they walked arm and arm upstairs to the guest bedroom to gather their gifts and coats. She had never been more in love with him than at that moment.

Fat tear drops spilled down Susan's cheeks and dotted the calendar that was now back on April. The hollow ache was suffocating her from the inside out. The coroner's report stated that it looked like a bomb had gone off in Phillip's heart. A heart that held more love, compassion and kindness than a roomful of people. When it rained the neighbor's son would come sprinting across their yard, beating on the door asking Phillip if he wanted to come out and play. Susan would watch them from the porch as they ran in circles around the yard, heads back, catching rain drops in their wide open mouths. At his funeral, Susan could only manage to tell the other mourners that Phillip made her whole and he was the smile on her face that no one else would understand. As she was led back to her seat she viewed her mother-in-law through her film of tears. Ruth Trainor sat stoic and poised. A grim, twisted look of satisfaction on her face. Susan wanted to ask her if she was happy now. After several months of heated debate between Phillip and Susan, Phillip agreed to accompany his brother down to Mexico to help renovate an orphanage.

"This isn't about my mother winning or getting her way. This is bigger than her, bigger than you and me. This is a chance to make a difference for some children who have nothing." Phillip was excited about the trip; he was like a little boy on Christmas Eve on the drive to the airport. Susan hugged him a little tighter and held him a little longer before letting go. This was the first time they would be apart for an extended period of time: almost two weeks, but he promised to call her every night before she went to bed. Phillip hugged Susan again and kissed her with a fervor and intensity that took her breath away. Before he walked through the security gates he handed Susan a sealed envelope.

"What's this?" she asked. Her eyes searched his face for a hint. He grinned, kissed her on the forehead and told her he loved her.

Susan watched him until he rounded the corner. She watched his plane take off into the cobalt blue sky until it became a tiny dot in the sky.

And then he was gone.

Susan stifled another sob as she stumbled to her bedroom and picked up the dog eared envelope that was lying on her night stand. Gingerly she pulled the card out and lay on the bed as she read what Phillip had written.

*My dearest Susan,
I've never been one to put much stock in premonitions, and maybe I'm already suffering from separation anxiety. I'm writing this while watching you sleep and your hair is fanned out on the pillow and the moon light is shining on your beautiful face. I fall in love with you all over every time I look into your eyes. Remember the Aaron Neville/Linda Ronstadt song we danced to at our wedding? "Don't Know Much?" I think they wrote the chorus just for us— "I don't know much, but I know I love you, and that may be all I need to know."*

I'll always be in your heart, Susan, and, if God forbid, something should happen that keeps us apart, please do not always grieve. If the past 14 years have meant as much to you as they have to me then you'll go on living for the both of us. The pain and sorrow will fade over time. It may not seem like it at the time, but it will, trust me and believe that. I love you more than anything else in this world and I don't want to leave it knowing you're dying with me in spirit. Live, laugh, cry, play in the rain with Trevor from across the street.

And always know that I love you.

I'll call you when we land, and I'll see you in two weeks!

All my love,

Phillip.

Susan gently tucked the card back into the envelope and placed it back in the drawer. She walked to the bathroom and splashed cool water over her face. When she went into the living room she picked up the phone with trembling hands and dialed her parent's number. Her father answered after three rings. Susan took a deep breath and asked him if they would like to come over for cake.

Untitled

Jason Welvaert

A winter cloud showers sugar coated frost upon dried leaves
as twinkling luminescent moonlight gently kisses a blade of grass.

This Scene is so . . .

Jillian Terrell

The leafy trees offer shade
while hanging up the laundry
The rustling of the leaves
lets out a gentle laugh

As the soggy blanket
catches in the breeze
and connects with my face

It is a budding meadow
After a gentle rain

I am dumbfounded as if I
have just taken a huge
bite out of a sour apple

Windy Day

Jillian Terrell

A November sky merges into the face of the river-
where white gushy little waves roll
and wily wild seagulls hover...
mimicking the choppy slop below.
Incessantly, the cold wind-whipped whirling water flows.

Tales by a Fire

Shane Dierkx

On a cool, silent summer night
two silhouettes sat near a fire.
first a boy, the second his Father,
the boy gazed deep into the surrounding shadows
while his father peered up into the dwindling smoke
listening to the boy recount all his fears.

One by one his deepest, twisted, most cynical fears
were greedily grabbed up by the night,
whilst the dark cloud of smoke,
prowled overhead, the flames listened in the fire
expunging their light into the deepening shadows.
Hurriedly, the panicked boy looked to his Father.

Who looked back and remembered his own Father
on another dark night with other dark fears.
That night, like this night, the menacing shadows
waltzed in a dizzying dance in the night.
The only thing protecting the silhouettes, the fire
whilst the lofty pillar of smoke

held the sky aloft. Then the smoke
began to change as the lion hearted Father
painted tales of heroes and adventure in the fire.
These courageous characters fought back the fears

as they rode on ash and ember in the night
striking down all with blades of flame, the shadows

could not stand before the onslaught and the shadows
were cast down. The heroes rode on steeds of smoke
jubilantly galloping, celebrating their victory over the night.
The ballad done, the elated boy and his Father
wove new tales to dispel the fears
and so on it went until the embers of the fire

burned low. The only telltale sign of the fire
was the warm inviting glow, and so the shadows
snuck in to reconquer the withering fears.

The air, now clear, showed stars through the fading smoke
the boy beamed up into the diminishing smoke, the Father
regarded the boy, two silhouettes in the deepening night.

Many dark thoughts and fears, dispersed into smoke
because a warm camp fire will always cast shadows.
It will always be a Father, who must fight the night.

Excuse Me

Paige Lloyd

All you could say was excuse me.
Riding on a bus full of people
Desired for greatness,
Just waiting on their destination.

You sit and you stare
At the hairs of many heads from people you cannot compare.
We all have a different story.
Yet we're all in the same place, maybe of a different race, maybe a different face.
But we are all still the same.

Humans with different facades to wear as we sit uncomfortably on this bus, you stare.
But you don't see.
That the boy you sit next to has run down shoes,
Trying to pay his tuition, he's overdue for time.
Time is running, out with a cloud full of doubt he humbly sits.
To his future, he commits. So he rides this bus route with little doubt
That the fear of failing forgives his less formal attire.

But you don't see. That the girl sitting next to you covers her face behind thick black shades
Shielding her sullen eyes that weep for some reprise. You are not aware of the unwanted stares
She shall receive if anyone on that bus did see...
So she hides and on this bush she rides and presses towards her destination.
But you don't see that your future ahead is the destination soon to be reached.
Passing by quickly you take your seat.
Pressing towards the mark, you didn't see who was at the start.
To them you were blind, in hope not to leave your future behind.

Blessing in Disguise

Stephanie Ramos

It was just yesterday when we were at the park, eating ice cream, and throwing the football around. The wind making the bright green trees dance in tune was like music to my ears. I could feel the cool breeze running chills through my body while the sun kissed my skin. It was a great summer day running around having fun with my best friend Salvador. We were talking about the grown up life that he was so scared for me to face. "You need to remember sometimes people aren't who they claim they are. You always gotta watch your back because people will turn on you at any second." I stopped and thought nothing of it; I was too naive and careless to think much of it at the time.

I was barely going into the fourth grade when he was already terrified of me going to high school. "There's so much to you that you barely even know. You have the power to be anything you want. You can't hang around with people that will get in the way of your success." He constantly reminded me to be careful who I allowed around me because not everyone had good intentions. I never really knew what that meant because I was just a kid worried about what cartoons would be playing when we got home. So I would just sit there drawing flowers on the sidewalk with chalk while listening to him. I never knew what any of the grown up talk meant but he made sure I listened and remembered everything he told me. He was facing the real world himself, so I trusted him. I believed what he said; after all, he was just my big brother doing what a big brother would do.

Then in an instant I was ripped from my days at the park having fun with my best friend. No more long talks about the grown up life. No more getting picked up from school and getting corn from the lady on the corner. No more movie nights or game time. My best friend was gone. Gone forever, and I did not know what this meant. It was as if I was in a dream. It was a nice evening watching the sunset from up high in the clouds. I was so excited in the airplane I stayed up the entire four hours babbling on about all the cool things I was going to tell my brother when I got home. I was coming back home from Mexico, so I had many adventures to share with him. When I finally got home I ran inside and straight to my brother's room. The door was unlocked so I turned the light on just to see his messy room but not him. My mom was just coming out of the shower and she looked exhausted. Her eyes were swollen, and she just wasn't her normal self. She told me that my brother had gone to a party with his friends a few blocks down so he should be home late. I was upset because I was eager to show him the pictures and his favorite candy that I had brought him back from Mexico. I fell asleep on the couch watching *Matilda* hoping that he would be back soon. I woke up the next morning and he still wasn't home, so I asked my mom when he was getting back. She kept saying "Soon, he spent the night at his friends." I waited the entire day and he never came home. It was the second day and he still didn't show up.

It was then when my mom went to work and she took me with her. She was acting weird the whole way there. She was very quiet and just dazing off; I remember looking at her just stare at nothing. She was here, but her mind was somewhere else. We got there and her coworkers just looked at us with sad puppy eyes; it was all weird to me because it wasn't like any other day. We went to the pastor's office and he closed the door and asked me how my trip was. He looked at me so hopelessly and said, "you're a very strong girl and I know you have so much ahead of you. A lot of things are about to change in your life and you just have to remember that god is always with you." I didn't really care about what he was saying until he mentioned my brother and my mom starting tearing up. "Salvador was going to his friends' party when some guys drove by and shot him. I'm sorry to tell you but your brother passed away." Then in a glimpse I saw my life and death before me. I instantly fall to the ground and start

screaming and crying. I felt my body shaking and I couldn't breathe. My mom picked me up and started caressing me, squeezing me, barely able to get her words out while she cried. I couldn't believe what I had just heard. I was convinced I was still dreaming and I pinched myself hoping to wake up. My brother was stripped from me with six bullets.

The innocence and purity of a clueless child all at once poured out of me. When I began learning about myself was the same instant I lost myself. I was learning how to write cursive when I began cursing. I was only eight, already so full of hate. I lost my best friend in the most tragic way ever. I was so young trying to figure out what I did to deserve such a thing. My mom always told me that god needed an angel so he took my brother. I asked myself why? My brother didn't deserve to die. He was still so young, just living life at eighteen. I felt like I was living in a dream for three years. Thanksgiving went by, Christmas passed, the New Year came, my birthday was so lonely, the holidays kept passing by. Months and seasons were going by. I couldn't get my mind wrapped around his absence. I was physically here but my heart and mind were in a dark place. Full of negativity, full of hate and resentment, full of bitterness. I isolated myself and I knew I had to toughen up. Kids in my class were still caught up in their kid moments. While I was already mad at the world and everything that ever existed. I questioned god and his intentions. I persistently asked for answers and for my brother back. At least one more day. I hated everyone and everything. I hated god and anyone who ever said he did the right thing by taking my best friend away from me. I was lost in the night skies staring at the stars hoping my brother would show up and I would wake up from this nightmare.

As I started growing up, this tragedy took a toll on me. I didn't want to be bothered or around anyone. I preferred being on my own because I feared getting close to someone. I didn't want to go through the pain and abandonment once again. I was so used to pushing people away. I was in high school doing things that got me in trouble. I didn't care about much because everything that I once cared for was taken from me. Many adults just thought I was going through my teen phase, but in reality I was going through so much more. More than I ever imagined enduring. I was in and out of psychologists, therapy, counseling, and nothing or no one seemed to help or even make a slight difference. I've always been the type to keep to myself about my personal problems. Everyone knew me as the pretty girl with the big smile. When in reality I was crying in silence and barely holding myself together. I didn't know what to make of myself. I just wanted answers that no one could answer.

Everyone would always tell me I have to let go and keep moving. They thought it was just my excuse for being the way I was, and doing the things I did. They just never understood that losing a best friend like mine wasn't something you get over easily. They would tease and say "it was years ago; you can't do anything anymore". Many would say it's just another gang related story; too bad deal with it. It took me ten years to finally understand why things happened the way they did. I spent ten birthdays wishing for the same thing. I kept hoping my number one wish of getting my brother back would come true. I was looking for answers in all the wrong places. I kept turning to different people to help me understand, but all along it was up to me. I already had all the answers.

It wasn't until my junior year in high school that I began opening my eyes. I was finally able to accept that although my brother wasn't here physically his presence is always felt. I was so used to living in the past that I couldn't keep myself together in the present moments. I questioned my catholic religion because everyone kept telling me that it was the best thing that could've happened. I refused to accept that, and I stopped turning to god for help. After all I spent 10 years in a black hole that no one ever seemed to get me out not even god himself. The man that everyone puts on a throne and worships. I came to a conclusion that he never even existed. I started asking myself why I was so stuck with no way out. All along I just had to find purpose in my life again. I had to be at peace and tame my demons. I couldn't stand looking at myself knowing the wrath and fury that boiled in my veins in each day. I had to

change my perception and open my heart. I had to start listening to myself and discovering who I really was behind all the negative emotions.

It took many trials and tribulations for me to learn that everything both positive and negative is a blessing in disguise. Everything is temporary. People. Emotions. Experiences. Living in the present moment is what keeps me sane now. Acceptance is key when it comes to losing someone so close to you. I don't believe in heaven or hell; that's just something religion made up. I believe that everyone has a soul which ascends when you've served your purpose in the physical reality. The soul wanders off in the stars and sometimes even comes back to reincarnate in another form. Knowing and understanding this has helped me so much because I know that I'm never alone. My brother is still alive in my heart and memories which I cherish. Now that I'm in college looking back, I feel so blessed to have had my days with my brother. My entire mindset has changed and so has my perception on life.

Salvador, I realized that once your flame burned out mine was barely being ignited. You left me hopeless and confused, but I'm standing here today because you have guided me through the crazy ride. You never left my side you were here all along watching me grow into the woman that I'm becoming. You were so scared of me going into high school, but I graduated and made it into college now. I sleep at ease knowing that you're with me everywhere I go. I carry a bigger smile and more wisdom day by day. I try to help those around me because I learned that I'm a reflection of everyone and everything I encounter. I'm not just me, I'm the bright sun that rises in the morning, the beautiful moon that ignites the night skies, the colorful flowers that give me life, the different people and places I see. I acknowledge the beauty in everything because I see myself in everything. I'm finally flourishing into the woman my brother would have loved to see.

I've grown with time and with your guidance through this crazy life of mine. Even though your vessel reached its demise, your soul forever remains alive. I know I've had my wrongs in the past, but I promise to continue to make it right. Moving on to bigger better things trying make you and mom proud. Knowing you're always watching over me keeps me at ease; I know I'll forever.

Said

Tyler Cieck

You said
That turning 21
Meant a pharmacy on every corner
And you said
That you can see the pictures
Fading in the mud
And you said
That your body
Is a cold forsaken place
And you said...
I don't remember
I forgot to write it down

There's only so much help that your vices can give you
Before they take what they want

It feels so weird
Calling your name in this voice
It feels so weird
Holding you back this tight

Gloves

Jeramie Okoh

You said that you
Wanted more.
But I didn't hear you.
The weather was so nice.

So when came by
That warm February morning,
Something told me
I should have left my glove.
Good thing brought them, though.
I expected your hands to keep mine warm.
Instead they were keeping his hot.
Hotter than I could handle.

So when you said you wanted more,
I should have kept watch of the temperature.
But I was too busy
Enjoy the weather.

Dusk

Jason Welvaert

A flock of sparrows-
high amongst the clouds
beats of collective wings
heard like a breeze
rustling through summer leaves
while majestic sun-rays paint the autumn sky.

Drive

Dakota Carlson

restless,
its all I know now
the only constant.
one vision,
two vision,
I despise
a special kind of pain
a sickness of heart
transmitted by you
 fuck you
 soulless,
 heartless,
 loveless
I try to dream;
dream that I'm driving
constantly moving
its safe here, mostly
sometimes I'll pull over
for a cigarette or coffee
but I never run out of gas
passing trees
 one tree
 two tree
white line fever
its better this way
keep
 fuckin'
 driving
if I see your face
I keep driving
 faster! and
 faster!
if I ask myself "why?"
if I hear your voice
I look for something
a new route
a new exit
something new...
after a while

it all becomes the same
when I wake
you're still there
the hurt wakes with me
I long to sleep again
to see if one more drive
will erase you

P(o)ortraits of a Father

Dyren Blalock

2nd Grade:

I remember my father's pale lemon colored Cadillac. It was so distinct that everyone could see my dad coming from a mile away. I remember the smell of Febreze air freshener and cigarettes that lingered long after my dad finished the carton. The fabric on the ceiling that was always coming down in the rear until he decided to use staples to keep it upright. I remember everything from the scratch in the shape of a J on the rear bumper to the precious time my dad took while parking because if he didn't do it just right, the Cadillac would protrude from the parking spot.

My father's car is parked in the lot of the local liquor store where we would frequently visit on the Westside of Chicago. I'm sitting on the top of the hood drinking my favorite Wildwood Fruit Punch pop. My father purchased a glass bottle full of gold. Later in life of course I found out it was beer but that's the story he sold to me as a child. I began to have doubts earlier though, I would wonder how everyone at the store could afford a gold drink but their clothes looked like they were straight from the dumpster. Dirty and torn in random spots from head to toe. My father was one of the few men outside the liquor store that looked like they could afford it. They wore nice denim outfits and Starter jackets, Kangol and Dobb hats. Some even dressed in colorful suits that seemed more appropriate for Easter Sunday than random afternoons at the liquor store. Women were around as well, some dressed in tattered rags, some in sweatpants and some wore nearly nothing at all.

My father would walk around the parking lot greeting everyone with names I was pretty sure he made up, some in which I would never forget. Red (who was dark skin), Payroll (who looked as if he never had one), Squeaks (big bald head dude), Link, Johnny Cash, and Pops (who wasn't related at all). But these were the names he called them and they would shake hands like old friends who spent too much time away.

Some feet down from the entrance is where many would gather. A cardboard box torn open to lay flat was their stage and men holding wads of cash, cigarettes, beer and cheap liquor were the acts. I could never understand the game but one man would roll the dice repeatedly until they hit their number or they "crapped". Every time the dice stopped rolling, half the crowd would erupt in profanity, and the other half erupted in cheers. I of course mimicked whatever my dad did. Even the profanity in which I knew to only say under my breath.

When it was time for my dad to roll the dice I had his routine pat down to a t. He would kneel down and turn his brown Kangol hat to the back. He would bounce from side to side as he rolled the dice in a circular motion, the clacking of the dice would resonate throughout the parking lot. He would point from man to man and I knew that after the point he would look back at me sitting on top of the car and smile. My father had the whitest teeth of anyone I knew. His smile seemed to shine even through the tattered crowd. I imagined his smile produced a sparkle like the superheroes on TV. My dad, the former University of Illinois linebacker turned crack dealer.

I would give my father the nod of approval and he would proceed to roll the dice against the cardboard box. The crowd would go completely silent and everything seemed to move in slow motion. My father would snap his fingers at the succession of his roll, still smiling confidently at the dice and they had no option but to abide to my father's demand.

“Seven motherfucker!” my father would yell as the dice landed, picking up handfuls of cash.
“Motherfucking seven.”

Be Beautiful Always

Joshua Luebke

Bullets streaking all around me
Explosions in the distance

Bomber planes fly above us, and
Even I can tell that they aren't ours.
As dark spots pepper the morning sky,
Unusual feelings well up within me.
To say that I am unafraid would be
Inconsiderate to my fellow man.
Fear is the one thing we all had in common.
Unlike the rest of them, I look into my helmet.
"Look at this photot of my beautiful fami..."

Another casualty to the Grat War.
Like many before him,
Will be missed, but not forgotten.
A man gets up with a gasp, blood covering his body, but not his.
Young men pull him up and take him from the front lines
So he can see his beautiful family again.

Hyper Insomnia-Para-Condroid

Jeramie Okoh

“How long will this take to wear out?”

“I don’t know, bro,” Ben answers through a mouthful of spicy beef jerky, “I’m not saying that you’ve completely different but something’s definitely up.”

The two were at Ben’s house playing video games on a windy Sunday afternoon. Mike had known Ben since he started going to school and they were like brothers.

“Like what?”

“Well for starters, remember how last weekend you slept from Friday night to Saturday night? You only got up for the bathroom. What’s that about, man?”

There is serious concern in his best friend’s eyes. Mike knew that he was letting him down.

“Oh, that! I told you it was a long week and I just wanted to chill.”

“Yeah, but my birthday party was on Saturday. You didn’t even come...”

Mike was finding it difficult to get out of bed nowadays. He wanted to see Ben but couldn’t bear to be around other people. Friends or not, Mike was starting to dislike people.

“I’m sorry, dude. It’s just... I mean we’re only in eighth grade. There’ll be plenty more birthday parties! I really just do not feel like myself lately.”

Ben looks up from the Playstation 2 and nods his head to the beat of the Dragon Ball Z game.

“It’s cool. I just don’t want you to be like this all the time now. I liked hanging out with the old Mike. The one who would get mad at me getting excited for winning and who would also get excited at me getting mad for losing. I mean you haven’t beat me in DBZ even once today and you’re not even swearing! I just wish I knew what was wrong.”

Mike intensely rubs his freshly shaved head as he tries to save the friendship that he knows is fading but can’t explain why. There are many words that he knows and could have said here but the only three that come out are,

“Yeah, me too.”

He always enters the house with his hood up, never wanting to be bothered with anyone. Whenever his mother tries to talk to him, his responses are short, snide, and cynical. She looks at him now and remembers how he was when he was younger. He was so full of energy, enthusiasm, and most of all, empathy. One thing that she’ll never forget is how kind he used to be. Boys from the neighborhood would always break his toys or hurt his feelings, but he still considered them friends.

Maybe that’s why he is the way he is now. She recounts all those times she took out her secret, seething emotions out on him eats her up inside.

“Ma, but how come I can’t go to Artie’s and play ghost in the graveyard? Everyone else is!” His mother was lying in bed, in her pajamas watching Wheel of Fortune.

“I told you that it’s too late.”

“It’s not even a school night. Just because you’re in bed doesn’t mean the whole world has to be with you. That’s just stupid!” He slammed the door to her room as he entered his own.

“Now you ain’t going nowhere ya dumb bastard!” His mom’s voice echoed through his head as he turned on his Sum 41 cd.

He looks so much like him. His dark, soft hair, His wide, always watching eyes. She didn’t notice

the change until it was too late. Sure, she picked up on how quiet he has become but thought nothing of it. The fear came the day she accidentally came upon his laptop and found searches for quickest and painless suicide methods. The tears couldn't come fast enough to make her understand that her son needed help. The years of regret came immediately after reading his computer screen because she knew that deep down somewhere in his heart, he blamed her.

"Please eat. Please. You're going to make me upset."

Olivia's voice breaks a bit but she's strong enough to hold back tears.

"Well we wouldn't want that now would we, Oliver?"

A weak smile is drawn on Mike's face as he takes a small sip from the water he ordered at Noodles & Company. The two made a tradition out of going to lunch there once a week after their first date. Recently, however, Mike has been eating less and less.

"Oh, shush! I just want to know why you aren't eating the way you used to. You used to love this place."

Olivia tosses her head to move her blonde hair out of her face and focus on him.

"Yeah, but you know. I'm probably just tired of it."

"Well you didn't eat Chipotle when we went there last week instead."

She cocks her head slightly to show that she proved a point. Mike only closes his eyes, relaxes his shoulders, and exhales.

"You just don't get it."

"Get what? Everyone needs to eat. You're nothing special."

Olivia stops after that, realizing how that could have been taken wrong.

"Nothing special?"

"Honey, wait. You know that I worded that badly. You are so special to me. I love everything about you."

She reaches across the table for his hand which is pulled away before she can make contact.

"No, you're right. There's nothing special about me. I have nothing to offer anyone. I'm just a dumbass that can't do anything right."

Mike's breathing increases to a pace that scares Olivia. It is not fear of him, but fear of what might happen. The boy that she fell in love with a few months ago is breaking down right in front of her and she can't do anything about it.

"Mike, that's not what I meant. I'm just worried about you and want to make sure you're okay. I don't even know what's wrong."

There are many words that Mike knew and could have been said here but the only three that come out are,

"Yeah, me either."

A few weeks have passed since that day with Olivia. I broke up with her that day because I knew she would do it whenever she got the chance. I liked the girl a lot but probably could never love her. Not sure that I actually love anybody or anything. I can walk past my mom without looking up or speaking to her. Why should I? There are things that she won't tell me so why should I act like I care?

My feelings could be confused for hatred but really are not. I could never hate the person who created me. I couldn't even hate Olivia because she at least tried to save me from myself. These thoughts just go on and on and I just feel helpless. When will I get through this?

In class last week we started reading this book called *Catcher in the Rye*. I'm really not a big fan of reading at all but that Holden kid pisses me off and make me smile at the same time. I don't know

what it is. I guess maybe it's how honest and truthful he is. I think he's a real idiot from what I read so far but he really understands people.

Ben has tried to call a few times recently but I can't talk to him. Why would I? To let him know he was right about me? I plan on leaving him my video game collection except for Kingdom Hearts. I want to take that with me.

My mom has been trying to talk to me ever since I decided to live in my room. I believe that she thinks that I hate her for whatever reason. The only times that we see each other is when I go to the bathroom. One morning, she stopped washing dishes to come talk to me as I left the bathroom.

"Mike, did you know that your father lives in New York? We can go see him sometime if you want."

"Maybe eight years ago. Not anymore, mom." I am not looking at her, but I can feel her eyes lower to the ground in disappointment.

"You sure? It'll be fun! We can go to Times Square and have a nice family weekend. Wouldn't that be nice?" I stop short of his room, in the threshold dividing it and the hallway. My mother pauses her breathing, hoping that I'll say yes. She wipes away the murky, soapy bubbles from her hands onto her worn down pajama pants. She never really wore anything other than that and that made me sad as hell. A few motionless seconds pass by until I decide that I actually have something to say.

"No, it wouldn't. You know what would be nice though? Knowing my dad from the get-go would be nice. Being loved for once would actually be nice. Not having to be a dumbass bastard would be very nice! I don't know what a family is, mom. You don't want anything to do with me and I don't want anything to do with you. I promise. I'm losing my mind. And I don't think you could save me this time." I slam the door in the face of his mother who, until now, hadn't realized the way her own son was feeling. She begins sobbing uncontrollably and banging on my locked door to let her in. The only response I give is of loud punk rock music blaring through the walls. The only words that she can make out from the wall of sound is "On and on."

The cries of her five-year old awake her from the sleep she was in. She turns over and asks him why he is crying.

"I don't know. I just feel sad," There's a pause before he finishes. "Will you always be here?" She grasps her son tighter, knowing of the struggles he'll have to endure, but not knowing how to help him.

"Aww, baby. Don't be sad. I'm right here and not going anywhere." She rubs the tears from her son's face, revealing a smile that will be missed one day.

"But I just feel like crying, ma. I don't know why. Just so sad..." The words drift away as he falls asleep, head in her lap. She shakes her head, for guilt and anger both play a part in why her son will grow up feeling this way. She looks for words of comfort to whisper to the sleeping boy but the only words she can come up with are, "Yeah, me too."

Weathered, Dull Hoe

Malcom O'Donnell

Once with a keen edge,
Through rich, black earth you slid
Once you were shiny and lively,
Taking every chance to show
You were hard and sharp in nature

Now the hoe has dulled,
Oxidation has taken your luster
In the corner of the shed you sit,
Resting with the sharpness gone,
Brittle and worn, a shadow of your younger self

A Musketeer on a Sunday Afternoon

Jillian Terrell

Memories running through my head like a gentle lullaby
I can almost hear my mother humming the one she'd use to calm
Our fears, cuddling my sister and me up with her in bed
Various memories dashing in and out of my consciousness
All filled with joyous rambunctious childhood delight

I can't recall when we chose to be the three musketeers
Andrew, dark brown hair, brown eyes, tan skin, free-spirited adventurer
Me, the sensible girl, blue eyes, light brown hair, fairer skin, story teller
Phil, blue eyes, buzz-cut blonde hair, easy going, everyone's best friend
Cousins, all born within a span of five months, so close

Memories running through my head like a gentle lullaby
Building in the sand, splashing about at the lake's edge
Running about at big family holiday parties
Phil and his family staying at my home, us visiting them
Andrew living a mile away, being in the same class

By Memorial Day 2008, we all had turned twenty one
Hanging out at Grandma's eating sloppy joes
Swimming at the out of towners hotel pool
Trying beef pizza for the first time, playing cards
The three Musketeers promising to get together more

Memories running through my head like a gentle lullaby
Two weeks after such a blissful Memorial Day weekend
Traveling eight hours to the Des Moines hospital
Helplessly watching a work related accident take Phil away
In a daze celebrating his life at his parents' house with a kegger
Avoiding Andrew until the end, hugging him made it all so real

With the cool breeze coming through my apartment door
I'm brought back to the present, being tightly held
In my sister's arms as my Dad waits patiently outside
She tells me Mom sends her love and would be here
But felt the four hour trip would be too draining and I agree

Memories running through my head like a gentle lullaby
They've come to tell me, that they're so sorry

Tears swell up and cloud my eyes, it becomes hard to stand
Yesterday at the age of 28, suddenly during sleep
I am now a lone Musketeer

Popcorn

Tyler Cieck

That morning, people felt very disrespectful. Everyone in East Ochre drove at least ten miles per hour over the speed limit. Half-full McDonald's cups were poured onto playground woodchips and discarded under the jungle gyms. Kids fell down, scraped their knees, and rubbed the blood on bike racks. The average stay-at-home mom frowned as she set the bowls and cereal boxes on the table for her kids, forgetting to pull the milk from the fridge. The average working dad sat at his desk and made snarky remarks towards Jennings, the guy who was never in a bad mood. There were no Jenningses in East Ochre.

Nobody slept well all week. Grade-schoolers tossed and turned in their cartoon-themed sheets. Young woman and young men sent each other text messages as they waited for sleep to come – some of them even traded naked photographs, under the assumption that self-pleasure would make sleep come easier (it didn't).

East Ochre became an increasingly hostile environment. The same moms who stopped making breakfast for their kids began to form semi-violent gangs. After a coupon-related spat at a local supermarket, one woman had her hedges burnt, and her young son, William, was picked last in every game of kickball for a week, in spite of his above-average kicking ability.

Strip clubs were crowded with lonely, frustrated fathers. Strippers wandered around the stage with a vague sense of entitlement as they picked up discarded dollar bills. After an hour or so, the men would trot out of their hole with a sense of artificial placidity; they felt more or less how they thought they should feel.

Couples, even the green ones, stopped holding each other at night. Soon, mattress sales began skyrocketing as people began to adopt an I Love Lucy brand of sleep separation. Everybody began masturbating to avoid the warmth of another's touch. "I'm not in the mood," they began saying, regardless of whether or not sexual intercourse was suggested.

East Ochre soon became a tourist destination. People replaced their houses with glass cages, and tourists came to view the life of a miserable person from a safe distance. Dad would frown as Jennings held his regulation binoculars up to his eyes and watched him choke down his Kraft Mac 'n' Cheese while yelling at a sports team.

Pretty soon everyone in East Ochre died. They just stopped eating. "I don't like eating pizza," most non-vegan kids were heard saying. Teenagers would lie in Taco Bell parking lots and eat rocks. The semi-violent gangs of momma bears became non-violent groups of jaded motherfolk. The elderly would shuffle into the street and die; it didn't matter because all the cars eventually ran out of gas.

They leveled East Ochre and turned it into a Six Flags. Everybody would come to Six Flags Great Depression to pretend to enjoy seemingly exciting pseudo-rides. Lines to the Spinning Desk Chair stretched out into the parking lot – the same lot where a group of children collectively starved to death a couple years ago. To commemorate the dead youth, they built a popcorn stand on the spot where the last one croaked, but it never had any popcorn. It was always out of popcorn.

Don't forget to check out our new website at

<http://elementswiu.org>