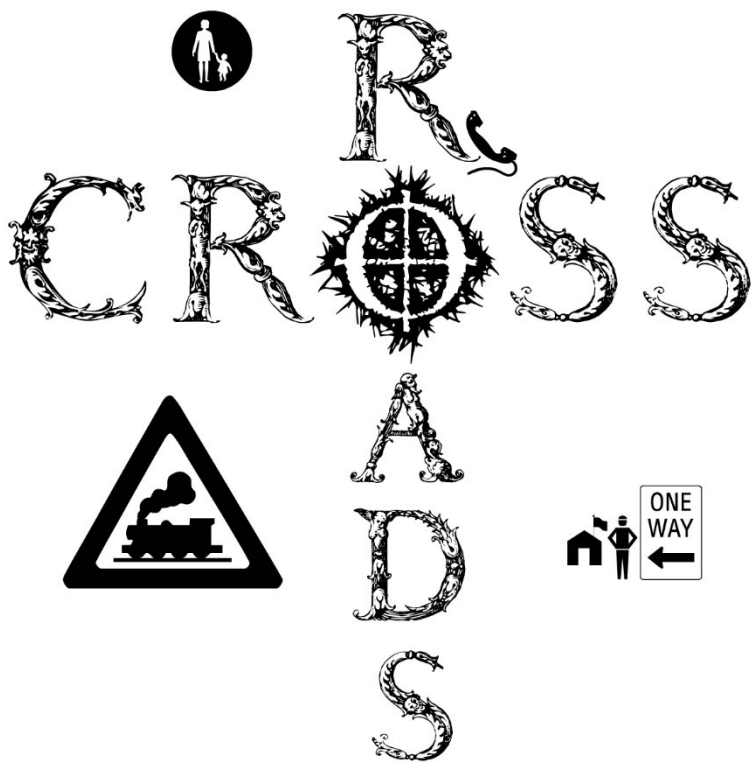


Crossroads



Inwood Indiana

Crossroads
Inwood Indiana
www.InwoodIndiana.com
ISBN 13: 978-1-63275-027-3
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Design and editing by Glenn Lyvers and April Zipser
Inwood Indiana is a Prolific Press, Inc. publication.
Printed in the U.S.A.

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On

Zakaria

He stood against the old barn door
relaxed not a con frontational bone
in his trim body
Farm hand, hunter, true shooter
the lens did him justice
A ring of white T-shirt gave a reverse
halo to his square jaw
loose fitting pants which rumpled
just right topped his kick ass boots

He stood against that old barn door
who held up who the real question
a bit of James Dean in pocket pressed hands
Paul Newman in his eyes
flannel hugged him [when the woman weren't]
capped by a bent brimmed hat
he rolled to perfection
I'm sure the nametag on his shirt
didn't do him justice

Deborah Guzzi

Free Lollipops, Really?

The children are
ransacking the restaurant again.

The four year old on one end by the doors
food-finger-paints the window panes
(and flips the light switches)
no one attempts to reign him in
he's in ecstasy
the whole restaurant
goes in and out of the dark.

At the other end of the room,
near the kitchen
at the corner roundtable – the adults
masticate
paying no mind to
stop the up and down yo-yoing
of their little ones whose flashlights
strobe in and out of diner's eyes.

Sponge Bob blares
from the ceilings obligatory T.V.
the juke box
and the radio give the back beat.

The mothers sit, dressed for their outing,
styling in three inch stiletto boots,
sipping cabernet from funnel shaped glasses
posed on lace paper dollies;
attempting alcoholic oblivion.

Fathers get their buzz-on
from pitchers of cheap golden beer.
And, ah, the pizza pick-up area
arcade games of racecars,
where captain's chairs
give wee ones height, to whiz –
gun engines and roar,
aided by the sugar high
from free lollipops.

Inwood Indiana

One could say, they owned the place,
and they wouldn't be wrong.

Deborah Guzzi

Fishing for Gramps

Grandfather drank. Trussell was his name, Tut for short. His life was hard, hard as the Maine coastline and the spine of Mt. Battie. His stance was rigid; rigid as his Protestant predestined you're-on-the-list-or-you're-not faith. Bone thin, and angular in a way you knew; there was no comfort there. From the jut of his nose to the thrust of his chin, he was a hard man. Only the hunt seemed to bring him joy. He dressed in a red and black checked wool cap, which covered the steel gray fringe of his pate, and a jacket of the same hunter's plaid. The jacket hung from the sparse scaffolding of his life-rounded shoulders. His piercing eyes were the blue of the ice on Lake Megunticook. His hands were as cold as the fish he pulled from beneath the lake in winter. There were no lashes on this Englishman's eyes. A stare from those agates would send any grandchild caterwauling for Gram.

a razor strap
hangs by a gilded mirror –
the baby cries

His granddaughters tried to cajole hugs from him on any occasion when Gramps was in a good mood. They squirreled away each gift of affection. I remember how he smelled of cherry pipe tobacco and Old Spice. I remember being five and having him take me fishing, reeling in the yellow perch and bass. We strung the fish on a rope as wide as my outspread arms. That once, I made Gramps proud and happy.

gun oil
on weathered hands –
venison frying

In general, he was a surly old coot. He left for his shed when we arrived. There he sat with his racks of antlers, beer in hand. He was a beaten man, who beat his wife, and kids. He sat rocking, watching, as we arrived once a year bubbling over with happiness to be at Grandma's house.

Deborah Guzzi

Petals Flew

Days since the words flew
gray days, felted days
pressed between the boards
a Victorian effigy to
the birthing of spring,
the ripening of summer.

Violet ink bleeds past life
petaling the crisp, sterile,
starkness, of the white page
with its stringent lines.

In the depth of hematite gray
the day draws breathe
and the words flow upward
glistening like a whetstone
from depression's depth
treasure rises.

Deborah Guzzi

The Panther's Diner

Sam Turner sat in Ginny Jackson's barber chair with a sigh so loud it seemed as if he were shaking off a lifetime's worth of trouble. She cut hair in a salon built into the walls of the Granville Wal-Mart. For five years, she'd slid back the metal gates that separated the salon from the store at nine in the morning to allow in the old men, unwilling to help their wives shop for groceries, and who didn't truly need a haircut but just a trim they'd say. They always seemed annoyed that she was able to shorten their wispy white hairs so quickly. It was there she met and lost her first and only boyfriend, who left her with a son and a rental house too expensive for her to keep along with a new car she never should've bought—and it was there that he left her, walking off in the same worn jeans, t-shirt, and boots he showed up in, saying that he was meant for a different life, and that he couldn't stay this way, that he couldn't stay here.

Ginny wanted a man willing to be a little sweet on her at times, and who would work hard just as her father worked hard day after day until he was buried on the job; and the father of her son was that man for a while. She thought about it all after he left. He said he had a right to go to all the same movies, eat at the same Olive Garden, watch the same satellite television, and buy the same beer and cars as everyone else because it was America and everyone was the same.

It didn't matter to him that they kept getting phone calls from the credit card companies who yelled at her on the phone, and she didn't know that every line of credit was in her name until he was gone. Her mother told her when he left that all a woman needed in this world was just a small amount of respect, and she could get by on that—just a reassurance that her life was of some value to someone else. You can deal with all the rest, but you have to have that. Even so, Ginny didn't believe her mother any more than she believed he would come back to her one day wanting to move back in, and provide for their son in the way only a father can.

After a few years, she realized that what she believed didn't matter anymore because beliefs didn't change anything. They only hid the thorns of day-to-day life when she should be thinking about picking up extra hours and tips, and were nothing more than wishful thinking.

Turner had a face darkened from the sun, with a long, thick nose sitting below two dark eyes. Sweat was starting to bubble beneath his eyes from the mid-summer heat outside. He was tall and thin, but his stomach stuck

out, rounded and wide from under his shirt. Ginny was a short, large woman as heavy in voice as in body; she flung out the black cape and draped the man in front of her.

"What kind a cut you want?" She was breathing heavily, and she threw her long, reddish brown curls away from her face.

"Well, I just like the buzz cut. Y'know, like a military look." He had a raspy drawl hidden beneath his thick, black mustache. "I wasn't ever in the military, but I do like the way they cut their hair. Nothin' to mess with, y'know? I ain't got time to be messin' with my hair."

"Yeah, I gotcha. You like to look good, but you don't want to put out any effort to get there. I'll fix you up. And it's so damn hot outside, it'll help you keep cool."

"At's just what I'm hopin' for young lady." She had the clippers in her hand and went to work. "You got any siblings hon?"

"Naw, it was just me. Only child."

"I've just been to see my oldest brother is why I ask. Six kids my parents pushed out, born one right after the other. Boy, girl, boy, girl, boy, girl. I's the last boy born, but I didn't get no special treatment; no ma'am. My brother though, he couldn't do a damn thing wrong when he was growin' up. My poor mother would fix him whatever in the world he wanted to eat, and she was always getting' him new clothes, and tellin' him he was so special. I swear, when he took a shit, she picked his turds out of the toilet with a napkin to show the whole damn town. Couldn't do nothin' wrong. He's dead now though--blew his head off with a revolver. I really don't know what got into him to where he didn't feel like livin' any more, but I suppose he had a reason." Ginny stopped her clippers.

"I thought you said you just went to see him."

"I did. I visit his grave every day almost. For the past month, I've been going there just to shoot the shit with him, talk to him about the girls I'm wanting to see, even though he's dead. I feel like he can hear me sometimes. I used to tell him he was an idiot for doing such a dumbass thing like killing himself, but now I just talk about the things we used to do together. My poor mother was devastated; still is." She started working the clippers again.

"I'll bet she is. Hell, it would tear me up if my boy shoved a gun in his mouth and pulled the trigger. He's only four years old. I hope he never gets so sad as to do a thing like that. Good Lord."

"I sure hope not. We don't even really know what got into Billy. He never seemed too sad, and he never went to the doctor for depression or anything like it. He was a big guy, tough and strong as a damn bear. But y'know, it's the littlest things that kill us sometimes. Some little voice in our heads that tell us that nothin's worth shit anyways, so why go on?"

He tilted his head to the side as she continued her work. "Bout the only thing wrong with him is that he would get so damn angry sometimes. It wasn't all the time, just when little things wouldn't happen the way he wanted them to. One time I was over at his house watchin' the Razorbacks — football, we were getting stomped, but anyways I was just sittin' there drinkin' my beer, rockin' back and forth in his rockin' chair, and he kept tellin' me to quit rockin'. I thought he was just bein' stupid, so I kept it up. After a while though, he stood up without sayin' a word, walked over to me, and slapped me right across the face — real hard. I couldn't believe it — just smacked me." "Look down."

"He did that a few times to a few different people, and we never could figure out what set him off so bad," he said towards his chest.

"Sounds like a crazy sonofabitch to me. Haulin' off and hittin' people for no reason."

"Well. Crazy maybe, but he was a helluva car salesman. Made tons of money up there at the Toyota lot just up the street, and he never had to share it with anyone. He never got married or had kids or nothin', and he'd be damned if he gave one cent to any of us. He barely even bought us Christmas presents, but hell, his money ain't none of my business. He didn't leave a will or nothin', so I guess everything just goes to the government or the bank or somethin'." Turner laughed softly at the thought of that. "He always had the best lookin' girls money could buy, and he even tried to set me up with this Asian chick who couldn't speak a lick of English. It was pretty weird, so I just left the bar we was at and went home."

Ginny faked a chuckle as she finished the man's hair. He was one of the easier ones who actually had something to say.

~~~OOO~~~

At 3:30 that afternoon, Turner pulled his small sedan into his garage, shut off the engine, slapped the button to lower the rumbling door, and went inside. He moved his head to the left and right, in front of the bathroom mirror, inspecting how well Ginny did the job. "Not bad, not bad." He turned on the tap, wet his face in the sink, and dried it with a towel on a hook to the right of the mirror. "Not bad at all." Whistling softly to himself, he made his way to the kitchen and pulled a beer from the fridge. Popping the top, he stared out the window above the sink and sipped. *Billy really was a crazy son of a bitch.* The tread marks were still in Turner's front yard from when his older brother drove his truck through the wet grass in a drunken rage just a few weeks before his death.

Turner struck a match on the box, lit a cigarette from the pocket in his shirt, and threw the burning match in the sink. He blew out the smoke, and it

drifted up to the ceiling in a thick cloud. It was raining that night, and they'd left a bar in Fort Smith with Turner driving his small sedan behind Billy's truck so he could keep any curious policemen from tailing his brother. His wipers could barely keep up with the rain. Billy talked all that night about wanting a wife and kids, and how he needed to settle down and take his life seriously and stop throwing it away, but Sam knew it was all for not. It was just the alcohol raging through his brother's blood, loosening his tongue to say the words their mother would want to hear. To point himself in a new direction would simply require too much effort, too much reconsideration, too much planning, too much of everything Sam saw him try to do time and time again, but everything Billy never seemed to be capable of. Sam knew this, but he listened to Billy anyways, reassuring him that he could settle down if he wanted to, and that it would be a good thing to break the cycle of girlfriends and bar hopping, and bigger tires for the truck that never left the pavement.

Instead of driving to his own house outside of Granville, Billy turned down Maine Street and pulled into Sam's driveway. He kept the wheels to the left and stepped hard on the gas, spinning his tires in the wet grass. He drove through the small empty lawn, dropped off the curb onto the street, and pulled into the driveway again to continue the destructive circle three times before finally turning to the right and gunning the engine back down to Center Street and into the storming night.

Sam watched this desperation from his car, wipers still marking time, and somewhere inside himself, he could feel that this was the end. He couldn't understand why someone with all his brother's advantages would still be so angry and sad. Sam was angry because things in life never seemed to go his way, the way he planned them. Everything, from his car breaking down just before he left for a vacation two years ago, to being fired from Whirlpool a year later, to women refusing to date him throughout his entire life. The way he saw it, Sam was the one who should be driving circles on the lawn of their childhood home, not Billy.

A week later, Sam found Billy's body floating in his hot tub. The water was still swirling in a gory, brown mess around his brother's swollen carcass. Their father's .357 revolver was at the bottom with its shiny nickel finish and dark walnut grips. The cop who responded to Sam's call fished it out with a long metal rod after the men from the funeral home wrestled Billy's body onto a stretcher. "It sure is a tragedy. I bought my wife's car from Billy a few years ago. It's a damn shame to see him like this."

Turner moved into the living room and eased on to the couch, propping his leg on the coffee table and setting his beer in front of him. He picked up the

remote from the table, and turned through the channels. Each image flashed a second's worth of color and sound, entire worlds cut to a fleeting moment. He didn't know what he was looking for, but he knew it wasn't there so he left it on a news channel and sat back to drink his beer. The phone on the side table rang.

Turner listened to the caller's persistence four or five times before muting the television, and picking up the cordless receiver; it was his mother.

"Sam? What're you doin'?"

"Hi momma. I was just flippin', just flippin' through the paper lookin' at the jobs - "

"How many times have I told you that all of the jobs are online nowadays? No one puts the real jobs in the paper anymore. They've got tons of websites out there that're advertisin' all sorts of openin's, and that's where you gotta look. Jiminy Christmas, Sam. When're you gonna get serious about this? It's been over a year since you were fired, and you ain't getting any younger."

"I'm tryin', I really am. I just haven't found the right one yet." She sighed into the phone, and he leaned his head backwards into the couch. "Besides, every time I go into the library, all of the computers are taken."

"What're you so afraid of?"

"What? Afraid? I'm not afraid of anything." He paused, "And, I was let go; I wasn't fired."

"Oh, well that makes all the difference don't it. Y'know, I was always afraid you'd be the one most like your father—too scared to try anything because you think you might fail." She trailed off a bit before coming back. "Listen, Sam, I'm not tryin' to be mean here, I just want you to get back on your feet is all. That unemployment don't last forever, and you'll soon be without any sort of monthly check at all. Then what'll you do?"

Sam watched the newswoman bobbing her head up and down with a serious look of concern carved into her face. "I know, I know. I'll find somethin'."

Turner straightened his legs on the coffee table. His cigarette had burned down to the filter sitting in the ashtray. He never smoked while on the phone with his mother. "Is that all you called about Mom?"

"No, no." She sighed again. "I called to let you know that Janey is pregnant again."

"Again? And I reckon the father is her jackass husband—"

"Hey! Don't talk about him that way; he's your brother."

"In-law. I don't claim no relation to him. How far along is she?"

"About two months I reckon."

"Well, tell her congrats for me." He tipped back the beer can. "If that's all momma, I've got to make a few phone calls."

"Who're you callin'?"

"There's a few employment agencies that I need to make appointments with to fill out applications and stuff."

"I thought you already did that."

"These are different ones. I just haven't gotten around to these yet."

"Alright, well, I'll let you get to it. Bye."

"Bye."

Turner set the phone on the arm of the couch and picked up the remote to turn the volume back up. His mother had never goaded him the way she had since he lost that job. Until then, he felt she never gave him much attention at all. So long as he steered clear of any criminal charges, and respected her, she didn't ask him any questions. The word came when he was forty-three years old that he was soon to be unemployed after just a year of attaching handles to refrigerator doors, and he believed himself too old to start over, but too young to retire. The company offered to pay for a two-year degree, and Turner thought about pursuing it. He saw himself as an electrician, or a plumber, driving around in a van with his company name painted on the side, TURNER'S PLUMBING, and how he could call his mother and Billy to tell them he was a business owner now, his own boss, and he don't have to listen to nobody. He saw himself as a man taking control of his own destiny, making enough money to stop renting from his parents and buy his own house, making enough to take some girl to that fancy Italian restaurant he could never remember or pronounce the name of in downtown Fort Smith, and making enough to vacation in the Caribbean whenever he needed a break.

The application forms sat in a neat pile on the corner of the coffee table for two months while he shuffled around them, lived around them, careful to set his beer and ashtray at the farthest edge away from the papers so he wouldn't ruin their crisp, white pages cramped full with words and blanks asking every detail of his life. He picked up the packet a few times, reading over the top lines, but he told himself that he would fill them out later and that there wasn't any rush. He missed the deadline to sign up for the courses because he couldn't bring himself to complete those application forms. He convinced himself later that they asked him too many questions, so he trashed the papers and didn't have to worry about achieving anything anymore.

Turner picked up the phone again and punched in a number on a slip of paper he pulled from his pocket. He muted the television again.

"Hello?"

"Hey Ginny, it's Sam; you 'bout off yet?"

"Yeah, but I just got home and I'm waitin' on momma to come over and watch my boy. She should be here in about fifteen minutes; then I'll come over there."

"Sounds good. I'll see y'then."

"Bye."

Ginny set the phone down on the edge of the side table, took a deep drag on her cigarette, and blew the smoke toward the ceiling of her living room. "Good Lord, it's hot." She wiped underneath her eyes with her thumb and leaned her head back into the cushion. "Ain't it, Jimmy?" The young boy on the floor nodded and kept pushing his small toy cars across the worn carpet, making sputtering noises higher and lower as the tiny drivers changed gears. A large, white fan on a pedestal blew air back and forth across the room.

Sam was the first man she agreed to have supper with since the father of her son stepped out four years ago. Several had asked her, but whether they were in her chair, at church, or where she dropped Jimmy off at daycare, she wouldn't accept it. They all had the same looks in their eyes, trying to put on a soft, innocent gleam, but Ginny could see the storms behind their words. They would all just be like before, and before wasn't any place to be. She felt she was just fine, if not better, on her own. A summer afternoon shower opened up over her house right as her mother walked through the front door.

"Hi kids." She wiped her feet on the rug as she shut the door, and tugged out of her raincoat.

"Hi granny," said Jimmy.

"Hi momma," said Ginny as she put out her cigarette and stood up from the chair. "Thanks for comin' over."

"You got a date or somethin'?"

"Somethin'. I ain't sure what to call it. Just goin' to eat."

"Well, alright. Just don't stay out too late. I'll put him to bed at seven." She stepped to Ginny and hugged her. "And don't be nervous. Just be yourself. OK?"

"Ok momma. Jimmy be good for granny. I'll see you tomorrow mornin'."

~~~OOO~~~

The Panther Diner had low ceilings and even lower lighting. Over the past five years it had been four different restaurants, and each one shut down quicker than the one before, unable to keep customers from going to the Mexican places two miles down the road. Turner told Ginny that the place always made him feel like he was in an old speakeasy sipping whiskey from

some professional bootlegger. "Then the girls would come out an start dancin' real sweet-like, and some old boys would get in a fist fight over a card game. Those were the days now, livin' life free." They met each other there at the diner instead of Turner picking her up, and he rightfully assumed it was so she could leave when she wanted without relying on him to take her home.

They stepped through the glass doors together, and blinked to adjust their eyes to the darkness. There were only two other couples seated, talking in hushed voices. A large American flag hung from the opposite wall, and on either side were pieces of Panther memorabilia: jerseys, pictures of old football teams, and a baseball autographed by the state champions of 1988 encased in a glass box sat on a shelf attached to the wall. They shuffled their way around the center tables, and sat at a corner booth. A thin woman weathered by cigarettes and sun asked what they wanted to drink.

"Y'all got Coke?" Ginny asked.

"Yeah, Coke, Diet Coke - "

"Coke for me."

"I'll have a sweet tea."

"Special tonight is the fried catfish. You get two filets, coleslaw, hushpuppies, and fries. I'll go get your drinks."

After they placed their orders and ate halfway through their meals, Ginny asked Turner what sort of new job he was looking for.

"Well, really just anything that'll pay the bills. I shore's hell been tryin', but there just ain't much out there for a man like me. Old and laid off." He paused for a moment, staring at his plate.

"Yeah. That's really bout all you can hope for these days." She talked around a mouth full of food. "Just somethin' to make sure y'don't starve to death. Cuttin' hair pays pretty good, but it shore don't stretch far enough at times." "I know what you mean."

They kept eating without talking. A sitcom was on the small television in the corner, and Turner looked up at it a few times out of habit. Ginny put down her fork, and cleared her throat. "My mother said, when my last boyfriend left - "

"The father of your son?"

"Yeah, him. Now, you've been real sweet to me, an I 'preciate it, but it's always made me wonder. Is that really all there is to life? Besides tryin' to do right by God, an raisin' your kids to be good people, just a little respect and findin' a job doesn't seem to be a good life."

"For most of us, yeah, I think this is it. Some people go on adventures and shit, but most of us just got to do right to each other, believe in God so that

one day we'll die and go to heaven. Doin' fun shit just costs money, and there ain't enough of that to go around." He set down his own fork, and leaned back into the seat. "But even with money, that ain't no guarantee. Just look at my brother, the dead one. He had all the money he could ever need, but it still didn't seem to help him. He hated life so much he put a bullet through his brain. Most of us just aren't meant for anything more than the daily grind. It's when we try to go out past that, that's when we get in trouble."

They ate in silence for a few moments, and Ginny said, "Y'know Sam, you sure are honest." She laughed, and he smiled. "I mean, hell, this mornin' you were talkin' about him in my chair right after you'd gone to see his grave. I was a total stranger — still am really."

"It's the only way to live if you ask me." He wiped his mouth with his napkin and pushed his plate away. "I've got some beers at the house. You wanna come over for a bit? Just watch some TV or somethin'?"

"Yeah, I'd like that."

After a few beers, several hours of television, and some comments about the shows, Turner leaned his head back into the cushion of his couch and fell into a light snore. Ginny Jackson looked over when she heard him, and studied his face. He looked kind, and he was honest, she thought. She bent over, and fumbled through her purse at the foot of the couch and came up with her pack of cigarettes. She stuck one between her lips and flicked the lighter from his coffee table, blowing the smoke into the hot, still air. Ginny got up to go into the kitchen for water. She saw a full moon hanging low and shining its pale light on the street and lawn outside the window over the sink. Was it enough? Standing in Sam Turner's kitchen, for the first time in a long time, she sunk her head into her hands, and cried.

P.E. Dixon

Waders

He sat in the old wooden chair, watching the fading sun change the color of the sky from a deep purple in the east to bright red in the west between the white posts of his wrap-around porch. He thought about the day he buried his wife, a day he remembered whenever his hands ached and were sore, because he remembered clutching the shovel's notched wooden handle until his knuckles were white as he fed the tip of the spade into the earth piled seven feet long and three feet high next to her grave. "I'll be damned. They're stuck again." He looked down to his legs at the thick, rubber waders that were shiny even in the early evening as the sun dipped below the trees that lined the pasture in front of his house. He sat back into the chair, taking off his cap to rest a minute.

He rubbed his hands, sore from fishing most of the day, submerged in the river up to his knees. The old man saw it as his work rather than leisure, tying flies and ripping the eight-foot rod back and forth. The cold water sent life into his veins. Life he wished to share.

He remembered her in a bed at the county hospital where their three children were born and nearly died, and where he took her the night he found her sprawled on the bathroom floor unconscious. Once they stuck tubes in her and woke her up, she said, "Now Jacob, honey, you never were too strong on your own, but you're gonna have to be strong now. You are. The kids are here now while I'm dying, but they're gonna be gone back to their own lives shortly and leave you alone in that house you so adore." She coughed violently, and it looked as if she would die right there, the way her body convulsed and tried to throw away the sickness. All he could do was hold her hand and nod at what she said. He didn't really hear.

There was a part of him that believed she would make it out of that bed, a part that couldn't and wouldn't accept that she was dying. That part of him woke early every morning and danced, turning in circles as a man does who tries to make his wife laugh, and hummed parts of songs when he brought muffins and coffee to the plastic tray hovering over her chest. He told her everything would be all right, that this would be over soon, and he told her that he was sorry for all the trouble he brought on the family, and all the pain he put them through. He told her that once she was out, he would make everything good, and he would go to church again, and pay more respect to her and their children—and he told her that God would give him another chance to change. But that part of him died the day he woke up stiff from the chair in her room, pulled out of his dreams by the beeping of a machine.

Two or three or twenty or thirty people rushed in and bent over her and wheeled her away.

They brought her back after some time, and he was still hunched with his elbows on his knees staring at the floor — they said she was going to be fine. He sat by her bed, holding her hand for fourteen days, watching her cough the life out of her lungs. "You've just got to be strong. There ain't no other way to be."

Jacob struggled with the waders, trying to lower them without having to stand up again. He felt he had stood up his whole life, and now it was time to sit down. He leaned his head into the wall of the house and closed his eyes — she appears, standing on the end of a roaring train, barreling through a sunny afternoon. She stands there, young again in her hospital gown, poised like a ballerina, singing with her mouth wide but he cannot hear her over the roar. She stands wide and breathes deeply between measures, red in the face from trying to reach him with her voice, and he leans closer, watching the sleeves of her gown extending straight behind her, as if held up by wires, and the train of her gown does the same as her chest heaves. He leans closer but she becomes smaller and smaller as he stretches further and further; he reaches toward her — he opened his eyes to see his hand raised toward the ceiling of the porch. He took a deep breath and scratched his bare head, looking out to the fading light and the moon that was just beginning to show. He looked down at his legs and the waders were still there. "I hate these damned things," he said aloud, stomping the floor with his rubber heel.

A red pick-up rounded the corner of the driveway at the end of the pasture, and he saw the silhouette of his oldest son bouncing in the cab. Jacob knew this wasn't going to be a pleasant visit by the speed of the truck, and the way it left a pillar of dust behind it. His son had nearly died the same day he was born; the umbilical cord was wrapped around his neck so tightly he couldn't breathe at all, and his right lung collapsed as his tiny body seized, trying to protect the heart and mind. Jacob wasn't there in the hospital that day, and the only hand his wife had to hold was her sister's. Through the six hours of labor and the next day of constant updates from the doctor and nurses, she told anyone who would listen to call Jacob so that he could be there when they named their son. For years afterward, and even now, he imagined what happened that day. "You've gotta pick out a name, hon," her sister said holding the birth papers. "No, we wait 'til he gets here."

Her sister looked down to the floor. "Honestly, I don't think he's comin', but you can stay with me at the house until you've rested a bit. This whole thing

has been hard on all of us. Hell, I thought so many times that we were gonna lose him. But you got a fighter there," she nodded to the baby in her sister's arms, "a real fighter."

His oldest son slammed the door of his truck, walked up to the porch, and stood on the top step staring at his father. He was a short, thin man, but with broad shoulders that hunched forward when he walked, and he always wore a short-sleeved collared shirt tucked into dark jeans. He held a white envelope in his right hand, and the left was in his pocket.

"Where were you today?"

"Fishin'. Where were you?"

The younger man laughed to himself. "Of course you were fishin'. I don't really know why we expected you, but we did." He turned to the side and leaned his elbow on the porch rail.

"Was everyone there?"

"Tom and Margie were. Debbie, Matt, and Ashley were all workin', and the kids in school. They wouldn't have wanted to come anyways."

"No. I reckon not."

"Why didn't you?" He faced his father again.

"Because. I don't need to make my peace or mourn her death or anything else. 'Sides, that ain't her in the ground, just her body. I don't know why y'all are so obsessed with it anyhow. She died long before that machine stopped beepin', and I don't see the point of draggin' it out any longer." He looked past his son into the field. "She didn't even say anything that whole time she was in the hospital. I buried her long ago, and I'm done thinkin' about it. You oughtta learn a lesson there son."

"Well, maybe." They listened for a while.

"What you got there?" The old man gestured toward the envelope.

"It's a letter she gave me, and she told me not to open it until after she was dead—gave it to me about two weeks before." "Well, what's it say?" He leaned toward his son, eyes narrow.

"I dunno, haven't read it yet."

The old man sat back. "Really? Why?"

"She told me not to 'til she was gone, and I just haven't got to it yet."

"Haven't got to it, or haven't wanted to get to it?"

"Yeah." He sat back and scratched his head. They were silent for a moment as the cicadas started to rise in that song that only means summer. The final light of day was quickly disappearing as darkness rose up from the ground.

"You got a drink on ya?"

"What? No. Why the hell would I have a drink on me?" The young man's foot kicked an empty bottle on the floor.

"I see you've finished yours."

"You gonna open that damn letter or not?" He looked his son in the face and

saw his own. The younger man crossed the porch to the front door, reached inside the house, flipped on the porch light, and sat back down. "Dammit son." Jacob held his hand to his eyes and shifted in his seat; the waders made it difficult to move, but he made a show of getting comfortable. "No need to get pissy." He reached into his shirt pocket for a cigarette and a lighter. "What're you always so mad about anyways?" He lit the tip and blew a cloud into the still air where it hung and turned slowly.

"Who says I'm mad all the time?" He held the closed envelope.

"Well, I do. If you give two shits about that. But, your mother did as well."

"Well, I'm a grown man, have been for a while. So, if I'm mad, I'm probably just pissed off at life y'know? You of all should know about that."

"Yeah. You've got a point there kid." He shifted again and tapped the ash into a beer can on the small table beside him. "Dammit these are hot. You gonna open that or are we gonna have to wait for the light of day?"

"You need help getting' out of those waders?"

"No, no. I'll just leave 'em on."

"Whatever."

He turned the envelope over in his hand, tapped it on his knee, and tore it open with a quick pull at the flap. Jacob could see the letter was only a few words on a small piece of lined paper. He leaned forward, dropping the cigarette into the empty can. His son looked over the page, his dark eyes darting back and forth, and he looked his father in the face with a sigh. "It just says that I need to take care of you." "Really? That's it? Take care of me?" He tugged at the top of his waders and scratched his head. "That sure beats all. Shit boy, can you even take care of yourself? Take care of me..." His voice trailed off as he fumbled through both shirt pockets to pull out another cigarette. Once he had it lit, he stared as his son folded the letter and shoved it into his jean pocket. "What do you think she meant by that?" The younger man leaned back in his chair.

"If I were to guess," he smiled, "I'd say it means I'm supposed to keep you from drinkin' yourself to death." He chuckled. "Looks like you're tryin' to beat me to it though."

Jacob rubbed his temples with both hands and started to laugh. He leaned back and knocked ash into the can. "I guess she knew me pretty well then. Shit, boy, pretty damn well."

"I'll say she did."

"Y'know, those words there in that letter were the last ones she said. She never said a thing the whole time she was in that hospital. For three weeks, only time I left her bed was when I had to piss. None of the nurses said they heard her say anything, and none of the doctors either."

"Well, I guess that shows how much she was worried about you."

"I guess so."

They both looked for a moment out into the night. Fireflies floated in the grass, disappearing and reappearing across the open pasture in front of the house. The gravel drive that ran between the woods and the field on the right was just visible. A whippoorwill perched somewhere at the edge of the trees sang out in quick bursts. It was her favorite bird, he thought. She never could wait for spring and summer evenings, when the whippoorwills would call back and forth across the field. She would sit just to listen, and perhaps to escape from him and his hands – the same hands that pulled at the waders once throttled her neck against the wall.

He stared at them; they were wrinkled now, still sore from fishing, with cracked skin and swollen veins that rose to the top as if they would burst – she is there beyond the porch rail, standing just inside the light, wearing the hospital gown, but hanging at her side this time in the windless night. He smiles but her face is stiff, not in death but in anger, and she reaches out her hand but she is far away and moving backwards.

"Hey, can you hear me?"

"What? Yeah. What did you say?"

"Did you pass out or somethin'? Dammit."

"No, I was just thinkin'. What were you sayin'?"

"I was just sayin' that I think Ashley is gonna leave me." He had his chin in his hand, leaning on the arm of the chair.

Jacob leaned forward and his throat tightened up as he took a final pull from the short cigarette. The weight of his son's admission pulled him from the clouds swimming in his mind. "Well, why would she do a thing like that?"

"Hell if I know." He scratched his head. "I really don't know what happened. It's like," he paused, "like we're in two boats on a river, and we're caught in different currents, y'know?"

"Yeah, I know. Have you told Margie, or Tom?"

"Not yet. It's so damn embarrassing really."

They sat quietly for several minutes, until the young man pulled out his own cigarette and broke the silence. "I mean, I'm the oldest, right? So I should have my shit together more than anyone." The old man lit another cigarette, and they sat for a moment smoking. She would've hated this, he thought, her son and husband sharing a smoke on her front porch. Jacob nearly smiled, but he stopped himself and took a deep breath. He said, "I wish I knew of somethin' more to say. Somethin' more profound or, or wise, but I don't. Marriage is tough, and I wasn't no example to follow. It's probably the hardest thing a man can do in this world. Tryin' to provide for a family while buttin' heads with a woman hard as a mule; and tryin' to make your own kids into strong men or women so they can provide for themselves one day; and doin' it all at the same time. Shit, hard don't even begin to describe it."

He coughed. "Some people learn to get along, and some don't."

"Yeah. I see that now. You don't really think about it much at first, then it just sneaks up on you and all of a sudden you're sleeping in different beds and not talkin' to each other." The old man shifted again, pulling at the top of the waders. "Here," his son set the cigarette down on the edge of the table and stood up, "let me help you get those damned things off. You really need to get a lighter pair. No one wears these rubber ones anymore."

"Well, they work fine for me."

With the waders hung over the porch rail, they spoke for another hour, and after their pauses stretched longer than their words, they said their goodbyes. The old man moved inside to sit alone at his kitchen table — just the faint light from the porch bending in through the windows. He finished his last cigarette, and began drinking from a new bottle. He usually didn't bother turning on the lights inside the house. A .40 caliber pistol was on the table in front of him, as it was every night since her death, and he leaned forward to pick it up, his cigarette dangling from the corner of his mouth. He popped the magazine to see if it was loaded, and then shoved it flush with the grip.

He looked through the dining room window, and saw a half moon behind the silhouette of a black cloud. A steady stream of smoke curled up as he clutched the gun with both hands. He could only see his children as adults now, all with salted hair and round stomachs, sitting on the couch in his living room, talking about what they wouldn't do for a long vacation. He waited for her to appear, but only the walls and windows stared back at him.

He picked up the bottle and drank again. His hands started to shake, and his knuckles were stark white against the blackness of the gun.

Jacob slammed the pistol on the table, snuffed his cigarette in the ashtray, and stood up. His knees were sore, but he shuffled himself to his bedroom, grabbing the wall for support. He fell into his bed, still fully clothed, rolled over on his back, and fell asleep.

P.E. Dixon

Ghosts

Asphalt bubbles punctuate US-12,
prairie expanse stretches blurred amber miles.
State map with square blocked counties can't capture
the lone tree on the horizon as a
rodent-fattened red-tailed hawk rides thermals.

Who were they, these pioneers? Did their dreams
end in despair of abandonment, the
population trickling away drop by
drop? Lone explorer walks down the remains
of Main Street in Griffin, North Dakota.

A single whitewashed grain elevator
stretches skyward; faint tints of corrosion
faded names of coop farmers long gone.
Milwaukee Road boxcar lacking wheels rusts
near a once busy siding, tracks taken up for scrap.

Now the train from Hettinger steals through town
at three am afraid of waking old souls.

One room school, holed roof showing signs of wear
from last year's record snowfall, yellowed shades
flutter in the breath of a breeze; chalkboard
bears a math lesson begging to be taught.

Old clapboard church, cross-adorned spire lacking
markings, echoes hymns on the west wind. Were
they Lutherans or Methodists braving
this stark land, strengthened by faith when at last
it too was swept away by plains zephyrs?

Afternoon shadows reach from Montana,
and he laments for their lost histories.
Telephone poles, sun glinting on the wires,
align fading to false infinity;
the wave of solitude overwhelming
the lone hawk's shrill cry in the dusk twilight.

Robert B Moreland

Tuesday Night, Foxy Lady Lounge

Ravenous eyes trace her from head to toe,
they linger on the fullness of her breasts.
Catlike whispers salacious, oh they wish;
wet dreams to use her in manhood conquests.

Once again, she will dance, encourage lusts,
petty impotent legends, hoots and catcalls.
Pander to their small head, thickening lies,
sock-stuffed pants and dimwitted, hopeless brains.

Proud of her body, long chestnut combed hair,
demurely hide, drive them wild. Exercise
shaped her fine legs and her thighs, yet they will
never know the intimacy of her heart.

Marketing, yes, as spider to their fly,
fleece their wallets, push them beyond control...
Paid well, dressed, she leaves at the end of the night
so her daughter will never know this life.

Robert B Moreland

April Showers

I love you naked
skin on skin,
radiating warmth;
spooning together,
holding your breasts
that overflow from
my cupped hands.

Spring rain falls gently
thunder growls lowly
rattling panes.
You sleep, spent
from afternoon delight
and I watch you breathe
peacefully embracing bliss.

Smell of rain drifts past
the garage sale curtains,
I listen to your heart;
blood coursing rhythmically
sign of mortality
holding that instant of life.

The metronome
of the shower
marks the minutes
lost in rapture and
I am blessed to hold
eternity in my hands.

Robert B Moreland

Plea for the Unborn

They melded, two as one, height of passion,
a million swimming tadpoles rushing there...
First skewering zona pellucida;
a soul, new life is born, of love or not.
Rich do not want the hassle for their son,
she is only six weeks along, abort
like a used condom, poor flotsam downtown;
we don't do this. You won't ruin your life!
What of the little one who cannot speak
in the dark as its heart begins to beat?

Her sister was driving to the store,
old Volvo wagon, child seat tight in the back.
Her young daughter cooed and smiled, NPR
on the radio, morning after pill
now OTC¹, a wave of dark sadness
descends and she realizes that the
convenience would have supplanted precious
life, cooing, smiling; blue-eyed innocent.

Oh dear boy, take a risk, who is to say
this life inside of her, this precious soul,
will be the one who delivers us from
the future's dark uncertainties! What would
have been of you had your mom opted out?

Robert B Moreland

¹Over the counter

The Good Son

First born. It seems a heavy load to bear
when not one thing he does turns his father's
head. Soon the vicious cycles begin where
if not perfect then why did you bother?

It is not what's right but what's wrong he finds
as his performance does not measure up.
"Excel to excess with no reward" defines
him as he sips conditional love's empty cup.

Dad, a man of the cloth, tended his flock
but in so doing, lost one little lamb.
It ended with a heartbeat stopping the clock,
delayed validation forever damned.

Angst fomented rage losing self. Shot echoes
leaving his memories on the white stucco.

Robert B Moreland

On the River

My brother and I float
in shiny, black inner-tubes
down the Shenandoah River.

Dragonflies hover
like helicopters.

Willows cast their branches
into the shallows
like fishermen.

Catfish skim
the bottom of the boat.

The river ripples over
moss-covered rocks
whispering,
follow me.

Anina Robb

Raking

Swish swish. Scratch scratch.
My father and I rake
the grey Sunday away
into a mountain of leaves.
It's no Blue Ridge Mountain
but yellow and orange and red.
I dance along behind him
with my little rake,
with my purple wind-breaker
zipped up to my chin.
I can't wait
to climb the mountain
and look out onto my home.

Anina Robb

Croix Valley Café

Three doughnuts, brown with white
frosted tops, impersonate waitresses
beside a coffee machine's burps. The morning
at seven, is ready for laughter, stories about kids
and Swedish cousins across town.

Yesterday Jim told me, "I can't go to the dentist
today," and I told him, "Your wisdom tooth is bad."
Then he said, "But Mom, I've only missed two days
of school." Then I reminded him that his algebra
was shaky. "I didn't know you were so up
on math, Sally," Florence whispered from a plate
surrounded by toast. "You are just full of surprises,"
Helen added, peeking over a row of Chinese mugs.

Sally's regular arrives, his cigarette smoke intertwines
the coffee steam around a chalkboard's message —
A person who blows his own horn is lost
in the fog. Words from a mystery source —
Reader's Digest, Croix Valley Gazette? Perhaps
Sally's grandmother. No horn is heard, a fog
quietly settles on the Croix Valley Café.

Robert Thimmesh

Three Wheeler

He dismounts his three wheeler
with the swaying gait of a
walker unbalanced; one good
hand and a clenched jaw,
his clamshell hat sways
back and forth, like a
metronome in molasses.

He orders espresso (*one shot,
no two, skim milk, no one*).
She adds soft punctuation to
his grizzled soliloquy then
guides his arm to her table with
coffee and a napkin of patience.

Across the table his prattles roll,
in circles before her quiet
resignation, coming to rest
before the stranger.

"How have you been," as if
dialogue will power his
three wheeler home. She
returns to her unread book and
napkin spongy with his talk
that waits to be heard.

Robert Thimmes

A Fleeting Mistress is Night

The night is young
He hungers for her embrace
The warm twilight
Bringer of dreams
Choked with the smog and sins of the city
Each one new
Filled with wonder
Infinite possibilities

He walks the streets
Viewing the world through a child's eyes
Innocent
Not yet jaded
Though time has marked him with scars
Humanity
A bitter wasteland in an abyss of stars
'Til morning comes
Morning with its golden glory
The light that chases the darkness away
He is alone

Chrystal Berche

A Night without Stars

He rises from the dust
Like mist
oozing between the cracks in the cobblestones
luminous wraith
silver, shimmering light
Like rain and moonbeams on silken threads
Refracting the sun

Reforming
He glides
over puddles and gutter water, spilled beer
Draped in spider's webs
A beggar's cloak,
chain-wrapped boots jingle-jangle in the night
Echo off pavement
Drifting on ice and wind

Taking shape, old colors
Twilight
Blue-black perfection of ankle length hair
marred by swirling colors
A kaleidoscope of neon lights
As he sways on music coaxed from a saxophone
Gentle blues in a harsh city night

He wanders, a ghostly silhouette
In a smoky room
Anchored to stone and soil
Treacherous flesh rotting beneath worm filled mud
Wriggling in the thralls of decomposition
Yet he is here, dancing in the strobe lights
On a night without stars

Chrystal Berche

Conformist

When inspiration runs
deep enough to evoke
some symbiotic sense of
pseudo-self-importance,
does the seed create the apple
or does the apple harbor
the seed?

Cores are unstable fence posts
barely keeping up the boundary
between invention and
imagined, or elation and
tradition.

Shared enthusiasm serves
fuel like wine at the
dinner table, while stagnant
dreams are discarded
like leftovers that were
kept in the back of the
fridge – forgotten in
a rush to create new
meals; abandoned like
railroad tracks.

Originality flourishes like a trumpet
played at dawn with the clouds
parting for the sun to strut through
the gap they make;
jumps through flaming hoops
to plant trees in urban parks;
hollows out pumpkins to
protect young brains
from ultraviolet radiation.

Systemic conformity paints
a picture of order like
biological wonders;
like the marked
formality and structure
of seeds inside
an apple.

Mike Schaffner

Cast to Weather the Generations

The tin basin in the garage
looks like it did 60 years ago.
No more than 12 inches deep,
one grandchild after the next
was bathed in it.
It never seemed to have any
rust. Or at least,
no one ever registered its presence.

Tennae Maki

Late March

The air was wet from the night before.
A cool damp had been spread
across the floor like a thin layer of glaze.
But it wasn't shiny —
that floor probably never had been.

Even when it was laid anew,
surly the fresh boards
were cut with a dry axe.
Who knew how long ago that was.
The rings that encircled the knots
and the fraying grain had stopped
telling their own story long ago.

More than just the damp could be
seen on those dark oak planks.
A dusting of seeds and fluff seemed
to have been strewn across them.
It was as if someone had taken an
enormous bouquet of dandelions,
with heads of fuzz and put it against
the howling wind.

Some of these white, weightless balls
lay flat against the ground.
While the others danced around
the nearly bare circular room.
Spinning and whirling, some
hovered close to the ground
while other bits flew to the top
of the tower.

And then there were some that had escaped
from the room altogether.
After all, they really hadn't
been dropped within the space
by some hidden hand.
Nor had they risen from the floor
boards by the distant hum
beneath them. The snow had

fluttered in from the deep
Gothic windows slated against
the shaky walls.

Unlike the snow fluff,
the seeds had been dropped there,
in that room. They had fallen from
a bag and rolled into the crevices of
the floor.

Tennae Maki

A Memory from Indiana

My grandparent's house was a deep brown that always reminded me of the surrounding forest. For the longest time, I thought their house was made of logs, but it was only the color fooling my young mind. They lived in Indiana, and for one reason or another, we were staying with them for Thanksgiving week.

Orange leaves covered the entire lawn and backyard like a festive comforter, and my little sister was piling them higher than she stood. I wanted to play too, but I was bringing in wood with my dad.

This was one of the few chores I was expected to do, and I tried to do it right. I curved my arms to carry three pieces at a time. My dad could get five, sometimes six. He carried some under his strong right arm, and one in his left hand, which would swing back and forth as he walked. Back then, he seemed so much taller than I was, like a mountain. One day, I carried as much wood as he did, and then I knew I would be a man, for whatever that's worth.

There was not as much wood at my grandparents' house, so we were done much sooner than usual. Pop Jack didn't like to buy precut wood. He'd get one of the neighbor boys to cut some for him, and I would always glance at the low stump. I wondered why Pop Jack never asked me to cut wood for him; maybe it was because we didn't visit often, since Indiana was so far away from California. It was much colder, and the distinct musk of ocean air was replaced with the cold of trees, like the difference between the ocean and stream.

With a long exaggerated sigh, my dad declared the chore complete, and I rushed over to play with my sister. I found her sprawled atop an orange and red bed of leaves, eyes a half closed like she was half asleep. A little disappointed, I picked her up, not like the wood, but like my sister, her arms around my shoulders, and legs through my arms. I carried her around the house and through the back door, resting her on the couch with dark and light greens, like some of the less interesting trees. Half asleep, she tells me she's sorry, and still wants to play. I tell her it's okay and to nap. She obliged with little objection, turning to her side, using her pink glove as a pillow.

My dad was inside drinking lemonade, an odd commodity for an Indiana autumn, but it was our family's drink of choice, no matter the season. I presume he was talking to my mom and Grandma, who were both in the

tiny kitchen talking about preparations for Thanksgiving. My mom didn't really cook, but Grandma loved the company, and liked to show off her years of expertise.

I sat outside, my back to the dark brown, almost black wall of the house. Now that my sister wasn't playing outside, the world seemed so quiet. There was space and a backyard, things I never really saw back in California. Instead of a beach, there were puddles of orange and red lingering on the grass.

From the side of the house, I heard footsteps and the sound of something flickering in a cage, metal shifting and banging. Pop Jack arrived, his body slouched forward, black gloves carrying the cage, his other hand stuffing a pipe in his pocket. He asked if we brought in the wood. He asked, "Do you still want to help?" Before, I had offered to help Pop Jack with anything he needed, especially if it involved the axe—I had an odd fascination with something that could cut wood, cut trees. "Alright," he said to me, "can you grab the axe from the shed?"

I had been waiting for those words. I ran to it, in the back of the black shed, near the wall of wood pieces I stacked with Dad. I walked over to it slowly, and with a false sense of reverence. It was not a toy, but still the desire to play was immense. The hilt was pointing up, and the blade stood atop the cold cement.

The first thing I noticed when I grabbed it was how heavy it was. It wobbled as I tried to hold it up by the end until it came down with a clang. The weight of it scared me; the sound of it clashing against the floor made me yelp. I ended up dragging it back to Pop Jack, its shrill shriek sending chills into me. He was watching me, judging if I was worthy. Panic stirred, and I picked up the pace. I stopped in front of him, panting, resting the axe on its head so it could stand up by itself.

"Are you sure you want to help?" he asked.

I said I wanted to more than anything else. He smiled in recognition, and went over to the cage. It was a large gray thing, plastic walls hiding whatever was living in it. He opened the wired door, and pulled out a turkey. It was brown, like mom's pumpkin pies, but its head was fleshier, and the creature, clearly confused, kept squawking for help.

Pop Jack was careful holding it. He tilted the bird until its head and neck were resting against the stump, right underneath one of the scars.

Again, he asked if I could do this. Now I wasn't sure, but still, I grabbed the axe, and he took that as an affirmation. The axe seemed heavier this time as

I tried to pick it up from the end of the hilt. Pop Jack said, “No, that’s not the way; grab it at its base.” Confused, yet obedient, I did as he said, and it seemed heavier than the world in my tiny arms.

After a deep breath, I lifted it up, above the turkey, the blade shaking. Moments passed and Pop Jack told me to hold it tighter, the way I was holding it was dangerous. I couldn’t listen as I locked eyes with its black gaze. It didn’t want to die. My body went limp; my legs refused to stand; my arms refused to hold the axe. With a collapse, the heavy axe struck the trunk, bouncing against the tough wood. I was on my knees, and I could see the blood—it was all I saw; it spurted out of the neck onto the red metal of the axe, blending in perfectly. The axe folded over the head, completely hiding the eyes that once pleaded to me.

Pop Jack struggled with the turkey; it still fought back even after the guillotine dropped. Eventually its heart gave its last pump, and the legs and wings dangled lifelessly above the ground. Pop Jack rested the turkey on its side. He turned and slapped me. The shock left me numb, and I wasn’t sure what happened, but when I did, I could feel tears forming behind my eyes. He told me never to drop the axe like that again—it was dangerous, and I could have cut him.

***HE STARED AT ME, OLD SAGE EYES
READING ME LIKE A BOOK UNTIL HE
SIGHED AND PUT HIS HAND ON MY
HEAD, SAYING HE WAS SORRY.***

He stared at me, old sage eyes reading me like a book until he sighed and put his hand on my head, saying he was sorry. Picking up the turkey, he said I did a good job and I should head back inside. Wordless, I went back into their house, trying my hardest to hide the tears.

The house was ablaze with conversation; Aunts had come over, and everyone was talking about Thanksgiving, sharing how excited they were. I was the only one not consumed by good spirits. Instead of participating, I was sitting by the house, in the same spot before Pop Jack came back. It was dark, and the sky had already come out. That night I saw more stars than I

could imagine. Perhaps it was because we were so close to the woods and away from the city, but the sky seemed so much softer, gentler than the California sky. It was like the world was covered in a giant blanket, each star a thread invisibly connected to one another.

Even in the dark, I could still see the stump, and I felt like it was staring back at me with resentment or disappointment. My dad, with his big, tan coat and white hair, came out of the boisterous house. He looked around for a little bit, until his eyes adjusted to the dark, and like magic he saw me amongst all the black empty space. Putting his hand by his mouth, he called out to me but I ignored him, going back to the comforting sky. He came to sit by my side, leaves and grass carelessly crunching with each of his steps. "What'cha doing out here champ?" he asked me. Silence was my answer; I didn't know how to talk anymore, like I dropped the ability to speak with the axe. It didn't take long for him to figure out what was wrong. Pop Jack told everyone inside how I did a good job, and everyone gasped at the violent act. With help from Grandma, everyone calmed down, and actually started to celebrate the event as if it were a party game.

"Pretty scary," dad said, "still you were brave." He put his hand on my head and scuffed up my hair.

"I don't like it." I said, breaking my silent oath. "I don't like the feeling of killing something."

"It's not a good feeling and never should be."

"Did you feel like this during the war?"

He went silent, searching for the right words to say to his son, who had no real idea of anything. "Yeah, it felt pretty bad too." His voice was low and the grip he had on my head was weak. I never liked asking questions about the war because he seemed sad when answering.

"What are you doing?"

We both looked to the right, my sister in her pink puffy jacket was looking at us, a little confused and betrayed. "I want to look at the stars too!" And like that, she rushed over to my side and sat down with an annoyed thump—she too looked up, her mouth rounded in awe—the three of us staring at the Indiana sky.

Joshua Flowers

Shattered By Love

He entered the sanctuary an hour early, just to be sure. He swelled with love, knowing his bride would soon be walking toward him. The Best Man arrived fifteen minutes later. He brought the music for the organist, and ribbons to mark the pews for the parents and families. He had the money for the priest, and even checked that the florist delivered all the flowers.

In quick succession, the groomsmen arrived, and stood nervously in a cluster. Her young cousin, serving as the ring bearer, ran up and down the aisle reporting on arriving friends and relatives. Right on cue, the men lined up and walked toward the altar.

The organist played the pre-service music, waiting for the cue to begin the special melody selected for the processional. People spoke in whispers, checked their watches and phones for an update on the time. The priest smiled at the groom, who nervously returned his smile. A few children tapped their toes on the wooden floor. Every one of the hundred guests wondered, "Where is the bride?"

The groom stood quite still as the seconds, and then minutes ticked past. He thought of the day they'd met, her sweet face and gorgeous smile. He thought of the day she said "Yes" to the most important question he would ever ask anyone. After an hour, a few people got up quietly and left. The priest suggested they retire to his vestry. The groom just stood still, not moving and barely breathing. As the church emptied, his friends gently guided him to a car, and then into his apartment. The Best Man stayed for a while longer, but eventually departed. Silence is difficult to deal with.

The next day his friends dropped by one by one, to check on him. They each stayed for ten or fifteen minutes, and still he stood silently. Days, then weeks passed, and the friends stopped their visits, getting on with their lives. He could not speak, could not move, did not notice they were even there.

His beard came in full and dark; his hair reached the shirt collar, and still he did not move. Not even his eyes blinked as he lost himself in thought, repeatedly reliving each moment he spent with her.

Weeks passed by, then months, and still he stood silent, unmoving. His nails grew long and curled around each other; his beard touched his waist, as did his hair—the dark tones changed to grey, then to white as years

turned into decades. No one came to call anymore; they had all forgotten him, the man lost in silence. He stood, replaying every word she uttered, every gesture she made—all of her outfits, her puzzled look, and her happy look, and her thoughtful look.

Eventually, a tenant, needing permission of all residents in the building to begin remodeling, knocked on the door. Still, he did not respond, could not talk or call out, did not even notice the knocking. The silence was unendurable, and the tenant called the police.

When they arrived, they got no sense that anything living was inside the residence. Pounding down the door, they were astonished to find him inside, standing silently, white hair, long nails, and a huge toothy smile. Paramedics, summoned by police, grabbed his arms to lower him onto a gurney. He seemed to fall apart. Piece by piece, the suit fell to the floor. Strand by strand, the hair drifted downward. His nails clattered when they hit the wood, sounding like so many mice scrambling for dark corners. Police and paramedics were stunned, had no idea who this man had been—the man shattered by love.

Joann Grisetti

Red Dragon Flute

Kimiko lived in a small village on the eastern side of Sadness Mountain. She lived a poor but happy life with her husband, a fisherman.

One morning, a terrible storm arose from the eastern sea. Thunder galloped around the small village and echoed out to sea. Lightning flashed so brightly the women thought the mountain was erupting. Rain poured upon the mountain and rushed down to the sea, carrying away many small plants and animals. All the village fishermen were lost that day.

Kimiko mourned her husband for the year of sorrow. At the end of the year, she did not stop mourning, but continued to weep and offer prayers. The Sadness Mountain god felt her sorrow adding to his, so he decided to send her an offer of comfort. He appeared before her tiny house as an old man asking for a meal. The widow gladly shared her meal, and told him the story of the terrible storm, and how she lost her husband. The old man was so moved by her tale that he gave her the Red Dragon flute.

"Play this flute when you are feeling lonely. A flower will blossom in your garden to keep you company."

Kimiko was overwhelmed at the kindness of the old man, and thanked him profusely. She tried her new flute that very afternoon, and sure enough, a peony bloomed on a bush in her garden, even though it was the month of frost.

The bright red peony delighted Kimiko so much, she forgot her sorrow for some days. She admired the peony, and sat in the garden watching it in the sun, thinking of happy times she had spent with her husband. When she smiled, the god of Sadness Mountain felt only his own sorrow, so he was pleased.

~~~OOO~~~

On the western side of Sadness Mountain was another small village. In this village lived a family with five daughters. The father, Takashi, felt so blessed by his beautiful daughters that his happiness filled the village and wafted up the side of Sadness Mountain. This happiness did not sit well with the god of Sadness Mountain. He devised a scheme to end the happiness and restore his sadness. He placed a curse on a bamboo flute, painting it with a red dragon. Then he delivered the flute to the widow Kimiko. Every time a peony in her garden bloomed, one of the daughters died.

When Takashi's first daughter died, he mourned and filled the air with his

sadness. This pleased the Sadness Mountain god and all was well. Over the next several years, all of Takashi's daughters died, one by one, until all were just memories. Takashi's wife, so deep in mourning, seemed as if she would also die. Takashi decided he would try to plead with the mountain god to spare the life of his wife. He set out on foot, up the side of Sadness Mountain.

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***DURING THE NIGHT, SWEET MUSICAL  
NOTES DRIFTED TO TAKASHI'S EARS.  
HE WAS SO TAKEN WITH THE MUSIC  
THAT, AT THE DAWN, HE PACKED UP  
HIS THINGS AND HEADED DOWN THE  
EASTERN SIDE, SEARCHING FOR THE  
SOURCE OF THE MUSIC.***

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When Takashi reached the top of the mountain, there was no sign of the mountain god. Takashi made camp for the night, and vowed to search again in the morning. During the night, sweet musical notes drifted to Takashi's ears. He was so taken with the music that, at the dawn, he packed up his things and headed down the eastern side, searching for the source of the music.

The first house he came to belonged to Kimiko. Takashi explained to her about his quest to find the source of the music, and to find the Sadness Mountain god. He told her about his five daughters, and the great sorrow of his wife. Kimiko gasped when he told her the months the girls had died, as they were the same months she had played the Red Dragon flute. Takashi asked her to destroy the flute so he would not lose his wife too. Kimiko promised to honor his request, but it had brought her so much peace and joy that she could not destroy it. She buried it in the garden under the peony bush that bloomed at any month of the year, not just summer.

Takashi set out over Sadness Mountain to see if his wife had recovered from her grief. He rejoiced when he found her smiling. He rejoiced when he found she was also pregnant, and he asked the gods for another daughter. They lived quite happily for several months, then one night both the wife and infant died. Takashi wept for one year, and then set out to visit Kimiko and make sure the flute had been destroyed. He did not want the sadness to spread to another family.

Kimiko assured him the flute had been destroyed, but when he told of the loss of both his wife and infant daughter, she broke down and told him the truth. She had not wished to anger the Sadness god, who she believed sent the flute to her, so she buried it. One night her sorrow became so great that she dug up the flute and played only long enough for the peony bush to grow a bud, and then she buried the flute again. Takashi wept, and Kimiko wept with him. Takashi's anger grew. He dug up the flute, and broke it into a thousand pieces, then scattered the pieces out to sea.

The Red Dragon painted on the flute was dashed on the rocks where the mountain joined hands with the sea. He roared his anger, and thunder echoed from the mountain. His tears fell on the small village causing a flood even greater than the one when Kimiko's husband was lost at sea. Kimiko and Takashi felt the anger unleashed and grew afraid. When the Red Dragon saw them together, he grew angrier and left that area. To this day, the small village lives peacefully with only small storms, and prosperous fishermen.

*Joann Grisetti*

## **Her Anatomy**

Jenna Wilde was staring at Mei-Ling's cold body, the first Chinese woman to represent Indiana in the up-and-coming Miss America Pageant, and the first Asian victim in the homicide investigation.

Her eyelashes rained like foliage. The body was carefully dismembered, and then disposed of in different areas. Body parts were stored in a freezer to avoid decomposition. This young woman's anatomy reminded the coroner of a Thanksgiving turkey.

It took the police two weeks to complete the search. After the autopsy, then came the stitching. The flesh was marinated by the hush-flowing river, wild hogs' leftover meals, etc. No fingerprints left. The inner-organs, nose, cheekbones, jaw, pelvic bone, and tibia were gone. It was Jenna's job to recreate Mei-Ling's skin, dress her up, and place her into a gold casket.

The clock struck midnight as Jenna looked up. She pressed the green button on her recording pen, and cleared her throat. "Case #444, Mei-Ling Kwan, female, twenty-seven, five feet six, one hundred pounds...cause of death, dismemberment while she was still alive." The power went out after a crack of deafening thunder. Jenna continued the meticulous description, something requested by Mei-Ling's parents.

She picked up a wig made from human hair, and tenderly lifted Mei-Ling's head to fit her hopefully-attached skull.

"Shit!"

She pressed too hard. The gap between Mei-Ling's head and neck bent forward. She adjusted the head forcefully, despite her fear that it might fall off.

"I'm so sorry Mei-Ling."

The slimy glue surrounding her head was failing, and the right arm fell partially, sinking to inner-bone. Slowly laying her down, Jenna opened the cabinet and reached for a plastic bucket.

"It won't take long, please bear with me."

Jenna touched Mei-Ling's jaw. It dropped into her hand. She shook her

head, looking at the incomplete masterpiece, condemning her poor workmanship. "Some anthropologist I am." She took a tube of roof sealer from the drawer, and applied the white sticky liquid to a prosthetic jaw.

"Sorry for being clumsy."

Jenna started on Mei-Ling's flawless face. Jenna mixed semi-permanent body paint on a palette. House paint would be too cruel to use on human skin. After all, the dead deserved respect, too.

Jenna saw a gold object stuck inside Mei-Ling's mouth. She opened the jaw, and retrieved some crumpled paper. Jenna coughed several times, fanning away the suffocating air. *That paper looked like a chocolate wrapper. It was coated in the kind of congealed saliva only a dead woman can produce.*

Jenna continued painting Mei-Ling's torso. There were deep teeth marks, where hogs had eaten the flesh. Her nipples were bitten off. *Nobody would see it after she was clothed.* Her torn breasts slid down her body. Maggots were oozing from her navel—her bulging stomach was an undulating ticking time bomb waiting to explode. Those creepy-crawlers were fun to watch, but Jenna had to get to work.

Mei-Ling's legs were thin. Her soles looked like she ran a marathon over broken glass. Jenna painted that area delicately.

"What courses did you take after high school?"

She picked up a few maggots that had crawled into Mei-Ling's wig. Jenna sighed, "I try to keep myself warm by talking. I do this to others as well, in case you wonder. I want you to trust me, for the last time, okay?"

The power came back on but the room was still cold, like meat-storage. Jenna looked around, and then to Mei-Ling. "I hope I've made you look beautiful." Jenna carefully glued a pair of eyelashes on. "A few more and you're done." Jenna sharpened the eyeliner, and meticulously outlined Mei-Ling's brows before shading them. She applied blush to both cheeks; spreading the color with a make-up sponge, and then followed with a few strokes of lipstick.

"Gorgeous –"

*Mei-Ling Kwan looked like a Geisha.*

Jenna crossed her arms, and scanned the “to-do” list. *All done, except curling her hair.* She studied Mei-Ling’s face—a masterpiece of re-plastering—a dead-makeover anyone would be proud of.

Hearing voices might be normal for a mortician like Jenna; it’s how she falls in love with the dead. She traced her fingers over Mei-Ling’s eyes, pouty lips, shoulder bone, hands, legs, toes, breasts, and then lightly brushed her undulating stomach, watching it roll with life.

*Deborah Wong*

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## The Taking Trees

"I saw a man with no legs after school today," Tommy said while pushing his eggs across his plate. "He was asking for change near the school. I asked him if the Taking Trees took his legs."

Vanna wanted to tell her son that he had been rude to the man but she waited before speaking. She was glad she did. Dean threw his head back and let out a loud laugh.

"What did he say?" Dean had been flipping through the paper while Vanna served his favorite dinner: eggs and bacon. He took a large scoop of eggs on his fork and shoveled it into his mouth.

"He said no, he lost them in Num. I told him he should go find them if he lost them," Tommy said, smiling with pleasure at making his father laugh.

"It's 'Nam, Tommy. It's short for Vietnam. There was a war there years go," Vanna said, her voice low, hoping that Dean wouldn't hear her over his laughter. She was wrong.

"Don't correct him, Vanna." His laughter stopped and he glared at her. Dean turned to Tommy, pointing his fork at him while he spoke. "You're a smart boy, so curious. That guy needs to get a job and get off the street. Defending the country isn't worth anything if you're just coming home to live off our hard-earned money, right?"

Vanna nodded. Tommy beamed and looked at his mother. She kept her mouth pressed tight.

"Hey Tommy, what did he say when you told him to go find his legs?" Dean asked, spitting out egg bits as he spoke.

"I dunno; he just wheeled away. He looked mad," Tommy said. He hadn't eaten a bite of his eggs. Vanna wanted to tell him to finish them.

"You know why? Because he was a freeloading loser! And what are we?"

Tommy shrugged.

"We're winners, Tommy. You're going to grow up a winner, like Rocky. Show me that fighting muscle."

"Grrr," Tommy said, pumping his little fist in the air and flexing his arm to show off his tiny bicep. Vanna exhaled and looked down.

"That's my boy," Dean said. He took out his phone and started typing. "I have to text this to Gary; he'll get a kick out of it." Vanna felt her cheeks flush. If Gary heard about her son being rude, then Gary's wife Melissa would hear, and then the rest of the PTA would be talking about what Tommy Porter had said to a disabled man.

She started clearing the plates while Dean kept texting back and forth with Gary. She wondered if any of the mothers would tell her what was said about her. They usually didn't, and she'd hear a whisper through the PTA

meeting, or see a post on the PTA Facebook page about an “anonymous child” or “unnamed mother.”

“Hey, Tommy, want to play a game of catch?” Dean’s voice was always softer when he talked to the boy. “I’ll go get the mitts out of the garage, and meet you out back.”

Dean kissed Tommy on the top of his head before passing by Vanna on his way to the garage. Once he was gone, Vanna took a deep breath and looked down at Tommy. She forced a smile onto her face, and squatted near his chair.

“You know, what you said to that man in the wheelchair wasn’t very nice. You have to be nice to people that look different than you.”

“Daddy thought what I said was alright. He laughed.” Tommy looked confused.

“Daddy thinks some things are funny that aren’t really meant to be funny. Remember when Mommy cut her hand in the kitchen, and Daddy laughed, and Mommy needed to get stitches? It’s like that. That wasn’t funny either, was it?”

Tommy shook his head no.

“So when you see someone that looks different, don’t make fun of them or point out what makes them different. OK?”

Tommy shook his head OK.

“Also, I’ve told you a million times. There’s no such thing as the Taking Trees.”

“But Donnie at school said they were real. He heard that the trees ate whole babies, and spit out their bones when they were done!” His eyes were wide. Vanna couldn’t tell if he was scared or excited.

“Those are just stories, Tommy. They’re old stories; people used to tell those stories when I was a kid too. But they’re not real.”

She thought about when she first met Dean, and how they laughed about the Taking Trees together. They had gone to a diner and ordered fried chicken. They’d both grown up on the side of Inwood that bordered the forest, and they talked about how much they had in common. She told him how her nanny growing up had warned her never to stray too far from the house or the Taking Trees would get her. Dean laughed his big laugh, but not at her. He told her that his mother told him the same thing, and said that if he were bad she would put him out by the trees, and let them take him. “Now,” Vanna said, pushing Tommy’s plate towards him. “Finish your eggs before you go out to play.”

When Dean came upstairs, Vanna waited in bed with her eyes closed, pretending to be asleep. She hoped this time it would work. He opened the door, and emptied his pockets onto the dresser. He took off his watch first, and then his clothes. The floor creaked as he approached the bed, and his weight hitting the mattress made her shake. She felt his hand slide under the sheet and across her stomach, feeling its way up to her chest.

She kept her body still. He breathed on her neck and moaned before pressing his lips against hers. When she didn't kiss back, he pulled away.

"Don't play this game. I know you're awake," he said. He put his mouth close to her ear and bit her earlobe. Before she could say anything, he rolled on top of her and pinned her wrists above her head.

"You can't say no if you're married," he said.

She didn't say anything, and kept her eyes closed the whole time. When he was finished, he rolled onto his side, facing away from her, and fell asleep. She always needed a few minutes in the dark afterward. She felt like crying, but she didn't. She lay there, staring at the ceiling, listening to him breathe.

He slept so easy; so peaceful. He used to hold her when they finished making love, spooning her body against his, kissing her neck and hair until she fell asleep. They didn't make love anymore. As she listened to Dean sleeping, she could almost pretend that it was as it used to be, that they were still young and had just collapsed into bed together after another day of laughing. The pull in her stomach and burning in her throat reminded her that those days were over.

Her eyes flickered to the closet where they kept their luggage. She could pack a bag and leave before Dean woke up. She thought about leaving every time he had finished with her, and like every other time, she remembered Tommy sleeping in the other room. She thought about her father—she would have killed to play a game of catch with him before he died. This was her life now, and that was it. One day, when Tommy was gone to college, maybe things would change, or she would leave. Until then, she'd bite her tongue.

She crept out of bed and took a shower, scrubbing herself until her skin was pink. When she had dried off, she wrapped herself in a bathrobe and left the bedroom, closing the door gently behind her so it wouldn't wake Dean.

As she passed Tommy's room, she peeked in. He was asleep on his stomach with one leg under the covers and one leg out, arms spread out wide on either side of him. She tiptoed in and tucked his leg under the covers. As she

left, she took one more look at his face, trying to see whom he looked more like. Dean insisted Tommy was the spitting image of himself as a kid, but Vanna didn't think so. Tommy had her eyes and long nose, and he was smaller than his classmates were, as she had been.

When she reached the kitchen, she made herself a cup of chamomile tea. The windows near the kitchen table overlooked the back yard. They had chosen this house for the yard. That was back when she wanted four kids, and wanted a yard big enough for all of them to play together. The two sides of the yard were fenced in, and the back of the yard was edged by the forest.

She pulled up her legs so they were tucked against her body, and she held the mug close to her chest. She watched the trees moving in the moonlight. It was a windy September night, and the pines were swaying in the breeze. Their constant motion soothed her, their limbs bending back and forth like a pendulum, and she took deep breaths of the tea's steam.

These were the trees that Inwood's children feared. Legend said that long ago, a little girl had wandered into the woods alone at night; the trees had put her to sleep and swallowed her whole. When her father found her the next morning, all that was left was her head. The story changed, depending on the generation that told it. When Vanna was a child, the story was that, when the little girl's head was found, her eyes were wide open in fright. She had heard Tommy telling his friend Nathan that the girl's eyes were closed when her head was found, but the mouth was smiling. She wondered how long mothers had been using the Taking Trees as a scare tactic to keep their children from getting lost in the woods.

The trees seemed to be dancing in the wind, spreading their arms wide above their head like a ballerina, and moving with the wind's music. They always seemed to calm her, no matter what Dean had said or done. They seemed free, effortless. The moon cast the trees' shadows across the yard, moving like fingers towards her window. Then, as if the wind had shut off, the trees stopped moving. Their swaying stopped, and they stood straight. Vanna could still hear the wind blowing, but the trees weren't moving. She held her breath while she watched, her heart starting to beat faster. The forest stood as still as a painting. When she finally released her breath, the trees started swaying again.

Vanna had never seen anything like it. She had an urge to pick up the phone, to call someone and tell them what she had just seen, but she had no one to call. She considered asking Dean in the morning, but imagined his face as he told her she was being stupid, and changed her mind.

A few weeks later, Vanna was cutting Tommy's sandwich for lunch when Dean stormed into the kitchen. She had been sick all morning, vomiting into the toilet while Dean slept. When she heard him come into the kitchen, her stomach lurched.

"My watch is gone; did you take it?" he asked her. "No, of course not. Do you want me to help you look for it?"

"I've already looked everywhere, what help would you be?" He sat down at the kitchen table, and slammed his fist down on it. "Dammit, it's an Omega. Do you know how expensive that is?"

"Yes," she said. She had bought it for him as a wedding gift seven years earlier. She knew exactly how expensive it was.

"Four thousand dollars, down the drain." He was staring at her. *It had actually cost three thousand.*

"When I clean the house today, I'll look for it," she told him. "I'm sure it will turn up soon."

He didn't break his gaze as she finished making him breakfast. When she handed him the toast on a paper towel, he grabbed it from her.

"I'm going to be late for work," he said, and walked out.

She let out a deep breath, and her heart slowed. She had a little time. She knew he'd notice it was gone, but didn't think he'd accuse her that fast.

Once Tommy was on the bus to school, Vanna walked across the back yard to the woods and found the tree right away. She had watched them all carefully, choosing one because its branches stretched into her yard the most. She ran her hand along the trunk, feeling its rough skin under her fingers. When she reached the point where the largest branch met the trunk, she stood on her tiptoes to look.

When she was a little girl, Vanna had gotten into trouble for leaving one of her plastic horses in a tree she was climbing on the edge of her yard. When they had gone to fetch the toy in the morning, the tree's bark had grown around the toy so it was embedded in the trunk. All that was left of the horse was its nose poking out of one end. Vanna remembered her nanny shaking as she walked back to the house, looking amazed and scared. This memory had come back to her a few nights after the trees stopped moving for her.

On her tiptoes, she felt along the tree, checking around the spot where she had placed the watch. Finally, she saw a glint of gold along the rough brown bark, and reached up to feel the metal inside the tree. Her stomach lurched again.



The police couldn't figure out who had stolen their missing things. The watch was gone, as was Dean's signed Indianapolis Indians baseball, the China teapot they'd received at their wedding, Dean's laptop, and finally, his Versace suit jacket. There were no signs of forced entry, no pattern to what went missing, aside from increasing size, and no clues in the house. When a police officer asked Dean if they could have just been misplaced, Dean's cheeks burned a deep purple, and the officer backed off.

Each time something went missing, Dean looked at Vanna with more and more suspicion. She told him she was just as baffled as he was, and that she'd looked through the house as carefully as she could. Dean kept watching her with squinted eyes.

Tommy loved watching the police. He asked them questions and told them he wanted to be a cop one day. When he asked to hold their guns, they smiled and told him no. Dean had thought it was hilarious; Vanna felt her heart creep into her throat at the thought of Tommy holding a gun.

Once the police left, Tommy told his father how he wanted to get to shoot things one day. They were in the living room; Vanna watched from the doorway.

"One day, I'll take you out and teach you to shoot; would you like that?"

Dean asked him, putting his hand on Tommy's head. Tommy's face lit up.

"What kind of guns can we shoot?"

"I have a pistol we could try out," Dean said, looking at Vanna while he said it. Her mouth opened a little to say something, but she didn't make a sound. They locked eyes for a moment before Dean turned back to Tommy.

"We should teach whoever's taking our stuff a lesson."

"Yeah!" Tommy said.

"That person's probably a loser, right? They need to learn not to mess with us."

"Yeah! Let's teach them a lesson!"

Vanna slipped out of the room and heard Dean follow her. She entered the kitchen, and stopped near the sink. He approached her from behind, putting his hands on either side of her, gripping the counter to trap her where she stood "I don't know what you're up to, but you're not fooling me." His voice was a hoarse whisper.

"I don't know what you mean," she said, hoping her voice sounded convincing.

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***"I KNOW YOU'RE TAKING MY STUFF. YOU'RE  
STEALING FROM ME. YOU CAN FOOL THE  
POLICE, BUT YOU CAN'T FOOL ME.  
I'VE BEEN WATCHING YOU."***

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"I know you're taking my stuff. You're stealing from me. You can fool the police, but you can't fool me. I've been watching you. You look around all nervous all the time, watching me from the corner of your eye. You try to play innocent, but I know you too well." She looked down at the floor, but he put his hand on her jaw, and pulled her face up to look at him.

"I'm sorry," she said, taking in a quick breath. "I just wanted to save up some money to get you something nice for your birthday. So I sold some of your things." It sounded like a lie and she knew it, but his eyes flickered with confusion. She kept going. "You said you really wanted a new car, a nice one like Gary's, so I've been saving up to surprise you, but I didn't have enough money in my own savings, so..." She let herself trail off. When she looked up at Dean, he was smirking at her.

"You idiot," he said. He ran his hand down to her throat for a second. She swallowed, and he dropped his hand. "Using my own money to buy me a birthday present. Better be a nice damn car." He took a step back, and she exhaled, placing a hand on her stomach. "You better get my shit back soon," he said, putting a finger in her face.

~~~OOO~~~

She was running out of time. After Dean fell asleep, Vanna headed out to her spot near the woods. She sat down next to her tree, put her hand on the trunk, and closed her eyes. The ground was cold, but she didn't mind.

She began to calm down. The crickets around her quieted, and she felt the muscles in her stomach relax. She breathed in the scent of the woods, a rich mixture of dirt, leaves, and moss.

"I need help," she said, hearing her voice crack as it left her.

She took another deep breath and felt an energy surge through her. It started in her fingertips, and moved down her wrists into her arms and chest. It continued through her stomach and into her legs, until she could feel it pulsing through her entire body. Every part of her felt stronger and she felt like her skin was glowing.

Vanna opened her eyes and stood up. She'd never felt so tall as she strode back to the house. She moved towards the staircase, and caught a glimpse of herself in the mirror in the hallway. Her hair was wild around her head, and her shoulders hunched forward. Her eyes looked hungry. She smiled and climbed the stairs two at a time.

She stood above Dean. He was sleeping on his back, one arm draped over his head. He looked so peaceful and harmless. Vanna had to hold in her laughter while she watched him. She didn't want to wake him just yet. She retrieved some items she'd staged earlier, zip ties, duct tape, one of Dean's Burberry socks, and his pistol.

Vanna looked at Dean one last time before continuing. She rolled him over without waking him, and picked up both of his arms. She slipped zip ties over his hands and tightened them before he opened his eyes. The sound of her pulling out a strip of duct tape woke him, and he looked at her, confused. As he slowly took in the scene around him, she shoved the sock into his mouth, and put a piece of tape over it.

"Goodbye, Dean," she said, her voice making his eyes flash around in panic. "I can put up with you, but I can't let you turn Tommy into a monster."

His eyes opened wider as she spoke, emerging from the depths of his sleep. She picked up the pistol and pointed it at his head. Dean's yells were muffled and panicked; he struggled to roll into a seated position with his hands tied together. Vanna didn't hold back her laughter this time.

"Be quiet. I don't want Tommy to wake up. Now stand up."

Dean worked his way into a standing position, and Vanna sneered at his filthy boxer shorts.

"Let's go. We're going to the yard," she said, motioning the gun towards the door. Dean trudged along in front of her, glancing back every few steps. When they reached the back yard, she could feel the trees pulling her in. They seemed to be humming, and she was humming back. The energy within her started to expand, and she felt like her skin was on fire. He seemed to feel it too; he started to scream into the sock as they approached the line of the forest.

She had him take a few steps into the woods before she cracked the pistol against his head. He dropped to the ground, his body falling onto the forest floor in a heap. She threw the gun onto the ground next to him. It was fast and unceremonious, just the way she'd hoped.

Vanna didn't want to watch. She turned back and went to the edge of the woods, placing her hand on the tree. "Thank you," she said. The surge of energy drained out of her. When she returned to the house, her limbs hung heavy against her body and she was out of breath. She had dirt and leaves stuck to her clothes, and she smelled the forest's earthy smell stuck to her body.

"Mommy?" Tommy's voice called from his room as she climbed the stairs. She went to his bed.

"Scoot over," she said, and climbed in.

"What was going on? I heard you and Daddy?"

"Dad got called into work so he had to go," she whispered. He nodded and closed his eyes, curling up next to her.

"Get some sleep," she said. She closed her eyes and felt her body relax. She put her hand on her stomach. "The three of us are safe now."

Madeline Weinland

The Lost Generation

Alienated adults remember happier times
Or are rose-tinted memories realigned?
Student rooms were once full of laughter
From teenage friends who could live forever.
Those halcyon summer days spent
In the sand-whipped House of Fun
Or the haunted Hippodrome
Are sadly long since gone.
Now weary, war-torn streets
Know only the exodus of youthful feet,
A schoolyard dispersed far and wide
Just to earn a living and thrive.
Boarded up shops and converted clubs
Smashed windows and deserted pubs,
Mock the thought of resuscitation
And mourn the lost generation.

Tim Gardiner

A Dying Actress Reads the Bible

Again, or even for the first
time, you prepared another one

of those emergencies. We know
how it turned out, naturally.

The chance to mime behaviors
of more complicated animals

always turned up well ahead
of us. At twenty-three you had

never lived that slow spring of
an ordinary woman. God and I

imagined that day – the terrible
truth is that we've lost.

Christopher Suda

Parallel and Proximity

I had to stop reading~ Stop between paragraphs, sentences...sometimes the words~ So enthralled...so inebriated~ Terrified of some inevitable end...between the chase and pace of it~ Lost within the infinite of possibility~ A thousand translations, perhaps~ Paused within invocations of blue~ Conjured by words~ A drink, a meal, an interlude~ Eros, absence, and vista~ Unified unto the experience~ Transcending the moment into a blinding glare of white light~ No word, no metaphor...no page to be forgotten~ Clung to as close as breast is to self...incapable of separation~ Returning always to nurse of itself~ As if the nearness of ink to page; proximity of page to skin, and skin to bone would never...ever...be close enough~

Why am I weeping? In the throes of abstraction I touched upon forbidden truths...and perhaps those truths pain me~ I am a poet unworthy of such a name~ I call upon you: My untitled poem of mystery; of revelation...of absolute...of nothing~ Yet...here you are: My everything...my concrete...my tangible nonsense...my lie~ I adore you as pulse and blood; as tourniquet and noose~ My newborn...my deathbed~ My fragments of resurrection~

Wide-eyed and bewildered~ Starry eyed in any-case~ Agony and passion...unspeakable~ Nothing will ever suffice the intent of this expression~ I slay myself as unworthy sacrifice~ In the splendor and elation of morning sun...my blood of golden ambrosia~ To be so worthy as insignificant in this great process~ My true love...my absolution and envy~ My painstaking thrust into the deep unknown...finding bitter-sweet refuge within parallel losses of sanity~

~With me...of me...and still nowhere to be found~

Leila A. Fortier

Marge and Terry

Terry flips open his cellphone and presses 'speaker.' Katharine is the fourth caller since Terry and Cheryl sat down to supper.

"Terry," Katharine asks, "have you heard anything new about Marge?"

Terry sighs. From across the table, Cheryl mouths, "Be nice."

"Sorry, Kat. I haven't. Nothing new."

"It's so terrible," Katharine says. "Marge, missing, lost somewhere in the fighting. You don't think they'd hurt a nurse, do you?"

"Kat, I don't know. The news says people are freakin' out over there."

"That's right, but you and Marge were always so . . . Cheryl, are you on the line?"

"Yes, Kat. I'm here."

"Oh, Cheryl. Since Reverend Hisslock put her 'In Our Prayers' this morning, the whole town's worried what's happened to Marge."

"We're worried too, Kat."

"What are we gonna do with all those donations in the church basement, the clothing and medical supplies? Every year Marge gives us new addresses. Where do we ship this batch?"

Terry shakes his head at Cheryl. Tonight, he can't deal with a call for prayers; he can't face his fear that Marge lies murdered, a world away.

Terry spreads a clean towel on top of the three-bean salad bowl and stalks out onto the front porch. Sun's going down, fireflies just starting to flicker. Red sky at night, sailors' delight. He ain't no sailor, but Terry will take it. Bats swoop from the hay barn, circle the sentry light, and then dive low over his soybean fields. Good God, it's been nearly fifty years, Terry realizes, fifty damn years and folks still remember, Marge and Terry, Terry and Marge.

He slumps onto the hanging porch swing and looks in the picture window beside him. Cheryl's there, forearms on the supper table, talking to the air and Kat. Cheryl's hair is white now, but she's the same skinny stick of dynamite he married forty-six years ago.

Damn, but he loves her.

Cheryl just bowled him over; he didn't stand a chance. He knows she did that, but thanks God for it.

~~~OOO~~~

Marge and I, Terry remembers, we were farm kids, like everybody round here. Ah, but Marge was smart, not like me. I was Motor Shop and Agriculture. Marge, she was Biology and Chemistry. When we were both

sixteen, the 4-H Club got us steers to raise by hand, three hundred fifty pounds of long tongue and fuzzy tail. Mine was a Black Angus; Marge thought that Hereford of hers was a lot cuter.

Those steers grew like weeds, and by August, they were nine hundred easy. County Fair time, us kids led 'em into the judging ring. Moms and dads and meat buyers, all hanging on the rails while we strut them cattle so the livestock judge could see muscle and finish to pick a winner. Maybe a dozen of us, Marge in line just behind me as round and round the sawdust ring we went, pulling our steers along with rope halters. Folks applauded; the high school band played a march, but even with all the noise, I heard her yelp when that Hereford stepped on Marge's foot, right smack dab on top. I watched her. She was already turning white. She took one limp, then another, then straightened up and shook her blonde hair at me. Her face told me, Terry, don't you dare come back here. So I stayed put, and we went round one last time and came to a stop.

Everybody held up halters so calves would raise their heads and stretch. They look pretty that way. Well, Marge did that; all of us did, but Marge was the only one biting her lips — she still didn't win, and neither did I. We both got Participation Ribbons and we tacked them on our wooden stalls in the 4-H Cattle Barn.

That night, about ten o'clock, when the Ferris wheel and Tilt-a-Whirl were doing land office business, there was a thunderstorm, a real gully-washer. Folks ran for their cars as Marge and I watched from under the Cattle Barn eaves. Rain came down in sheets, waves of it in tower lights, but in a few minutes, it was over. No one was left at the Ring Toss or Milk Bottle games, no one in line at the Dunk Tank, just two little kids beside Spin-A-Wheel, a boy about 7 and his little sister, both wet as half-drowned kittens, looking lost. Marge limped out into the mud to take their hands. I could see the way they looked up at her when she did that.

Marge wrapped them in a blanket and sat them on the bench next to me.

"Want to see something gross?" she asked.

"Yeah!" the boy said. His little sister wasn't so sure.

Marge pulled off her sneaker and showed us a big red bruise.

"Is it broke?" the boy asked.

"Don't think so. Look."

*Marge could wiggle her toes some.*

She glanced at me and said, "Terry, we'll wait here."

"Right. I'll go find their parents."

Later, we held hands. That was when I fell in love with Marge.

Senior year in high school, Katharine and Marge decided they'd go

downstate to college. Kat went to be a teacher, and she did that; taught Fifth Grade in town for the last so many years. Kat taught our three youngsters, Cheryl's and mine, and when it was time to teach our grandkids, she did that too.

But Marge wanted to be a nurse, and I thought she'd be a good one.

That summer before college started, Marge and I, we planned it all out. When I finished helping in my dad's fields, he'd let us borrow his farm equipment; the mower and rake, wagons and elevator, wheat combine, baler and corn picker. We'd hire ourselves to other farmers, and Marge would use her share to pay college tuition. We'd be a team and save money to buy our own place when Marge finished school.

I remember us baling straw in July. It was hot, dusty work. Marge drove the tractor, pulling the baler, and I stacked straw on the wagon, third in line. Marge could thread twine when it ran out, and grease gears and joints. Back and forth in those fields we went, from morning 'till sundown. I pulled up bales and stacked 'em eight, nine high on the wagon, ten rows deep, then off we'd go to the barn to unload.

Like I said, it was hot and dusty work, in boiling sun, 'cause you don't ever store wet straw or hay inside. Everybody knows that. Marge looked back at me there on the wagon, slinging bales over my head, me shirtless, baking in the sun, sweating. I saw her smile before she stopped the tractor.

"Where's the water bottle?" she called. I held it up.

"Time for a break. Let's find some shade."

I jumped down and went under the wagon 'cause I knew what she wanted. Marge got under there with me. We sat cross-legged on wheat stubble, our hair brushing up against the wagon bed. Oh, the way she looked at me! Then she took the thermos, tilted it for a swig, water just pouring out over her chin onto her shirt. She stared at me some more, then began to unbutton that shirt. Her mom thought Marge a scandal, but back then fashion was girls didn't wear bras, 'cept on Sunday. She lay her shirt on the ground and patted down the stubble underneath.

"Wait a sec," I said and climbed out from under to get my own shirt.

She was grinning like mad when I got back, real quick.

"Think I'd start without you?" Marge asked as she slipped off her jeans. I put my shirt under her bottom.

Marge, she was fine . . . real fine. I kissed her softly. She always liked that a lot. I was careful not to finish inside her, careful not to spoil things for Marge—for us. Ain't no song could ever say how much I loved her.

I don't hardly know how Cheryl Campbell got her hooks in me. In school,

Cheryl was just this scraggy little Niner when Marge and I were seniors. Flat as a washboard Cheryl was, I hardly ever noticed her, but she was always hanging round us in the halls, the lunchroom. One time, Cheryl sat across the table to watch us eat. I paid her no mind, but afterwards Marge told me, "Watch out. She's sweet on you."

"Well, that's silly," I said, and Marge kissed me right there in the hall.

Cheryl Campbell's farm was three down from me on Muckshaw Road, a big old place her Great Great Grandpa Campbell bought and was handed down in the family ever since. Thing was, that fall after Marge went off to nurses college; Cheryl's dad lost an arm picking corn. He got off his tractor to clear a stalk jam, but somehow the drive slipped back in gear and caught him something terrible, pulled him into the shucking rollers right to his chest. Damn near killed him then and there.

Everybody in the township knew Marge and I were saving up, and so while Mr. Campbell was in the hospital, it was Cheryl's mom who called my dad about me finishing the corn harvest. I was glad to do that, and glad to be paid with a share of the crop like we agreed. The Campbell place had an old red barn with a slow hill up to the main doors. Next to that was a big metal corn crib. It was when I was filling that crib, Cheryl came out of the house and stood by the elevator. She was fifteen then, a sophomore.

Hell, it probably wasn't legal even to talk to her.

While I shoveled down corn from that last wagonload, I tried not to see her there, standing a little way uphill so she could look me in the eye. She waited, then waited some more. When the last couple ears thunked onto the elevator and started climbing to the top, I leaned on my shovel and said to Cheryl, "All done now."

"No we ain't," she said. "We're just getting started."

Lord help me, I never forgot that.

Next summer, Marge and I worked the fields, up and down Green and Walnut townships, and the summer after that, too. I got a winter job at the gas station in town, oil changes and tune ups, winter tires and radiator flushes. One spring I installed a turbo charger in a Thunderbird - took me nearly a week but she run like a bat out of hell.

It was our last summer as a team. One more school year and Marge would finish her nursing degree. One more year, we'd have enough for a down payment on a farm. Not to get our hopes too high, I didn't say anything to Marge, but I had my eye on the Zehner place, on Olive Road over in the next county. Harold and Betty Zehner were thinking about retiring down south.

When I planted winter wheat for him in the fall, Harold as much as told me he'd take back a mortgage at a little less than market.

Marge and I didn't have to make love in the fields any more. I had a one bedroom apartment above the gas station for next to nothing, 'cause I opened and closed the station, and pretty much did everything in between, for five months of a year.

"Marge," I said one night in bed, "You know how much I love you?"

"Yes, Terry. I know."

"And we got near enough money for a mortgage."

"Yes," Marge laughed.

"Well, don't you think it's time we set a date?"

"A date for what, Terry?"

That wasn't what I hoped she'd say.

"Oh, Terry. I'm just teasing," Marge said. "I'll be back again for Thanksgiving. We'll go buy an engagement ring."

I said that would be just fine.

Except Marge didn't come home at Thanksgiving. Instead, she wrote a letter promising she'd see me at Christmas. She and a girlfriend were going to Indianapolis to visit someone and see the sights. Sights, in Indianapolis?

A month later, snow was falling. In front of the savings and loan, our little town had a twelve-foot Christmas tree, tied against the wind, and decorated with bubble lights. The gas station was just up the street from the bus stop. I waited at the stop for Marge, three nights running, watching as the 5:20 parked outside Schoonover's Casual Clothing, then rolled away north, every bus leaving me emptier than the one before.

On the fourth night, Cheryl Campbell was angle-parked outside The Hometown News, by Schoonover's. Cheryl was leaning her scrawny butt against her dad's blue Plymouth. She had a magazine open in her hands, but I knew damned well she was reading me. When the 5:20 didn't even slow down to stop, I wandered over to Cheryl, making odds with myself whether I would cry or yell.

"Terry," Cheryl said so quiet I barely heard. "Where do you want to go?"

"I better ask Marge's dad when she's coming home."

Cheryl drove me there, waited in the car, and then brought me back to town. As Cheryl drove slowly down icy roads, it took me a while to say it, to believe it.

Finally, I told Cheryl, "Marge met someone."

"Who?"

"Marge met a missionary."

Cheryl laughed. She thought I was joking. "Whatd'ya mean? A 'Mr. Livingstone, I presume?' kind of missionary?"

"Yes, that's it. She met a medical missionary at an Indianapolis seminary. They're already married. Springtime, he's taking Marge overseas to a clinic for folks busted up by land mines."

Cheryl didn't come round after that, I 'spect because I was the most pitiful, broken-hearted loser in five counties. Kat, when she was home for practice teaching, she said Marge could do a lot of good over there, that war amps and orphans needed somebody like Marge.

No, that wasn't right. It was me who needed Marge, and I always would. The whole town felt sorry for me, when they weren't laughing behind my back.

Lord, I could have crawled in a hole and died.

January was cold, February was colder, March worse than both together. But April come in bright, and when I snuck out of town, I didn't tell folks I was going to the Zehners in Starke County. I knew Marge, with her nursing degree all done and her doctor-missionary husband, she'd say goodbye to everyone before leaving. I made my dad and mom swear to high heaven they'd never tell if Marge asked where I'd gone, not the truth anyway. When I went to live at the Zehners, Betty didn't say anything, she just hugged me tight, and then we walked up the lane with Harold.

"Winter wheat's greening up," Harold said as we leaned on a gate. "Almost dry enough to start planting beans."

My dad said Marge introduced her husband all around town, but just before they left, she gave him a letter for me. It was in a long sealed envelope with 'Terry' handwritten in the middle. Dad brought it to the Zehners and I propped it on my dresser in their spare room.

At night, I'd sit by the bedroom window and listen to baseball on the radio. I'd look over at the dresser, thinking about what that letter might say, thinking about whether Marge had tried to make things easier on me, or on herself, but then a music program would come on the radio, and I'd climb into bed wondering if the Chisox had won after all. I listened to a lot of baseball in May and June until I decided what it was Marge wrote.

Maybe just "I know I've hurt you. I'm sorry."

That would be enough, for me.

Next morning I gave the envelope to Betty to take out with the trash.

"You sure you want Harold to burn this?" Betty asked.

"Yes," I said, and kissed her forehead. "I know what it says."

That summer, Cheryl's dad passed on in mid-July. He was never right again after he got out of the hospital. She tried to pick up the pieces. She was eighteen by then, and Cheryl tried hard, but she saw she couldn't do it alone. So she did what she always wanted to do, what I so needed her to do, she came looking for me.

Cheryl knocked on my dad's door and said, "Mom and I need him. Please tell me where Terry is."

Thank goodness Dad told her.

I borrowed Dad's mower and rake. Cheryl ran the baler, threaded twine and greased joints when we went out to bale straw in her wheat field. I stacked and I stacked. When we finished about sunset, I'd built a wall in the barn, seven bales high, ten long and wide.

Cheryl pushed me up against that wall and loosened my belt. She handled me some, kissed me, and unzipped her jeans. She lay back across a bale, saying, "Come here." She wrapped those skinny legs of hers round my butt and pulled me in. There was no being careful with Cheryl; she wrapped my body so tight in those legs that there was no pulling out. I thought I'd died and gone to heaven. Cheryl held onto me, and when I was done, she said, "Let's do it again."

Next morning, I went back to Cheryl's house and asked her mom, "Please, Mrs. Campbell, could I see Cheryl?"

She came downstairs to the living room, bright as a new penny, straight from the shower, her hair short and spiky and wet. Those nipples were hard as two little stones under her shirt. I looked at her and decided I'd say it right out.

"Cheryl, I ain't never gonna touch you again unless you come to town right now to see Doc Hansard about taking The Pill."

Cheryl looked to her mom who didn't say a word. For years, Mrs. Campbell must have known who her daughter wanted. When Cheryl turned to me, I asked, "Are we going to Doc Hansard?"

"All right."

"Good. Cause, if it ain't too late already, I don't want folks counting time backwards on their fingers."

"Terry, are you asking to marry me?"

"Yes, I am. I'm gonna love you forever."

Well we did that, and I still do.

~~~OOO~~~

I hear Cheryl call from the supper table. "Terry, come in now. I think folks are done worrying about Marge for tonight."

I walk into the dining room and stand behind Cheryl's chair. I wrap my arms around her shoulders and kiss her white hair.

"That bastard missionary," I tell her. "If he ain't lying dead beside Marge, I swear to God I'll kill him myself."

Cheryl stands and snuggles into me. "I'm so sorry, Terry. Everyone loves her, almost as much as you."

Ken Leland

Under The Moon

Under the moon, where hate and love are both true.
Where being happy makes you blue.
Where life thrives, withers, then dies.

Under the moon, where I lay in silence
between the sounds of us two;
Where time is slow, but ends too soon.
Where wide-awake, I sleep next to you;
Where day and night may meet, may sigh.

Under the Luna, where in safety
we're allowed to stare at the reflection of Sunna.
Under the moon, where every instant is a life-
time between me and you.

Me and you, under the moon;
Where I hope to meet you soon
and watch our dreams come true...
Let's meet again, under the moon.

Isa Surreal Muse

Inwood Station

Just east of Plymouth, Indiana, out on a craggy stretch of the old Lincoln Highway, sits a grimy brick shit house with a mansard roof, three walls of windows and a gravel parking lot. The neon sign that once sat atop the roof said Karl's Five'n Grill. Now, there was no sign; not even a piece of plywood with spray paint. The twenty-seat grease trap had nothing more than a sun-bleached exterior slathered with yearly coats of milk paint and spite. Stripped down foundations straddled the relic as hoary footprints of a forgotten time. There weren't any trees to provide shade, no bushes, nothing decorative—just ugly weeds and a few black rat snakes.

The hot griddle behind the counter was sputtering and snapping with microscopic pieces of egg shooting across the diner, evaporating. A guy by the name of Rhett was cooking. City folk would have dubbed him a lummo, an oaf, broad shoulders with more hair on his back than his head. He was tall, scowling, his few tufts of hair dusty black with flecks of greasy gray, cut short, high and tight underneath a paper hat. He wore a tank top underneath his bloodstained apron. Local kids told stories that Rhett butchered his own meat. Their parents hushed them with grave-concern.

Darla was serving. She sat on a stool in the corner between two yellow-stained greasy walls, admiring her cherry lipstick in a purse mirror. She would occasionally run her tongue over her teeth, underneath her lips, as if to wipe away errant lipstick. In fact, she was sucking out pieces of undercooked meat from the cracks. She was tall, too, taller than most women. She had permed mahogany hair, a long nose with a pocked bulb of nostrils. Her lips were thin on top and thick along the bottom. She would sometimes go into the men's bathroom at Pamida, her lips smeared with red lipstick. She would kiss the stall door, big and full, and hot. She wanted guys to imagine her lips while their wives waited outside.

Kevin and Susan were from the city. They'd bellied up to places like this before. In fact, they considered themselves hip to the small town scene. Kevin worked in accounting at an insurance company. Susan's dreams of being an artist had long passed. She worked part-time at an upscale grocery store in Indianapolis.

Every Saturday, Kevin would saddle up his blue Toyota Camry, and head out to a town with a name that was all but forgotten. He would hoist his Canon EOS 6D over one shoulder, his padded bag full of lenses over the other. He often photographed aging consolidated schools, their innards

made of oak and stone, spray painted and salvaged away. Or he would hap upon an old train station boarded and bricked up with signs like, "Warning," or, "No Trespassing."

Meanwhile, Susan would sit almost a mile away in the couple's car, reading dog-eared issues of Rolling Stone, or Wired. If her phone had reception, she would sometimes call her mother, Ivy, and listen to the woman cackle and sputter, a fresh cigarette always at hand—anything to kill the boredom, because if it wasn't this, it wasn't anything.

On the way into a town, Kevin insisted they stop at whatever local diner was at hand. Susan never questioned, never complained. She entered, ate the food, swallowed it down, never so much as murmured. Kevin was too boyish, too naïve to believe that Susan hated small town food. It was greasy. It sat heavy. It made her hair smell for the rest of the day. Going into those places was like standing in a spray tanner full of acrid smoke and grease. But persist, she did.

"What's a good place to take pictures around here?" Kevin asked Rhett and Darla. He sipped his coffee waiting for a response.

Rhett had his back turned. His teeth were grinding back and forth slowly. The spatula was made of metal. When Rhett was young, the doctors told his mother not to allow him to play with sharp metal objects. And now look at him. What a big man he was now. Think of all the things he could do with that spatula.

Darla also heard Kevin's question, but chose to ignore it. She popped her mirror closed, and put it in her purse under the counter. She stood up from her stool, grabbed two plates from a rack and set them near Rhett.

"More coffee?" she asked dryly.

Susan nodded, her eyes glued to an issue of National Geographic.

Kevin drank what was left and set the cup down with a smile, "Thanks." He squinted to see Darla's nametag covered by the open collar of her shirt. Her décolletage was quite apparent.

She looked into his eyes as she filled his cup. It wasn't a saucy look; it was half-eyed disinterest, feigned politeness, crisp.

She turned and poured coffee into Susan's cup.

"So Darla, what's a good place to take pictures nearby?"

"I heard you the first time," Darla said unenthusiastically. She dribbled coffee from the pot after pouring Susan's cup.

"You guys have any old buildings around? Anything abandoned or falling apart?" Kevin persisted.

"Yeah," Darla snorted, "like, the whole damn town." She smacked her gum

and shook her head.

"Fair enough," Kevin nodded, still smiling. He wasn't impressed with the coffee. It was inky and iridescent. It smelled burnt.

Rhett turned with two plates in his hand, "Sausage and biscuits, and..." he looked back at the ticket, "Waffles and eggs." Although the food had been prepared correctly, neither of them ordered any of the things Rhett just named. Kevin looked him in the eyes, looked at him through the hollows, black and vacant, and so suddenly flushing with venom.

"I'll take the...uh, sausage," Kevin nodded. "She has the waffles."

Rhett set the plate in front of Susan quietly, so as not to disturb her reading. "So Rhett, what about Inwood?" Kevin asked.

Rhett stopped cold in his tracks, his eyes staring down at his shoes. Darla looked up from her purse, brows together.

"Inwood, Iowa?" Rhett asked calmly.

Kevin cocked his head, "Is there...there's an Inwood, Iowa?"

Rhett suddenly came back to life, resuming his shuffle into the back room. Darla closed her purse and followed.

"Nice job, Sherlock," Susan mumbled from her magazine.

"Jeez, must be a touchy subject around here."

In truth, Kevin half hoped an old man would be sitting in the diner reading a newspaper. The man would overhear his question and provide a treasure trove of strange history about Inwood. But there was no one. Only a few construction workers ever ate there anyway, and they didn't like working weekends.

The couple ate their food slowly, Darla occasionally peeking out from the back room to fill their coffee. There was, in fact, no conspiracy. There was a 15" flat screen in the storeroom with poor digital reception. The manager quit years ago, and the family who owned the place never stopped in anymore. No one cared who saw what these days, just so long as there was enough cash to go around at the end of the night.

Kevin left a modest tip and penned his displeasure on the receipt, "I pay well for info!" Neither Rhett nor Darla gave a shit. Susan had nearly finished her magazine by the time the two hit the road. Inwood was only about ten miles east of the diner. Kevin had seen an old railroad map that pinned a station nearby. He wanted to see if the interior had somehow survived looting.

After looking over a road atlas of the state, Kevin set coordinates on his dash-mounted GPS and set sail. That was back in Indianapolis, two and a half hours ago. After finishing lunch, the road seemed longer and stranger than the GPS let on. In fact, after nearly twenty minutes, Kevin slowed down and pulled to the side of the road. He unhooked his GPS and brought it to his eyes.

"What's wrong, honey?" Susan asked dispassionately.

"I don't know. We headed in the right direction and the estimated time was seven minutes. We've been driving for twenty, and the estimated time is still seven minutes."

"Huh," Susan muttered. "Why don't you head back to the diner and start over?"

Kevin nearly responded with a quick negative, but stopped himself short. According to the atlas, Inwood was roughly ten miles from Plymouth on Lincoln Highway. He knew that with certainty, but a creeping sense of doubt made him wonder if Inwood was really off US Highway 30. Perhaps he could ask someone at the diner for directions.

Kevin turned the car around and headed back. Susan didn't notice one wink. Kevin was surprised, and quite alarmed, when he happened upon the diner after only seven minutes of driving.

"Susan," he said, fingering his lips.

"Yes," she looked up from her magazine.

"That drive, from where we stopped...only took seven minutes."

"Uh huh," she looked at him vacantly.

"Yeah."

She nodded and put her eyes back down into her magazine.

"But I drove twenty minutes away from here before I stopped," Kevin said with dire certainty.

"Alright, I believe you," Susan said.

Kevin shook his head, confused. He looked back at the GPS, but it offered no assistance, no direction, no answers. "I'll go in and see what they say," he finally mumbled, setting the GPS back on the dash.

He stepped out onto the gravel and approached the entrance. The blinds were drawn in all of the windows, and a sign fashioned from one of the cash receipts was taped between the screen and front doors. "Closed" was scrawled in black marker across the sheet. Kevin tried the handle anyway, but it was locked.

He walked back to the car, got in, and started the engine. He sat. He thought. "What did they say?" Susan masked her impatience.

"Who?" Kevin asked.

Susan looked over at the diner, to which Kevin responded, "Oh, yeah, them."

They're not in there. Closed shop." He chuckled, "Or claw-sd shop, as they wrote."

Susan raised her eyebrows and returned to her magazine, "So are we going to Inwood, or have you given up?"

Kevin reversed the car without answering and checked the GPS. Ten miles, straight ahead. East. "Inwood," he said aloud.

After another twenty minutes of driving, Kevin started to sweat. "This damn thing," he muttered. He pounded his fist on the dash, as if to unsettle the GPS. "Work!"

"I'm sure it's not the machine," Susan shook her head. "Here, let me see it." She grabbed it from the dash and turned it in a number of different directions before settling on, what appeared to be, the correct orientation. "Are you sure this thing even works?"

"Well, yes, it got us out here," Kevin snorted. "Obviously, we couldn't have found the diner without it."

"Well, then maybe Inwood has vanished. That happens to all sorts of towns we've tried to find."

Kevin shook his head as if to placate, "Yes, honey, that's right, but the damn GPS is saying we're still 10 miles away from it, thirty miles ago. You see what I mean?"

She shrugged, "Maybe you bought a damn Positioning System, instead of the real thing. Did you check the box?"

Kevin shook his head and looked out the window.

"I thought that was funny." Susan smirked and looked back into her magazine.

"Well maybe if you'd help me, we'd get there," Kevin sighed bitterly.

"Ok," Susan closed the magazine, "what do you want me to do?"

"Could you pull up a map on your phone?"

She produced a phone from her purse and managed to turn it on. "It's not...hmm," she cocked her head, "there's no signal out here."

"Probably not, no cell towers for miles."

"No internet either. It won't even let me get into a map."

Kevin shook his head and stared out his window, muttering expletives to himself.

"Why don't you just keep driving, dear? You're not going to fall off the edge of the Earth, you know."

Kevin nodded, cranked the wheel and accelerated quickly.

This time, Susan did not open her magazine. Instead, she kept her face glued to the GPS. After nearly ten minutes of driving, she puckered her mouth, "Huh, that's weird. You're right. This thing says there's seven more minutes." She turned the GPS over to make sure it was still plugged in, "But

we've driven at least ten minutes. I watched the clock."

"Yeah, I know," Kevin said bitterly, "it's been thirty minutes since we left the diner."

They both looked out the window — nothing but cornfields, followed by hills of green grass, trees, the occasional fence. "At least we know we're in Indiana," Susan smiled.

"It's definitely not Kansas, and you're not Toto," Kevin sighed, the humor simply not sparking.

"How much longer should we drive?" Susan asked, but just as suddenly sat back in her seat and let out a yelp.

"What the..." Kevin slowed the car down from eighty to thirty miles an hour.

To their right, along the side of the road and very nearly in the ditch, stood an entire carnival of parked diesel rides, boarded up attractions, wagons, trailers, and cars. The rear trailer had a beautifully painted advertisement in blue and white around a clown's smiling face: Col. Spec's Mighty Blue Grass Amusements.

The shining eyes of wandering carnies followed Kevin's Toyota as if they had not seen another living soul in decades. As Kevin approached the front of the caravan, a hardened looking man stepped off an old Indian motorcycle and stood in the path of the car.

"Oh my god," Susan said, gripping the side of her seat, "what the hell is he doing?"

"Not sure," said Kevin as he drew the car to a stop. He rolled down his window and thought to himself that this was definitely one of those times he wished he'd carried a revolver.

The biker wore beige denim jeans underneath a pair of dusty and worn chaps. His leather vest sported dimly colored insignia, but Kevin could not determine to which gang the man belonged. His hair was long and black, and greasy — his face chapped, his eyes murky and green. With a scowl that set Kevin's throat tight, the man approached the window.

"What can I do for you?" Kevin beamed.

"Where the hell are we?" the biker asked. There was a strange combustible mix of fear and anger in the man's eyes. It dripped from his chipped teeth, and oozed from his sweating pores.

"We're in...Indiana," Kevin said hesitantly.

"But where?" the man asked again.

"I'm not sure," Kevin answered. He suddenly remembered that over five thousand dollars in camera equipment was sitting in his backseat, ripe for the raw hands of any biker that should decide to take it.

"Dammit!" the biker cursed, slamming his gnarled hands down on Kevin's

windowsill. Both Kevin and Susan jumped in their seats. "Where were you headed?" the biker asked.

"We were..." Kevin looked at Susan. She was shaking her head quickly, as if to warn him. "Um," he licked his lips and thought, "uh..."

"Spit it out," the biker growled.

"Inwood. We were looking for a train station in Inwood," Kevin's heart leapt into his throat.

"Oh no," the biker's eyes suddenly rolled back in his head. "No, no, no, no." Tears began forming at the corners of his eyes. He stumbled away from the car, crossed the road and nearly fell onto his bike. He set his eyes into his hand as his body was wracked with visible sobs.

"Shit," Kevin whispered.

"Honey, drive the car," Susan said grabbing Kevin's arm. Her little porcelain hand was hot and scared, gripping firmly.

Kevin shifted into gear and sent his wheels spinning against the pavement. It was nearly ten minutes before he looked in his rearview mirror to see nothing, and no one, in the distance. Only the fields of corn, the rolling hills, the fences, the greenery. It was as if the land swallowed itself up behind the car, sending nothing but corn, and pavement, and fences in its wake.

"What are we going to do?" Kevin asked himself quietly.

"Keep driving," Susan answered.

"What does the GPS say?"

"Ten miles, ten minutes."

"Son of a bitch," Kevin cursed. "Rotten son of a bitch! I mean...aren't we close to anything? We have to be heading somewhere."

"Have you seen any signs?" Susan asked.

"No dammit, this is an old piece of road. You can't rely on anyone to update the signage."

"Well there has to be a town somewhere," Susan said.

Kevin slammed on his breaks, hard. The car skidded, screeched, peeled to a halt. Susan's hand shot up to the ceiling to steady herself.

"Dammit, Kevin, what was that for?" Susan asked, but as she looked out ahead of the car, in the distance, she could see an old trailer, painted, with words in white and blue. A clown's face smiled back at them.

Electric chills ran up and down her spine, and she nearly cried out, but stopped without breath.

Kevin swallowed hard, "We have to get out of here."

"What the hell is this?" Susan's voice started to split.

"I don't know," Kevin said, and pushed the gas pedal down as hard as he could. All six cylinders burst into action as the vehicle hit 60 in six seconds. They cruised by the entire carnival and their biker comrade in a blur, neither

occupant able to see as the car dashed past at over 100 miles an hour. "These are the same damn cornfields, Kevin." Susan was shaking. Her hand was still clenching his arm as if it were bolted down.

The GPS still read ten miles. Kevin rolled down the window and threw the unit out into the road.

"Why did you do that!?" Susan pleaded. "We have to go back! We have to get that!"

"What for?" Kevin asked sourly. "That's half the damn problem."

The car didn't slow down as they approached the carnival again. Kevin kept the pedal to the floor and sped by unceremoniously. Twice.

After seeing the biker sobbing into his hand a fourth time, Susan finally burst into tears, "Oh my god, what is happening to us?"

Once more, Kevin slammed on the breaks. He reached up and turned off the ignition. The engine stopped, and there was silence. A nearby cricket had begun to chirp. It was somewhere out of sight, off the road, between shoots of tall grass. Kevin looked at the clock. Darkness had just touched the sky. Eight at night in the summer was bright, but not hot. Street lamps would be flickering to life back at home. Dinner would have been consumed an hour and a half ago. Frankly, neither passenger was hungry now.

An old turkey vulture floated in the air somewhere above the car. There was a breeze coming from the north, cool and sweet. "We're going to run out of gas," Kevin finally said. "We can't just keep driving like this."

Susan nodded. Although the swell inside her was painful and frantic, she took deep breaths and exhaled.

There was another period of silence before something finally dawned on Susan, "Kevin, turn around."

Kevin immediately looked behind him, but there was nothing. Just cornfields. Road. The dim sky. "What?" he asked.

"Turn the car around. Remember...how we went back to the diner? And it only took seven minutes? Maybe..."

"Yes!" Kevin's hands slapped against the wheel. "Of course. Oh dear, thank you!" He reached over and kissed Susan on her forehead, sloppy and wet. Kevin cranked the ignition, spun the wheel around, and floored the pedal. The cornfields jumped by the car with alarming certainty. Hope and joy leapt into Kevin's throat, and Susan smiled, chuckling. It was all over. So simple. It would be a good night. Finality, Closure. Home.

Just as it had before, the two passengers saw a structure in the distance after only seven minutes.

"Look," Susan yelled, "there it is! There's the diner!"

Kevin was nodding and smiling, and slapping the wheel with excitement. But the mood quickly decayed, and their hearts dropped into the pits of their stomachs. As the structure approached, they no longer saw a milk paint diner. They had reached the edge of town, but it wasn't Plymouth. A small faded sign marked the edge of the road. It read, "Inwood."

Kevin slowed the car and pulled off the road. There was no greasy eatery, only a red brick building. Red painted plywood had replaced the outside windows. A rusted coal hatch was haphazardly built into one wall – looking like it had been welded shut a century ago. The gable roof was covered in black clay shingles; something resembling a mission style home, but twisted and tarnished. Bolted footings stood against a pale concrete pad nearby, where an old water tower had stood in the days of steam engines.

Kevin and Susan got out of the car and shut their doors. The sun had fallen; the pale moon reflected everything back to them. They both walked to the foot of the building and stared down the tracks, off into the infinite distance. A hand painted sign was stuck in the ground. The faded red letters spelled CF&E.

"Chicago, Fort Wayne and Eastern," Kevin said, as if in a trance.

"What's that?" Susan asked.

"It's a railway – a freight line."

"What does that mean?" she asked.

"CF&E is a modern freight line...it's part of the old Norfolk Southern route."

Susan looked off at the sign and shook her head, "So what? You're not making any sense, Kevin."

"It means these tracks are still active. Well..." he placed his finger to his lips, "the tracks are anyway. The station is obviously not being used."

They turned toward the eerily preserved station, which stood ominously, an entity observing self-preservation of its own accord. Kevin approached the platform where passengers and freight loaders had stood decades in the past.

"If we could just...if we could just get on one of the passing trains...maybe we could get out of here."

"But I thought trains went really fast through the country?" "They do," Kevin nodded, "really fast. Like, probably seventy miles an hour; maybe more depending on their freight."

"We couldn't possibly catch that," Susan shook her head. Her voice began to crack again. "We're going to be stuck out here in this, this...dimension..."

A long, shrill moan sounded in the distance. The two of them froze. Silence. A moment lapsed. Again, the moan in the distance neared. It was a

terrifying, evil sound. Kevin leapt up on the platform and looked out, down the tracks. He stood there for a moment, looking hard, and then jumped down.

"I can see the head lamps."

"Of what, a train?" Susan asked.

"Yes," Kevin said. He ran and opened the car door, grabbing his camera equipment.

"What are you doing?" Susan shouted after him, but she knew what he was after. She watched him run all the way back to the station.

"I know what you're thinking...and you know what I'm thinking," Kevin said, an air of desperation in his voice.

"Do we have to do this?" Susan asked, on the brink of tears.

"Don't worry, honey," Kevin wrapped his arms around her. He brought his lips to her hair and kissed her head. "Remember - if I don't make it, you have to hold on tight, OK? Don't, let, go."

The horn was much louder this time, as if they were both staring down the giant throat of some demonic creature. The train approached at high speed, the cars rocking to and fro over imperfections in the track. The blistering lamps approached like a rocket. Kevin looked into Susan's eyes and mouthed, "I love you." They both took positions next to the tracks. The earth began rumbling underneath. The horn broke once more; sparks shot out from the wheels that were pounding seventy-miles-an-hour-forward.

The engine passed suddenly, sending their hair backwards with a sharp gust of diesel exhaust and wind. They looked at each other, then at the train. With a spring of their heels, they jumped together.

David Hukill

The Press Conference

Monday morning, shortly before nine o'clock, a dozen people waited in the rotunda of Town Hall for a press conference. A television crew had set up lights and microphones. Reporters were on hand from local newspapers and radio stations. They had recorders, cameras, notebooks, and disposable cups of coffee. The domed space, with a circular balcony at the second floor, echoed and glared.

The entire staff of the *Vindicator* was on hand – Walter Nickles, Jimmy Lense, and Louisa Abernethy Jones. Nickles, in his trademark fedora, hob-knobbed with fellow reporters, while Lense checked light levels and camera angles. The television reporter looked predictably like a mannequin, preened and primed for the camera.

Standing on the polished marble floor, Louisa was glad that she wore her sensible shoes with the rubber soles. The only woman in the press corps, she observed the crowd. Patrick Willis had predicted the scene with disturbing accuracy. It was as close to a media circus as Hapsburg had ever seen. Louisa waved to her friend, Mavis Puffenbarger. The Town Hall receptionist had deserted her desk to hover nearby.

"I had to get a peek at the action. Oh, Weeza, maybe you'll be on TV!"

At nine o'clock sharp, Town Manager Peter Stone stepped up to the lectern – behind him stood a large, solemn man in a gray suit. While Stone was no featherweight, he looked as slender as a reed compared to this man, who weighed three hundred pounds if he weighed an ounce.

"Ladies and gentlemen, I appreciate you all coming out this morning. As some of you may know, we had a busy weekend. On Saturday, an arrest was made in the case of Ralph Willis, who was found shot to death a week ago. That arrest led to an emergency meeting of our town council the same day. At issue was a possible link between our Chief of Police, J. D. Ryder, and the victim. On the recommendation of the council, Captain Ryder was then suspended with pay until further notice. Officer Norman Coles will act as head of the department in the meantime."

"To continue the ongoing investigation into the death of Ralph Willis, Detective Stewart Blake of the Staunton Police has agreed to help us out. Lieutenant Blake is a familiar figure to some of you from his work in Staunton. A veteran crime solver with close to twenty years of experience under his belt, he will head the team in the days and weeks ahead. Without further ado, it is my pleasure to introduce Lieutenant Blake."

Stone retreated from the lectern, and the man lurking behind him advanced to meet a flurry of photoflashes. Fortyish, with a barrel chest, thick arms and legs, and a bull neck, Blake seized the sides of the lectern as though he were about to lift it over his head. His gray suit hung on his massive frame like a sack. His black hair was slick on top and trimmed high on the sides, military-style. His necktie was askew, as though he were not used to wearing one.

"This may be a press conference, but I probably can't answer any of your questions. Sorry to disappoint you on my first day on the job. I reviewed the file yesterday and talked to Officer Coles. He set up a temporary desk for me in police headquarters. I understand that the town has never had a case of this kind. The special circumstances Mr. Stone mentioned led to me standing here today. To the best of my ability, I will press for a speedy conclusion, so things can get back to normal."

Blake relaxed his grip on the lectern to indicate that he had finished speaking. A reporter immediately thrust a microphone at him.

"Lt. Blake, is it fair to say that this heinous and bloody murder is unparalleled in the two hundred-year history of Hapsburg?"

"At the moment, we are treating it as a homicide which may or may not turn out to be premeditated, which would make it a murder."

"Do you have any suspects?" another reporter asked.

"I reviewed the case, and at this point there are no solid leads and no suspects."

"What about Patrick Willis?"

"The judge determined that there is not enough evidence to charge him."

"Is J. D. Ryder a suspect?"

"As I said, there are no suspects."

"Is Ryder's career in law enforcement all washed up?"

"It's too early to say. In any case, I would not be able to comment on his future."

"Is it true that the victim engaged in lewd and lascivious behavior that very likely resulted in getting him killed?"

"I can't comment on that, either."

"What about the robbery theory?"

"It appears that valuables were taken from the house. In the past week, the police department has been working on a theory that the crime originated as a robbery. It may have escalated to violence that led to the fatal shot."

"Are you still looking for clues?"

"I am combing through what has been collected so far. I intend to visit the crime scene soon. I will leave no stone unturned in the search for all available evidence."

"Is the arrest of Patrick Willis a significant breakthrough?"

"In a case that has so far provided few leads, it's promising."

"Are you going to charge him again?"

"That depends on additional evidence. So far as I know, Mr. Willis will be in the county jail for six months, during which time he will be available for further questioning."

"What about Ryder? Are you going to grill him?"

"At the moment, I have no decision on that. I may request that Captain Ryder come in for an interview."

Peter Stone leaned sideways into the lectern. "A great deal of work lies ahead of Lieutenant Blake, and he is eager to get started. We are fortunate to have him aboard. He has promised to keep us informed of developments as they occur. Thank you all for your interest."

"Don't go anywhere," Nickles said to Louisa. "Stone and Blake agreed to give us first crack at an interview."

"He just said that he can't answer questions."

"And then he did. Come on, Louisa, where's your sporting instinct?"

As the other news crews started packing up and moving toward the street entrance, Nickles grasped Louisa by the elbow and steered her toward the stair which would take them down to police headquarters.

"Lense, did you get any good shots?"

"Yes, boss."

"You head back to the office while we grill Lt. Beefsteak. See you there."

~~~OOO~~~

Police headquarters occupied the basement of Town Hall, with windows and a grade-level entrance at the rear of the building. Massive stone walls and the subterranean location evoked a sense of security. Norman Coles was promoted, for the moment, to Captain Ryder's office, just behind Beth, the office manager and dispatcher. The temporary desk for the detective turned out to be the heavy-duty table in the interrogation cell. A well-worn briefcase lay open on the table, and a file trolley was parked beside it. With his suit jacket off, necktie loosened, and gun in its shoulder holster, Lt. Blake appeared to be right at home. He pointed to two steel side chairs, the only other furniture in the room.

"Thanks for squeezing us in," Nickles said. "Allow me to introduce Mrs. Jones, who is covering this story for the Vindicator."

They shook hands. Lt. Blake made no attempt to lessen his vice-like grip, and Louisa winced with pain. He seemed not to notice as her right hand dangled uselessly from the wrist.

"Are you familiar with our newspaper?" she asked.

"I can't say that I read every page, but I see it at the office. We try to keep

up with all the local papers. Don't you write the social notes?"

"It's a lifestyle column called Tittle-Tattle."

"How did Peter Stone locate you?" Nickles asked.

"All the departments in the valley stay in touch," Blake said. "As it happens, J. D. Ryder is a good friend of the Staunton Police Chief. They were in the same class at the police academy. Stone asked for names, which included my boss, and made some calls. Chief Powell then sent me on this special assignment. It's a cute town you have here, very historical."

"We like it," Louisa said. "Does J. D. Ryder also happen to be a friend of yours?"

"Years ago, we met on the football field. We had some close personal contact in the form of tackles and scrimmages. Since then, we've run into each other at regional meetings on police business."

"Is there a time limit to your assignment?" Nickles asked. "Any idea how long you will be in Hapsburg?"

"As long as it takes. You see, Mr. Knuckles, I'm a bulldog. Once I get my teeth in a case, I don't let go. Nothing can shake me off."

"You mentioned that you reviewed the case yesterday," Louisa said. "That isn't much time to form an opinion. Can you tell us where it stands?"

"I can't comment on the work done by my predecessor, except to say that he went by the book. And Coles and Truncheon did everything that could be expected of them in the line of duty. It's far from an open and shut case."

"You mentioned questioning Patrick Willis," Nickles said.

"The brother angle is interesting. I haven't had a chance to meet him yet. Maybe we can wring something out of him."

"Do you mean a confession?" Louisa asked.

"If he did it."

"Somehow, Lt. Blake, that is not reassuring."

"How so?"

"With very little evidence, and no other suspect handy to interrogate, it sounds as though you intend to apply pressure."

"My job is to find out what happened and to catch criminals."

"And our job is report the facts," Nickles said, looking sidelong at Louisa,

"How do the facts look, Lt. Blake?"

"We have the autopsy report, the bullet analysis, prints, and samples recovered from the house, photos taken by your man Lense, and statements from various people like Wolfram, the guy who discovered the body."

"But no eyewitness, no weapon, no suspect, and no motive," Louisa said.

"Correct." The detective's face darkened. The editor saw a storm looming on the horizon.

"As for the stolen items, wouldn't they be fenced or pawned by now?" Louisa asked.

"Only if the thief was desperate for cash. Even then, whoever takes in the

items may not be in a hurry to report them. It could take weeks for that kind of information to surface."

"What if the thief hangs on to them?"

"Then they don't do us any good."

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***WITHOUT THE VICTIM HERE TO TELL US,  
WE'RE NOT EVEN SURE...***

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"Unless you find them. Wouldn't they be a link to the killer?"

"Yes, but how? It's like looking for a needle in a haystack. Check all the pawnshops in the state? Without the victim here to tell us, we're not even sure what was taken."

"Come now, Lt. Blake. It isn't that difficult to find out. In concert, Ralph Willis was a flashy dresser. He wore a tuxedo and jewelry. You should be looking for a gold bracelet and a set of pearl shirt studs."

"Is that right? I suppose you can tell me if it was 24-carat gold and the size of the pearls. How do you know his new boyfriend didn't slip them into a pocket? What's his name?"

"Gary Nash."

"And if he did, what's to stop him from claiming they were a gift?"

"All very plausible, Lt. Blake. Why don't you ask him?"

"As soon as I can get my hands on him, I will."

"If that happens, I hope you will remember to advise him of his rights."

"Maybe you know where he is."

"No more than you do."

"Maybe you are deliberately withholding evidence."

"Certainly not; I just gave you a clue."

"From an unknown source, which may have nothing to do with the case. Anyway, who cares about some homosexual?"

"Are you referring to Mr. Nash or Mr. Willis?"

"Which Mr. Willis?"

"The deceased. It hardly seems appropriate to refer to him by an epithet."

"Maybe you should go back to your gossip column."

"Time out, you two," Nickles said. "Mrs. Jones is new to this type of investigation, Lt. Blake. We appreciate any nuggets of information you can toss our way, and we look forward to briefings in the weeks ahead."

"I don't expect it will take that long," Blake said.

"Thank you, Lt. Blake." Louisa gathered her coat and bag. Nickles held the door for Louisa, who swept through like a ship in full sail. She calmed down

as they walked to the Vindicator office.

"I thought you were going to take a swing at him," Nickles said. "Then I would have to write about you: Lady reporter attacks meathead detective."

"Perhaps I went too far."

"It's easy enough to do."

"Thank you for acting as referee."

"Don't mention it. And don't let Blake ruffle your feathers. Maybe he's a social conservative, or maybe he's a troglodyte in a cheap suit. Either way, we need him more than he needs us."

"We'll see about that."

*Robert Boucheron*

## The Acorn

You could call it a seed,  
an acorn, that small place  
from which we stretch limbs —

The pizza place is pretty good,  
they say, but has my tongue  
changed, and how we worshipped  
the daughter of the small shop  
owner, how she was the prize —

Now she is somewhere in space  
while the rest of us have moved  
on to other orbits, other planets —

When I go there now, I see tiny  
cracks from which I emerged,  
protruding like bone, the spaces  
and hollows where I learned to  
speak and think and tune down  
the doubts in my mind.

*JD DeHart*

## To Belong to The Sea

She knew The Sea had saved her, because it had told her so. The Sea took pity on girls drowned at sea and gave them a new life in his home. Her earliest memory was opening her eyes and seeing bellies of waves as they rolled above her. Her first intake of ocean was salty as it passed through her lips and filled her body with life. In her new skin and gleaming scales, she was free to travel wherever the ocean reached. However, The Sea had saved her, and so she was forever tethered to him.

She made her home in a small underwater cave at the base of a trench. She opened her eyes when a small fish grazed her cheek, a gentle 'good morning' from The Sea. Every day she woke up to brightly colored coral speckled along the ceiling of her little home. She smiled and closed her eyes, arching her back and stretching her arms, the end of her tail giving a flip that accidentally sent a small sea snail toppling to the floor.

Her hair, the color of pale moonlight, billowed around her, tickling her shoulders. She ran her fingers through it, letting the soft locks slip between them. She let three small starfish live along the left side of her hairline. They helped keep it clean, and she adored the bright shades of purple and orange they brought to her dark home. It was the hermit crabs she had to weed out of her hair in the mornings.

Then she would polish her scales with bits of seaweed. Down at the bottom of the sea, they didn't look like much, but when she ventured near the ocean's surface, they were quite the spectacle, and she was very proud of them. The beauty of her fin was what her lovers were so entranced by, so hers must have been the most beautiful they had ever seen.

When she was finished primping herself, she swam to the mouth of her cave. Outside was a forest of tall seaweed that swayed gently with the current. Just to the right and through the thick entanglements was her garden, where her lovers waited for her devotedly. She could just make out their shadows swaying back and forth against the curtain of green.

She chewed on her bottom lip and ran her fingers along the necklace draped over her breast. It was made of small trinkets from her lovers, coins, buttons, and rings she had strewn together with seaweed. That was usually how she chose her lovers. She loved the glimmer of silver and gold, anything that could catch the smallest bit of light. It was weighty, growing heavier with each new lover.

She handpicked each of her lovers – plucked them each like a flower, and brought them to her garden. They were faithfully waiting for her, but she would not visit them today. The ocean was very jealous, which is why they hid in the garden. Today, she wanted to visit the surface, if just for a short while, to see the daylight streaming through the water.

As she made her way up to the surface, tendrils of seaweed swirled around her fin, The Sea catching her, as if he knew where she was going. Nevertheless, she shook herself free with a small swish of her tail. Her garden was beginning to become so overrun, but she couldn't bring herself to weed it.

She left the darkness and safety of the watery trench, and entered the higher realm of the sea, which was full of life. Schools of fish swam by her, their fins leaving gentle kisses on her skin. The water was warmer and the sun spilled in. She rolled onto her back, reveling in the ribbons of light shimmering over her fin and necklace. She smiled as The Sea cradled her in his current, stroking her hair and caressing her scales.

She kicked her fin lazily and stared up through the water, watching the light dance and the bellies of waves roll above her. Then she noticed a shadow cutting down from the surface.

She stopped, swam in small circles, and tried to squint through the water to make out what the shape was. Her fingers danced over her necklace for a moment before she decided to swim further up. The closer she got to the surface, the more she could make out a large dark rectangle. Over the edge, submerged in the water, was a torso and pair of legs.

Legs! Excitement rose in her chest, pulling against the weight of her lover's necklace. The Sea nudged her with its current, telling her to move on, to go back home, but she wouldn't listen. She swam up, emerging from the water just a few yards from the curious form, just enough so that the ocean lapped against the tip of her nose. She had to squint in the sunlight as it bounced off the surface of the water, lighting up a boy who was draped over a large piece of wood. Her eyebrows drew together, and she cautiously approached his form. She placed the tips of her fingers on the thick slab of wood and looked at him carefully.

His arms were splayed out; his hands looked rough and dirty. His cheek was pressed into the wood, and his eyes were closed. Was he sleeping?

She pulled her upper body onto the board and lightly stroked her fingers along one of his arms. The Sea washed over the board, nudging her hand but she ignored it. His skin was hot and so tan compared to her cold, pale hand – and his hair was a rich shade of brown that sparked with gold in the sunlight, unlike her silvery hair that now fell limp and heavy over her shoulders.

Why wasn't he waking up? She wondered with a frown.

Her fingers worked their way up his shoulder to his jaw. All of her lovers had thick hair that grew on their faces, but his was hardly a shadow, exposing every curve and contour of his cheeks and neck. She drew herself closer, running her hands through his rich hair.

Suddenly, a noise came from the boy's throat and his eyes opened. They swept around him for a moment before fixing upon her. She was able to gaze into them (a shocking shade of green she had never seen except for the emeralds that adorned some of her lovers gifts) before the boy gave a start. He flailed back, almost losing his grip on the board, and The Sea tried to pull at him, but she quickly caught his arms.

Once he had regained his grip, she pulled away. She watched him as he watched her. His mouth was agape and those brilliant green eyes were opened wide, like an unblinking fish. She rested both arms on the board, propping up one of her elbows so that she could rest her chin in her hand. She smiled at him, humored by how silly the expression on his face looked.

Finally, he spoke to her, but they were words she couldn't understand. She tilted her head, drawing her eyebrows together. He made the same string of noise again, but she simply shook her head. He looked disappointed.

Her heart ached; she didn't want him to be sad. Or did he not like her? She slid back into the water and gave a flap of her fin as she floated around to his side. The sunlight caught her scales, revealing their pearly iridescence. His eyes were glued to her tail, making that funny face again. She knew he would be impressed.

She swam up to his side, leaning onto the wood again, her arms folded over while leaning her cheek against her shoulder. He had no silver or gold on him – was not adorned in shiny armor like some of her lovers. He wore only a tattered white shirt that billowed and pulled against his skin in the water. His pants were ragged, the legs completely torn off at the knees, exposing more of his tanned skin and bare feet below. He was

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completely unlike the other lovers waiting in her garden, and she loved him all the more for it. He had no tokens for her, but he, himself, was new token.

His hand reached out slowly, hesitating for a moment before lightly trailing the side of her face, brushing the starfish she adorned. She smiled, closed her eyes, and basked in the sunlight, relishing the feel of his calloused thumb tracing her cheekbone. She sighed at how soft and loving his touch was, even though her skin started to burn as it dried in the sun, a jealous reminder from The Sea.

Her eyes opened when he spoke to her again. It was soft, a quiet humming that was gentle and soothing – it seemed like the familiar ring of something musical she had forgotten.

She slid back into the water and moved closer to him, her hands resting on his sides as she dipped her chin into the water and gazed up at him. The Sea swelled and tried to push its way between them.

He didn't look scared anymore, just dazed, and entranced. A small giggle bubbled past her lips and tickled her nose. She pulled herself closer to the boy and buried her face into the bare skin of his neck. He was so warm and comforting compared to the frigid seclusion of the ocean's depths. She was lonely in the trench, and her heart ached in a way none of her lovers from her garden could soothe. Her fin brushed against his legs. She drew a deep sigh, the smell of salt water and sweat filling her nose. She wished to stay with him and forever feel the heat of his body, the security of his muscles as he held her close.

She leaned her head back to gaze up at him. He was smiling now, dimples cutting into his cheeks.

She loved and needed him, desperately – and surely he must love her too by the way he trusted her enough to let go of the board, one hand cradling the back of her head, the other encircling her waist. Her fin swept back and forth, keeping them both afloat. He spoke into her ear and she didn't care that she didn't know what he was saying. She wanted to keep his warmth all for herself.

Her arms wrapped themselves around his waist tightly, pressing her body to his as she gave him a kiss. Their lips were still pressed together as she pulled him with her into the sea.

She swam down, twirling in circles, bubbles dancing around them as she laughed with pure joy. She pulled him down further and tried to give him another kiss, but now he was straining against her. His legs kicked and his arms flung out above him, as if he were trying to grab onto the rays of sunlight, but The Sea held him down. His mouth opened and closed, huge bubbles bursting forth before water rushed in.

She tried to comfort him, tried to reassure him that everything was okay, holding him close, and cupping his cheek with her hand – but it was like he couldn't even see her anymore. Her heart pounded violently in her chest. If he would just relax, just see what she was trying to say, maybe this time The Sea would let her keep him. His eyes darted back and forth, turning red as they bulged from their sockets. His arms slammed against her and she recoiled. His body jerked, and then he suddenly went still. Just before his eyelids slid shut, she saw the dazzling green light in them fade away.

She swam forward, balled up his shirt in her hands, and shook him. Wake up! She kissed him but his lips remained motionless. Please wake up! She held his cheeks and she stared at him intently, waiting for his eyes to open back up, but they didn't.

Her stomach churned and a shudder ran from the back of her neck to the tip of her tail. Once again, The Sea had been jealous – and once again, he made one of her lovers fall asleep.

She hugged the boy close and swam down to the bottom of the sea. She swam through the forest of seaweed with him until she reached her garden where all of her lovers were waiting. Some had long beards that drafted back and forth in the water; some wore heavy coats with bronze buttons; some had rings of gold pierced through their ears – all were asleep, their eyes closed, and at the end of their legs, their ankles were tied down with seaweed, otherwise her lovers would just float away. She passed a sleeping man, whose mouth was wide open with a small fish nestled inside. Another had barnacles growing along his boots. Some were tied too close to each other, their shoulders bumping as they swayed back and forth in the water.

She had found them all on the surface, and had tried to bring them with her into the ocean, but The Sea always put them into an unwaking sleep – no matter how much she loved them, or how lonely she was. The Sea would not allow a man to live in his realm.

She brought her new lover to the edge of the garden, nearest the opening to her cave. She tied a strong piece of seaweed around one of his ankles and stared at him. She waited some more, but his eyes wouldn't open. Trembling, she nuzzled into her lover, locking her arms around his waist. She curled up, cheek pressed into his chest, eyes closed, trying to soak in every last bit of his warmth before The Sea closed around them and took it all away.

*Aiden Thomas*

## This Town

This is a town of strange flavors.  
Northern towns like this  
never really rid themselves of winter.  
Not in the heat or the humid thunder,  
not in the calm chatter of crickets  
where the night is carried away  
by the soft, distant, hiss and moan  
of never ending travelers  
on the freeway. Rubber, asphalt, diesel  
like never-ending waves caressing  
a far off shore.

And the town  
is only in respite from winter.  
In the wee hours the launder-o-mat sleeps  
in dim light behind dark glass,  
and the streetlights and the night  
feels ripe for robbery, though nothing  
happens, save the odd possum or raccoon  
caught in the headlights of a straggler  
near a sewer grate; half-expecting  
reports of a newly found body  
in the morning paper, long after  
the hazy moon has disappeared.

*Barry Yeoman*

## Some Notes on the Day

I missed my street  
but found the great bazaar everywhere.  
The mathematics of the mind  
builds a civilization.  
Philosophy covers it with moss.  
Jesus was a performance artist.  
Mankind need not understand  
its love of art.  
The cracked vase has its place,  
the trimmed bush,  
the rippled sand. All these  
are contained in a glance.  
Burning rubber  
drives the herd elsewhere.  
The cathedral ceiling leaks  
into golden buckets, wishing wells  
for the young, who toss their coins.  
Alcohol drags you under,  
turns the dank into crimson,  
drives the mind of antiquity  
to perceived brilliance,  
washes the too-bright sun  
upon the morning surf.  
We dreamt we had walked  
out of ourselves, into the garden.  
The hell of the intellect  
brings us back to ourselves,  
places the treadmill under our feet  
and describes the intimacy  
of terminal illness. Excuse me,  
did you say love? When time  
disappears, cupid has struck bone  
with a razor-edged broad-head.  
The world is a giddy island.  
Treasures at the newsstand.  
Tips grow large for the single waitress.  
Winter starts its inevitable campaign.

*Barry Yeoman*

## Glass Half Something

The glass of water on the  
table is old; did I leave it there?  
Was it mine? No  
matter; I drink from it anyway.

I can't help anyone, any of them,  
you know, because the only  
people who even brush the  
edge of my heart all love  
truth more than life,  
and I can't fit that in with  
the world as I know it. I  
don't know a world where  
self-preservation wasn't  
worth a lie, or two, or such a lifetime.

The water is gone. I assume  
I'm the reason why.

*Jude Conlee*

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## Salmagundi

I manage an occult bookstore. I only met the owner, a small grizzled man with a deep gravelly voice and cataracts, once. His beautiful daughter, Melinda, comes by the store a couple of times a month to empty the cash box. Other than that, I'm on my own, ordering new materials, cataloging them with the new software I bought to finally bring the store into the digital era, and selling. Before the new system, purchases and sales were recorded by hand in thick ledgers that fill one of the supply closets. Some of them are so old that the ink has browned and the pages have yellowed.

We've extended our hours from 6 p.m. to 1 a.m. It works because I'm a bit of a night owl, and the bulk of our customers come in around midnight. Some ask questions about where to find a book, to decipher the instructions to a spell, or where to obtain ingredients, which we also stock in the back. I've learned that most spells revolve around love: spells to make people fall in love, spells to forget, and everything in between. Revenge comes in second, which I guess is intertwined with jealousy.

There's a regular customer, a girl, who comes in once a week. She looks anywhere from fifteen to thirty. She carries a beat up knapsack with holes in its corners where pens, lint, and loose change slip out as she wanders through the store. I'm amused when I watch some of the other customers pick up her litter and hand it back to her politely or stuff it into their bags and pockets. Once I saw a twenty-dollar bill slip through and I grabbed it before a mousy looking guy could. I gave it back to her and she smiled, asking where she could find a book on African shamans.

"What type of African shaman?" I asked.

"Any type. You see, I have this book. Here, let me show you." She pulled out a large leather bound book. The front cover featured gilded curlicues on its corners and faded lettering. She flipped the book open to page 103 and pointed out a symbol.

"It was drawn by an African shaman but the book doesn't provide much more information. I was just curious."

"Well, we have an African section over there, divided by country, but that's a lot of books to sort through for one symbol."

"That's okay. I come here a lot."

"Are you a student?"

"I guess I kind of am," she said, then abruptly turned away to pull the first book from the shelf.

I returned to my counter but occasionally glanced at the girl sitting cross-legged in front of the bookshelves. Her dark, curly red hair swept the pages in front of her and I could just imagine running my hands through its silkiness. She gradually skimmed one book after another, and by the time I had to close, she was down to the middle of the first bookshelf.

"Any luck?" I asked, approaching her.

She shook her head and smiled cheerfully. "That just means I have to come in again." She glanced around the store and noticed its emptiness. "Oh, sorry. I didn't realize the time. Well, thanks again and have a good night."

I followed her out and locked the door. I got into my car and had just started the engine when I heard a knock on the passenger window — it was her.

I rolled down the window and asked if anything was wrong.

"My bike's been stolen. Do you think you could give me a ride home? I don't live too far."

"Sure, get in."

She slid inside and placed her bag on her lap. "Thanks. Turn left at the light, and then keep going for a while."

"Do you live near the university?"

She shook her head. It began raining and my windshield wipers squeaked painfully.

"I'm sorry, I didn't introduce myself. My name's Nancy." Our eyes met briefly.

"I'm Kevin," I said. "So where'd you get that big old book?"

"This?" she asked, spreading her hands over her bag. "It's just something I found."

"How long have you had it?"

"A couple of months."

"I know the store would be interested in something like that."

"It's not for sale. Turn right at the stop sign, and then turn left at the next light. There, to the right. You can let me out here."

I slowed down in front of a gray apartment complex. She darted out of the car before I had fully stopped, and disappeared up a staircase. I searched for a sign of her, noticing the cracks on the exterior of the ugly building and the rusty handrails that resembled blood spots in the dim lighting. She never showed, and I eventually drove away.

She came into the store about a week later, never acknowledging me, and avoiding eye contact as she walked to the African section, leaving a trail of gum wrappers and pennies behind her. She slipped out before closing time, and I did not see her for a couple of weeks. In the meantime, I acquired more African books, and when she came into the store again, she must have noticed because she approached my counter.

"I don't need any more books on African shamans," she said.

"Hi, Nancy. How're you doing?"

"I've moved on to Romania now." She pulled out her tome and flipped it open to page 123, which featured an intricate window display opening to a snow-covered landscape. "I've already gone through some of the regular suspects: Germany, France, Russia. It might be Transylvanian. I'm not too sure." She suddenly slammed the book shut and turned to glare at a teenage boy with thick greasy blue hair wearing an oversized black hoodie who had crept up behind her to steal a better view of her book. "Go away."

The boy wiped his nose and backed away, stumbling into a chubby girl who dropped a book she was holding. "Now look what you've done!" the chubby girl said. The boy picked up the book and handed it back to her. The chubby girl scowled before gingerly grabbing the book. Nancy retreated to her bookshelves.

"Do I have to buy this?" the chubby girl asked, showing me the bent book cover. "He should be the one who should pay."

The boy had already turned away and was browsing through the medicinal section. The chubby girl placed the book on the counter and left the store. It was a book on familiars, and a crease ran through the large black cat on the cover. I removed the book sleeve and pressed my fingertips along the edge of the crease.

"I can pay for that," the boy said, suddenly appearing in front of me. "How much is it?"

"Ten dollars," I said, glancing at the clock. It was 12:45 a.m. and Nancy had already left. The boy hung around after buying the book and helped me close the store.

"Are you hiring?" he asked, as I locked the front door.

"No, not right now. It's a small shop."

"I could help out sometimes. You don't have to pay me."

"I'll think about it."

The boy nodded. "Well, all right then," he said.

I watched him walk down the street, hunched over, his hands in the pockets of his baggy jeans. He looked so thin and lonely, especially when he slipped his hood on as it started raining.

I jogged over to my car and stepped into a pothole filled with water, soaking my entire right shoe. Someone laughed and I saw Nancy waiting by my car.

"Can you give me a ride?" she asked.

"Did your bike get stolen again?"

She shrugged and we got into the car. I tried to think of something witty or interesting to say; but instead, we listened to the pleasant swish of my new windshield wipers.

"You remember," she said, as I automatically took the turns to her apartment.

"Oh, uh. It's really easy." I pulled over by her apartment complex.

"Aren't you going to turn off the engine?"

"I thought I was just dropping you off."

"Come in. I want to show you something."

I followed her up two flights of stairs, falling behind after the first story. I tried to hush my heavy breathing as she unlocked the door.

"You're red," she said. "Are you okay?"

I nodded and stepped into her apartment. Floor to ceiling bookshelves lined every wall, including the kitchen. The bookshelf nearest to the front door was neatly arranged in alphabetical order and labeled. I circled the living room, glancing from one label to another, and realized that she had recreated the bookstore. Every book I had ever ordered for the catalog was there. Some had taken years to find. Others I had found at garage sales and in dumpsters.

"How?" I asked. "Why?"

"Why what?" she said, handing me a glass of yellow liquid.

"What is it?"

"Try it. It's good."

I held the glass up to my nose, and I didn't smell anything, so I took a tentative sip. It tasted sweet and fizzy.

"Let me show you something."

I followed her down a thin hallway lined with bookshelves on one side. My shirt brushed the pages of the books as I squeezed through. There were three doors at the end of the hall. The one directly in front was ajar and led to a bathroom. She opened the door to the left.

The room was almost bare, with only a circular table in the middle, holding the tome, and a singlewide window opened halfway. She opened the book to page 203, which featured a fox with a bloodied mouth in a chicken coop.

"This is my favorite story," she said, then turned the page. The next scene showed an Asian couple facing each other and holding hands. The text below the figures was Japanese.

I heard something bounce against the window but it was too dark to see anything. Nancy continued showing me various odd scenes, within what looked to be the same story. I approached the window and tried to look out. Something hit the window again and I retreated. I turned around and saw Nancy staring at the window.

"Nancy?" I asked. "Are you okay?"

She had grown pale. She pointed at the window and started moaning. Her eyes rolled upwards and she collapsed. Her body shook as she lay on the ground, and foam seeped out of her mouth. She grew still. I called the paramedics. I stayed by her side initially, but her skin felt so cold and clammy that I went outside and watched for the ambulance.

When it finally arrived, the paramedics bounded up the stairs and into the apartment. They quickly strapped Nancy onto a stretcher and carried her out. I rode in the back of the ambulance, holding her hand as we jolted down the street. Nancy opened her eyes and stared at me for a few minutes before closing them again. I waited in an empty lounge at the hospital until a nurse came out.

"You can see your girlfriend now."

"How is she?"

"She'll be fine. She forgot to take her medication. She just needs to rest now." She was sleeping when I entered the room. I settled into a chair by the corner and watched her for a bit before falling asleep. When I woke up, she was gone. I stopped a few passing nurses but they had just arrived for their shifts, and the night crew had already left.

My car was at her place, and I had to take three buses to get back there. I knocked on the door to her apartment and waited but she never came. I sat in my car for a while, not sure what to do, and went home after pasting a note on her door.

She did not come into the store that night or the next. During the day, I would knock on her door. When I saw the note still hanging there on the third day, I tore it off. I was about to leave when her neighbor's door opened and a man stepped out.

"Are you looking for that girl?" he asked. "I can hear you knocking on her door every day. I think she moved out."

"Have you seen her?"

"No. I haven't heard anything through the walls in days. You should ask the landlady downstairs. She might know."

I waited until he walked away before knocking on her door again.

"Are you Kevin?" A middle-aged woman had appeared on the landing. "She left a few days ago. Paid for the rest of her lease but left her books behind for you. Said that you run a bookstore?"

"Yeah, that's me."

"Do you think you could empty the apartment by Monday? I have to get it cleaned."

"Mind if I take a look?"

"Sure, sure," the landlady said. She unlocked the door and let me in.

The air was musty and the apartment appeared unchanged. The book collection was intact. A few pieces of furniture remained. A cockroach skittered away as I turned on the kitchen light.

"Actually, my lease is running out soon," I said. "How about I rent this place from you? It looks like it's in good shape."

"Could you? Oh that would be great. Let's go back to my office to fill out some paperwork."

My lease was not ending for six months but I knew I would find something in that apartment that would indicate what happened to Nancy. I was certain she was trying to send me a message by leaving all her books for me. I was worried that she had suffered a mental blow from whatever had terrified her. I waited restlessly while the landlady prepared the lease agreement, and reviewed the terms. I signed and initialed a stack of papers before she finally handed me a set of keys.

When I returned to the apartment, I immediately went to the room where Nancy had collapsed. It was completely empty. The window overlooked a broken parking lot. The opposite door opened to the bedroom. A bare mattress lay in the corner with a pile of books leaning precariously against it. The closet door was slightly ajar. Inside, a mound of clothes covered the floor, and three unmarked white boxes lined a small shelf.

I spent the entire weekend sorting through Nancy's possessions. I washed her clothes and set them aside neatly. I rummaged through the white boxes in the closet and found a strange collection of papers and newspaper clippings. I discovered nothing that would help me find her. No legal papers, nothing with her full name, no correspondence. Her mailbox only contained flyers and letters to "Current Resident." I tried to obtain more information from the landlady, but she immediately grew suspicious and refused to tell me, despite assurances that I was Nancy's friend.

Within her book collection, I slowly found books that were not duplicates of the ones in the bookstore. I set them aside and counted fourteen brand new books devoid of any markings or hidden scraps of paper. I started reading them, taking notes on the general theme, the names of characters, and any odd fluctuations in the storyline. I raced through the novels and enjoyed them, plodding through the nonfiction texts on subjects like tikis and aboriginal witchcraft. By the end of the year, I finished all of them without being any closer to finding Nancy or learning more about her.

I considered the months I spent reading and realized how isolated I had become. I no longer looked forward to Melinda's visits as I used to. I started

to notice her flaws and her annoying penchant for laughing at my serious comments. The customers bored me more than usual. I started to avoid the counter unless someone was actually purchasing something. I became so used to silence that my voice cracked when I spoke.

Then it hit me. I had placed all fourteen books on the floor and was staring at them again to try to find a connecting theme when I saw the message. Looking at the first letter of each title, I read, "I love you Kevin." The extra book was an anthology of ghost stories from Savannah.

I immediately took leave from the store for the first time in years and started driving. It would take a few days for me to reach Savannah. The hours on the road passed quickly as my mind rushed through various tangents. She loved me after such a short time? She must've known and I was relieved.

I reached Savannah just after sunset and started walking. I passed a couple of empty blocks deeply shrouded in shadows and reached a crowded street by a river. I checked into a hotel and marked the sights mentioned in the book on a map I had picked up at a bar. The next day, I visited each spot and saving the cemetery for last. I read a few of the tombstones and spent the rest of the day sitting on a bench beneath a weeping willow scanning people's faces.

I did not realize how late it was when a guard asked me to leave. As the sun set and the lampposts lit up, I became aware of how alone I was, in an unfamiliar city, spending what little savings I had. I felt pained and defeated—like I had failed. Perhaps I had misread the message. It was possible that the letters had merely lined up into that sentence. She was gone and I was going home.

A group of people huddled near the street corner, chatting noisily and laughing. I passed them indifferently, waiting for the crosswalk sign to change. When I glanced at the group, I saw her. She had dyed her hair black, and she wore makeup and a costume, but I still recognized the face I had fallen in love with.

"All right everyone," she said. "It's 7:00 and it looks like everyone's here." The group drew nearer to her. "Welcome to Savannah's best ghost tour! If everyone could pay for their tour now, I'd really appreciate it. This should only take about an hour, and tips are more than welcome at the end. We're going to start at this cemetery—but before I begin, did you know that you are all walking on the dead?"

I quietly asked someone how much the tour cost, and passed along my cash. I followed at the back of the group and listened to Nancy prattle on about

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the sights. She had chosen the lighthearted ghost stories from the anthology. One was about a ghost who stole women's undergarments and moved jewelry. Another was a child who snuggled next to any female sleeper that resembled its mother. The more horrific ghost stories were delicately unmentioned. She only added a few embellishments. We clustered in unlit sections of sidewalks, gazing at one haunted place after another. Every once in a while our eyes met but she failed to recognize me in the darkness. I could barely distinguish the features of some of the people walking beside me.

We wound back to the cemetery at the end of the tour. I waited until everyone had given her tips and dispersed before I approached her.

"Nancy?"

"Yes? How may I help you?"

"It's me. Kevin. Don't you remember?"

"Kevin...no, I'm sorry. I don't think we've met."

"I work at the bookstore. I was there when you collapsed in your apartment. At the hospital?"

Her eyes widened and she backed away from me. "You! What are you doing here? What do you want?"

"I got your message. I found you."

"You just stay away from me." She ran off before I had a chance to respond. I was too shocked and tired to follow her.

I waited at the corner the next couple of nights but the tour guide was always different. I asked each one about Nancy but none of them had ever heard of her before. I went on competing ghost tours but never saw her again. I had to leave the city at the end of the week to avoid losing my job. Melinda had already called a few times to nag me about the impossible store hours she was keeping. I left Savannah in temporary defeat, already planning to return once I settled my affairs back home.

When I unlocked the door to Nancy's apartment, I immediately noticed that the thirteen books I had left on the floor were missing. In their place someone had written, "You invoke evil," in large red letters. I shuddered to think who could have been in the apartment while I was gone. I checked for signs of a break in but found none. Everything else was untouched, until I walked into the bedroom. The mattress was missing. My bed sheets were crumpled in a corner. The stack of Nancy's clothes had disappeared. I opened the closet and noted the absent white boxes.

I asked the neighbors and the landlady if they had seen Nancy or heard anything in the apartment while I was gone but they all said no. Yet I knew

that while I had lingered in Savannah, Nancy had returned.

All I had left were her books and that message. I tried to erase the message but whatever she used to write it stubbornly clung to the carpet fibers. I had been wrong. I was foolish to think that she could love me after such a short time together. She was clearly frightened, but in time, I was certain that I could convince her otherwise. I would eventually transform "You invoke evil" to "I love you Kevin."

*Michelle Ong*

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## The Privacy of Windows

Lisa was alone in the darkened space of her home office. It was evening and the window let the last bits of orange sun seep sharply through the curtains and onto her face. The blaze of the computer screen and the dull evening sun flooded into the etched lines of her skin and gave her a sort of ghostly appearance.

She had been sitting there for some time, checking her students' emails and grading their papers. They chose English as their majors and wanted to talk about Virginia Woolf and the methods of the picaresque novel. They were so young, and Lisa, nearing fifty, felt this urgently.

She clicked away at her computer, and then stopped to turn and look at the window. She lived on a small suburban street. All the houses were covered with shades of tan stucco, topped by deep gray roofs. The lawns were manicured, and the fees paid to the Homeowner's Association made people feel safe. It was a neighborhood where the houses were so close together that when Debra called to say that Tim Gregory, their neighbor, had been caught watching Janey O'Brien through her bedroom window, an awful quiet settled over the whole street.

Lisa stood and walked to the window. The sun had set, and she lifted her hands to pull the laced curtain back. She had always found Tim attractive. Who wouldn't? He was a good-looking man, who worked as a pediatrician at the local hospital. He had a smile that was instantly memorable, and was the kind of man who made Lisa quiet in his presence; not because she had nothing to say to him, but because she never wanted to say the wrong thing. It was the same Tim who showed her the right way to plant her sweetspire shrubs along the walkway that summer, who had lived next to her for such a long time now. How old was Janey? Nine or ten?

They had lived next to the Gregorys since Sarah was young. Sarah was gone now, had left for San Diego State a month before. There were still boxes of her things scattered around. Lisa pressed her hand against the window. It was cold. She shuddered. Had there been a time when he watched Sarah? An upstairs bedroom light flashed on at the Gregory's. She stood next to the window, in the dark, watching a shadow move.

There was a time when Lisa could feel the warmth of loneliness in her bones—on the soft flesh of her thighs. It had been after David died of a second heart attack. Sarah had been sixteen, and Lisa resolved to be both her mother and father, as impossible as it was. The two of them held onto David

for so long, keeping his ties and shirts lined up in the closets. And even when they finally donated his clothes, they held onto him without saying it. But in the back of Lisa's mind, Sarah would leave someday, and then what? Lisa knew.

She would be alone.

Her friends had encouraged her to date, but Lisa always thought of Sarah. How sensitive the girl was, like soft clay, so easily altered – how much Sarah cried when Lisa finally threw away David's old wallet – how much she held Sarah. And then later, there were the arguments.

"But I want to go to school here. I want to stay with you."

"You can't stay with me forever."

"But I'll be all alone."

*She was such a sensitive girl.*

"You'll make friends."

In the end, Sarah left for San Diego. It was a seven-hour drive from San Jose, and Lisa denied for so long that she wanted Sarah gone. The truth was, she wanted Sarah to be far away. It was the strangest of things. Lisa wanted to be alone. She thought she could learn to love someone again without waves of guilt pressing into her every time she saw Sarah. Was she a terrible mother for wanting these things? Hadn't it been long enough? Lisa didn't want to hurt Sarah, but she didn't deserve to be alone.

That night, Lisa couldn't sleep. It was nearly midnight, and the October air was warm and dry. She kept flipping her pillows until finally, she sat up in the darkness. She sat like this for some time, letting her feet dangle over the bed so that the tips of her toes felt the wooden floor. She took breaths, so quiet she could barely hear them, feeling calmly aware of her own existence. Not that she had never felt it before, but it seemed inescapable, alone amidst the dark, a warm heaviness of silence surrounding her – she laughed, for no other reason than she was wonderfully comfortable in that silence.

She slipped her feet inside a pair of slippers, and dragged herself to the window. She had left it open a crack, and felt the hot air against her skin. She pulled the curtains back gently, curtains she and Sarah had sewn one summer. Lisa saw now, the places where all the stitching was off, where the ends of the curtains hung unevenly.

She looked out and saw the scattered streetlights create an orange glow. The silhouettes of palm trees stood in the distance. The kids from across the street had left their bikes laying in the grass. And then she felt the pull, the urge really, to walk to the window on the other side of her room, the

window which looked directly at the Gregory's home.

She pulled back the curtain carefully, as if she were afraid someone might see her. But who would see her? The lights were off at the Gregory's.

There was an alteration, a shift; the home did not feel as private as it had before. Everywhere along the street, windows were turning into holes in white walls. Something had been ruptured, broken in a way that could not be put into words. Everywhere along the street, the holes opened up like mouths waiting to feed. Lisa felt it—a feeling of anxious paranoia.

She hadn't decided whether she believed any of it. The news interviewed some neighbors, and most seemed to be on Tim's side. Everybody liked Tim, they said.

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***SHE SAW A SUDDEN MOVEMENT  
FROM THE DOWNSTAIRS WINDOW  
OF THE GREGORY HOME***

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She saw a sudden movement from the downstairs window of the Gregory home. Or had she? Did someone pull a curtain back? Was he watching? What would it feel like to have him watch her? It was a strange thought, but one that excited her. She was older, but she felt as if she still retained some of the beauty she'd held in her youth. Did he only like young girls? She felt wrong for wanting him to want to watch her too.

She looked closer, but the lights were off, and she couldn't be sure she saw anything at all. She stood in front of the window in her robe. If he had been watching, he would have seen her pull the string on her robe, only slightly, but just enough to expose her breast. Then, after a moment, she grew embarrassed, and hurriedly pulled her robe closed. She stepped away from the window, and pressed her back against the wall. Her breathing was rapid. Had anyone seen her? She could not say for sure but it was the uncertainty, the possibility of knowing she had been seen which excited her.

Before Sarah had left, Lisa spent long nights on the computer. It started with one online dating website. She knew Sarah would be leaving soon. That was all—a single dating service. She remembered feeling a sort of excitement when she first filled out the profile—question after question, and there was the matter of her profile photo. How exactly should it be taken? And at what angle? Lisa had propped up the tripod, and took dozens of photos until she

liked one enough to use. Her smile seemed inviting yet mysterious, and she pretended she meant it that way. It was all so personal. In some way, that was why she liked it.

Lisa would wait until Sarah was asleep to spend several hours answering her inbox messages, waiting for instant chats. It was all so easy from behind a computer. It gave her a sense of power. She couldn't help but like the attention. She told her coworkers she was finally planning on meeting someone she met online, and they told her to be careful, to meet in a public place. She tried — Lisa sat in a coffee shop, waiting, buying coffee after coffee, but he never showed up. She wondered if he'd come and seen her sitting at the table alone. She wondered if she looked much different in person. She hadn't arranged a meeting with anyone since.

Her students made it look so easy. How easily they exchanged their phone numbers with each other after class, in the hallways. They posted their statuses online, where they were, what they were doing — their entire lives documented in a separate reality. Lisa couldn't quite figure out how to connect the two.

That summer, she had begun teaching Delillo's "Videotape" as part of a literary analysis course. The students seemed to love the strangeness of the story — a man shot in the head by the Texas Highway Killer is captured on film, and the narrator, along with countless others, although disturbed by the footage, cannot help but watch it repeatedly. Lisa stared at her class, asking why with her eyes. The students sat quietly until a young girl, her face lit up by her laptop, making her appear soft and angelic, said something like, "We are fascinated by what disturbs us."

It was now nearing five in the morning, and Lisa could see the dull glow of dawn from behind the curtain in her home office. She had been checking her profiles, message after message, answering them in the sort of playful tone she was familiar with. Sarah was gone, and yet Lisa still felt uneasy, like she might be caught somehow.

It was Saturday, and Lisa had nowhere to be. She thought of maybe going down to the farmer's market. She could get some fresh flowers for the house. The Gregorys usually hosted a neighborhood barbecue party. That was supposed to be coming up, but of course, Lisa hadn't heard anything. They didn't send out invitations like they did last summer — not that anyone would show up now.

Lisa sat back in the computer chair. Had she ever noticed Tim Gregory act oddly around the children? She didn't want to wonder these things but her mind kept wandering, had been wandering all throughout the night. She hadn't slept, her mind scanning neighborhood memories – hadn't she seem Tim staring at Janey during last year's barbecue party? Now that she thought of it, yes, she had—and a twinge of guilt flushed across her stomach. But...no, it had been a quick and subtle glance, one that hadn't seemed inappropriate. He hadn't been leering at Janey in a strange way. He had simply been watching her...

Lisa turned off her computer and sighed. She thought she heard the familiar sound of the front porch swing, and she felt uneasy, clutching her shawl at the neck. She clumsily walked to the door, and switched on the light, but there was nobody there. There was nothing except the porch swing swaying softly in the night, empty and alone. She walked back upstairs to her bedroom where she fell asleep.

It was nearly noon when she woke up. She made coffee and sipped it, peeking through the blinds, feeling the dust on her fingertips. How long has it been since she cleaned? There was a local news channel van sitting on the corner. No kids were playing outside.

For the first time, Lisa couldn't stand the silence.

She called Sarah.

"A bunch of us are going rock climbing," Sarah said.

"Oh," said Lisa. "That's great."

There was a long pause.

"Sarah?"

"What is it?"

"Do you remember any strange shadows moving around next door?"

"Shadows, why?"

"Nevermind."

"Mom?"

"I miss you."

There was another long pause. Lisa, not wanting to believe she was the type of mother who could think of nothing else to say to her daughter, said, "Wait," when Sarah started to say goodbye. Lisa used to make Bill Clinton impersonations, and Sarah always laughed. Only, now, when Lisa did it over the phone, it sounded forced and rushed, and Sarah didn't laugh. Sarah sighed. She was late and maybe they could talk again next week?

"Yeah, of course," Lisa said.

Lisa hung up. She heard the far off hum of the highway. She never noticed the constant hum before. Now it filled the silence. It was deafening.

It was early afternoon when the doorbell rang. Lisa made her way to the

front door. She had been watching the news all day, and still wore the clothes she slept in. She imagined it was probably one of the mothers who'd also been watching the news. The street was filled with houses, each barely restraining the excitement of a neighbor wanting to pretend that her need to gossip was simply the concern of a mother—it was all very scandalous. Janey's mother reportedly had some hidden camera showing Tim looking into Janey's bedroom window. It was all becoming very real. Lisa peered through the peephole, feeling a rush of warmth as it was not a mother standing on her front porch but Tim Gregory, with his hands inside his jean pockets.

Lisa took a step back. There was a small flutter in her chest. She stood there, not wanting to breathe heavily, not wanting Tim to know she was there. She waited. The neighbors, no doubt, would be watching.

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***IT WOULD BE RUDE IF SHE DIDN'T  
OPEN THE DOOR.***

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He rang the doorbell again. Did he know she was home? Of course not; how could he know? She began to feel uneasy. Had he seen her last night through the window? Did others know?

It would be rude if she didn't open the door. She looked through the peephole again. He hadn't moved. She could feel her arm reaching out. What would happen if people found out she'd exposed herself? She would tell them it was an accident. It was an accident, wasn't it? No, she had meant to. She unlocked the top bolt. Lisa felt the cool brass doorknob in her hand, felt the warm California air as she opened the door.

~~~OOO~~~

"Why are the characters fascinated by the video clip," Lisa had asked her students that past summer. She loved that they kept coming to her classes, yet she knew there was a space between her and them—a widening space in which her years advancing into old age were ever more apparent.

"It's authentic," a student said, "It's real."

Lisa felt it when she glanced in the mirror. No, that is not her face, but yes,

of course, it is her face and she hated that she could feel it changing.

"Why," she asked them, "Why is it real?"

The class sat still.

Lisa wanted to think she had learned to embrace this, the aging process, but most days she only felt increasing nostalgia for what was. Maybe that was what she wanted, a feeling of connection. How far would she have to go to get it?

Then, a girl in the back shifted in her chair and said, "They didn't know they were being watched. That's what makes it real."

~~~OOO~~~

Lisa offered, but Tim didn't want to come in. He laughed a little at first. Lisa didn't laugh back. She went to say something but stopped. He was wearing jeans with white tennis shoes and a t-shirt from the hospital. He looked tired. Even so, Lisa still found him attractive.

"You're not," he asked her, "leaving any time soon?"

His voice was smooth and soft. He seemed sensitive and vulnerable.

She shook her head.

"I just don't want my plants dying," he whispered. "That's all I wanted to ask."

"Sure," Lisa said. What had the news said earlier? Tim had been seen masturbating? Then, the thought flashed quickly in her mind. Would he masturbate to her?

"That's all I wanted."

"Sure," Lisa said again.

"Maybe," he sighed, "you could--"

"Of course."

"My wife won't."

"Of course."

There was a quiet moment between them—he smiled at her and didn't look away—she met his eyes. It was as if there was some sort of understood thought. It was like a bridge connecting the two of them, connecting all the things they wanted to say, but couldn't. A heaviness settled within her. Lisa wanted to believe that he knew, that he had seen her in the window last night. She smiled back at Tim. He could be so charming when he smiled.

The moment she broke eye contact, he turned, glancing over his shoulder, saying "goodbye" while he walked away, down the steps, to his own house,  
eleven                      long                      feet                      away.

That night, it was quiet. A crescent of moonlight glimmered through the windows. She heard a neighbor's dog barking. The woofing was hollow and echoed between the houses. It cut through the night air for a long while before it stopped abruptly. Lisa felt a sort of relief, until the silence that followed unsettled her. She could feel it surrounding her, filling up the spaces of the house—filling up the rooms and corners. Everything was as it was, had always been, only now she felt more aware. She sensed something new, the unhurried mindfulness that someone was watching her. She left the curtains open and began to undress.

*Mercedes Lucero*

## Memories of Summer

You stop by my house  
selling sweets that seem rendered  
from your vanilla skin

Reaching into your pocket for change  
you're welcome to keep  
affords me one last chance

to sample your homemade smile  
and takes me to a long ago summer day  
when flush faced girls in cutoff jeans

laughed at jokes made to pass the time  
before being kissed, waiting nervously  
to see what might happen next

*Daniel von der Embse*

## **The Missionary Boys**

She knew how to cause a commotion  
just drifting past some missionary boys  
in suits that hung on them  
like on a clothesline

concealing their puerile attentions  
to her perfect roundedness,  
held in place by a second skin stretched  
to the point of exhaustion

Recalling warnings of dire consequences  
from their elders, temptation tasted  
all the sweeter in the presence of  
such epic flesh

They discuss whose nerve is strongest,  
and select the handsomest one  
to go up to her and speak –

but she escapes them, heading out into the night,  
in search of men having better skills  
with which to convert her

*Daniel von der Embse*

## My Father Died Last Night

My father died last night.  
His body long as a casket  
gaunt as a heron  
gnarly as roots  
soon buried beneath the shade of a pin oak tree.

My father died last night.  
I held his hand and watched his neck  
a tiny bluish tick under paper thin skin  
suddenly melt to stillness.

Ninety-two years he was a river of blood.  
His Indiana father coursing through time  
to my New York children  
as surely as the Wabash is a varicose vein  
meandering from Ohio to Illinois.

My father died last night.  
Tomorrow the earth swallows him,  
smothered by the same dry, thirsty grass  
covering his mother and father and wife, and secretly,  
the ashes of his old dog.

My father died last night.  
At home in his bed by the window,  
his long carpentering fingers lacing mine  
still larger in death  
than my own fingers warmed by life.

*Cameron Miller*

## Wind on Snow

Wind blows tiny ghost horses  
spinning in herds across white dunes  
left  
then right, zig  
then zag  
disappearing over a mound  
never reaching the lake  
beneath two feet of snow  
on four feet of ice.  
I see it all

*Cameron Miller*

## **Natural Revolution**

Oceans are gobbling up oil-rigs  
and coastal beaches; hailstones  
are bringing down roof tops,  
and harshly dismantling vehicles;  
winds are taking out bridges,  
like a peel from a banana.....

Nature put Her trust in Man,  
but Man put his trust in Science;  
Science as dangerous as a Minotaur  
that has escaped the Labyrinth  
in the night.

An invincible revolution has swept  
across the world; lament reeking deep  
within our souls, makes us vulnerable  
to deathly hopelessness.

*Teddy Kimathi*

## Eyes of the Ocean

Martin sat on his daughter's bed and read Dr. Seuss's *The Cat in the Hat*. His words drifted like snow while Iris sat with her back against the headboard, and a sketchpad on her raised legs. She drew at a frantic rate. When Martin finished, he closed the book and considered his daughter. Straight brown hair spilled over her shoulders. A small lock of hair fell into her eyes. She returned his gaze with her own.

"Well?" he said, waiting for the big reveal.

Iris tightened her lips, and then turned the pad toward him. It was a replica of the *Cat in the Hat*, but it had its own twist—it didn't stand on two legs, but walked normally, and had a hint of oddity from Alice in Wonderland. The feline had a squiggly tail, bulging eyes, and a wide smile.

"You're starting to get shading down. It's really a wonderful picture."

She beamed and he winked.

"Are you ready for bed?"

"No," Iris said, flipping the page. "Tell me a story."

"I just told you one." He showed her the Dr. Seuss book as he got up and put it on the bookshelf near the window.

"Tell me one more."

"What do you want to hear?"

"Something new."

Martin stopped, and looked at her.

"How 'bout you make one up?"

He blinked. "Uh, well, okay." He slowly returned to the bed. "Once upon a time there was this couple." He paused, eyes wandering. "They decided they wanted to go on a road trip. So they got in the car and went. They drove. It was a long drive. They drove all day and night..." Martin drifted, and looked at his daughter. She was frowning.

"You ever told a story?"

He puffed his cheeks in a long sigh. "Not really."

"Add twists."

Martin scratched his head. "Like what?"

Iris rolled her eyes. "Well maybe they get a flat tire?"

"Okay, so they have a flat. So they find a repair shop—"

"Dad."

"Yes?"

"Start over."

He clasped his hands together. "What do you want to hear?"

She put pencil to paper, stopped, and looked at him. "Use your imagination."

Martin winced. "I'm afraid I don't know what that is."

Iris looked at him as if he should know better. He opened his mouth to argue that he really didn't, but stopped himself. He looked away from her, and allowed the silence of the room to settle. Martin gazed through the only window and listened to the hissing tide wash over a white sand shoreline. Feeling his daughter watch him, he spoke the words that bubbled from his throat.

"Once, there was a boy who couldn't sleep. Something bothered him, but he didn't know what, and it ate at his mind until the night was old and dreaming was impossible."

Martin looked at his daughter, surprised at the words slipping from his lips.

"And?" Iris asked. She was drawing again.

Martin went on.

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***WHEN THE GRANDFATHER CLOCK STRUCK  
THREE A.M., THE BOY GOT OUT OF BED  
AND GRABBED HIS BANJO.***

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When the grandfather clock struck three a.m., the boy got out of bed and grabbed his banjo. He walked into the kitchen, took the drinking glass by the sink, and ran the faucet. Once he had his fill, the boy studied the glass, then the kitchen—the smudged tile floor, dirty white refrigerator, the banister beside the downward stairwell worn, scratched and beaten, the counters filled with cook books and loose papers, the metal sink stained and filled with dishes of old dried food.

Moonlight filtered through the front screen door. He went outside and crisp fall air embraced his body, chilling his toes and nose. The boy sat on the steps and played the banjo. He observed how the plains went on for miles without a single blemish, a hill, a ditch, a creek. Irrigation systems stood like skeletal dinosaurs, reflecting silver light. It was a serene image, one he was accustomed to, and he noticed the turning leaves and browning grass. The vibrant earth tones had been dimmed, however, for the landscape had been soaked in the inky indigo that undulated from the settled sea of the night sky. Through the canvass of dry and comforting familiarity, he heard water flowing.

He ceased playing his banjo and listened carefully, as if to register what he heard could be true. Nevertheless, he wasn't mistaken, for the sound was alien to the usual resonance of yipping coyotes and slow oscillating locusts. The boy followed the sound, and it led him to the end of his home's long gravel driveway. Beyond the dirt road, the flatlands were imminent, but there wasn't a single clue to where the sound of water came from.

The boy stepped onto the road, and saw something that blurred the lines of the events one perceives in a dream and what happens in reality. What he witnessed, was something he could not believe.

Martin fell quiet. The sound of Iris's frantic sketching – a scratchy, scraping sound – stopped, and was followed by a jab in the side. He looked at her. She leaned forward with curious eyes and clutched her pad tightly.

"Well, what did he see?"

Martin rubbed his chin, then glanced at his watch. "It's late, you should really get some rest."

"What?" She grabbed him. "No way! You gotta finish, Dad!"

"I'll tell you more tomorrow night."

"No! Right now!"

"Iris," he said, his voice became stern. "Now you got school in the morning. I don't want you to be late because you didn't get out of bed on time."

"But...but, the story!"

"Tomorrow night," he repeated.

She groaned, then said, "Promise?"

He nodded. "Yes. I promise."

Martin tucked Iris in and gave her a kiss. He went downstairs to the living room where his wife, Lily, sat on a gray loveseat between two lounge chairs in front of a TV. Her long legs were pushed against her thin frame while she read TIME Magazine. Her hazel eyes looked at Martin. "You were up there a while," she said, and brushed black hair from her face.

"Yeah, Iris wanted to hear another story."

Lily chuckled. "That sounds about right. Did you notice how she's really gotten into drawing?"

She marked her page and set the magazine on the coffee table. Martin sat down and Lily snuggled next to him. He kissed her forehead.

"Yes I have, but you think she would find time to do it during the day," he said.

"She gets it from you," Lily said, tapping his nose. "That artistic gene, that's all you. I couldn't do anything creative to save my life."

"Yeah right. I'm no more imaginative than a rock."

"Stop that."

He looked at her. "What?"

"Don't run yourself down; you were great, still are."

He didn't reply, just stared at the TV, which was tuned to the evening news. His mind numbed. He sighed deeply and let his mouth drop open. The color in his eyes faded. Lily touched his cheek, and he blinked a few times to find himself in the living room again.

"What stories did you read her?" Lily asked.

"Cat in the Hat, and then she asked me to make up a story."

She brightened. "Really?"

A cool breeze blew from the open screen door, and Martin shivered. He suppressed a smile. "Don't get excited. It wasn't very good."

She looked at him sardonically.

This time he did smile. "Don't even. Stop giving me that look."

"What look?" she said in a dainty voice.

"That look, that same dang look I get from Iris when I don't want to do something."

Lily leaned in, whispering, "But I've got more power." She kissed him, just missing his lips.

"How about one more, eh? Right here?" He touched his lips.

She shook her head, chin raised. "Nope. Not doing it."

He pushed her over and rubbed his stubbly face into her neck. "Give me the kisses!"

Lily laughed uncontrollably, then took his head in her long hands and kissed him on the lips. She ran her hand through his hair, clutched it, and released. Her eyes sparkled in the soft light, and he kissed her once more.

Martin put his back against the loveseat's arm, and Lily carefully laid on him. He put his arms around her and let go a deep breath. His attention went to the TV, but when the cool outside-air tickled him once more, he was reminded that he had no idea what to tell Iris tomorrow. Sorry honey, I'm not sure how I began last night. I'm going to have to break my promise. How about more Dr. Seuss, instead?

That wouldn't go over very well.

~~~OOO~~~

While working at the grocery store, Martin thought about the story he had started last night. After his shift ended, he drove home with the windows down, and dug into his pockets, removing something small, turning it in his hand, taking short glances at it before rolling it into his fist.

Martin pulled into the driveway, and listened to the surf after he killed the engine. He watched palm trees sway in the breeze before going inside to the

kitchen. Flowered wallpaper glittered in the white light. The silver refrigerator, smooth counters, and tile floor all shined like polished chrome. Garlic sizzled in a saucepan, its scent filling Martin's nose, and making his stomach growl. Lily was getting a pack of hamburger out when he embraced her from behind and kissed the back of her neck.

"What's the occasion, Professor Sanders?"

Lily rolled her head back and closed her eyes, smiling broadly. "My students turned in their first English papers, going to find out if I'm doing okay."

She turned in his arms and kissed him. He watched her. She huffed and said, "Okay, I'm cooking because I'm stalling."

"I thought so; you never cook."

She turned and threw meat into a pan. "I am tonight. Hope you're hungry." Martin looked at his hands.

Lily turned, followed his eyes, and then froze. Hamburger sizzled in the pan. "You still carry that?" she said.

"Yep."

Martin held up a yellow guitar pick.

"It's still downstairs," Lily said.

He looked at his wife. She nodded in confirmation. "Wouldn't it be something if you were to play again?"

"Lily..."

"You could use it. Give you some guidance."

"I'm perfectly happy right here," he said, sounding defensive.

"I don't doubt it. But..." she hesitated, thinking a moment. "You've lost something, Martin. I used to see it in your eyes, a spark. I miss seeing that part of you."

Lily turned and continued cooking. He left the room and wandered into the den—the windows were open and the cool wind grazed against him. Iris lay on the floor with math sheets spread out before her. She wrote answers in big curly numbers. Martin knelt beside her, watching until Iris looked up and waved him away dismissively.

"I'm busy, buzz off."

He smirked. "Don't need help?"

"No way," she said, flipping her hair at him.

Martin smiled and stood up, watching her for a moment longer before going downstairs. He stopped in front of a white wooden door, and opened it. Inside was a spacious, almost empty room covered in cobwebs and dust. Against the far wall was his acoustic guitar sitting on an old creaky rack.

Martin approached the instrument, running his fingers along the dusty maple neck. He picked it up and sat down, brushing the body off. With great uncertainty, he brushed the pick over the strings. The sound that came from the instrument was incoherent and broken. He tuned the guitar, first with hesitation, then with a somewhat more confident hand. He hit the strings

again, and the tune resonated a moment before two of the guitar strings snapped. He rested an arm on top of the guitar and sighed heavily. He tossed the pick on the floor, but decided to pick it back up before leaving the room.

After supper, he turned on the evening news, watching but not listening. Martin lay his head back and stared at the white ceiling until Lily came in and noticed his blank stare.

"How was it?"

He shook his head slowly, played with her hair. "Damn strings gave out." He paused, then said, "I thought I'd gotten rid of it."

Lily sat on the back of the loveseat. "I told you not to, remember?"

He didn't, and though he tried to recall the time when the equipment had been sold, it seemed that remembering was like recalling a dream.

"You know, I felt something when I picked up the guitar."

Lily slid down the couch's back and rolled to a sitting position. Martin scratched his head. "I don't know what exactly. It's a strange thing. When was the last time I played any music?"

"Years," Lily said. "You were getting really good, too. Had a record deal within reach. Then you just...stopped."

Martin was going to argue that, because there was a deeper reason, but Iris dashed down the stairs and jumped on him.

"Dad, Daddy, Dadd-o!"

He grunted in surprise. "Yes?"

"It's story time!"

Lily smiled, then nudged Martin in the side. She feigned the voice of a child,

"Yeah, Dad, you gotta keep your promise."

Martin smiled, and then kissed Lily's cheek.

Iris covered her eyes. "Ewwwwwww!"

He carried Iris upstairs, and into her room that was decorated with posters of unicorns, forests, and elaborate landscapes of fantasy worlds. He set her down on the indigo bed. Iris grabbed her sketchpad and flipped to the page she had been working on the previous night.

She waited.

Martin bought himself an extra moment by looking out the half-open window. The tide was in; he could tell by the way it sounded, growling forward, and then sighing away.

He turned to Iris, and the words flowed.

The boy woke the following day with a roaring headache, and no idea how he got back to bed. But he remembered what he'd seen. In school, he thought of the night that remained in his mind like a splinter. For weeks, he sat outside on the deck and played his banjo while gazing out to the plains, listening until evening arrived, but never hearing what he wanted. One day,

he remained until after sunset, passing on supper, and playing his banjo relentlessly, hoping for a change.

Later that night, the boy lay in bed, and stared at the ceiling. When the grandfather clock signaled one a.m., he went into the kitchen and grabbed the glass sitting beside the sink. He reached for the faucet, but stopped. The boy turned to the windows over the downward stairwell. Moonlight poured over the beaten banister and onto the floor.

The boy stepped outside. It was unseasonably warm, and the moon was high in the sky, making the plains a blue-lit world decorated with lightning bugs. Normally, the air smelled of hay, dirt, and hogs from up the road, but that night it smelled like vanilla and cinnamon. He heard water again.

**AT THE END OF THE DRIVEWAY, THE
BOY SAW WHAT HE HAD SEEN WEEKS
BEFORE. THE FLATLANDS MORPHED
INTO A JUNGLE.**

At the end of the driveway, the boy saw what he had seen weeks before. The flatlands morphed into a jungle. He watched in awe as trees rose and exotic foliage grew, once more ripping apart what was real and replacing it with something equally beautiful and unknown. The event wiped away any sense of tranquility or normality, but the transformation brought a strong sensation to the heart of that young boy. It was curiosity, and he entered the jungle.

Trees stood like ancient noble pillars. Chirping and singing filled the boy's ears in an orchestra of song coming from white furred deer. They skipped through the woodlands with elegance. Purple luminescence lined all the plant life. Fireflies danced in the sugary atmosphere, showing off their multicolored sparks of light. The smell of vanilla grew stronger, tickling his taste buds and making him believe he had bitten into a warm cinnamon roll. The boy trekked through the vegetation; plants brushed gently against his legs the whole way. It wasn't very long before the boy found what he unknowingly sought after.

Light blue water shined like a reflecting mirror. It stretched into the darkened horizon until it merged and became one. Ripples swirled as if it were silk in the wind. The boy bent and twirled his fingers through the warm water. When he removed his hand, his fingers glittered. With caution, he knelt and sipped. The water tasted like blueberry waffles, his favorite food. He dropped to his stomach and drank until his belly bulged out.

When he lifted his head, there was a man sitting beside him on the shore, dressed in indigo robes. His knees were raised to his chest and his arms rested on top. The boy—startled—backed away, but the man made no response. Instead, he reached out his hand, and pointed to the distance.

“What was it?” Iris said.

Martin pursed his lips. “You know, I think...bedtime is now.”

“Dad!” She threw the sketchpad onto the floor. “You can’t! You promised —”

“I never said anything about finishing the whole story.”

Iris threw her fists in the air. “That is so not fair!”

“Iris,” he said, waiting until his daughter calmed down. “Mind me, hear? I need some time. Tomorrow, I’ll wrap up the story. Okay?”

“You swear?”

“Yes.”

“Stick a needle in your eye?”

He nodded.

Iris held out her pinky. Martin looked at her a moment, grinned, and then wrapped his own around it.

“Don’t break your promise,” she grumbled.

“I won’t.” He reached for the pad she’d thrown on the floor and Iris screamed.

“No!” She snatched it before he could and held it to her chest.

“What in the world are you drawing?”

She shook her head. “I’m not telling! Keep your promise and maybe I’ll show you.”

He laughed, tucked Iris in, and went downstairs. The living room was empty, the TV turned off. Soft music and shuffling papers crept through the closed door of Lily’s study. Martin went to the open screen door, feeling the cool and crisp air, and walked outside.

Martin walked along the open shoreline, warm ocean water washing over his toes. Salty air blew his hair and graced his nostrils. He walked a great distance before stopping and turning to the living ocean. He removed the guitar pick and watched it gleam in the moonlight.



Martin called in sick the next day. He said hello to his wife, gave her a kiss on the cheek, and told her to have a good day as she headed for the door. There was a look in his wife's eyes, a look he had seen many times, the kind that demanded an answer to what was going on. He smiled at her, and assured everything was fine. Lily gave him a kiss and left with Iris.

Martin drove into town, where he stopped at a guitar shop and bought two packs of guitar strings. When he returned, he took the guitar from the basement and carried it outside to the deck that overlooked the glittering sea. He cleaned, restrung, and tuned his guitar. All afternoon, he ran his thumbs over the strings, attempting to play a few songs but never heard what he wanted.

When the sun hung low, sending streaks of purple and red into the sky like torn fruit, Martin paused to watch the sea rise and fall. The ocean smelled of vanilla, and in the distance where the waves were larger, there were the multicolored lights—fireflies. Martin rubbed his stubbly chin and looked at his guitar. He took the beaten yellow pick from his pocket and grazed it across the strings. A soft tune carried out, and a chill shot up his spine, making him quiver, but also smile.

Lily stepped out, a glass of wine cupped in her palm. Martin looked at her. She wore a deep blue sundress that flapped in the sugary air. She met his gaze with a warm smile. "Well, Mr. I-don't-have-creativity, look at you."

He smiled and set the instrument aside.

She sat in the chair beside him, took a sip from her glass, then set it down and crossed her legs. It was an elegant motion. "Remember how we met?" Martin nodded. "I was sitting by the lakeside playing my guitar. You came up to me."

"I was nervous, really nervous. There was a look in your eyes when you played, like you weren't really there because you were somehow riding along the melodies you created."

"You bought me this pick." He held it up.

She nodded. "I didn't know what else to get you. After five dates, all I knew was that you loved playing guitar. It centered you." Palm leaves rattled in the wind. "Why did you stop playing?"

Martin chewed his lip before answering. "Guys at the label liked my music, wanted to promote it, but they had a vision in mind that was different from mine." He looked at her. "They always gave the impression they would work with me, but after only a week of trying to find a hook for an album,

they said they found someone else who could do what I could, and was more interested in appealing to the label's vision."

"So...you gave up, got rid of everything." She raised her eyes to him. "That's why you never told me?"

He nodded, looking out at the ocean.

Lily leaned in. "It's okay, Martin. I don't care."

"I should've told you, but it was my dream they took away..."

"I'm happy you're playing again."

They looked at each other for a long time. Martin pulled her close, kissing her deeply. When they pulled away, Lily's cheeks were flooded with color.

"Oh, wow," she whispered, closing her eyes and rubbing her lips together.

"We're going to have to finish this, but there's another lady looking for you."

Martin stood.

Lily held onto his hand. "How do you feel about playing?"

"Excited."

She smiled. He tightened his grip and then went inside. Once in Iris's bedroom, he shut the door. She was in bed with the sketchpad resting on her thighs. Martin looked to the window. It was open, wind flirting with the curtains.

"So, how's it going to end, Dad?"

Martin sat down, smoothed the covers, and told her.

The sight had terrified the boy so much that he ran out of the forest and swore never to return. He focused on school and homework, and his banjo sat in the corner of his bedroom, neglected. But eventually, his thoughts returned to the sea hidden within the great jungle. He returned to his banjo, playing it in the living room where he could peer through the windows at the whitewashed prairie, but nothing ever happened.

One day, after playing for hours, the boy came upon a melody, one unpracticed but beautiful to his ears. It carried itself from one crescendo to the next. The connecting melodies became its own song, and the memory of the man in robes came back to him. It replayed itself slowly, and the boy realized that the mysterious man had not pointed towards the sea, but had reached out with a shaking hand. The song ended, and he was left to look at the hands that had played the music he could not remember.

Another full moon arrived. The boy reflected on how life had been since he'd ran away from the jungle. What had life become? There was something missing, and his mind came back to the unknown man reaching for the very thing that had frightened the boy. What was it?

He went outside, trekking through several inches of snow, and then entered the jungle that waited for him. Foliage cracked under his boots. When he reached the shore, light flashed in his eyes. He shielded his eyes with a raised hand. When the light dimmed, he found the man where he was before. This time he was on his knees, and once more reaching for what was in the great distance of the endless mirrored water.

Starlight shined in the night sky, and at first, the boy believed that was all he saw on the faraway horizon. But...no, it was there, he barely saw it—a faint, yet unique glimmer of light, flashing like a beacon. The man turned to him, and though he was tempted to run, he didn't. There was something familiar in the man's eyes, something he would see in the future.

The man held out his hand, saying, "Together, we'll obtain it."

He looked to the horizon once more, and though that speck of light was hardly distinguishable from the rest of the stars, there was the flash that made it stand out, a brilliance making it as real to the boy as the man on his knees.

"Yes we will," the boy said, and grabbed the man's hand.

Martin fell silent, and watched the curtains sway. He raised a knuckle to his eye and was shocked when it came away wet. Martin observed Iris's room. The lights were here, flickering, no longer fireflies but Christmas lights Iris had refused to take down after the season ended. They were slow, then fast, then flashed in unison, then separately. It was a dance, and even when the lights appeared to be out of sync, they found a way to come together.

But the light that caught his eye was outside, and he saw it from where he sat now, through the open window and between dancing curtains. He turned to Iris. She was drawing with a fever he had never seen before. He left the room and went downstairs where the guitar had been propped against the wall. He returned to Iris's room and sat down.

Iris noticed the guitar, wiggled the pencil in her hand and said, "Are you going to play?"

He gave her a smile and removed the yellow pick from his pocket. Martin put his hands in position, and waited, closing his eyes. It wasn't long before his hands moved, and yes, the feeling was magnificent. But there was a difference, and Martin noticed this with pinched brows. The song was the same, this was certain, but the sound was altered; it was deeper. He had tuned his guitar differently, and he hadn't even thought about it.

The song carried on for as long as it demanded, and it seemed to grow in strength the longer it went on, taking on new life and richer tones. The old memory returned, and he was on the beach once again. This time, he was on his knees and wearing the indigo robes. Instead of fruitlessly reaching for that dim star that seemed out of reach, it was there, within his grasp.

His hands played faster, the song grew louder and stronger. The light grazed his soft palm; it was warm and embracing, enough to make him cry out in joy. He reached out to grasp it, but the song ended, and Martin returned to Iris's bedroom.

She was watching him, and Lily was standing at the door, watching with the same awed expression. He set the guitar aside and placed his hands on his knees, eyes shifting here and there. The sigh of the ocean drifted through the window. Iris poked him in the side to get his attention.

"MY GOD," LILY WHISPERED...

She showed him her picture—a collage of images that were interconnected by musical notes. The upper left showed the boy walking through the jungle, the exotic deer leaping through the forestry. Next was the boy standing before the endless sea, looking toward a dim light on the horizon. The bottom half of the drawing was of himself, sitting on the bed playing his guitar, musical notes all around him, doubled over like stars, and in the background was the ocean. The reverent light rested above a pair of eyes that rose from the water. Eyes that watched him play while his own were closed.

"My god," Lily whispered, kneeling beside Martin. He gently took the drawing from Iris and held it before him, touched it to confirm it was real.

"He was you wasn't he?" Iris said in a sleepy voice. "The boy."

He nodded.

She smiled, then stretched and laid back. "Sleepy time, Daddy. Tuck me in." He did, and stayed to watch her fall asleep. Then he left the room with Lily. They went downstairs, where Lily further admired the sketched image. "I can't believe this, Martin. She created a masterpiece." She looked at him. "I thought you were telling her a story?"

"I was."

"That music, Martin. It was beautiful!"

He took her hand and they went into the basement. They entered the former studio, and Martin set the guitar on the stand. After a minute, he turned and took Lily in his arms.

"Will you play more?"

Martin considered it, and peered over his shoulder at the instrument. Faint, multicolored lights sparkled. The song began again, progressing with each flash of light.

"I think I've had my fill." He winked at her. "But as for us, we have business together."

She raised her brows, gave a small smile. "Yes we do."

He took her by the hand, and led her along the shoreline, stopping occasionally to lock eyes. As they stood, looking out at the ocean, she said, "I can see it; that light in your eyes, it's back."

Jacob Adams

Hospital Blues

half-drunk cups upturned
crescent eyes fall to dreams
blue veins show up to shore
I always wanted more out of life

mornings rise; suffocating cigarette blue
count the hours, wishing for another 11:11
maybe I'm sick, I say
maybe I can get out of everything
never happens the way I want it to be

too much caffeine makes my heart biled
I reminisce on the many women I used to love
what happened that made us fade
I ask as the yellow moon bleeds on the veranda
I was the issue, the symptom
of these passionate humors
this greenhouse became my ailed cage
I'm waiting for the white sheen woman to
give me the bitter roots and roses
to think consciously again

Crystal Hapner

The Mirror

When I first moved
to Indiana, I lived
in Indianapolis.
Unfortunately my resources
were limited and I had
to move to a bad neighborhood.
My rental house was small
and rat infested.

The mirror in my bedroom
had a dark shadowy spot
in the corner.

It looked creepy, but I
told myself to ignore it.
But sometimes I swear
the shadow pulsated
like it was breathing.

When my lease ran out I
moved to a small town
by the name of
Inwood, Indiana.
The neighborhood and
residents were great.

This house was perfect.
Except for one little flaw.
The mirror in my bedroom
had a dark shadowy spot
that pulsated, like
it was breathing.

Shirley Smothers

Darkness and Light

My Mother, Sister, Brother and I
check into a hotel room just a few
miles outside of Inwood, Indiana. When
we enter the room my Dad who
passed away almost five years
ago is sitting on the bed. He has
a wide smile on his face.

We ask, "Daddy why are you here?"
He says, "I wanted to see my family."
We are overcome with emotion and hug
him. We are all talking at once. Dad
interrupts us, "OK, let me say this,
sometimes I get lonely without loved ones."

It seems as if only a few minutes have
passed and a man walks into the room.

He says, "It's time to go."
He has coal black hair.
He is dressed in a dark suit. I say,
"No I'm not ready to say goodbye!"

I follow Dad and this stranger into
an elevator. I look away for a few seconds.

When I look back this stranger's hair is now
white. His dark suit is glowing.
He is holding a small baby
wrapped in a blanket.
I ask, "What did you do with my Dad?"

The dark stranger, who is now glowing, says
"Sometimes we have to let go and allow our
loved ones move on."

"This Baby is Your Dad, I am taking him to
see his new family."

Inwood Indiana

I open my eyes. I am in my bedroom.
I realize this was a dream. But was it just a dream?
My daughter Amanda tells me
the dark stranger represented death,
the glowing stranger represents life.
So you decide, "Was this just a dream?"

Shirley Smothers

Moving On

A German sensibility –
A will to power –
A Nietzschean grasp for the heights
without fear of submerging below –
Doing both, or neither,
whichever, it is ok, it is as it is –
All things in their time, in their place –
So it goes, as Vonnegut said –
Be not afraid to walk through shadows –
Be not afraid to burn like the sun –
My flesh cannot catch fire
because my flesh is the fire –
I cannot be drowned in the flood
because I am the water –
I cannot be poisoned by carbon monoxide
because I am oxygen in rhythm –
I am the air –
I cannot be buried
because I am the dirt, I am
the soil, I am the mud, I am
the shit, I am the gravel,
I am the clay, I am the
dust, I am the ash, I am –
I am the Earth –
I cannot be lied to
because I know the truth –
I cannot be tempted
because I have already bitten the fruit –
I cannot be shocked, nor scared,
nor scarred, nor broken, nor hurt,
nor ruined, nor frightened,
nor moved from where I stand
because I have been hardened –
I am metal –
I am steel –
I am absolution –
I am apocalypse –
I am revolution –
I am renaissance –
I am revelation –

Inwood Indiana

I am everything, I am nothing,
I am nowhere, I am here –
I am not here,
I am there, I am out there, I
am past that, I am more than,
I am gone –

Scott Outlar

Ten Minutes Before It Happened

Ten minutes before it happened
we were walking towards the theatre where all the actors
smoke outside curtains, reeking of cloves

I didn't see it coming
Did you – did you suspect?
Five minutes and I still didn't know.
I was taken in by the red velvet of the seats.
The wood stage floor smells like sweat,
Dialogue is caught in the cracks
I need something urgent.

I bet you did, you knew and – and
Didn't tell me?
One minute, seconds.
The lights all dim and it's me, it's me,
I am the show,
I am the show!

Ashley Dean

Running Red Lights in Indiana

Beating out the battle silence
Calling always on to rage
Blood thirst dripping up and down my throat

You have to watch out for motorcycles on country roads.

There's a question on a Chinese driving test:
If you came across a person
Their intestines all spilled like wine across pavement
Would you put them back or not?

I sew them up with ants, just to watch death reflecting in the sky, same for
people as dead deer
That internal purple of blood clots in open air.

Ashley Dean

On

David Lawrence floated in darkness for what seemed like forever—or perhaps no time at all?—before he felt the lurching side to side, heard the rushing of the waves. The faintest light began to tease his eyelids, coaxing him into full wakefulness. He sat up, looked around, and discovered he was on the deck of a massive sailing ship. He got to his feet and began to wander around the deck, examining his new surroundings. The ship was not made of wood, nor of any substance David had ever seen; it was something swirling, shifting, but still somehow holding its shape, with a faint, rosy glow like mother of pearl in the sunshine. He reached out and touched a swirling railing; the substance was warm, made his skin tingle, and bowed to his touch before slowly swirling back into place.

David was amazed. “This can’t be real,” he said softly.

“Just because it can’t be real doesn’t mean it’s not, you know.”

David tipped his head back and peered up the mast and into the sails. There, among the billowing cloth, which gave off a soft golden light all its own, was a woman, hanging upside down from a length of rigging. She smiled at David, and the first thing that struck him was how beautiful she was—inky black hair streaming down from her head, and piercing blue eyes that sparkled with kindness.

***“HI, DAVID,” SHE SAID WARMLY.
“I’VE BEEN WAITING FOR YOU.”***

David cleared his throat. “Hello there, Miss,” he said. The woman’s grin widened, and she let go of the rigging, tumbling gracefully through the air and landing on her feet without a sound. She walked up to David and put one hand on each of his shoulders, surveying him.

“Hi, David,” she said warmly. “I’ve been waiting for you.” She patted his cheek in a motherly way.

David’s brow furrowed. “I’m sorry, young lady,” he said, “but—”

“Oh, don’t ‘young lady’ me, David! It’s really not necessary.” She laughed richly, and gave him a wry smile.

Flustered, David tried to recover. “Oh, well excuse me, then, Miss—I—um...what should I call you, then?”

The woman gave no indication of having heard him; she turned, staring into

the distance, a small smile playing around her lips. She pranced to the bow of the ship in an instant, and perched on the rail, her legs dangling over the edge. She turned to look back at David, her smile still in place. "It doesn't matter."

Did she ever stop smiling? David wondered. "I...it doesn't?"

The woman shrugged, her legs still swinging carefree over the side of the ship. "Not at the moment, no."

David opened his mouth to speak, and then shut it again. This woman bewildered him. He passed a hand over his head in exasperation. Under his fingers, he felt a full head of hair – he hadn't had hair in twenty years.

The woman raised an eyebrow at him. "Something wrong, David?"

"How do you know my name?" He demanded. "What is this? Where are we? What's happening?"

The woman's expression began to change; that eternal smile slid off her face and was replaced with a look of concern – concern and pity. "Oh," she said softly, slowly sliding off the rail and back onto the deck. "Oh."

David rounded on the woman, his frustration growing. "'Oh'? That's all you can say? What's going on here? I have hair. That's impossible, you understand? I – it...please," he looked at the woman in desperation. "Please. What's happening to me?"

The woman walked towards him, extending a hand, cupping his cheek. David felt himself relaxing, slightly; her touch was incredibly calming, for some reason.

"You don't know," she whispered. "You don't. I thought for sure you'd be one of the ones who knew."

"Know what?" David pleaded.

The woman bit her lip and glanced away. An instant later, her eyes were back on him, and she had that small smile on her lips again. She dropped her hand from his face and took his hand, interlocking her fingers with his. "Come here, David," she said, "I want to show you something." She began to pull him towards the edge of the ship, but he snatched his hand out of hers, terror getting the better of him.

"I'm not moving until you tell me what's going on," he snapped.

The woman sighed and dragged her fingers through her hair – exactly the way David had earlier. She looked at him, a silent plea in her iridescent eyes. "David," she said, "please. Come stand by me, and everything will make sense, I promise."

David was still uneasy. "Why can't you just tell me what's going on?"

"Because you won't believe me." She extended her hand toward him, an invitation. "I have to show you, to make you understand. Please?"

David considered the woman—his logical side didn't trust her. But he couldn't shake the feeling that he knew her, somehow. He reached out and tentatively took the woman's outstretched hand. The instant they touched, her face broke into a wide grin, and she yanked him swiftly to her side, next to the rail.

"Okay, David," she said. "Now, look down."

"Into the water?" He asked.

"Just...look down."

David stared at the woman for a moment, one eyebrow raised. The woman stared pleasantly back at him, blinking expectantly. David sighed, leaned out over the railing, and looked down.

He immediately pulled back with a cry. "What the hell?" He asked, looking at the woman in terror.

"I know, I know, but...David. Please. Just keep looking."

David swallowed hard, and lifted his chin slightly, so he was just barely peering down into the swirling mass below the ship. They were not sailing on water. Beneath the ship swirled a mass of colors, every color David could think of, that he'd ever seen. Words and blurred images swam among the colors, nothing clear enough for him to make out—sometimes there was a face, an image that would float up out of the mass with a pang of familiarity—but it was the whispering that unnerved him. The mass beneath whispered to him, soft, indistinct voices, thousands of them, all whispering in his ears. Voices he loved, voices he barely knew, all pressing on him in a hoarse roar. David pulled away from the edge once again, cowering, covering his eyes with one hand, the other grasping the air frantically, searching for the woman. He found her hand, and held it tight, trembling.

"David?" The woman's voice brought a modicum of calm down upon him; he looked up to find her still smiling at him with that small, comforting smile.

"What is it?" He whimpered.

The woman smiled, and took his hand in both of hers, squeezing it. "Nothing to be scared of," she promised. She gently led him back to the railing. "Let's look together, huh?" She said softly.

David swallowed. "Alright," he croaked.

The woman's smile widened slightly, and she looked down over the edge. David followed suit, and was enveloped once more in the colors and sounds, the words and the whispers—the whispers. Pressing in on him, it felt like each one was fighting to be heard above the others. David screwed his eyes up tight, wanting to retreat, but the woman had his hand pinned against the railing beneath hers, preventing his escape. The whispers pressed in, seeping into his brain, his heart, he felt his very soul. He couldn't take it, the pressing, the pushing—

"Davey!"

David jumped and his eyes flew open, looking around for the source of the sound.

"Davey Lawrence, you come in for supper right now, or I'll call your father out here to knock you into next week! Davey!"

The whispers had died away, but David barely noticed — he was too focused on the voice, the one shouting his childhood nickname.

"Davey!"

"M...Mom?" David rounded on the woman, shock etched in his face. "This is impossible..."

The woman smiled. "Look down, David."

David peered over the edge of the ship again. The swirling mass was gone. It had been replaced by a smooth surface, shining like glass, and there, beneath the ship, was his mother. Wearing a blue-checkered dress and an apron stained with grease, her raven hair pulled back in a knot at the base of her skull, looking exactly as she had when he was a boy. She was staring out in front of her, past the ship, at something David couldn't see, a severe look on her face.

"Davey! You hear me?"

"Mom!" He shouted. "What are you doing down there? Mom? Mom!"

"Get your behind in this house, you hear?" With that, David's mother turned and walked away, vanishing into thin air.

"Mom!" David cried, leaning out over the railing as far as he could.

The woman put a cautionary hand on his shoulder, pulling him back to the safety of the deck. "Easy David," she said, "it won't do to have you falling in."

David turned to her in wonder. "But that...my mother...how...how..."

The woman smiled at him through his sputtering. "A memory," she said, gesturing back to the whispering mass below them, "among a sea of memories."

"Memories?" David echoed.

The woman nodded. "Yours." She jerked her head towards the railing.

"What do you see now?"

David lifted his chin and looked over the edge into the sea, which was once again smooth as glass. Standing on the mirror surface now, he saw a girl, around age sixteen, wearing a pink skirt emblazoned with a black poodle, her hair in a ponytail, saddle shoes on her feet. Her eyes were blue, her lips rose pink, and David's stomach was doing backflips as he stared at her, remembering.

"Melinda," he breathed, leaning on the railing, distracted, dreaming.

The woman smiled and joined him, resting her chin on her palm as she too

gazed down at the memory. "Melinda, huh?" She said playfully. David nodded, still enveloped in the girl's beauty. "Why don't you tell me about her?"

David sighed, happiness pulling the corner of his mouth into a sideways smile. "She...she was perfect," he said with a gentle laugh. We'd gone to school together since we were little kids, and...I thought she was the prettiest girl to ever...be pretty."

The woman laughed. "You don't say?"

David laughed and passed an embarrassed hand through his hair. "I know. But...she just made me that way, you know? She made me want to pick flowers and write poetry and skip and do all kinds of crazy stuff I never would have done otherwise."

"Skip?" The woman asked with a smirk.

"Yeah," David said, laughing at himself. "And...I think this is the day I asked her on our first date," he said, surprised.

As if on cue, the memory of Melinda turned and smiled at someone who did not appear in the memory. "Oh hey, Davey," she said warmly, "How's it going?"

"God, I'd never been so nervous in my life," he laughed.

The woman watched him, smiling, a trace of longing in her eyes. David continued, "You could've dropped me in front of a firing squad, and I would've been less scared...but this--"

He stood up a little straighter, as the Melinda in the poodle skirt wavered, melted, and transformed into a slightly older Melinda – her hands covering her mouth, a happy look in her tearful eyes, "--This is the day I asked her to marry me!" He shook his head, grin widening. "I change my mind! I was definitely more nervous that day."

The woman laughed; "But she said yes, didn't she?"

"Yeah," David said, his eyes drifting as the dream of reminiscence crept into his voice, "yeah, she did."

He looked down again, staring deeply. That Melinda also wavered, and vanished, and was replaced by a quick succession of Melindas as the years went by – Melinda in her wedding gown, Melinda covered from head to toe in brownie batter, learning to use an electric mixer for the first time, Melinda glowing and radiant, her belly swollen with their first child –

David drew back from the railing as if he'd been burned. He turned away from the scene of his pregnant wife down below, breathing hard. The woman turned to look at him, a sad look of understanding on her face.

"You have many happy memories of Melinda, don't you David?" She said,

slowly walking towards him.

"Please," David croaked, his voice barely above a whisper, "please. Don't make me watch this."

"But not all the memories are happy, are they?"

A high, keening scream bubbled up over the edge of the ship, from the mirror surface where David's memories danced—he turned towards the sound, tears welling in his eyes.

"No," he whispered, "Not again."

And yet, as if against his own will, his feet moved him back to the edge of the railing. He looked down to the memory, his wife sitting in the hospital bed, blood soaking the sheets around her waist, crying as she held their blue-lipped, stillborn baby in her arms. "Anabelle," she sobbed, over and over, "Anabelle, Anabelle, Anabelle..."

Tears were streaming unchecked down David's face as the memory shuddered, faded and died. He turned to the woman.

"Why did you make me watch this?" He demanded. "Wasn't suffering through it once enough? More than enough?"

"You couldn't save her, could you?" The woman said softly. "Not Anabelle, not Melinda. There was nothing you could do to stop her pain, was there?"

"Stop it," David muttered.

"No," the woman replied, a challenge in her voice. "You need to remember, David. The pain, the suffering you endured and caused. All of it..."

"Why?" David replied, rage filtering through his pain, making his voice sharp, pounding an angry fist down on the railing. "Why should I have to relive all this pain? Shouldn't it all be peaceful, be white sands and clear skies now that I'm—" David choked on the last word as the revelation hit him like a weight. "Oh God," David whispered. His rage vanished as quickly as it appeared. He looked into the woman's eyes, all at once timid and afraid.

"Oh my God. I...I'm dead, aren't I?"

The woman nodded slowly. David felt his knees grow weak; he sank slowly down, sitting with his back against the railing, head cradled in his hands. His heart was pounding as he felt the absolute finality of his situation crash down upon him. Dear God, he was dead...

After a moment, the woman came and sat beside him.

"I'm dead," David mumbled into his palms.

"You're dead," the woman replied.

David lifted his head and turned his tear-streaked face towards her. "Why didn't you tell me?"

For the first time, the woman's eyes began to well up, much as David's had. "I don't make the rules," her voice quivered slightly. "We're not allowed to tell you, you have to figure it out on your own. It makes the

transition...easier."

"Transition?" David stared around at the effervescent ship. "So...so this isn't heaven, then?"

The woman gave a soft, humorless snort. "No," she said, "definitely not. This is merely a vessel. The...final journey, if you will."

"Where's it taking us?" David asked.

The woman opened and closed her mouth several times, her brow furrowing. Finally, she shrugged. "On," she said.

David looked at her blankly. "On?" He repeated. The woman nodded. David sighed, defeated. "I'm never going to get a straight answer out of you, am I?"

The woman looked apologetic but unyielding. "Like I said, I don't make the rules. I just have to follow them."

"Alright then."

David's eyes flicked back to the railing of the ship. "So why...why the memories? Why show it all to me again?" His voice broke as he remembered the vision of Melinda, bloody and broken, holding their dead daughter in her arms.

The woman was silent for a long time. "Because it's important for you to remember," she said.

"What does that mean?" David asked.

The woman stood, beckoning David to stand with her, and they looked over the edge of the railing once more. David moaned and turned away when he saw the scene that lay below – Melinda, among others, all dressed in black, surrounding a tiny grave, a tiny headstone. Anabelle Jeanine Lawrence, April 2, 1976.

"That this life," the woman said, "doesn't come without pain, David. You remember, don't you?"

There had been a montage of happy scenes with Melinda before, now David had to endure a barrage of the worst moments of his life – the day his mother died with vacant eyes that didn't remember him, the thud-crack-crunch in the road as their cat got hit by a car, the day his boss looked him in the eye and said, "Sorry, David, but we can't afford to pay you anymore," the day he left his brother behind in Vietnam, legs blown off and bleeding, "Help me, Davey! Please don't leave me..."

More voices drifted up over the railing, and David knew them all too well – drinking buddies at the bar, a swirling tumult of pain that could never quite be drowned away – Vietnam, Melinda, and Anabelle – always Anabelle. Then there was Melinda, confronting him as he staggered through the door falling-down drunk. Her voice raised, hysterical – an argument.

"You think I like this?" Melinda shrieked from below.

David shook his head and closed his eyes, clapping his hands over his ears, but nothing he did could muffle her voice.

"You go out every night and drink yourself stupid, and I'm left here alone...You aren't the only one who's suffering, okay?...I will not shut up, I'll—"

Her speech was cut off by the crack of flesh striking flesh, followed by a squeal from Melinda that dissolved into sobs.

David moaned and shook his head more violently. The scenes continued to rain down on David like so many heavy blows, more than he could bear. The guilt swirled in his stomach, making bile rise in his throat.

"Stop! Please! No more!" He begged the woman. The ship seemed to pitch and rock beneath his feet; tumultuous seas for the first time since their journey began. "I can't do this again! Please! Stop the memories, stop the pain! I know I failed them, okay? I don't want it!"

***DAVID COULD HEAR A THOUSAND
WHISPERING VOICES, TENDRILS FROM
HIS PAST, ROARING IN HIS EARS...***

The pitching of the ship grew more violent; David could hear a thousand whispering voices, tendrils from his past, roaring in his ears, reminding him of how he'd abandoned the people he loved, and how it was too late to take it all back.

"I'm sorry!" David wailed – whether to the woman or the voices, he had no idea. "I'm so sorry!"

All at once, the sea of memories calmed – the silence pressed in on all sides. David crashed to his knees, sobbing brokenly into his hands. He lifted his head to look at the woman; he was surprised to see tears welling in her eyes once again.

"You say this ship is going 'on'?" He asked hoarsely.

The woman nodded.

"Good...or...or bad?"

The woman shook her head. "We won't know until we get there," she whispered. She stepped forward and offered David her hand. He took it, and she pulled him to his feet. "But between you and me," she wiped away

his tears with her free hand, "I think you deserve the good."

"How?" He asked. "How can you believe that of me, after everything I've done? The ways I messed up..."

The woman shrugged. "You're only human, as they say. You struggle, you fall, you fail. You're beautiful creatures, but you screw up sometimes. It happens." She looked down at her feet. "The key is to ask for forgiveness...and to allow yourself to be forgiven."

David looked at the woman with new eyes. "Are you...an angel?" He asked in awe.

The woman nodded, smiling at him. She turned to face the bow of the ship. David followed her gaze; he saw a blazing white light ahead, brighter than anything in the universe.

"On?" David asked.

"On," the angel replied.

David felt his knees begin to tremble as the light grew bigger, threatening to envelop them. The angel gave his hand a reassuring squeeze.

"You never did tell me your name," David murmured.

The angel turned and looked at David, that small, playful smile back, dancing on her lips.

"My name is Anabelle."

Elizabeth Trueblood