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STEPHEN F. AUSTIN STATE UNIVERSITY  
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# HUMID

## THE

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# TOWN OF FIRE

by

Arianna Doughty

Untied shoelaces slapped against sneakers. The rubber soles of our shoes pushed on pedals of metal and plastic.

It was the perfect day for a long ride, to the little store a few miles from our place. A dry air whipped around us, the tail end of summer. We'd only been back in school a couple of weeks.

But this day we'd left our homework for another day, as we often did at this time. I couldn't ignore a clear blue sky with a wind so strong. I could almost pretend it was cool.

Jack cheered as we rounded the corner; he'd been complaining loudly for a while now, waiting to see the candy blue roof of Sandy's Corner Store. Flashing lights cut off Jack's joy. At fourteen he was the oldest, so he swaggered over to the cop car as the officer stepped out. I, on the other hand, tried to make myself as small as possible, hoping to blend into the trees and brush behind me.

The officer was chewing Jack out for riding our bikes on the busy highway. I tried to listen, but there was something in the air that felt wrong. I looked at my other brother and my sister too to see if they smelled what I had.

Burning wood. Trees burning.

Over the blue roof, a slender stream of smoke rose in the air. The cops' radio crackled.

"Code 904F."

"What's that?" Jack asked. He was ignored. The officer was talking quickly into his radio. Asking questions: what was the location, and could this be contained easily. The answers made no sense to me. He turned to Jack,

"Your parents should be on their way soon."

I stood there for a long time watching the sky above the roof of the store turn into an orange haze. How peaceful it looked from this distance, that stream of smoke slowly getting larger, dancing and swaying in the wind.



“Get in the van,” my father shouted at us. He was always shouting, the only time he seemed to get off his ass was to yell at us. I’m sure the only reason he knew we’d gone was the cop; he’s not the kind of father that would check on his too quiet children.

We rode back to the house in silence. Trash littered the front yard, the calf tied to the swingset grazed the overgrown brush. He was the color of whiskey, with eyes as big as the moon. How I wished to climb into those big brown eyes, somewhere I could hide.

The paint was peeling off the swingset, letting the rust show through. I wondered if people are like that; beneath their glossy new paint is an ugly orange stain, smelling of a time long past their first summer.

“Phebe, come in,” This time it was my stepmom who yelled. She was a small woman that I pitied. She was kind and sweet but a total pushover. He didn’t deserve someone like her. I kicked off the swing and ran into the house.

It was in more disarray than usual. Bags littered the floor.

“Big forest fire, grab your stuff before we all die,” Jonah said around the baloney sandwich that hung from his mouth. He was a year younger than me, a dramatic twelve-year-old. He averted his eyes when our father gave him a sharp glare.

Anna walked by, rolling her eyes. I followed her back to her room. That’s where I stayed when I was with my dad, I didn’t have a room of my own, nor did I have to pack a lot. Mostly I helped Anna pack up her things, dolls and family photos.

Packing the car was my favorite part, like a game of real live Tetris. Anna could reach the places I couldn’t quite get to. Although she was only eleven she stood several inches taller than me. I stuffed Jonah’s bag on the side, wedging it between the car and some framed photos, careful not to break the glass.

Anna had tears in her eyes when the police car rolled up our drive, blaring an evacuation order.

“What if I never see this place again?” She was scared

“We’ll come back here, don’t you worry about that.” Even

as I said this I knew it was useless. She'd still worry because it was the only thing we could do.

We piled into the minivan. I wondered if this was the last time I would see this tree-lined highway. Fire truck sirens called out to one another, a distressed game of Marco Polo where everyone was screaming their names, but no one could answer them. A helicopter passed overhead, like an angel sent to rescue us, but it just kept flying.

The radio blared the oldies a bit too loud. Every so often they would stop the music for an emergency broadcast calling for evacuations. The sky behind us had lost every ounce of blue. It became the color of the cafeteria counters. It felt like a demon was chasing our car away.

We stayed in a hotel in the big city an hour away that night, it was one of those Comfort hotels, inn, suites, or something or another. It didn't really matter because it had a pool, and that was enough for me. From the window, I could see my town. The sky was filled with the burning smoke of the forest.

Tuesday came, labor day weekend was over, and we returned to our town. Of course, we did as best we could. But more often than not we found ourselves staring up at the sky, wondering about the homes we'd left behind days earlier.

The sky was still on fire. Glowing red and orange, like something angry and sinister was lurking at the horizon.

My middle school was one of the designated places for evacuees to go. I wandered over there from time to time, handing out water and watching people cry over the burnt areas. Everything was displayed on a neat color-coded map that got updated daily. A crazed tangle of lines, many blocked out in big letters. BURN ZONE.

The fire was eating up the town, racing across farmlands, swallowing up the forest.

"Ashes to ashes, dust to dust," I whispered under my breath.

"Whaat? Whaat was that?" Said the old lady with wrinkles as deep as the Grand Canyon, her stringy hair fell to frame her face. She smelt of cigarettes, even worse than mom after a hard night.

“Oh nothing, just a little rhyme, would you like a water bottle?” She frowned at me but took a water bottle.

I scurried away quickly, to avoid her piercing gaze. I hated that. Hated the way people would look at me sometimes, trying to figure me out as if I was some puzzle for them to twist and turn and put together.

“Hey P, wait up.” Jack was racing up to me. It wasn’t until he got closer that I realized that he had a black eye.

“What’s that from?”

“Whatever are you talking about?”

“The black eye, dummy,” I said jabbing my finger in his stupid face.

“Oh yeah, that. I got into a fight”.

“Another fight.” He’d been in three just this last month, and at this rate by eighteen he’d either be dead or in jail.

“Should I even ask what this one was about?”

He shrugged his shoulders, “No, probably not.”

“The wind’s picking up again.” My eyes drifted back to the map on the wall, thinking of all the areas marked off in black.

“Maybe Jonah was right, we’re all gonna die.”

“Jonah doesn’t know a damn thing.”

Talking to Jack could either calm me down or enrage me further. Although I doubted he knew that.

I had another sleepless night at the shelter; the school gym lined with neat rows of cots where everyone had unneatly strewn their personal belongings. The ash was thick, and the coughing echoed across the gym. It reminded me of exam days, when they’d stuff us all in the gym to take mandatory exams. Someone would whistle, the teachers could never figure out who it was, then a few minutes later the same whistle would come from a different side of the gym. This would herald in a hushing and shushing from the teachers, but like clockwork it would all start again.

Dad was mad.

It was Jack and Jonah. I saw him leading them out of the gym, gripping their forearms. Jonah was twisting, trying to break the hold our father had on him. Panic was screaming through my body.

I ducked around people, side-stepping families, and hopping over bags. I pushed through the gym doors. My father might be an asshole, but he wasn't a complete idiot. He knew that he had to get the boys out of ear shot if he was going to discipline his children.

I crept up to the corner, I could hear their labored breathing.

Jonah started to cry, "No, Daddy I'm sorry." I flinch as I hear my fathers' thick hand connect with my little brother.

I can't move. I want to move, but I can't. Fear holds me, captive. I want to throw myself on top of my brothers, I want to be brave.

But I'm not.

I sink to my knees. And let the tears fall.

Jack didn't cry. He was past that point.

When it came time for them to leave, I hid in a darkened hallway. Jonah's face was still wet from tears, and his blond hair casting shadows over his face.

As I slipped back into the gym after them, my father shot me a look that could've said where the hell have you been, but he said nothing.

The boys got a few concerned glances. Whispers whirled around us, careful not to point directly in our direction. My father tried to shield them from prying eyes. He'd never had an audience before. A mother in the corner of the room, looked as though she wanted to say something, but she just nodded her head as if she understood. Understood why our family wore long sleeves, even in the insufferable heat of the summer. No one reports bruises they can't see. A calm welled up around us like a trench dug up around our precious farmland to keep the fire out. The fire could not burn what had already been rid of grass and brush. Take the fuel from the fire.

I sat there on my cot picking at the loose threads in the seams of the fabric. A woman in a navy blue blazer strode in, and the first thing I thought was she wasn't supposed to be here. She looked out of place, her shoes unscuffed, her shoulders over-stuffed. She scanned the gym as if a robot searching

for her next target. Then she locked in on my siblings and me. Just my luck.

She beelined her way through the crowd of people milling about. I wanted to run, but I couldn't. I'd been taught that running looked suspicious. People who had nothing to hide didn't run, but that didn't make it any easier to resist the urge.

I had nothing to hide, right?

Her triumphant smile made my stomach turn, so wide and proud as if she'd just completed some heroic feat, not walked across the gym. Her teeth were yellow and smudged with her lipstick, the color of a watermelon sucker.

"Are y'all the Martinez kids?" She spoke too loud, as if we would be unable to hear her if she didn't speak at a pitch only dogs could hear.

Jonah nodded his big blue eyes, staring up at her, his straw blond hair stuck out at odd angles. Jack shoved Jonah's shoulder.

"We're not supposed to talk to strangers," Jack said, not sounding at all like a fourteen-year-old but much more like a child.

"I'm Dora Lee from Child Protective Services. It's okay, you can talk to me." She took us to a different part of the school, where we could talk without everyone looking on. Dad was there smiling a wide smile that didn't budge from his mouth, but never touched his eyes. He hugged each of us in turn before we went into the classroom alone with the lady.

"I am here today to investigate reports of possible child abuse or neglect," said Dora Lee

I knew what this meant.

They were going to separate us.

I would never see my siblings again.

The fire had reached me.

It had sought me out, and now it would burn down my world.

Take everything from me.

So I did the only thing I could do.

I lied.

"Has an adult ever hit you or one of the other children

living in the house?” Her eyes bored into me, searching.

I'd watched my dad throw my little brother to the ground, and I'd closed my eyes tight as his fist had arched downwards.

I looked away from her and focused on the fake wood grain of the table top. “No.”

She glanced down at her notes, “Have you ever felt that you or the other children were in danger?”

My dad had chased Jack down with the car, he'd almost run through the front doors of the grocery store. Jack was scared of what dad would do when he caught him, I told Jack not to run, running makes you look like you've done something wrong.

“No, I don't think so,” I lied once again. I couldn't look her directly in the eye, so I traced wrinkles around her eyes.

“Phebe?”

“Yes?”

“You can tell me the truth.” No, no I couldn't. She didn't know. She wouldn't understand. Family stays together.

“I know. I am,” I said, smiling.

I'd sat in that hallway for a long time after that, and I didn't know what the others said. Had they told the truth?

Each night I would face Anna and look into her wide dark brown eyes. Her hair was cropped short she looked like a cartoon character. I'd tried to give her a brave smile, the kind that said everything would be okay, after all, I was her big sister and I was here.

I wanted to be brave so bad. I remember my grandma praising me for being so strong, but I never felt that way. I felt tiny, timid as a rabbit. How could I be anything that would resemble strong?

I just wanted one thing, to keep us together. I didn't want to lose them. That's why I did what I did.

It's the reason Jonah would no longer talk to me as we did when we were younger. I worried this over in my mind, smoothing it like a pebble in a river.

The BURN ZONE got larger each and every day. Sixty-three new fires. Over thirteen hundred homes lost. We were told it was safe to return to our homes. People had been trickling back in all week, but finally, it was our turn.

The corpses of hundred-year-old pines littered the sides of the highway. Others still stood but were merely husks of their former selves. Hillsides of blackened trees, here where I'd lived all my life and never known there was a hillside.

A weight settled in my chest, this was where we'd spent our youth. We would run through the woods playing hide and go seek, and building forts that only we could find.

There was no trash to be found on the sides of the drive. There was no anything. The cinder blocks that the mobile home had sat on was all that was left. Through my open window I could hear it before I saw it.

I heard the mooing of the calf.

There was a small circle around the swingset, all around it had been burned. Our house, the neighbor's house that sat across from us, all burned. But this little cow with its eyes of deep chocolate brown had lived.

We sifted through the ashes, trying to find anything that had been forgotten. Why did we look? I knew there was nothing to find. The silt in my hands slid through my fingers, turning them gray.

"Where's Jack?" I asked my step-mom

She looked up distracted as if her oldest step sons' disappearance hadn't seemed odd to her, "I think he walked off in that direction..." she trailed off pointing toward the blackened treeline. The trees looked like the inside of the mouth of some nightmare.

The pigs had turned to bacon; my sister's beloved pigs that she'd begged our father for.

I stepped around their charred carcasses, holding my breath. There was no way I could breathe in those toxic fumes without emptying the contents of my stomach onto the ground next to them.

Jack sat on the remains of a tree, staining his backside black. Sniffing. I stood in front of him, and begged him to meet my gaze.

"Pull it together," I whispered. The fire had reached his heart as well. I could see it burning him from the inside out. Jack with his dark hair has always had a tender heart, but he

titers on the edge. Walking the tightrope of what most call sanity. Makes me want to take his hand, and gently say just one step at a time. But I know that won't make a difference, it would only make things worse. Instead, I plant myself in front of him and wait - waiting for him to make the first move.

I've been doing this since before I could remember, waiting for reality to sink back into his face or the face of our mother. Waiting for the rain to come, and put out the firestorm that raged.

Finally, his cedar eyes met mine.

"It's gone."

"But we're not."

"Phebe," he said my name as if it caused him great sadness.

"I'm leaving soon, I just wanted to leave y'all with something."

"Where are you going?"

"Somewhere they can help me, somewhere I don't have to be hurting anymore" he fingered the scars that laced their way up his right arm.

But I had lied to keep us together. How could this happen? Why? After all we'd gone through? A car door slammed, like a thunderclap. Jarring me out of my thoughts.

"That must be them now." Jack said.

"Jack, honey" Mom called. My mom, she was here to take Jack away.

My brother left me there standing in the woods that smelled of fire and smoke. I was just another tree that had been burned.



# SILENCE YOUR CELLPHONES NOW

by

Payton Hudak

Tension sizzles under the skin  
of my hands like freshly-poured  
Pepsi. Whispered kernels pop  
in my ears, liquid butter trickling  
down my spine. I came to see the stars  
but now crush candy beneath my teeth,  
imagining it to be the people conversing  
languidly in front of me, while light  
flickers across their faces, untroubled  
by the supernova pressure piling up,  
unaware of the universal fury behind them.

# IGLOO

by  
Payton Hudak

Our skin is cold as Death, yet heat lives  
inside us. The womb around us is hard  
ice and we can see moisture, hot  
from our mouths, hanging in the air.  
We are dragons, breathing fire, guarding  
each other. Snowballs fly, angels lie,  
we build our home below a sun  
that promises to melt it all.

# WHAT WE DO

by

Payton Hudak

Dad always asks, *How is your friend?*  
I always say, *He's doing fine.*  
We survive this way. We pretend

that our conversations don't tend  
to amount to passive lying.  
Dad always asks, *How is your friend?*

like the band on my finger blends  
with my hand, like it doesn't shine.  
I survive this way. I pretend

that my heart doesn't comprehend  
how his question aims to confine  
me. He always asks, *How is your friend?*

My soul screams, *How can you condemn  
happiness?* My partner and I,  
we survive this way. We pretend

it's not exhausting to defend  
love; there's no option to resign.  
Dad always asks, *How is your friend?*  
We survive this way. We pretend.

ROLLERSKATING  
TO KATRINA  
AND THE WAVES

by  
Payton Hudak

This carpeting was prevalent in the 80s,  
the green and purple and yellow geometry  
deceptively haphazardous in its overlap.  
But it isn't here by accident, it's meant to stop

you from barreling into another body  
when you leave the arena, blood glowing  
in your cheeks and bruises creeping up  
your knees, heart pulsing with the disco lights.

# THE CEILING

by

Margaret Godfrey

The first time I saw someone die I was 18 years old. I worked at Texas Emergency Care, a little clinic outside of Houston in a trafficky area off Will Clayton. Little did I know what had started out as a normal day would change my life forever.

I'd spent the morning on homework, writing an essay on cell structure when my phone buzzed, the camera light flashing. My attention shifted from cell walls and membranes to the phone. Work. I debated if I should answer or decline the call. I quickly answered, knowing I had a shift that night. My boss sounded panicked, asking how fast I could get to work. She didn't explain the situation. I assumed we were short-staffed or the systems were down, and I pushed aside my schoolwork to get ready. I dreaded going to work and took as much time as possible, sliding one leg into my pants at a time, slowly pulling the soft cloth to my hips. I knotted the waistband into the perfect bow. Grabbing my shirt, I slid it over my head, enjoying the smell of flowers from my new laundry detergent. I smoothed my hair into a tight ponytail, shoved my feet into my worn-out scrub shoes, dingy white with various stains splattered on them like an art canvas. I reached for my car keys and headed to work. If I had known in that moment what I was being called in for, I would have rushed to help.

The clinic seemed unusually quiet, and I pushed through the glass doors, cool air slapping my face. I immediately knew something was wrong. When is an emergency room ever quiet, or a waiting room vacant? I imagined every worst-case scenario, my thoughts bouncing and leaping like a confused frog. I started to feel stressed, my mouth dry, my chest tight. I was a rubber band stretched across the highway. I walked around the corner. My heart thumped like a drum, ready to explode. I found a woman on the floor, head in her hands, praying frantically. She looked mid-fifties and could have been my mother.

Tears streamed down her face. Her sharp voice cracked as she prayed, "Lord please give him more time. I can't do this alone. Help me." She repeated herself, repeated herself so many times the words burrowed into my brain. I put my hand on her back and searched for the right words. She struggled to put together a cohesive thought, "My... My husband. I don't know what to do. Please... Room four." I eased the woman back into her chair, reassured her. I would check on her husband.

Down the hall, staff members swarmed like flustered wasps, ready to dive and sting. Everyone yelled orders, bumped into each other, bounced off of each other. I squeezed through to see what was happening. The man lay sprawled on the bed, gazing at the ceiling. He looked terrified, sad, as if he knew something we did not. His splotchy red skin darkened to deep purple. As his oxygen levels plummeted, a jagged line formed across his chest. He was a textbook case. Pulmonary embolism.

Unable to breathe, he danced on the thin line of death. My boss ordered me to start CPR. I climbed up the stool and positioned myself directly above his heart, placed my hands on his chest and took a deep breath, knowing I could make the situation worse, but if I stood around and did nothing, he'd have no chance of survival.

My coworkers called for an ambulance as I started compressions. His ribs fractured under my hands. Every time I pushed down, his ribs and cartilage popped like bubble-wrap, a unsettling noise I still hear today. At this point our options seemed slim to none, and we knew it. Hope slowly drained from everyone in the room. Time never moved so slowly.

Those fifteen minutes felt like eternity, and I wondered if this really was the right profession for me, questioned my ability to handle each situation that I may or may not make worse, depending on the severity of the case, who called me and when, how soon I arrived or did not arrive. How many women would I find on their knees praying for their husbands to live?

The paramedics exploded through the door, left the room empty as if the man had never existed.

I often find myself thinking about that afternoon. Will I ever erase that day from my memory, or do I even want to? He gave me a glimpse of reality, the ceiling, and it haunts me like a ghost.

# THE WOODS

by

Savannah Shelton

The woods are a dangerous place.

Not because they contain deadly fauna or breath-snatching flora, but because they don't. Not because the trees trap oblivious travelers in their branches and the whistling winds cut to the bone, but because they don't.

No, these woods are far from terrifying or bloodthirsty. One could even go so far as to say they're normal, if such a thing still exists. The trees are tall and wear emerald crowns bejeweled with bird nests and spiderwebs. The soil is dark and fertile, carpeted with fallen leaves and thick rugs of moss and skittering insects. Sunlight is easy to come by. It enjoys shifting between the trees and bushes like molten gold. Streams run swift and silver through the foliage, populated with smooth stones and shimmering fish.

Creatures here are shy, but friendly if approached. They are accustomed to humans traipsing through their home, marveling at the dreamlike silence of the trees. Nothing rancid or foul resides here. It's a pure environment, flawless by design. No predators stalk the night, no snow or hail or thunder disrupts the perpetual peace.

That is exactly how it draws them in.

These woods are a haven, the perfect example of harmony in nature. Very few people venture here, but those who do seldom leave the same, if at all. They become entranced by the beauty of the woods, the vibrant colors that bleed into each other, a smear of emerald and gold, jasper and sapphire. They forget, in the woods, that there's danger beyond its borders. They forget that there's famine and disease and poverty in the outside world. They enter a fantasy atmosphere and leave reality behind.

But just because you abandon something doesn't mean it's gone forever.

Eventually, they recover their wits when they realize they are starving to death, unwilling to kill any animal or destroy any plant. Such is their desire to preserve the splendor of the woods. Their basic human needs jerk them back to reason, and with heavy hearts and clear minds, they shield their eyes and make their way through the trees. Once they reach the edge of the woods, without fail, they turn around and have one last look. The sunlight shines just a bit brighter, the animals seem to become more tranquil, and the trees rustle oh-so-invitingly. It is a goblin market of living things, whispering one final time,

Come look.

Come see.

Come stay.

Many decide to go back into the woods, unable to resist its allure, and are never seen again. The wise few who are able to turn away from the spell of nature return to their homes, gloomy and heartsick but alive. Those who make it out are sure to never return. They know what will happen if they do.

The woods are a dangerous place.



# AWAY WITH THE SEA

by  
Shaylynn Packard

time and tide, indeed, wait for no man—  
or woman

she stands entranced —  
the shimmer, the depth,  
the swirling hues of cerulean sea—  
feeling insignificant yet freed

the rise and fall of crushing waves—  
tender gestures flung  
towards the one who lives  
with saltwater in her veins

pulled in by the receding tide  
towards the rippling of the sea—  
destined to control the depths and breadths  
of the sprawling infinite blue horizon

she boards her ship setting sail —  
escaping the realm  
of dust and foliage,  
duty and frailty

riding rippling waters  
towards the horizon

she waits for no one—  
for nothing

# BARCELONA

by

Shaylynn Packard

round and round the city by bus  
hands intertwined, my head on your shoulder  
surrounded by strangers, I'm at home  
we don't speak the native tongue but it's music to our ears

hands intertwined, my head on your shoulder  
walking along cobbled streets alive with song  
we don't speak the native tongue but it's music to our ears  
dancers' dresses swirl and shimmer brilliant blue

we stop along a cobbled street alive with song,  
sangria soaked lips soft pressed against mine  
the sea swirls and shimmers brilliant blue,  
we're drawn to its color, sparkle, size

sangria soaked lips soft pressed against mine  
warm salt air, sunshine and sandy painted toes  
we're drawn in by the color, sparkle, and size  
sitting half soaked in briny clothes, we're content

warm salt air, sunshine and turquoise painted toes  
surrounded by strangers, I'm at home  
sitting half soaked in briny clothes, I'm content  
as we go round and round the city by bus

# YOU LOVED ME LIKE THE OCEAN

by

Shaylynn Packard

As I move closer, the sound dances in my ears.  
Standing at the shore,  
the smell of salt stimulates my nose.  
Wild wind rushes through my hair.

Warm sand covers my toes,  
the water glistens aquamarine.  
As I move closer, the ground turns damp,  
the waves leap eagerly to caress me.  
I yearn to feel more of this embrace.

Water slides up my legs like liquid silk.  
The water and its waves have an undeniable magnetism.  
I want to know you, be surrounded by you.  
I want to discover your secrets.

As I move closer, water encircles my body.  
The balance between our waters creates a buoyancy.  
My feet no longer touch the ground.  
The vastness of your beauty is alluring.

I want to be part of your enormity,  
to see what lies beneath the surface.  
Your shallow parts are remarkable,  
your heart must be the same.

As I move closer, waves pull me out faster.  
You yearn to possess me as much as I do you.  
I go with you willingly, succumbing to you.  
I place my face below your surface until my lungs burn.

Maybe you're not what I thought.  
You take my breath away and yet blind me.

I let myself disappear for you.  
Deeper and deeper and deeper and deeper.  
Until there is no way back,  
and I fear the dark.

You are no longer beautiful.  
Your waters turn a gloomy shade of navy.  
You turn cold and vicious, holding me beneath the waves.  
I fight it, hacking up brackish water.

I open my eyes to see what you are beneath the surface.  
When I finally see, the pain stings like  
jellyfish tendrils, writhing.

My body grows tired of the pain you inflict.  
It's getting harder and harder to fight for myself.

I let you hurt me.  
My lips are sore and split.  
Lungs compressed by your weight.

You push me under, tossing and turning, gasping for air.  
You push me away, a bruised and broken vessel,  
damaging me on every wave.

And somehow, you've pushed me back to shore.

# THE CALL OF THE VOID

BY

MERIDIAN PARHAM

Have you ever wondered what it felt like to die? Is it as truly painless as they say? To fall asleep for the last time and become one with nothing? Or maybe become one with... something. Is there really an afterlife? A Heaven with angels and Hell with demons? What are we to everything?

All this I wondered as I watched Melanie's lifeless body on the bed, tubes running like veins and the rhythmic beeping of the instruments keeping her alive but not living.

My sister didn't deserve to be there, in a vegetative state, and me, awake. It had been weeks since the accident. The scarlet rips in her flesh had barely begun to heal. They never would. Not fully. If she even woke up, they'd join the brown dots on her skin, passing over them like white rivers in the landscape. Flaws on Perfect Melanie. Her hand lay on the bed next to her, free to grab if I wanted to. Except I didn't.

She seemed peaceful in a way. Even though a machine breathed for her, she could have been taking a nap, as she always did after she came home from school. The doctors kept telling me that she was just sleeping. I hated when they would tell me something fake. I wasn't eleven anymore. She's in a coma. Not asleep. A vegetative state, as the doctors called it. Comatose. It's just as bad as when they call it "passing away" because they don't pass; they die. There is no little-farm-in-the-country for sisters that get killed in car accidents.

"Except she's not dead, Grace," my mother loved to remind me every time I would say she was as good as.

"She's a vegetable. The only difference between her and broccoli is that I can eat broccoli," I told her. She just lay, limp and lifeless, in this hospital, where the fluorescent lights even gave her a greenish glow.

I hated when they tried to comfort me. I didn't want their pity. I wanted my sister.

"You know, she can probably still hear what you say." Melanie's nurse walked in, disturbing my thoughts. They always checked on me when Mom and Dad were out. Annoying.

"Yeah," I said. I didn't bother to look up at her. She never changed. Same scrubs, same shift, same expression of pity.

"You should tell her about your day."

"My day sucked."

I could feel the nurse purse her lips through the tension in the air. I meant no disrespect. But I did. She busied herself with checking Melanie's tubes, not bothering to be subtle with her quiet mutters about how twelve-year-olds were getting ruder the older she got.

Then, she left, shutting the door with a snap to show her irritation. Something crashed, the sound split the quiet room. Panic flared through my body and I was gone from Melanie's side and the hospital, back on that dark country road. Melanie jerked the wheel; tires squealing, the headlights of the other car, glass shattering and steel crunching together like aluminum.

Then, I was back, bent over the side of my chair, panting and sweating, forcing myself not to vomit again.

I controlled myself long enough to look around the room. The picture of a blooming sunflower had fallen from the nail in the wall, probably from the air when the nurse had closed the door. It had been my fault. Again. I blinked, my eyes blurred, overcome with tears. I snatched a tissue from the tray next to Melanie's bed, quickly wiping my nose and eyes before anyone could see that I had been weak.

I needed to clean up the mess. They would think I did it out of anger. Again.

I crossed to the broken glass, bending down and grabbing the jagged shards with my whole hand, ignoring the sharp stings that came from my hands. I threw piece after piece into the trash can, unaware I was sniffing so much and that my eyes were blurry. I need to throw the glass away.

Get it out of here. Far, far away. Glass caused too much pain. Too much hurt...

It hurt Melanie in the accident.

No, wait.

I hurt Melanie in the accident when I yelled at her for not letting me use her laptop at home. I grabbed the wheel and—

The door opened, giving way to my mother, clutching her purse and the overused wad of tissue she used to dab her eyes all the time. I could feel her gaze on the back of my head as I paused, on my knees, surrounded by little diamonds of glass and smeared droplets of blood.

This had happened before but it hadn't been an accident. The poor lamp never saw me coming. Mom didn't do anything but turn, step into the hallway to call for a nurse and a broom. She then knelt next to me, took my shoulders in her hands and guided me to my feet, leading me to the chair beside Melanie's bed. She wasn't angry with me.

I think.

The nurse returned. This time I felt pity from her as she took each of my bloody hands in hers, turning them over to check for glass in the cuts. The room was quiet again as the nurse set about cleaning and bandaging up my hands. The alcohol stung but I didn't flinch. Nothing hurt anymore.

Mom said nothing. She didn't need to. A mother's eyes always said more than their mouths did. Melanie looked like Mom. From the freckles to the brown color of her hair. I didn't want to look at the disappointment in the eyes of my sister on the expression of my mother. I looked back at the vegetable. No change in her condition, I repeated to myself. It always helped to say that.

The nurse left as quietly as she had come.

Mom took a breath in before asking, "How is everything here?" Her voice was soft and delicate, like it had never been before her favorite child was almost killed by her least favorite child.

I resisted the urge to scoff. She didn't want me here. She wanted precious alone time with Perfect Melanie. Perfect Melanie who played with life and death like it was my old train set. The engine going around and around the track, faster and faster until that track became a straight line and the pearly white gates were hers and hers alone and...

I would be alone.

They might have always favored Melanie, but she loved me more than the both of them but how could I hate my sister? I still gave her a hard time, even though she gave me everything she had and Mom and Dad gave everything they had to her. She always got praise for the good grades and I got criticized for everything I did.

“You know, you shouldn’t always be here.” Case in point.

“I can if I want to be.” I knew that wasn’t true. She could easily make me leave. That wouldn’t stop me and she knew that. I loved my Perfect Sister.

A long silence followed. She wanted to say something to me.

“Spit it out, Mom.” I didn’t care if it was rude.

Mom inhaled, ignoring my tone, “Grace, I know you don’t want to, but your father and I have talked about,” she swallowed, “taking Melanie off life support.”

I felt my heart stop and my whole body shivered. Off? Why? It’s only been a few weeks of nothing, “No, Mom. She-she’s going to wake up any day now.” My chin started to quiver and my eyes watered over again, “You can’t give up on her!”

“Honey, it’s been weeks and there’s been no sign of brain activity. The doctors have done all they can for her. It’s time to do what we can and think about the possibility of letting her go.”

“No, I won’t let you.”

Mom rolled her fingers into her fist, a red flush began to creep up her neck, “It’s not up to you.” She was trying to maintain a level tone. She knew how volatile I was.

I didn’t want to see her becoming angrier with me. As always, I pushed her buttons. I turned to look at Melanie, letting myself be childish. “I will make it up to me.”

“Stop it.” The sharpness of her words made me turn to look at her. Lips tight, her face blotchy and her shoulders shaking as she spoke, “I have tried to go easy on you these past few weeks, but I’m tired of your ungrateful attitude. You’re not the only one who is suffering. Your selfishness means that—” Tears brimmed her eyes as her throat thickened— “you do not deserve to be here.”

“Here in this room, or here on Earth?” I snapped.

My mom clenched her teeth together so hard I thought they’d shatter, her fingernails dug into her palms, turning her



knuckles white. Tears escaped from her eyes as she flung her bag over her shoulder and sped from the room, her shoes crunched through the broken glass that had yet to be swept away.

I exhaled slowly, not realizing I had been so tense. Why didn't she answer the question?

It was silent now, except for the sounds of Melanie being kept alive and the sniffs that came from my nose.

You are hurting, Grace. A voice came to me in the quiet ambiance of the room. The door hadn't opened and Melanie and I were alone.

I turned in my chair to see a light shape that spiraled in on itself as if a white storm cloud had accumulated in the hospital, twisting and churning upon itself like a snake rolling over its prey.

I was scared at first. Feeling immense power emanating through the room, channeling into me. What was it?

Seconds passed before I was able to muster the words to speak, "What are you—"

You are hurting. It repeated. It didn't speak, not out loud. The words didn't come from the cloud but from my mind, the syllables echoed and bounced through my skull. I put my hands over my ears but that didn't help as the echo faded. I'm here to guide you, Grace.

I opened my mouth to say something sharp and smart but I was stopped as a bright flash ripped through my mind like lightning and the room was replaced by red. The feeling didn't hurt but I could tell the cloud didn't like my tone.

Think carefully, child. A lie will get you nowhere. I know you. It hummed gently, a soft buzz in my ear.

"Yes," I found myself saying, "I am hurting."

Good. Tell me why you are hurting.

"I-I hurt my sister." The words fell out of my mouth before I could change them.

The cloud seemed to chuckle. You make everything about you. You have done nothing but say 'I' while you're here. It is not only about you.

What was this cloud and who made it in charge?

The cloud laughed, the sound echoed through my ears, my mind, and my body, rocking through my bones and my soul. I

am... there was a pause in the cloud's rumbling voice. ...a Void. A protector to you. And to Melanie.

"Are you like a guardian angel?" I'd heard about those sometimes when people's loved ones died.

Not quite. I'm the color gray. The middle. You have a story that I want to read and I'm here to help you.

"And what story is that? The one where I killed my sister?"

The one where you figure it out with my help.

"Help?" I scoffed, "Why do I need your help?"

Your sister is dying because of you.

"I know that," I snapped, turning away from the stupid cloud-void. The gravity of what I said reached my heart and my next words were soft, "I know. I caused the car to crash and put her in a coma."

The void chuckled again. No, that is not the reason she is dying. Your sister saved your life. She jerked the wheel before the other driver could hit you straight on. You both should have died.

The memories came rushing back like a broken dam. The roads were slippery. I was mad at her. I hit the wheel. Melanie screamed. Headlights flashed the inside of the car, the wheel had spun in her hands, and I was thrown into the passenger door. My head hit the glass.

Why are you so angry with yourself, little one?

I felt my heart sink. I was angry with myself, "I-I don't know."

Think about that. With a sudden flash of light, the Void had vanished and I was alone in the room with the sounds of the ventilator keeping Melanie with us.

A knock on the door and the nurse returned, clutching a broom and dustpan, "I'm sorry to bother you but I thought I'd—"

I found my mouth spoke for me, "No, no, please, let me." I reached out for the broom and the nurse looked taken aback. I'd never said please to her before. Or anything that wasn't full of preteen angst.

She gave it to me, "Are you feeling alright?" She seemed apprehensive and I could tell she thought I had a concussion or maybe an aneurysm.

I didn't say anything as I swept away the last of the glass. I threw the remains in the garbage bin as I turned to her, taking a

deep breath, “No. I’m not.” My voice broke as hot tears began to spill down my cheeks. The nurse enveloped me into a hug and I cried into her shirt, “My sister is dying and I don’t want her to leave.”

The nurse hushed me softly, “I know, dear. Deep breaths. No one is doing anything yet. There’s still time for her to wake up.”

I sniffed and let her go, stepping back and wiping my eyes. I couldn’t do anything but nod and blubber out a “thank you.” She nodded back, giving me a smile that was full of hope and leaving with the bag of glass, closing the door behind her.

See? That wasn’t so hard. I turned, and saw the Void had returned.

“No,” I admitted.

You did well. You are letting go of your anger.

“Who sent you to me?” I had to know why this guardian had come to rescue me from myself. I’d grown up believing in fairy tales but this wasn’t a fairy godmother.

I came because of your sister. I stayed for you. So many of the souls I meet are hopeless, but you showed me something else.

What did that mean? Before I could ask, the Void interrupted. Be with your sister. She needs you.

“No,” I corrected the Void, “I need her.”

The Void gave a low chuckle, pleased with my response. It had given me the kick I needed. Melanie had always been there for me and now it was time for me to be there for her.

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Someone gently shook my shoulder.

I opened my eyes, feeling hope rise in my chest before I realized that it wasn’t Melanie who was waking me up. I’d fallen asleep in the chair.

It was Mom. “Sweetheart,” she didn’t seem angry, but her voice shook, “we’ve decided to—” her voice failed.

“—to let the doctors turn off life support,” Dad finished her sentence. He was standing behind her, resolute in his expression, a gentle hand rubbing her shoulder. Always there for us.

I felt something begin to rise in me, bubbling at the surface. It should have been anger but it felt familiar. Like before something intense, like a soccer game. It felt like spirit. I got to my feet, looking them both in the eye. From one to the other, I glanced

between them, then to the doctors and nurses standing in the back, their faces solemn.

Once more, the voice echoed across my mind, Why so angry, little one? Was that it's lesson all along?

I didn't see the mysterious Void that guided me from my anger but I felt a wave of peace wash over my body, feeling clean for the first time in weeks since I'd woken up in the hospital.

I looked at Melanie, asleep on her bed. She didn't look like my sister. The tubes twisted and turned on themselves, skin sunken on her face. Her freckles had faded away from the sun's grasp. They blended almost seamlessly into her skin. If you were close enough, you could see the pale brown spots. She may have been alive, but this wasn't living. Seeing her suffer for a selfish hope or dream that she'd wake up and be my sister again wasn't worth this anger. I had to let her go and find peace for myself.

Good, Grace, good. You live up to your name.

I nodded, looking at Mom and feeling a soft smile emerge. "I'm with you, Mom." I looked at my Dad, standing strong, as he always was. He was falling apart, like Mom, but on the inside. "And you, Dad."

Relief flooded her expression when I didn't fight her. I knelt beside my sister and took her cold hand in mine for the first time in weeks.

A gift for you. A flash of light accompanied the resonant voice.

The doctor stepped toward the machines where the tubes intersected. He reached out, hand outstretched when...

Melanie squeezed my fingers and opened her eyes.

# NO SOUVENIRS ALLOWED IN MONASTERIES

by

Brice Ashton Kohleriter

In 1959 the Dalai Lama fled Tibet with the assistance of the CIA, following the Chinese invasion and takeover of Tibet in 1950. He sought refuge in India where he has since grown to the ripe old age of eighty-three. Even now he is an active teacher and humanitarian. He has proclaimed that he is ready to move back to Tibet in a moment's notice, should China cease its oppressive rule and return Tibet to a state of independence.

According to Bardo Thodol: The Tibetan Book of the Dead by His Holiness the Dalai Lama, Tibetan outlook on death states that when you die, your soul will experience at the very least one of six tests. Six trials which even the lowliest of humans have the opportunity to take. At each trial, one will see a dull light in front and a blinding light behind. It is up to that person to choose the path most bright, even though it hurts to look at, as that is the path to enlightenment. If they walk into the dull light, they are cast downward to their next trial. If by the end of the sixth trial a soul is still not liberated from existence, then it is either sent into the body of an animal, a man, or a demon depending on your actions in life. Some souls are sent to burn in hell of course.

Have you ever spent a week writing a memoir or painting a portrait with watercolors, only to set it ablaze on Sunday? A storm had come and gone over Dallas, leaving the roads wet and petrichor on the wind. Asphalt crunches beneath the tires of my mom's car as twigs under heavy footfall. After only

a thirty-minute drive, we arrive at a building with a green statue sitting crisscross in the center of a fountain. The Crow museum of Asian art is under construction. The sound of power drills and the smell of burnt rubber stains the atmosphere. My mom walks in front of me, glancing back every now and again as if to make sure I'm just as excited as I was thirty seconds ago. We walk through the glass doors but are immediately lost due to the chaos of the construction workers. It's strange to think that these workers toil day to day, late into the afternoon, pouring their sweat and occasionally their blood into something that will outlive them and might even outlive humanity. Lost in these thoughts, I start to lag behind. My mom hears the shuffling of my feet, which she immediately scorns. Picking up my pace we find our way to an elevator with blue cloth covering the walls.

A rare complete set of samurai armor greets me at the museum's entrance. I stare it down, hoping to intimidate it, but it doesn't flinch. My mom shakes my shoulder and hands me my ticket. Ascending the stairs, we sweep straight through the heart of the museum. We have some time before the ritual, so we make use of it by navigating the corridors. We can only observe the museum attractions, as we don't have enough time to read about them. Locked behind plastic or hung on the wall is preserved Art, sculpture, weapons, ceramic plates, and astrolabes. Depictions of warriors in conflict with warriors, demons, or animals. We see the Buddha in his many forms fashioned from bronze or ink blotted paintings of black rivers.

We had rushed through this all in about twenty minutes. It seemed not enough time. We cross a glass skybridge and enter into a heavily populated room. Immediately, my eye is caught by the multicolored sand art in the center of the room. It's a mandala, which from Sanskrit translates to sacred Cosmo gram. Its design is composed of six vibrant colors of sand, each of which represents one of the six teachings of perfection, or one of the six Buddhas of enlightenment, or one of the six realms of rebirth. Each intricate pattern is painstakingly detailed across a very basic stencil which lies

underneath. Directly behind the mandala is an altar upon which sits a framed picture of the Dalai Lama. His smile is radiant, exercising nothing but compassion and wisdom. Laid out to the right and left of the Dalai Lama are gold goblets and silver platters, upon which are various fruits, herbs, and grains. Elegantly dressed visitors snap pictures madly. I take my seat in the front and rightmost section of the room. A few rows down, an oversized stuffed dog plush rests next to the seat of a boy much too old to be carrying it around. A woman in a black dress tells us to be seated. Some opening statements are made, a “thanks for coming!”, and an even huger “thank you to our sponsors”. A second speaker takes the front center and attempts to lead us through some brief meditation. She tells us to close our eyes and focus on the word “ohm”. Very few people humor her, choosing instead to scroll through reddit or whisper to each other about sports teams and tuna casserole. At last, the monks step out from behind a dividing wall. Their heads are shaved bald and they wear red robes with a golden sash. They stand in a line, waiting patiently for their moment in the spotlight. The room falls silent and the ritual begins.

The ground buzzes and quakes as though someone was playing the tuba. The voices of the monks match in synchrony and tone, a deep rumbling voice which fills the room. Through it all, I can make out words spoken in a foreign tongue. For a moment they stop. Two of the monks retrieve what appears to be golden and intricately engraved metallic jugs. Reaching inside, they pull out section by section the interconnected components of the jug like contraptions. By the time they’ve finished, the two monks hold massive mammoth’s tusk shaped trumpets so large that they can only be held up from the top so that the bulk of its body rests on the floor. The trumpets shake every chair in the room and a mother has to take her child outside to silence its screams. A photographer with the Dallas morning news crouches next to me, snapping pictures loudly.

I try to ignore him. I close my eyes and focus my attention inwards, letting the sounds fill and nourish me. Only one of

the monks has a necklace of wooden beads. He pounds a leather drum with a vortex insignia of pink and turquoise in rhythm with the chanting. The pacing of the drumbeat picks up and the chanting fills the room and for one-moment there is order in the chaos. The ritual climaxes with the lead monk destroying the circular sand mandala. He collects a pinch of sand from each of the six sides of the mandala, palming it in his hand. He then sprinkles the sand onto his own head, signifying his enlightenment and refinement of the third eye. Pushing his brush in a straight line across the middle, he cuts the weeklong labor in half. Then he walks counterclockwise around six times, destroying and dividing it line by line each rotation. After the sixth rotation, the sand is mixed into a dull grey conglomeration at the center of the table. Where once there had been brilliance and symbolism, now there was only dust. The closing ceremony had concluded.

Four of the eight monks shuffle to the center table and scooped the sand into tiny Ziplock bags with spoons. They passed the bags out to everyone in the audience. Upon closer inspection, you could pick out each individually colored grain of sand, beautiful individually but dirty and dull when inspected from afar. We're told to scatter the sand into the wind or sprinkle it into running water as a reminder that all suffering is impermanent. I wait a little longer than most, hoping for a chance to talk with the visiting monks. Once all the sand had been distributed, one of the monks steps forward and begins accepting questions. His group had traveled from a monastery in India to Dallas, Texas. They'd spent a little over a week doing little more than rubbing two hollow rods against each other to scatter the colored sands held inside. People ask him intently about his life as a monk or about the mandala they had so carelessly destroyed. It could have been worth tens of thousands you know. Unfortunately, I understand very little of his response due to his accent. Finally, it's my turn to ask him a question. I had read just the previous year Bardo Thodol: *The Tibetan Book of the Dead* almost to its entirety, a thousand-page bible dedicated to Tibetan gods, Buddhas, demons, and rituals that shamans conduct on the



dying. I tell the monk this. I ask if the lessons we learn in life stay with us during our trials in death. He hesitantly says yes, although he seems to be struggling to grasp the right words. Indeed, it's no small task explaining Tibetan death.

"I really can't explain this in words. You just have to keep searching for answers. Look inward."

This is all the monk could tell me and although I'm certainly not satisfied with that, he has other questions to answer. Thanking him for his time, I return to my seat. My mom asks me if I'm ready to go and I hesitantly nod yes. On our way to the elevator, my mom and I see some familiar faces. It's the boy with the stuffed dog and his mother. In the elevator, we strike up a conversation about the closing ceremony and about each other's lives. The kid is in fourth grade and the mom does interior design. I ask him why he's carrying around a stuffed puppy to a ceremony about the acceptance of death, yet the mother answers for him.

"Oh, well the monks gave it to him. Apparently, they went to the carnival last night and won it."

"Huh," says my Mom, "I guess there's no souvenirs allowed in monasteries." Funny that. I guess there's no souvenirs allowed beyond death either. You just simply can't take them with you.

# OSWALD'S DEMON

by

Taylor Smith

Oswald was never a good sleeper. His father was to blame. He always had the television at maximum volume because his hearing wasn't the best, but what made it worse was his open-ended comments. He always had something to say. Oswald was sure his father thought he was muttering under his breath, but at the same time, Dad had no regard for others. Oswald's sleepless nights were even more excruciating because of school.

It was hard for him to walk the halls without drawing attention. A part of him didn't mind, but he wanted more respect out of those fish-eyed stares. Most boys didn't walk around in high-heeled platform boots. Painting his nails black or framing his eyes with eyeliner didn't help him, either. Like others who did not fit the social norm, Oswald was labeled as weird. The boy's appearance was weird, his lack of friends was weird, and staying quiet all day was weird. What made him all the weirder was his magic.

Oswald didn't want to be categorized with those wannabe girls who thought boiling rose petals or using lavender oil in their baths gave them a 'spiritual' awakening to nature's magic. His magic was real.

His mother told him he was special for as long as he could remember. Oswald assumed it was her way of making him feel better about himself. She would reassure him whenever he wanted to get a Barbie doll over a toy truck that it was okay. One day he wore a tutu to class and discovered that boys don't wear tutus. After a day filled with jabs to the stomach that escalated to punches, his mother was there to comfort him. They just don't understand, she would say. It's hard, but you should never be afraid to express yourself. You're special. His mother tried her best to have his father be just

as supportive as she was, but it wasn't the same. He didn't see his son like his mother did. When Oswald was eight, his mother died in a car accident. The loss was indescribable. He didn't cry at the funeral. Oswald was angry. Something in him snapped. It broke in his chest and pulsed with the power of inferno. Oswald had magic.

The boy made sure to keep it a secret. Through years of trial and error he learned his craft, even if he didn't truly understand it. His journal was filled with hexes and rituals that would shake those aesthetic seekers to their cores. Oswald could create potions that evoked the emotions of man. He could communicate to the dead if he wanted the company. Now, those wannabe girls wouldn't be able to sleep for months. Oswald could, if his father ever learned how to shut up.

The boy's brow furrowed deeply with annoyance. He was done. He was done with the stares, the loud whispers in the hallways, the disregard for the way he looked and his muttering father. He wanted to make it stop. "That's it," he said aloud. Oswald boiled underneath his sheets as he waited for his father to turn off the evening news and go to his room. After that, he would be able to do what he wanted to do. Oswald let his dark thoughts fog his mind. As soon as he heard his father's door close across the house, Oswald pushed the suffocating sheets off and stormed to his closet. He tossed aside several comic books and pairs of flashy shoes to get to what he needed. Candles. Blood-red candles only available at a shop deep in the downtown alleys. The seller had the vague knowledge of how powerful they were and was hesitant about selling them to Oswald. The boy used his bewitching charisma to get what he wanted. He knew what he was doing. Already burned into the wooden floor underneath his rug was a series of precise and skeletal circles that overlapped each other, a symbol for the demon he wanted to summon.

He had read about them in a forgotten book that was stacked on the highest shelf of the public library. Why was there such a dangerous book in the public library? Oswald did not question it. This particular demon, if summoned, would

serve their master for three days. Within that time, anything could be possible. Nothing would be out of Oswald's grasp. The reward was high, but so was the price. This demon was powerful, hard to conjure. If Oswald were to succeed, he wouldn't be allowed to enter Heaven. He would have let one of the most powerful demons out of Hell. How would they accept him? Oswald's eyes hardened.

So be it.

The boy placed each candle in its place, and as quietly as he could, pulled out a small case of matches from his desk drawer. As he grabbed his journal, he asked himself why he wasn't scared. Normal people would be anxious. They wouldn't be able to stop sweating or keep their hands still. Their knees would rattle and their stomachs would flip. Not Oswald. He strode about his room with confidence, determination etched into his stony features. The boy took his place at the base of the symbol and went to work.

Oswald muttered the incantation as he ignited a match and lit the candles. He wasn't surprised to see the flame turn black. The book, *The Chronicles Of Demons*, said it would do that. That meant he was reciting the spell correctly. He lit six candles in total and leaned back onto his heels. Despite being as black as night, the small spits of flame casted an eerie glow around his room. Oswald's expression twitched. He had read about what it would look like but seeing it in real life was different. No one has ever managed to conjure this demon. For all he knew, they could have tried but were never successful. What happened to the summoner if the ritual failed? He hesitated. The flames dimmed. Panic ignited in his chest.

"No, no, no," he stammered. Oswald hurriedly leaned forward and outstretched his hand over the center of the symbol. He tried to calm down, to grab the confidence he had earlier and put that energy into the ritual. After a few moments of silence, the flames returned to their unnatural glow. Oswald let out a shaky exhale. That was close. A few moments had passed before he began to recite the conjuring spell again.

His words began to roll off his tongue without effort. As the demonic words intensified, the black flames grew stronger.

The symbol glowed red. Oswald's voice deepened into an unnatural baritone as the spell strengthened. He could feel the floor rumble beneath his fingertips. The spell poured out of his mouth at rapid speed, as if the demon were pulling itself out of Hell with his words. He felt how they dug their claws into his stomach, how they pierced and pulled their way up his throat and into his mouth. Oswald forced himself to remain calm the closer the demon came to the surface. He would get what he wanted.

The small black flames of the candles shot up to the ceiling. The room shook violently. Oswald's voice became someone else's as something writhed out of his mouth. Fear raked his chest at the black substance, how it slunk out of his mouth, down his chest and across the floor like a slug. It was groaning in agony, a symphony of distorted roars that wasn't animal or human. Oswald's part was complete. He coughed and resisted the urge to vomit when he brought his hand up to wipe whatever was left around his mouth. The substance was thick and dripped from his fingers like syrup. The glob had reached the center of the symbol. The noise grew louder as it transformed.

Arms and legs sprouted out of the blob's sides. They squirmed and screamed as their back arched grotesquely. From the body grew a neck and a face. Oswald shrunk back once he recognized human features. The inky substance began to melt away and was replaced with human flesh. The demon spit and snarled in pain. Their voice became more decipherable. Ears grew and were pointed at the tip. From the spine, a tail sprouted. The end was shaped similarly to a spade and was dark red, notably scaly. When the final spots of human flesh patched together, clothes were summoned on top. Oswald didn't expect to see a pair of torn up jeans and a red flannel. Within the next couple of seconds, searing pain smoked against his wrists. Oswald looked down and saw them decorated with glowing red shackles. Chains slithered between him and the demon and linked together. Before he could tug at them or scream, they vanished. Once their formation was complete, the demon sharply outstretched their hands. In a rush of power, the flames were snuffed out. The symbol stopped glowing and the room grew still. It was done.

The house was deathly quiet except for the demon's labored breathing. They took in a deep breath and exhaled in finality. Smoke left their mouth. Oswald watched in horror as one of the most powerful demons of Hell attempted to stand. They were much shorter than he thought they would be. Their legs shook with effort before they collapsed to their knees. Oswald heard them grunt in frustration. "Curse these fucking human legs," they muttered. The boy felt his head tilt to the side with surprise. They sounded young, perhaps a few years younger than he was. Their voice was high pitched, feminine. Oswald made a move to stand and reached for his chair to steady himself. Of course, having just conjured a demon, his body was weak. He fell against the back of the chair and made it skid against the floor. The noise was loud enough to make them jump. The demon whipped their head around and stared at him. Oswald froze.

The demon had a small, round face with large oval shaped lips. They had olive-toned skin and their nose was small, almost flat to their face. Wide and alert almond-shaped eyes bore into him. Oswald blinked. They don't look like a demon. They looked they could be a student at his school. He made a double take when he saw their eyes, how they glowed black, similar to the flames that were lit mere moments before. Never mind. The two stared at each other. Oswald swallowed roughly. Was he supposed to say something? Give them his command? Something told him they wouldn't be easily ordered. Their brows furrowed. They opened their mouth to speak before the voice of Oswald's father interrupted them.

"Oswald? What the hell was that? Was there an earthquake?" he asked groggily. The doorknob began to jiggle. Oswald and the demon exchanged a look before the boy barreled over to the door. He pushed himself against it to prevent his father from coming in.

"Y-Yeah, Dad! Just a small one! I'm fine!" he said. His voice cracked. He avoided the demon's curious gaze. They turned around and attempted to stand again as Oswald's father continued to knock on the door.

"Why won't the door open?" he asked.

“Dad, I’m fine!” Oswald shouted. The demon wobbled to their feet; arms outstretched to keep their balance. Oswald’s legs shook as their red tail flicked from side to side. “I-It’s late and I have a test tomorrow! Go back to bed!” He heard his father grumble before his footsteps retreated further into the house. Oswald’s breathing was rapid and shallow. The demon paid him no mind as they managed to stand up straight. They glanced in confusion between their arms and how the sleeves of their shirt covered their hands. They moved their hands up and down and watched the fabric flop.

“Huh...” they muttered. The demon poked at their new face and tugged at their hair. “Weird.” Oswald opened his mouth to say something but was interrupted.

“You summoned me?” they asked. The demon had stopped staring at their clothes and glanced back to the boy for an answer. Oswald felt uncomfortable. He managed a shaky nod. There was a short pause. The demon abruptly snorted and slammed a hand over their mouth. Oswald’s cheeks burned red. “You? A fucking skinny-ass teenager?” The demon howled with laughter. It didn’t sound demonic like he thought it would. They sounded human. Oswald’s anger reignited. The demon he conjured treated him the same way his classmates did. They laughed at his appearance. They weren’t supposed to do that. Oswald’s brow furrowed deeply. He shot off the door and marched over to the demon, who giggled into the palm of their hand. He let anger be his guide, just as it was before.

“You should have more respect for your new master—” he began. The demon erupted into more laughter. Oswald resisted the urge to shrink away. After a few moments of cackling, they began to calm down.

“Silly boy,” they sighed. Their face abruptly fell into a glowering stare. A flash of fear burst in Oswald’s chest. “You think I’m going to treat you like my savior?” The boy blinked with surprise. The demon pointed a finger at him. He hadn’t noticed their sharp nails, how their fingers were scaly red like the end of their tail. “I’m out of that hole for three days. You’re just...” The demon paused to think of the right words. “... the one who opened the door.”

“But you’ll serve me,” Oswald said. His voice wavered. His confidence from earlier had diminished. “You have to grant me anything I desire, that’s what it said in the book!” By now, laughing at the boy had gotten old. The demon looked around Oswald’s room with mild interest as he talked. Their flaming eyes scanned over his band posters and clothes that littered the floor.

“Yeah, yeah, whatever,” the demon muttered. They sauntered over to his closet to examine it. The demon’s expression pinched in thought. “I thought I would be summoned by someone much older.” Oswald hadn’t heard them. He started to panic. What if the book lied? No, not lied. How could the authors know about this demon if they hadn’t conjured them themselves? It was all theory, not fact. What if he had brought the end of the world? The demon hummed as they picked out a metal band t-shirt. “So, what will it be, Oswald?” they asked. Oswald didn’t realize he had begun to pace the dark room. He glanced up and noticed the demon had helped themselves to his wardrobe, now wearing the metal band shirt. Oswald blinked.

“You know my name?” he blurted out. The demon rolled their eyes.

“Your dad said it a few minutes ago,” they said.

“Oh,” Oswald muttered, embarrassed again. “What’s yours?” The demon stared at him. When they didn’t answer, Oswald stuttered. “I-It didn’t tell me in the book—”

“What?” the demon spat. They stomped over their symbol and grabbed the discarded book. They angrily flipped through the yellowed pages. “I would think they would be decent enough to write it down somewhere.” Oswald forced his outstretched hand back to his side. He didn’t like how rough they were with the book.

“A-Actually, there’s no name at all. Your incantation is the only one that doesn’t mention a name...” The demon hummed at the thought, pleased that they were different from the others. Oswald was sure it was because they were more powerful than he had read. A name wasn’t enough to summon them.



“It doesn’t matter,” they said in finality. The demon snapped the book shut and tossed it aside. Oswald scrambled to catch it. There was a pause.

“Can... I give you one?” Oswald asked.

“I’m not your fucking dog.”

“No! I-I mean, of course not! That’s not what I meant!” Oswald jabbered. “I just thought it would be better than ‘Demon’.” They didn’t say anything. Oswald started to get frustrated. “Have any names in mind?”

“You’re asking me?” the demon asked in disbelief, their eyebrows raised. Oswald nodded, as if it wasn’t an odd question. “No one ever asked me that before.” He was about to ask why, but figured spending eternity in Hell didn’t give them a chance to discuss names. The demon had crossed their arms in front of their chest and thought for a few moments. “Dmitri,” they said. “I like that name.” Oswald blinked.

“Why?” he asked the demon. They shrugged.

“I knew someone named Dmitri in the seventh circle. Killed his family. Nice guy.” Oswald felt a pit form in his stomach.

“Well, uh, nice to meet you, Dmitri,” he said awkwardly.

They waved a dismissive hand in his direction.

“Yeah, whatever. When are we going to get down to business?” Dmitri asked impatiently. Oh, right. Oswald had gotten so wrapped up in having an actual demon in his room that he forgot why he summoned them in the first place.

“O-Oh, yeah. Well, I figured we could start tomorrow when we get to school,” Oswald said. Dmitri nodded, a sign for him to continue. When he didn’t, they blinked.

“And then what?”

“Then, uh, maybe you can give Jake and Grayson a wedgie if they make fun of my shoes. O-Oh, and if Brooke whispers to her friends about me, you could make her hair fall out,” Oswald listed. The pitch of his voice raised out of excitement. A smile sprouted on his face at the thought of the endless possibilities. Dmitri, on the other hand, did not look happy. The demon frantically glanced around the room before their eyes found the window behind Oswald’s desk. Dmitri ran towards it. Oswald looked after them with confusion.

“What are you—” The demon tumbled through Oswald’s room and clambered onto his desk. Dmitri made a move to open the window, perhaps break it, before their hands were tugged back by an invisible force. The demon yelped. At the same moment, Oswald felt something pull on his wrists. He glanced down and found the eerie outline of the shackles from before. Dmitri roared in anger and leaned back on their heels. This only made Oswald lurch forward. His eyes widened. He forgot. They were bound together.

“NO!” Dmitri screamed. Oswald brought a trembling finger to his mouth and attempted to hush the demon.

“You have to be quiet, my dad—”

“Are you fucking kidding me?!” the demon yelled. They glared at Oswald. “Seriously? A wedgie? How old are you?”

“Sixteen,” Oswald muttered.

“You think this is a game?” Dmitri growled. “You want me to stop people from bullying you?” Oswald hesitated before he nodded. The demon’s hands clenched into fists. “You don’t want to set the school on fire? Make your teachers drown in their own puke? Maybe have everyone fight to the death while you watch?” Oswald’s expression twisted into discomfort.

“Ew, n-no. I just want them to leave me alone. If they do something bad, then you can just... I don’t know, make them hurt for an hour and then I’ll be okay,” Oswald said. Dmitri’s shoulders shook with fury.

“I give birth to plagues! I can tear a man’s mind apart! I make mortals wish for death!” Dmitri howled. They tugged against the shackles again. “I-I made kingdoms fall, started wars, famine, pollution! A-And you want me to go to high school?” Oswald returned their tug with one of his own, a spark of his confidence returning.

“I got you out of Hell, so you will do as I say, and what I want you to do is keep everyone’s eyes off me,” he said firmly. Dmitri’s breathing was ragged with rage. They collapsed to their knees. He never thought he would ever see a demon look so defeated.

“How are you that powerful?” they asked. Oswald blinked with confusion. “How are you—” They were angry again.

Dmitri scrambled down from the desk and stalked over to the boy. “—powerful enough to summon me, a demon who can do anything?”

“Well, clearly you can’t do ‘anything’,” Oswald blurted out. He gestured to their wrists. “Without me, at least.” Dmitri blinked up at him with the force of Hell.

“You realize the price you paid, right? You can never go to Heaven,” they said. Dmitri’s tone had shifted from anger to one of importance, like it was the most serious thing in Oswald’s life. In a way, it was. The boy merely shrugged.

“That’s fine,” the teenager said. “It’s okay.” Dmitri made a move to strike him, to dig their claws into his stupid skull. The shackles pulled their hands roughly back to their sides. Oswald shied away from them before he managed a sigh of relief. After a few moments of intense silence with the visibly shaking demon, Oswald uneasily glanced around his room. “So, do you want a sleeping bag? I can give you one of my pillows, if you want.”

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The next morning, an elated Oswald trotted out of the house. He wore his favorite platform boots with fishnets and torn skinny jeans. He woke up early to do his makeup. His glittery champagne eyeshadow twinkled with the morning sun. Oswald tossed his bag over his shoulder and glanced back to the house. Dmitri followed him, their expression dripping with annoyance and anger. Oswald had been so kind as to lend them a shirt and jeans for the day. He liked seeing Dmitri in something that wasn’t so oversized and glum-looking. Pink was their color. Oswald had insisted that he did their makeup so they could match, but Dmitri said that if he did, they would personally drag him to Hell.

The two waited patiently for the bus. The demon gazed around the neighborhood with skeptical eyes.

“What’s wrong?” Oswald asked. “You look... grossed out?”

“Earth changed,” they said shortly. The boy bounced on the balls of his feet with interest.

“What did it look like before?” he asked. Dmitri eyed the large yellow bus as it neared their stop.

“The sky was bluer,” Dmitri said. Oswald felt his stomach sink. The two climbed onto the bus. Dmitri squirmed next to Oswald uncomfortably as the teenage chatter grew louder with each stop. When they arrived at the high school, Dmitri understood what compelled Oswald to summon them.

The school was run-down, unloved and uncared for. The halls reeked with the stench of marijuana and body odor. Dmitri saw the foul stares and glances aimed in Oswald’s direction. He ignored it and continued to trudge through the overpopulated corridors. Dmitri had to quicken their pace to keep up. As they neared Oswald’s locker, the demon watched with shock as a jock stuck out his foot in the middle of the hallway and made Oswald trip. Before the boy could find his footing, another jock pushed him into the lockers. They snickered and fist bumped as they left the scene. Dmitri found themselves glaring after them. They felt an anger they hadn’t felt in a long time. When they saw how Oswald attempted to use the lockers to regain his composure, Dmitri expected to be given an order. Set them on fire. Make them vomit up their intestines. Kill their families. Instead, Oswald heaved a shaky sigh and rubbed his bruised arm before he opened his locker.

The day didn’t get any better. Everywhere he went, Oswald was ignored and treated poorly. The popular girls would whisper into each other’s ears, hissing with grins as they exchanged fake rumors. The boys would avoid him at all costs, confused and unsettled by the way Oswald dressed. Even the “weird” kids didn’t go near him. Oswald was avoided like the plague. Dmitri waited for him to say something, to give them an order. They didn’t expect to feel so eager to make the school suffer. Oswald remained silent. It was as if an invisible force sealed his lips shut. At lunch time, the two sat underneath an old oak tree at the edge of the courtyard, away from everyone else. Oswald ate his lunch quietly while Dmitri stared out into the sea of students, close to their breaking point.

“I understand why you summoned me,” Dmitri muttered. Their fiery eyes narrowed as a group of girls walked past them. “High school is terrible.” Oswald only nodded softly and swallowed. The demon turned towards him. “So, what do you want me to do?” The boy glanced up to the crowd and mustered a shrug.

“I don’t know,” he said glumly. “I’m not really in the mood.” If Dmitri heard this earlier in the day, they wouldn’t have hesitated to growl in frustration or send a string of curses his way. The demon’s shoulders sank the longer they stared at Oswald. He wasn’t the confident boy they saw the night before. Oswald constantly messed with his hair and looked at his reflection through the screen of his phone to check his makeup. His eyes flashed anxiously to the crowd every ten seconds. He looked hollow, drained.

Dmitri was lost in thought when Oswald offered them some chips. The boy had to nudge the demon’s arm to get their attention. Dmitri blinked at him, then the chips. They accepted his silent offer and plucked one from the Ziploc bag.

Oswald couldn’t go to Hell. He didn’t deserve to spend eternity in the fiery pits just because he wanted a protector, a friend. As Dmitri chewed the disgusting artificial cheese-flavored corn chip, their expression hardened into determination. The demon made up their mind. It has ever been done before, but that didn’t mean it was impossible. Dmitri was going to get Oswald’s soul back. He deserved Heaven.

# AN EARLY INHERITANCE

by  
Rebecca Chatskis

My father presses the porcelain bowl into my hands  
with the insistence of an immigrant who was once forced  
to flee, leaving behind cherished heirlooms.  
My fingers run along the gold rim, flowers blossoming  
under the rosy swirl of my prints.  
Warm ivory tones, dotted with luminous petals,  
match my father's voice as it softens, low  
telling stories of a motherland I have never known.

Of birches that burned bright in a long-abandoned fireplace,  
of frost nipping the feeling out of toes and tips of ears,  
of his shattered bones under jackboots.

The end of my visit looms, tears pinprick our blue eyes.  
We fold newspaper between each saucer  
to protect the porcelain from turbulence.  
A choked goodbye in my throat, I pray the TSA  
will not force me to unpack the fragile box,  
but knowing that my ID is not required to state *Jewish*.

Safely tucked away in my apartment, I pierce  
the tape with the tip of my kitchen knife  
and carefully lay out each piece:

Bowls too shallow for soup and cups with tiny handles  
too delicate for coffee, the treasures of my father's inalienable love.

MOSES  
MOURNS MIRIAM  
by  
Rebecca Chatskis

Would that when I struck the rock,  
YHWH brought forth my sister  
in place of water to quench

His petulant flock.

Would that when I struck the rock,  
poison seeped from stones to mock,  
damn all from Canaan like me

their tears still bitter.

Would that when I struck the rock,  
YHWH brought back my sister.

# MAKING JAM WITH YOU

by  
Rebecca Chatskis

Fresh fragrant strawberries, juicy and sweet,  
arrive only once a year. In summer,  
bright red becomes a deep garnet color  
as the soft flesh bakes in the July heat.

You always trust me to choose the best batch,  
pooling our meager funds for a pallet,  
mashing the fruit in our practiced ballad  
of sugar and pectin.

Dewberry patch  
in California, your uncle's orchard,  
our berry kiss, my heart a hummingbird.

Twisting metal lids, you seal still warm jam  
in clear glass with sticky pink fingertips.  
Leaving jars to set, your hand to my lips,  
I kiss your sweet prints and you smile. *Goddamn.*



# CROSS

by  
Allison Swaim

This was not where I pictured myself,  
chained to my Saviour,  
his veins tied tight around my neck and  
his string of fate binding my ankles.

I cannot move.

And years go by and he is still my S a v i o u r,  
I was once betrayed but am now betrothed,  
forces unseen binding us once again and  
I am choking.

I cannot see.

Like sandy sludge clogs up everything  
my sight and my mind,  
blurring my thoughts and vision,  
until I finally choke and die.

My S A V I O U R is here again.

He clears out the sludge,  
tells me how beautiful I am,  
touches me *again* and suddenly  
I am living for him.

Contradictory thoughts are racing and fighting  
in my brain.  
I can't tell if I've become the doll he destined me to be  
Or if I'm chained to sin.

My S A V I O U R commands me once more.

My own tumultuous wails at night render  
my body useless,  
trapped by his will and his words  
My *S A V I O U R* has rendered me a failure again.

Long after freeing myself of his chains,  
I still find that string I severed trailing behind me.  
the threads become longer each day,  
searching for his end to connect  
to what's left of him.

I fear the return of my S A V I O U R.

# 180 DAYS/ PARABOLA

by

Allison Swaim

*Day 1: I make a list.*

Pros versus cons. When I read his text, I felt confused. Torn up and down, and only he could restore me to my previous state. Bright, bubbly and enthusiastic! I played soccer and was killer at guitar hero, and now? Now I'm nothing. Pros: I'm happy again. Probably. If I'm happy I can go off my medicine again, and wear short sleeved shirts. Cons: I'm a rebound. Or not. I don't really know. I'm not sure how he feels about me and I think I care. It's all jumbled and feels strange in my head.

I think that the pros outweigh the cons. I pick the phone up from my bed, and I see myself in the mirror. Should I consult with someone? He broke my heart, and now I'm crawling back to him again. I add that to the Cons side of the list. I notice that I'm still holding my phone; swipe right and pull up messages. I respond "Sure" and the send button clicks itself. The word launches into white techno abyss.

*Day 23: I don't kiss back.*

In the car, returning home from school, he's almost on top of me. It makes me uncomfortable but hey, that's what girlfriends do. And I know he'd never hurt me. He whispers in my ear and asks if he can kiss me for the first time. I'd been kissed on the cheek by exes and I think it won't be different, but it is. I feel like throwing up. It's my fault, I'm not used to it, I should just make myself more comfortable. Then he touches my chest, I can feel myself pulling back and I can't breathe, but I don't stop him because girlfriends don't do that. He stops.

He drives home, I smile and say I can't wait to see him again. Why didn't I ask him to stop? I can go home and reflect on that. I cry that night.

*Day 47: I talk about it.*

I arrive at his house. I tell him about my problem, and say I just need to practice. Practice being comfortable. He says okay and that he understands. Exposure therapy has to be the way to go. I practice and kiss him more, he holds me tightly. He's kind to me. He's kind; I couldn't ask for a better boyfriend. I just couldn't. Besides, it's not like there are any other guys I like. Just the one. I know I like him. I drill it into my brain that I like him, I like him, I like him.

*Day 58: I love you.*

He said it to me in the car that night, and he kept repeating it. He loves me. He loves me. I say it back for the first time. I can't say it out loud, so I write it down. Soon I can whisper it, but I can never say them normally. I know I would cry, but there is no reason to. He loves me, I like him, I love him. People ask if we're dating, of course I say yes. My parents love him, I'm sure one day we'll get married, even though we don't have the same goals. I'd live in the city with him, no children, no pets. A loft and we overlook the city at night, it's beautiful and bright. I'm comfortable, and I'm sure I'll be happy. I remember that I'm only 15, I shouldn't think about life so far from now. But I do love him. I love him, I do, I do, I do.

*Day 84: I snap for the first time.*

He touches my chest again. He laughs when he does, and compliments my chest. I snap. WHY WOULD YOU DO THAT?! But I know he couldn't have known better. I let him do it the first time, why would now be different? He apologizes, says he didn't mean to hurt me. I know he meant well. He was just playing, he loves me all the same. Why would he make that joke if he hated me. He thinks that I'm attractive, nobody else will, so I let it pass. But I remember when my parents walked in on him with his hand where it shouldn't have been, long before we dated. I didn't remember before. I cry again that night.

*Day 103: I question if I'm happy.*

I reread my list. "I'm happy again. Probably." Probably

stands out more than before, there was always a risk of me spiraling, and I realize that it's happening now. I cry that night, and the next, and I still tell him I love him. My mother begs to me, why are you unhappy? But I can't even verbalize how I feel, I'm so useless. I can't please anyone, I'm a useless person if I'm not pleasing others. Why am I here? Everything's going my way. I have friends, and new clothes, and a boyfriend like everyone. I'm acing my hardest classes and my teachers love me. Why do I feel so wrong?

I break down again. I tell my mother that something is wrong. I don't know what's wrong with me. She says that I just need to become more comfortable with him, and relationships. I'm just a kid after all. She says I'm confused.

*Day 126: I make a list.*

I list the reasons for my discomfort. I don't like it when he touches me, kisses me, or tells me he loves me. But why? He's made his mistakes, but when he broke me the first time, I could have sworn that I loved him. I know I did, back then! Emotions are confusing but I'm sure. So why does everything about him repulse me? Am I just not attracted to him?

How could that be?

*Day 145: I see a girl.*

I kept digging. My brain was hurting from overthinking everything, and day to day I was still with him. I don't know why I don't break the relationship off. I walk into my first period that morning. I sit next to my friend. I notice the girl across the classroom, she cut her hair short. She looks really good, it makes me happy. I invite her to sit with me and she does. Maybe I'll invite her tomorrow, too.

*Day 147: I think about a girl.*

She remains on my mind. It's been a couple days and I know I need to end things with him. I began to think I'd be happier if he were her.

I've never doubted my attraction to him, to men in general. Women were another story. I often find women pretty,

beautiful. It's normal, or maybe I'm bisexual. It doesn't matter so much to me what my sexuality is. As long as I still like men, somehow, I have to. I always have, if I don't I must be faking. So I assert my bisexuality, she's beautiful, but I still love men. I'd be a stereotype if I didn't, just picking a side. That's not me. I still love men.

*Day 168: I talk to a girl.*

She starts to sit with me daily. I get in trouble for talking during class. She's gay. That's cool. I blush around her, and bring her candy every day. It's strange. But I know she'd never like me, and anyways I'm still with him. I need to break it off, but I don't. I remain with him because it's easier, and I know she'd never like me. She probably thinks that I'm straight anyways. She wouldn't like me, so this is better.

*Day 180: I end things.*

I just need a break, I tell him. It's through the phone. I'm scared to hurt him, I led him on, I know it's all my fault. He deserves better, and I can't face him. I feel slightly justified because he asked me out over text, so it feels right to end things the same way. It's finally over. I feel sick but free at the same time. I tell my friends what is happening, they say they're sorry but I'm relieved. They don't need to say they're sorry because I ended it. I cut the string, I broke the chains, and I'm free. He's still sad though. I broke his heart.

My mother is upset with me. She loved him, he was smart and strong, more so than me. She said I'd marry him because he's just like my father and daughters always marry men like their fathers. She begs me to stay friends, so I do. We're still friends. I wouldn't throw away a perfectly good relationship like that, over something this silly. But we don't talk for awhile.

We don't talk for awhile.

# DEATH IS A HIGHWAY

by  
Paton Hudak

One of my past incarnations died in a car crash; that's my best guess as to why I have an innate fear of driving. Since elementary school, I have had nightmares that involve my dad calling my younger sister and I, asking us to come pick him up from an unknown location. To this day, it remains such due to the fact that we never reached it. Having only seven or eight years on this Earth under my tiny belt, I had no idea how to drive. But I was the big sister, so my dream-self would always climb into the driver's seat of my family's minivan. I felt like Thumbelina in a towering throne; the burden of the crown encircled me entirely. My legs hardly reached the end of the seat, let alone the pedals. My stubby fingers did not grasp the sticky, pleather wheel so much as rest on its surface. By some miracle dream mechanic, I would always get the van started and have a loose approximation of control over the vehicle for a brief moment. Often, I got the van out of the driveway and down the street before we would launch into someone or something and go careening down the hills of our neighborhood, wrecking the neighbor's cars and lawn decorations.

These dreams began nearly a decade before I learned how to drive, and they only got worse the more I learned. Driver's Ed was a series of statistics—the occurrence of six million crashes every year, the fact that one million of those were fatal, the reality that smaller drivers (one of which, being 5'2" and 100 pounds, I certainly am) are often crushed by the airbags meant to protect them—splayed across photos of people who had lost eyes or noses or legs and cars that had been balled up like smoking sheets of tin foil, and all of this was

delivered through a haze of weed to glassy-eyed teenagers, some of whom had already been driving illegally for years.

Most adolescents' incentive for completing driver's education is the privilege and freedom that comes with the license; my parents told me before every class that if I would just pass the test and get it over with, I wouldn't have to drive anymore. My own utter lack of faith in my own ability to command a temperamental, two-ton beast was a given, but I was beginning to think that the prospect of accidentally killing someone was considered an exciting rite of passage by my peers.

My first car came into my possession by accident. My high school was giving away a car at the end of the year to a random student with high attendance. I was only there, melting in the wet heat in our school football stadium, on the insistence of my parents; my friends and I had plans to sneak out after the giveaway and go to lunch, then round out the afternoon with video games and movies. Even before my full name was called, everything went into slow motion. "Payton" is a fairly common name, so they probably—nope, they just called my very unique last name and most definitely meant me. I staggered down the stairs toward the silver 2014 Nissan Sentra as the world of metal bandstands and AstroTurf football fields went in and out of focus like a manual-lens camera in the hands of a child.

The rest of the event is a black shadow in my memory. Tied to it is the feeling of my heartbeat in my white-knuckled fists and the sounds of muffled cheers as though I were underwater. Then comes the cloth seat against my back as I sat in the car, the resistance of the brake beneath my tennis shoes, and the *chi-chink* of the key being shoved into the ignition by what felt like someone else's hand. Everything returns to black when the beast I've been swallowed by roars to life and my body is kept from leaping out the window only by my sudden paralysis. At the end of the day, I ended up with a several-thousand-dollar gift that made me sick to think about.

It drove me crazy that no one else thought of this as a death sentence. The chances of dying by some of the most



common and acceptable fears, like snakes and spiders, are practically zero. The likelihood of a little turbulence taking an airplane out of the sky is around one in eleven million. There are people who never go to the beach despite the odds of a shark attack being in their favor at three million to one. But my fear of being one of the three thousand people that die in a car crash every single day—that's irrational.

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Two years later, my original nightmare was realized. Society had officially placed its trust in me as a responsible and capable driver in the form of a license, and my parents called to say that they were going to be late picking up my younger siblings and some of their friends from school. Could I go get them instead? Yes, I felt comfortable enough in my car on a familiar trip, though I didn't like the idea of having the lives of rowdy children in my hands. That's when I realized: my car didn't have enough seats for everyone. I would have to take the minivan.

The keys jingled softly in my trembling hand as I reached for the driver's door with the other. Whereas my car was something I could step down into, this monster had to be stepped up to. But it was only a step, unlike the hike in my dream. The seat was roomier than my car's, but I didn't feel like puny Jack looking for a giant golden goose as I felt for the gear shift. After an adjustment, my foot pressed firmly into the brake pedal. My fingers curled around the Texas-baked wheel. I closed my eyes for a moment, then turned the key.

Nothing happened. The car started, but I wasn't suddenly thrown from my metal steed or blown up in fiery regret. For a few minutes, I just sat and moved air in and out of my lungs. Then I put the machine in reverse, double-checking it had fully shifted gears and that all my mirrors were in place. I rolled down the driveway with such pain-staking caution that I could have sworn I could feel the tracks in the tires cyclically easing themselves across the pavement. I was out of my home base and on the road, and neither my brakes nor

my heart had given out. As I rolled up to the stop sign at the end of my street, I realized that I was ok. The vehicle obeyed my directions without rebellion. The neighbors' yards were barren of black rubber marks and broken ornaments. There were no screams of pedestrians caught beneath my wheels. I could even see over the steering wheel, mostly.

The elementary school was a less-than-ten-minute drive from my house, so in this case, the journey wasn't the issue. The destination—riddled with soccer moms, their hulking family vans, and children scurrying between the bumpers they were scarcely taller than, bookmarked by flashing yellow "School Zone" signs—was the true battleground. My fingers trembled as they wrapped around the steering wheel to complete the wide turn into the pick-up lane. The minivan slid into place. I stayed a full car length away from the next driver and rolled toward the front entrance of the school.

When at last I reached the front, I saw the kids running toward the familiar vehicle. My little brother yanked the sliding metal door aside and opened his mouth to greet our parents, but his eyes met mine instead. He stood there for a moment before helping our younger siblings and their friends into the van. Once everyone was loaded, I made sure they all had their seatbelts on. I was about to ask how their days were when my ten-year-old brother turned and said, "Payton doesn't like driving. Everybody be quiet until we get home, please."

And they were. For the next five minutes, I was able to focus on getting my cargo home in one piece. Only once we had returned to the driveway and I had put the emergency brake on, felt the beast settle, and taken back the key could I take another full breath. The kids broke into chatter, unbuckled their belts and were in the backyard by the time I shut the driver's door.

I don't know where my driving phobia stems from, but I've realized that it doesn't matter. If my family needs me, I am going to find a way to be there.

# IN THE MORNING

by

Kendall Simmons

There's a warm body  
that curves  
    around you  
moves the sheets in a delicate  
    dance  
            against  
your skin

Butterflies  
    kiss your cheeks  
the light touch  
            tickles  
your mouth

The sun's lazy  
    ascent  
            into the sky  
lets you lay  
    for a little  
longer

With eyes closed it's easy to imagine  
someone loves you

The sheets caress  
the part of your body  
    that is  
        lonely  
When your eyes open  
the bed  
    is cold

# PROM'S PHANTOM

by

Kendall Simmons

Breathing is hard  
with broken ribs  
The phantom in my chest  
has broken it

into pieces  
to create hands  
that no one else can see  
Using pieces of me

to try to stop  
my heart  
from beating  
so fast  
when I look at you  
and her

dancing  
watching you sway with her in arms  
I used to call  
safe

I wish it would rain  
in this gymnasium  
so the only evidence of this pain  
would be the taste of salt  
on the upper part of my lip





Image 1  
Deana Jones



Image 2  
Deana Jones



# Neither Tear Nor Mend.

Brianna Dunston





# Migrating Omens

Emma Rhyne



# Backbone of the Forest

Emma Rhyne



## Changing Skins

Emma Rhyne



# Grand Canyon

Katie Harris



**Morbid Curiosity**  
Emma Rhyne



## Safe in the Shelter of Speed

Emma Rhyne



Persephone Steps out of her Skin  
Emma Rhyne

# IN A LOVE STORY

by

Kendall Simmons

There is always a beginning,

when we sat next to each other  
our chairs just an inch apart.  
We breathed the same air,  
I felt lucky when you asked me for a pen.  
I gave you the one  
I wrote all my dreams with by accident.  
I hoped you couldn't feel how many times I've written your name.

A middle,

I got to hold your hand at the movie theater,  
watched you fall asleep.

I hear you mutter I love you,  
but the name isn't mine.  
I love you.  
Even when you close your eyes  
you don't see me.

And an end,

I have to get used to breathing  
on my own.  
When I write new poems  
I use my laptop, because  
my pen only holds nightmares, but

I still love you.  
I still feel  
so lucky  
to have created a love story  
with you.



# YELLOW-LIGHT GIRLS

by

Krista Lambert

The hot-tub's sides were slippery with congealing dish soap—the kind that smelled like stale lemons and churned up a tower of bubbles so high that God should've gotten himself involved, Lynn thought. (He hadn't.) Instead the babble of Camp Mikiwam's counselors—and a few favored wranglers—rang out deep into the northern night, punctuated by Tate's laughter and the occasional girl's squeal.

Lynn wasn't among the group—not when they dumped the slimy yellow soap into the water, not when they sang along to Ke\$ha on someone's smuggled phone, not when Tate did his impression of their high school's Algebra teacher to loud applause.

Nope, she hadn't been among them. Instead, she was watching from the window of the Snack Shack, where Tate had asked if she could clean snow-cone syrup off the floor. “Or there'll be ants,” he'd said. His hand had played with Ashley's hair while he spoke.

Lynn could've joined them when she'd finished scrubbing, sure, palms red from cherry food-coloring and body smelling of Cheetos and 409. She'd thought about it. But hovering, uncertain, by the edges of the lamplight, her swimsuit hiding too much and not enough at the same time, she wasn't able to take that final step. She crept back into the Shack instead, and waited till she saw Tate slip his hand under Ashley's blue nylon top to make her decision.

Quietly, carefully, while the camp workers shrieked and giggled behind her, she snuck through the night-black Maine woods to the Unit Leader's cabin, sure that Tate wouldn't

have bothered to leave it locked. Inside, against the wall and beneath his mattress, just as he'd revealed to Lynn last summer (when his mattress was where they'd spent most of their free time), was his collection of old Altoid tins and Zig Zag rolling papers. Of course he hadn't moved them.

Before she could slow down enough to change her mind, Lynn snatched a tin and a paper pack and darted back to the safety of the red spruce shadows, where she paused again to watch the fun.

She'd made it just in time: the steam and jostling bodies had all become too much for poor Ashley by that point, and the girl dropped like a soft carcass onto the deck. Everyone left within three minutes: Tate took Ashley on his back to the infirmary while the rest of the summer workers wandered off to shower and climb into their bunks. There was no point, really, in continuing the impromptu Sunday-night pool party without Tate there, and they knew it. A new batch of campers would be swarming in tomorrow anyway, and the chance to sleep in the meantime was precious.

So now, with the spotlights off, party over, and soap scum drying on the artificial wood-grain planks, Lynn stepped up to the hot-tub and placed her contraband on its broad edge. She hoisted one leg over the side, then the other, feeling the still-warm water lap about her thighs. This was good, this was okay. She didn't need the noise, the brightness, or the play. She didn't need Tate, that was for sure.

That was for damn sure.

She took a breath. Her hands were shaking as she popped the lid off the canister, so she paused and clenched them into fists until they stopped. Fuzzy moss-green clumps of marijuana peered up at her from the tin, looking a bit too close to a cat's leftovers on a rug for her taste. The smell caught hold of the tub's steam and rode it. Lynn looked around.

Alone.

How had Tate done this when she'd watched him from his bed last year? When he'd told her, step by step, his own technique? Lynn couldn't remember. She'd never needed to, before. She'd never had an interest.

Fingers fumbling in the darkness, she slipped a paper from the pack and spread it on the tub's edge, trying to avoid any water droplets or lingering bubbles which might interfere. She smoothed the thin sheet out. It felt waxy, fragile, like what she wrapped her campers' sandwiches in for Picnic Tuesdays.

Okay.

Still alone.

A pinch of weed between her thumb and forefinger, Lynn slowly crumbled a dark line down one side of the flimsy square. It shuddered in the night breeze, but didn't blow away. What next?

"Whoa, now." The voice from behind her was low and a little hoarse, as if the speaker couldn't catch her breath. Lynn spun. Water sloshed against her stomach as she did. "Mei."

The camp dishwasher—Mei—had one hand on her hip and the other clutching her ribs, shaking with silent laughter. She was staring at the half-made joint. "Of all the people—Of all the things that I... Chupta, bitch? What the fuck?"

Chupta. Lynn almost laughed, herself. (Almost.) Even though Mei wasn't from around here, she talked like a forty-year-old native Mainer—presumably because she liked the looks she got when local lumbermen heard things like "chupta" coming out of a skinny Asian kid no taller than their belt-loops. It really freaked them out. Lynn'd seen it.

It was pretty funny, actually. This whole thing.

And so, instead of stumbling through some bogus explanation, Lynn cracked a grin. A thread of hope had begun forming at the edges of her brain, consisting of one simple, certain fact: Mei hadn't been invited to the pool party, either.

Lynn gestured to the loot. "You wanna share?"

Mei, though, left her laughter like it stung and dropped her eyes to her torn jeans. (Fashionably torn. She really had this whole badass-punk thing down, Lynn thought.) "Nah," she said. "I'm clean."

Lynn's lungs felt tight—and she hadn't even taken her first drag. "Well... er," she said, and stopped. Mei glanced up. "I kind of... um. I've never tried, before—I swear. And I. I need this job."

Mei rolled her eyes. (Yeah, she definitely had the punk thing solid). “I’m no snitch.” She nodded at the makings of the joint. “Go nuts.”

“Oh... thanks.”

A whippoorwill sang somewhere in the pines. The two girls looked at each other.

Lynn cleared her throat. “Coming in?”

Mei regarded the tub for a moment in the gloom. A half-smirk made its way onto her face, and she bent to tug at her Doc Martens. Before Lynn realized what was happening, the dishwasher had stripped her jeans and tank top, unhooked her bra, and squirmed out of what looked like boxer briefs. She vaulted the tub’s side in one graceful leap; warmth sloshed up Lynn’s chest as the water took Mei’s body in.

“I,” Lynn started, “I meant...” She glanced down at her own checkered top, now looking dated and pathetically prudent next to the nakedness beside her. If she took it off, though, she knew her bare figure would look worse.

“Don’t have a swimsuit,” Mei explained when the rest of Lynn’s sentence never came out. “You don’t mind, do you? Yours is cute.”

“I—Thanks.” That was a lie, and Lynn knew it; it had to be. When she’d first squeezed the two-piece on four weeks ago, at the start of summer, the earliest campers of the year had squealed at the colors (pink and green), and christened her “Watermelon.”

The kids weren’t usually that bad; she doubted they’d meant it to be mean. But Tate had glommed onto the name and kept it going, booming “Hey, Watermel-Lynn!” with exaggerated emphasis anytime he caught her eye—long after that first batch of kids had been shipped home.

It wasn’t about the colors, for him.

She’d been much slimmer last year. Skinny, even. When she’d danced with Tate at the August bash, his arms had wound around her waist and across her spine with ease, his rough palms hot against her skin. After the break-up, come that fall, a lot of things had changed: the way he spoke when she could hear him, the friends they shared, and this—how her clothes fit her. (Or how they didn’t.)

Mei, at least, had never called her any type of gourd. Mei'd never called her much at all, though, to be fair. Counselors and kitchen help didn't mingle at Camp Mikiwam, and the most Lynn had seen of Mei before now (other than spouting Maine-isms across the room at mandatory staff sessions) was a dark silhouette dumping dirty water out the back doors of the mess hall. Her name had come up now and then along the lunch-line, but Lynn had never bothered asking for details. Gossip at Camp Mikiwam was cheaper than STDs.

The joint was ruined, by now—soaked with tub water. Lynn turned her back on Mei and faced the forest as she peeled out a new paper, pretending to focus on rolling but in reality trying to forget the slim legs and perfectly flat stomach on display, so much prettier than any part of Lynn had ever been.

Her fingers couldn't seem to learn their job: licking the edges of the sheet just made it slimy, and dark pot was spilling out from either end. How on earth did people do this and enjoy it?

Soft laughter sounded from behind Lynn, and then there she was—Mei, with her blue-tipped hair and wiry arms—pressing close and pulling the crinkled spliff out of Lynn's grasp. "I'll take pity, just this once," she said. "Much as I find this hilarious."

Lynn gave up immediately, scooting back to watch as Mei's long fingers twisted, rolled, and sealed the joint with ease. "You're good at this," she breathed. Better than Tate ever was, anyway.

Mei laughed again—but it wasn't soft this time. "Why do you think I'm here?" She passed the finished joint back and cracked her knuckles.

"Huh?"

"Community Service, bitch. I got caught."

"You mean..." Lynn let the horror of it wash over her face. "You mean you're not getting paid?" Kitchen duty at this place was hellish. Everyone knew that.

Mei shook her head, grinning; something in her eyes had shifted as she'd watched Lynn's reaction to her past. "It's

better than juvie, which is where I'll be headed if I'm found with the likes of you, you rebel."

Lynn coughed—the earthy scent of weed was heavy in her nostrils—and glanced around. "Sorry. I didn't mean to get you..." She stopped. The little stick in her palm sat waiting, motionless. "Oh, Lord."

"What? What's going on?" Mei reached an arm up to cover her bare chest, eyes darting from one tree trunk to the next.

"No, it's—" Lynn sighed. "I forgot to bring a light."

The silence stretched between them like an ocean. Finally, Mei leaned back against the tub's side and said, "You weren't lying about never having done this before, huh?"

"I wasn't lying. This isn't... I just, I just needed to..." How could she explain this feeling? It was the same one she'd had in July of last year, when she'd cruised back roads in her mom's mustang with Tate—because he'd said he liked the sound the engine made, and because his own old beater's windows were always jammed. They'd taken ME-35 to Waterford to buy some Ginger Ale, and he'd laughed (God, he'd laughed) when she'd pulled up to the intersection. "That sums you up, Lynn," he'd said. "Right there."

Now, Lynn glanced at the naked girl across from her—so beautiful, so bold—and blurted it out before she could stop herself: "What sort of yellow-light driver are you?"

Mei blinked at her, skin glowing in the starlight. "Pardon?"

"I mean, you hit the gas, right, when the traffic signal goes from green to yellow, and you're right there, you're at that perfect spot—so maybe if you hoof it, you'll get through...? Yeah? Well, I hit the brakes. Every time. And I just... I'm sick of it. People like Ta—" She swallowed. "I bet you hit the gas."

For a long time, Mei just sat there, arms slung over the laminated plastic on either side of her, looking for all the world like some sort of street boss, despite her lack of clothes. Finally, she tipped her head forward to catch Lynn's eyes—hair falling, damp, around her cheeks—and whispered, "I can't drive."

Lynn had to dunk her face under the water to keep her giggles from growing too loud in the quiet camp. She saw Mei's mouth quirking up around the edges, saw her narrow shoulders shake. The joint slipped from Lynn's hand and bobbed in the water beside them. Somewhere, an owl cooed, low.

"Why are you even awake, anyway?" Lynn asked once she'd caught her breath. It was past midnight by now—it had to be—and kitchen hands had to work earlier than pretty much anyone else on staff.

"Eh? I'm always up this late. It's peaceful."

Lynn raised her brows.

"Okay," said Mei, "that, and I try not to shower with the other girls. They don't like it so much."

"Say what now?" Lynn stared. Mikiwam's showers weren't open-air or anything... each girl got her own stall. The most someone might even see would be bare shoulders. Why should that bother anybody? Unless—

"I'm queer," said Mei. "I thought you knew." She started pulling in on herself, then, hunching over and shifting farther from where Lynn sat in the confines of the tub. Her eyes were down. "Not like I hide it."

Lynn swallowed. "Oh," she said. Her mind was racing—how could anyone so pretty be self-conscious? And what was she supposed to do, now that Mei'd... caught her up?

Across the tub, Mei didn't seem to be taking the silence as a good sign. "Go ahead and say it," she told Lynn, flicking droplets from her fingers and staring at them fixedly as they formed ripples on the surface of the water. "I know you need to."

Had Lynn missed something? Was there a coming-out etiquette class she should've gone to between study hall and French? "Er... what?" God, she was fucking this up.

Mei formed air-quotes in the space between them as she said, "I don't care if you're gay, just try not to fall in love with me, pretty please." Her voice was rough.

The absurdity of it drew a laugh from Lynn, which she stifled quickly as Mei glanced up. "Sorry," she said. "Sorry. It's

just—well, look at you. And look at me. I hold no delusions.” Her swimsuit felt tight around her belly, pinched under her arms. Now it was her turn to stare down at her hands.

But Mei moved closer, after a moment, and knelt in the water so that only her eyes poked out, directly in Lynn’s line of sight. She let a whirl of bubbles rise and pop around her cheeks, lips forming words underwater that rose garbled practically beyond comprehension in open air. They sounded kind, though.

Lynn thought of the old tales of sirens in green swamps luring travelers to their death—and for one second, she believed them. She cracked a smile.

Mei smirked back, sat up, and spat water in a stream onto the deck. “Tate’s a moron, you know?” she said. “Fuck him.”

Lynn jolted. “How do you...?”

“I’m a grunt worker, bitch: I’m invisible. Like a ninja.” She spread her hands like fans before her face. “People say things and don’t even know I’m there to hear ’em. Tate’s an ass.”

“Yeah,” Lynn said. She felt a secret coil in her chest uncurl as she fished the soggy joint out from a floating clump of foam and held it up. “This is his, you know.”

Mei looked proud. “You kified it?”

“I mean... I guess.” Lynn shrugged. “I was pissed, okay?”

“Man, stay away from me—You’ll get me thirty years and no parole.” The words were soft.

“Nah,” said Lynn. “I hit the brakes, remember?” She crushed the soaked gray paper in her hand. “This is not the sort of thing I’m good at, anyway.” Stupid non-existent lighter.

Mei just nodded, though. “What is?”

For a long while, Lynn peered around them at the camp’s grounds bathed in shadow. She listened to the whirring of the crickets in the rye and shivered at the light touch of the wind. The water felt almost cold, now, on her ribs.

Mei was waiting; she hadn’t turned away.

“I’ll let you know,” said Lynn finally, “once I’ve got some idea.”



At that, her naked friend (they were friends, now, right?) nodded, rose, and hopped out of the tub just as easily as she'd jumped in. She scooped her piled clothes up to her chest, winked, and said, "I'll hold you to it."

Lynn watched her as she strolled into the trees, bare back shining, pale, for all the night to see.

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When Lynn herself finally clambered from the water and headed for Cabin 17—which tomorrow would be packed with hyper children—she only paused a moment to toss the ruined joint and paper-pack into a bin. The tin itself she shoved under the pier-and-beam foundations of her Cabin's deck; she couldn't very well offer the weed back to Tate, but it still seemed somehow profane to simply... chuck it. She'd worry about that another day. Plenty of time, still, to handle everything. Right now, she wanted pillows and dry clothes. And maybe, just maybe, a good dream.

But that night, Lynn dreamt of lights that turned from green straight into red, with nothing at all coming between.

\*\*

The next day, that week's kids spewed out of busses beneath a heavy sky; clouds had rolled in from the north. Lynn spent the afternoon cross-legged on the floor of her cabin, playing I-Spy, Mad-Libs, and Spoons with twelve slightly dampened tweens.

Chris McKinley, Mikiwam's Chief of Staff, was coming Tuesday to lead the bonfire songs, but if this downpour didn't let up, he'd be hard-pressed to find a log still dry enough to light. (Mei would probably tell him he was "in a gaum," Lynn thought, and shook her head.)

They had chili dogs at the mess hall while rain hammered the roof. It was hot, but Lynn wore her grey knit cardigan over her shirt anyway, to hide the bunching of the fat along her back. Every once in a while, she would glance over her

shoulder towards the kitchens, trying to catch a glimpse of spiked blue hair. She saw none—until the dessert line opened up and she was corralling her cabin towards the pudding. Then, from behind her, the double doors to the dumpsters swung inward to reveal tossing trees, swirling leaves, and Mei.

A wolf-whistle rang across the room; Lynn turned, confused, to see Tate grinning at the dish hand from over his pile of beans, his gaze holding a glint Lynn recognized—one she used to like. Beside him, Ashley'd lowered her head.

Lynn swiveled again, and—Ah. The rain had soaked straight through Mei's tank, revealing the clear outline of her bra underneath. At Tate's whistle, the eyes of every male in the hall had landed on the clinging fabric. Lynn could see, as if in slow-motion, Mei's shoulders start to hunch—like they had for that awful moment in the tub.

Lynn thought of clothes hitting the ground so easily the night before, of Mei's smile and the stretch of her naked arms. Now, Mei's fists were clenched at her sides; her body seemed to crumple like an empty soda can.

Lynn set her jaw so firmly that it hurt. Before she realized what she was doing, she was striding across the room, peeling off her cardigan as she went. (Her own bra-line didn't seem important anymore).

She reached Mei just as Tate called out, "Aw, no fun, Watermelynn," but she didn't turn. She offered Mei the grey lump of fabric with both hands.

Mei gave her a blank look in return. By her sides, her bony fists were clenching, unclenching, clenching again.

Maybe Lynn wasn't the only one feeling stuck.

"Only if you want it," Lynn mumbled. She shifted where she stood.

Mei took the cardi.

Just then, a squeal rang out from Lynn's right: one of her campers had dropped vanilla custard on another. Lynn bolted for the napkins, and by the time she'd raised her head again, the mess-hall chatter had resumed, and Mei was gone.

Minutes later, when a from-away girl got a stomach cramp and started crying to go home, Lynn had to herd her

group back to their cabin early. She watched the back doors to the kitchen as she went, but they stayed closed.

Maybe come morning, she'd wake before the kids and slip out in time to help with breakfast prep. The cooks might not trust her to scramble cartoned eggs, but surely they wouldn't turn down an extra dish hand. Lynn set her alarm for four instead of five, and drifted off to the sounds of wind and water.

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Sometime in the night, the storm knocked out Mikiwam's power. It was because of this that Lynn awoke not to her queued-up Bowie song and the pre-dawn chill, but to whispering, and warm sun striking her eyes.

"Is she up? She's up!" came the voice of Abbie, a lanky ten-year-old from—(Lynn searched her brain a moment)—Farmington. "Miss Lynn, the toilet won't flush, and there's a trooper's car outside."

"Urgh," said Lynn, parting painfully from her pillow. "The toilet's... There's a what?" She nearly clipped her head on the bunk above as she bolted upright.

"A trooper. A cop, Miss Lynn."

"Yeah, I know what a... trooper... is..." She was at the window, now, and sure enough: there was a periwinkle Ford pulled up in front of the Creation Station, and an officer in matching colors pacing near Cabin 23. In a huddle some yards away from him stood five counselors and one very jumpy-looking kid.

Lynn felt a vortex open in her gut. "Stay here, girls," she said without glancing behind her, then yanked open the door.

Soggy earth squished between her toes as she walked across the grounds, trying her best to look natural, unconcerned. She was halfway to the little group before she realized she was still in nothing but her pj's. Oh well. Too late now.

"Hey, Miranda," she called to the youngest of the counselors—a new girl who'd just started at Mikiwam this summer. She hadn't known Lynn last year, so Lynn liked her. "Chupt—What's going on?"

“Ah,” said Miranda, as she broke away from the others to meet Lynn. “It’s crazy—”

“Stephen here found a tin can full of pot, just lyin’ on the road,” hollered Sal of Cabin 3, bulldozing the rest of Miranda’s explanation and putting a hand on the nervous boy’s shoulder. “Handed it right to Mr. McKinley when he arrived.”

McKinley. Shit. Lynn glanced behind her at the muddied mess of lawn around her cabin; she hadn’t even thought about the rising water yesterday, or how easy it might be for her loot to be swept from its nook under the deck. Shit, shit, shit.

“Does McKinley...” She cleared her throat, started again. “Do they know whose weed it was?” She’d joined the huddle now and could see the glitter in Sal’s eyes.

“That’s the weird part,” said Miranda, twisting her neck to glance at the officer, who was mumbling something into his scanner. “McKinley was about to scour the whole camp, roust everyone—but somebody stepped up before he could.”

“Somebody?” Lynn’s mouth was dry.

“Yeah,” said Sal. “Some kitchen aid I think. The real news, though, is that she snitched on where she scored it. You’ll never believe—”

“It was Tate!” hissed Miranda, this time foiling Sal’s own reveal. “Tate Beckworth: he’s the one who brought it in. He’s kept a whole stash in his bunk—it’s the first place the trooper looked, after McKinley’d called him and the girl narked.”

“Oh my God,” said Lynn, squinting at the Ford sedan. If she put one hand over her brow, she could just make out a shadow in the seats... or was that two shadows? She started for the car.

But the policeman was already there himself and climbing in. He pocketed his scanner and slid behind the wheel while Lynn was struggling to push the shout in her belly up through her lips. The blue door slammed. The engine revved.

Miranda and Sal were calling for her to wait, but Lynn ignored them and broke into a run. From the corner of her eye, she glimpsed Ashley in an alley between two cabins, looking like someone’d just socked her in the gut.

Lynn didn't break one stride. She reached the Creation Station lot just as Tate's slack face came into view through the passenger-side window. But the trooper turned his ride around, then, and it was Mei who was lounging in the back.

She'd known it would be Mei, of course, since the moment Miranda had said somebody took the fall. She'd known, but still...

She had to do something, say something—make them stop—

Yellow sunlight blinked off the tinted glass. Mei turned her head, caught Lynn's gaze... and smiled.

From behind Lynn, the other counselors were jogging to catch up, their breath growing louder as they approached. They paused, though—a few feet away from her—and started whispering.

“Look,” came Kenna's voice. “Lynn's crying.”

“Yeah,” said Sal. “She's crying over Tate.”

Beyond the window, Mei's grin hadn't wavered. As her driver rolled the Ford onto the gravel of Mikiwam's entrance road and hit the gas, she held up two fingers in a 'peace' salute, then blew a kiss.

No, no, no.

Lynn swallowed. She took a breath.

She raised her hand.

# M&M'S AND OTHER SWEET THINGS

by  
Marisela Rios

They called us M&M's  
because our names started the same.  
We were small and round  
in our faces. Our eyes  
were little chocolates  
like blue, green, and red-coated  
treats we split between our teeth.  
We were a pair of kids  
sharing our packets of gum  
and candy on the playground,  
near the swings, swallowing them  
faster and faster like a game  
we couldn't outgrow, so we replaced  
our M&M's with other sweet things of the same  
blue, green, and red, but this time I don't think it's a game.

# FROM OUTSIDE THE WAITING PLACE

by  
Emma Rhyne

Hammering heels beat the dust  
out of the boards, and off the stairs  
as we rush to conquer the basement  
of our third antique store.

Like marauders, our glittering eyes see  
An opportune conquest - "Sate our starvation!" -  
We're addicted to interrupting the dust of moments.

Aha! We see a doll. She sits on her meek  
throne of fruit crates. Mildew clouds her  
eyes and the spores clog our lungs  
with the patient reek of fear  
as we, the entitled, indulge our curiosity.

...Who she is,  
what sticky, loving fingers  
clutched her to a trusting chest  
before dropping her to rest in  
this waiting place...

is irrelevant. We are here to stare,  
bare-faced, in our ugly greed  
as we ravage her loneliness for laughs.

# WOULD YOU LIKE TO MEET ME?

by  
Emma Rhyne

I see it in your eyes  
that no, probably not.  
Our lives, strangely,  
differ too much for us  
to hope to click and so  
I pull out my phone  
to spare both of us  
the embarrassment  
of conversation as we walk,  
side by side to class.



# BREAKING A MOLD

by

Payton Hudak

I hovered over the girl's bed, watching, wondering how she would die. The universe was telling me to remain here, at this human's side, the next twenty-four hours or so. Bailey was a twenty-two-year-old college student in some city or another—some place where humans crowded themselves even tighter than usual.

She was just beginning her day, still in bed even though her alarm had gone off several times. Her roommate was growing increasingly annoyed with her. I chuckled to myself—that is, I jovially vibrated the particles along my z-axis—because I felt the ripple in the universe caused by her roommate's decision to throw a pillow at her.

My kind, being eternal, can more or less tell the future, at least for lower beings. But any time a human gets involved—all that passion, redirected on a whim—the numbers get infinitely less certain. This prediction, however, was fulfilled the next moment. Did it hurt, I wonder? It didn't look like the projectile was suited for its purpose, if the other human meant to harm Bailey. I didn't think this would be her cause of death.

We can narrow it down to about twenty-four hours before they die, so we keep an eye on them when we know their time is coming, and we make sure we're there when their soul separates from their physical form. They're almost endearing that way, after being cleaved from their foul flesh. I wonder how they feel when they realize they've transformed from worm to winged.

I guess you could call me an angel. But not like that doll with which humans top their flaming foliage in the winter. I'm really more of an eternal, formless consciousness occupying a plane of reality that overlaps the corporeal human world, but I like the simplicity of angel. "Guardian," though—not in the job description. My kind, we just get humans from point A to

point B—from Earth to wherever humans go when they die. I'm not here to save anybody's life.

As awful as human life must be, I had a moment of compassion for this creature who would die so young. I watched as she finally shut off her alarm and crawled out of bed in the dark. When her smallest balancing digit made sudden contact with her bed frame in a way that was apparently unpleasant, she yelled something short and aggressive, provoking her roommate to sit up and yell at her.

Verbal speech is such a primitive means of communication, it borders on painful for my kind. Though pain is not actually a sensation we experience, of course. Humans talk so much, it's almost easier to keep track of when they're silent. Are they embarrassed that they haven't learned telepathy after all these millennia? What a pitiful existence, to have to eat and sleep and feel, always barking at each other because they're too loud to think properly.

They finished their inane conversation and Bailey prepared herself for the day in the dark, fumbling due to her innate human limitations. The fact that humans get by with only five senses has always amazed me, especially given that they're all so dismal. I was far from all-knowing, but I didn't need clairvoyance to know that the red top she chose to don would not increase her chances of finding a life partner. She radiated an odd mixture of disgust and pride toward the clothing, as if she knew she shouldn't be wearing it but it had something else of value.

Humans are creatures cast from a mold. I let myself drift through her eating breakfast, brushing her teeth, combing her hair. I've seen it all done—rarely does a human's final day begin differently than any other, or from any other human's. The only thing that nearly registered as of interest was her writing a lovely note for her roommate. I thought they had been arguing earlier, but I may have been a touch distracted by my own supreme abilities—there were countless other little human oddities less common, if not less inexplicable, than human conflict. It wasn't as if I cared enough to ask, even if I could.

Without a physical form, my kind can't interact with the physical world. I know of a few angels who have chosen to

manifest, but the transformation is permanent. We lose our knowledge and memories along with our place in the spiritual plane. It isn't common, obviously. Who would give up this power? It's our approximation of death, in a way, the true fall from grace.

I would soon arrive at a fate worse than death—a human Christmas party. Bailey entered a large, dimly-lit building with noise coming from the walls and sustenance either entering or exiting each human present. How a restaurant can be considered a place of celebration is beyond my un-Earthly understanding. Would their midday gathering be the end of Bailey? I could feel that she didn't have any allergies, but there was always food poisoning or choking. Indeed, there were a handful of other angels around, no doubt waiting for their own humans to expire one way or another. But we've all seen a human break out or turn blue. I hoped it would be something more exciting.

An overwhelming crowd greeted Bailey, though her red turtle-neck still shone through like the deer in that human holiday song. One of her companions seemed especially excited to see her in this particular top, judging by her relentless tugging and squeaking; I dipped into this friend's consciousness to learn that she had bought the shirt as a gift for Bailey. Bored again, I pulled back to focus again on the human the universe had pushed me toward that day.

Other females took her aside in sequence, each letting words fall from their lips like rushing water until Bailey would open her mouth to respond, then turning to some other distraction that had become more enticing than a person that soaked up all their problems. Between each of these would come a male, but the only difference between the interactions was that the men spoke endlessly of themselves. No single human caused a reaction in Bailey, but I sensed her muscles tense and her head ache an increment more with each breath. I thought it was strange that simple social interactions were causing such a reaction.

Then adrenaline coursed through her body like an electric shock. Negative energy came off of her in waves, jostling my particles uncomfortably. Disgruntled, I registered every change in the environment in the past minute. I may not have been able

to address the problem, but I certainly wanted to know where to direct my irritation. I settled on the arrival of another male human, one whom Bailey had crossed her arms at and turned from, as if trying to make herself smaller and invisible.

Scanning the surrounding human's minds, I gleaned no ill opinion from any of them—all seemed in admiration of or attracted to him. Touching his mind, however, was an odd contrast. Not only did he think little of anyone around him, whereas his companions were relaxed and rambunctious, he was quiet, senses tuned as if on the hunt.

I sent out thoughts to the angels in the vicinity. Does anybody know what's going on with this guy?

One hovering near an elderly couple at a booth responded. Does it matter?

I, and all my atoms, blinked. No. Of course not. I was here to get my human from point A to point B, not to prevent or judge or understand. There was no point in the rest. This human was going to die soon, as all inevitably do, and that was the end of the story.

In the seconds my investigation took, Bailey had slipped away. I felt her now locked in a little room inside the restaurant.

She was in the restroom, and though my knowledge of the future assured me it was not the case, she appeared to be dying. Her breath was irregular, and I sensed the lack of oxygen making her eyes and limbs fuzzy. Her heart was beating all the blood it could, deafening in its effort to keep its host alive. I knew I could do nothing to ease her suffering, but like happening upon an insect twitching in its last moments, I was curious all the same. I touched her thoughts for only a moment.

Panic. Like teeth clamped around legs, like a weight placed atop lungs, like chains dragging and water rising. I was dying, but there was nowhere to go, no enemy to subdue. Then who was holding me down?

I pulled myself back, finding that I needed to concentrate more on the process than I had in millennia. I couldn't be attacked, crushed, or drowned. I knew this. I was still recovering from my own confusion when I realized that Bailey's body was working again. Her breath, heartrate, and muscles were fully

functional. When I touched her thoughts, I felt not the comforting nothingness of being an angel, but an aggressive nothingness that smothered the emotions a human should be feeling.

For the first time, I understood fallen angels' draw to humanity. I had always thought that to know one human was to know them all, but to spend only a single planetary rotation observing this human would not be enough to understand her. When she died, I would see her soul only briefly before reaching the drop-off, and I would never know what internal miscoding or external pressure had rendered a healthy young human so completely dysfunctional.

Bailey spent the remainder of the party circling the room. Whenever someone ensnared her, she tapped her foot and kept the male in her sights, ducking behind her conversation partner if he should look her way. She declined every drink offered to her and sang the ritual cake song beneath her breath. The rest of them enjoyed the celebration, as well as humans can appreciate anything. She smiled and laughed with them, but humans are able to hide their emotions from each other. Only I saw the lackluster behind her eyes.

Now she was driving home. Even if I couldn't feel the cloud in her mind and the tension in her hands gripping the wheel, I would have been nervous for her for the duration of the drive, due to the impressive number of deaths humans manage in their little metal boxes. No one within a reasonable radius was texting or drinking while driving. At least, not headed in Bailey's direction. But I still checked my future senses every few seconds, because you never know with humans. For example, the numbers scrambled like an interrupted radio signal when Bailey chose, at that moment, to take a ninety-degree turn, her tires screeching in protest. I swung my awareness around to catch up with the new route.

It was too dark to see her tire tracks in the slushy frozen mud, but I felt them. Gravel would work its way into her shoes when she stepped out of her car, stumbling once again without her sight, but able to find the walking path to the giant metal bridge. I only wondered for a moment what Bailey was doing here before I knew—this was where she would die. She would

walk along the edge of the bridge until she stood above the deepest part of the river. She would climb up the icy guardrails and stand in her soaked sneakers, the wind whipping shards of rain into her eyes. She would think about jumping. She would slip.

A flash of that human panic resurfaced in me. If Bailey died here and now, I would lose my chance to explore this connection, to discern what had happened to her, to see what she would do about it. She would lose her chance to do anything about it. And if she realized that, if she chose not to jump—this was a mistake. I could see her walking to her doom, halfway there now, and though I desperately wanted to change her fate, I had no vocal cords to call out, no hands with which to reach for her.

Even if I did manifest, what could I do? I would forget everything the moment I met her reality. I had to remember my purpose. I tried to be loud in my own thoughts, like a human. She brought her knee to her chest, her foot to the rail. I tried to scream, Bailey! Bailey! Bailey!

\*\*

“Bailey!”

The girl in red stumbled away from the rails, looking for whoever had called her name. Her breath short and shallow, her heart hammering in her chest, Bailey took in the ledge she had just come down from. The person who had shouted her name from across the bridge stumbled toward her and took her by the arm.

“Are you okay?”

Bailey swallowed, trying to catch her breath while staring at the other woman’s smooth, hairless head. “I’m sorry. Do I... know you?”

Reflections of the falling snow twinkled across a cloud that Bailey’s question brought over the woman’s eyes. “I...don’t think so. But you look so familiar.” She looked around, as if seeing her surroundings for the first time. “I don’t...do you know where we are?”

Bailey had been about to ask how this apparition knew her name, but the thought vanished when she took in the fact that

this person was wearing nothing but what looked like a white sheet, soaked through in this storm, and didn't seem to know where she was.

"Do you need a ride?" she asked, teeth chattering now. "It looks like you've had a lot to drink."

"A ride?" It sounded as if the word were foreign to her.

"Is there someone I can call for you?"

"No, I—I don't think so."

Bailey took the strange woman's arm. "Why don't we get out of the rain?"

The woman nodded. They walked to the car; there was no point in running when they were both soaked, and Bailey was unsure that her charge was capable of running. She tottered like a newborn as it was.

"Can you at least tell me your name?" Bailey asked gently. "Also, how did you know mine?"

The woman's answer was slow and quiet. "I don't know. I can't remember anything. Except..."

"Except?"

"The word 'angel.' I don't know why."

"Well, Angel, why don't we get you some hot food, warm clothes, and sobering coffee, and see if we can't figure out where you're supposed to be?"

The lights of the bridge were soon far behind them.

# THE INFINITE ANSWER

by Amanda Kleiber

What makes humanity special?

A loaded question

which, in biology, they answer

with a four-item list:

bipedalism, opposable thumbs, larger brains, capacity for language.

And, as we know, mankind's greatest achievements:

walking, pinching, thinking, talking.

What makes humanity special?

Stopping entire buses just to run

down lanes of sunflowers, mirroring their proud posture.

Tiny pairs of boots splashing down sidewalks,

pausing for every puddle to make waves.

Watching sad movies simply to cry and cartoons just to laugh.

Pink, plastic flamingos in friends' yards,

a surprise party complete with your favorite flavor cake,

the happy dance performed when a handwritten letter arrives

and the all too familiar struggle of attempting to roll off a beanbag chair.

What makes humanity special?

Entire days devoted to spreading soil around saplings,

sharing smiles and imagining future shade.

The unadulterated joy lighting up faces of all ages

by colored ice in a paper cone.

Superheroes knocking on your door,

plastic pumpkin baskets clutched in their fists.

The complex exchange of a secret handshake

complete with dance moves, high fives, and fist bumps

saved for only close companions.



What makes humanity special?

Eagerly skipping to mount the backs of painted horses on braided poles  
the burning anticipation of riding in circles.

Willingness to leap off edges of tall places attached to mere strings,  
all for the rush of adrenaline and the right to claim insanity.

Ingesting spicy foods and refusing water when offered,  
because pride is hurt by tears, coughing, or giving in.

Hearing sounds of souls in the wall and assigning them names  
of friends, the famous, or infamous, all long passed.

What makes humanity special?

Hummed tunes which can be finished  
by any stranger or passerby.

A cutting glare thrown to an old adversary.

The exchange of embraces after a long day.

A breath,

a gift,

a voice,

an act,

a sign that everything is going to be okay.

What makes humanity special?

Write your list of wonders,

may you never reach its end.

# LABORIOUS LIVING

by

Kaitlyn Sharrock

My Grandpa has worked at the shop for as long as I can remember. It was started in 1941 as a part-time endeavor by my Great-Grandparents. Whenever asked, Mom says it's a "on-sie-twosie metal shop", which means nothing to me, and most people. After a google dive, I discovered that it is a real term, and means the shop makes special parts that other places don't often bother with. They go from making hundreds of one piece, to only one of another depending on the day.

The shop is like an ancient elder; it has seen unspoken success and triumph, new life and death. It hands out its wealth with a finicky hand. It teaches harsh lessons through barren times, with heart-breaking, head-pounding stress and path-altering failures. It carries a legacy of hard-work and family that my Grandpa has dedicated his life to keeping alive. This legacy is like a ball and chain intertwined with his being.

I know hundreds of things about his wife, my Nana, the woman who was cursed with babysitting me for most of my childhood, but there are only three things that I truly recognize as my Grandpa's:

1) Warm, toothy grins whenever I appear, like I am the exact Christmas gift he had asked for, but never expected to receive.

2) Scruffy, cheek kisses whenever we hug, which I would normally despise, but from him it is an expected ritual.

3) The knowledge that he lived to work.

I have seen him in the pinstriped, gray and white uniform more often than any other type of attire. He wore it to Christmas, church, and other sanctified events. The short-sleeved shirt and dark pants are a badge of honor, a comfort. In many ways, they proclaim his identity more than the name tag across his chest.

Grandpa has worked at the shop since he was a teen, hair greased into a careful swirl and white t-shirts perfectly tucked into jeans. He had a brief stint of disloyalty when his brother, Mike, delved into alcoholic thievery. Mike began to use his sticky-with-sin fingers to steal from the shop, leaving their father no money to pay Grandpa anything beyond the minimum. With nobody willing to do anything about the thievery, and the business in a cycle of moderate success and abrupt failure, my Grandpa was forced to leave. With four-children to support, he moved to Washington State, abandoning the pieces of his soul ingrained in the shop through the sweat drops absorbed into the floor.

This stint up north ended a couple months later when my young, rowdy, red-headed Mom answered the phone at midnight to Great-Grandma, who had protected Mike and caused the whole mess, begging Grandpa to come home.

Within two weeks Grandpa was home, among giant metal machines and water jets, this time there to stay. It took his body literally failing to get him out of the shop a second time.

A brief period of my tweendom was spent home alone while my parents drove around for hospital visits. I was too young to really understand what had happened to cause it, but I know they had to remove an insane amount of his intestines, and that his body almost went septic. Mom still says, with a dark face, that her and Nana were taken to the dreaded private room and told he wouldn't live through the night. But he did live. Sort of.

He suffered in that hospital bed for almost a whole year, sometimes barely coherent, other times so angry I barely recognized him as the soft-spoken Christian from my childhood. Eventually, he progressed from wheelchair, to walker, to unsteady hospital-socked feet. He left the hospital with an entirely new diet filled with greens that Nana was completely invested in, and a brain that was slower than it used to be. The knowledge was still there, but it was like he had to unlock the chest before opening it, and sometimes the right key got lost in a cluster of clinging silver.

Still, he put on that pinstriped uniform and returned to work, but no one said anything when Mom started to take on

more of his responsibilities. They weren't going to deny him this constant comfort. Besides, he was not only her father, but the big kahuna at the shop since Great-Grandpa's passing and his siblings' disconnection.

Mike was properly banned from having anything to do with the business, while the remaining brother stupidly sold his shares, believing they'd still allow him to be part of the business afterwards. Grandpa's sister, Pat, was the only one who still had her shares, but she paid the shop no mind. She resented it, blaming the shop and her parents for her poor upbringing. She invested herself in nursing, believing that to be where all the money was.

Grandpa continued working at his slower pace, his desk a chaotic puzzle made from hundreds of pieces of paper. He continued playing solitaire at lunch, munching on his healthy leftovers only to coerce Mom to get him a Georgia Mudslide Blizzard for dessert, a secret that Nana has only recently discovered.

He continued living the only way he knew how, until the board meeting where Pat lost her mind, as my Mom so eloquently put it. Board meetings are always a laborious affair, at least for Mom, but the consolatory cash all board members receive make them tolerable events. They occur every three months and generally serve as either a necessary annoyance or a battleground where people who have no idea what they're talking about try to interfere with people who are integral parts of the business machine. It was a clear divide: Grandpa, Mom, and Casey (an uncle who was practically born in the shop), and Pat with her horde of nurse children. Mom always came home late from board meetings since they happen afterhours and she had to sift through Houston traffic, but once the clock struck 9:00, we knew this meeting had been particularly terrible.

I know there was a phone call, although I don't remember who initiated the phone call, my worried Dad or nosy sister both being likely culprits, but I do remember the game of phone hot potato and the emotional mother on the line.

The words, "I'm going to quit," and, "she's a bitch," were tossed around from across the line in a congested, tear-ridden

voice. Those words, and variants of them, are still regular features around the house.

Hearing my parents insult Pat wasn't surprising – she had a reputation after all. One of Dad's favorite stories to regale us with consists of a nervous, nineteen-year-old version of himself picking her up at the ferry, the day before his wedding, and the words, "marriage isn't for everyone," slipping from her lips. It was much more shocking to hear Mom say she was ready to quit the only job I ever remember her having.

The story came out over the next few days and I continued to discover more details as I got older. The gist was that Pat declared her majority control equal to God's word and stated that, "Things were going to change." My favorite details were her hands shaking as she screamed at Grandpa and called him "Dad" and "Mike," revealing that Grandpa was a scapegoat for the entire family's sins.

She didn't mention that she only had majority shares because she had thrown a similar screeching, cussing tantrum at their dying mother. She might have forgotten that my Mom was living with them at the time, and that Mom could run Sherlock Holmes out of business. Pat had used guilt, claiming their mother favored Grandpa, to get more shares, and then didn't use them for decades as she pursued her own career.

She only stepped foot in the shop for board meetings, but now she wanted to, "change things." And change things she did. Pat and her children try to run a metal shop like a hospital, forgetting the different hours, amount of staff, and money in the bank. They have created a spiral of failure that those with experience don't have the power to fix.

And with each change she makes, my Grandpa turns more and more into the man he was at the hospital – angry, confused, barely living. It is like the emotional reversion has summoned old wounds.

For the past couple years, Grandpa has been inside the hospital for weeks at a time, only to return and have another chain added to his shackles as Pat took away his responsibilities. Eventually, the chains became so heavy he retired, preferring to lock himself into place than have his own blood do it for him, slowly, painfully, and with spiteful glee.

A year prior, an employee of 15 years had retired. Pat threw him a party and gifted him \$5,000 and a golden brand name watch.

For Grandpa, she was content to do nothing. It was only her son dropping snide hints in emails that led to the board gifting him a fishing rod.

A gift he isn't healthy enough to use, equal to \$5,000.

Dad and I had taken to calling Pat the Red Queen since the beginning of her reign, in honor of her merciless nature. We toned it down for Mom, who had to intermingle with Pat for work. Mom readily accepted the name back into the household after this slight.

When someone's whole life revolves around getting up in the morning, putting on a uniform, and going to work, retirement becomes a nightmare. Mom bought him a big, tablet-like electronic to play solitaire on, with big letters for his 80-year-old eyes to see. I have heard neither praise or complaint, making me suspicious he has been in hospitals and nursing homes too often to use it. After Nana decided their independence wasn't as important as their health, I spotted the tablet on the dresser in their new apartment, a measly five minutes from my parent's house.

The latest hospital/nursing-home stint has lasted two months. They have resulted in Pat sending Mom a series of scattered texts full of random caps, lower cases, and blank spaces. My favorite drunken proclamations were, "He is such a kind man," and, "I feel so bad for him to suffer so much." As if her regard for his suffering hasn't already been made clear.

The nurses tell Mom and Nana that Grandpa must be able to walk before they'll let him come home.

When Nana is busy fussing over his blankets, they tell Mom he's given up.

I want to disagree, I want to know that the warm grin won't always melt into puzzlement when I visit him and that the scruffy kiss that I don't remember wasn't my last one, but I can't.

I think he gave up a long time ago. In a lot of ways, Nana, Mom, and hospitals are the only thing pushing him along, chains and all.

# BETTER TO BE ABDUCTED

by  
Harleigh McGowan

It's easier to believe he was abducted. That, maybe, a bright white light filled his dorm room as he slept next to me and when it finally died, he was gone. Or maybe a silvery UFO beamed him up with a brilliant ray of color while he smoked a joint on the roof of the art studio. Even if he is naked on a metal slab surrounded by Roswell Greys or Tall Whites with probes and tools for dissection. Even if they pull out his teeth one by one and put a chip inside his brain, at least he is away from here and alive. At least he's not surrounded by medical examiners using his dental records to identify his charred body.

# SNOW ANGELS AMONG SHADOWS

by

Harleigh McGowan

Two days before the school caught on fire, there was a blizzard. We were used to snow-covered mountains lining the New Mexican sky, but to have so much of it in April was unusual. You laughed that morning as you opened the blinds, and said the five inches of fresh powder was Nature's late April Fool's joke. I was just happy classes were canceled. I tried to convince you to stay in bed with me, to wrap me in your warm embrace. You wouldn't have it. A walk would be good for us, but really I knew you wanted to play in the snow. We needed a distraction.

The campus was quiet and cast in a foggy haze. Shadows of the contemporary sculptures distorted by blankets of snow felt like creatures looming just out of sight. It made me realize there was a fine line between Christmas card and horror movie, but your excitement was enough to make me forget about what I know now were omens. Instead of commenting on the shadow figures, you pointed out how my winter boots left star-shaped indents in the fresh snow and said that it was as if I was leaving a constellation in my wake. Smiling at me, you held out open arms and as I went for an embrace, you fell backward, laughing. Shoveling snow with your limbs' sweeping motions, you made a snow angel. When you got up, we could see the red clay underneath peeking through like blossoming wounds.



# RIVERBED CLOUDS

by

Harleigh McGowan

I.

The sky married orange and mauve as I laid on my back covered in New Mexican red clay and dried paint. I cupped my hands around my mouth and shouted Congrats, but the sky didn't care about what I had to say. After a moment of cicada filled silence, I realized I didn't care about what I had to say either.

The orange began to fade as mauve got to know indigo and I could feel the chemicals slowly leaving my body. I ran my tongue over my cracked lips, imagining a dry riverbed veined with emptiness.

II.

"I call those riverbed clouds," my brother once said, his head tilted back. I followed his gaze to the sky, overcast but shattered. The blue breaking through.

Chin still skyward, I almost hoped to catch a glimpse of God. Is he watching? Is anyone watching? There is nothing between the gaps in the clouds. Nothing but blue forever.

"You'll have to let me steal that."

My brother nodded then, shoving his hands into his pockets before saying, "Only if you stop dropping acid."

I tried to explain to him why I can't. Adobe brick and red clay make me want to kill myself, but how windowpane and needlepoint give my life some color. It wasn't until the blue was overcome by pinks, oranges, and purples that I could let my mind be clear.

III.

I felt myself come down as the orange completely vanished behind the mountains, knowing mauve's new lover would soon completely overcome her. I saw them then, three little green lights dancing on the distant peaks. "Take me! Take me!" I shouted as I scrambled to my feet, still disoriented from the trip, and waved my arms above my head.

The sky still didn't care- but, I was starting to.

# THE UPSTAIRS NEIGHBORS

by

Amanda Kleiber

Rats live in my ceiling. I have yet to see a single rodent, but I know they linger in the walls, the only thing separating them from my gaze a too-thin layer of plaster. They skitter about, paws pitter-pattering down planks of wood, through insulation, and to their nests.

Sometimes, late at night, the skittering turns to shuffling, and I know it's the rat children in their slippers, scuffling about, hoping not to get caught by their rat parents. They're sneaking into the kitchen for a midnight snack, maybe crumbs leftover from dinner if they're lucky. And then it's back to bed before anybody notices they were gone. They make no sound save for the soles of their slippers beneath them, not a single squeak.

During the day, when I am not home, I wonder what the rats are doing in my absence. Perhaps they throw a lavish party in the attic. With the humans away, they come out to play, popping open bottles of champagne and breaking out little disco balls. They dance the day away, free from potential capture, squeaky laughter bouncing off the pink fluff crammed between the beams that hold up the roof.

But that would be silly. Rats are never sure whether they will have the house to themselves on a given day. By chance, a human could drop in during the day, or one might return home unexpectedly early, and then what? They wouldn't have the time to take down the disco ball and recork the champagne without being caught. So it must be less exuberant.

The rats, then, must have jobs. Some of them are business rats, lawyers, doctors, and police rats. Where there are rat salesmen, there are rat consumers. With the lawyers come criminals,

judges, and juries. And a rat legal system implies a rat constitution. Each rat abiding by the supreme law of the attic, vowing to never get caught by the humans or else face a harsh penalty. The rat police paw around, ensuring the populace is safe, and that every furry rodent stays in line.

Although if any of that were true, I'd have heard the sirens by now. So it must be a simpler explanation. An entire colony would be far too complicated. No, it must be just a single family.

The unit is comprised of the aforementioned rat children, always up to no good, their parents, a bit more responsible, and a grandparent rat. One of the creatures moves a little slower, one paw scraping slightly behind the other three--a limp. They're happy up there in the ceiling. It's dark and private, and they don't have to wonder where their next meal will come from. They don't concern themselves with things like school or money or showing off to their neighbors. They simply focus on staying together and working enough to see another day.

It's almost sweet, this family in my ceiling. And I am almost apologetic when the exterminator climbs the ladder to the attic to get rid of them once and for all.

# KUNTE KINTE

by  
Nia McCray

“The past seemed with the present, the present with the future,  
the dead with the living and those yet to be born”  
- *Roots: The Saga of an American Family* by Alex Haley

Mother asked me to go and hide away  
she knew what raids like this could mean for me,  
but I rock in a nauseating sway  
waves crashing, voices crying out, moans, pleas.  
They labeled me as a strong, working buck,  
one that can work the fields from dusk to dawn;  
hope and freedom disappear with each pluck.  
I wince with every drop of red blood drawn  
by Master’s whip. “You be a good nigger,”  
he taunts. “Yessuh.” My shirt clings to my wounds.  
And do not let the dogs catch you— trigger  
pointed at your face, bloodhounds long, loud croon.  
The chains of slavery and its bondage,  
my freedom is permanently hostaged.

# BREWED TO PERFECTION

by Kaitlyn Sharrock

Boiling bubbles rumble along  
shaking the cauldron,  
filling the room with toxic fumes.

The brew shifts,  
colors dancing,  
like Halloween lights on a street puddle.

The concoction hits the right tone,  
singing sweetly  
a ghostly lullaby into the night.

I force my trembling hand,  
to ladle it into  
a crystalline vial's skeletal neck.

Blisters blossom  
as I swallow  
and wait with stilled breath and outstretched arms.

But nothing happens.  
No surge of strength, no lengthening of hair or nails,  
no eyes turning wide and piercing or a richer color,  
no lips turning into delicate, feathered pillows,  
no weight taken or added in just the right place,  
no urge to be sweeter,  
braver,  
smarter,  
happier.

I am stuck being me  
a failure, with nothing remarkable to my name.

I toss the vial over my shoulder and it cracks among others.  
The broken glass and brews combine.  
They eat holes through the floorboards, seeping into the earth below.

I heat the cauldron again,  
watch it rise to a turbulent roar,  
and wonder what else it will take.

# A TALE OF WOE

by  
Nia McCray

“#InOurLifeTime we will fight for and alongside victims of gun violence, and we will prevail. Forget our kids, our Neighbors shouldn't have to worry about this.”

- Emma Gonzales, Parkland Shooting survivor

Young children should have lived in dignity.  
In a school once thought safe, we lay our scene.  
Here a troubled soul caused a mutiny.  
Here innocent blood made mad hands unclean.  
From forth the deranged thoughts, this enraged foe,

multiple pairs of children lose their life--  
their bodies ducked behind desks overthrown,  
hiding from the death of a bullet's strike.

Now fearful parents are fighting with love  
the ignorant politicians. Their rage  
which mourns their children's end not could remove  
the issue of gun control on our stage.  
Those of us who in protest do attend,  
with raised voices, fight the troubles to mend.

# ONE OF THE BOYS

by

Kennedy Thurmond

I wanted to be skinny. I wanted to have a day go by where my mother didn't give me a speech about my health and dieting tips and congratulate me for eating an apple instead of a chocolate-chip cookie where I only ended up feeling smaller rather than proud. That it's an actual conversation we had countless times. That she wanted me to be the little girl she remembered from years ago. I wanted that too. I wanted to please her. I wanted those conversations to cease forever and to feel proud of myself. I didn't want to look in the mirror and feel repulsed, squinting, as I tried to imagine the girl I was.

I wanted to return to school a completely new person, unrecognizable to my friends; super thin, golden tan, new clothes. I wanted them to finally see me as skinny instead of hearing about how I used to be, before my parents got divorced and we moved states. I wanted to be skinny when it counted. When boys looked at you and judged whether you were worth dating or not. I wanted them to think about it when they saw me, not just pass me over and glance at the tan legs on my friend.

I wanted to be a girl, because I had never felt that way. I used to like that about myself. Guys didn't think I was soft, or a baby. My brother even started calling me Larry when I was little instead of Hillary. I was proud to be one of them. But that was also the problem. I wanted to be teased like my girlfriends instead of like the guys. To be fought over. I wanted to get mad like Elody, because guys were talking about how great her butt is, not because it's a good thing, but because it's worth discussing. I wanted 'will you go out with me' to not be the butt end of a joke. For boys to want to talk to me. To feel pretty.

I didn't realize how badly I wanted it until a week before school got out and my brother was helping me study. We were finishing up when he took his chewed-up ball-point pen out of



his mouth and swiveled his chair in my direction. "You know, we are polar opposites," he said grinning. "Like, you're short. I'm tall."

"I know, moron," I said. "You're lazy. I'm productive,"

"No." He rolled his eyes. "I mean like, I'm hot and you're... you know?" He chucked me in the chin in his annoying older brother way and sauntered off.

I stuck my tongue out at his back. "I could be pretty. If I really tried," I said.

So, that was what I was going to become. It would take all summer to lose fifty pounds if I lost four pounds a week. I realized I'd have to miss the lake trip to accomplish my goal. It was a steep hill to climb, but I was committed.

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I was nervous the morning I had agreed to meet up with everyone before the trip. I had told Casey the night before over the phone that I had decided not to go. She had screamed so loud I had to hold it away from my ear which caused Noah to come in and complain.

"What do you mean you aren't going? This isn't funny, Hilly," she said. I could picture her crossing her arms.

"I'm sorry, Casey Bridge." She always liked it when I said her full name. It made her feel powerful rather than in trouble.

"Why is it you can't go Betraye?"

This was the part I had been trying to sort out for an hour. "I found out there was a job opening at the snow cone stand on the beach. You know the one we used to love? And I start the week we leave. My mom says it would be smart of me to work this summer rather than laying around with my friends for three months." Which was true. "And I really need the money to fix the bumper on the Bronco." This was also true. My mom refused to pay for it, since I hit the brick pillar, not her.

"Fine. Be productive. But I'm not bringing you a keychain."

We bought keychains every time we went to the lake. It was a tradition. "Okay," I said, because I knew she didn't mean it. She was mad, but there was no breaking the tradition even if I

was left behind in Seaburrow. Afterward we talked about which swimsuits she should pack and what color she should paint her nails, and I knew I was forgiven.

I drove over to Casey's neighborhood around 6:30. The sun was just starting to streak across the sky, its fingers slicing through the morning fog. Everyone was already there loading the white minivan.

"Larry!" Jake said as soon as I climbed out of my truck. "Let me get your stuff for you."

"She's not going," Tyler said, rearranging the bags in the trunk. This of course caught the others' attention.

"What?" Jake spun around staring at me like I'd slapped him or said surfing wasn't a real sport. I gave him a sheepish smile.

"It's not going to be as fun without you, Larry," Grayson said. My heart skipped a beat, my cheeks flushing hot crimson, twisting a piece of hair around my finger.

"Why aren't you going?" Jake stepped in front of me, ruining the moment.

"I have to work. I got a job."

"Why?"

I opened my mouth, but Grayson spoke over me. "At least there's one smart person in this group. Good job, Larry."

"Was that a pun?" I smiled in spite of myself.

"If you want it to be," Grayson winked. "Don't have too much fun without us." He got in the car.

"I won't with you gone all summer," I whispered. I heard Jake scoff. I couldn't tell if he was annoyed over my crush on Grayson, or if he was being petty because I wasn't going and didn't tell him. Casey wrapped me up in a hug before I could ask him, warning me not to work myself to death and to be careful and not forget about her while she was away.

"Bye, Hilly," Elody said before telling Grayson to scoot down.

When they were gone, I headed to the beach to surf, snapping a picture to send in our group chat, since internet was spotty up there and we wouldn't talk much for a while.

When I was little, Mom used to take Noah and I to the

beach at the crack of dawn. I think it was her excuse for skipping the awkward conversations with Dad while he got ready for work. Their divorce hadn't been finalized, and Dad hadn't found a new place to live yet. She said it was because she liked to enjoy the vibrant colors streaming across the sky at a time when the rest of the world was in bed. Noah would cross his eyes when she said this, and I would giggle. We knew she was trying to prove she was keeping it all together, to be strong for us, but she didn't know Noah caught her crying at the kitchen table one night after we had been sent to bed, an old scrap book of their honeymoon in her hands.

That was how I fell in love with surfing. I didn't mind getting up before the sun, slipping on some of Noah's old board shorts, a swim shirt and helping Mom load our boards into the back of the Bronco. I didn't care about sand getting in my clothes or the salt in my lungs, as long as I got to paddle out through blue water and return to where I belonged. Surfing was the only time I truly knew who I was. It didn't matter what I looked like, where I came from, or who I wanted to be. All that mattered was the coming tide. Life, however, is not like that. Life is less open minded.

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The day my friends were headed back I had bravely asked Grayson to a movie the next day. Noah said I had finally grown some balls. I glared at him for his choice of wording, but no matter how I looked, I was always going to be his little sister. But he was right. I was a new person, with a new mind set and new clothes. The ugly duckling had finally become a swan.

Unfortunately, Grayson must have misunderstood my invitation, or I wouldn't have been standing on Casey's porch with my makeup bag so we could get ready together. I rang the doorbell again and shot her a text.

I heard Casey's muffled voice moments later. "Mom get the door, please! My nails are wet!"

Mrs. Bridge came shuffling up. She gave rushed apologies, unlocking the door. "Oh, Hilly. You look lovely," she said, ushering me inside. "Congratulations. You must be pleased."

“Yes ma’am.” I bit my lip. People never knew what to say when you lost weight, besides strange compliments I never knew what to do with. I made my way up-stairs, holding my skirt against my legs. I knocked once at her room, loud enough to be heard over Hey Violet’s “Guys My Age” blasting from her speakers.

“Come in!” Casey said. I straightened my skirt, fluffed my hair, and walked in. “Hilly, come pick—” She broke off, mouth forming a small ‘O’.

“What happened to you?” Elody closed the lid on the hot pink nail polish.

“I lost fifty pounds,” I said, holding my arms out. “I finally did it.”

“No kidding, I wouldn’t have recognized you,” she said circling me. “I don’t understand. Why did you need to lose weight?”

“Because, I was over-weight. I’m 5’2. Extra weight on a short person is way more noticeable. It’s got nowhere to go. But I feel great in my skin now.”

“You know, Hilly. You look beautiful, but you looked beautiful before. You realize you don’t have to change yourself in order to be happy. You don’t have to give in to what society thinks women should look like. Be your own person. You just have to learn to except yourself,” Casey said.

My face scrunched. Sometimes I really hated girls. I hated how bettering yourself made them want to bring you down. It didn’t mean I was calling you fat, or ugly. Instead of congratulating you, they try to sabotage you, or undermine your motives by saying it was the wrong answer and you should’ve learned to love the way you looked no matter what. Maybe loving yourself is taking care of your body by eating right and exercising.

I was completely annoyed by the time we made it to the movie theater. I didn’t want to listen to all the fun I missed at the lake, or the diving rocks they found while on a nature trail, or how they shot fireworks from the lawn on the Fourth of July. I wanted them to realize how awful they had been to me. I wanted them to apologize. But I knew they wouldn’t. They didn’t believe they had done anything wrong. What did they

know? They had always been skinny; had always been beautiful. They just were. No work required.

The boys were waiting by the ticket booth when we scrambled out of my Bronco. My anger ebbed as soon as I saw Grayson, my cheeks warming. I straightened up, shoulders back. I was the new and improved Hilly. No more hiding. Elody hugged Tyler like they hadn't just spent the whole summer together, and I caught Casey roll her eyes, greeting them. That's when they finally noticed me; double takes and wide eyes, the reaction I'd been waiting for my entire life, like I was a girl.

"Larry?" Jake scooped me into a hug, but it was loose like he didn't know the person he was holding. "You look amazing."

The way he was looking at me made a blush spread across my face, and I had to look away. "Thanks," I said, tucking my newly bleached hair behind my ear.

"You look fantastic," Grayson said, pulling me into him. My heart skipped a beat, wrapping my arms around his torso, breathing in his vanilla scented cologne. He had never hugged me like that before. No "bro" hug. He was what kept me going for three months, that he would finally see me. That I would finally be a girl he'd want to kiss. "That dress looks great on you."

"It's new," I said lamely, but it made him smile anyway.

I tried wearing a dress two years ago. It was one of those few days where I was in the mood to actually wear one without it being a special occasion. It had been raining for weeks, and I wanted to celebrate the sun returning, slipping into my only sun dress and actually trying to do my makeup for once. Casey and Elody clapped their hands in excitement, pleased I was wearing something other than a t-shirt. I felt confident, until Tyler told me I looked interesting and Jake asked why I was wearing lipstick. After that I swore off dresses. I felt as though I had decided to wear a Halloween costume to a Christmas party.

It wasn't exactly the date I had imagined, but Grayson bought me my usual—popcorn with milk duds and a Coke ICEE—and saved me a chair next to him while I was in the bathroom. He may have felt obligated since I was the one that invited him, but I didn't care. He had never paid for my food before or saved me a seat next to him. The night would

have been absolutely perfect if Casey wasn't challenging me for Grayson's attention all evening and Jake wasn't staring at me like I was an imposter, but it didn't stop me from enjoying the fact that Grayson was so close I found myself holding my breath during the movie, especially when our hands would graze when we both reached into the popcorn bucket at the same time. I was grateful for the darkness, hiding the burning in my cheeks.

I was tanning with the girls the next afternoon when a shadow passed over my face, blocking out the sun. Water began dripping on to my legs and I sat up grumpily, putting my shades down so I could see. Jake was standing there, frowning at me. "What?"

He pursed his lips. "Can I talk to you?" He ran a hand through his dark hair, water droplets flinging off.

"Why?" I wanted to be as tan as possible by the time school started, to distance myself from my natural, milky paleness. I was tired of being a ghost. And Jake was blocking me from it. Every minute counted.

"Because," he said. He was irritating me. "It's about Grayson." That caught my attention.

I followed him to the Crab N' Go Snack Shack that was attached to the snow cone stand I spent most of the summer working at. "What's wrong with Grayson? Is it about his birthday tonight?"

"Huh? No." Jake shook his head like he was running out of patience with me, which annoyed me even more. He was interrupting me. "I just think you need to be careful. Grayson and Casey, they've kinda had this thing going on since July. I don't want you getting caught in the middle of it."

"Are you implying that if I did, I'd lose to her?" I crossed my arms, nails digging into my palms till little crescent moons formed in my skin.

"No! I just don't want you getting hurt is all," he sputtered, trying to dig himself out.

"I can take care of myself. I don't need you big brothering me. I have Noah for that." I started to walk off, but he grabbed my arm. "Let go."

“I care about you Hilly,” he said which made me know he was serious, but I was sweaty and angry, and wanted him to leave me alone, so I said something I knew would hurt him. “At least I’m willing to fight for the person I’m in love with.”

He’d had a crush on Elody last summer, and Casey wasn’t supposed to have told her, but she thought it was funny. Elody picked Tyler, since he was forward about what he wanted.

He let go, drawing in a breath. I had got to him. “At least I’m not self-absorbed,” he said. I kept walking, kicking up sand as I headed back to my towel. I wasn’t gonna let him see me cry. Never again.

I was out jet skiing with my guy friends. We had rented them for the day, but we only had two, so we had to take turns. Grayson and Tyler had been hogging both of them for an hour, and I was getting impatient, stuck on the dock with Jake and Noah. Finally, Grayson came around the corner to dock.

“Where have you been?” I was beyond agitated.

“Sorry, Larry. Tyler wanted to race.” He slid off, giving me an apologetic side hug, before bouncing off to celebrate his win with Noah.

I had just backed out when Tyler showed up. “Dude! The babes are here!” he called out to Grayson, waving his phone that was stuffed in a zip-lock bag in the air before instructing me to get off so they could take “the babes” for a ride.

“No,” I said, looking to Grayson for help.

I knew he would take my side. He wasn’t a jerk obsessed with girls. He would make the right choice and see what a pig Tyler was being. He stood there going back and forth between the two of us. “Larry—”

“No! You two were gone forever, and it’s my turn now.” My heart plummeted.

“Come on, Larry. You can have it back when we’re done. I promise,” Grayson pleaded, making it sound like I was being completely unreasonable.

I scrutinized him for a moment, furious, hands clenching the handlebars. “Fine,” I spit, forcing him to swim out to me if he wanted the jet ski.

After that, I realized I was and will always be one of the boys. And I hated it. They flirted with Elody and Casey, teasingly, but never with me. The thought of me as dating material never crossed their minds. And suddenly, I wanted to be beautiful and gain their attention. I had cried for an hour, as I explained it to Jake, and I felt so weak and babyish afterward.

I decided on a tight-fitting royal blue strappy dress and wedges to wear to Grayson's eighteenth birthday party. I arrived a little late since I had to fight Noah for the Bronco keys. He wanted to teach his girlfriend to drive stick on the way home. I refused to sit in the back seat for two hours watching that. I was driving or he wasn't going. Grayson's birthday was always the biggest party of the year. Noah never missed it. Mom told him to hand them over, and I stuck my tongue out at him once her back was turned.

The girls were standing near the snack table holding plastic cups and whispering when I spotted them. "Hey," I said, smoothing down my dress.

"Hot," Elody said slinging an arm around me. "I'd date you." I grinned, tucking my hair behind my ear.

Casey was smiling too, but something about it seemed off, like she was wearing her evil scheme face.

"What's up Casey?"

"Nothing. You look gorge. Let's go raid the snack table." She looped her arm through mine, walking too quickly for my wobbly legs. I wasn't used to heels, much less in the sand which kept sifting under my uneven weight. She handed me a cup. "Here. You look like you could use a drink."

"I don't drink C," I said righting myself once we came to a stop.

"Oh, that's right. Have a cookie then," she said trading me.

"I'm actually trying to lower my junk food intake."

She took the cookie from me, stuffing it in her mouth. "Are you sure? They are so good."

"That's okay," I said uneasily. "I think I'm going to go find Grayson and tell him happy birthday." I couldn't tell if Casey was acting this way because Grayson had genuinely paid attention to me and she was actually jealous or if this was her being



a girl. Either way I was already tired of it. This was how I looked now. She was just going to have to get used to it. I snagged a cup from the table and marched off in search of the guys.

Grayson was chatting with a group of people from school when I walked up. “Larry!” he called, pulling me into his side. I sipped on my drink as they talked, the taste bitter in my mouth. “But anyway, Tyler, your form was way off earlier.” They were talking about surfing.

“Whatever! You wiped out the most today.”

“What was he doing wrong?” I glanced up at Grayson, who was rolling his eyes.

“It’s hard to explain. You had to be there,” he said.

“I surf you know. I think I could figure it out if you give a description,” I said, annoyed. “Hey, anyone in need of another refill?” Casey said, flouncing her way into the circle.

Grayson removed his arm from around my waist immediately, his back straightening in her presence. Everyone raised their hand except Jake.

“You know what, I’ll come with you for extra hands.” As Grayson followed after my best friend, my heart ripped in half; Jake was right. I was going to get hurt.

I could see him watching me from the corner of my eye. I shrugged it off and forced a smile. “I think I’ll go too.”

“Larry, you shouldn’t be drinking. You’re underage,” Jake warned me.

“You’re drinking.” I reminded him, gulping down the last swallow of beer. “Wait up, guys!”

I heard Jake’s footsteps behind me.

By midnight I was a little tipsy, my head swimming, so I sat down by the bonfire, warming my hands. I didn’t think to bring a jacket for after dark and I was regretting my thin dress. I noticed the new keychain Casey had gotten me on my key ring, realizing I hadn’t seen her or Grayson in a while. I stood up, shuffling from group to group asking if anyone had talked to them recently. Maybe they had gone into the house to get more chips. No one was allowed in unless you were with Grayson.

I gave up after twenty minutes, finding it hard to focus. I took my shoes off, and walked along the shoreline, flinging

shells into the water. The music from the house and conversations bounced off the water, traveling through the darkness. I watched my thin silhouette stretch across the sand in front of me. I picked up another shell, dusting the granules of sand away, bringing it up to my head, prepared to lob it, when a familiar lilted laugh leaked into the night several feet away. I froze. Casey.

I followed the sound, dark figures morphing into my view on a picnic table under two palm trees. We used to eat lunch out here on weekends when we were in eighth grade. We weren't allowed to go to the main surfing spot yet, and Grayson's parents could see us from the house here.

I ducked behind a few bushes outlining the trees. They were talking with their heads bent, like they were whispering and didn't want anyone else to hear, even though no one else was around but me. I couldn't see faces, but I knew it was them. Casey and Grayson. She had won, and I hadn't even really had a chance to be a part of the fight. He kissed her, slow and passionate. Tears pricked my eyes, and I backed away, hands over my mouth, sprinting away from them as fast as possible. I chunked the stupid shell that was still in my hand into the ocean. I headed toward the Bronco to go home.

"Hilly!" Jake pushed through the throng of teens, chasing after me. "Wait!" I must have passed him and not said anything.

"Go away," I said. I didn't want to hear him say I told you so. I didn't want to talk to him about it. I wanted to curl up in my bed and cry my eyes out. I wanted to pretend today never existed. I wanted to eat a quart of ice cream and not worry that I would gain some of the weight back I'd worked so hard to lose. I wanted Noah to have been the one to see me, because he would've known not to talk to me as we headed out. I had texted him I wanted to leave, but he hadn't responded.

"What's wrong?" Jake was next to me now, matching my pace with his annoying long legs.

"I don't want to talk to you about it. Wouldn't want to worry you with my self-absorbed problems."

"You can't drive yourself home like this."

"I'm fine."

“Larry, you’re not. You’re drunk, so stop being a baby.” He picked me up bridal style, unlocking my car.

“I didn’t ask for your help and stop calling me that. Just go back to the party and leave me alone.” He sat me down in the passenger seat, shutting the door. I felt nauseous suddenly, placing my forehead on the window, until he got in and backed out. “You were right.” I said.

He didn’t say anything. I knew he felt bad for me, which was worse. He walked me to my front door, gave me the keys, and headed home. He didn’t live far so I didn’t feel terrible about him walking home in the dark. I took a cold shower before I threw up right there in the tub, my knees wobbling. I popped some Advil in my mouth to help my headache and crawled in bed before the tears returned in chest racking sobs.

I wanted to be mad at Casey the next day when we were all out surfing, but I knew it was really my fault. They had gotten close over the summer, and I tried to come in and steal him away from her after two months of them being a “thing.” I never told her I was in love with him, only Jake.

We were walking to get drinks from the Crab N’ Go, the two of them holding hands, Jake quietly keeping an eye on me when I stepped on a broken shell, letting out a strangled scream before plopping down in the sand.

“Oh my gosh! Hilly?” Casey bent down, gripping my shoulder. I saw her gag at the blood flowing on to the sand.

Jake bent down examining my foot, before scooping me up like he did last night and taking me to the nurse’s station. I held my foot, moaning in pain. Casey and Grayson followed more slowly, still in shock.

They placed me on a cushioned table, cleaning my foot, and rubbing bacterial wipes over the wound, before wrapping it with gauze. “It’s not as bad as it seems,” the nurse said, smiling reassuringly at me. I nodded, biting my lip, trying not to cry.

“We’ll go get you a snow cone,” Casey said, ushering Grayson out the door. The nurse handed me a cup of water before following after them. I let the tears leak out then.

“Does it hurt?” Jake squeezed my knee, worried.

I shook my head. “I’m so stupid.”

“Why?” Jake sat down in a swivel chair.

“I wanted the guys, or more importantly Grayson, to see me as a girl for once. I wanted to feel beautiful. I wanted to be something he wanted. But nothing really changed. It all felt worth it for about five minutes and it all went to my head.”

“I like that you aren’t super girly. You just need to realize the reasons to have done all this should be for you. You’re healthy. You’ve gained back your confidence. You aren’t hiding your frame behind baggy t-shirts anymore,” Jake said reassuringly.

“But I want to feel like a girl. So, I thought if I looked the part, I’d finally feel it.”

“Do you?”

“No, because now my outsides don’t match my insides. Instead, I lost myself.”

“Hills, you don’t have to fit perfectly into a stereotypical girl in order to be a girl. You’re a Hillary. You’re all your own, and that’s why I love you.” Jake smiled, his cheeks flushing uncontrollably.

“You—what?”

Jake mashed his lips to mine, his hands in my hair. My stomach dipped, electric pulses shooting throughout my body, and I melted into him. I had been self-absorbed way before I became pretty. I had missed all the signs, that he had always been there for me, had loved me, payed attention to me like I had always wanted. I only counted it when I believed it counted, excluding Jake the entire time because I didn’t believe someone could love me when I didn’t love myself. Bettering myself wasn’t my mistake. It was all my reasons. I did it for selfish wants. I had been blind. ‘Beauty is in the eye of the beholder’ had always sounded so stupid to me, but I just hadn’t understood it. It’s when you’re finally able to look in the mirror and happily say that’s me. It doesn’t matter how you get there as long as you get there.

# WHAT IT TAKES TO GET TO YOU

by

Sandra Carranza

My car broke down along the empty dirt road,  
at the edge of conifers and narrow creek,  
so, I walked the one hundred feet to reach  
the brown-bricked house with the red front door.

My tennis shoes scraped against the white rocks  
of the driveway – a dog barked somewhere –  
and my hand lifted the rusted doorknocker  
– three times – until someone opened the door.

A new nurse this time, but she knew of me –  
the only person who cared enough to visit.  
Led me through the house – as if my childhood photos  
were not the ones hanging in the hallway.

She led me to your rocking chair, Father,  
where you sat facing the backyard,  
hair a bit grayer – eyes a bit more lost –  
but wrinkled face smiling as you called

*Caroline, darling.*

Somehow, you managed to find Mother  
before you found me.  
And for now, that is enough.

# EMPANADA

by

Angela Galvan

Ingredients:

*1 cup Philadelphia cream*

*1 cup of butter*

*2 cups of flour*

*1 can of dulce de leche*

*2 cups of granulated sugar*

*Step 1: Mix 1 cup Philadelphia cream + 1 cup of butter*

We had done this many times. We learned how, and how not to make these pastries. Each region makes them differently. Sometimes they are made with corn instead of flour, or meat instead of caramel. But for others; our sweet. Tooth dominates. Our mother has redefined what was to her the traditional Mexican empanada with ingredients she now has access to in a new country, along with my sister and I who follow like two chicks behind mother goose. Once we see the yellowness of the butter, turn into a light cream, then we know we're ready for the next step.

*Step 2: Mix 2 cups of flour into wet ingredients*

We sprinkle flour carefully on the wet ingredients. This is nothing like the original empanadas. House rule number one, no speaking English in the house. Ask my mother to pronounce all purpose baking flour. We disregard this knowing she cannot, and that to her all flour is the same, as it all comes from the lady across the street who sold only flour. We mix this passing the bowl to each other, asking "Are you sure its not only one cup?." We laugh at the doubtfulness. We push ahead as we feel the hard work our parents have overcome to make these empanadas in a world of which they dreamed.

### *Step 3: La Tortilladora*

A tool we can call our own, the root of our country stretches over the border. Let us remind you that it is not lost, it sits on our kitchen counter the way a microwave would on any other kitchen counter. Next to it a molcajete, laughing at the blender being used to grind your spices. This was a gift from my grandmother to my mother the day she got married. She was the last of ten children to leave and decided that was the way to go. We pick up our tortilladoras and joke about who will take it first, once we are married. There is nothing here that doesn't feel right, evolving from making the typical day to day tortilla, we learn to develop the use of this for other foods too. Placing circular balls of dough, we compress into wide 4 inch "tortillitas".

### *Step 4: Add dulce de leche into dough*

You know when your Hispanic friends are talking in Spanish and you ask them to translate, they simply say "oh it's not the same in English." You try to act like you don't care but you do, which is, exactly why you should try this. Our caramel does the exact same thing. We add this creamy paste with a spoon, careful not to hurt the dough underneath. We smile as we do this, licking our fingers when mother isn't watching. When she looks, we smile as we are aware of our parents desire to keep us from being too well known with the new world around us. We keep these traditions close to us. We think of our words being only ours and laugh at the way our ingredients lay far behind customer's eyes. We are okay with it. We giggle as we see the underestimation of these ingredients, along with my mother who laughs at the thought of her adding a hundred year old pumpkin filling recipe instead.

### *Step 5: Close empanada*

We start off with forks and "empanada stamps" in order to close the pastries. We sit in front of the oven counting the ones who survived the hot temperature of 325 which caused the filling to spill out through the indented fork masters. All but...

all but one pan. The empanadas which my mother closed off by twisting the dough with her fingers. We joke about cutting her hands off before she dies in order to finish these empanadas without the messiness the oven creates for us. She laughs, but we worry at not being able to show our own kids the lessons our mother taught us.

#### *Step 6: Coat Empanadas with Granulated Sugar*

We take turns removing the hot pans out of the oven, fast enough to keep them hot when rolling them into a bowl of granulated sugar. This imitates the drops of sweat and tears my parents produced to achieve the American Dream. A dream in which our own aspirations includes fulfilling parents. We don't use spoons and forks to do this as it adds time, instead we flip them like fishes with the hard tips of our fingers. Managing to learn the twist our mother had created, we are at peace with who we have become.

#### *Step 7: Share*

“Where are you from” they ask, amazed to see a white face with a Spanish accent. “Tamaulipas,” We say expecting the quizzical expressions on hearing the name of a place they've never heard of before. The place that lies under the Mexican borderline, underneath the state they claim to know so much about. I forgive this ignorance as they take another bite of what they call an empanada. We have given this recipe out numerous times. We laugh at the thought of our neighbors attempt to top these off with powdered sugar. And to our own friends who don't want to purchase the Mexican caramel. What they don't understand is that this dish comes with a story which is told within the recipe itself. A sweet breading with a crunch that imitates the breeding of an American pie, a caramel filling that doesn't stick to your teeth like candy apple, but melts in your mouth like a Hershey Kiss would in your pocket. We top it off with a crystallized coat of sugar not powdered, but granulated, enough to cover and brighten the final look of the pastry. They see Mexico, but we see compromise.



# TOSS OF THE SEA

by Rebecca Miller

The woman in the boat  
sets out over the blue,  
ready for, by all appearances,  
a calm trip with little trouble.

The surface of the sea  
is serene, peaceful, but  
underneath it churns  
in a whirlpool.

The tension builds  
until it is too much.  
Waves rumple the surface  
growing

bigger

and

bigger.

The boat tosses  
on the uneven surface

back

and

forth

it pitches, rolling over the swells.

The woman holds  
on for as long  
as possible.

She does what she can,  
bailing out water,  
wrestling to steer  
the boat.

She sits there,  
the waves  
surrounding and pounding  
her and she wonders  
how much more  
she can take.



# CONTRIBUTORS' NOTES

**Sandra Carranza** is from the small town of Hemphill, Texas and is currently a sophomore at SFA. She is pursuing a major in Mass Communications with a concentration in Journalism and a minor in Creative Writing. Most of Sandra's poetry centers around topics like love, heartbreak, family, and being Latina.

**Rebecca Chatskis** was born and raised near Dallas, Texas. She is a Creative Writing major in her senior year at SFA. When she's not writing, Rebecca enjoys playing videogames as well as designing and sewing costumes for conventions. In June 2019, she got engaged to her long-term partner, Jesse Russell.

**Arianna Doughty** is just starting her third year at SFA as a creative writing major. She grew up in the small town of Bastrop, Texas. An area that during her adolescence was ravaged by wildfires. One of which was used as inspiration for Town of Fire.

**Brianna Dunston** is currently a freshman majoring in Creative Writing.

**Margaret Godfrey** is a freshman at Stephen F Austin State University. Originally from Galveston, Texas, she found her passion for helping others through healthcare. She is a pre-nursing major and is fluent in American Sign Language.

**Katie Harris** is a sophomore at SFA with a criminal justice major. She grew up in Austin, TX and enjoys reading and hiking in her free time. This photo was taken at the bottom of the Grand Canyon while on a 4 day family backpacking trip. Katie was carrying a 35 pound backpack at the time!

**Payton Hudak** is a senior at SFA and an International & Intercultural Communications major with minors in Modern Language and Creative Writing. She enjoys fantasy and sci-fi stories, travel, and crocheting for her friends and family, and especially learning new things.

**Deana Jones** is a senior psychology major at SFA. Commuting from her hometown of Lufkin, she hopes to use her major to figure out how to help other people, as well as herself. When she isn't in classes or at work, you can find Deana continuing to dabble in vector art, advocate for mental health and illnesses, write for various publications and herself, and claim all of her neighborhood stray cats as her own (which they would disagree with, but they don't know any better. They're cats).

**Amelia Kleiber** is a freshman at SFA studying English with a double minor in Secondary Education and Creative Writing. Originally from Katy, she hopes to teach and publish novels in the future. When Amelia isn't reading, you can find her playing guitar, singing, and spending time with family and friends.

**Brice Kohleriter** is a free speech advocate, writer, and public speaker. He is a Junior pursuing a degree in Marketing and will graduate in December of 2020. He founded the First Amendment Club and participates in poetry slams on campus. Eventually, he hopes to publish his own allegorical fiction novel.

**Krista Lambert** grew up in Lufkin, Texas, and is a Creative Writing Major at SFA. She has previously been published in SFA's Humid 12, and SUNY Fredonia's The Trident. She'd like to dedicate "Yellow Light Girls" to her sister Brenna, whom she misses very much. Krista enjoys reading stories, listening to music, pampering her vicious cat, and generally wasting time. She's very excited to be part of this year's edition of Humid!

**Nia McCray** is a Creative Writing major at SFA. She is from Katy, TX and this is her second year as a Lumberjack. Her hobbies include reading, writing, and music. She has been playing the cello since she was 11 years old. She is super grateful to be in HUMID 13.

**Harleigh McGowan** is a Senior Creative Writing undergraduate currently working on her senior thesis in poetry. She hopes to get her master's degree in Library Science so she can live out her life surrounded by books.

**Rebecca Miller** is a sophomore in the creative writing program at SFA. In her spare time, Rebecca enjoys reading, walking in the woods, listening to music, and binge watching TV shows. Rebecca hopes to one day travel the world and write about her experience.

**Shaylynn Packard** is from Chireno, Texas, and currently a senior. She is completing her bachelor's degree in English with a Creative Writing minor. Once finished, she is moving to Northamptonshire, England to pursue a career in publishing alongside her fiancé.

**Meridian Parham** is from Buda, Texas—a town south of urban Austin. She is a Creative Writing major in her second year at Stephen F. Austin State University. She's wanted to be a writer since she was seven years old and she's so happy to follow her dreams, here at SFA.

**Emma Rhyne** is a freshman Creative Writing major enjoying her first semester at SFA. Although her hometown of Bullard (near Tyler, for anyone not in a thirty-minute radius) is tiny, the stories of the town inspired her love for writing. She loves photography and making people laugh with corny puns.

**Marisela Rios** is from Lytle, Texas. Her major is Creative Writing with a double minor in English Literature and Art. She is a Senior and will graduate in Fall 2019 with a Bachelor's in Fine Arts.

**Kaitlyn Sharrock** is a senior and majors in Creative Writing. She is from Katy, Texas, and currently lives off-campus with two cats and two sisters.

**Savannah Shelton** is a sophomore at SFA currently working towards her BFA in Creative Writing. Her hometown is Westphalia, a tiny farming community in central Texas, where her closest neighbors are cornfields and gravel roads. She spends most of her time procrastinating on her writing projects and reading fantasy novels.

**Kendall Simmons** is a Junior attending Stephen F. Austin State University. She is a Creative Writing Major. In her spare time, she reads a lot and daydreams way too much.

**Taylor Smith** is a third-year Creative Writing major from Houston, Texas. Taylor plays the piccolo for the Lumberjack Marching Band.

**Allison Swaim** is currently a freshman at Stephen F. Austin State University. They are majoring in Chemistry and enjoy writing and art as hobbies. Allison has also received two gold keys for their poetry in the 2018 National Scholastic Art and Writing competition.