The Sigma Tau Delta Rectangle

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Isabel Sparks	1998-1999	Kevin Stemmler	2011-2012
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Sigma Tau Delta is a member of the Association of College Honor Societies.

2016–17 Writing Awards for *The Sigma Tau Delta Review* and *The Sigma Tau Delta Rectangle*

Frederic Fadner Critical Essay Award
Victoria Pyron Tankersley
"Migrants as Criminals & Criminals as Migrants: Reimagining Jimmy Santiago Baca's US Prison Writing as Transnational Literature"

E. Nelson James Poetry Award
Mara Koren
"Yoko Ono: Living Woman, 1970"

Eleanor B. North Poetry Award
Richard Thompson
"salt free, gluten free"

Elizabeth Holtze Creative Non-fiction Award
Sarah Williams
"The Sands of Pelican Bay"

Herbert Hughes Short Story Award
Rebekah Becker
"Lolita"

Judges for Writing Awards

MATT CALIHMAN is an associate professor and the director of the graduate programs in English at Missouri State University. He teaches African-American literature and other US literature courses. He has published articles on Amiri Baraka and John A. Williams, and he recently co-edited (with Tracy Floreani and Yęmisi Jimoh) a special issue of *American Studies* on Ralph Ellison. His long-term project is a study of post-World War II African-American intellectuals' engagement with cultural pluralist thought.

ARLEY MCNENEY is the author of *Post*, which was shortlisted for the Commonwealth Writer's Prize, and *The Time We All Went Marching*, which was named to the *Globe and Mail's* "Best 100 Books of 2011" list. She teaches applied communications at Kwantlen Polytechnic University and has worked as a communications manager, press attaché, communications consultant, and social media strategist for amateur sports organizations.

SAM TAYLOR is the author of two books of poems, *Body of the World* (Ausable/Copper Canyon Press) and *Nude Descending an Empire* (Pitt Poetry Series), as well as a recipient of the Amy Lowell Poetry Traveling Scholarship. His work has appeared in *The Kenyon Review, AGNI,* and *The New Republic*, and he is the director of the Creative Writing program at Wichita State University.

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Poetry

salt free, gluten free

Richard Thompson

We said we'd write. We didn't
write. When I came back
to Côtes-des-Neiges,
I ate with you in semi-dark:
brown rice, cruciferous
vegetables. Filtered water.
You were living, in a way:
the married, lonely men,
the basement studio,
the icy drive. Since I
had gotten out, my news
was good. And you were
waiting for a scan
you hoped would show
the dark floret of cells.
Outside, the snow
was melting. It was spring.

Richard Thompson is a post-baccalaureate student at the University of Houston and is in the process of applying for an MFA. *He is also a psychologist, a Canadian, a husband, and a dad to a very cool 18-month-old. His poems have appeared in* Empirical Magazine, Skive Magazine, *and* Avenue Journal, *among others.*

Yoko Ono: Living Woman, 1970

Mara Koren

Being woman is complex, it's
Motherhood
building life in your stomach,
loving a sack of cells.
Mammary glands, birth canal:
your Womanhouse filled with parts
not meant for you.

Mother Piece

Birth something for three days in a row.
It may be a child, a cloud, a length of
rope.

Woman is
mother/daughter/wife:
feedmeownmeloveme
Woman is
Sister.

Sister Piece

Listen
a. to yourself cry
b. to another woman cry
c. to each other's brains

Woman is blame:
She is not heaven-on-earth
enough for you.
Women get their fingers in
cracks and
p u l l
(4 whole men,

after 10 years of
love, love, love,
their destruction is
WOMAN) (That's okay)

Blame Piece

Take on every sin of the world.
Give them away one by one.
Keep the best for yourself.

Woman is
slick and smooth
a bar of soap
she slips through your hands
while you rub her down your legs.

Hair Piece

Grow your body hair for one year.
Offer clippings to anyone who visits.

Woman is woman,
divine worthlessness,
grabbable body
face-beauty unfailingly
appraised

Body Piece

Talk to your body often.
You may discuss the weather,
ask questions, share the best part
of your day.

Mara Koren is a senior at Ursinus College where she majors in English and has intended minors in Creative Writing, Gender and Women's Studies, and Visual Art. Mara is the Vice President of the Sigma Tau Delta chapter at Ursinus. After graduation she hopes to work for a nonprofit organization.

How Did Those Girls Survive?

Gabrielle Weiss

In the fairy tales, the girls were always golden.
Bones fragile as bird wings.
In science class we used a brittle skeleton
to learn the names.
Clavicle
femur
tibia.

Even before school, when the house slept
I practiced ballet, using the dusty windowsill
as a barre. Imagining my bones, the sunlight

an x-ray revealing the stretch of my patella
bending
into *plié.*

When my heart sped up, I swore
I could see my veins, thin stems
tangling into each other when my shin and calf

extended into *tendu.* I convinced myself
I could feel the blood swirling in the sole of my foot.

That's how it feels to be a girl
in the stories. Muted footsteps. Blood
pumping a whole world beneath your skin.

Gabrielle Weiss graduated summa cum laude from Canisius College with degrees in English and Creative Writing. She served as Vice President of her school's Sigma Tau Delta chapter while writing a chapbook-length thesis about women in fairy tales. Recently, she studied abroad in Italy with her best friend and ate gelato for dinner every night. She hopes to one day hold an MFA in poetry and raise a golden retriever named Minnie.

Tarzan Tells Jane He Wants A Divorce

Emily Tuttle

He told her at dinner,
as she ripped apart her meat,
clawing fat with thick, vulture fingernails.
Things are so different now, he mumbled,
recanting silhouettes of his Venus
in silk white ruffled skirts,
sketching beautiful things on her notepad,
using roses to rouge her cheeks.
The woman across the fire pit now
has blended dirt into her pores,
a strange kind of camouflage so now even Tarzan
cannot see her.
The jungle wrapped its vines around her arms
crusted mud on her once soft legs,
shrinking breasts, tightening thighs—
Last week, he caught her sharpening her old shoes
into plastic pikes.
She crouched inside the trees,
until a snake slipped through the branches.
Tarzan felt the feather tongue slip over his fingers and flinched,
and she screamed, and drove the makeshift spear into its head.
You're not the woman I married, Tarzan confesses,
Jane says nothing, simply stares with calm wild eyes
while her husband thinks how foolish he was
to try to keep a flower soft
in such barren, tempest soil.

Emily Tuttle is a recent graduate of the University of Maryland, College Park, where she received her BA in English Language and Literature, with a double minor in Creative Writing and Neuroscience. While at the University of Maryland, she was editor-in-chief of both the critical and creative journals, member of the Jimenez-Porter Writer's House, and an intern at Poet Lore in Bethesda. She has work featured in the Doctor TJ Eckleburg Review *and* Blotterature. *She hopes to continue her career in editing and publishing while applying to MFA programs for 2017.*

My Beautiful Uncut Hair after Walt Whitman

Megan Olsen

Turn left at the wig shop—
I am hiding between
the tall grasses and the statue
of a woman praying.

I like to think she is praying
for me. Asking God to keep me
from wondering how we rise
or how we collapse. She is

as bald as an egg which
helps her converse with God;
None of her thoughts get caught
in the snarls brushed behind the ears,
devout, or devoid, and listening.
This makes me want

to try on a new head. Something neat like red,
Something that could open me up—
because I've been sitting with a tangle of
questions in my hands.

But I don't believe in the Big Man, so I think
she is just wasting her time. I think
she needs a wig to comb through the uncertainty

just like the rest of us.
A brown bouffant sprayed open,
as if catching

falling answers,
like praying palms gathering dust.

Megan Olsen is a senior at Weber State University studying English with an emphasis in Creative Writing. She served as editor-in-chief of the undergraduate literature journal, Metaphor. *Currently, she works as a tutor at the university and is an editor for* Jolly Fish Press. *Her publications include* Sink Hollow *along with poems published in multiple issues of* Metaphor. *Megan has also presented her work at the National Undergraduate Literature Conference for the past four years. She lives with her daughter and husband in Ogden, UT, where she continues to write. After graduation, Megan plans on attending graduate school and publishing a collection of poetry.*

How to Survive in a Mexican-American Home

Luis Daniel Salgado

Beware
of the *chancla*, if your family is crazy enough it will consist of a flip flop on a stick.
It never misses.

Say goodbye to your summers. Your deadbeat dad will rob you of your
childhood vacations as he takes your "ungrateful ass" to cut yards
that you will have walked more times than those *gringos* ever will. All for a crisp
20-dollar bill, which I guess is enough for a nine-year-old boy.

If you ever bring a girl home, make sure she is respectable and gives respect.
No miniskirts or drawn on eyebrows, big bro said so.

Also, go ahead and hide that embarrassing family video of you swinging at *piñatas*
and eating undeserved cake as a kid, and when you are old
enough, make a copy of it and save it for the memories.

Every morning wake up early so you can beat
your three sisters to the shower before they take all the hot water.

Be happy for every year you get. Statistics say we aren't supposed to live past 30. P.S.
Don't go to the other side of the *barrio*, the side with all the dirty weapons and shiny drugs.
You saw what happened to big bro, and how those dull chains and bars
made mom's eyes drown in agony.

While your father is there, pay attention
to the way he shaves his prickly face (against the grain), the way he ties his tie (a crooked half-
Windsor knot), and to the way he drives (hands at 2 and 8),
because he won't be there to teach you later.

While your grandmother is alive, cherish every moment before school. The way she would wake
you up and iron your shirt, and the way her hot chocolate will never be beat (take notes ladies).
She will teach you how to be a gentleman, but won't get to see the man you will become.

Get used to being too American to be Mexican and too Mexican to be American.

Love your mom every day for her sacrifices.
The eldest of 12. Forced to stop going to school at the age of 10. At 15 compelled
to take the bus to Texas to work every fucking day, then take the same bus back to Mexico at
night to bring back a waitress paycheck.
Never love a woman more than your mother.

When your oldest sister graduates high school, the first person in your family to ever do that,
admire her. And when she is the first to graduate college tell her you are proud
of her for all of her accomplishments and for not becoming a statistic.

When your little sisters fall into that statistic and get pregnant, be there
for your niece and nephew.
Teach them how to ride a bike, play *fútbol*, and how to love.
Treat your niece like a *princesa*

and give your nephew his first taste of beer as he exchanges
his milk bottle for your bottle of *Corona*
because their dads won't. Just like yours didn't.

When you are the first man in your family to go to college, find a nice white girl your freshman
year. Oh, and don't let her parents bring you down for being brown. Have sex with her instead.
It's what your friends always talked about, "Put your Mexican flag on this American land."

When you are older, find a passion, get the hell out of Houston, follow that passion,
write a poem, call it "How to Survive in a Mexican-American
Home," and share it with the next Godforsaken Mexican-American.

Luis Daniel Salgado is a senior at Sam Houston State University. He is originally from Houston, TX. Luis plans on applying to graduate school to earn his MFA in Creative Writing. Luis's poetry has been published in River Poet Journal, Sam Houston State Review, *and* Beacon.

Flight Patterns

Amy Hutto

I.

I saw my mother once, from the back
only. My grandmother still cries every day,
tears running through wrinkled forks
and tributaries. I watch the sky
for answers, like my grandpa taught me.

The pictures of my mother are
always from the back.
I wonder if she's ever had
a face, if she's just hiding.
I wonder if she sat by the river's
edge, perched in stillness, waiting.

II.

My mother has the face of a coyote.
Which makes sense, because my
feet are small and quiet and I feast
on leftovers.

My mother has the face of a rabbit.
Which makes sense, because my
ears are large, and I nibble quickly,
and I am usually fast and afraid.

My mother has the face of a crow.
And this makes the most sense,
because I, too, feel the wings heavy
and aching on my back. My legs
are black and thin and have
nowhere to run. I feel my beak,
very sharp and very greedy.
And I stretch my wings daily,

wondering where they would
take me.

III.

There is a talon in the road.
A talon and a leg and some feathers.
Not much else. I walk farther,
and there is another scaly leg,
blood spots like freckles on the
sad concrete. There, to the right,
a pair of wings. Crumpled, feathers
missing, splayed out, like they are reaching
for something that would have
been blue and tasted like freedom.

IV.

I think my mother was a crow. Because
I can feel the hardness of my own heart.
I can feel my feet, black and leathery,
and I can
    feel the wings
sprouted on my back, ready for flight.
I can look at my own children and know
why she did it. I understand.
The choice is obvious; the decision,
undeniable. I still tell the stories,
like sweet poison in my gaping mouth,
but I long to stretch my inky, unused wings.

There are more places than here that I know.

V.

My grandma cries. Like the drought
might be over; like she could refill
the well and the lake. There are
letters every two, five, three years.

My mother is alive, but I still see her
ghost at night.

She has the face of a crow.
Her beak is greedier than mine.
I weave flower beads feathers
into my dream catcher, just in case.
The feathers are black, like the
yawn of a cave. I don't tie it
too tightly. She will need to
escape, and I've never been
able to keep her before.

My mother visits at night, like a totem
missing from its village. I am only
a little afraid when I see her, beak
clacking shut. She never says a word.
And I understand.

Amy Hutto is a senior Creative Writing major with a minor in Marketing at the University of Southern California. She is co-editor of the literary and art magazine Adsum *and her work has previously appeared in* The Social Justice Review. *When Amy isn't writing or reading, she plays tuba in the Trojan Marching Band.*

on the grammar of the body

Kate O'Donoghue

read my body like a sentence: i am a collection
of clauses. nose like a comma, puzzle me into parts

manifesting mostly in the three dark beauty marks aligned
on my forearm. orion kissed me

there, read my body like a myth, but artemis
was no better, constellating my freckles,

my semicolon moons. orion-like, she burrowed
into my beauty marks, speared me

there, read my body like a myth, so athena kissed me
there, all there, over.

war-woman, she swallowed me grey, in hexameters, trochee
throat a refuge from the hunt. but she disappeared

my syllables & my calluses in careful dactyls
until only bone & heart remained.

then she pierced my heart: murmur, empty
parenthetical, gap in my biology.

she read my body like a poem, great grey
goddess, exploited my comma nose,

my caesura.

so if you ride my knuckles like a line
break, i will invade your laugh

lines until i am wedged in your head,
        O zeus, O mind, i am your daughter,

your skull, your sentence
        gone wrong, spliced.

Kate O'Donoghue is a senior at Muhlenberg College, where she studies English, Creative Writing, and Film Studies. She is the editor-in-chief of Muses, *Muhlenberg's arts and literary magazine, as well as a lead writing tutor and an officer of her Sigma Tau Delta chapter. She plans eventually to pursue a graduate degree in English Literature. She previously has been published in* Muses *and* See Spot Run.

Statue of Aristotle at Oxford Museum

Benjamin Jones

An opulent forehead, wrinkles chiseled in stone.
The Greek's grey eyes veer over an etched form
of a strong nose. Below, lips bend like a bow,
pregnant with words, like clouds before a storm.

The T-Rex's jaws spread wide in endless babble.
Silent as the desert; archeologists discovered
his hindquarters beneath oil drums and gravel.
Now his six claws hang over heads at Oxford.

Visitors brush tired hands across the carved
name of Aristotle, his sandals frozen
and cloak ruffled, but left normal, unscarred.
While disciples flock to the archaic hen,

where kids pet the Rex's petrified talons,
hoping for one roar, one growl of ancient wisdom.

Benjamin Jones graduated from Dallas Baptist University in December 2016 with a BA in English and a minor in Spanish. He has worked in the University Writing Center and as a tutor for international students. He has taught at a summer camp in China and plans on doing further international teaching. He aspires to do graduate work in Linguistics and then doctoral work in Literature, Composition, or Rhetoric with the ultimate goal of becoming an English professor. His life motto is: Soli Deo Gloria.

Lowercase H

Alissa Pagano

Christ was a hit at the Christmas party. Although He
sobs when He's not sober. I found Him winedrunk in the
kitchen,

smashing the caterer's good china, choking out I'm so sorry—
we've let each other down. Porcelain slick blood trickling from
one palm.

I never asked his name, afraid ancestry.com would say son of:
the Lord, and they'd Baker Act every last one of us.

Paper boys don't bike through psych wards. We'd never find out
when Hollywood cast Brad Pitt for the biopic, slapping his big
head

onto billboards behind a BASED ON TRUE EVENTS tagline. I
couldn't risk it,
so I told everyone His name was Joshua and He never seemed to
mind.

On New Year's Eve Joshua kissed me. Punch-drunk Jesus.
He smacked of liquor, stained glass, and the betrayal

of people's faiths falling apart.

Alissa Pagano is a fourth-year English major at Stetson University with a minor in Creative Writing. She is President of the university's chapter of Sigma Tau Delta and Stetson's most recent Academy of American Poets prize recipient. She has a preoccupation with sometimes surreal, oft unconventional writing and hopes you get to read the collection someday.

On The Shoulders of Minor Poets

Dan Rattelle

So there we stood, stoned in the garden, and still as statuettes. The primroses glistened with dew. Looked like rain. We were born like this. Hank, drunker than I was, pulled a luger from his belt. I pointed a rifle straight at his head. "Hank," I said, "isn't it time we made our peace? I ain't scared to blow your head off." Hank stumbled. Smiled. Fired twice. Brain and heart. I dropped dead. And there I lay in the new mud of early spring, hidden by Hank's gnarly hedges. Later, half sober, he calls up a buddy. They roll me up in some tarp and duct tape. Toss me in the trunk, then off the nearest bridge. I float down the river a while, not sure how long. Let's say six days, until I wash up on a farm and Wendell Berry's dog unrolls my tarp. She finds me bloated and green, leans me up against a tree and runs to get her master.

Dan Rattelle is a senior at Westfield State University in Massachusetts where he is poetry editor of Persona, *the campus literary magazine. His poetry has appeared in* Dappled Things *and* The Society of Classical Poets. *He is currently working on a chapbook manuscript.*

Aquifer

Daniel Mata

all this time i
sit on the edge and i
        think to my

self god   could
i look at the lights
        ashore   next to

breakwaters in peace
        for a few hours
        intoxicated

forget   myself
in the screams
of waves

in the half-moon   above
        and the crooked shadow
of its smile on holy water

        it wrestles to hold
        itself
together

a blue step away
two fish swim
and swallow the moonlight

while   i sit
here   rusted
metal hooks   for hands

the salt
has made its way
        into my flesh

wood crackles in a fire
pit like
incense above me

these two
speak a strange tongue
and pull each other

away from the world
beneath them
but i'm

here please allow
me show me the
lights ashore

reflected on the ocean
sea-towns dying under
clouds

and the
firmament
slow paddles

away
i hear splashes
and the bark of the sea

lions
half asleep
drift ashore

their
pack breaks up
and quiets

Daniel Mata is a senior international student at Chapman University, where he is pursuing a BA in English Literature with a minor in Anthropology. As a queer, Latino author, his influences vary and often are at odds with each other, yet he suspects they're quite similar at the core. He looks forward to spending some time with his family in Vargas, Venezuela, before hopefully moving on to graduate school.

Being Born in the South

Robert Bishop

Oh brown tangle,
birthed by earth,
fire, and hands,

the dirt womb
didn't prepare you
for life by a window

scrubbing at stains
you didn't leave
behind. But copper

wool that sits
only sprouts
rust blossoms.

Robert Bishop, a senior English and Philosophy double major at Carson-Newman University, serves on the editorial team for the university literary journal, Ampersand. *He plans on attending graduate school to study philosophy next year.*

Jackfruit
To J.

Quang Vo

You pack some jackfruit
for lunch, forgetting to share
your intentions. I understand

the task is pensive,
messy, wonderful—
why share with me?

Your hands move patiently—
courting fingers fumbling
sunlit skin for resin pearls
nestling inside.

And so,
my fingers are left idle, starving
while the seeds you remove
sparkle like polished stones.

Quang Vo is an International Studies major with concentrations in Diplomacy and East Asia at the University of St. Thomas in Houston. A recipient of the Joy Linsley Memorial Poetry Scholarship, he is currently serving as poetry editor for the university's literary magazine, Laurels.

For the Emptied Street: An Elegy

Megan A. Jones

A dead-end sign, barely yellow, hangs crooked
where the pavement dies.
On the other corner, a street sign,
letters not white enough, background not green
enough to divide a name from symbols.

The trees are cold.

The grass is jealous of the puddles, which are jealous of the three-leaved clovers in the yard of every pasteled house.
The windows are not invisible, but deep. They mirror the
puddles.

Stoic front doors stand at attention.
Their screens creak—
the wind makes their bones ache.

The first box crouches too close
to the road. From the asphalt, an unprivileged
anyone could see the bicycle laying on the little green almost-stars.
The tires are flat.
The basket has been chewed through by moths.
But the bell might still talk,
if someone scrubbed the scabbed dirt from the inside.

And along the gaps between the boxes, fallen
Sky Dancers rest, their winged skirts sewn in
the weeds' roots. The mute air is their coffin.

The pavement pays its respects.

Megan A. Jones is a student at Oakland University in Rochester Hills, MI, where she is completing her BA in Creative Writing with a double minor in Writing and Rhetoric and Music. Her poem, "Aerial Green," was awarded third-place in OU's 2016 Ekphrasis Poetry Contest. In addition to writing poetry, Megan also enjoys writing fiction–particularly flash fiction–as well as literary nonfiction. After graduating in April 2017, she hopes to pursue an MFA in Creative Writing.

Raices
after Kahlo

Robert Julius Schumaker

under a sky of gray
lies a woman in a dress of burnt orange.

she sprouts green ivy.
her red tendrils, engorged with blood, r e a c h o u t

for c r a c k s
in the soil,
where there are many.
the parched earth drinks her up
like wine, enamored with the
taste and the way she makes
what was once solid s o f t e n.

it's a big dream to try and water the world.
her face reveals her fear:

can a single woman be the seed of life
that nourishes or revives the d e a d ?

Robert Julius Schumaker is a senior Creative Writing and French major at Chapman University in Orange, CA. He is a queer writer of both poetry and prose. His work has also appeared in Calliope Art & Literary Magazine, FIVE Poetry Magazine, *and* The Indiana Review: Online.

September 11

Christina Wheeler

The day was never ours to claim.
It left its mark on Chile twenty-eight years before.
And those who say time heals all wounds
don't hear the ticking clock, the countdown.

Bodies diving from buildings,
buildings collapsing like bodies–
jump or burn alive?

Nixon told the CIA,
"Make the economy scream."
The wails grew louder and louder
as Allende's big plans crumbled:
workers on strike, unable to pay
the rising costs of goods. Tensions
rising too.

Feeling as if we're falling,
holding the hands of the ones who jump
who take the plunge
no words shared no words needed
crumpling against the unyielding
pavement.

Bombs in the background,
gunshots firing,
Allende saying farewell.
Suicide? Assassination?
Where does the line fall?

Three thousand dead.
Who to blame?
Someone to blame.
Point a finger.

After Allende, the military ruled.
Tens of thousands disappeared, died
hundreds of thousands put in prison.
And yet one man stood up and sang.
It was Víctor Jara.
It was a song of horror,
a song that forty-four bullets could not put to an end.

But we remember our own day of tragedy.
Isn't that how it always is?

Who to blame?
Someone to blame.
Point a finger.

Christina Wheeler graduated from Stockton University with a BA in Literature and a minor in Writing in December 2016. She discovered her passion when she started tutoring at the university's Writing Center in fall 2012 and has wanted to help students ever since. After graduation, she plans to pursue an MFA in Creative Writing and eventually become a professor in the field.

Night Swim

Kasy Long

She told me to stop the wind, but she never told me why. She grins, blushes, waltzes with her elegant grace. The water moves against the curve of her rotating hips. Small pebbles bounce and skim across the pond in a speed race. I grab her wet ankles and pull her body toward mine. Her lace swimsuit flutters against the current. I watch her float and spin in the water, her hands push back her red hair. Fireflies blink in the distance, the air gives me goosebumps even though it's the middle of the July summer heat. She holds me close, my body aches at her pressure. She gazes at the world around her; I only gaze at the dip of her chin. She told me to stop the wind, I ask for a reason. She sinks into the water.

Kasy Long is a senior Creative Writing major at Ohio Northern University. She is the Historian for ONU's Sigma Tau Delta chapter. Her work has been previously published in The Sucarnochee Review, Glass Mountain, The RavensPerch, *and* Polaris Literary Magazine. *In her free time, she watches* I Love Lucy, *reads Emily Dickinson's poetry, and dreams about the beautiful Lake Chautauqua in western New York. After graduation, she hopes to work in communications for a thriving cultural museum.*

Elss, the Cow

Tom Lubben

Elss, the cow.
Wandering woman, ripping dusky weeds along the gravel.
Sunset singer;
no-fly evenings, winking sun, so spun behind the hills it scatters
sunlight

over Elss, the cow.
Crickets calling—do you listen? They are in your song.

Go on, Elss, sunset singer,
ring your tired, lilting voice, the farmer's listening always.
As you stoop your ditchward sleep,
he'll call his Elss, his cow,
and in the twinkling soft-moon deep
will lead you home.

Tom Lubben studies English and Music at Palm Beach Atlantic University. He has been published in PBA's Advent Guide, Catfish Creek Review, Sigma Tau Delta's Mind Murals, the Quaker, *and* PBA's Living Waters Review, *where he currently serves as managing editor. With his wife and two of his brothers and sister in-law, Tom plays in a bluegrass band called The Lubben Brothers and also joins his brothers in a classical piano trio. After graduating from PBA, Tom and his wife would like to attend graduate school and continue collaborating musically with the rest of their family.*

Creative Non-Fiction

The Sands of Pelican Bay

Sarah Williams

She was playing in the dirt. Our yard was mostly sand and dirt. Patches of grass speckled the sandy lot like little emerald isles. We lived in what the politically correct would call a "low socioeconomic community." Pelican Bay was and still is a giant trailer park. Oddly enough, Pelican Bay is lake property, but the shitty housing and water system keep it down. Sometimes I would go inside after playing all day and find sand in my shoes or my hair and even in my panties. That sand crept into you; it wanted to escape Pelican Bay, like so many of us did once we were old enough to know better. Big, rich houses surrounded us on either side, but those kids never came to swim or play with us. Trash and empty beer bottles were the foliage of our beach. Dad got dentures and lost them while swimming. We still make jokes about fish or turtles wearing them. Some things just aren't meant to get out of Pelican Bay.

I was around six, but I can't be sure. All I remember was that I had to wear a pair of high-heeled, red jelly slippers every day. They weren't just red, they were *ruby* red. I was Dorothy and the sand was only a few shades darker than the Yellow Brick Road. The world was my runway in those shoes. Flecks of shimmery red glitter inside the jelly sparkled translucent, like a 1950's idea of space-age material. I washed them every day to keep the sand at bay. I wore them everywhere and with every step I took: click, tap, click, tap . . . I was a *lady*. Once, I ran away wearing only one of those shoes. The Texas summer is no joke and the road was so hot that my bare foot only tolerated the ground for a split second as I half-sprinted away. I only got one block away before mom yelled from the back door of the trailer and came to get me.

"SARAH RAE-ANN, YOU GET YOUR ASS BACK HERE NOW!" Mom yelled repeatedly while I just stood there.

I turned so I could put my slipper-less foot on the sand rather than the scorching road. My foot sank just enough to fill the space around my toes and cool my heels. Mom caught up to

me easily because once I was caught, I just quit running away. She gave me a Southern Momma Greeting, which is a whoopin' for each step you take back to the house followed by a severe hugging for loving you so damn much.

My sister and I didn't care that we lived in Pelican Bay. The world was full of wonder and traveling sand to us. At three years old, Hollie played in the sand every day. She loved to run it through her hands. She never built castles with it or any typical thing like that; she just wanted to submerge Barbies and burrow in it. She was an imperialist even then. Hollie was small with dark, straight hair, and she was always cute. If you ever saw a baby or a kid that you knew would grow to be beauty-contestant beautiful . . . that was Hollie. I was cute, too, but in a way that all chubby kids are cute, with a hint of pity.

I was playing by the front porch while Hollie once again poured sand over her hands. She sat halfway down the driveway, so she must have been about twenty feet from me. Our driveway was long in comparison to others. We had prime real estate when it came to trailer parks: the coveted corner lot. Our back door wasn't ten feet away from the next trailer's front door.

An old truck stopped and parked on the street at the very end of our driveway. I didn't recognize the truck, but it looked like all the trucks in Pelican Bay, a hair away from the junk yard. The man was a stranger. I was old enough to know about stranger danger, but too young to understand completely. He opened his door, he looked like my Daddy. My Dad always wore flannel shirts and even in those old black-and-white photos of him as a kid he is wearing flannel. I don't remember the stranger's skin or hair color, and when I think of him now, his face is a blur of shadows like a horror film, but that's only because I now understand the evil of the situation. As a child, things seem simple when you think. There's not much philosophy behind a child's choices and observations, but in that moment, this man who looked like my Daddy and my community felt wrong.

It wasn't the first time I felt real fear. My parents smoked cigarettes for some of my childhood and I snuck around to get them while they weren't looking. I took a lit cigarette and sucked

it like a straw. This is my first memory: coughing and coughing and feeling like I wouldn't breathe again.

"Drink!"

It was the one word I recognized and the first word I remember hearing. Mom said it while she beat the breath into my back. I drank orange juice and it felt like acidic lava flowing down my cough-raw throat; it stings my memory. My mom told me when I got older that I was two when that happened. Mom quit smoking shortly after that, cold turkey. You don't think a two-year-old would have knowledge of death or dying, but when I couldn't breathe, I knew. I have no idea how or why, but I damn sure felt that I would just stop being here if I couldn't breathe.

That's how it felt that day when he appeared. I felt afraid I wouldn't be able to catch my breath, or worse, Hollie wouldn't. He walked toward my sister and I remember feeling like things were slowing down. I couldn't move but I knew that I had to do something, *something*, but I just stood there. My eyes were locked, my body still. Hollie never looked up or moved, she just sat there in the sand while the world shook. He took several steps, not fast but not slow, looking down at Hollie like a god.

The man didn't belong here. Dad was at work and that meant it was supposed to be just Mom, Hollie, and me. It was our playtime and Mom's time for cleaning and soap operas. He disrupted the natural order. When my cousins came over, it would be after Dad got home from work because we didn't have visitors while Dad was away. He was an intruder.

I heard a thud behind me, an indistinct sound and the only sound I recall. There should have been the daily buzzing of bees and six-legged pests that swarmed the waters of Pelican Bay, the usual loud redneck music from a couple trailers away, and that truck should have been loudest of all. Old trucks are always loud, but I don't remember a sound other than *thud*. To my left, something blurry entered my vision and flew past me. Mom was the thud. She never said a word, or maybe she did, as she grabbed little Hollie with both arms, the sand pouring from Hollie's hands and clothes in a cascade. The man froze, turned around, ran to his truck and sped out of Pelican Bay.

Mom would check on us outside every ten minutes or so and she always left the door open; she later told us she just had a strong feeling she should look out at that very moment. I know there's nothing I could have done and part of me thinks that if I had run toward Hollie, maybe he would have snatched her up like ravenous fowl and sped away before Mom could stop him. Mom always protected us and we moved out of Pelican Bay as soon as we could afford to. My beloved ruby red slippers were lost in Pelican Bay along with Dad's choppers. We left many things behind, but we still found sand in the bottom of the washing machine and in the car weeks after we moved.

Sarah Williams will graduate in spring 2017 with a BA in English from Texas Wesleyan University in Fort Worth, TX. She plans to teach English at the secondary level and continue her writing. She has published two pieces in Texas Wesleyan University's Academic Archive *and she served as an editor and as a contributing writer for Tarrant County College's award-winning literary magazine,* Marine Creek Reflections. *She serves as Treasurer of her Sigma Tau Delta chapter.*

I Swear I'm Really Trying

Eric Rubeo

Age 3:

Your first memory is a haze of salty water and sand. A red pale. Lobster? Your mother is loud, so loud. Years later, around the dinner table, she'll tell you, "You were walking into the ocean, Eric. I was calling you back," and you'll realize she was just trying to protect you. But back there, on the beach, she's just loud. You are scooped into the air and you're not sure what's happening. A splash of water tickles your feet and you laugh and don't understand what your mother is saying, but you hear the urgency in her voice and stop laughing. She is your mother, your protector. You trust her. Though you don't realize it yet, you begin to consider all older women in this matronly, protective way.

The first of many ways you learn to consider women.

Age 6:

Having lived at home with two brothers, kindergarten is your first real encounter with girls. Though kindergarten girls are not much different than boys, a small part of you notices how your caretakers treat boys and girls differently, and so an equally small part of you is scared, unsure what the difference means. Of course you don't have access to language to discuss this—after all, you're only six—but the fear pressures you to be around and play only with boys, your kind. Among boys you know the rules. Girls, on the other hand, are strange. They do weird things. For instance, they sit when they use the restroom.

And since no one speaks to you of these weird things, the human girl becomes, somewhere along the way, a sort of exotic and misunderstood creature. Years later you'll wonder if you really understood the boys, with all their oddities, any better than the girls. But in kindergarten, boys are safe.

Age 7:

In the first grade your teacher hands you a sheet of paper

and asks you to "imagine and draw your dream home." On the back a list of brainstorming questions ask: "Where are you? What is your house made of? What possessions do you own?"

You pick up a red crayon, because to you a red square represents bricks. On top of that square, you draw a brown triangle. You are not a good artist. In the margins you map out all the rooms: a kitchen with fifteen stoves, three game rooms, a music room with walled speakers and a purple couch positioned purposefully in the center. You capture in those crude blueprints that which you, at age seven, think will make you happy.

You turn in your work and earn an A and are so, so proud. At home you show your father. "What about this?" he says, pointing to the list of brainstorming questions on the back. Specifically, he points to the question you'd skipped: "Who are you living with?"

"I don't want to live with anyone," you say.

"But won't you get lonely?"

You hadn't thought about that.

You say, "I'll live with Jake," since Jake is your best friend.

Your father laughs and says, "Don't be a gay-bird."

And though you don't really know what a *gay-bird* is, you hear in his voice its undesirability. You love your father. You don't want to be a gay-bird. So, don't be one, you think. And in your effort not to be a gay-bird, you consider again the question "but won't you be lonely?" and search for the right answer. A woman. You should live with a woman. A woman who cooks and cleans and takes care of the kids while you work. That's what you should do when you're older, right? Next question: What kind of woman should she be?

Age 13:

You're a bit of a late bloomer, and so you don't realize you do, in fact, like girls until you find yourself sitting on the toilet thinking of Erin, a short and overweight classmate with pig-tails who says smart things in class. You surprise yourself by thinking of her. After all, you were just trying to escape your teacher's crude discussion of an abridged version of *The Diary of Anne*

Frank when she popped into your mind. But you smile as her face impresses on your mind's eye.

At lunch that day, stirring the greasy mashed potatoes in the corner of your flimsy Styrofoam plate, you admit this imagining to Jake.

"Erin?" he says, followed by awkward silence. And in that silence, it's not as though he said *what an ugly bitch* or something so awful, but you hear a kind of concerned surprise as if, perhaps, Erin was not the kind of person you should be attracted to.

"Have you seen the new *Transfomers* movie?" Jake says. "Megan Fox is so hot."

"Oh, yes," you say. "Megan Fox is so hot."

Age 15:

Family is important. For Thanksgiving, your parents load you into a van and drive nine hours in one sitting from Cincinnati to Philadelphia to spend two days in half a packed duplex with loud relatives who call tomato sauce "gravy" and believe Philadelphia to be the heart of Italian-American culture.

"Have a girlfriend yet?" your grandmother, a kind woman, asks.

"No."

"I'm not getting any younger," she says. "Don't keep your grandmother waiting."

And you know she's joking, she really is—you're small and far away from children, and that's the joke. Of course she, like your parents and all your relatives, just wants you to be happy. She wants you to wait and find the woman who is perfect for you. That's what you heard just beyond her words. Though it would be nice if it happened sooner rather than later, right? And it would be nice if that perfect woman, whoever she was, would raise the great-grandkids like you were raised. And it would be nice if she behaved and thought and believed she was exactly the kind of woman we expect her to be.

Though your grandmother said none of these things, you feel her wishes in your bones, in the marrow inside your bones. And, like your father, you respect and love her. You don't want to let her down. You don't stop and wonder how she, your

grandmother, is contributing to your masculine sense of what a woman should be, or how poisonous such words, so full of love and hope, truly are.

Age 18:

You're a senior in high school and you've fallen so deep into the school, work, sleep, school, work, sleep routine it has exhausted your young, interrogative processes to numbness so severe you're hardly considering what you might like for dinner, let alone the unseen, often unacknowledged world of social pressure all around you.

You arrive in English class long before the sun and you place your head down on the desk. Everything hurts, as it does in those years. And when your teacher steps in and says, "Let's talk about *feminism*," you basically shut down because you want no part of this discussion. What does feminism matter to you? You are a young man concerned with your own problems. At eighteen, that doesn't seem so selfish yet.

Age 21:

You're a third-year English major and, by now, you've taken and passed many literature courses. What interests you most is the growing sense you've gained of the ways books navigate the concerns of their age. In week nine of your literature capstone, you are assigned to read a story collection all about women and conceptions of beauty, and you don't think it'll be your favorite book but you're excited because short stories are your focus.

You begin reading and the first story is about a woman compulsively conscious of her wig—how it sits, how it curls, how it makes her feel normal after the chemotherapy which robbed her of her locks. You write about this in your response paper, how sad it is this character only feels herself when she's wearing synthetic strands of string. Why not embrace who she is? How she truly appears? Your paper asks this question and, it's a quick moment—like a snap—when the synapses of your brain connect these questions and your history, applying empathy—how sad, how sad!—to all the impulses and urges and unstated understandings

you'd come to buy into on what it means to be a beautiful, desired woman. And it's muddy in your head, it doesn't quite make sense, but you begin to understand that this woman wears the wig because she's hardly considered human without it. Why is that?

It'll take time, you think, to grasp what this means. But here, sitting at the laptop writing a response to a book which was not your favorite book, you begin to understand the weight of subtle, unacknowledged implications laced in words like—

"Don't be a gay-bird."

"Megan Fox is so hot."

"Don't keep your grandmother waiting."

And so on.

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Come Out to Play

Aryanna Falkner

When we listen to *The White Album* on your fifth birthday, I get that feeling—the one where my stomach tugs closer to my spine and my arms break out in goosebumps. Waiting for the album to start is like straining to hear a quarter fall into an empty jug, when it's just hanging there for a second, less than a second, before it hits the bottom with the unmistakable ringing of metal ridges on glass. We let the CD load, and I know I can expect the sound of a plane meeting an electric guitar in "Back in the USSR." When the drums come in, a reliable beat that is somehow quieter than the sound of the planes, I look at you, and I know you feel it too.

I'm supposed to play "Birthday," which we always listen to after you blow out your candles. It goes like this: you would buckle yourself into your booster seat, we would light the candles, and you wouldn't find it necessary to use a fork for your Funfetti cake. Mommy and Daddy would dance around your chair, stomping on the floor to make you laugh and you would clap, clap, clap with your frosting fingers. It's our tradition, our own rhythm.

This year, I put in disc one on accident. You start wiggling your toes, which means that you like it. Mommy and Daddy look at each other, at me, and we nod, applauding ourselves for making you love the Beatles as much as we do. You jump down from your seat, run to our beat-up, once-was-brown couch, and fold your legs underneath you, rocking back and forth, back and forth, to the rest of the song in perfect time.

You knew who the Beatles were before now—we were raised on them, you and me. My favorite memory to tell you is of Papa jumping up on a table to dance to "Twist and Shout," popping his hip up, right knee bent, tippy-toes twisting next to the dinner plates. You knew all of their songs on *Help!*, my favorite, and *Rubber Soul*, because Mommy and Papa danced to "In My Life" when she married Daddy. You met an old family friend named

George once, but you didn't believe that anybody could have that name other than George Harrison. He introduced himself, and you looked him up and down, wrinkling your nose. Your lips opened a little, and you said, "Yeah. And I'm Ringo."

We never owned a record player, but I liked the idea that there were two sides to a record. That's why I liked *The White Album*—there were two discs. Two sides, like two different people. Like you and me. I want you to listen to the first disc from the beginning, because my favorite part is when "Back in the USSR" seems to melt into "Dear Prudence," whose guitar is lullaby-like, plucking two notes steadily until after the second chorus. When I was your age, I pictured Prudence as a little girl with pigtails, missing front teeth, and a green rain jacket. On your birthday, watching you listen to it for the first time, I start to think that she would have your blue eyes.

When we get to "Blackbird," I sing to you, pursing my lips to whistle with Paul, tapping both feet the way I think it sounds in the song. There is a pause between the chorus and the second verse, a breath, and I can hear Paul's fingers sliding across the guitar's warm, taut strings. When he sings, "All your life, you were only waiting for this moment to arise," I understand what he means, all at once. This is our moment, when you will hold my hand, twirling underneath my arm as we laugh at "Piggies" and the animal noises that come at the end. But instead of taking my hand, you shake your head, not wanting to miss anything. We listen to both discs, and in your head you keep track of how long each song is.

It won't take long before we can ask you the song order of both albums and how long each song is, and you can recite it without needing to think. I will smile, slap my palm against yours. You will be their biggest fan, and I am yours.

I don't know that you won't be able to sleep at night because you are thinking, worrying, about whether or not "Honey Pie" is number eight or number nine on the album, and if it is two-minutes and forty-one seconds, or longer. You will mumble all of the beats, the made-up lyrics that you thought were true, and count to see if you were right. Twice. You are, baby boy.

After your birthday, every Sunday will become *White Album* day. When we want to put in another CD, you will cry, and we will halfheartedly laugh, thinking, *Okay, okay, maybe we've created a monster.* "Helter Skelter" will become your favorite, and my least favorite next to "Revolution Nine," which you can dance to, somehow. You will think it is funny that the end of the song is not really the end, hold your breath during the pause. You will wait to hear Ringo shout, "I've got blisters on my fingers," before unfurling your fingers from your clenched fists, finally able to relax. Fingers, toes, belly tight like a steady bass line. There is no room for error. If you miss the beginning beat because you are thinking about something else, or because your legs aren't folded the exact way they were when you first listened to it, you will replay the song.

I don't know it now, but we will listen to "Helter Skelter" seventeen times within thirty minutes before we know that something is wrong. Mommy and Daddy will tell you that you aren't allowed to listen to *The White Album* for a while, and I have to keep it a secret that I listen to it late at night with an old baby blanket stuffed in my mouth to stop myself from humming out loud. You will find the words for it four years later. I will hear you climb into bed with Mom and Dad when you can't stop the music, the obsession, crying, "I'm having obsessive-compulsive-disorder thoughts." We will teach you those words like they are lyrics to your favorite song. And some nights I will push earbuds into my ears and listen to *The White Album*, trying to find the reason behind why you got so stuck. This version of the Beatles is different than the safe, sugary beats of their early records—the ones where I can predict where their voices will go before they reach the note. This CD is off-beat, Paul's feathery-light voice in "Martha My Dear" falling in between the layers of piano chords, violin strings, and bubbly tuba blows, like a penny head-up in sidewalk cracks. Something close to luck, the way the song feels complete, clean, even though George starts singing slightly before Paul in the chorus of "While My Guitar Gently Weeps." I will listen to and rewind the parts where they become real people—talking, mumbling, laughing. Is this what you hear? Is this what you want to figure out?

Most nights, though, I will remember playing pretend: you were Ringo because he was the drummer, and even though I was eleven years older than you, I took my assigned role as Paul seriously. I thought he was the one that kept the band together for so long, and I wanted to do that too. I wanted to keep us together. We used plastic broomsticks and wet mops as guitars, television remotes as microphones. I will remember singing about love and heartbreak. Neither of us really understood what those were back then, but I think we'll be okay when we do.

Aryanna Falkner is a senior double-majoring in English and Creative Writing at Canisius College in Buffalo, NY, where she also serves as President of her Sigma Tau Delta chapter and co-editor-in-chief of Quadrangle, *her school's literary magazine. She recently studied abroad in Florence, Italy, where she was able to practice her three favorite things: writing, yoga, and eating gelato. Once she graduates, she hopes to attend graduate school to continue reading, studying literature, and creating stories wherever she can.*

A Second Chance

Keri Lindenmuth

In 1910, thousands of men from the West Virginia Pulp and Paper Company would board flat-cars and ride the Greenbrier, Cheat & Elk Railroad up the Appalachian mountainside. Pulled by a steam-driven Shay locomotive, the train cut through the vast wilderness, its black smoke billowing into the chilly air and its whistle piercing the rural silence. Hours later, the train and exhausted men hauled lumber back down the mountain, where it fed the mill in the tiny town of Cass, West Virginia.

Over a century later, thousands of tourists from around the country flock to what is now called the Cass Scenic Railroad, one site among West Virginia's many state parks. Those who arrive at the platform early can sit on the wooden benches that line the converted flat-cars. Those who arrive late, just as the original Shay locomotive blows its final whistle, must stand for the roughly five-hour journey. The lumber mill in Cass has long since closed and many feared the town would disappear. However, a new industry tied to the railroad and mountains has given Cass another chance at life.

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After hours in the car, driving through the mostly rural parts of Virginia and West Virginia, my family was not sure what to expect as we stretched our legs in the parking lot and looked up at the long white building called the Cass Country Store. My knowledge of a country store was limited to Mr. Olsen's shop in *Little House on the Prairie*. To me, the large store was another piece of the antiquated scenery that seemed frozen in time. The train had not yet arrived, but high in the mountains looming above the country store, a thick plume of smoke wafted into the air. A whistle echoed.

My sister shivered beneath her jean jacket, the August heat masked by the chill of being hundreds of feet above sea level.

"I can't believe you paid over a hundred dollars so all of us could ride some stupid train," she said to my mother, who was packing snacks into her tote bag.

Behind her, a woman in a blue shirt turned and scowled. I looked down at my feet, feeling embarrassed and ashamed, when I saw the white words printed across the woman's shirt: *Cass Scenic Railroad*. I could not get over the feeling that, as an employee of the park and perhaps a citizen of the small town, the woman probably my sister had not only insulted the railroad, but insulted *her*.

In a way, I did understand where my sister was coming from. Back at home, if one drove about an hour past the district of shopping centers and strip malls, a refurbished train gave tourists a ride through the Pocono Mountains. Like my sister, I wasn't sure why my mother insisted on purchasing tickets for a train ride roughly six hours away.

However, the way the woman in the blue shirt turned over her shoulder and stared at my sister, and the way the families of tourists lined the platform in excited groups, told me that perhaps this train ride would be different than the one closer to home.

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1908 to 1922 was what many historians in the area consider the town's heyday. The railroad and mill operated six days a week, twenty-two hours a day, cutting nearly 1.5 million feet of lumber. There were between 2,500 and 3,000 men employed by the West Virginia Pulp and Paper Company, and they lived in twelve logging camps in the town. Oftentimes, the wives and children of the lumber workers lived in the camps, too.

In order to accommodate the workers who had to ride the train up and down the mountain, the company built a town at the very top of the mountain. With thirty-five company homes, a forty-room hotel, a supply store, and a post office, this town was named Spruce. It was one of the highest towns in the country, at slightly more than 3,800 feet above sea level. On warm summer days, while others in West Virginia waded in springs and rivers to cool off, the town of Spruce woke to frost.

The railroad was the backbone of not only Cass, but also Spruce. Spruce, so high in the mountains, had no roads. Only by train could people and all the necessary supplies reach the residents. In the case of a death, the train carried the deceased down the mountain. There were no cemeteries in Spruce.

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As Shay Engine #6, the largest Shay locomotive ever built, pulled into the depot in a cloud of black smoke, a little boy a few feet away, in a replica conductor's hat, cheered. The train screeched to a halt and an army of people in blue t-shirts and jeans darkened by coal dust stepped out of the flat-cars. Each stood to the side of a car and watched proudly as tourists stepped forward and climbed the short ladders to the cars.

The train started slowly. The pistons, the gears along the train's wheels, began to pulsate and the wheels screeched along the tracks. Suddenly, I found that my heart began to echo the pulsing of the train along its steel tracks. Extra coal and steam was needed in the beginning of the journey, as the train ascended the steep mountain. Smoke encircled the train, temporarily blocking the view of the rising terrain. Light soot began to coat the passengers' clothes.

"We are going to get lung cancer," my sister said for the third or fourth time that day.

However, in my opinion, the air had never felt cleaner. The coal dust did nothing to hamper the cool air that filled my lungs. It was crisp and it smelled clean, absent of the vehicle exhaust so common in the air back home.

I stood from my seat, moving rather wobbly on the bumpy track, and leaned over the train's rail. The speed was increasing as the Shay locomotive pushed the train up the mountain, at an eleven percent grade. We passed creeks, tall trees, thick brush, and deer grazing in the shelter of the green canopy. So far, the view was not very different from the scenery at home, but there was a mysterious sense of something new yet to come with every push of the old engine. The men and women helping to power

the train worked faster and faster, like they knew something the rest of the passengers did not and could not wait to reveal the secret.

We passed the abandoned lumber mill, badly damaged in a fire. Between the mill and a water tower was an engine house. Unlike the mills and company homes, the engine house was not abandoned. Half a dozen men, wearing greasy clothing and clunky, brown gloves, waved as the train went past, as the mechanics had done over a century before when their coworkers piled in the flat-cars for their eleven-hour shifts.

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The company's and railroad's rapid line of succession and the ownership's changing of hands greatly damaged the lumber industry of Cass. In 1925, the mill in Spruce closed. The population dwindled to zero, the homes and hotel fell into disrepair, and the Shay locomotive stopped venturing the steep heights to the abandoned town.

In 1960, the mills in Cass followed suit. Employees were only given a day's notice. A scrap dealer was asked to dismantle the railroad. There was no doubt the railroad would not be the only piece of Cass to disappear. The town itself and the lives of the people who lived there would meet a similar fate. Just as the railroad had built the town, the loss of the railroad could erase Cass from the map. However, before the railroad could be torn apart and the town of Cass abandoned, Russel Baum saw in the railroad the opportunity for a tourist site. He led businessmen and local officials along the tracks, to Bald Knob, in hopes to persuade them.

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The ride to Bald Knob took about two and a half hours. The higher the train journeyed, the more distinctive the differences all around. The tall, leafy trees disappeared. The squirrels that had roamed and frolicked along the sides of the tracks were gone. The

air was silent, the songs of chirping birds suddenly absent. A chill settled in the air and everyone hugged jackets around themselves. Ancient needle-bearing trees towered above the train. I couldn't help but imagine people thousands of feet below fanning themselves in the warm summer air, as those of us on the train were plunged into winter.

I leaned over the railing again and looked out at a collage of different shades of green plastered against a cloudless blue sky. It didn't seem as though it was possible for the train to pulse on any higher. The pressure clogged my ears and made the noises of the train pushing its way up the mountain fuzzy and muffled. Sometimes the train would stop and the workers in the blue shirts had to pour water into the train, as though they were refreshing it and trying to ease its fatigue.

Finally, the train screeched to a halt at Bald Knob. The wooden tracks didn't go any further, for the mountain reached no higher. The end of the line. Carefully, I climbed out of the flat-car and caught my breath.

At 4,700 feet, all the eye could see were mountains. Not one range of mountains, but perhaps a dozen, one line of mountains after another after another after another. It was endless, infinite. It seemed impossible that there could be a country of malls and highways and cities beyond, because it seemed as if the mountains rolled straight towards the coast. The few clouds that did linger cast dark shadows on the green mountain range. However, they moved rapidly across the vast horizon, as if the clouds themselves knew they were interfering with the view. Below the mountain, in the valley, it was as though someone had lifted the very ground of the earth, like a blanket, and draped it back over the land where it lay wrinkled. The land rose and fell and rolled, not sharply, but gently, billowing almost like waves on solid ground.

No one talked, not even my sister who had so complained about the long, expensive train journey. Perhaps she felt as I did: that the few hundred dollars we had spent were not so much for the train ride itself, but for the view, a priceless view, one hidden near the very heart of the country, a view one could only find if they ventured nearly 5,000 feet above sea level. We simply stood

at the top of the mountain and breathed in the clean air and let the slight breeze rustle the long, wild grass growing in tufts along the mountain's edge.

The men and women in the blue shirts, who had exerted their muscles on the long journey, stood huddled together as they looked at the never-ending range of mountains. Despite the fact that they had already been to the top of the mountain that very morning, and were destined to return with the late afternoon train one more time, they looked speechless and in awe. One took a picture with a phone while another's arms were folded in front of him, almost smugly, as if he were silently boasting, proudly showing off his home.

This view, the view of the entirety of West Virginia, is what gave the town of Cass a second chance at life. It was why the woman my sister had insulted had been so protective of her train and her railroad. This was what stopped the railroad from being dismantled and made sure the men in the engine house still had jobs and guaranteed the Shay locomotives would never become scrap metal. This view not only ensured a livelihood for the present-day town with a population of fifty-two, it guaranteed that the livelihood of the 3,000 men who made the journey to Bald Knob every day would not be forgotten.

Keri Lindenmuth is a recent graduate of Moravian College in Bethlehem, PA, where she earned a BA in English with a certification in writing arts. Her writing has appeared in several literary magazines and anthologies. Currently, she works as a freelancer and hopes to pursue a full-time career that will allow her to make use of her love of writing. She resides in eastern Pennsylvania with her family.

Unmuting

Albert Hahn

When people ask me about my missing tooth, they tend to do so with a sense of trepidation. As if I would explode with anger at the very notion that someone pointed out an obvious physical feature of mine. The answer, which I've shortened to its most concise form by this point, is as follows: "It happened in a car accident back in 2004, when I was eight. While we were living in China, my family and some of our friends went to visit the Baek Doo Mountains that border China and North Korea. A tree had fallen on the road and a police officer was directing traffic. When it was our turn to go, the dumbass on the other side decided to go as well. My mother fractured her leg and I broke my jaw. I also lost this tooth."

***

My family moved to China in November 2003. Neither my older brother (Timothy, but he prefers Tim, and to me he's *Yejong*) nor I had any say in this matter—our parents decided to become missionaries out of the blue and within a year they finished training for their new vocation and we were shipped off to Yanji, a small city north of the Chinese-North Korean border. Before the decision to move, we were a seemingly idyllic family. But our father in particular grew more and more oppressive in the way he addressed us. And our mother was never strong enough to oppose him when he threw self-serving, patriarchal passages of the Bible in our faces. Unconditional respect for one's elders is a powerful ally of those who misuse religious texts.

***

I had known about the trip to the mountains for some time before it happened, but on the day it came up, I found myself not wanting to go.

"*Soojong* (my Korean name), we're going," my father said. "Get ready and let's go."

"I don't want to go," I said.

"Why not?" he asked.

"I just don't want to." My stomach felt like it was being torn up, but it didn't feel like a stomach ache. I have yet to come up with a rational explanation for how I felt that morning.

"You're going." His word was law.

I later learned my mother had similar reservations about going, but she also couldn't say anything to dissuade my father. I slept for most of the ride in order to calm myself and was not conscious for the entire duration of the accident.

When I woke up, I was in a hospital bed. No one was in the room. It smelled of chemicals with unreasonably long names, just like any other hospital. The walls were an unresponsive white. Waking up alone had never been so terrifying. I knew that something went wrong, but I didn't know what. And I didn't know if I would see any of my family members alive again.

Fifteen minutes of unnerving consciousness later, my father walked into the room and gave me a brief description of what happened. At first, I couldn't comprehend the things he was saying. Even though I felt safer with him there, I was still arrested with fear. The cot I was on was unwelcoming—a blunt reminder that I was somewhere I didn't expect I'd be, even though I "felt" that something bad would happen that day. For a few months after the accident, there were nights I couldn't sleep because I was terrified I would crawl into my bed at night and wake up in a hospital.

***

Not long after the accident, we flew to Seoul. The Chinese hospital we were in wasn't equipped to deal with the severity of our injuries, so we were transferred to Severance Hospital, one of the oldest and largest hospitals in South Korea. My mother and I underwent surgery and for the remainder of the summer, the four of us spent time in housing provided by the hospital. When

my father, brother, and I left, we had to leave our mother behind because she needed to undergo significant physical rehabilitation in order to walk on her own. Looking back, I'm ashamed that this brought some measure of relief to me, but the young boy that left his mother behind struggled to look her in the eyes. It took far too long for the spark in them to return.

At some point before she came back, our family took a short trip to the river that borders China and North Korea. I refused to go, considering what had happened the last time we went in that direction. But once more, I had no choice in the matter. I didn't put up as much of a fight this time, and I don't think I would've minded if God sent another crash our way to finish what He started, if I assume my parents were right and God was responsible for what happened to us.

When we got there, I spent all my time either collecting rocks or staring at the armed guards across the river. I'd like to be able to say I'm a slightly interesting person that continued collecting rocks from that point on, but I stashed the ones I grabbed from the river away in a shoebox and never added to them.

***

Silence can come in two main forms: comfort or fear. There are times when all I want is to be removed from aural distractions, like when I read a good book or try to fall asleep. There was time dedicated to this idea of silence in our house before the accident, but there was also time dedicated to background noise. My mother would play gospel music in English or Korean on a CD player with a tiny orange LED display and sing along. I would play the violin. But, of all the sources of music in our home, the most comforting was that of my brother playing the cello. His most commonly played piece was the prelude to Bach's Cello Suite No. 1. To this day, nothing has a stronger calming effect on me than that song.

After the accident, music disappeared from our house. The form of silence associated with fear came into play. There were

times when I sat in my room and the silence was so fear-inducing that I wanted to run to my brother and demand he play the cello.

But even worse than those secluded silences were the stretches of reticence when we were together. It seemed like we had forgotten how to speak to each other. Anything we said to break the silence seemed amiss. And silence that carried on too long felt stifling.

When my mother returned, she could barely walk without assistance. She could only eat heavily puréed foods, and each of us was responsible for helping her eat at one meal each day. These meals were separate from the normal ones and involved the helper sitting alone with our mother in our parents' bedroom. She lacked the strength to hold silverware long enough to eat. The symbolism of those moments was not lost on me: I can vividly remember bringing up spoonfuls of what was essentially baby food to my mother's mouth, then waiting patiently for the nod of her head that signaled she was ready for the next bite. For most of these meals, the act of feeding my mother was not the issue. What was killing me inside was the absolute silence that filled the house whenever she was being fed.

But there was one time when the silence was engulfed by something else. During one meal, I found I was not disturbed by the silence; what bothered me was that the spoon I was holding felt impossibly heavy. It seemed like it took much greater effort to lift it and my hand starting shaking as a result of the added ethereal weight I was trying to resist. I wasn't Atlas, a powerful titan with an enormous burden to shoulder. I was a scrawny kid trying to hold a normal spoon. I spilled food more than once—a fact that brought me no little humiliation. Like the sickening feeling I had the morning of the car accident, I can offer no explanation for this bizarre occurrence.

I can't seem to separate myself from that incident. There are times when I'll hold a spoon and find my hand shaking, as if some of the weight from *that* spoon reverberated through time just to harass me with unwanted memories.

***

It always seemed a bit funny to me that I associate the weight of that spoon with Atlas's struggle, since I've also always likened my brother to Atlas. He's always been the one to carry me when I start to drag my feet. He rarely falters, despite the fact that he shoulders the burdens of many besides himself. That enduring strength made me ashamed that I was barely able to hold a spoon for my mother. My brother's camaraderie when it comes to dealing with our parents and their stubbornness has always been welcome, but his uncanny ability to exceed me in what seems like every single thing I do or try sometimes makes it hard not to feel overshadowed by a well-meaning sibling.

It's also hard not to feel manipulated and ignored by my parents whenever they wield the Bible as a weapon against me. Using their twisted perspective on the Book, they firmly established an indomitable system of patriarchy within the family, made it impossible for my brother or me to be honest with them about our lack of faith, and created feelings of guilt about who I truly am that last to this day. I didn't have any friends at my second high school, where I first read *Hamlet*, but Ophelia felt like someone who knew what it's like to never have the courage to speak for yourself.

***

Despite what that one incident with the spoon may indicate, there was something meaningful to those times spent with my mother. Up until the accident, my faith corresponded with my parents' and I even marveled at how devoted they were to their convictions. I was perfectly fine with going to church every Sunday and being on my best behavior. And as I grew older, I never grew tired with thinking about theology and all the different ways of viewing Christianity, even though I, as well as my brother, drifted apart from our parents in terms of personal beliefs. But in some of those moments together—where the only movement present was that of my mother rocking herself back and forth, and the only sound was the low hum of what sounded like the hymns she normally sung—I found something spiritual I could not ignore.

Which would make those meal times the only spiritually significant parts of my past. The lack of spirituality on my part may have created the divide between me and my parents—the divide that started with the unholy silence permeating our house for months after the accident. I refused to accept that the car accident was God's way of testing our faith. And I refuse to accept that a benevolent God would make it possible for a nine-year-old to fuck up the simple task of feeding his mother.

There were many other simple things I failed at, as well. I was a sullen kid. I didn't know how to talk to people at all. I became notorious for getting into fistfights. And I couldn't keep from hating myself. I thought self-loathing might be some sort of penance for holding on to so much anger towards God and the universe.

***

Eventually, in replacement of anger, I tried numbness. The silence within the family fed into my apathy. And, for the longest time, that worked. But in the summer of 2014, when I was learning how to drive, I encountered my first instance of highway hypnosis. I was normally extremely careful when driving, but I slipped for a few seconds and my eyes weren't focused on the road at all. After I snapped out of it, my muscles tensed, and I peeked out of the side of my eyes to confirm that my father was there, ready to take control of the steering wheel if I messed up. I knew from experience that he was more than ready to make sure I was safe. What he couldn't do—and what He couldn't do—was make me not feel like shit. If anything, both of them succeeded in doing the opposite.

When we returned home in the early afternoon from that driving lesson, I retreated to my room and didn't come out until the next day. I was shaking uncontrollably, as if I was shuddering off some demon that was trying to possess me. I tried reading my copy of *The Once and Future King*, only to have it fall out of my hands. I lost my place in it, and, as of now, I have yet to try to find where I was. I avoided touching anything else in my room for

fear of breaking something. It took hours to fall asleep because of the shaking.

***

After that specific instance of feeding my mother, I retreated to my room and sat in a corner. I huddled my knees together and tried, in vain, not to cry. It could have been out of anger towards God, frustration with myself, or pity for my mother. It was most likely a combination of those things, but the most disappointing aspect was me being angry at a deity I didn't even believe in anymore.

As a little boy crying in my room, I didn't know it quite yet, but just as the missing tooth would become a banal part of life, so too would the spoon lose its power. My tooth is still gone. My hand still shakes for reasons I can't really explain. But they don't bother me anymore. They don't deserve my anger; the only attention of mine they deserve is quiet acknowledgment of their existence. The silence in our family stands resolute, but the silence I put upon myself over ten years ago—the refusal to say or do anything that reflects how I truly feel—is starting to break.

Albert Hahn is a junior at Ursinus College, where he majors in English and minors in Creative Writing and Gender and Women's Studies. He is the editor of Ursinus's literary journal, The Lantern. *He plans to pursue further education and/or a career in creative writing.*

Whaling in Pioneer Town

Megan Freiberg

Crossing this dusky entry, and on through yon low-arched way . . .
A still duskier place is this, with such low ponderous beams above, and such old wrinkled planks beneath . . . On one side stood a long, low, shelf-like table covered with cracked glass cases, filled with dusty rarities gathered from this wide world's remotest nooks.

***

It was our first trip to Joshua Tree. Garrett and I wanted an adventure and something about the cold, alienated desert of the Morongo Basin appealed to both of our inner wanderers. *But no more of this blubbering now, we are going a-whaling, and there is plenty of that yet to come.* On a Wednesday I booked our desert studio, and that Friday we headed east on the 210 freeway towards the vast emptiness of San Bernardino.

As we passed through the sea of energy mills there was a sort of release—the massive turbines carried away the weight of our weekday worries and held them there, prisoner, to ensure our safe passage into our personal unknown.

Pioneer, v: intr. To explore a new territory.

All three days I searched in vain for the bound spine that would speak to me, only to encounter picked-over nothings that had been left by previous explorers. And after two perfect days of sunsets, farmer's markets, and skies loaded with stars, it was time to return to our weekdays. But before facing the turbines, we agreed on one last adventure: Pioneertown.

Whenever I find myself growing grim about the mouth;
whenever it is a damp, drizzly November in my soul . . .
then, I account it high time to get to a bookstore as soon as I can.

It has become a sort of tradition—more than tradition, a necessity—to bring someone else's words home with me. To take a thing and add to it something new—something of mine. To bookmark their pages with memories—train tickets and boarding passes, tri-folds and guidebooks, instant photos and receipts, the delicate impressions of local flora, found things. Memories that, when I cannot remember the reasons each day, can be opened, touched between thumb and forefinger, and inhaled deeply into the lungs. Memories of the senses.

We ate our breakfast at the Crossroads Cafe and headed out—down Highway 62. Past the tattoo parlors and succulent stands and the newly developed shopping mall that felt as if it had been built there by accident, to a fork at Pioneertown Road. In the town of Yucca Valley, less than thirty minutes from Joshua Tree, hidden behind a few miles of canyon, is a time capsule that contains an intriguing blend of life and abandon.

Pioneertown began as a live-in Old West motion picture set where the actors could actually stay in the homes their on-screen characters "lived" in. Although portions of the sets have been torn down, "Mane Street" and the Pioneertown Motel are still intact and are operated by the three hundred and fifty residents who prefer life in the 1880's.

We parked in a large dirt lot with five other cars and stepped out of time and into the days of Gene Autry, Roy Rogers, and The Cisco Kid. *It was a queer sort of place.* Walking through the center of the movie town where gunslingers had once staged their showdowns, we saw adult men posing for photos behind saloon doors, blowing smoke from the barrels of finger pistols and children running in large cowboy hats.

I was still determined to find that thing which spoke to me—that title for our trip I could take home. The tangible memory, that, when fanning through its pages, and closing my eyes, would whisk me back to this weekend.

Pioneer, n: One who prepares the way for the settler.

Realizing the only physical evidence I may take home was the

literature from our day at Joshua Tree National Park, I prepared myself to settle: a history of the first fifty years of western movie locations. It was the only book in the small gift shop, and I had all but committed to it when something caught my eye: a coonhound tanning at the steps of a business across the way. She was as still as the dead, unaffected by the legs stepping over her sleek and speckled body to see the shop of leather pyrography.

Temporarily distracted from my desperation purchase, we walked further down Mane Street, eventually reaching a point where it seemed like most others had lost interest. There was a barn. Its large doors hung open and gospel music echoed through the old rafters. Up three sets of stairs there was a weathered old display case, filled with select sci-fi novels from the fifties and sixties. Titles like *The Space Merchants, Tunnel in the Sky, More Than Human* lay strategically arranged beneath the foggy glass protected by plastic covers. Beside them stood a stack of old turntables, layered in such dust and earth they had become a part of the structure itself.

Inside, the walls were lined with books. Boxes of unpacked books, stacked and shoved under tables and in corners. There were books everywhere. Cooking, self-help, art and design, music, home and garden, religion—and then on the back wall, behind a barricade of boxes was an entire section of sea stories. Garrett had already found his treasure—the 1981 sci-fi novel *The Keep* by F. Paul Wilson—and was reading the prefatory pages on the steps. I stood alone, gazing over pile after pile, row after row, waves of titles—all on the subject of seafaring.

After a mesmerizing few minutes, I saw it. Spine up and squeezed between two other water-based novels: a 1930, Random House, first edition, magnificent copy of Herman Melville's *Moby-Dick*.

Pioneer, adj: Being the earliest, original, first of a particular kind.

I had been re-reading my Signet Classics version on the drive to the desert, giggling to myself and trying to explain to Garrett the humor behind Ishmael's stressful plea that Queequeg put

his clothes on before the neighbors saw the two men together through the undressed window. “Babe. You’re a nerd.” I can accept that.

It was in good condition for something that had been circulating for the better part of a century. The dust jacket had minor wear, no markings, no library-card pocket or Dewey Decimals on its spine, the binding was not broken or detached—it had to be mine. I found Garrett, already a handful of pages into the mountains of Romania in 1941. He looked up and asked if I was ready. I handed him the Rockwell Kent illustrated cover and the kindred nerd revealed itself.

We leafed through the pages together for a few minutes before realizing we had absolutely no idea who or where to pay for our trove. We made another circle of the barn, carrying our finds. “I wonder how much this copy is…” I thought aloud. “That one’s five dollars.” The tufted-velvet salon chair had come alive.

Pioneer, n: Ecol. An organism that successfully establishes itself in a barren area.

Seated outside the barn doors, to the left of the old display case, past the stack of turntables, was a body hidden by the sunken-in piece of furniture. An old Stetson covered the top half of the long, silvery hair that rested on a flannel button-down which was tucked into Levis. At the bottom of him was a pair of old, well-worn boots. In his hands was a book, which he placed open and facedown over the velvet arm. “I saw you reading that Keep novel over there. You know they made a film of it? Scott Glenn, I think.” Garrett, being a sucker for horror/mystery flicks, was immediately intrigued. They talked for a while about their similar loves of science fiction and somehow ended up on the subject of the barn.

He had acquired the building twelve years ago and seen a lot of change in Pioneertown since. “It’s getting touristier out here every year,” he said, pointing in the direction of town. “We’ve got a Starbucks now. I knew the day that happened that things had changed.” I thought about the elation I’d felt on the drive over at

the idea of an iced latte. “Have you always lived out here?” “No, I lived in Palm Springs until I bought this place. Still getting used to the cold.” He told us of the Friday nights at Pappy & Harriet’s where he used to go to enjoy the local music. “Now you need reservations a week in advance or it’s standing room only in the crowded bar. They’ve got real good food though. You two should check it out.” We’d tried the night before and had left after the disappointment of a two-hour wait time.

He looked at the hardcover pressed tenderly to my chest. “That’s a nice copy there.” I took it in my hands. “It really is—are you sure it’s only five dollars?” “I’m sure. I’d rather have it go to a good home than sit in one of those old boxes.” I pulled out a twenty-dollar bill—an amount which I’d budgeted myself by purposefully leaving my bag in the car—and handed it to him. “That’ll be seven for the two.” “Sold.” He made my change from a bundle of cash in his front pocket. We said our goodbyes and thank yous and he wished us luck “out there in the city.” When we got to the car, Garrett turned to face the dusty path we’d returned from. “I really wish I’d gotten his name.” Then he opened the car door and we stood, letting the moment find its place in our memory.

Thirty-five miles later, as waves from the turbines propelled our weekdays in a tailwind, I held our memory in my lap. The eighty-four-year-old pages would forever contain within them the stories of three more pioneers.

Pioneer: n, adj, v.

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Book! You lie there; the fact is, you books must know your places. You do to give us the bare words and facts, but we come in to supply the thoughts.

Megan Freiberg recently graduated cum laude with departmental distinction from California Lutheran University, with a BA in Literature and an emphasis in Creative Writing. She is the recipient of the Ledbetter Prize for Excellence in Writing and her work has appeared in The Morning Glory *literary magazine. Megan is currently pursuing her graduate studies in Creative Writing at California State University, Northridge and is an officer for the Northridge Creative Writing Circle.*

Put Down

Kody Martin

The rain fell hard, washing away some of the mud and blood off a lifeless duck's feathers in early morning. Black oak trees stood out against a dark blue sky. The stained plumage contrasted with the reddish water in the kiddie pool. Entrails hung over the edge.

I leaned against the porch railing with my older brother, Kurt, looking off to where we kept five white ducks in a makeshift pen. We'd had them since they were ducklings. Korey, my little brother, would lie on the porch while they huddled around in a soft, yellow pile. Their awkward, quick movements and faint whistles made him laugh.

We listened to the sputtering gurgles of a faceless duck. It stood still by the pool, missing the top half of its bill and skull. I could see its brain.

I asked Kurt, "Where're the other three?"

"In the hutch."

I noticed the open door. "Dead?"

"Korey said so."

Korey was the first to see the mess. He fed the ducks every morning before school and had developed a strong maternal bond. They followed him around the yard, even when they grew fat and mean.

***

Half an hour before, when Korey had lifted the top of the small hutch, he stood there in the dark, with a small pocket light, looking in, where he laid eyes on three mangled ducks—one headless, two inside out. Hay and feathers were covered in blood and green excrement. Outside the hutch, the faceless duck made a raspy cry. Korey had wet his pants and would not go near it. The faceless duck remained still, red bubbles streaming down its neck. The rain started.

***

My hair was drenched. The damp porch wood was cold on my feet. As the mud puddles grew and the water in the pool rippled, the floating dead duck bobbed.

I mumbled, "What happened?"

"What?" Kurt paused. "Oh, fisher cat. Heard one screaming a few nights ago. No one locked the hutch last night."

My stomach felt weird. The school bus was going to arrive soon, so I went back inside to get ready. Korey, in tears, was standing in the middle of the kitchen. I saw him wearing a black, long-sleeved shirt and asked, "Hey, isn't that my mine?"

It was. Being only eighteen months apart, Korey often stole from my laundry. He'd hog the PlayStation after school. He once called me ugly—made me cry—at night mass. With intention to kill, we put holes in walls with broken broomsticks and threw each other into windows, cracking them. We never shared, nor let each other get away with anything. Now, a crime had been committed.

I broke. "Take it off. Now." He just stood there, looking down, sniffling. I pulled at the shirt and shook, screaming, voice cracking, "It's mine!"

I heard my father's footsteps behind me. "What the fuck is going on here?" he boomed.

"Korey won't give me my shirt! Also, he's faking. He just doesn't want to go to school today." Korey hated school. He had trouble making friends.

My father, high-blood-pressured, looked at me, and yelled, "Fuck! What is wrong with you?"

I stared at Korey for a moment while he looked down at the floor. My father was about to say something to me, but I shouldered Korey out of the way, heading down to the basement to change out of my soaked pajamas. I needed a different shirt. I sifted through the clean, hung-up clothes, breathing heavy, half listening to my father's heated words through the floorboards. He was talking to Kurt.

"What the fuck is wrong with that asshole?" he went on. "A shirt? A fucking shirt?"

***

My father had brought the ducks home in a cardboard box six months earlier. They were going to be sold for meat, so he paid the old guy at Pete's Grain and Tackle fifty bucks. He fixed up a pen for them and bought them food. Every day, he changed their pool water. He was the one who forgot to lock the hutch door.

***

I found another black shirt, similar, but not the same. I put it on and hunched over, wanting to puke, not because of what I did, but because of what my father said. He usually spoke like that to Kurt whenever he threatened to kick him out, or Korey when he refused to get on the school bus. It would arrive in five minutes.

The fisher cat didn't kill the ducks to feed. It only ate part of one. Among the biting, slashing, and heavy breathing, feathers silently floated down.

The rain died while I waited by the street. Korey stayed home that day. Hours after the attack, animal control picked up the faceless duck. They put it down.

Kody Martin graduated in December from Emmanuel College in Boston with a BA in Management and a minor in Writing. This winter, he will start the Solstice Low-Residency MFA in Creative Writing Program at Pine Manor College. He will continue to be a vegan, coffee-loving writer for the rest of his life.

The Things I Kept

Courtney Price

It was a relatively small book, with a smooth, hard, pastel cover and a bright red circle in the upper corner that told me how many copies had been sold. It was quite a few. The pages were rough, but of a decent quality, and the most important ideas—all stated very simply—were printed in bold. The whole ensemble made a satisfying package. I even liked the sound it made when I tapped my fingers on the cover. The title was *The Life-Changing Magic of Tidying Up* by Marie Kondo. I had never been a tidy person, but something about the way the book spoke to me made me want to be one.

Kondo is a small, slender Japanese woman who discovered very early in life that she has a talent for tidying. She apparently has made an entire business out of helping people learn to clean up their living spaces. Her method is unusual: she makes her clients go through everything they own, one item at a time, in a very specific order. The client considers each item and decides if it "sparks joy." If the item passes inspection, it is kept; otherwise, it is discarded or recycled. Other so-called minimalists that I've read about teach that people should only keep the things they need in order to live and work. Kondo's method takes into account that owning things isn't necessarily bad; it is only bad when we keep things we dislike because we feel compelled to do so.

I bought Marie Kondo's book after running across it in a list of bestsellers at the bookstore where I worked. I read the description and was hooked. I suppose it was something about the simplicity of the method and the overwhelming challenge it presented. I was a collector of things that perpetually might be useful later, and I had begun to discover that I didn't want to stay that way forever. The first thing I did when I got off work was buy a copy, and in one evening I powered through the whole thing. Kondo tells her readers to begin with the things that are easiest to tidy, like clothes, books, and papers; so, naturally I jumped

in immediately, pulling everything out of my closet and sorting through the things I wanted to keep and the things I would discard or donate. There was a white sweater that I only wore once a year to church on Easter. I no longer owned the dress I had worn with it and I didn't like to wear white anyway, so it went into the donate pile. There was a clover-green skirt I had seen online and bought on an impulse. Now I was paying the price for my rashness, realizing I didn't like the skirt after all and thus had never even worn it. There were shoes that didn't fit, T-shirts from summer camps long past (and long forgotten), and old Halloween costumes for which I knew I had no use. All of those things had the potential to be used someday, but after forcing myself to be honest, I admitted they were only taking up space. Everything I did keep returned to my closet and I stood back to take a look. There was much more room. I could see the corners of my closet, which was surprising. Nothing was wedged so far off to the side that I wouldn't remember it was there. Over the weekend, I bought a shoe rack for my closet and began folding my clothes so I could always see exactly what I owned. When I reached a pile that wouldn't fit in a drawer, I was forced to eliminate a few more things. When I was done, I couldn't even remember what I had taken out. None of those items ever mattered to me.

I moved on through the other categories. Books was the category I dreaded most, having been an avid book collector for most of my life. However, when I took a good hard look at my shelves, I saw for the first time how many things I owned and had never read. Most were classics I thought I ought to have as an English major, picked up at garage sales and secondhand bookstores for anywhere from twenty-five cents to five dollars. Many weren't authors or subjects I even liked. By the time I went through them all, half were gone. Looking at my shelves today, I can't remember what is missing. I only kept the things that brought me joy, and I never miss the rest.

Eventually, I got to the category of mementoes. These were kept in different places throughout my room, depending on the type. Old cards and high school essays were kept in a filing cabinet I rarely opened. Under my bed were boxes and boxes

of children's books, *Star Wars* memorabilia, and a collection of souvenirs that a Japanese pen pal had sent when I graduated high school. When it comes to these kinds of objects, Marie Kondo sticks to her mantra: keep only the ones that spark joy. Her reason is that most people keep things because they feel throwing away a sentimental item is also a way of throwing away the sentiment. Most of these things are never used or looked at, but people can't stand the idea of giving them up. I understand why, after going through everything I owned, but I managed, and I felt lighter for doing so. By forcing myself to look at every item, I had the opportunity to appreciate the memories, but not confine those memories to an object. That's not to say I got rid of everything that reminded me of my childhood. The boxes of children's books have been whittled down to one box. Some went to the garage sale, but most were donated to a classroom of second-graders who will certainly put them to better use than I would. The box of Japanese souvenirs still sits under my bed, and so does the container of *Star Wars* memorabilia. They're just a little lighter now.

I told myself that I began this process because I wanted to feel more in control of my life. I wanted to be independent of the things I owned. Maybe it was peer-pressure I felt from friends who had left all their worldly goods behind to travel to foreign countries. Maybe it was wanting to grow up and put aside the messiness of my childhood. When I think back to those years, which seem much farther away than they really are, the mess is what I remember most. I remember all the toys spread out across the floor as my sister and I played, combining stuffed animals, Barbie dolls, Tinkertoys, and wooden blocks into new worlds that only we could see. I recall how my mother always smiled when she would tell other moms about her girls and the imaginations they had when they were little. I also remember the fear when my sister and I heard the garage door at five thirty, and how we would scramble to move everything away from the area of "walking space" my father had impressed upon us with a leather belt. For some reason, his lesson never sank in, no matter how angry the repetition of this process made him.

In fact, messiness was the thing my father and I argued about the most, especially as I got older. I would leave my clothes in a heap in the bathroom, or forget to clean off the rug the hair that would build up every so often. I was a girl with long hair; what did he expect? He left his things all over the basement wherever he wanted, but I wasn't allowed to do the same. I remember stumbling blindly without my glasses into the bathroom in the morning only to step on a disgusting wad of hair my father had taken the time to leave right where he knew I would trip over it. If he cared so much about gathering it up in the first place, why didn't he just throw it away himself? But my father always did things to make a point. The problem was, in my opinion, he never had a point worth going to such trouble to make. I wasn't what my parents would have usually called a "problem kid." I didn't drink, smoke, have sex, sneak out, or hang out with shady people. Why did it matter so much where I left my clothes?

Perhaps, in some ways, my attempt to declutter my life was a fulfillment of my earlier messiness. I know there were times I could have picked up my room but chose not to, just to spite my father. Was I trying to tell him I would learn to be tidy on my own terms? Sometimes I think so. Whatever the case, my newfound room-cleaning ritual made everyone happy—until I decided they could use Marie Kondo's help, too. Helping my sister organize her room didn't go as well as I planned. She reverted back to piles of things and no visible floor within the month. With my mother, it's been a far subtler process as I make gentle suggestions about sending old knickknacks to the garage-sale box when we run out of places to put things. I would love to have a go at her closet sometime, but I've since given up trying to make that happen.

This last Christmas, as I struggled to pass boxes of decorations down from the attic to my mother, I spotted something tucked away in the corner. It was rectangular, about an inch thick, and covered in an opaque trash bag to keep away dust. Just enough of the colors came through that I realized what it was: our family portrait that used to hang above the fireplace at the old house. Had it really only had time to hang there for a year? Instantly, I remembered that warm summer evening as my

then-whole family followed the photographer through a wheat field. Then my thoughts flitted to another evening, later that same year, as I sat in my apartment alone with my guitar, playing the same song over and over, but unable to get the words out. I thought about saying something to my mother about the photo, but decided not to. I knew why it was there. I knew there were some things too precious to give up so easily. Like hope trapped in Pandora's jar, my mother had kept the physical proof of her hope here in the attic. As much as part of me wanted to throw something like that away so I would never have to look at it again, I wasn't ready to let it go either. It had cost too much.

As months have passed and the bulk of my physical possessions have come to be fairly stable, I still occasionally feel tempted to throw something else out. There is a certain sweater I own, for example, that has cats prancing up and down the sleeves. I love that sweater, but sometimes it reminds me of the old roommate who gave it to me, the one who turned out to be verbally abusive. I feel conflicted about keeping it, but then I tell myself memories and sweaters are not the same things. There are also things I have kept, like the letters from my father that he sends when he gets mad, and the Hallmark cards he sends when he feels bad for sending the letters. I tell myself I keep them so one day I can prove, if I need to, that he really was the kind of person I remember him to be. I realize now that there are times when I want to think that objects and memories are inseparable, and times when I have to believe they are not.

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The Last Gift

Lorraine Dresch

My grandparents lived together for decades in a weathered, white-paneled house so dirty I almost winced with every step of my socked feet on their faded-red shag carpet. Between the lumpy sofa and the living-room wall was a graveyard; the floor was blanketed with deceased beetles whose iridescent green exoskeletons glinted like emeralds when I peered over the furniture. The Korean doll, with its painted face and traditional clothing ensemble, also had an untidy home. The top of the glass display case was covered with a tempting layer of downy gray dust, as if it were the surface of the moon waiting for Neil Armstrong's footprints.

My grandmother, an immigrant from South Korea, speaks heavily accented English and a language I can't understand, which frightened me as a child. Growing up, I was instructed to call her the Korean word for grandmother, which tumbled from my American mouth as "Hominy." When I was eight, I learned at a summer camp that this was the name for a Southern soul food. When I was nine, I learned that this wasn't a common title for a relative; at a pottery studio, none of the "I <3 my" mugs for sale had her designation on them.

My granddad was a veteran of the U.S. Army. He had met Hominy in 1957 while stationed in Korea after the war. Her name was Kyong Han back then. When the two married and moved to the States, the U.S. military accidentally changed it. The couple didn't have time to fix the mistake before they caught their plane, so she arrived in Texas as Soon Duke, a stranger to herself. Later, she received another name from my granddad's parents: Nina. They didn't approve of her Buddhism or her name. So they changed them.

My granddad had been raised during the Great Depression, which asserted itself in the twenty-first century as strict adherence to the principle of "waste not, want not."

In practicality, this meant he saved bits and pieces of leftover everything in rusty cans and acrid pickle jars. The kitchen contained a hardware store's worth of extra bolts and screws in Folgers canisters. The guest bedroom had Laura Lynn cookie tins filled with buttons. He decorated the walls throughout the house in the same way; all the drawings his grandchildren had ever sent him were proudly displayed, from scribbled lines to detailed animal art. Framed collages of decades of photographs—interlocking layers of smiling children cut and pasted together by his own hands— winked at me from each room.

I loved my grandparents. When I was younger, I loved the way they would give me anything I wanted plus extra, loading down my tiny arms with goods until I was forced to take more than one trip to carry away my new treasures. I was drowned in surplus possessions: long strands of plastic rosary beads that constantly arrived in their mailbox, a reused metal cookie tin filled with a collection of tarnished coins and sticky with sugar, and a trio of tiny rooster figurines Hominy won at Bingo. On one occasion, my granddad attempted to give me a witch statue he bought at the Army commissary for Halloween. My parents refused to let me keep it, citing Galatians 5:20. So it had to sit on the shelf with the Korean doll, green skin a strong contrast to the doll's fair porcelain.

Now my granddad is gone. Permanently. The feeling that he is missing is so thick I can feel it crawling down my throat with every inhaled breath, and when I exhale, it sticks there. It's a hard chunk of black coal, but it's also a poisonous smoke, slithering into my lungs. My throat feels tight and I am choking on empty absence. There is a granddad-shaped black hole floating in that old white-paneled house. It circles me when I sit in his place on the sofa, flies around my head when I eat from his chipped dishes, and settles over me like a thick fog when I lie down to sleep in the same spot of the bed where he spent his final months. Wherever he touched, the black hole leaks an oily grease impossible to wash from my clothing. I have to carry the stain with me. The black hole is about to swallow me, I know, and I tell myself I won't let it overpower me. I'm not ready. I still have a

promise to keep before I can follow my granddad into the light at the end of the tunnel.

I promised my granddad I'd become just like him. He hadn't known of my promise, of course, but I feel I have to keep it nonetheless, because maybe it is more important now than when he was still alive. It has risen to a higher priority today than yesterday, when I'd been living my life thinking people were invincible and time lasted forever, or at least as long as I wanted.

I'd made my promise in the middle of the summer, when the heat sizzled off the pavement in mesmerizing waves. It was the first time I'd seen my granddad since late December. In the stuffy back bedroom, he lay on the left side of the king-size bed. He had grown a sizable gray and white beard since my last visit. He was silent, watching mindless infomercials on the ancient TV. His no longer white T-shirt draped limply over his frail body, obviously two sizes too large, like a neglected blank canvas sagging from its loose frame. He used to be a proficient painter, and I felt the simile was the only thing left that fit him.

But what haunted me enough to make my promise were his bones. I could see every bone in his body. It got to me, I guess, hitting some hidden part of my soul. There was something so beautiful in the sloping curve of his ribs, the way they stuck out so prominently, like a cry for help and a work of art all wrapped in a thin, insubstantial covering of flesh. Like the final piece of art he would ever create. His last gift to me.

It was everything I'd ever wanted, and at that moment I swore to become my own masterpiece, just like him. I too would inspire people to think deep thoughts of invincibility in mortality, strength in weakness, and beauty in ugliness. I'd become such complete perfection that it captured everyone's eyes until they felt sick with envy and longing. I would not fear the end, but would present myself as a finished masterpiece.

So here I am. The diagnosis of "anorexia nervosa" echoes faintly in my mind. I am lying on the left side of the king size bed. Alone. In the dark.

I pick up the nearby remote and press the dull red power button. A salesman, too cheery for grim reality, commands me in

a shrill screaming voice to pick up the phone and call the 1-800 number displayed on the bottom of the screen. But I am done following orders. So I don't.

I lie in the flickering light of the television and wait for perfection.

Lorraine Dresch will graduate in 2018 with an English major and Theatre minor from The University of Virginia's College at Wise. Read more about her experiences with mental illnesses, her take on politics, and interpretation of social issues on her blog, The Feathered Elephant.

Hello

Kami Bates

I once watched a TED-Ed video that explained how the phrases "hearty welcome" and "cordial reception" reflect the respective Saxon and French linguistic histories of the words comprising these expressions. "Hearty" and "welcome" are earthy and rustic, while "cordial" and "reception" are classy and refined; "hearty" and "welcome" are lumberjack shirts and beer; "cordial" and "reception" are blazers and caviar. "Hearty" invites the person next to you into a hug, but "cordial" makes you purse your lips. These feelings and images are all wrapped up in the sounds that emerge from our open throats. As the narrator's voice softly reminds us at the close of the video, "our history lives in the words we speak and hear." That's why, I finally figured out, we put "reception" on our fancy invitations and "welcome" on our dusty doormats.

Because I am in the habit of looking up such things, I once read a blog on NPR about the history of "hello." Apparently, "hello" has only been in use in the English language since about the mid-1800s. "Hello" is commonly used to garner attention or to express surprise and our very own Thomas Edison urged people to say "hello" when answering their new telephones. Even the how-to sections in the very first phonebooks commonly hailed "hello" as the officially sanctioned greeting of the modern era. With some influence, an authoritative how-to guide, and consumer buy-in, a standard greeting was born.

But the story doesn't actually begin there. A quick perusal of a dictionary will tell you that "hello" came from the chiefly British "hullo," which itself comes from "hallo," a call used to incite dogs on a hunting trip. Hallo finds its history in the Middle French "hola," a combination of "ho" (ahoy) and "la" (there). Which is interesting because, well, Alexander Graham Bell wanted people to greet each other on the telephone with a hearty "Ahoy!" rather than Thomas's now normative address. But that never really caught on, did it?

Say that I called you, though I know that is a rare occurrence these days, but pretend that I did. Perhaps I had broken both of my thumbs in an unfortunate accident with a car door and some rubber bands one late Saturday evening, and I found texting to be a bit more difficult than usual. Maybe my family, out of frustration with rising bills and consumerist tendencies, decided to switch our plan to a pay-as-you-go system, and though I wanted to tell you something important, I figured it isn't worth ten cents of text. Or what probably happened was that the thing I needed to say wouldn't fit in one or two or even three of those little bubbles and I knew that you never read those long messages anyway, so I called you.

The last time someone called you, your grandma was wishing you a happy 22nd birthday. Well, I guess there was also that time not too long ago that your then girlfriend, now ex-girlfriend, let you know that her plane had landed and she needed you to come pick her up at the airport, but you don't think about that very much anymore. You tap the green button and answer "hello" with a question mark in your voice. You're surprised.

Say that I responded with a sudden "Ahoy!" What would you think? Would your mind wander to houseboats and lighthouses and red-and-white-checkered tables and that summer you spent at your grandparents' lake house, watching *Jaws* with your older cousins even though you were supposed to be sleeping? Would you think I was inviting you to some sort of nautical-themed party, which really wouldn't be too odd of a thing, considering our group of friends? As I told you I was sorry about your recent breakup and asked how you were doing, but actually wanting to know if you wanted to grab coffee or frozen yogurt or go on a walk, would you actually be listening, or would you be too distracted by my unorthodox word choice? Say that I told you I wanted to talk, talk about being more than friends, or at least see what that could be like, a possibility we haven't been able to consider since your junior year of high school. Would that "ahoy" cause you to want to listen to me more, or less?

Let's say that you are here, instead of 1094 long miles up the coast. You're walking through a hallway. You have just finished

one of those four-hour labs and you are making your way home, thinking about digging out that book about Ireland—the one that you and your brother used to read when you guys were little—from underneath the pile of books by the side of your bed. You're in a pensive mood, ready to not have to talk to anyone for the rest of the night, but you place a cordial smile on your five o'clock shadow.

Imagine I'm walking the other direction, towards the class that I always enjoy telling you about when we run into each other in the cafeteria. I didn't expect to see you here—usually you walk a different way home, I've come to find out. I'm surprised. I quickly throw out a "hallo," and my cheeks redden at my mistake. Will you notice? Will that one vowel difference cause you to pause before you give me Edison's "hello" as a reply? And will it be a reply as cordial as the smile on your face, or will your embrace be a hearty welcome on this slow Thursday afternoon? Will my slip of the tongue make you think of foxes and bugle horns and chases and how we used to run track together? Do you remember those days, those days when we would talk about raindrops and your trip to Poland while we ran through the woods of the Pacific Northwest, me following you?

And will you realize that I, in fact, am hunting? That I am trying to garner your attention? Or will it be just another standard greeting in a how-to guide?

Our history lives in the words we speak and hear, my friend.

Kami Bates graduated summa cum laude from Pepperdine University in April 2016 with a BA in English Literature and a minor in Religion. At Pepperdine, she served as a first-year spiritual life advisor, worked as an editorial assistant for a sociology professor, had her faith challenged and encouraged, and received the support of many invaluable friends and mentors. Currently, she is tackling her enormous reading list, which has only grown thanks to her English degree, and is pursuing a career in publishing and editing. If you would like to check out what's she's been reading lately, follow her book review Instagram account: @kambythebook.

Short Fiction

Lolita

Rebekah Becker

"Sleep," I tell Lolita in the middle of the day. I press the word into the palms of her hands like pieces of candy.

"I'm not tired," she replies, each letter an eager bird plucking a breadcrumb from my fingertips and fluttering away. I put her in bed and she sleeps anyway, or pretends to.

I pack two bags, one for each of us, fill them with bread and cheese and canteens of tepid water and lukewarm tea. I put a blanket and a sweet pastry in her bag and a pack of cigarettes in mine.

Every moment I worry that between the angry honks of impatient horns, I can hear a buzz in the air, at the edge of earshot, and every moment I have to reassure myself that I am imagining things, that it is just the busy hum of motors backed up on the streets. In the cramped cell of her bedroom, my daughter breathes slowly. Is it easy for her to sleep, with nothing to keep her awake but her own excited thoughts?

I kiss her awake, make her use the bathroom one last time, make her drink from the drum of stagnant water in our kitchen sink.

"How long?" she signs.

"Not long now," I return and sling her bag across her slim shoulders.

I lock the door of our apartment just in case we return, carry her down the stairs and outside, let her down on her own two feet. Then I light a cigarette and hurry her up the street. A cab sails past us, and a second one follows. I try to hail them, but they are already full.

Lolita clutches two of my fingers and I clamp my hand around hers, determined not to lose her as stranger after stranger brushes by, not bothering to apologize when their shoulders slam into mine. I take my time. I cannot carry Lolita far, nor can she walk swiftly. As we go along her cane splays out ahead of her to catch the curvature of the cobblestones.

We reach the end of the street, the edge of the city. The distant drone of approaching planes is clear over the din now.

Lolita tugs on my arm, insisting that I release her from my grasp so she can speak to me.

"Will we have a picnic?" she asks.

"It's a surprise," I tell her.

"It's a picnic," she insists.

"Yes, it's a picnic."

We start up a great hill, picking our way delicately up. Impatience claws at my breast, but I swallow it as best I can, wishing Lolita were younger still. There would be no questions, no slow stroll up the grassy slope.

Halfway up, she again tugs on my arm. My cigarette is burning out. I squash it under my heel, hardly noticing as the still-glowing tip burns into the rough calluses of my soles.

"Will there be fireworks?"

"Yes, fireworks, and a parade," I sign absentmindedly, picking up my pace a little. She follows suit, hanging on my every word. By now, we are the only ones left on the hill. Traffic is still backed up in the city, over the bridge, on the exiting highways. On the horizon, black dots begin to appear, a distant swarm of danger.

"And lots of people will cheer?"

"Lots and lots of people."

I grab hold of her hand, silencing her, but I can still sense her voiceless dissatisfaction.

I swallow the urge to run as the planes whir closer. I hang my head and trudge uphill, focusing on the lumpy ground against the soles of my bare feet. The shoes were the first things I sold, hoping that Lolita wouldn't notice, but every Sunday since she had asked me why I did not wear my heels to church. She said the click of stilettos felt different reverberating through the floor.

"I want to be quiet with God," I had told her. "I will wear quiet shoes now. Soft, quiet slippers." I said they were silk, too precious to touch. I would not let her touch the thinned wool socks on my feet, darned and darned again, and she could not see the stares of strangers as I passed down the streets. Better let

their gaze rest on me than on her. Blind as she was, she had an uncanny sense of being watched. Never did my eyes fall on her without her acknowledgment of my stare.

I do not lift my gaze or look back until we reach the crest of the hill. There my knees sink as my heart does, and Lolita kicks off her shoes.

She takes the blanket from her bag and spreads it on the grass. I acquiesce absently as she tugs my arm, insisting that I sit on the soft blanket with her. She pokes a wedge of the sharp cheese between my teeth and onto my tongue like the Eucharist, but I can't taste it, can't even chew. She unscrews a canteen and takes a long, messy swig, two lines of tea tracing down her neck like tears and soiling her shirt. She puts the canteen down on the blanket, balances it between a concealed clod of soil and a bare foot, and draws the back of her hand over her mouth.

"Is there music?" Lolita asks.

"Yes," I sign back, watching one of the black *things* fall from the sky like a dead bird.

The first bomb hits.

Lolita shrieks with delight as the earth trembles beneath her. Before us, a hot cloud of smoke and debris blooms like a rose.

"Fireworks!" her sticky fingers exclaim into my limp palm.

"Yes, fireworks. Red and gold fireworks," my fingers tell her without my mind's consent.

Somewhere far behind us a baby shrieks. Sirens wail spontaneously; the firefighters have stayed behind. Another bomb hits, this time across the city, and a church's brick steeple crumbles like a sandcastle bowled over by a child. I watch as our apartment building disappears in a cloud of thick, black smoke and shattered glass rains down our street like confetti. The bridge takes a hit near the shore, automobiles still on it.

Already a fog of smoke is gathering around us. I turn around, gaze into the fog where we would have fled. For a moment I think I can perceive a smoky apparition, a small-framed woman smoking a cigarette, carrying a child and running, but then they are consumed by an inferno of fire.

A sense of calm settles over me. I remember the slice of

cheese in my mouth, chew it, savor it and its tiny sesame seeds, and swallow it. I light another cigarette and breathe in deep, the bittersweet flavor drowning out the smoke.

"I can smell the fireworks!" Lolita signs.

"Yes, they are setting them off close by now. They set them off all over the city so that everyone can see them," I tell her.

"They are warm!"

"Yes, fireworks are warm."

"Isn't it a nice warm?"

"Yes, very nice. Drink your tea."

The cigarette trembles in my fingers, but my hands are still. It is the ground that shivers. Bomb after bomb hits until I can hardly see the city, or what's left of it.

"Is this the grand finale?" Lolita asks.

"No, not yet," I tell her. "It will shake the ground even more than these, but don't be afraid; it will only last a moment."

Lolita finds the pastry I have hidden in her bag and eats it slowly, confectioner's sugar dusting her lips. It cost me a week's worth of work. I watch as each thin, sweet layer dissolves on her tongue like a prayer. I relish this picnic at the end of the world. Lolita grins a powdered sugar grin and takes my hand, places her sugar-and-jam fingers in my palm and signs for me one last time.

And then we, too, are fireworks.

Rebekah Becker is a junior at Cardinal Stritch University in Milwaukee double majoring in English and Writing. She is an editor of the 2016 edition of Clare Literary Magazine, *works as an OWL writing tutor, and a writer for* The Odyssey Online. *Rebekah aspires to one day be noted among such literary greats as C.S. Lewis and J.R.R. Tolkien, but for now she is content to write lengthy literary analysis papers and contemplate attending graduate school.*

Growth: A Myth of Four Elements

Hank Morgan

Fire Child

The infant sprung from a campfire. He was recalling his life before he encountered the spark. His memories of that dawn consisted of being shucked from his mother's limbs and lying on the cold earth. When he met the spark, she pushed her fingers deep into his throat and ignited his breath. He crackled away under her kindling and was reborn. She shook off his old skin and forced him to embrace the brightness that he preferred to conceal.

Flames crept over his body and consumed his former personality. The memories curled into black ashes inside his stomach. Everything forgotten was chucked inside the furnace. His outside splintered from the combustion. The hungry figure released a fiery belch. A starved fire poured from his lips. It spread outward and devoured a gentleman watching the metamorphosis. The fiery creature rolled away from his birthplace. Embers followed behind him. His strides devoured entire forests, until someone finally said, "That's enough."

He pulled the heat inside himself and let it glow on his skin. The towering inferno stood alone in his clearing. In the deep woods, he was a solitary light. He pulled himself down to run beneath the leaves. Starlight was extinguished beneath the canopy.

Wind Mother

The radio was reporting the sentencing, but neither boy was paying any attention. They were more concerned with if they could see their destination from their position in the back of the truck. The little one was holding a preservative jar on his lap. The elder brother was tapping the windows until the driver fussed at him. It was supposed to be a week away from the outside world, but they were also spending the week with each other. Their father was off somewhere, probably answering questions on how the boys were eating, and if their schoolwork was consistent. The thought of their shared solace filled both minds as they walked

into the cabin. Each one chose a room and attempted to redress it to fit their needs.

Little placed his jar on the kitchen table. He hoped Elder would eventually believe him about its contents, but knew it was not going to happen today. It did not happen that night either when Little snuck into the bed of Elder. Elder did not immediately remove the pest from his sheets, but instead turned his back to him. When Little reached out for comfort, Elder decided to vacate the bed for the couch. It was easier than screaming at him in the middle of the night. The jar watched Elder sleep in the living room. He decided, that unlike the other vacant bed, this piece of furniture only had enough room for him, and not Little. Little felt cold beneath the sheets and missed the warmth of his brother's body.

In the morning, Elder tapped the jar until Little shook a bit too much. They both watched the eyes rise from blueberry pancakes. Elder asked if Little remembered the time Mom accidently grew three pancakes into a breakfast angel. Little shook his head and reminded Elder that he had never been a fan of breakfast. Elder still deposited a stack on his brother's plate. Then, they struggled through morning conversation. Elder asked if Little had believed the whisper he snuck into his brother's ear last night.

"Yep, Mama is in that jar," Little responded.

Elder shook his head, but refrained from giving the jar an experimental jostle.

Little had already noted the bewitched nature of their temporary home. There were thirteen crooked spoons in the silverware drawer. A tile in the bathroom had six cracks. The third step on the porch was the only one to squeak. Even if Elder would not note the strange occurrences in the cabin, he could certainly see the rollie pollies crawl forth from their mysterious corners or hear the morning birds practice their incantations. They had been brought to a magical place. Elder felt the forest was enchanted in a different way. He remembered his terror at the lightless night and how he strained to hear any noise outside his own thoughts.

"Why do you think she is in a jar?" Elder asked.

"She tried to become a salmon and jump the waterfall back into our lives, but a keen eyed cormorant devoured her in the middle of her leap. The bird was not too bright and he flew into

the sun, where Mama rained back down to us, and I put her in this jar."

Elder pondered Little's introduction to the word cormorant. He was sure he never used it and could not figure out how the word lodged itself inside a child's vocabulary. Elder's bigger concern was the fact that it was day one of what he hoped would only be a five-day entrenchment. Elder looked up at a sudden flash. His scowl relaxed when he saw Little had found a disposable camera. Little began to pull back the shutter. The whirring of the gear was the first comforting sound Elder had heard in the cabin.

"I wanna go take pictures of the tadpoles in the pond," Little demanded.

"Why?"

Little declined to give a reason and instead plopped out of his seat on a beeline for the door. Elder followed his brother's waddle through the woods. The pond Little discovered was not a pond, but a diminishing puddle. The tadpoles scuttled around the edges. The lucky ones were already sprouting legs and close to achieving their goal of abandoning the puddle. Little clicked the camera so quickly he probably disoriented a few emerging polliwogs.

"Do you want to take some home?" Elder asked.

"With what?" Little said.

"We could get a jar from the cabin. Maybe Mom would like some company?"

Little shot Elder a look. Elder also wondered when he began calling her Mom. Little was still using the childish title of Mama and Elder doubted that would ever change now. A few months ago, Elder had taken pleasure in barking across the house with a call for Ma or Mom. He had also changed Papa to Pops.

"Don't you want to save the tadpoles?"

"Why? They can save themselves."

"What if the puddle dries up? Or a bear comes along and slurps it all down?"

"What if someone knocks over their jar or the water gets changed and they suffocate?"

The last one was a personal reminder to Elder. He had repeatedly tried to raise tadpoles in his room, but Mom always insisted that he clean the water. Tadpoles couldn't survive in tap water. It lacked oxygen, or nutrients, or something. The two

brothers walked back to the cabin. From a windowsill, the jar watched their approach. There was no television or video games. They had become accustomed to both luxuries and missed them dearly. The cabin only gave them two options: think or talk to each other. They wanted lunch when they got back. Elder wondered if they were eating more because of boredom.

Elder watched the pot boil. He pushed the whisked eggs to the side and opened a packet of ramen. Pops had said they would be here for a week. Elder hoped he meant the five-day school week and not a seven-day full week. Little was unconcerned with the passage of time. He had found a photo album. His eyes scrolled down the photographs of people he didn't recognize. The boys spent four and a half days in this state of near wilderness. They traveled to the back where they tossed a football, before realizing they were bored. They trekked out to the highest point they could find, only to discover they could see a higher point from their position.

On the last night of their retreat, Elder attempted to see his mother inside the Mason jar. He noticed a crack in the container. It started to spiral across the rim before it slipped from his hands and shattered on the floor. For a brief instant, he spied his mother fleeing from the room. Elder ran to his brother's bed and pulled the covers over them. The next day, they mimicked each other's movements in the backseat on the ride home.

Earth Lover

He has been watching the children stroll by the porch for a few afternoons now. When he was young, in a different neighborhood, he used to watch them from behind a window, but only if he was bored with watching the television. His father would sit on the stone steps and read the newspaper. In the summer, mosquitos would sit with the father. In the winter, the father would no longer sit outside, but become determined to bring the world inside the home. He roamed through their tiny bungalow and opened all the windows and doors, but left the screens latched. In one embarrassing incident, the father had opened the windows to the son's room while he was showering. The son returned to towel off, only to realize every blind and window had exposed him to their neighbors. The son screamed at the father across their tiny house, but the old bat refused to hear voices from different rooms.

In winter, the son yelled at the father about his efforts to siphon heat from their home. The son yelled in the morning when the father had left the air conditioner on overnight, and the house was colder than the outside world. In turn, the son switched on the heater as soon as he woke up because otherwise he was frozen to his bed. He took showers that left him red-skinned. He slammed every door and window to energize his body. These efforts were pointless because when the father returned, he switched back the thermostat, complained about the water bill, and opened the windows.

The son and father argued these points while driving across town on their weekly chores. One day, they passed the state cemetery and the son asked if the father had argued with his parents over their temperature. The son was partly convinced they did not have heaters or air conditioners back then, so he was hoping to prove a point. The father looked past the gates, and thought back to the funeral two years ago. He mentioned that his father required him to fix the air conditioner and heater when it broke. The son pointed out the widow was the only one maintaining the grandfather's resting place. The two descendants pulled into the graveyard. They walked to the plot and the father hugged the son. It was the first time the father had seen the gravestone. He grabbed his son with both arms and wrapped the boy's back. The son filled the bear hug with his embarrassment.

Baptism

His memories of the city pool were fragmented. They consisted of dives and underwater fights. He recalled rushing over hot concrete on a mission to quickly cool his feet by leaping into the water. He did not remember the usual games like Marco Polo. Instead, he thought about the splash fights and the dunks. In one arm, he could sling his baby brother up and pull the little tyke's head down.

Somewhere, he lost the enjoyment of the pool. He imagined the bottom opening up into a dark pit of great white sharks. Even as a child, he knew this sounded ridiculous. Still, he feared the deep end slinking towards him. It was a fear that started to crawl out of the pool. It crept across the park's green grass and down the neighborhood streets. One night, it became brave enough to pull the sheets off of his bed and awaken him in the cold. He gasped in the night and breathed in the fear.

Now, he was preparing to leave this town. In the distance, the lifeguards were being verbally assaulted by young parents for closing the pool on the last day of summer. He drove past them. The fear was attempting to stroke his mind back towards his empty house. The fear was wondering who would notice he was gone. The fear wanted to know what their destination was. He knew better than to speak out loud his thoughts. His car was kept quiet for the six-hour drive. Lights swam around him as he propelled down the highway. His hometown was consumed by the horizon.

Eventually, he approached his destination. The waves curled against the sand. Above him, the sun had already sunk in the black bay. He stepped forward. His shoes were abandoned in the car, but he kept his clothes on. Fear beckoned from behind the closed windshield, but he would no longer be kept contained. At first he tied his jeans up around his ankles. Then, he forgot them as the water lapped against his calves. He had been to the beach a few times, but never at night. His parents always pulled him and his brother away from the sunset. He was leaving soon, but wanted to say goodbye. He could not pardon the city pool. It was clustered with a new generation of schoolyard children. They now had free reign to shove each other off the edge. It was their turn to run around like idiots.

He stepped farther into the white foamy seaside. In the distance, a pier was still alight. The sounds of a young couple chasing each other across the empty boardwalk fell around him. He smiled in the dark. A wave crashed into his head as his legs lifted him up from the bottom. He dove once more into the water. Behind him, the sun began to rise. He felt morning trickle down and fill him.

Hank Morgan surprised everyone by graduating from Emmanuel College with a BA in Secondary Education and English Literature. At Emmanuel, he served on the executive board of Writer's Block, the college's creative writing club. He spent four years spurring the club to publish their first collection. The resulting piece, Pocketful of Pretention, *is a one page minimalist literary magazine that is not only home to three great minimalist works, written by three great minimalists, but also world record holder for greatest ratio disparity between time spent in development and content produced.*

Decisions

Kaitlynn Sass

"Mama, I can't find Oscar anywhere," Cole whines. Cole is my little brother. He thinks the whole world revolves around him and his stupid cat. Dingy thing. The cat, I mean. We found it last fall hiding under our half-collapsed porch, missing part of a tail and smelling worse than the spaghetti sauce Mama forgot was in the back of the fridge. That cat climbed right into my brother's arms and almost never left.

Dad didn't want us to keep it. He said seven kids and two parents made for enough mouths to feed around here. Said if we could barely afford food for ourselves, we sure as hell weren't buying any cat food. But Mama said Cole should be allowed to keep the poor thing. So the cat stayed, and Dad left.

That was almost three months ago. Now, Mama has to take care of all of us kids, and hold down her new janitor job. She cleans at the school. It's real exciting for us kids, cause we see her all the time now. How many kids get to say hey to their mamas in the hallways? And anyway, Mama doesn't mind doing the extra work. It's like practice for cleaning up around our house. At least, that's how I look at it.

"Cole, honey, I'm trying to get all of you kids fed breakfast and pack your lunches. I can't be looking for Oscar right now. Sit down and eat, and I'm sure he'll turn up." Mama's trying to be reassuring, but Cole still looks real worried. He sits down at the scratched up table and looks down into his hands like they hold some big secret of the universe.

"Tracy, run up and make sure everyone's dressed and ready to go. I don't want any more repeats of what happened last week," Mama says to me. I roll my eyes, but head for the stairs. Mama means that she doesn't want anybody leaving the house in their underwear again. Lily, the baby of the family, left for kindergarten last week wearing a pink t-shirt and Cinderella underwear, and that was it. Mama was so busy yelling at the boys to stop pulling my hair that she didn't even notice until we were standing at the

bus stop and the whole neighborhood already saw her.

By the time I make sure everyone is presentable and herd them toward the kitchen, Cole is whining about that cat again and Mama is standing at the stove telling him to quit his fussing. Even though Cole is the only one older than me, he has a real sensitive side that makes him seem way younger. That's probably why so many of the boys pick on him in school.

We all come into the kitchen and make a big fuss about who's gonna sit where, even though we always end up in the same spots as the day before. I don't think anybody but me notices when Cole gets up and slips out the front door. I don't say anything, cuz what harm can he do?

Mama serves us pancakes the size of the skillet she used to cook them in with warm butter and syrup. Everyone stops talking and the contest begins to see who can finish in the fewest mouthfuls. Just when I'm about halfway done—in four bites, mind you—Mama asks where Cole is.

"He went outside," I struggle to get out around the pancake taking up a lot of space in my mouth. I get to be the hero now, being the only one who knows where Cole went and all.

Mama tells everyone else to stay inside and finish up, while she grabs me by the arm and pulls me out the door right behind her. We head down the street, trying to see where Cole ran off to. Finally, Mama spots him sitting right on the side of the road and gives out a little involuntary croak. She sounds like the little frog I hid in my pocket once. No one woulda known about him if he had just kept quiet through dinner. That was back when Dad was still around.

Mama runs toward Cole as fast as she can and starts to yell at him to get away from the road. That's when I see the cat. Cole is stroking the fur that is flatter than I remember it being before. Mama sees it too, pretty soon, and changes the tone of her voice to the soft and caring one. We get closer and see the tears falling down Cole's cheeks faster than his wiper-blade fingers can catch them.

In some situations, I believe, there is a choice. A choice between crying or laughing to keep from crying. The past few

months, I've made this choice a lot of times. A lot of times, I chose wrong. This is one of those times.

I can't stop the cackle that escapes from deep inside my throat. It jumps high into the air and echoes across the whole neighborhood. I might as well have slapped Cole across the face. His eyes turn dark and his frown starts to look mean instead of sad. Next thing I know, he jumps on me and I tumble into the grass of the neighbor's yard. Mama is yelling again and trying to pull Cole off of me. His fists jab into my stomach and arms. I twist and turn, trying to get out from underneath him, but he's stronger than I realized.

He tires fast and gets up. Now his eyes look dead. Him and Mama start to walk home and Mama puts her arm around his shoulders.

"We'll get you another cat, sweetie."

I watch them from my spot on the wet ground, feeling cold water seep into my jeans. I realize how big small decisions can be.

Kaitlynn Sass is a senior at Clarion University in Clarion, PA, where she majors in Secondary English Education and has a minor in Creative Writing. She is employed in the Clarion Honors Office and is a writing consultant at the Writing Center. She serves as the President of the Rho Iota Chapter of Sigma Tau Delta, is the Student Representative for the Eastern Region of Sigma Tau Delta, and is president of Reading for the Cure, a breast cancer fundraiser. Kaitlynn is also co-editor-in-chief of Clarion's literary and arts journal, Tobeco, *and is the vice-president of Clarion's English Club.*

The Nights that Belonged to Neruda

Emma Oliver

From the balcony, Areilia watched José at the base of the beach cliffs, enjoying his morning cigarette in the shadow of the crags as he watched the dolphins. The smoke smelled acrid, lessened by her distance and the smell of the incoming storm. La Tormenta had an aroma, one that gave the island a few hours notice before she'd blow through. The scent made Areilia want to stand in the spray of the surf, a smile on her face.

She watched José run a hand through his sandy-colored hair, fingers slowing at the ends, which brushed the nape of his neck. When he turned, she saw his eyes find her in the doorway and smile, before he threw his cigarette to the sand, guilt evident, and pocketed his lighter with a grin. She released a laugh, scrunching her nose in disapproval. He claimed the expression would be her "mom" face when the time came. He shook out his pipe and jogged to the steps around the front of the house. In minutes, he'd come up behind her and wrapped her in his arms, pressing his nose to her neck.

"You reek, babe," she scolded as he nuzzled her, pushing aside her hair and scratching her with the stubble of his jaw.

"I don't do it often," he mumbled and she laughed.

"Cariño, I do your laundry. Tell me again that you don't smoke every morning."

He sighed into her skin, pulling away slightly to trace her ear with his nose. "I'm making the last payment on the house today," he informed her.

"Already?" she asked, looking back.

"Just in time, right? I told you the dollar to colón difference made this a steal. Also, the lease on my practice is about to expire. Remind me to renew that." He smiled before turning to take in the palm trees along the crest of the bluffs, swaying in the harsh breeze. His expression changed, lips closing around his smile, and she couldn't read his eyes.

"Looks like it'll be a night for Neruda," he murmured. He squeezed her hand and retreated into the house.

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Areilia tossed eggs in a pan while she waited for her student. What had been a Costa Rican girl of eight was now a young woman of twelve, with a greater grasp of the English language than Arei had thought herself capable of teaching. She had taken on tutoring Josefina to distract and support herself after José had left, and she simply hadn't stopped. She'd wished for a little girl, as clever and vibrant as her student, when she and José became pregnant, shortly before Josita had become a constant facet of her life.

There was a knock on the front door of the split-level bungalow and Josefina walked in with her paper and books. Areilia took the eggs off the stove, laying out two plates. "Estás temprano, Josita," she commented, returning to the kitchen to wash some dishes. "En inglés, dime, what did you do yesterday?"

"Yesterday, I go to the market with mi mamá to buy Papi's favorite fruit, and Celeste and I go to the waves to swim," she said.

"Y el tiempo pasado?" Areilia asked.

"...went. I went. And we went."

"¡Tienes razón!" Areilia exclaimed. "Would you like to go to the beach and name the things we see?" she asked, moving to the table, and Josefina smiled. The young girl set her books by the door and returned to the bamboo table, shoveling some eggs off of a steaming plate and into her mouth.

"¡Los huevos son deliciosos!" Josefina complimented around a mouthful. Frowning at her student's impoliteness, Areilia flicked her dishtowel in disapproval. Josefina wiped her mouth, looking confused.

"I'm sorry, señora; ¿Hay alguien más nos une? I thought these were for me," the young girl apologized.

"No, not for you, for—"

–José, she finished silently, sighing and closing her eyes as she realized her mistake. *José, Josita*, she'd done it again. "Claro que sí, son para ti, pero do not talk with your mouth full. Es de mala educación," Arei saved, walking to the fridge to pour a glass of milk before bringing the cup back to the table. "And do not rush," she urged, sitting across from her pupil, "we can wait until you've finished." She smiled, pushing the blunder from her mind.

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As he prepared to leave for the day, Areilia walked up to José and pushed his hair behind his ears, touching a kiss to his nose as he bent down. He'd barely sat down at the table to eat before he'd been up again and pulling on his shoes, running late as always. He never for a minute thought of giving up watching the dolphins, even if it meant less of a rush. So Arei made breakfast, though José was the only one she'd want touching the other meals of the day: scrambling eggs was the peak of her culinary potential.

"Be safe if you're going to be out there long," he said as he took his plate over to the sink, empty except for the pan used in breakfast preparation. She watched his back, tracing his silhouette with her eyes as if memorizing it, like he'd disappear if she looked away.

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Blinking away the memory of José's retreating figure, Arei and her student browsed the fruit selection at the market. One of Areilia's favorite things about Costa Rica was the peach-like paraguayo, white flesh protecting a pulpy heart of crimson seeds—though she hadn't yet figured out how to eat them properly. Each juicy bite left her sticky from her chin to her elbows.

The market was buzzing like the thunderclouds overhead as customers hastened to make purchases before the sky split. Los vendedores were packing up, folding things away into wooden boxes that both displayed and transported wares. These reminded Arei of metal bins she'd seen near the Seine, like large green dumpsters until the foot traffic picked up and vendors opened tourist shops. She thought she'd return to Europe, envisioning herself as a fluid being drifting across continents. She hadn't thought she'd settle down, but now, without a family or true job to tie her down, the brittle hope that her old life could return dragged heavy like an anchor on the ocean floor, keeping her on the Costa Rican shore. Looking down at Josita as she poked at the bruise in a mango, Areilia thought that some ports were worth an extended stay.

Areilia felt the first drops on the back of her neck and lifted her scarf to shield her head as she accepted change from the vendor.

"Ready, mi niña?" she asked, gathering up her skirt—which seemed to be sprouting patches of darker green in the rain—and Josefina nodded, grabbing her teacher's hand and pulling her in the direction of home as Areilia thanked fate for bringing this sweet one into her life. They jogged as the precipitation picked up, and with a hug, Areilia left Josefina with her mamá before making her way toward her own empty home along the damp gravel road.

***

She pictured him there, standing under the overhang, water dripping from his blonde-brown hair and into his eyes.

"Haz prisa, mi monada," he called. She climbed the steps and pecked him on the lips, brushing his bangs from his forehead. His eyes, the green-blue of their ocean, crackling with the storm as he smiled, water clinging to his lashes as he tipped his head to kiss her cheek, his lips trailing her neck and shoulder.

But her porch, as it came into sight, was empty.

The desire, despite the dampness of the evening, started as a flame—kindled beneath the waist of her skirt—and quickly jumped up within her chest, licking her ribs and constricting her breath, a feeling near hysteria. *The ocean, the ocean.* She hadn't felt the pull in the longest time, the violent crash of the tormented waves that called to her only in storms.

At first it had made him laugh, wondering what she was doing wading into the shallows as it began to rain, but when lightning cracked the sky, she remembered his beautiful features strained, his voice struggling to stay calm while shouting for her to come back.

She did. She always did, and he'd kiss her and laugh, but that tension wouldn't leave his eyes—his desperate confusion, his desire to understand what drew her to step into the ocean with the crests at their roughest. It was a sickness that made her burn until the mist from the churn was upon her skin and she could breathe. She knew it troubled him, but she couldn't explain, so she'd pull Neruda from the shelf and slip it into his lap where he sat in their only armchair, jaw clenched. Her gesture would distract him and he'd open the worn red book to the page where

they'd left off, and he'd begin to read aloud. She'd curl up at his feet with her head on his knees, tamed for an evening as the storm thundered outside.

The urge ceased after he left. She'd weathered many storms without him, safely behind the storm door, protected but anxious—but the desire returned now with a fury, and she could feel the steam rising off her arms, her chest, her face. Quickening her pace as the storm clouds rumbled, she released the bag of paraguayos to the rocky red dirt of the empty lane and slung off the pashmina that had protected her from the rain. *The ocean, the ocean.* The end was in sight.

Arei closed her eyes and sprinted that last bit of distance, raindrops sliding over her face until she felt the streams splashing up around her waist when her feet broke the water and connected with smooth, soft mud. As the purr of the surf hit her ears, a natural tranquilizer, so did the invigorating iciness of the water. She caught her breath with a gasp, stumbling deeper until she was in up to her stomach, muscles constricting beneath her skin, then her chest, goose flesh raising everywhere and bringing the soft hair on her arms and legs to stand at attention, stinging as it went. She could see him lie before her, head in her lap like their last night: she felt peace.

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"Tonight I can write the saddest lines," he began in Spanish.

"Is that right?" Arei fought the waver in her voice. He didn't return her fragile smile, as she traced the outline of his jaw, but she knew when he did it'd clear their Tormenta and reassure her that a place still existed where they'd weather more storms.

"Write, for example, 'The night is shattered and the blue stars shiver in the distance,'" he continued, letting his eyes close as a clap of thunder rumbled about a mile off.

Areilia collected a drop of water from his collar bone with the tip of her index finger. Though this poem wasn't a happy one—"*Love is so short, forgetting is so long*"—she assumed he'd chosen it because it was her favorite.

That night, she'd stood among the crests long enough for the current to grasp her ankles and yank her under.

His green flannel shirt, the one that brought out his eyes, hung over the back of the bathroom door to dry. It was the same shirt he asked her to marry him in, with a different set of Neruda's lines.

"I love you without knowing how, or when, or from where...

I love you in this way because I do not know any other way of loving but this, in which there is no I or you."

His hair had been long then too as he closed his eyes against the sun, looking just the same as he did now. Areilia bowed her head to kiss his nose, causing his eyes to flutter open, the green of the sea.

That night, abdominal cramps racked her as she stood in the shower, drying off. Her body, not yet showing, had kept their daughter like a secret, but it betrayed her. As she held herself up by the showerhead, blood fled down from between her legs, taking with it their late night whispers of what their daughter would look like and which language they would teach her first. Tears escaped her eyes like drops from the ocean, and when José found her and held her, he couldn't help but mutter, "The ocean, the ocean. Why, Arei?"

Rain drops collected on the face floating before her, rolling toward his chin like teardrops. José gazed up at her through the rain, lightning dancing behind her head. "I'll miss her, Arei," he whispered.

***

The current, as familiar as thoughts of him, grabbed her around the waist and dragged her out to where her toes couldn't touch. She tried to scream but coughed and spluttered as the water rushed in, invading her eyes, ears, nose and throat.

"We have more time," she said, but the tension of his eyes cradled resignation, and with an epiphany that hit her like a tidal wave, she understood why storms were named after people.

Parallel. The words came like a salt strain through the ocean water burning her nostrils, the way it had that night when he, not the current, had held her. *Parallel to the beach*. She struck out her limbs and began a clumsy, strong stroke to her right. She pulled against the current, her skin on fire with adrenaline,

and shrugged out of her sarong to lessen the grip of the waves. Her toes scraped sand, and she pushed herself as hard as she could, one desperate stroke after another until her hand touched bottom, grainy particles collecting under her fingernails as she dragged herself to shore. She rolled onto her back on the rain-drenched sand as lightning sparked the clouds and she choked, coughing up the water that had run into her lungs, burning. Tears sprang to her eyes but all she felt was the salt coating her skin, a mineral membrane as if she'd been birthed from the ocean. He had not come for her, as she had known he would not, and he *would* not come for her again. She breathed in. And then out, murmuring one final set of verses.

Closing the door tight, she trudged to their room—her room—and turned to the bookshelf. *"If little by little you stop loving me,"* she whispered, Neruda's words flowing from memory as she fell back against the bed: *"I shall stop loving you little by little. If suddenly you forget me do not look for me, for I shall have forgotten you."* She turned to watch the rain through the window, calmer now. *"I want you to know one thing,"* she began again.

On the bookshelf behind her, the spot where Neruda had been was empty.

Emma Oliver graduated from Christopher Newport University in May 2016 with a BA in English and Spanish and a minor in Leadership Studies. While at CNU, she was awarded English major with distinction, Spanish major with departmental honors, and the Provost's Award for Excellence in Student Writing. Her works of fiction and literary essays have been previously published in The Cupola, The Kennesaw Tower Undergraduate Foreign Language Research Journal, Currents Literary Magazine, *and* Icarus Down. *As a graduate, Emma looks forward to pursuing publication with her works of fiction and theatre and currently works at Walt Disney World as a part of their college program.*

Georgia Peach

Erin Roux

My momma never talks much, she says, because her momma talked too much.

I was born when my momma was only a few years older than me and I can't imagine having a baby before I learn more about myself, I guess, and my chest is bigger than stings made from the sweetest of honey bees.

She sometimes calls me her Georgia peach, because that's where we are from, but I have never actually seen her eat a peach. I think they are too fleshy for her liking.

My momma always covers up. I've never seen her nude except for these fuzzy, instinctual memories I have of feeding at her breast. I sometimes think about that when she lets me hug her.

I know she loves me, but she never says it. I can feel it when she fixes a button on my shirt or rubs Vicks on my chest when I'm sick or when she puts crumpled dollar bills into my palm when I ask to go get an ice cream.

I don't know all of the details, but I do know that no one can make a baby on their own, and momma hasn't been around a man that doesn't make her lower her eyes or tug at her shirt collar.

One time a man stole her purse in line at the supermarket and she didn't say a word, just left her groceries in a cart and walked away. I was seven and screaming but didn't know what I was screaming about. I can see that even the men at church make her hands shake when she empties her coin purse into the collection plate.

My momma didn't talk much, she said, because he didn't say anything, either.

I never knew my father but now I think I know why. I know why I never had big strong hands holding me up to the sun or a deep voice from down the hall or warm, heavy steps on the stairs.

She holds tight, so tight, too tight wearing my fingers like the

pages of Leviticus that she keeps inside the door of the kitchen cupboard.

My momma took me to the ocean today. The tide is doing an odd thing where it pulls way out and you can walk out hundreds of feet and still have the water lap at your ankles. You feel like Jesus walking on water. I think she took me here so I can feel small, so small, and maybe play in the water.

My momma walks out into the water covered by a long-sleeved shirt and a skirt that skims the tops of her feet. She's so far out that the water grazes the space between her legs. The water wraps around her like gauze from the doctor's office. Her eyes are closed.

I stay closer to shore and walk back to our seersucker sheet. I sit down and notice that the bottom of my swimsuit is stained sweet cherry red. I don't mind.

I talk too much. I think I talk too much because my momma doesn't talk at all.

Erin Roux is a sophomore at DePaul University in Chicago, IL, working toward her degree in English and Creative Writing. When she isn't working or worrying, she is writing and editing for various online and print publications (including Her Campus DePaul; The DePaulia *newspaper;* Crook and Folly, *DePaul's art and literary magazine;* Shredded Mag; *the* Honorable Mentions *newsletter; and* The Brave Face *online publication, amongst others), trying to understand herself and the world better. Erin is young and busy, but she is grateful.*

Blessings

Marissa Lane

My wrists have that feeling again. Like someone took all the marrow from my bones and replaced it with Pop Rocks.

It's just Kroger. At an off time. There's barely anyone here. It's okay.

I squeeze my daughter's hand. She's oblivious, happy to skip and twirl beside me in her favorite secondhand dress that I've had to patch and hem so many times that I don't think there's a single stitch on it I haven't touched. On her little feet are the pretty new sandals her daddy bought her even though I told him what she needed was a new pair of sneakers. She'll wear the soles off of them, at least.

She sings nonsense to herself, songs she makes up herself, the voice of a little girl who doesn't know what the word "poor" means, but will help subtract the coupon from the price.

I keep a running total in my head while searching for what still needs tossed in the cart—*bread cheese rice beans oatmeal yo*—

"Mommy, can we have hamburgers this week?"

I grab the smallest, cheapest pack of ground beef I can find, just barely enough for two burgers. I can't say no, she actually wants to eat something so rarely, even the junk food at her dad's, he tells me. The meal shakes and multivitamins the doctor told me to get for her, my stubborn child who refuses to grow, are the same price as a week's worth of groceries. I choose the groceries. She grins at me, a gap-toothed smile, and my heart fumbles; until I realize I have to find a way to get her to the dentist soon, have to find a way to pay for it. I have to call her father to figure out that one.

He still hasn't sent his check this month.

She tugs my fingers. "Mommy, don't we have more?"

What a loaded question, kiddo. "Yes, little love. I got distracted. Want to read the list and tell me what we have left?"

She nods, and I hand her the paper. "Peanut butter, pretzels, dried plums, raisins, milk."

We continue through the aisles. If she can reach what she needs, she grabs it herself—if not, I lift her up. Every time she puts it in the cart, the mental total goes up. *Twenty-seven fifty-three. Thirty-four oh-nine.*

There are people in the dairy section and I want to turn and run. *I want to.* But what kind of mother would that make me? My heart is in my throat, now, and the fluorescent flickering overhead seems even more obnoxious and should those fridges be making those kinds of buzzing noises? Are they malfunctioning? What if they're too warm and she gets sick because of it? What if *I* get—

"Mommy?"

"Yes, sweetie?"

"What kinda milk do we get?" She swings her arms beside her and bounces on her toes.

I tear myself away from my runaway train of thought and try to remember what our total was. I push the cart closer, eyeing the other shoppers who haven't even looked up from their own shopping and I show her, I show her which milk we get. She grabs her yogurt, the kind in cups, the kind with no animals or pretty colors on the sides without complaint.

And that's it. We're almost free, almost out, we just have to make it through checkout. We should be under what we have left, we should have some wiggle room, maybe even enough to justify a candy bar for my little girl because she has been *so good* today. The two of us unload the cart and the cashier woman scans the items one by one and then the coupons I hand her and we smile at her and it looks like I did flawless math.

Until I scan our food stamp card.

We had less left than I thought—I must have checked an older receipt for the balance, a stupid mistake, a stupid, *stupid* mistake. Or maybe one of the coupons slipped into the depths of my purse? I flip through my wallet, start shuffling things around in my bag, but it's all candy wrappers, receipts, tissues. No coupon.

"You still have a balance left of eleven seventy-three, ma'am," the cashier says. She's the one I always go to, older, with a real

beauty mark right where Marilyn Monroe's fake one was. She always seems more understanding of how shitty the world can be than the teenagers managing most of the other open registers.

I flinch and try to restrain a sob. Ten bucks may not seem like much, but it's a pack of toilet paper. It's keeping the lights on and the water warm. It's a new book. It's no candy bar for the little girl. I reach into my beat-up purse and grab the emergency twenty I keep there in case I see something she might like.

The cashier stops me. Her nametag says Elizabeth. She says, "Sweetheart, pick yourself out a candy bar," to my daughter. And she pulls out a twenty from her own pocket. "I'm not supposed to do this." She shakes her head.

My daughter pulls a Snickers bar from the shelves of candy and sets it on the conveyor belt with a shy smile. "Thank you very much," she says.

The woman scans it and motions for me to come closer, like she doesn't want to say something in front of my kid. She doesn't smile.

"It's not my job to take care of your kid. That's your job. Do it next time."

Marissa Lane is a senior majoring in Creative Writing and English Literature at Miami University. She is an active member of the Phi Nu Chapter of Sigma Tau Delta, the president of the Miami University Association of Creative Writers, and the creative writing intern at the Howe Center for Writing Excellence. After graduation, she plans to pursue her loves of traveling, writing, art, yoga, and teaching, but in the meantime she is working on her thesis for English departmental honors.

High

Courtney Wimberly

They came from nowhere, as if risen from the foam capping the gulf's lapping waves—and passed us, circled around a budding fire. The sun was preparing to set, and their night was only beginning. Each night, the crew of misfit humans would emerge from the trees at the edge of the sand to get drunk and dance and make love. Most of us withdrew to the house before long. Those rebellious souls in our group stayed to watch, if not take part, in the evening debauchery.

I liked the noise, the way their voices reverberated with the ocean's perpetual sigh.

Their hair was long, even the men, and their abundance of exposed skin was scrubbed bronze by the coastal sun. She came down the dunes after them—draped in dingy white linen, barefoot on the sand that scorched my feet through my foam sandals. She was tough, and I had yet to know her name.

She trod downhill but stopped and turned toward us when she reached a spot where the dune dissolved into the shore. She appeared to survey our circle before settling her gaze on me, eyes reflecting the fire like smoldering charcoal. She saw me looking back, and a smirk sliced across her copper face. She licked her lips and turned away, toward gathering of hippies collected around their own fire. I watched the flux of bodies swell and crest, engulfing her as she moved to join them, and I knew.

I wanted her.

She said her name was Meg Ruby, and I was inclined not to believe it. But I called her Meg anyway because it's what she wanted. I sat beside her at sunset, sand warm with remnants of the day's beating heat, and watched as she braided slivers of driftwood and tattered seashells into her dreadlocks with beach grass. She said her hair came out like that, twisted and thin, dark strands she bunched on top of her head during the day but let loose at nightfall, when the moon broke the waves and bonfires went up along the waterfront. When she danced around our fire, she looked like a warrior. She made love like one, too.

I never joined her ritual around the fire, though she asked for my hand each time. I just watched her—chestnut skin taut over her legs and arms as she swayed with the music of the ocean or some distant drumming only she could discern, how her dreads shook down over her bare chest like serpents. Queen of the night sky, the woods, and the shoreline, all at once.

That first night we were together, the last night of my trip, a storm blew in and wiped out the fires. Everyone moved under their lean-tos. Meg hadn't constructed hers, so we retreated into the woodlands walling the coast from the knot of highways beyond. There, beneath wild yaupon holly laden with blushing red fruit, under slippery palmetto limbs and the live oak with its Spanish moss sodden with rain, I encountered paradise.

***

Afterward, she held me to her, bare and rain soaked, and asked what was I doing there, and I told her the first thing that came to mind. I told her fall break, and we'd rented a beachfront house for the week. Tonight was our last, and we were to go back to our college town the following morning. Which wasn't false, at least the latter part. I didn't tell her I was on an outreach trip for women; we were there to hold hands and break bread with the sun and quietly talk to Jesus.

"You leave in the morning?" she asked, fingers combing my scalp.

Falling in and out of sleep, I replied in a way I thought would impress her. "Tomorrow, at sunrise, I shall no longer be here."

She didn't recognize the reference; the closest thing she had to a prophet was the jade Buddha dangling from a hemp cord around her neck.

She laughed and told me I sounded scholarly, but the next words she spoke were serious. "Come back."

It was feasible. A university three hours from the coast and a car on campus. At that moment, I wanted more than anything to taste the salt on her skin over and over. So I agreed.

***

We became the tide. Each time I returned she was there, the sea rushing forth to greet its master moon. We drank and ate with her companions, and when night fell, they retreated to their lean-tos and I helped her construct our own farther down the beach, against the sand cliffs, from palm fronds and braids of beach grass. She tugged handfuls of slender stalks from the sand and showed me how to weave them into strong cords that could withstand the ocean breeze. I worked for her, twisting the tender strands and handing them off as she secured the shelter.

Once the lean-to was stable, we'd slip underneath and drink more, which helped us talk about everything in general. Usually, I talked about the tough classes and responsibilities I had at the university. After a while, she started asking me why I stayed, and I would change the subject, asking something new about her each time.

She never showered but occasionally sank into the ocean to let it wash away the grit caked to her soles and calves. She like to rub fresh mint on the soft flesh connecting the neck to the shoulder, under her unshaven arms, and between her breasts, which I could smell nights we were together and which I can still recall, lying in my shared room, my roommate on her bed, back to me, in the compressing dark.

One night, after our ritual greeting, she explained to me that each entity on Earth has a vibration. The higher the frequency of that vibration, the more positive the energy that flows from the entity. Elements of the natural world possess inherently positive vibrations that living beings may use to tune their own.

"It's our job," she said, "as children of the universe, to try for the highest vibrations possible."

"Why?" I asked, burying my face in the crook of her neck, where the scent of sweat mingled with that of unwashed hair and mint.

"So we can spread positive energy."

"To everything?"

"And everyone. Even people you hate," she said. "Especially them."

***

I didn't tell her it was my last year. As graduation crept closer, it was harder to get to the coast. The drive was the same, but the applications, the exams, the projects were unending. I knew if I tried to explain, she wouldn't understand. She would tell me the piece of paper I was vying for was arbitrary, I could learn just as much from the earth as I could from people who also held meaningless pieces of paper, and for free.

Truth be told, I believed her, but I was so close to completing my degree, so close to getting out of the region. In the same way, I couldn't understand the appeal of a lifestyle like hers. It's true, she was exotic because she was so wild. Wild, not only because she never hesitated to claw my back or gnaw my bottom lip until she drew blood. Wild, because she was *so near* that wilderness. The earth told her things. But me, there's no way I could have dropped everything to bake on the beach for the rest of my life. The earth would have told me naught. It would have tired me, anyhow.

***

The days brimmed with work. The outreach program paid for our meals and stay but asked that we offer our hands in return, both on the beach trip and after we'd come back. On the coast, we gathered trash regurgitated by brackish tide. Later in the day, when the water swelled to tongue farther inland, we regressed to the communities bordering the beach, two miles in or so, and slapped paint at vinyl spider-webbed with cracks, push-mowed lawns, and handed out miniature Bibles to the impoverished families that lived there. They always took them and listened with hungry eyes, whether they could speak or read English or not, as the other women explained that by cleaning up their lawns, we were doing God's work. I couldn't bring myself to call it that. I was unaware what I was signing myself up for when I scrawled my name on the form that read "FREE BEACH TRIP." It was a way to get off campus without paying. The work was a way to prove to people that we could see them, that we cared whether they ate

enough or whether their kids suffered a snakebite in their jungle of a front yard.

I let everyone else distribute the little books. I carried the box.

***

When we returned to campus, I'd gotten what I wanted, but I kept seeing the faces of those families at the beach, the parents' eyes as they watched their children bolt across the slashed grass, kicking up green fragments. Those expressions kept me savoring the pearls of sweat, the sunburn, the splinters, as trophies. I yanked weeds from community gardens and aided in transplanting of native species. I pressure washed multicolored brick and sidewalks in the project housing. Sometimes we did these things as a group; more often than not, I went by myself.

During mandatory services, the speakers talked about how they saw God working within each member of the program. It was in these moments I'd allow my mind to drift back to the coast, to Meg. She'd found me out a few weeks in.

"Do you believe in God?" she said, feet sunk into soaked, cushiony sand. The water continually lapped at her ankle bracelets.

I watched the water drain from a cowrie shell resting against the bulge where her leg met her ankle and considered not answering.

"You talked with them, but they never stayed long after dark." I knew she was referring to the other girls in the program. "And they all wore little wooden crosses."

Too bad that those girls didn't haul their cross like they were supposed to, I thought.

"I don't know," I said.

She lowered to her knees, sat back on her feet, and closed her eyes. I didn't know if she was meditating or just reveling in the sensation of the high sun on her forehand and shoulders. The approaching and receding water dampened the blades of linen lying across her legs.

"I mean," I started, "I see God in you, I think."

She didn't move, but she said, "What if they knew?"

If they knew where I'd been all night before we'd left, why there were tiny breaks of twigs in my hair, why my knees and elbows and shoulder blades were crusted with sand and salt. If they knew I had taken advantage of their trip to lounge on the beach for free. If they knew I'd come back more weekends than not.

I came clean. "I sit through the sermons. They speak about doing good. I don't want their god, but—"

She shifted in place to look at me with those eyes, eternally burning. "Then why say you do?"

"I like helping people."

She offered a sorrowful sound, and for a moment, her expression morphed from blazing to pitiful. It was almost infuriating. Some invisible bolt of light struck deep within me then, and I didn't respond.

She said, "You can help people and know them, truly know them. Don't hide behind a book."

***

I came back in late spring. It had been months, and I hardly expected her to show for the nightly romp. I sank into the sand by a fire and submerged myself in a bottle someone handed me. The liquid was lukewarm but spicy, and I kept drinking. I wanted to be able to explain myself if she arrived and was under the impression it would take a buzz to do so.

The night's attendees waned until just a few were left on the shore, smoking and talking to themselves or the sand or the moon, which was blazing that night. It was closer than usual, and the pale glow it cast over the beach was comforting as the fire beside me crackled out.

***

When I emerged from my trance, the moonlight outlined her body standing over me. I traced the nimbus with my eyes, over her curves, to the dreadlocks, down to those calloused feet.

From my place on the sand, I couldn't tell whether her silhouette smiled, scowled, offered any emotion.

I reached up a hand for her to join me. Instead, she knelt mechanically by the fire. Cupping her hands on either side of the barely flaming embers, she blew life back into the fire and added some kindling from a communal stack nearby. Only then did she lie with me on the beach, under the encroaching moon. I held her against me, and as she slid a hand under my shirt, over my stomach, and along the edge of my pants, I knew this was the last time.

***

We remained a tangle of limbs after. I kept looking at the horizon, watching for the peach tendrils creeping the water, hinting at the coming sun. It was almost morning, and I could see that the approaching clouds brought with them a low lying mist.

"The fog is rising, and I must go."

"You always talk like that. Why?"

Because I can't think when I'm with you. Because I can never tell you the truth of the situation. Because I'm shaking and don't want to leave your world.

"We're from different dimensions," I said, wrapping one dread around my first finger.

For a moment, I inspected the strand of hair, its sand, dried salt, remnants of beach grass. I unwrapped and rewrapped it around my finger a few times, savoring the roughness.

I let the strand drop and said, "I have to go."

And I went.

***

The woods have been bulldozed, and in their place rise gray-faced buildings with tinted windows, and I wonder if the people inside don't want the sun to touch them. The beachfront on which we used to lie boasts a steady stream of tourists during the day.

When I can't take the city, I drive to Meg's memory. I

leave at night and get there in time to occupy the final hours of darkness before the sun crests the horizon and sets everything to glowing. Settled into the sand beside an expiring fire, I feel the first rays of sunlight caress my exposed arms and imagine it's her. We're on this beach still untouched and touching, heated by the flame moving between us and the sand scratching our knees and elbows and backs.

I open my eyes, lips buzzing, thinking maybe this is the vibration she told me about. Maybe she's on another coast, channeling her energy into the sunlight, into me.

Courtney Wimberly hails from a small town in northeast Alabama. She is a senior Creative Writing major and Biology minor at Berry College in Georgia. In addition to the college's chapter of Sigma Tau Delta, she is a member of the Phi Kappa Phi National Honor Society. She has been the recipient of the Eleanor B. North Portfolio, the Gordon Barber Memorial Poetry, and the Academy of American Poets awards. In 2016, she was awarded first place in the poetry category at the Southern Literary Festival. Her work has appeared in Ramifications, *Berry College's literary magazine. Upon graduating, Courtney plans to spend some time collecting tattoos, traveling, and napping with her dogs before pursuing an MPH in Epidemiology.*

Dead Tissue

Laura Hartman

It starts with a knock at his door in the middle of the night. It is not a loud, banging knock of anger, but a soft knock. The kind made by a petite woman wearing knitted mittens. It's a knock made out of concern and one Nick has been expecting for some time now. He pulls open the heavy cabin door as Mary rushes in quick to close it behind her and leave all of winter's thunder outside. She stands on the rug, catching her breath. She makes no effort to remove any of her multiple layers. As quickly as she enters, the heavy snow that has gathered on her jacket and gloves begins to melt, puddling at her feet.

"I'm sorry it's so late, but I wanted to check on you," she says still shivering. Mary runs Mondays where the last call is 1:30 a.m. She's been known to get a whole day's work of chores accomplished while the rest of the UP sleeps. Sometimes these chores include Nick. She doesn't mind driving out to his cabin, even when the snow is blinding. He doesn't own a phone and there's something she finds endearing in his commitment to seclusion. Most nights he makes an appearance at Mondays, not because he is a heavy drinker, but because everyone needs some community, even if it's at a dive bar in a town like Marguerite. On this night it has been nearly a week since Mary has seen him.

"Stay," is all he says and he helps her remove her layers.

In the bedroom she watches him through the reflection in the mirror. His jeans, unbuttoned, hang low off his hips. He is thicker around the middle than she imagines he was in his youth, but she has no proof of this. The hair on his chest curls in tufts of salt and pepper; his shirt lays crumpled on the floor. Nick studies the lost man staring back, not recognizing the reflection. He takes a long, slow swig of the bottle of Jack he's been nursing all night. He grimaces as the heat runs down his throat and the fire settles in his belly. He studies his right thumb, rubbing his middle finger over toughened flesh. The dead tissue serving as the tell of his trade. Calloused and rough, the muddied earth has stained the

cracked skin so deeply it is permanently discolored. There was a time he took great pride in his angler's thumb. Now it is just another sign of someone he used to be. He thinks of the mouths he'd held by thin lips as they gasped for wet oxygen. Some for dinner, some for trophy. It doesn't matter the kind; their jagged little teeth tore his thumb to shreds. Lost in himself Nick has all but forgotten Mary; she sits quietly, naked on the bed.

She's seen a lot of drunk fishermen from her vantage point behind the bar, but she's never seen Nick like this. He blew into town one summer three years ago for the Walleye Festival and simply never left. According to some of the regulars at Mondays, he'd spent a good amount of time on the competitive circuit. He'd even had a sponsor at one time, but there was no sign of that now. Marguerite is barely a blue collar town. It is one of the first stops on the shore of Lake Huron, after crossing to the UP, right on the edge of the of the Sault Ste. Marie Forest. Winters here are long and rough. Only two types of people stay in Marguerite. Those who have the unlucky fortune of being born here and those who are hiding from someone or something. It is generally agreed that it takes a special kind of recluse to make a life in Marguerite, Michigan.

"You ok?" Mary's voice brings Nick's thoughts hurtling back to the small, dimly lit bedroom. She is clutching the sheet to her chest, careful to hide the scars of her stolen femininity. Quickly she reaches for her shirt—green and faded—and pulls it over her head. He doesn't mind seeing her naked, but he knows it bothers her. He isn't quite sure how he and Mary started sleeping together. It began innocently enough. His second winter in town, he'd been in Mondays drinking and fighting an obvious cold. After listening to him cough for several nights in a row, she offered to make him soup and bring it by the next day. He'd just started renting this cabin on Mud Lake, about fifteen miles north of Marguerite. He told her it was too far and not necessary, but she had shown up the next afternoon with vegetable beef soup. One thing led to another and for two years now they had been keeping each other warm. That's what Mary calls it. There are no expectations or promises. It is just someone to be in the silence with.

"I'm fine." Nick doesn't turn to face her, the mirror providing false confidence as they make eye contact in their reflections.

"You're drinking like you've got something to drown." Her eyes fall on his nervous thumb. Nick's cheeks redden as he waits for the familiar anger to form. This is when he should rip into her; he should verbally assault her for acting like she knows him so well, but he is all out of fight. Maybe it is age that is mellowing him. Maybe it is the Tennessee Fire burning down his throat, but looking at her through the dirty reflection, he can't find the rage. There is a strange comfort in realizing someone knows you well enough to know when something is off.

"My father died." He says it simply, with no pain or loss behind the words. Pulling on her jeans, Mary pauses. He never mentions his family and she never asks. People who don't want to talk about their own pasts don't ask about others. This is why you come to Marguerite.

"I'm sorry, Nick. It's a hell of a thing to lose a parent." They stand there in Nick's cabin, silence but for the soft buzz of a snowmobile in the distance. Neither say a word for several seconds.

"Is there anything I can do?" Nick doesn't reply. He can't reply. He feels the lump he's had in his throat for the last two days swell and his knees buckle. He slumps to the floor, his long legs crossed and cramped in the small space between the bed and the dresser. The knot grows, finally escaping in a sob. Mary slowly walks over to him and slides down beside him. She takes the bottle of Jack Daniel's and sets it out of his reach. Flashes of a college party and a young girl losing control silently play in the back of her mind. She never touches the stuff unless she's pouring for someone else.

Mary breaks the silence. "When I was leaving the bar I saw a guy putting up flyers all over Marquette Street. Never seen him before. They were for a lost beagle. Never seen the dog before either."

"It won't survive in this cold." Nick says wiping his cheek with the back of his hand.

"I know. I just wondered if he does."

He stares ahead, not brave enough to meet Mary's eyes. She studies the grain of the hardwood floor as her mind floods with

the questions she will never ask. They sit this way, with him crying softly and her simply being present, until their legs have gone numb and stiff. Then they find their way back to the bed.

In the morning they sit on his sunporch. The wind rattles the thin glass as it barely barricades them from the cutting cold. Wrapped in blankets and warmed by a cast iron stove, they stare off at the frozen lake. They watch as a lone figure makes his way carefully to a fishing shack in the distance. He waves a distant sign of acknowledgement before disappearing into his sanctuary. There has been no additional talk of Nick's father. She does not ask, it is only for him to offer. This is their code. They sit this way for nearly an hour before Nick finally speaks.

"My father was a collector. He just liked stuff, he always had, but after my sister . . . and then my mom . . . well it kind of got out of control. When I last saw him, I guess it was nine years ago, he was living in the house I grew up in; if you can call it living. It was so full, I couldn't stand to be there." Nick rubs his calloused thumb with his ring finger and watches the smoke begin to rise from the fishing shack in the distance. "I don't know when he lost the house, but I guess he'd been living in a shed in a salvage yard, just outside Gary. When I talked to the sheriff, he said it wasn't fit for a human to live in. He must've known the owner of the yard or something. I don't know. Anyway there was a fire. They think he'd been burning tires to keep warm. There was nothing they could do."

"Then there's nothing you could've done either." Mary watches as her words take form. Her hot breath meeting the cold air dissipates as quickly as it appears.

"I don't think I would've gone to the funeral even if I had known. I mean if there was a funeral. I guess the guy who owns the salvage yard took care of things. It took them a couple weeks to find me." Nick pauses allowing the weight of his absence to surround him. Slowly he stands to add a log to the stove. Mary sits silent, not quite certain if she wants to hear the rest, but his story pours out of him unstoppable.

"My kid sister, she was thirteen, on her way home from school, and she didn't make it. Just never came home. That was

it. Like she never even existed. The police searched but there was nothing." He turns toward her. "A thing like that, we just . . . we never recovered." Mary reaches for Nick's hand steadying it. Her slim fingers tracing the sandpaper skin.

"My mom, I think she died of a broken heart. She couldn't take the not knowing. And my dad, well, he was weak. He always was." Reaching across Mary, Nick picks up a thermos and pours himself more coffee. Her small figure feels like a frail bird to him. Her frame is a good fifteen pounds less than it should be and her dirty blond hair, streaked with silver, is probably too long for a woman of her age. But Mary is a kind person; she is quiet and still. He appreciates this. The hard life she's clearly lived is etched into her face, though her clothing hides the more telling scars. Where life would have hardened many, he guesses it has softened her.

When the smoke no longer rises from the fishing shack and the figure in the distance emerges, when the warmth of the sun begins to vanish, Mary tells him goodbye and heads back into town. The roads are still snow covered but it has stopped falling for the time being. She parks her car on Marquette Street and heads around back to see if there have been any deliveries. She pauses at the missing dog photo taped to the door of the bar. The word "Missing" has been scratched out and replaced with "RIP." She glances down the alley where she sees the same stranger from yesterday, memorializing his loss with a black Sharpie on each sign.

Mondays is slower than usual tonight and despite the grumbles from the regulars, Mary makes the last call thirty minutes early. Upstairs, in her studio apartment Nick is frying yesterday's catch. She watched him slip in through the back and nod at her before heading up the back stairs. She ushers out the last of Marguerite's finest, turns the deadbolt on the bar and goes to join him.

Bellies full, they lay in bed holding hands and staring at the water stained ceiling. In the distance they hear the cry of a loon and the sound of boat docking from a long day on Huron. She didn't expect to see him tonight, but she welcomes the company.

His dam broken, he is not done sharing and she listens dutifully. He tells her of his time on the pro circuit. She laughs when he talks of the fishing groupies, young girls who would throw themselves at men wearing T-shirts boasting "sore lip 'em." Mary sits silent when he tells her of the college girl he'd met while competing on Lake Norman. He'd begged her to keep the baby, but ultimately gave her the money to make her own choice.

They talk all through the night, laughing and crying as they relay the strange paths that led them to Marguerite. He does not ask her about her story, but in the intimacy of this small frozen world she willingly offers him the only thing she has left to give. When she speaks of her marriage, she explains that they were too young, married because both of their parents felt they should. She weeps when she tells of the tiny casket with pink roses and the years of depression that followed. "There wasn't any reason to stay after that."

When she found the lump she was living in Flagstaff alone. She considered not fighting it and just letting it slowly eat at her until nothing was left. Somedays she's still not sure why she did fight. She could've had reconstruction surgery, but she chose her scars instead. She says that life at Mondays is easier than being back there and that every day she makes a choice to keep going forward.

Just before the sun rises, Mary drifts off to sleep. With the room cooling under the weight of the dying fire, the light begins to fill the small space. Turning on his side, Nick faces Mary. The comfort and laughter that had covered them both like a warm blanket is gone. In the morning light he is exposed to the ghosts of both their pasts. For her part, Mary sleeps still and deep, but not peacefully and he would not expect that of her. It is not their way. Lightly he places his calloused thumb on her bare, flattened chest and slowly traces each scar; the dead tissue preventing either one of them from feeling his gentle touch. He quietly dresses and adds several logs to the fire. In the darkness of an old apartment above an even older bar, he gently kisses her forehead. It ends much in the same way it began, with a door closing and a distance growing.

Laura Hartman recently received her BA in English from Ohio Dominican University. She considers her creative writing to be a cross between realism and minimalism. Though Laura's stories are all fictitious, she draws on her years studying people as a professional photographer for her inspiration.

Surrogates

Lauren Vierling

There is a man sitting on a park bench reading a newspaper. He's old, probably in his late seventies, early eighties. He has on those black Velcro strap sneakers that the elderly are accustomed to wearing. Wisps of thin, gray hair poke out from the crown of his head and from the neckline of his dark button-up. The distance between his bench and mine nears around twenty to thirty feet. I bet he's a grandfather. He has that grandfather look. I never had a grandfather. Well, I suppose that I did, but they both died from their excessive consumption of cigarettes before I was born. Skip and Al were their names. Nice names for grandfathers.

Quite a few benches were vacant when I strolled into the park an hour ago, but I decided that if I sat near the elderly, maybe the people around us would be less bothersome or boisterous. I am not considered elderly, not yet, but I don't have the energy to tolerate toddlers and teenagers today. This grandfather and I demand some peacefulness in the park. The peacefulness ceased when I heard Becca's high-heels clicking against the pavement to my left. I keep my eyes on the old man across the way as Becca sits down beside me, panting slightly.

She takes a deep breath and then says, "Ro, are you okay? Tell me what Wise said."

Wise is my doctor, Dr. Wise, OB/GYN. I had another appointment this morning, the second this month. Six weeks ago I awoke in the middle of the night due to a sharp, unfamiliar pain in my lower abdomen. Assuming it was appendicitis, I hurried to the emergency room all the while pushing my fingers deeper and deeper into the intangible ache. But it wasn't appendicitis. As I sat on that uncomfortable plastic chair, a short, blonde nurse had asked me to rate my pain on a scale from 1-10. At that moment I thought to myself, *what would be worse than my current pain*? and then I answered, *being on fire*. "Nine," I had told her.

My ovaries had disappointed and betrayed me. They weren't

functioning as ovaries should. Part of what makes women women are their lady parts: uterus, mammary glands, and ovaries. It's strange to think that one of those is broken. The cause of the terrifying pain which awakened me weeks ago was the rupture of an ovarian cyst the size of golf ball on my right ovary. *Damn you.*

"I have another follow-up appointment to discuss the operation," I say to Becca.

"Operation? Why? I thought it was fluid-filled…" she asks.

It was, originally. Cysts filled with fluids are usually harmless, unlike the solids. As quickly as the first shrunk, another took its place, larger and cancerous.

"Becca, do you know what seven centimeters looks like?" I ask.

"Huh?"

"I mean, can you tell me how long seven centimeters is? What is something seven centimeters long? Hm?"

"Um… that's around," she thought for a moment, "3 inches. So… a finger?" she holds out her hand, wiggles her fingers. "That's probably 7 centimeters. But why, Rowan? Why do you ask?" She's talking in her soothing voice now.

"My finger?" I'm bemused, pointing my index finger out and in front of my face to better inspect it. "Who knew seven centimeters could wreak such havoc on your body."

"Rowan, what are you talking about?"

"The cyst, Becca, the cyst. It's seven centimeters," I answer and don't continue.

"It came back?" she whispers as she places her hand on my upper back.

"Jesus, Rebecca." I sigh frustratedly. "No, it didn't. Another appeared. It's seven centimeters, the new one. And…" I breathe in and out a few times trying to calm myself. I'm afraid tears will cascade into my lap. With a steady voice I tell her, "It's cancerous."

Her sharp intake of breath is expected. She turns her head to look at the ground as we sit in silence for several minutes, her hand still resting on my back. "So that's why you're having the operation." She says more to herself than me. "It hasn't spread, right? There is only one and they're going to remove it and then you'll be okay?"

I shrug my shoulders weakly and look away. Some snotty-nosed kids are tormenting a turtle in the grass a few yards from us.

"Rowan! What— you don't know? How can you be so calm right now?"

I snap my attention back to her. "What do you want me to do? What do you want me to say? I don't know, Becca! Yes, there is a cancerous cyst as big as a fuckin' tennis ball covering my ovary. Has the cancer spread? I don't know, it hasn't appeared so, but who knows, it might." I exhale loudly. "Fuckin' calm. I'm not calm. I'm…*perturbed*."

Unexpectedly, she wraps her arms around my neck, lays her head on my shoulder and tells me she loves me. I embrace her, my twin sister, my best friend. We sit like this for a while, I'm not sure how long. I think I hear her sniffle and push back her curly brown hair, identical to mine.

"Hey," I say to her. "I'm sorry. I know you want all of the details, but I just can't right now, Bec. I need to sit here quietly and think. You understand, hm?"

She nods and pulls back to look at me, her eyes damp. Giving her a sideways glance, I reach for her hand. "It will be fine. It's just a minor operation, lil sis." *That could potentially fuck up my ovary and leave me with everlasting pain.*

"Are you hungry? I am on my lunch break after all and would like to eat. Let me buy you lunch." she says. "We could go to that café down the street."

"Thanks, but I'm not very hungry. I'll eat later."

"Ro—"

"Why don't you ask Ben, he's your boyfriend." I say to avoid a lecture about skipping a meal.

"Because I was hoping to eat with my sister and talk about…" she trails off. "But you don't want to do either of those," she exhales. We're both quiet for a minute. Like statues on a bench, we become pieces of the park.

"Do you want me to go?" she asks.

I don't answer because the truth is that I do want her to leave, only so I can sulk in silence without feeling obligated to converse with another human being. But I immediately feel guilty for wanting it.

"Okay," she nods in understanding. "But I'll see you tonight for dinner at my house. Ben is cooking. Seven thirty, don't forget." I nod as she stands. "Ro," she says. When she doesn't continue I look up to her.

"Hm?"

"Nothing." She twists her mouth in that familiar mannerism, indicating whether or not she should speak what's on her mind. I don't press her. She leans in and gives me a quick hug. She smells like Chanel. We both exchange feeble smiles before she departs. "I'll call you later!" she hollers back at me, the clicking of her heels growing fainter.

I'm once again alone on the park bench, feeling restless. I naturally look straight ahead towards the spot of the grandfathery old man, but the bench is empty. I search the park left and right and finally find him walking hunched over en route to the parking lot, newspaper tucked in his armpit. Hesitantly, I rise from the bench and commence walking the same path. If I were to walk at my normal speed I'd catch up to him too quickly, so I dillydally a while absorbing my surroundings.

It's an exquisite Wednesday in June. The sun's warmth seems to pierce my skin, greeting my bones. In this moment, I feel no pain. Children play with their parents, adults play with their dogs, and couples enjoy picnics. Bringing my eyes once more to the old man, he's presently stopped at the mouth of the park entrance. He seems to be waiting. I'm just a few steps behind him. I close the space between us appearing on his right side. I slowly turn my face to him, and he seems to not have noticed me yet. *Will he?* I tell myself it's okay if he doesn't. I am content to stand next to this surrogate grandfather. I never had a grandfather. I hope my children have grandfathers, and my children's children, too. Will I have children? Thank God for two ovaries. Dr. Wise said I can still have children with only one ovary. *Maybe*. If not, there is always the option of using a surrogate. *Could Becca do it? Would she want to?* I'm uncertain about my feelings towards a stranger carrying my child experiencing nine months of tiny kicks, sickness, and the thrill of growing a baby bump. I'm getting ahead of myself. Forcing

my mind back to reality, I focus once again on the grandfather beside me. The newspaper is still poking out from under his arm. I take a deep breath.

"Any interesting news?" I say shakily. He doesn't acknowledge that I have spoken, I don't think he's heard me. Taking a miniscule step closer, I clear my throat. "Excuse me?" I say louder. He looks at me, furrowing his eyebrows in confusion, probably wondering why some strange young woman has suddenly spoken to him.

"Hi. Um, I noticed that you were reading the newspaper," pointing at it, "anything worth reading nowadays?" I attempt to smile sweetly. He's still eyeing me in confusion, but then looks down at the paper as if he's forgotten it's there. Feeling his hesitancy, I try a different approach. "Do you have grandchildren?"

He looks around for a few seconds and then nods, skin wobbling on his neck. "Three grandsons," he says, "and one great grand-daughter." His voice is hoarse with age, grandfather sounding. His face lights up like mine on Christmas morning; he must love his grandchildren dearly.

We break eye contact and then I tell him, "I never had a grandfather." He fidgets with the newspaper, bellows a dry cough. Perhaps I've made him uncomfortable. From my peripheral vision I see him extend his arm to me, offering the newspaper. I turn and slowly accept it, not sure why. He nonchalantly waves his hand in dismissal when I thank him. Then, he points a shaky finger to the paper now in my hands, his gaze directly meeting mine.

"There's so much meanness in the world," he muses, shakes his head. "Don't let it steal your joy," he adds, face sincere. Not what I expected. Absorbing those words, I look down at the front page and read the headline, "Two More Bodies Recovered From Mississippi River."

I glance at the grandfather again, but he's looking off into the distance. His feet start to patter on the gravel and I look to see a burgundy SUV pull up. The middle-aged man in the driver's seat gets out, opening the passenger door as grandfather ambles to the

car. They both smile goodbye at me. When inside and strapped in, he and the other man drive off. *Farewell, Grandfather…*

I stand there for a several seconds and realize I didn't get his name. Neither ready to head home nor back inside the park, I mindlessly stroll through town. Passing by little shops and diners, I stop in front of a place with a carved wooden bench outside. The door opens to the shop as I sit down. Suddenly, the acrid smell of ammonia burns inside my nostrils. I rise and turn. *Walk-ins welcome*, reads the sign on the hair salon door. I open it and advance to the front desk where a chubby lady with dark spiky hair greets me.

"Hi. Do you have an appointment?"

"No, I don't," I tell her.

"Alright, well what can we do for you today?"

I shrug. "I guess a haircut."

"Okay, let me see if Chelsea is available. I'll be right back." As she waddles away I take a seat on the nearby couch. I've barely had time to look around this place before a redhead, whom I assume is Chelsea, cheerily expresses salutations and leads me to her work station.

"So, what are we doing with it today?" she asks, playing with my long, brown hair.

I don't answer immediately. As I sit in the chair looking in the mirror, tilting my head this way and that way in contemplation, an idea pops into my head and I smirk.

"Have you ever seen *Rosemary's Baby*?" I peek up seeing her slowly nod, then back to my reflection. "Mia Farrow."

Laura Vierling recently graduated with a BA in English from the University of Southern Mississippi. She is currently working on her English licensure degree to hopefully ignite a passion for reading and writing in teenagers. After graduation, she plans to travel by teaching English abroad.

Jane Doe

Hannah Christopher

"Oh, yeah," she said, stretching her arms high above her head, like the telephone poles lining the deserted highway cutting the landscape apart from his apartment window. Her freckles mirrored him, were birds perched on the tightly coiled wires, ready to fly at the slightest movement. "Happens every week. You get used to it. You know how jobs work, I expect."

He was a mortician, and he'd just asked her what she was doing, being alive and all. It generally didn't go with his occupation. But he wasn't about to break the news to her, no. He'd seen her body on the steel examination table. He knew certain people's nakedness demanded respect from all other inferior beings, even if they'd been fixed with the yellow torpor of deadness not moments ago.

She fixed him with an ice-blue stare and frowned. The bare curve of her shoulders looked shiny and fake in the chemical white light of the morgue.

"What?" she asked. "What's wrong? Haven't you ever seen a woman before? Your mother raise you right?"

He shrugged again. He'd seen many women, all of them dead, and he felt he could never look at another living woman in his life, having seen so many dead ones. He kept thinking about what they'd look like on the inside. It tended to dampen things.

She arched an immaculate brow, swinging off the table in the same movement—her movement bore a professional sort of fluidity that made him feel inspected.

She sighed and stretched and questioned him. "So, what's my name?"

"Uncertain."

"Another Jane Doe, huh? I can live with that." She glanced through the loose bit of the bright orange wrist tag some other coroner attached to her. "Drug bust? That's a new one." She smiled. Of all the expressions he'd seen on people, this most reminded him of a killer's smile, tempting danger. "You want me to lie back down and let you get to work?"

He shook his head. He'd had enough of the morgue today, and was beginning to develop an awful headache. "That won't be a problem now. I'm taking my lunch break."

He started for the ramp leading up to the door, but her voice followed him, grabbed him by the shoulder and turned him around. "Do you mind," she said, "throwing me your scrubs on the way out? It's a little chilly in here."

And on second thought, perhaps it wasn't too bright to leave her on her own. He returned to her the plastic bag the police sealed her clothes in, threw her a spare blue tunic to cover the stain where the bullet ripped through, and invited her to lunch. He was surprised when she accepted, disdained to be pleased—not at all because he wanted her company, but because he didn't want her fleeing the morgue, like she looked she might. Then he'd really have to answer to the police.

***

Of all the places to put a bistro: sandwiched between the city hospital and the street. A lovely view, with wailing victims and nightsticks in suits on one side, ambulances and cabbie smog on the other. Between it: a few square feet of smooth auburn paving stones sliced through with black grout, a roll-out parasol over a glass table with uneven legs. The bistro inside was dark and brooding, and he often avoided eating in if he could help it. The patrons there were beatniks and distraught widowers, often relative of someone whose body he'd handled earlier in the day. It made for an awkward eating environment.

Today, the glass table outside sat empty—the sky was gray, forecast predicted rain. He pulled a chair out for himself and sat down, still thinking about standing again to offer her a chair when she did it herself. He wondered if he should act the gentleman, or keep up the business atmosphere, or ignore her altogether. She didn't seem offended by anything.

"Nice place," she commented. "I remember when this was an apartment. Must have been ten years ago, not long."

"My aunt used to live here with her husband," he said. "They

moved to California, and died there last year. Only a month apart, if you'd believe it. So many people do that nowadays."

"Yeah? Small world."

A barista eventually abandoned the counter inside to serve them menus, which the mortician declined. Instead he ordered a croissant and coffee, the former of which was promptly delivered to him on a tiny silver plate with an assortment of plastic cutlery—for what reason? The barista asked Jane if she wanted anything. Jane shook her head and gestured to the empty pocket of her borrowed blue cover shirt. "Broke." The barista nodded sympathetically.

The mortician obsessed with his eyes over the stale croissant on the table in front of him before setting his fork and knife to its upper ridge, peeling it apart, revealing the airy layers of pastry organs within. Jane flicked her ankles up to meet her thighs. She rocked back and forth in her chair.

"Are you going to eat that?" she asked, eyeing his dissection without apparent interest.

He shook his head. "No, I'm not hungry." He'd ordered it so the waitress would leave him alone, but now regretted it. He glanced up from the splayed pastry to meet her eyes, surprised to find them wandering. He gestured to the croissant. "Do you want this?"

"Please," she said, simultaneously grabbing his plate and pulling it toward herself. His cutlery clattered off the table and landed on the decorative pavement. He nudged them with his feet for a few moments, stopping only to pick them up. "I'm starved." Her mouth was already full. "I'm surprised you aren't. Doesn't work take it out of you?"

"Not particularly."

"Bored? You should look for another job, you know. I'm not sure if you're really that suited for the one you've got now. You feel too much."

"Do I?"

She nodded, mid-swallow. When she spoke, her teeth flashed like a wild animal's. "Trust me. I've seen them all. The saddest of your bunch are always the ones who think and feel too often for their own good."

The mortician shrugged. Watching her ripping mouthfuls out of the croissant made him queasy for a reason he couldn't put his finger on. Perhaps it was because he'd been scheduled to probe her stomach for contents at four o'clock—something he'd have to postpone indefinitely. He asked, "What about you? What do you do?"

"I die for people."

He started up in his chair—it was a metal chair, the kind that hurt his rear to sit in for too long, and imbedded a mesh pattern into his skin. He thought he'd spied screws bolting it to the ground once, but never bothered investigating any further than that. "You're joking." She didn't reply. "What kind of people?"

Jane Doe shrugged. She'd finished her croissant, and now moved on to picking the blood from underneath her fingernails with the wrong end of a plastic spoon. "Any people, really. People who need to live longer, who just messed up and got themselves into stupid places. I have a knack for knowing when people will be great, just by looking at them."

The mortician blinked. What he wanted to say didn't matter, was nonsense anyway. He didn't want to ask her how she did it, or if she was an alien or a monster, or even where she came from. He'd pushed down a different idea entirely.

Jane Doe, as if she knew, replaced the spoon on the table and turned her head to the bustling lunchtime traffic congesting the street.

***

"Do you mind giving me a lift?" asked Jane, when she'd digested the croissant—he could only assume she digested, she looked functional enough—and he'd slurped tastelessly at the top half of his coffee. He watched the barista reappear to take his money and dishes into the bistro. "I feel bad, having you pay for the food and all. But, my preferred job doesn't exactly pay well. Or at all."

"I'd have to take the day off."

"Is that going to be a problem?" she said.

He pulled hesitantly on the edge of his gray shirt sleeve. "No, I suppose not. I hope you don't mind tight quarters, though."

"How tight?"

He led her to the parking deck behind the mortuary. He didn't appreciate the aesthetic qualities of parking decks—the dusty crackle of tires on covered concrete, domestic arguments echoing up and down the stories infiltrated and filled to bursting with shiny-hulled cars, ugly fluorescent lights glancing in and out of helpfulness, humming like hives of sleepy bees. These were sensations of years of unforeseeable federal tedium, the death-sounds of men who'd save money at their funerals, being buried in their cubicles instead of a coffin.

The mortician enjoyed the qualities of his inhospitable occupation that set him apart from these men, but understood with dismal clarity the ones that made them the same. He parked next to the chief of police's Harley Davidson and the head attorney's year-old Lincoln sedan—it had leather seats, which preserved fingerprints extravagantly better than the fabric ones—and that was reminder enough. His own Kawasaki scooter leaned between the bike and the Lincoln.

Jane Doe surveyed the scooter with her hands in her pockets. "Well," she said, "technically, it does have room for two."

"I guess," he said, not feeling too enthused at the idea. Jane Doe didn't spare him sympathy. She walked around the side of the scooter and nudged the gas tank with the side of her foot. She wore black boots that wouldn't have looked bad paired with the chief's Harley, but they'd been a pain going into the evidence bags.

"It'll have to do. I just need to be a few towns over by sundown, and I should be able to hitchhike from there."

"I only have one helmet," he said.

Jane Doe blinked, swung around to the Harley, and retrieved the beetle-black helmet snapped around the chief's handlebars. She said, already buckling it on, "I can use this one. Don't worry, it'll get back to where it came from. Take my word." She met his eyes with hers. It was more terrifying than intended, probably—he wasn't accustomed to people looking him in the eyes and meaning it.

He shook his head, put on his own helmet—dull baby blue with a sticker that let him under crime scene tape—and mounted his vehicle. He whispered a silent prayer that Japanese manufacturing held up as well as he'd been told by the dealer while Jane slid her long legs over the leftovers of the seat, put her hands around his middle and agitated her boney knees deep under his thighs.

Keys out of his pocket, into the ignition. He didn't rev the engine, like Bruce or Tom would do before rescuing the damsel, or whatever else it was they did for fun. The mortician lived a simple life. He started his bike and left his spot empty on the third floor of the parking deck, packing the road full of one more vital existence.

***

He drove. He drove until the heat of the pavement dissolved at his feet, until he couldn't see the city in his mirrors, until the darkness necessitated turning up headlamps and helmet visors. He navigated the tire-flattened stripes in the concrete. He drove.

Going forward unbravely. The sky broke open and it started to rain.

***

He was starting to think that all this driving without purpose or direction was pretty boring when Jane Doe whipped off her helmet—he could tell this was the case by the sting of her blonde hair in his nose between raindrops—and then his own.

The mortician braked the Kawasaki on the side of the highway. The headlamp flickered and went out. Jane Doe swung easily off the seat, chucked both helmets onto the shoulder of the road like throwing darts, and planted her hands on her hips. She looked infuriating and attractive between the licentious red glares of passing taillights.

"Why'd you stop?" she demanded.

He threw up his arms. "This is so reckless! Why'd you do that? Why am I doing this?"

"Well," she said, "it's part of the job."

"Do you want to die?"

"No. But I need to, so I can't be afraid. Now, let me ask you something. Why do you try so hard?"

"What are you saying?"

Holding things that can't be held. Saving things that slip away. A mortician's satisfaction is one of the most fleeting feelings of all.

The air felt balmy and almost liquid. Her eyes were the dull blue of a discolored sprinkle, of salt sprinkled over winter pavement to keep it from icing over. He'd save them in his pocket for later, thinking foolishly that they were diamonds and sapphires.

She didn't pause for the answer that never came. Jane shook her head. Her eyes traveled away from him, bearing gravely into the twilight distance. "I don't understand you people," she said. "I just don't understand."

"Is it alright if I leave you here?"

"Yes. I'd prefer that to the alternative."

He knocked a clenched fist against the side of his bike, dispelling the water gathering on the gas tank. He yanked the keys from the ignition and stomped without looking into the first lane, eventually the second. He needed to pace. He needed to pace back and forth like the detectives in those old mystery cartoons, so he could solve things proper. Only he didn't know where to begin. Jane edged onto the seat of his scooter and crossed her legs thoughtfully.

"I don't know why I bother, really." He paused to squint his eyes at the closest streetlamp. He could feel the growling of the opposite lanes quivering through the concrete and into the soles of his shoes. "Nothing good ever happens to me."

"You chose your job."

"That's right. I did. Ha."

He never turned around, and he never saw the eighteen-wheeler blasting through the rain trying to speak or stop before it hit him.

A thump, a sliding, the mechanical creaking of hurried brakes, some dry, dark splotches in puddles of rain. Someone called the

police, the driver didn't know who, and a coroner drove slowly to the scene to pronounce him dead. The police ambled near the side of the road, turned over a busted Kawasaki, trying to figure out why one rider would carry two helmets—both sanctioned by official department stickers—and decide not to wear either.

But before all this, in a moment of life-before-death, suspended upside down with the blood beating behind his eyes, he saw her. Jane Doe shattering like glass, filling the sky, taller than the tales of all men. She waved once. She ducked over the shoulder of the highway and was gone.

Hannah Christopher is a junior at Mount Vernon Nazarene University in Ohio, where she studies English and Creative Writing. Her work has been published in several other journals, including the Threepenny Review. *She hopes to one day publish her longer pieces.*

Jurors

Rebeccah Bechtold is an assistant professor of English at Wichita State University, where she teaches early American literature and serves as graduate coordinator. Her work has appeared in *Southern Quarterly*, *ESQ: A Journal of the American Renaissance*, the *Journal of the Early Republic*, and *J19: The Journal of Nineteenth-Century Americanists*.

Michael Behrens is assistant professor of English at Emporia State University, where he teaches courses in British literature and literary studies. His research focuses on early modern women and religion.

Kevin Brown is a professor at Lee University. He has published three books of poetry—*Liturgical Calendar: Poems* (Wipf and Stock, 2014); *A Lexicon of Lost Words* (winner of the 2013 Violet Reed Haas Prize for Poetry, Snake Nation Press); and *Exit Lines* (Plain View Press, 2009)—and two chapbooks: *Abecedarium* (Finishing Line Press, 2011) and *Holy Days: Poems* (winner of Split Oak Press Chapbook Contest, 2011). He also has written a memoir, *Another Way: Finding Faith, Then Finding It Again* (Wipf and Stock, 2012), and a book of scholarship, *They Love to Tell the Stories: Five Contemporary Novelists Take on the Gospels* (Kennesaw State University Press, 2012). He received his MFA from Murray State University.

Shannin Schroeder is an associate professor of English at Southern Arkansas University, where she teaches world literature, composition, and creative writing, as well as directing the Writing Center. She recently completed her first young adult novel based on *über*-orphan Ernest Frankenstein, as well as a co-written young adult project with a fellow Sigma Tau Delta sponsor. Her publications include the monograph *Rediscovering Magical Realism in the Americas*, and recent or forthcoming presentations discuss writing by female characters, the American and presentation flags, patriotism, and superheroes. Her research interests include magical realism, the contemporary novel, and popular culture; her most recent research grant supports her co-creation of a sandbox children's video game.

Kevin Stemmler is a professor emeritus from Clarion University where he taught literature and writing. His fiction, poetry, and essays have appeared in *Writing: The Translation of Memory*, *Paper Street*, *Heart: Human Equity Through Art*, *Gay & Lesbian Review Worldwide*, and *Pittsburgh Quarterly*. He was a recipient of the 2008 Pennsylvania Council on the Arts Grant.

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*Due to the submission deadline, the *MLA Handbook for Writers of Research Papers, 7th Edition* was used for the 2017 edition of *The Rectangle*.