

*The
Sigma Tau Delta
Rectangle*

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2015–16 Writing Awards for *The Sigma Tau Delta Review* and *The Sigma Tau Delta Rectangle*

Judson Q. Owen Award for Best Piece Overall

Rebecca Parks

“Passing, Performing: Constructing a Modern African American, Female Queer Identity in Nella Larsen’s *Passing*”

Frederic Fadner Critical Essay Award

Rebecca Parks

“Passing, Performing: Constructing a Modern African American, Female Queer Identity in Nella Larsen’s *Passing*”

E. Nelson James Poetry Award

Shawn Murdoch

“Wild Burt Logger and the Kerouac Kid—on the Icy Road to Arkansas, February 2009”

Eleanor B. North Poetry Award

Lizzy Polishan

“Yesterday’s X’s”

Elizabeth Holtze Creative Nonfiction Award

Donald Scherschligt

“Rome Fell at the Red Lobster”

Herbert Hughes Short Story Award

Haley Stuart

“Semblance”

Judges for Writing Awards

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AMY SAGE WEBB is professor of English and director of the creative writing program at Emporia State University, where she was named Roe R. Cross Distinguished Professor. She has edited several literary journals and presses. She is an active reviewer and a specialist in creative writing pedagogy. Her poetry and fiction appear in numerous literary journals, and she has been nominated for the Pushcart Prize. She lives in the Kansas Flint Hills.

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Poetry

Wild Burt Logger and the Kerouac Kid—on the Icy Road to Arkansas, February 2009

| Shawn Murdock

We learned that beater sedans with cop-magnet stickers for punk rock bands are not made to traverse the Cascades or the Rockies in a blizzard and that if two men dare to buy a motel room with just one bed, cross-eyed mountain men will stare daggers of mild contempt into your tattooed skin, but when you don't cry or bleed and you stare right back you'll make the motherfuckers stink with their fear of that freak flag that we flew as we rolled on through into America's legendary frontier.

Worn bald tires wore something we'd never heard of, called 'snow chains,' and the brakes let out the violent roar of metal grinding against gravity as we fought a downhill battle against the frictionless grade. Black ice sprayed in our wake as it tried to throw us free while we did a steady seventy through old cowboy towns like Cow Carcass, Devil's Dick, and Hell's Burning Sensation When You Pee.

We stopped to eat lunch in honor of the resourceful Donners, shoe-leather to rouse the appetite and a frostbitten leg to bed it back down, then an afternoon nap under an old overturned wagon next to the skeleton of a pretty little pioneer lady.

The next morning we screamed through Utah along the flawless ice that topped the asphalt of I-80, dabbling in improvised spirituality on a snow-smothered mountain peak when we skidded into a lo-fi meditation on our twisted limbs in mangled steel as we anticipated the tumble into the frozen ravine.

We survived, so to fill the silence that came from unexpected relief I tried having a conversation with Jesse.

The Wild West might have been hell way back when, but now all you can see is a lot of dirty flannel and Motel Sixes,

but the Fiery Furnaces album in the CD player started skipping and he just heard the words “—from Cairo—from Cairo—from Cairo—” blare over me and I didn’t want to repeat anything just for small talk’s sake, so I called my Meemaw as we wound around another craggy peak. I told her I was watching my first real-life twister, but all she heard was *we can see a tornado* before my battered Nokia lost its signal.

That night she had nightmares about my corpse being shredded by the wind and scattered over a potato field as an ancient barn watched over and cast a jagged grin.

Shawn C. Murdock is a senior double-majoring in English and Theatre with a focus in Dramaturgy at the University of Alabama in Huntsville. He is constantly overbooking himself and usually has at least three or four different projects that he’s working on at any given time as an actor, director, editor, writer, or some nightmarish combination of the four. Shawn hopes to pursue a M.F.A. in Creative Writing after he graduates from UAH in December 2015.

Yesterday's X's

|Lizzy Polishan

We listen to “Yesterday” on loop. You
finger a photo of me—with Fruit
Loops, a thermometer, and pneumonia, at
age 11—through thin cracked glass, while

I watch your irises glaze, in my own
fuzzed field of vision. Sharpie X's
on the backs of our hands, from that folk
concert, are faded now, and the us who

didn't want them is different from the us who
got them is different from the us who tried
scrubbing them off in the bathroom sink is
different from the us who examines them now.

We play another vinyl backwards, but don't
hear Paul's the walrus anymore, don't hear the walrus's dead.

Lizzy Polishan, a junior English, philosophy, and theology triple major at The University of Scranton, serves as the co-president of her Sigma Tau Delta Chapter and the Production Chief of her campus literary magazine, Esprit. Her work has appeared in Mangrove and Esprit. She wants to write more and finish Infinite Jest.

When John Was Young

| Bianca Flores

A deer crosses your backyard in the snow,
and your child breath blooms into
fog on the window glass.

It is winter outside, the world
white on white so that you forget colors,
pastels, blues and greens,
until, of course, your backyard—
and the deer walking,
stumbling, doused in crimson.

Its back bent, its blood
inside out, so red,
ashamed to be so out of the body.

Its back bent, and you don't know how.
Maybe shot by hunters,
drunk on bullets and thrill.
Or maybe another animal.

Its back bent the way no back should,
and you don't know why.
You were young then, didn't know death
when it revealed itself in color,
just knew that you couldn't look away—
the dust of diamonds doused in crimson.

And now you lay down, a grown man,
on the floor of your girl's apartment, bodies
on white carpet and red blankets.

She faces you, sweet—blushing red,
a blossoming beneath her white skin,
with her leg bent around yours,
your arm bent around her waist,
and, again, you know there's no looking away.

Bianca Flores is a recent college graduate from Hawai`i Pacific University where she earned her degree in English and Writing while working with award-winning writers such as Tyler McMahon and Adele NeJame. She is now focusing on the aesthetics of poetry and short-story writing as a 21-year-old while mapping her next novel. Her recent publications include Prairie Margins, Green Blotter, and Wanderlust. In addition, she has been the Managing Editor of Hawai`i Pacific Review.

Pasture (Over/grown)***

| Molly Davidson

i.

She plays in fields
I fear the most.

Lilacs that come
to life, clusters of color
tied to my feet, pinching
labels on my toes.

ii.

July in Denver. Sprinklers
making the soundtrack
to a tender descent.

Olive skin teasing me:
unwritten verse read
along her collarbones.

iii.

Blue picnic table has holes to look
through them—I see Lilacs grazing
our shins and I wink at her hand
to be sure she feels it too.

Almond eyes that won't rest;
Things she sees through, I do not.

iv.

I dare her to lie in
the tall grass with me,
brushing away the weeds. I give her
a blanket. She spreads out
into the span of a field I no longer

recognize. Such beauty
I cannot lie down next to.

Molly Davidson is a senior at Colorado State University in Fort Collins, CO, where she majors in English and holds a concentration in creative writing. She is the president of CSU's Sigma Tau Delta Chapter. After graduation in December 2015, Molly plans on taking some time off to raise a puppy before applying to master's programs in both poetry and therapeutic counseling.

Dying, Mama, Apple Pie

| Sabrina Barreto

There is a sudden sun that blooms after rain.
Keep the water simple. It washes the white
of the church the same as the colors of the trees.

Keep the casket closed. I can remain faithful
without my sight. I can christen secrets like
watching the birth of cotton from softened thorns,
like watching the birth of cloth from field to hand to bag to gin.

There is a slavery to absolutes. Mash the yams, fry the okra,
butter the grits. Sharecroppers can't expect to cover territory
when the sun bleaches the dust and sweat turns to drink.

Mama says, "Hominy is my homily." Papa says,
"It's a pleasure to cook with a sharp knife."
The child says, "August rain."

I'm still walking. Those who did not come to the funeral
will worship at their own shrines. Some will be crying
in their kitchens as praise. A sister will lament, "God
made her beautiful for me to see." Others will say Amen.

A few generations, and the century has passed. Was it
a prayer or a hymn that read *Good God, make not sacrifice
the lord of my life*. One time Mama said, bringing the coffee pot and
apple pie, "This isn't confession, this is reconciliation."

Sabrina Barreto is a Bay Area wordsmith and recent graduate of Santa Clara University, where she studied English and served as President of the Phi Phi Chapter. She has received two Shipsey Poetry Prizes, the Academy of American Poets Tamara Verga Prize, and two Ina Coolbrith Memorial Poetry Prizes. Her work has appeared in The Bohemian, explore journal, and the Santa Clara Review, and her collaborations with German poetry magazine Das Gedicht can be viewed on the Santa Clara Review Poetry Exchange Blog at www.santaclarareview.com/poetry-blog.

Lessons in Anatomy and Human Psych

| Rachael Owen

Page 126,
Diagram 18:
the shoulder—
now cupped by my palm.

It sweeps
into her clavicle,
a heavy mantle
above her chest.

Each morning,
the therapist
updates us
on another word
or phrase,
or encouragement
we can't use.

So we touch,
our warm hands
space heaters
to her cold skin

navigating tubes
and the sharp angles
of bones.

The therapist says
we shouldn't cry
in front of her:
"it only reaffirms
her sadness."

In the stairwell
I am consumed,
lungs left hungry and empty,
my body falling into its frame
and nestling along the spine.

Rachael Owen is a senior at Chatham University, where she majors in English and Women's & Gender Studies, with a minor in Creative Writing. She is the assistant editor for the undergraduate literary magazine The Minor Bird, in addition to acting as president of Beyond the Page Book Club, treasurer of the Creative Writing Club, and secretary of Chatham's Sigma Tau Delta chapter. In the fall, she plans to attend graduate school.

Caught in the Rain

| Emilio Gomez

Water from heaven
is respite, revival,

An opportunity
to discard every canopy

and dance

Like my grandmother
did, un-
shackled
on clay soil;

I
am un-
bridled
on barren streets

abandoned
by shallow businessmen
hidden beneath concrete umbrellas.

They are the peering eyes
in forest shrubs;

I am the wild rain man
they envy.

And here comes my bride,

Unbinding her
hair,
Unstrapping her
heels,

Diving headfirst
into God's im-
promptu
cascade

where pressure falls.

Emilio J. Gomez graduated from Palm Beach Atlantic University in West Palm Beach, FL. He is a sophist, logophile, and professional artist. He is pursuing a career in pedagogy.

Briarwood

| Jeremy De La Rosa

Imagine trees as tall as the lake was deep
a hundred years ago.

Somewhere in that dense kingdom of pines
a jungle gym sits rusting.

You'd find me there, seven years old, ascending
my castle wall, each rung shedding crimson

chips and cobwebs, pulling myself closer to my
throne. You could watch me half-collapse—

catching my breath on the corroded steel floor.
You could follow my eyes, searching the empty

space between tree trunks, praying you'd poke your
head out, stare back, disappointed.

You'd notice the longing in me to smell the citrus
in your hair—to hear the crack in your always-older

voice, the crunch of dead needles beneath your
approaching feet.

You'd find me, not wanting to be the seven-year old
ruler of anywhere you are not, seconds from leaping.

Jeremy De La Rosa is an English major at Hardin-Simmons University in Abilene, Texas. He is a recipient of the 2015 Campbell-Lacy Writer's award. Jeremy plans to continue studying English at the graduate level with an emphasis on creative writing.

Cash and Wine

| Eleanor Davis

Johnny Cash still reminds me of steak
and thick cut potatoes,
his baritone gracing dinner with my grandparents,
D-Daddy thanking God to the tune of “One Piece at a Time”
and “Sunday Morning Coming Down,”
our hands folded into prayer above the hardwood table
and dark red wine.

I look around their house,
the heavy art balancing on stone pillars,
the ceilings twenty feet above my head;
I didn’t know that our family made page six
of the Orange County 100 in 1995,
but still remember the time I asked D-Daddy
what his favorite Shakespeare play is—
“I don’t know anything about it,” he’d said.

But my philosophy class taught me about Marx,
and I know how the Fox News blaring
on the television at my grandparents’ is making them bitter,
and sometimes when my D-Daddy pours too much wine
for my Grandmother,
she fights with me about it all.

“Black people all have thirty-year-old grandmothers, you know,”
she stage-whispered to me from across the dinner table,
when I used the education they were paying for to tell her
that the only reason that we have any beliefs at all is because
of how we were raised, not who we are
and My Dad, who went to law school to learn
how to argue for a living,
sat silent with his head in his hands.

My grandparents took a picture in front
of their old house in Louisiana,
and Grandma told me she gave my Dad
spoons and bowls to play with because they
couldn't afford to buy toys.
They tried to smile for their picture, but
couldn't quite manage it—
and then I knew why my D-Daddy grew up
to be the CEO of a Fortune 500 company.

When I was between too little to understand
and old enough to know better,
I asked my parents why Grandma and D-Daddy needed
such a huge house for two people.
My Dad glanced out towards the putting green and shook his head,
“They like their space.”

Eleanor Davis is a recent graduate of Ripon College, where she received her B.A. in English. Eleanor enjoyed taking many classes in creative writing and poetry, especially an American Poetry class with John Burnside while studying abroad at the University of St. Andrews in Scotland. Eleanor enjoys everything about poetry, even reading it aloud in front of an audience. Eleanor is excited to see what the next chapter in her life will bring, and hopes that it will include writing.

Seeing an Old Friend in the Moon

| Kelsey Dolhon

I was walking her to the airport when she told me about the rabbit In
the moon, big wild kind that raids gardens, leaps and fights Through
spring. I thought it was a man up there, but what did I know

Of Korea or astronomy. Look, she said, he's making rice cakes.
The shadow his paddle. Those dark arches there, his two ears Flicking
content as he stirs the pot. And I can forget it's a rock
Up high some nights, the white shining blurry, furry, fat haunches

Waxing full, a paw raised to feel the perfect smallness of the grains.
See, a frilly apron tucked under crater head. His paddle the Big Dipper,
Rim spilling the Milky Way. Keep stirring: jet contrails his whiskers,
Clouds the slow steam rising, she left but this autumn night is alive

With a halo around the moon, or a rabbit cooking rice cakes—
All I see now, the full pale circle of a portrait, her broad face Glowing
the last time we were together. Look, she said. The moon.

*Kelsey Dolhon is a member of the Omega Tau chapter of Sigma Tau Delta.
She is working toward a B.A. in Creative and Professional Writing at
Carnegie Mellon University.*

Barcelona

| Amanda Sierzega

You used antique maps of the world
to wallpaper your white bedroom
“because the ocean grounds me,”
you said as we laid on the floor
deciphering which country was the
center of each map.

How it was almost always North America,
except for the one above your bed from 1635
when Europe was the center of the universe
and everyone believed it.

We’d never been to Europe but we would one day,
and our friends who’d been abroad asked us why we never were
“because it’s the greatest opportunity you’ll ever get.”

I thought about the maps on your ceiling
with all of your favorite places faded from
your fingertips touching them so much,
and the night you traced these places along my shoulder blades.
The Nile, my spine,
Antarctica above my tailbone,
“because sometimes you thought it felt left out from lack of visitors.”
Underground volcanoes along the Mid-Atlantic Ridge
up the arch of my back
underneath all of the countries
we visited together with carpet airplanes
and invisible ink.

And my skin is fading from your fingerprints,
but in the mirror I see Spain.

Amanda Sierzega is a senior English major minoring in Secondary Education at Ursinus College in Collegeville, PA, where she will also receive her teaching certificate. She is a member of the college’s cross country and track and field teams and is a resident of the Writing and Arts Special Interest House. Previously, she has been published in the college’s literary magazine The Lantern and previously served as the magazine’s copy editor for two years. Amanda currently works in Ursinus College’s Career Services department and plans to teach high school English after graduation.

My Father's Wine

| Jennifer Filannino

Somehow they make their way under the surface,
like a fat splinter that splits and tears at dry winter skin,
at the chasm created from over-washing, overuse.
I sobbed the other night, overwrought, while my father's

voice thundered through the paper-thin walls. My mother
leaning over the kitchen sink, clutching his wine glass
and scrubbing away the stench of garlic from her palms.
The fan billowed above. What about us now, my lover?

You so distant while I watch this scene, clutching
onto the banister of my family home. Will she crush
my father's favorite glass to silence his booming voice?
Let the shards shatter.

It's her birthday today, sixty-two. She hunches while washing pasta
dishes. Her wispy voice hushed below rushing water.
I kiss her rough, rouged cheek and whisper, *love you, ma*.
The fan swirls, masking the aroma of burnt garlic.

My lover, what about us? Just yesterday, bacon fat
splattered across my shirt and burned my palms. You
chewed in silence until words finally shot out,
not in love. Not yet.

I sobbed the other day, overwrought, while my father's
voice thundered through paper-thin walls. My mother's
veiny hands grasped his glass and washed away the plum
wine stains from forty years of overuse.

Jennifer Filannino is an adjunct professor at Kean University where she teaches College Composition to young, impressionable minds. She strives to imprint the importance of the literary arts on their young minds. It is her passion. Ms. Filannino has received many awards for her poetry; her first accolade was won at the young age of fourteen from NJCTE for a poem titled "Journey of a Young Girl." She didn't stop her pursuit then, and received her B.A. in English and Creative Writing at Kean and then an M.A. at Monmouth University. She was awarded first place in a poetry contest from the Department of English from Kean University for a poem titled "Earthen Aria" and a scholarship from Monmouth to the Chautauqua Writers' Festival. Professor Filannino co-facilitates writing workshops in Jersey City with her other friend, also a poet, and continues to work on her poetry. She anticipates receiving yet another degree, an M.F.A. in 2016.

And Lead Us Not into Temptation

| Anna Kholod

January 11, 1999

The dark pew bruises the back of her bare thighs.
She is a frilled-sock statue among God's
head-covered daughters. Somehow the
left side full of idle sex infatuated her more
than the perspiring, right-side preachers.

May 4, 2004

*Her friends giggle over the hot amateur
who barely sings in tune. She pays no notice,
hypnotized by the dancer: her arms part through the seas
of stagnant air like wings of the Death Angel.
The sway of her landscaped body is inspiring.
She feels the covert crave again:
for sweet instead of salty.*

August 16, 2009

The moon is barely yawning through the velvet glimmer.
Friends and laughter gospel through
late summer air. His hand creeping over
the back of her chair feels like an unwanted, dirty blanket.
She glances towards the glimmer of the girl's eyes, the shimmer of her hair;
and feels the tug she never felt with Jacob.

November 29, 2013

The touch of her roommate's composed fingers left a mark against her
burning cheek. The image of her smile lingers
on her mind's east wind divided oceans.
She kneels beside the dark pew
for a thousandth time, *and lead us not*
hollow bounce against the silent cross.

Anna Kholod is a senior at Lee University located in Cleveland, Tennessee. She is pursuing a B.A. in English with an Emphasis on Writing with minors in Religion, Psychology, and Teaching English as a Foreign Language. She is a member of Alpha Beta Iota, Lee University's chapter of Sigma Tau Delta, as well as Alpha Chi National Honor Society. She is currently the Officer of Office and Administration of Lee University's Student Diversity Council. After graduation she plans to travel and then pursue a career in law and government.

Heavy at the Eleven

| Jess Turner

We lie here—
leeching Daddy like nectar.

Fingers beating letters into two bodies,
six flasks or feet deep.

Can you hear me now?
I'm shouting now, Daddy.

I'm your little baby bumblebee—
tutu umbrella over artless feet.

And I've inherited your hobbies:
chemicals and melittology.

Are you getting this, Daddy?
I've gutted you dry.

Buttercups do not compare
when I'm thirsty for meat.

Jess Turner is a junior at Chatham University where she majors in Creative Writing and minors in Music. She is an editor of the campus literary magazine, The Minor Bird, a writer for the campus Newspaper, The Communiqué, and a rising staff member of the online magazine, Her Campus. She also has interests in Food Studies and Agriculture. Jess plans to pursue a Ph.D. in Writing.

Skin Like Mine

| Heather Johnson Lapahie

A young man, face cut with trceries of the Sun's finger strokes, slumps
in a battered wheelchair while urine streaks the front of his jeans
and pools in his seat. Tucked away in a slate-blank corner
of the Southwest-themed emergency room lobby
until he stumbles into waking and glares
a red question at me.

Maneuvering through the maze of acrid, semiconscious bodies littering
the antiseptic hallway, some spill out of wheelchairs, others are folded
up and propped against each other, or bound into gurneys
to tame their weary ravings. A blunt, sunburnt hand,
several degrees darker than mine, but cast in the same
telltale hue, grasps at the empty air
where I passed him by.

He, the prone body stitched together with wide, white gurney straps,
meanness, and fractured history, slings alcohol-scented curses
after me: "Hey! You're one of ME! Bitch! You're like ME!"

The Sandia Mountains' gaudy pink evening haze distorts
the doppelgangers of Man and Woman, so they dip,
and flinch against the unbroken line of cinderblock walls,
and plunge from the roofs of dun-colored,
middle-class, affected-adobe homes.

The bleary-eyed First Man and First Woman, skin like mine,
a bold burnt umber, hike through the tangled remains of tumble
weeds, dog shit, vodka glass, and cigarette butts.
They're bowed under the fraying weight
of Salvation Army backpacks. Loaded
with misbegotten, transitory homes.

Yet they hoot Indian cries atop the riddled, prairie dog ridge
and dance in turns—

and circles—

and veering—

steps along the shotgun

highway.

Heather Johnson Lapahie expects to graduate this fall from the University of New Mexico in Albuquerque, NM, with a B.A. in English Studies and a minor in History. She has two previous B.A.s in Anthropology and Criminal Justice and uses her experience as a former social worker, sociology research assistant, and sexual-assault victim advocate to explore issues of marginalization, social justice, and empathy in her writing. She intends to pursue graduate studies in poetry and fiction and fulfill her obligation to herself as a writer.

Arkansas

| Stephen Turner

You run through pregnant furrows
without socks and muddied shoes
with chiggers that pox your skinny ankles.

You have nowhere to run.
There is no East, West, North, or South.
Only clamoring for the endless summits,
until you pause for that familiar majestic sight
of the Ozarks.

The rivers and mud of the Delta
run through your veins like the powerful Mississippi.

And how your words slur and preserve
the native tongue of your people
like an ill-tuned fiddle.

Stephen Turner is a second year M.A. student at Arkansas State University, with a focus in Composition and Rhetoric. Turner spent two years teaching ESL in rural towns in South Korea and currently works as a graduate assistant in the ASU Writing Center as well as teaching Composition. Recently, he has begun working on his thesis, which explores psychosomatic models within Border Literature, paying specific attention to the work of Leslie Marmon Silko and Cormac McCarthy. His literary areas of interest include (but are not limited to) critical and community-engaged pedagogies, poetry, and early American literature.

I Was a Buddhist for a Week

| Emily Black

I was a Buddhist for a week
 when I was 18. God was tapping his feet
 behind me and I felt like I had a
 meteor in my chest. The Kingdom is
 so close to the burning sun and Siddhartha balanced
 atop a pool of the kind
 my body craved submersion.

I rented a book from the library
 knowing I've only ever read myself
 into nirvana. This had to be like 13 steps.
 My brain was built to scan lines and absorb
 them as if they were my womb's material:
 I'm confident since I passed honors Geometry
 all the while in my big-time-writer's makeup.

But I tripped because I saw
 there were eight stones to step upon if you
 wanted in the fold. I guess I'd hoped for
 more time, and not in the way we
 had to hold our eyes from the sight of the world
 for hours in each day, freezing feelings
 with successive sessions. Meditation would not
 medicate me. I needed water but I needed
 it in a thunderous flood.

I couldn't shut down, when I thought
 that's just what I had wanted.

I was a Buddhist for a week
 when I was 18, and neither of us
 did a thing
 to change the name of the other.

Emily Black is a resident and fan of the Midwest, where she has lived and studied in order to earn her bachelor's degree in Professional Writing from the University of Wisconsin-River Falls come spring 2016. She hopes to pursue a career in editing or publishing with her education. Over the past years she's worked as an editor for campus literary journal Prologue and as a part-time librarian, where she's surrounded by books much like the kind she hopes to write someday.

Tennessee Rain Song

| Morgan Storrer

Thick, fat soldiers pound
the tin above our
heads. May's fingers squeeze
mine, eyes wide as blue
patterned plates. Her
ivory face glows,
seeing silver drops
spatter our roof like
crystal cotton balls.

Outside, cool liquid
clings—a second skin
darkening her light
blue, calico dress.
Beams of sunlight brush
her body, and laughter
like bubbled lightning
tickles my ears loud
as cannon fire.

Morgan Storrer graduated from Taylor University in May 2015 with a B.A. in English literature. She currently lives in Archbold, OH, and plans on attending law school in the fall of 2016.

Creative Non-Fiction

Rome Fell at the Red Lobster

| Donald Scherschligt

Do you ever have those moments where you're standing in the bathroom stall of the local Red Lobster, with tears trickling down your face, a lack of oxygen to your head because you're hyperventilating a little bit, and actually, there might be vomit as well (wait for it, wait, OK... nope, just a burp) and *goddammit*, you're terrified, but even though you've been in this lavatorial panic room for five minutes, no one else has come in, so you wait two minutes more and then two more after that, and finally you tell yourself, *Listen up, you have to go out and face him*, but still you delay, because when you step outside of the bathroom—well, *if*—everything will be different. Things may be worse, or hope against hope they could be better, but no matter what—different.

The safe haven of this washroom has metamorphosed into a Schrödinger-like closet of ambiguity, and so you have to leave; you have to, because no matter the answer, not knowing it is worst of all.

Do you ever have those moments?

Of course you do. Of course you do.

So, a warning: when you finally leave your sanitary safe house, things will seem utterly unchanged. Look around at the poor lobsters still crawling around in their tank, unaware that the water they call home will soon boil over and trap them; the cute waiter still rushing by carrying the trays of Parrot Isle Jumbo Coconut Shrimp platters and Cheddar Bay Biscuit baskets to hungry patrons; Adam Levine and Katy Perry and Kelly Clarkson still gently filling in gaps of conversation that occur when guests realize they have nothing to say to their father other than, *I'm sorry*. And the clock still ticks on the wall, and you can't believe your soul just went through eons of change inside that bathroom while outside, to the rest of the world, only nine mundane minutes passed.

You fool. You don't realize this normalcy deceives you. Don't forget that back at your table, empires have risen and empires have fallen. The civil war in your head has ended. The first atomic truth-bomb has been dropped, and when you get back to the table, Fat

Man will be locked and loaded. You tore down your Berlin wall of secrets. The world has changed.

Don't you see? Look closer. Maybe now you'll notice that those poor lobsters might be a metaphor, and that waiter you smiled at might have smiled back at you, and maybe you don't need to apologize. For anything.

Or maybe you do. For some things.

Anyway.

I love this next moment (part two of the story, if you will) where you walk to the table and your dad asks you if this letter is true. I love this part because you, being you, are tempted to say, *No, Dad, I was just pulling your leg! Ain't that funny?* But you don't, of course, because, well, you're you. And at this point, you realize you haven't changed a bit. Yes, the world has transformed, but you, like Astronaut Taylor waking up from cryo-sleep in *Planet of the Apes*, have remained utterly the same.

You were gay when you woke up today, and the day before that, and the day before that.

You were gay when you agreed to go out to dinner with your father.

You were gay when you handed him the letter.

You were gay when you walked into the bathroom, and you're gay now.

But your father remains unconvinced, as you both sit on a bench outside the restaurant while he smokes his cigar. He asks to keep the letter, and you say okay. Like an archaeologist handling an ancient manuscript, he carefully places it in his jacket pocket, and you wonder what secrets he hopes to uncover in its 12-point, Times New Roman glory. Perhaps he'll try to find the dark forces that turned you into a homosexual (answer: nothing turned you). Maybe he'll dig around, hoping to discover what childhood trauma has manifested itself in this orientation (answer: again, nothing). Maybe, like one of those biblical doomsday predictors, he'll run some algorithms and come up with false answers: where he failed his eldest son, how his physical absences or emotional issues or spiritual vacancies led you here (answer: it's not his fault, either).

Out here, there is no Adam Levine or Kelly Clarkson to

warm the cold silence, and as Dad puffs the cigar, you shiver. Inside, the server clears the plates off your table, and as he walks back toward the kitchen, he glances out the front doors. He sees you seeing him. He winks.

The world is different. Like the fall of the Confederacy or the Japanese forces or East Berlin, it's too soon to assess the damage and know whether you made the right choice in the long run. History reveals herself to the patient.

No one else can know yet, you tell him. *I'm not ready to tell everyone*. Like a fool, you believe him when he says he'll keep a secret, not knowing the betrayal that is coming. You will learn.

You apologize. You must. For what? For nothing, for everything, for all things running the gamut between. You apologize to avoid answering his questions. You apologize to make him feel better. You wrote the letter so he would stop calling your running shorts gay, and so he would stop asking why you don't have a girlfriend and why you keep texting that boy Tyler so much. But do you see now what you've done?

You fool. You thought you had a perfect plan, coming out like this. But your defense has become an offense. You've wounded him. It was not meant to be this way, but history has a way of taking her own turns and dragging us along for the ride.

The sun has set. The Red Lobster closes soon. You keep saying, *I'm sorry*, and though your father insists there's nothing for which to apologize, you know he's lying.

Donald Scherschligt will graduate in December 2015 from Westmont College in Santa Barbara, California, with a B.A. in English and a minor in Theatre Arts. He has served as co-president of the Alpha Zeta Zappa chapter of Sigma Tau Delta. Post-graduation, he plans to continue writing in the world of film and television.

l'appel du vide

| Mary Kate Elliott

“Let them think what they like, but I didn’t mean to drown myself.
I meant to swim till I sank—but that’s not the same thing.”

—Joseph Conrad, *The Secret Sharer*

A woman in Oregon killed herself with the help of her doctor under the Death with Dignity law that only exists in five states. Suffering from stage-two, grade-four glioblastoma multiforme, she chose to unspool thirty-odd capsules of barbiturates, mix them into a glass of water, drink, and die twenty minutes later. Her name was Brittany Maynard, and the media capitalizes on the fact that she was only twenty-nine; she wouldn’t have done it if she was older, websites bemoan over glossy glamour shots of her face. If only they showed X-rays instead. They might understand the choice to avoid a gibbering, strung-out death, the staggering downward spiral.

...

There is no dignity in suicide, popular Christian blogger Matt Walsh wrote on August 12th, less than twenty-four hours after Robin Williams’ death. We, the public, had no consolation, no glamorized suicide note to comfort the masses, no official word from the press. Not yet. Instead, Walsh condescendingly filled the void with incendiary commentary on the banality of suicide; a Fox News anchor called the decision cowardly on live television. “Death is not something that is exercised . . . it is just something that happens to us whether we like it or not,” Walsh noted in a separate article on Brittany Maynard. “There is nothing brave about suicide.” Somewhere, a void opens, an emptiness blooms. We are hollowed out in small, secret places almost without our knowledge until something, somewhere reminds us. The phantom pain lingers.

...

The Milky Way is a spiral galaxy consisting of 100 to 400 billion stars and spanning roughly 120,000 light years in diameter. It appears as a band in every photograph; we cannot see its circular shape because we exist inside it. The earliest observed supernova in

the Milky Way occurred over China in 185 A.D. Part of the word comes from Latin, “nova” meaning “new star,” but supernovae are far brighter and more glorious than newly birthed nova in the celestial sphere. Supernovae blaze into life for two reasons: gravitational collapse in the core of a large star or reignition of nuclear fusion in a dying star. The stars first cave into themselves, imploding into the core before releasing energy outwards in a stellar explosion that can fleetingly outshine entire galaxies before the fallout. The afterimage blossoms for months.

...

There are moments that spark fires within us, burning themselves into memory like a brand leaves a sizzling imprint on bare flesh. These moments are collective, indelible; they don't age, don't wither, don't fade like the edges of photographs over time. Time coagulates. Where were you when the planes hit? What were you doing when the second tower fell? Did you see the Kent State photos? When did you hear about Michael Jackson? Did you pause your commute for the OJ Simpson verdict? Did your coffee grow cold and stale on the kitchen counter while the Isla Vista shootings rang out across millions of TV screens? When exactly did your heart splinter, delineate, while reading “Portrait of the Shooter as a Young Man”?

...

It takes a long time for the light of stars to reach Earth's atmosphere. Most visible starlight comes from stars that have self-destructed, galaxies winking out thousands of years before we witness the fallout. The stars of the ocean, siphonophores, string lacy nets of tentacles throughout the Twilight Zone, a little over 300 meters below sea level. Members of Cnidaria, siphonophores are categorized with corals, hydroids, and true jellyfish, but look nothing like them. Their bodies are so fragile that they cannot be brought to the surface for observation; the jelly-like material disintegrates into fibrous, ghostlike particles immediately. They can span up to forty meters in length, translucent, bioluminescent; made up of long, gelatinous bodies strung with filaments of iridescent phosphorescence that twinkle like Christmas lights, each bead of light produces a crippling paralytic. All siphonophores are predators

despite their delicate nature.

...

I first thought about killing myself when I was twelve or thirteen. I can't remember the exact details, but I clearly recall sitting in the upstairs bathroom, razor in hand. It was summer; I was wearing a t-shirt and shorts, thighs clammy against the closed toilet lid. Outside, a lawnmower droned in the distance. The faint scent of sweet hay and shorn grass drifted in through the open window in my mother's room. I felt hyperaware of everything, of the blood whooshing through the valves in my heart, of the goosebumps lighting my arms up like fireflies, of each small, insignificant noise from my family downstairs. Most of all, I remember feeling vaguely ashamed of myself; I knew about the kids who sliced open their wrists, carved into their legs, the secret places they could hide under layers and jeans in the summertime. I remember feeling selfish for wanting the convenience of shorts. I remember the fluttery edges of skin I raised on one shoulder, t-shirt sleeve rolled up so I could watch myself chicken out. There was no blood.

...

Astrocytes are star-shaped cells that comprise supporting brain structures; they are far more likely to develop malignancies because they reproduce so quickly, constellations multiplying. Glioblastoma tumors are the most difficult to treat because the cancerous cells spiral out into laddered branches, delicate tentacles that twine like kudzu vine into surrounding brain matter. Chemotherapy can slow tumor growth. The median survival rate ranges from two months to one year, following all standard treatment options. Unchecked, glioblastomas tear through fragile brain tissue, inciting necrosis and hemorrhage as glioma cells travel away from the central tumor mass and into the brain parenchyma. Glioblastoma multiforme is an invasive species that oozes into empty spaces, fills cavities, insinuates itself into crevices and hollows until there is no room for anything else.

...

My grandmother died of ALS when I was eleven. Amyotrophic lateral sclerosis drew blank stares when I tried to explain it to my friends back in Kentucky after months of living

in Virginia. Referring to it as Lou Gehrig's disease was equally mystifying, so I began to invoke Stephen Hawking instead. That, they understood in a hushed, awkward sort of way. ALS is a progressive, aggressive neurological disease that attacks the myelin sheaths surrounding motor neurons in the brain and spinal cord. When the myelin sheaths degenerate, neural impulses can no longer pass from neuron to muscle to create movement, and the motor neurons die. In my grandmother, the disease progressed top down, meaning that she lost the voice that used to bring congregations to their feet, that neighbors heard from their back yards, that I remember echoing from the old piano in her formal living room, reflecting off the wooden staircase to settle into the quiet upstairs bedrooms where the grandchildren slept. ALS sufferers can expect to experience dysphagia, dysarthria, spasticity, hyperreflexia, muscle weakness and atrophy, and frontotemporal dementia, all of which I remember seeing in her, watching her diminish, degenerate into a stranger. Most of all, though, I remember her voice—raspy, croaking, rough like the bark of the giant oak tree towering in the front yard.

...

The second time I wanted to kill myself, I was nineteen and very, very sick. No one knew what was wrong with me, not doctors, not my parents. Every day, a yawning chasm in my chest opened further, the fissure widened. I wasn't eating or sleeping. I wanted to unravel my skin at the seams. There were times I wanted to crawl out of my own esophagus, to unstick myself from my aching spine, my swollen knuckles and creaking knees. At times, I got so angry, so furious. No one understood. I wanted to gather them up in my fist—friends, family, strangers—and just squeeze until they got it. It was a vicious surge in my blood late at night. I saved all my crises for the bathroom and the blank wall against my bed, and there I would grit my teeth against the tears and think of how I'd show them, how I'd thrust it in their faces and say, this is how I feel. Opportunities for escape pricked my eyes everywhere I went: fire-escape ladders, traffic patterns, razors left lying in shower stalls. One day, I stood at a crosswalk, watching a bus pick up speed in the distance. I could, I thought. One step. That's all it would take. Passive, really.

Accidental, almost. The bus came and went, passing me poised on the sidewalk, trembling between decisions. There would be another bus, another truck. I stood solid, two feet beneath me, and waited for the light to change, thinking of oak trees.

...

A conversation with my mother, late August 2012, washing the dishes, summer breeze licking at our bare legs, dog barking four houses down, moon waxing gibbous:

“If I took the whole bottle, all of them at one time, what would happen?”

“Depends on the prescription.”

“Mycophenolate.”

“Well, your immune system would just stop functioning.”

“Amitriptylene—the antidepressants.”

“That would probably kill you. But you don’t have enough.”

“I know.”

...

Astrophysicists theorize that black holes, regions of spacetime that prevent anything from escaping, exist in the hearts of all supernovae. There is a boundary called the event horizon that demarcates where no escape is possible; once matter, or light, crosses that boundary, it is lost to us—not in the way cheap science fiction movies depict, a vacuum-like amoeba of darkness that sucks up anything in its path, but in a gradual, slow spread of nothing. Black holes emit Hawking radiation (that bastard) with a temperature inversely proportionate to mass; this temperature measures in billionths of a Kelvin, making them impossible to observe with current technology. We can only determine the size of a black hole by the stars and systems orbiting it. Supermassive black holes are created by singular black holes merging with one another or absorbing multiple stars, some several hundred times the size of our sun. Scientists have concluded that black holes exist in the center of most galaxies. The Milky Way itself contains a supermassive black hole at its core that contains 4.3 million solar masses. 4.3 million suns past the point of no return, no escape possible, swallowed by an impregnable, impenetrable darkness.

...

The third time I wanted to kill myself, I was in the shower, arms propped against the slimy tile because I couldn't hold them up to shampoo my own hair. They were too heavy.

The fourth time I wanted to kill myself, I had spent the night sleepless, staring at the wall and ceiling, watching the sun slowly rise to peek through the flimsy blinds.

The fifth time, I was sitting in class, taking notes. Everything hurt.

The sixth time, I was eating dinner. Alone. Again.

The seventh time, I was walking to the bookstore.

The eighth time, I was brushing my teeth.

The ninth time, I was typing a paper.

The tenth time, I was tired.

...

I don't remember all the times after that.

...

Cigarettes cut life expectancy by 10 years; alcohol abuse cuts it by 30. Obesity is responsible for 1 in 5 deaths, and eating disorders have a mortality rate of 13%, but that number should be higher as many sufferers die from heart failure, organ failure, or malnutrition. An average of 80 people die while on the road every day, and the US alone reported almost 5.5 million car crashes in 2013. There is no question that death is unavoidable, that everyone will come to the end of the line one day, some way, and the blessed beauty of it all lies in not knowing the date. Perhaps it's cheating to circumvent steps B-Y and go directly to Z.

...

The Hippocratic Oath does not, in fact, include the phrase "do no harm." This is a misconception, a falsity that has been used in protests about execution, abortion, euthanasia, and assisted suicide. The Oath has changed multiple times since its Greek origination, the most recent of which occurred in 1964, the last revision to the text. The Modern Physician's Oath allows that it may be within a physician's power to take a life, but s/he must face that decision with awareness of his/her own frailty. "Above all," the Oath states, "I must not play at God."

...

Rather than succumbing to the eventual respiratory failure from ALS, my grandmother chose instead to stop eating. It was a fairly easy process considering that she had long since lost the use of her throat muscles and instead relied on a feeding tube inserted into her abdomen. Hospice workers taught my mother and her two sisters to administer her medication, but someone from the system came by daily to check on her anyway. There were hushed conversations I wasn't privy to, injections I wasn't aware of until after the fact. The amount of morphine they gave her was illegal. Not enough to kill her, but enough to mute the pain, fade her distress into a sleepy haze. They did this out of love.

...

The choices we make spiral outwards infinitely; there are thousands of worlds where we have made different decisions and lived different lives. Perhaps everything was leading up to a glass of water the whole time, your whole life, and you never knew until this very moment whether you would drink it or not.

Mary Kate Elliott graduated in the spring of 2015 from the University of Kentucky with a B.A. in English. Prior to her graduation, she was an active participant in both her Sigma Tau Delta chapter and the English department. She was also the head prose editor for the undergraduate arts journal, Shale. Currently, she is pursuing an internship with the Walt Disney Company.

Persimmon Pentameter

| Sara Coito

You've spent your days looking for someone who feels like you do, a person who crumbles in the rhythms of poetry and comes together again at the sight of a magnolia tree in bloom. Your person.

But you know possession is never kind and souls aren't sticky. So maybe you are never looking for your person in the exclusive sense of the phrase. Perhaps, in your case, the concept of "mine" is replaced by the beauty of "belong." Yes, this is what you mean, what you seek. Looking, digging through the skins of companions past has only left you empty, save the stories left under your fingernails (but those will only fall down the drain next time you shampoo your hair). You give up. You decide to feed on the world rare—raw and pulsing—on your own. To feast on words and sounds and realities but always be hungry.

You're in a classroom now and the walls are purple and, though you've never tasted a plum, you're disgusted by the walls because they're *almost* the hue of a ripe, red one—but they fall short. They fall short. And so you draw your attention away from them and look at the people coming in. There is someone with a circle of frizz around her head, like you, so she must be Portuguese. There is a small and frightened person, fiddling her fingers two inches away from her face, with brown frame glasses and a dress that reaches her knees. But then there is someone who just looks smart. You see her calves from under her rolled-up jeans and you love them immediately because they are unshaved. A few weeks later you listen to her comment on "The Flesh and the Spirit" by Anne Bradstreet. She is smart.

Another year goes by and you still find yourself in the threadbare truth of your existence: the people around you prefer to wade in the shallow end of experience rather than wholeheartedly submerge themselves underwater and watch bubbles float up to the surface. However, you have also found comfort in the fermenting of persimmons in your grandmother's backyard and the sound of teeth biting down on forks. You travel to the mountains and the

city in summer and are reminded of your insignificance at the base of pine trees and skyscrapers. You consider getting a tattoo because Mark Doty expressed the necessity of permanence in his writing (“What noun would you want spoken on your skin your whole life through?”). You’ve written (bad) poetry and you’ve listened to (good) music. And although all of this is supposed to nourish you so that the hunger subsides for a bit longer, when you go to work in retail every day from 9 to 5, surrounded by models who look over their shoulders and smile for a living, you remember the pang in your soul for the beauty of “belong,” for a fellow feeler, observer, thinker. The pang continues in the walls of your stomach and has resided in the branches of your blood vessels since birth, but you know it’s not inherited because, otherwise, your parents would buy you poetry by Gwendolyn Brooks instead of a memoir by Sarah Palin.

You travel nine hours to displace yourself from the humdrum of suburban living again this year and move into the small creative space of your dorm. You like these walls because they accept their bumpy, ecru failure. It’s easy to identify with. You put your books on your shelves and are overwhelmed by how much you have yet to read, how much you have yet to taste and roll over the inflamed redness of your gums and the vulnerable grooves of your brain. And you question the purpose of university but then quickly snap out of it—because this is America. This is America. You wait for the day when you will wake up for school and paint on your half-assed attempt at femininity and realize, as you remember this routine, that you’re not much different from the almost-plum walls after all. Because you’ve always been almost-female with a kind-of pastel wardrobe, an I-guess attitude about your relationship with the opposite sex, and a no-thank-you sentiment surrounding make-up. Your broad shoulders are biologically necessary to carry the weight of your breasts (which went up a cup size this summer), but you also think they’re the sexiest part of you and secretly revel in their masculine frame mingling with feminine softness. So you touch them in the mirror, so your thumb speaks to them in circles. You like how you can see your collarbone when you lift them because it makes you look as malnourished as you feel.

The day has come when you find yourself in a classroom again and the smart one with unshaved legs has a schedule that overlaps with yours. She wears button-up shirts and hoodies and denim—lots of it. Lots of it. You're fascinated by her and after palling around for a few weeks decide to really break the ice with, "What's your opinion on the new pickle bar?" Surprisingly, this question doesn't scare her away. You become friends. You become friends over Americanos with no room, over a shared hatred of English classes that just analyze plot. You become friends in the time it takes to walk to the parking lot after hours of studying, in the time it takes to make a simple syrup for whiskey sours. You become friends in the peach colored space of her room that changes hues with the light outside, in the margins of *Midnight's Children* and *The Scarlet Letter*.

(You're going to read this because you read all my drafts, those papers with half-coherent ideas that you help me rescue from the scattered passions of my mind. What I most want to tell you is what I know, so this is just to say exactly that. This is just to say: I know that our stories won't fall down the drain after being scrubbed out from underneath my fingernails because my nail biting habit has conveniently come back and I can chew on those memories while keeping the images of us agitating film in the dark room and sampling bread at the grocery store somewhere safe like one of the four chambers of my heart or a nasal cavity. I know that Nina Simone will continue to remind me of floury pizza dough. I know that last Thanksgiving I would have shaved my gloriously unapologetic leg and armpit hair at my parents' demand if you hadn't taught me that my body and my voice are mine. I know that you letting me call at 2 A.M. Pittsburgh time to hear about me coming out to my family as I sat in the Home Depot parking lot, watching people go in and out of the store, is a moment etched on my eardrums from you asking if I was okay, how proud you were, how I felt. I know that I will always use red onions for their color the way you did in your salsa. I know that you become easily annoyed by our peers looking for love in literature as if they know what it is, in all of its variations, complexities, fluidities. I know that I am no longer starving; I am full. I know this because you tell me

when you feel the rhythm of a line of poetry and that you've grown up watching magnolias bloom. The last thing I know: you stealing chocolate almond milk for me among students who memorize and don't create (like we do) will remain the best way anybody has ever told me that they care about what I have to say and think.)

Now you find yourself on the porch of her house with gin and tonics between you. The citrus scent in the porcelain cups floats into the air and mingles with the fragrance of fresh, upturned soil and loosely planted dandelion bulbs because the old woman next door is working on her garden, as always. She is a constant in your fleeting moments. You turn to your left, strands of your frizzy, brown hair brushing up against your eyelashes, as you look at your person—she's reading a book of poetry. She starts over when she stutters on sounds and goes back to the beginning of a line when she realizes she has misunderstood where the emphasis is supposed to go. She honors the writing. The intentional placement of this syllable, the deliberate trailing off of that ellipsis. And you want to pickle this, pickle it and have a pickle bar of your friendship to feed on sitting in those vulnerable spaces of your brain. Your feet are bare and her voice is beautiful. Beautiful. You imagine this is all which is natural, which is infinite, which is yes. You sit. You listen. The cherry blossoms across the street shake in the wind. You tear a magnolia petal between your fingers. There's an apple core rotting in the gutter across the street. She tucks a curl of hair behind her ear.

You go home after you've each had your fill of gin, sunlight, and words. You sit at your desk. And you—no matter how often you would have used the word “halfway” to describe yourself in the past—now look to the inscription in your copy of *Zami* by Audre Lorde, gifted by her, and feel the beauty of “belong.” The inscription is in pen; this is what cannot be erased. So even though you have spent years convincing yourself of the soul's lack of stickiness, you now like to think that it can be easily pieced apart and shared, like a tangerine, and there must be some permanence in this; in this act of choosing to house another's softness, another's vulnerability; in the trading of one sweet wedge of experience for another. This is what

you have sought and what you have found. This is what cannot be erased.

You go home to the fermenting persimmons in your grandmother's backyard, so heavy with sugars and rot that they fall to the ground and wrinkle into oblivion. You bend down and poke one. Its flesh collapses around yours. You pull your finger out and peer into the imprint left by it. This is the poem you know by heart. You send her a photo of this. She replies:

“People don't feel like we do.”

Sara Coito is a junior at the University of Portland in Portland, OR, where she is pursuing a B.A. in English.

Nothing Happens in Chicago

| Sara Robertson

I remember it as an observer, watching the soles of my feet rip through one pink and one purple sock as I bolt down the stairs to the street. The socks take quick, tiny steps across the rocky, wet asphalt until they reach the concrete expanse known as the Greenway.

My eyes are back in my head as I pass “our bench”: the one that held our frappuccinos while we cuddled up in the shade and seclusion of the trees. I turn sharply to the right, and I’m parallel with the street, where the cars are sparse because it’s midnight in Cleveland, Tennessee. Now, I can run. On the tips of my toes, I dash beneath two bridges, past the trees with dedicated plaques, and around the corner to where the walk breaks back into asphalt; smooth, this time, for the bikes. Or the barefoot.

To my right, the Church of God Headquarters. To my left, the creek. The trees block the view of the water, except where the dirt or stone paths jut between them like paisley swirls. I’m looking for one of these paths—the one where we fought that one time about that one thing. What were we fighting about that day? I think it was his talking. He talked too much when I needed quiet. He joked when I needed to be serious. The only way to shut him up was to trap his lips in mine, which I did often. Maybe that was his idea.

I can’t find the right path. It ends in a large rock, which I sat on to watch the water while Stephen was learning how to be quiet. He shut up long enough for me to forgive him, and we moved on. We walked until we could get frozen yogurt, then we sat on a bench, and he complained about children. He didn’t like the little ones. I didn’t like the big ones, so I thought we could work out a system. That was back when I thought we could work out anything.

I’m expecting him to be there, on the path. I don’t know why he would be—he probably doesn’t remember the fight. Even if he did, that’s not where he would run. He’s back in his dorm, sleeping. That’s why he’s not answering his phone. That’s the only good reason not to answer his phone.

I find the path, and I sit down. I don't have headphones, so I keep the volume low and play the music through my speakers. It's to calm me down, distract me, and remind me how much time I'm spending on this rock, in the middle of the night, while there are cops outside my boyfriend's dorm and security golf carts driving behind me.

He's mad, I'm thinking. He broke something—like a window. He hurt somebody. He hurt himself. The cops are there to arrest him.

I text him again. "It's okay if you're mad at me, but please tell me where you are."

I am beginning to understand why my mother insists on tracking my phone.

Kelsey texts me at 1:20. "Please come back to the house." I'm already walking. I'm tired, and he isn't answering, and I'm drifting back into the awareness of nighttime animals and other dangers.

Fifteen minutes later, I'm halfway home, and he gets to the point. "Go home and go to bed."

"I'm going. Are you home?"

"Obviously."

"Are you mad?"

...

I pull the grimy socks from my feet and shed a tear over the five big holes in each one. It hurts too much to throw them away, so I pretend I'm going to wash them. I have a hard time letting things go. Meanwhile, he still hasn't answered, and I don't know if I'm going to see him tomorrow. Exhaustion is stronger than worry; I'm out in two minutes.

...

The next day, we go on our last walk. He tells me we need to slow things down. I'm not his number one priority. Also, he wants to join the Air Force instead of becoming a teacher, and he wants me to think about whether or not I can handle that.

Then he stops talking to me.

...

Two weeks later, I'm in Knoxville, watching *Avatar* on Ryan's couch. Ryan's arms are around me, one hand on my lower stomach, the other grabbing at the front of my thin green tank top.

We've known each other for nine years, but we've never touched for longer than a hug. There's a thrill in it, but there's also a fear. I'm content with where we are, but I don't want to move.

I make the mistake of rolling over and looking him in the eye. *Oh, no. He's going to ruin it.* Three gentle pecks later, I'm on my feet, spinning away. I run to the bathroom. I refuse to cry, and I can't make myself throw up, so I do what the bathroom is designed for, and I walk back out.

He's sitting up, watching the TV. I sit on the other couch and rest my chin on my knees.

"It's been one week," I explain.

He shakes it off. It's not a big deal. We're both just feeling lonely.

...

The night before, we were walking around downtown Knoxville, and Ryan was pointing out the architecture. We stopped on a bridge and leaned over to observe the deserted red tracks. The station to their left was as blue as Ryan's Aryan eyes; the whole scene was full of color, even in the dark. Ryan told me trains didn't run there anymore. It was haunting, and it was beautiful.

Everything about it was too romantic. We had to walk away.

...

It's been six weeks. It's October. We visit our friend in Chicago. Nothing happens in Chicago.

...

On the way to Edgar's house, we stop at Wal-Mart to buy marshmallows. Ryan tells me I look pretty.

...

The boys—my boys—are laughing and lighting Edgar's grass on fire. They're drinking, but not much; they still have to drive home. We're back in our suburbs for the break, in the part of Tennessee that doesn't claim to be Tennessee. The back porch is a launch pad for every kind of firework, and someone let the dog lap up the mysterious green juice.

I'm sitting between Ryan and my high school sweetheart. HSS tells me about his new female friend. I'm happy for him. I feel safe. I feel loved.

Edgar uses me as a human shield as the tiny rockets are scattering across the yard. He's wasted, and I'm dying of laughter.

Ryan drives me home, and I remember riding in his car for the first time. We were sixteen, and he made me listen to Explosions in the Sky. Even then, we were too romantic. We danced on the edge of platonic. We sat in his room watching *SpongeBob* for hours, and he tried to teach me how to play guitar. We sang "Chasing Cars" at our graduation party. We played with the hula-hoops at Toys-R-U's, and I helped him pick out his first fedora.

In my driveway, he tells me that he's recreating himself. He formed his college identity around a girl, and he doesn't know who he'll be without her. My mind is racing, counting the pros and cons, wondering if he's a virgin, wondering if religion is a problem, wanting to make up for the kiss I ran away from. Meanwhile, he's telling me what my friendship means to him. We're swapping stories about our fears and insecurities. We're feeling understood.

...

Four months later, Ryan asks me what I'm stressed about. I say "everything" but pretend it's just school. I tell him I might fail two classes and I might lose my scholarship.

He says, "But you're Sara. Sara wins. Always."

And I know that he believes it because he's never seen me lose. He didn't see me running. He didn't see me fighting for a man who would only hurt me. He didn't see me desperate, clinging to any hope of true love I could find.

He saw me shining, at seventeen, back when I knew who I was. He saw me writing, making stories out of blood and shadows. He saw me singing in the car, waving my arms out the window, laughing, feeling free, but feeling protected. He saw me competing, achieving, winning awards, dating the genius, reigning over the marching band.

He says, "You're great, Sara. Don't ever forget that."

And I fall asleep knowing that he'll never abandon me.

Sara Robertson is a senior at Lee University, where she is double-majoring in English with a Writing emphasis and Psychology. Her previous publications include two stories in her college literary journal and a tweet in Creative Nonfiction. The tweet was much harder to compose.

Curly Girl

| Maria Donovan

I look at the mirror where I see a girl with green eyes and pale skin that contrasts with the dark navy polyester graduation gown and hat. I don't see my pretty green dress underneath or anything else. The only thing I can see is my hair. Dark brown with a reddish tint on good days, looks thicker than it actually is, and curly. Very, very curly. Spirals, waves, and zigzags intersect and run around each other forming the mass that is my hair. I try and adjust my hat to try and make my hair not poof out like an upside-down cupcake on either side of the elastic on my head. Finally I drop my hands, look myself in the eye and decide that it just isn't worth it. My hair will look like whatever it decides to look like today, and there is nothing I can do about it. I know I will look different from other people no matter what, so I choose to smile at my trademark hair, push it behind my shoulder, and walk away from the mirror.

In Mrs. Bursmeyer's kindergarten room, I stood in line behind my best friend Grace because we were on our way to have a snack and recess before we were dismissed to go home to our mothers. The obnoxious Michael came and squeezed in right behind me in order to be closer to the front of the line. I turned my back to him and talked with Grace about the imaginary game of house that we were planning on picking back up from yesterday outside on the playground. Suddenly Michael interrupted us: "Maria, your hair is too big, you need to cut it." I felt myself turn warm; I looked down and didn't respond. I tried to smooth my hair down on both sides of head to make them straighter as we quietly walked out of the classroom and into the cafeteria.

Tears ran down my cheeks whenever my mom tried to brush my hair when I was young. My thick and curly Italian hair was from the other side of the family; she did not have the slightest idea how to tame the animal that was my hair. She had slightly wavy hair that happily adapted to whatever she wanted it to do. My cabinet beneath the sink was filled with numerous colorful bottles of de-tangler that had done not one ounce of good on my hair. "I

must have some pretty weird hair if nothing can fix it,” I thought to myself in between the screams and squeals that would occur during our post-shower combing sessions.

I relied heavily on my mother for hair care throughout my elementary and early junior high days. I really didn’t really care all that much what I looked like, and honestly, I hadn’t the slightest idea how to take care of my hair. It was simply easier to let my mother worry about it while I worried about homework, or the next sports practice that I was dashing off to. Sixth grade in particular was the year that I wore a braid straight down my back every single day. It was so simple to just sit down sideways in one of our wooden kitchen chairs in the morning while my mom hurried to braid my hair and get the rest of my three younger siblings off to school on time. Even though she did not understand my hair, my mom always told me that my hair was a gift that I had been given, and I needed to accept what the Lord gave me. I usually just rolled my eyes, but her words stuck with me as I grew older.

Then I hit junior high, the most awkward and terrible years of my life. All I cared about was what others thought of me and how I looked in comparison to others. It seemed to me that every other girl was short with straight, shiny blond hair. I was the complete opposite because I hit my growth spurt early and was half a head taller than most other girls and had dark and crazy hair to go along with it. What made the situation even worse was that it seemed the girls in my class took it upon themselves to comment on my hair at every opportunity. “Hey, have you ever considered straightening your hair?” Nope, not at all. “You should let me straighten your hair, trust me, I’m an expert.” Ha, no thank you. My personal favorite was, “Your hair is too curly, you need to straighten it!” which was told to me by a very tactful and compassionate soul. In each of those instances I was reminded of what my mom had told me about my hair, and I could not bring myself to succumb to the pressure of my classmates. I did not really understand what good my mom saw in my hair, but I loved and respected her too much to go against her judgment.

The transformation began to happen when I joined a traveling club volleyball team when I was twelve years old. My mom

and I would go on weekend trips to tournaments with other moms and daughters, where during our down time we would go out to eat, shop and talk. There was another mother who had just about as crazy of hair as I did, and her daughters had that same hair. She saw the struggle that my mother and I were going through and invited us to her room one evening. She sat me down on a bed and grabbed a bottle full of hair mousse. She worked the white foam through my hair, while I sat and fretted about the tangles she was adding to my hair. When she finished, I ran to inspect the damage that had been done to my hair in the bathroom mirror. I came to a startling halt when I saw my hair. It wasn't frizzy, and it actually looked like I had wanted it to look that way. Huh, maybe there was something to this mousse stuff.

I began experimenting with different products to see what made my hair look good, and what certainly did not. Round one occurred when I tried to blow dry my hair after a shower to see if that time-saving device was an option. My hair grew into a sizable Afro that any 70s child would be proud of. Blow dryers quickly were added to the avoid-at-all-costs list. Round two was using a deep moisturizing conditioner. My curls looked so defined and healthy that I knew that I had found a winner. I even tried different hairstyles to see what might look good besides a braid. My attempts at curly bangs were an abysmal failure and were quickly grown out to hide the evidence. I let my hair grow out to my waist and then cut it so that it barely touched my shoulders.

Once I reached high school I settled down with the many changes and experiments that I was doing to my hair. It stayed at a consistent length, right at my shoulder blades. I tried to let it be, but my friends always wanted to investigate my hair. One summer afternoon my two friends Sarah and Sarah, whom I call Sarah Squared, decided that while we had a *Harry Potter* marathon they would attempt to straighten my hair. That is how I found myself sitting in a metal folding chair in my friend's basement watching Ron and Harry try to tame the basilisk while my friends in turn tried to tame my hair. I shuddered every time they came close to my ear and lived in fear of being singed by the intense heat radiating off of the straightener.

After a strenuous two and a half hours, Sarah Squared decided that they had had enough and let me look in the mirror. I was curious to see what I looked like with straight hair; and slowly held up the mirror in front of me while I sat in the chair. My stomach dropped when I saw the image. Gone were the ringlets, waves and zigzags; in their place was straight, slightly frizzy brown hair. I did not look like me. I looked like a stranger, like a girl I would see across the room at a restaurant or shop and never think twice about. I left soon after and sped back to my house to quickly remove this strange hair that I had suddenly possessed. After a few washes my hair finally began to seem normal again. I looked in the mirror and saw the soft curls slowly recovering from the torture they had been through. I realized I had missed them.

My hair was only straightened one other time while I was in high school. It occurred when I allowed my hair stylist to do it in order to “smooth it” for junior prom. In the process she fried my hair to the point that it took two months for my curls to come full circle back to their former selves. While I sat in the black, fake-leather chair and felt myself stick to it in the process, I looked myself in the mirror and stared at my hair. My stylist was chattering away to me as the steam and smoke seemed to rise from her hand as she passed it over and over a section of my hair. Nonchalantly she destroyed the feature that most distinguished me from other people. I watched as I slowly transformed into someone that I was not, and felt a bit of myself wilt inside of me. I realized how important and essential my hair was to my persona. She didn’t understand the significance obviously; she even seemed afraid of my hair. “Your hair looks so much healthier straight,” and “in order to style it I will have to straighten it” were only a few of the comments that made me think that I should have never agreed to this whole endeavor.

I walk away from the mirror and head downstairs so I can take pictures and be off to my high school graduation. My hair bounces with me as I fly down the carpeted stairs to join the rest of my family where they comment on my cap and gown. I feel at peace with my hair; I will look like myself during one of the most pivotal moments of my life thus far. I refuse to allow anybody to make me think that because of my hair I can’t be taken seriously, that I will

look too different from everybody else. My hair will not lay pin straight underneath my hat and look sleek. That is not who I am. I am spirals, zigzags, and soft waves. I am not perfect and never will be and have accepted that fact. I am both complicated and incredibly simple. I am a curly girl.

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Mimi and Me

| Lydia Biggs

Mimi likes teaching.

When I look around, everything is tinged with the golden haze of either Southern country sunshine or my young, clouded memory. I'm sitting next to my grandmother, surrounded by fresh, black dirt, spade in my small chubby hand, listening to her as she expertly pours seeds into the hole she dug. "See Lyddie-Pooh? Make it just deep enough so the seeds can grow. Three seeds in each hole and now you scoop the dirt back in and pat it." I guide my little hill of dirt into the hole and give the mound a few smacks. "No no, that's wrong! Do it like this." My hands are empty and Mimi has the spade, making perfect circle holes in the earth. Her hair is deep red; last time it was brown. As she concentrates on sifting through the dirt, her eyes squint, highlighting the wrinkles forming on her face. I sit in silence while Mimi sings in her church vibrato, her voice warbling.

While I wait for more directions I pick at the grass and try to think about gardening. I know Mimi used to be a teacher, but she must not have been very good; she always gives me extra work when I spend the summer with her. I have to copy lots of sentences from the yellowy pages of her book, stumbling over words like "kettle" and "rotary phone." When I'm finished and Mimi looks, she clucks her tongue and grabs the fat eraser. "Now Lydia, your letters are so sloppy! Don't you want to be popular and pretty? You have to fix your writing!" She lays her hand over mine and guides the pencil, making little loops and an odd looking "a." "Mimi," I ask, "why do I have to have good letters to be popular?" Mimi smooths her hair and replies, "Oh Lydia, all the Miss Americas have pretty handwriting. Don't you want to be Miss America?" I nod and grab my pencil.

"Here Lydia, be a good girl and take this bucket to go pick some blueberries while I finish planting" grabs me from my thoughts. I straighten my garden hat that matches Mimi's and take the bucket to the edge of the yard. The berries make a satisfying *plunk* as each hits the bucket. The fattest and the bluest berries I save

to eat, squishing them to the roof of my mouth as their warm juice bursts with flavor.

When Mimi comes to check, she smiles at my half full bucket and my sticky blue hands. “Oh this is plenty Lydia! Now it’s time to learn to make a blueberry crumble. Ready to go wash up and bake?” I smile, glad for the approval, and follow Mimi to the kitchen.

Mimi likes celebration.

It’s Mimi’s birthday and everyone is running around the house getting ready. Today I get to dress by myself. I look at the blue bib dress, covered in brightly colored balloons. It’s my favorite. I put on the dress and find some white socks with lace on the edges. I snap on my Mary Jane shoes and go to find Mom so she can comb my hair.

We pick up Mimi and Pop on the way to her favorite restaurant, Golden’s on the Square. “Oh Lyddia-Pooh, your dress looks lovely! Such a perfect party outfit!” Mimi wears a scarf pinned by a fancy, bejeweled brooch.

When we get there, I sit next to Pop. I get fried chicken and green beans, just like him. Everyone laughs and talks with Mimi, who is smiling. After plates have been cleared, Mimi begins to open her presents. My favorites are the new gardening hat, another brooch, and a beautiful bracelet.

Mimi calls me over, “Come here Lydia and give me a Birthday kiss!” I climb into her lap and kiss her on the cheek but Mimi’s eyes go wide, almost bugging out. Her face grows redder and she calls my mother over. “This child seems to have forgotten her *panties!*” Mimi whispers through a smile. Mom just laughs and shakes her head. “She probably just forgot, she’s only four!” she says.

On the way home Mimi stops at a store and hurries inside, telling me to wait in the car. When she comes back she hands me a pack of underwear. “Here Lydia, put one of these on. I cannot believe this happened! A lady should never forget her underthings, dear.” As I open the package I notice they’re *The Hunchback of Notre Dame* themed, my favorite movie. I pick out the Esmeralda pair and put them on.

Mimi likes perfection.

“Ow! That hurt, Mimi. The pins are sticking in my brain!” I complain as Mimi wields another bobby pin, two more held between her lips. After squirming but not daring to move my head, Mimi finally finishes. “Hold still, Lydia! Ballerinas never wiggle.” I sigh as she coats my bun with hairspray, smoothing the flyaways. She sprays some on her own soft red hair, poofier and shorter now. She peers at the directions my ballet teacher handed out for the recital.

DIRECTIONS FOR OUR BLUE BALLERINAS!!!

Hair in a bun

Clean blue unitard and new tights

Blue tutu

Light makeup optional- mascara and lips!

Mimi purses her lips and reaches for her red pocket book. Out comes a stack of makeup and some ribbons. “Mimi, Ms. Brittany said we didn’t *have* to wear makeup! It makes my face feel gross.” I lean back and pout, knowing I won’t win this. Mimi grabs some powder and replies, “Oh but you have to! Otherwise you’ll get washed out on stage and look sickly. And like my mother said, beauty knows no pain! Close your eyes but not too tight. Good. Now hold still and make a kissy face. Not so hard! Softer. Better.”

When I see my class, their faces don’t look as pinched as mine. My eyelids are a bright blue and my very red cheeks match my very red lips. A little halo of roses and ribbons circles my bun. My friend Abigail giggles when she sees me and pokes my stiff bun. After the recital, all the parents clap and hand us flowers. Mimi gives me a bouquet that matches the roses in my hair and beams. “Oh Lyddie-Pooh, you were the most beautiful one out there! It reminds me of my debutante days. Come here and take a picture!” I blush redder and Mimi leans close, smelling like her floral perfume and lotion. I beam as Mom clicks away. “Oh Lydia, don’t crinkle your face!” Mimi continues, “Keep your lips together so your teeth don’t stick out and ruin your smile.”

Mimi likes good girls.

We walk around Belk Shopping Center as Mimi pulls some frilly dresses. “Oh Lydia, you’ve bloomed into a teenager, you’re a young lady! Stop trying to hide your feminine figure and stand up straight!” she scolds. I mumble some weak reply and lower my arms, adjusting my new bra. I sure don’t feel feminine, I feel awkward. “Mimi, I don’t really wear dresses anymore. Can I just wear khakis tomorrow?” Mimi huffs and puts a pinker, frillier dress into the cart. “Good gracious, no! You’ll be meeting all my church friends and I will not have you slumping in the corner in *pants*,” she retorts, enunciating the last word like it hurts her. I follow her to the dressing rooms and try on each dress. When I show her one she likes, she instructs, “Yes, it’s very nice. Now do a twirl and walk towards that mirror,” closely followed by an, “Oh but it bunches when you walk,” or, “Well that is too short! Next!”

The next morning, Mimi gives some last minute coaching while she fixes her white-blond hair and finds me some hose. “Sweetie, you need to stand straight and smile when people talk to you, but don’t show those braces. And don’t pull on your dress, it sits so nicely! Here, put these on so you don’t have bare legs in church.” “But the ruffles keep bothering me! And if I was wearing *pants* instead of *this* I wouldn’t have bare legs!” I reply as I snatch at the tights, tired of the criticism. Mimi looks at me and coolly says, “A lady never loses her temper and never questions what she is told. Boys would not want to marry a smart mouth.” I scowl as I pull on the tights. “The last thing is that your voice is so harsh. You need to talk like a Southern Belle, not some trash.” I just stare. At church I stand up straight and smile with my mouth closed but beyond a light “hello, how are you?” I say nothing.

Mimi likes success stories.

It’s a game day and my family is coming to see me perform with the band and colorguard, including Mimi. Since my biggest fan/critic will be there, I spend extra time on my hair and makeup, smoothing flyaways and checking my lipstick is even. Right before the band marches to the football field, I tug at my dress hem and practice a few flag tosses to distract me. When we march past the

stands, I see my family waving like mad. Mimi waves like a queen on a float. Though grayer and more stooped than I remember, she's elegant as ever.

When it's time to perform I'm extra nervous but excited. The flag tosses are flawless and our cute pom routine to "Single Ladies" is a hit. When I leave the band stands to find my family for a quick hug, I pull my shoulders back and hold my head up. When they come into view I use my softer "Mimi voice" to say "Hello! I'm so glad you came to see me! What did you think?" Mimi beams at me and says "Oh it was just wonderful! You look very pretty and put together! We need a picture so I can show my friends what a young lady you are!" I stand close and smile with my mouth closed, glad for her approval.

Mimi loves family.

It's spring break and I'm up in a mountain cabin with friends. We hike, fish, drink, and deal with hangovers all week; our only connections to the outside world are a house phone and trips into a small town nearby. On one trip into town, my phone buzzes wildly once I get cell service. A rush of texts come in from Mom: *Mimi is going to the doctor. Mimi may be having surgery. Mimi's doctor won't let her leave and she's having surgery today.* I panic and call. "Hi honey. Don't worry; Mimi is fine. She just got out of surgery and is starting to wake up." "Do I need to come?" I ask. "No you're fine, enjoy your break! You can see her when you all come back."

The second we get back to the cabin, I begin packing. I jump in the car and drive straight to the hospital. I find Mimi's room and stop just outside the door, looking down. I'm wearing stretchy pants with sneakers, no makeup, and smell like the woods. Oh well. I walk in with a smile and a soft voice. "Hi Mimi." Mimi turns and smiles dreamily. "Lyddie-Pooh! You came!" I give her a gentle hug first, then Mom. Mom catches me up on what happened and Mimi chimes in. "They drilled a hole in my spine because it was pinching all my nerves! But this medicine is so nice! I can't even feel it!" I smile and talk for awhile. Once Mimi gets tired I head back home to see the rest of the family.

The next day I show up looking much more put together.

Mom has work so I plan to sit with Mimi all day. The moment I walk in the door she stirs and I help her to the bathroom. After brushing her teeth and settling back in bed, Mimi asks for a favor. “Would you reach into my tan pocket book and pull out my makeup? I’d like you to do it so I look better for the doctor! He’s very handsome!” I smile and agree, spreading the familiar tubes and shadows across her blankets. While I apply she talks. “I can’t believe you left your trip to come see me, Lydia. I didn’t want to end your good time.” “Of course I did Mimi! Pucker your lips real quick... there! You’re more important than a trip.” We sit in silence while I pat on some blush. “Well thank you for being so good to me Lyddie-Pooh.” I just smile and hold up a mirror. “What do you think?” Mimi purses her lips. “Well the shadow is a bit heavy-handed. If you turn down the lights it’ll look better.” I sigh at the criticism, put her makeup back in the bag, and walk toward the light switch. “The lipstick looks very nice though. Thank you.” I smile.

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The Road Where She Grew Up

| Lindsay Base

It wasn't anything extra special—just an old concrete road from the thirties or forties that had long faded in importance. Its surface was still composed of the original pavement, split with cracks and potholes stuffed unevenly with asphalt. It passed pastureland, grassy fields, a handful of houses—some farmhouses, some more modern—a cemetery dating back to the mid-1800s, and somewhere in between all those houses and fields and gravestones, it went over a creek that sometimes flowed and sometimes didn't, depending on how dry or wet it was at the time. Probably no one thought too much of that little stretch of road.

Except her, that is.

Unlike the road, she was young and budding. She had blond hair that until third grade, her mom made her keep short, not much past her ears. She always wore bangs, cut straight across, until the summer before junior year when she finally decided to grow them out. People said she was tall for her age, and she was skinny, too, with freckles sprinkled across her nose. But lots of people told her she was a pretty little girl, even though she could be a tom-boy at times. She had a big imagination and liked school, reading, and being outside. She was shy except for around her family and close friends—and around herself, of course. Not that she really liked being shy.

She wanted to be a fighter.

As a young kid, her parents took walks on that road, and her dad pulled her and her little brother behind in their red Radio Flyer. During those times, she pretended herself a pioneer journeying through uncharted territory. The swaying grasses concealed bands of wild Indians and maybe some roaming buffalo. When she got older and there were three kids instead of two, she pulled the wagon with her brother and sister inside, keeping a steady clip so the Indians wouldn't get them. Her dad pinched her gangly arms and told her how strong she was. Even if her muscles burned, she wouldn't let on and kept going.

At nine, she experienced her first real taste of freedom on that wild wagon trail. She mounted her bike like it was a mighty steed and set off down the right-hand lane with a whistle on her lips. She traveled a whole mile all by herself, heading to sewing lessons at a house just down the road. She pedaled that mile once a week that summer in 2005, and when school started again, sometimes she and her steed still ventured back onto the pavement to feel the freedom of the wind rushing past her skin.

Then the cracks in the road got a little bit bigger, and a few extra potholes appeared. Her hair got longer, she grew taller, and she didn't pretend she was a pioneer anymore. But for a while, she did hope that boy with the dark curly hair would drive by while she was on one of her bike rides.

And then the end of seventh grade rolled around. The sun got warmer, the sap started flowing again, buds swelled so big they split open, and patches of emerald velvet opened the pores of the earth so that a person could smell the sweetness of the dirt. Her school had just started a track team and she decided to join. She was the only junior-higher with several seniors and a sophomore. But she had pulled a wagon loaded with her brother and sister at age seven. She could run with anybody.

And she did. She only ran in high school meets—JV, yeah—but she kept up with those older girls, and the coach said she did just fine. If she practiced at home, she could be better.

So there she stood, at the top of that road, looking down its half-mile hill. It seemed a long way without her bike, but she could do it. Coach Philips said she was strong, after all, and so did her dad. So down she went, her breath coming quick, until she reached the stop sign at the intersection down by the bridge. Then back up she went, bum, bum, bum, bum, keeping a steady pace like Coach Philips taught. So close to the top, but she couldn't quite make it. She walked the last stretch up the hill, gasping for breath.

But no need to worry too much. She'd get better. She'd keep practicing. She was only in seventh grade, after all.

Track season ended, but her running did not. She got to where she could run that whole mile—half up, half down—without stopping, and she didn't see why it had been so hard before. If she

could go one mile, why not two? She got to where she could run that as well. But the mile was her favorite, that half-mile stretch of road where she made her first triumph. She bought herself a watch that kept track of the time down to the second. She got faster, slowly, steadily. No need to rush too much.

She liked to run in the middle of the morning, when the sun shone fresh and bright but not too hot yet. Sometimes the air dripped with humidity, and she sweated bucket-loads anyway. She discovered she didn't really mind. Over time, she ran in the afternoon occasionally, and sometimes in the evening. Once in a while, she ran more than once a day. It started not to matter if she sweated a gallon and a half or if she'd just eaten. She ran anyway. It was one of her favorite things to do.

It was her freedom.

She was in shape, and when she ran, unhindered, her feet might as well have never touched the ground. She ran all kinds of things—the mile, two miles, sprints up the hill, a hard run on the half-mile down-stretch. She pushed herself—harder, faster, longer. She was strong and invincible when she finished the last uphill stretch even though she felt like toppling over in a dead heap. She realized if she could run and finish and go faster and longer, well, she could probably do most anything. She wouldn't die, even though she might feel like it.

It got to where she knew that road by heart, all its cracks and crevices and rough spots. She watched them expand over time, even when she stopped growing herself. Maybe it was all her use wearing that road out.

The road got to know her, too, her gait, the weight of her footsteps. It got to where it could tell her mood by the way her soles fell. There were times when her feet fairly flew across the pavement—sure, even, and smooth. That was when her heart soared, like after she'd been inspired by a certain story or idea. Those were the times she was on top of the world, when nothing could stop her. She was unstoppable, strong like a man, entirely free. That's when she'd imagine heroes like Maximus from *Gladiator*, Benjamin and Gabriel Martin from *The Patriot*, and Uncas and Hawkeye from *The Last of the Mohicans* watched her and considered her one of them.

There were times when her pace was more relaxed, when her mind was full of daydreams and hopes for the future. She ran that way a lot her freshman year. She'd long forgotten the boy with the dark curly hair, and her heart fell for the most exciting young man she'd ever met. He was tall, handsome, ornery, and had short, rusty brown hair. He was two years older than her, three years ahead in school, but that didn't make any difference, especially when she was certain he noticed her, too. She never told him of her feelings, and he likewise said nothing. But somehow she knew she would be his one day, and how her heart would mount to the sky when she imagined it.

Sometimes her feet plodded unevenly, out of pace, her movements stiff. That meant she was trying to focus on something—usually the story she was writing at the time—and trying to come up with a new plot-twist or character development. When an inspiration came, her muscles loosened, energy burst through her veins, and her feet carried her on wings back to her keyboard and computer screen.

But a time came when her tennis shoes pounded the ground with a fury—racing, racing, racing, like the creature in her heart. That was when her stories stopped coming and she couldn't write anymore, when she discovered she had been terribly mistaken about her future with the boy of her dreams. She tore across that road, over and over and over again. She never knew a person could be so angry, so desperate, so empty and heartbroken at the same time. She ran, ran, ran, and ran some more. It was the one thing that made sense anymore—sweat, road, and working muscles.

But she didn't feel free so much now. In between those mad races, her feet dragged across the road's aging surface, her bones aching, her muscles stiff. She didn't finish as often during those times, but trudged, panting, the uphill half-mile. How old she felt!—older than her actual age, it seemed. Her dreams weren't turning out as she'd hoped, and maybe she wasn't invincible as she'd once thought.

Then springtime came again, four years after that spring in seventh grade when the road became her steady companion. She stopped running so much and more often took long walks—leisurely

walks that paused here, then there. She observed the road and the things along it as if she'd never seen them before. Fluorescent greens misted the ground and trees like delicate lace, and tiny wildflowers dotted the earth like jewels. God spoke to her on those walks, and her footsteps treaded peacefully for the first time in a long while. She felt pretty again, like nature's finery, when an old friend took her on her very first date. She didn't cry so much when she thought of her lost dreams anymore, although she still missed that boyish grin.

With the track season to spur her on, she ran like she used to when her heart felt free. And yet something had changed. The road sensed it in the way her feet hit its surface. Her stride held more confidence, possessed a strength that went beyond the ability of her limbs and the assumptions of childish daydreams. She didn't imagine herself recognized by heroes as much anymore.

Maybe she didn't need to.

More had changed than just her spirit. For years she had run without going much-noticed by passing cars. But one day a truck full of boys rumbled by, and they revved their engine, blared their horn, and hooted out the windows. Her pace faltered, as if she didn't know how to take it. Then her mouth drifted into a smile, and her steady stride resumed, as strong and confident as ever. It became a regular occurrence, men and boys driving by, staring out their windshields and side windows and rearview mirrors, giving a honk, pressing the gas a little harder.

Senior year came and went. She worked more, had less time for personal leisure. When she did run, her footsteps didn't always fall with the same amount of focus and drive for improvement. They were more distracted, like she was looking for the trucks to come by. And often she remembered the road as it had once been and all the things she had done on it over the years, like when she first took out the car all by herself at age fourteen.

But as summer carried on and the time remaining before she went off to college lessened every day, she paid more attention to the road as it was now, like that spring when God spoke to her. She ran like she was a little girl back in junior high again, her whole life before her, her hopes and dreams as fresh as an early summer rain.

About a month, maybe two, before her departure, the county started repaving all the roads. They made their way to that little country stretch and covered up all those cracks and crevices and potholes—which by now she had practically memorized—with asphalt. That new road was black, black, black, new and smooth and soft and smelling of tar. Maybe she should have been sad to see all those familiar age-scars go, but she felt only delight.

How she ran that first day after the road was completed! She hadn't run so fast and so smooth and so free in a long time. That new surface felt just like a pillow.

And it seemed fitting for the road to turn a new page, to have a new beginning, right when her life was doing the same.

She left for college, and the road seemed empty without her there to run it up and down, wearing grooves into its sides.

But cracks appeared anyway, so it wasn't her fault the county repaved after all.

She's still in college now, three and a half hours north from that little road. She's found other places to run, other pavements to dream and think and feel on.

But she comes back home sometimes. When she does, her feet always manage to find that little country stretch again, and down that hill she runs, back up, pushing it to the end.

She'll always find it and always go back to it, I imagine—even when she no longer can.

Lindsay Base is currently a sophomore with junior credits at Kansas State University. She plans to complete a major in English with an emphasis on creative writing by Spring 2017. To complement her studies, she is a member of KSU's Alpha Theta Eta chapter in Sigma Tau Delta, is active in the campus group Christian Challenge, and participates in an on-campus country swing dance club. She received previous publication of a work of short fiction in the 2014 edition of the Nota Bene Literary Anthology.

A White Christmas

| Vanessa Robins

We used to drive to Maryland every year to get a 20-foot spruce for our living room. The last year we went, the guy placing the tree on our tiny four-door sedan said, “I’m surprised your windshield hasn’t shattered yet.” That was the last year we got a real tree.

...

The tree farm cleaned a horse barn out and filled it with different stands. Fudge. Cookies. Alpacas. Santa himself. This Santa was the only Santa I wouldn’t scream bloody murder at. It’s probably because he gave me a coloring book each time.

...

The company that my dad worked for used to throw these huge Christmas parties at a local hotel. You’d walk in the lobby and be surrounded by elaborate gingerbread houses. Their yearly contest. I never knew you could make a log cabin from ginger bread.

...

One year we went to the party, dad and I got our faces painted. I got sparkly holly leaves down the side of my face. My dad got a Christmas tree on the top of his bald head. The star on the top of the tree was painted in the middle of his forehead, expanding his head and the stump running down the back of his neck.

...

Hardcore elves.

...

All I wanted as a little girl was one of those electronic cats—creepy little things with bulging eyes. Everywhere was sold out. Everywhere. My dad tried special ordering it through Toys-R-Us (this was before the days of the internet). They were sold out. My dad’s boss ended up buying it for me. I think it made dad feel like a failure.

...

We wrote notes for Santa. Telling him

“Thank you!”

“Have a safe trip!”

“Eat our cookies!”

“Don’t forget the carrots for the reindeer!”

The carrots and cookies were always gone in the morning.

...

Crumbs.

...

One Christmas my dad borrowed a sleigh from an Amish family. It snowed that Christmas. My father pushed me and a few others down a steep hill in the backyard. There was nothing to stop us.

...

He had cut the umbilical cord.

...

The Amish family who lent us the sleigh has two teenage boys. They stowed their beer in the sleigh that their family never used anymore.

“No, dad. We swear we don’t know where the beer came from.”

...

My mother always chooses multicolored lights for our tree. The red glow always overpowers the rest of the bulbs. Sometimes I imagine Santa shooting down the chimney, thinking he actually entered some eerie place in winter wonderland hell.

...

Two snowflakes or more and I’d jump out of bed, race to the living room, turn on WGAL and pray for the scroll at the bottom of the screen to keep me home.

...

Presents never sit beneath our tree. Instead there’s a little village of ceramic houses. A drug store, a church, homes, schools, a post office, a living world for little tiny ceramic people. I’ve already told my sister, Randi, when my parents die those houses are mine.

...

I slept downstairs in the basement with Randi every Christmas Eve until she moved rooms. The walls were painted a faded green with little monkeys sponged on the walls. I always thought I heard Santa on the roof, Rudolph landing. It was my father’s footsteps.

...

We’re not a Christian family. The last time I went to church was by force from my aunt. “Go! It’ll be fun! There’s singing you know!” It was not fun and I didn’t know the words.

...

Every Christmas Eve my dad's side of the family packs into my Aunt Ginger's house—all 72 of us (at last count). Each family brings food to share. Somehow we always end up with ham sandwiches and 9 trays of cookie—3 of which are store bought chocolate chip.

...

Christmas carols and candle lighting.

...

We exchange gifts. Little trinkets, keepsakes, giftcards, clothing, dolls, games. One year my Aunt Marie got everyone little flying helicopters.

...

Buzzzzzzzzzzz.

...

I always wore my green velvet dress with the white collar and pink rose in the middle.

...

Innocent little girl.

...

During these Christmas Eve parties my favorite cousins and I would sit underneath the dining room table. Amanda, Devin, Kevin, and I would eat our ham sandwiches and cookies giggling and hitting our heads every time we moved. We kept eating under the table until we couldn't fit anymore.

...

Kevin stopped coming to Christmas Eve a few years ago. There's been a box marked "For Kevin" by the door each year for people to put his gifts in. His gifts are never delivered to his prison cell. I don't know where they go.

...

Last year my mother was the only one to put a present in Kevin's box.

...

One Christmas Eve dad had to work. Mom, Randi and I went to Aunt Ginger's by ourselves. We brought mom's favorite cheese plate—covered in frogs with little Santa hats. On the way home the frogs-in-Santa-hats-cheese-plate crashed from our roof and onto the

road before us. We forgot to put it in the car. Mom and Randi tried to gather the little pieces from the road. They were unsuccessful.

...

Each year around the holidays we'd make the trek over toward Philadelphia to see my grandparents in their retirement home. One of the last times we went down was after my grandmother had died.

It was the first time my sister brought her boyfriend Matt. Matt is black. Matt and I were playing, wrestling happily. My grandfather didn't like that. His scowl made us leave early.

...

Mom doesn't like to wake up. Ever. Christmas mornings, bright and early, we would tear the covers back, open the curtains, jump on the bed, make coffee, turn on blaringly loud bell-ringing music, grab the nearest singing plush toy and play the drowning music right next to her head. It was only after she screamed at us to go away that she got up.

...

As kids, the first thing Randi and I wanted to do was rip into the wrapping paper, leaving brightly colored flurries everywhere. We weren't allowed to. We had to save the paper, bows, tags and ribbon.

...

Peel back the tape—surgery.

...

As a little girl I didn't play by the gender rules when it came to gifts. I always asked for a Sunoco toy truck.

...

Each November every member of my family writes a Christmas wish list and posts it on the cabinets in the kitchen. One year Mom asked for a new clock for her bedroom. She forgot she asked for the clock.

That Christmas mom opened 5 clocks. One from Dad. One from Randi. One from me and two from herself (she wrote "From Santa" on the tags).

...

Fragments of tape still cling to the kitchen cabinets.

...

We eat puppy chow for breakfast. Sugar and chocolate covered Chex mix.

...

When we finish unwrapping gifts, Randi and I would race to go make the stuffing. We liked our hands to squish between the raw eggs and bread cubes.

...

No one liked to cut the onions.

...

Last Christmas morning my friend Andy was riding home from a party the night before. He was ejected 180 feet from the car. The shattered glass lying on the road looked like snow.

...

A white Christmas.

Vanessa Robins graduated in the spring of 2015 from York College of Pennsylvania in York, PA, where she majored in English literary studies and minored in professional writing. She was also the managing editor of the college's student-run undergraduate literary magazine, The York Review.

Short Fiction

Semblance

|Haley Stuart

When her husband came home from the hospital, he had six holes in his chest. They ranged in size, the biggest ones being about the width of a quarter. They had healed strangely, edges rounded so smooth that the paths the bullets had torn through were still visible. If he were sitting on the couch shirtless, his chest would be dotted with leathery green spots. If he stood too close to the window, light streamed through them like dim flashlights.

She hadn't been home when the accident happened. Her shift had run over late into the night and by the time her headlights flooded the driveway, the door was off its hinges. She found him in the living room on his back, eyes closed, blood seeping from those six holes in his chest and staining his shirt like watercolor. His skin had been cold to the touch as she knelt by his side until the paramedics arrived. She stayed with him in the hospital, knees curled under in an armchair pulled up to his bed, one warm, pulsing hand grasping a chunk of ice.

The doctor said he was a medical miracle, a complete and utter mystery. She had been hypnotized by every word while he stood at the foot of her husband's bed, hair gelled back and thin fingers cradling a plastic clipboard. He had recovered, against all odds. But there were the holes. Six perfectly rounded holes that went straight through his body, chest to back. She could stick her finger in and wiggle it, but there would only be space. The holes shouldn't affect his daily life if he kept them covered, the doctor said. No one would know the difference. Just be careful not to snag them on anything. He was just lucky that the intruders hadn't been wielding a shotgun.

Her husband insisted on driving himself home. She brought him a change of clothes and as he slipped out of the hospital gown, she couldn't help but stare. His back was to her, yet she could still see the television through the holes, like little snippets of footage from the closing of vintage films. She filled him in on what he had missed. The house hadn't been too thoroughly ransacked and

the cops suspected that her car had scared off the robbers before they could do even more damage. Their television and stereo were gone, but none of her grandmother's jewelry had been touched. The coffee table was shattered and the police had yet to recover his wallet, but she canceled all of his credit cards and filed for a new license. The Yankees won the World Series, yet again. The neighbors had gotten a puppy that yapped at all hours and left gooey presents for them to step in on their yard. She had gotten a raise, rather unexpectedly, but she worked so hard she knew she deserved it. And she also had stopped their newspaper subscription because they never read them and she kept finding outdated piles of paper and plastic tossed into the corner of their porch. It was a waste of trees.

There were flowers on their doorstep when they finally got home. She picked them up and put them in a vase on the kitchen table. They were beautifully white, tips kissed with the lightest of pink.

Aren't they just lovely, she said. I wonder who they're from. There's no card.

Her husband shrugged and retired to their room. She knew he must have been exhausted. She helped him remove his jacket and shirt. While the edge of skin around the holes had healed on the surface, the doctor said he would probably feel discomfort for weeks. He compared the pain to six deep bruises. The ache and soreness would be there, but it was possible for her husband to continue his life as normal.

In bed she would softly trace the holes with the pads of her fingers. She would see pictures, connecting the dots in the constellation of his chest. Sometimes she would imagine Ursa Major curled up in bed next to her, fur toasty and inviting. Other times she could see a face staring down, its hollow eyes the color of the ceiling. She kissed each hole tenderly, savoring his shudders as her lips brushed his skin. The first one was on his shoulder, the second below his collarbone. The doctor said they were the first shots, the ones that caught her husband off guard. Three and four were close together, almost touching, under his ribs. He must have turned to run, they said, but he wasn't fast enough. Five was in the middle of his chest. She could imagine the recoil of the gun shifting the

shooter's aim before he fired again. Six was above his left nipple, inches from his heart.

Yet he was still the same man she had fallen for. He was soft spoken and reserved, but he was sturdy and had a comfortable salary. A sensible choice, as her mother had put it. They hadn't known each other for very long, but he had romanced her with tickets to the opera and long warm nights by the fire with bottomless wine. After two content years she finally persuaded him to start a family of their own. They had been trying, though that was before the accident. She didn't see it as an end to that possibility, however. Maybe it was just more like hitting pause.

The warmth of sunlight stirred her from sleep. She had to go to work, she said. Her husband's arms tightened around her waist, his face in her neck. The holes pressed against her chest. I have to leave, she said. The warmth of his arms disappeared as he rolled over. She stared at his back, connecting the dots in her mind. She could see the crack in the wall through his shoulder. He had said he would fix that months ago, along with the dripping faucet in the guest bathroom. She closed her eyes.

In the break room, huddled around the coffee maker, they stared.

I'm just thinking about my husband, she said. I can't seem to picture him without knowing I'm missing a part of him, you know.

I heard, they all said. I'm so sorry.

She shook her head and smiled. Everything was okay, she said. She could make it through this. They tilted their heads and smiled sweetly, their eyes sad.

We're here if you need anything, they said. An empty promise. They would never accept him if they knew the truth.

She was eating dinner with her husband when there was a knock at the door. It was their neighbor, Linda, an elderly woman who always wore prescription glasses tied to a string around her neck and never on her face.

How are you feeling, Linda asked.

She said she was fine.

I brought you some casserole for later, Linda said, you know,

in case you are hungry. It has green beans in it.

Sounds delicious, she said. As Linda handed over the casserole, her glasses glinted at her throat.

Linda invited her over for dinner, but she was already eating, she said. She thanked her for the offer and went back inside.

Her husband was wearing a black shirt, his chest whole. His plate of food was still untouched, a shiny fork at the edge of his plate. She looked down at her own dinner.

I know, she said. I'm not the best cook. But you didn't marry me for my food, did you?

Her husband smiled.

She picked up the casserole.

How do you feel about green beans?

That night, when they made love, she forgot about the holes in a brief moment of bliss. She didn't need to count them with her mouth. There were no constellations to trace with her fingers. Only two beings, separate but whole, together in rapture. For a moment, there was no accident, no terror. Her heart raced but she felt at ease, finally comfortable and alive.

The next day there were more flowers on the porch, milky lilies glistening with dew. There was no card.

I must have a secret admirer, she said. You better step up your game, honey. She sniffed them and sighed. They would look lovely next to the curtains. But she remembered she didn't have another vase; she had used it for the flowers in the kitchen. She set them down on the side table and grabbed her purse.

I'll be back soon, she said. Her husband was next to the lilies, watching television on the couch, spotted like an unfinished painting. He was too interested in the game to look up, but he gave her a slight nod. I'm just running to the store. If you need anything, call me.

She drove to the supermarket that was just up the street, picked out a clear glass vase and got in line. The cashier behind the counter was young and attractive, with blue eyes and white teeth.

She jumped as a man leaned over and dropped a heavy pack of beer beside her vase. As he reached for a magazine from the rack, his eyes mapped a constellation over her chest. Her eyes fell to his

jacket pocket. It was too weighted and a pointed edge threatened to burst from the seams. She stared into his dark eyes, remembering them flash as her headlights shone through the shattered front door. His hand drifted towards his pocket, fingers curled as if ready to fire.

The cashier smiled, teeth glinting. Will that be all today, ma'am?

She could feel his eyes on her back. Knives pricked her skin. They were following her. She had to get out of there. She nodded and fumbled with her purse, desperately trying to appear calm.

They would shoot her just like they did her husband. She would have six holes in her chest, the first one on her shoulder, the second on her collar. She would try to run, but three and four would pass through her ribs. She would stumble, turning. Five would tear through her gut. She would fall. A black boot would shove her onto her back. He would level his gun, inches above her heart, and pull the trigger. At night, she would trace her constellation next to her husband's, Ursa Major and Ursa Minor entangled in the endless stars.

She grabbed the vase and left. The man walked out the store seconds later, hands empty, and followed her to her car.

Bone knuckles were white against the steering wheel. She drove off, watching him get into his truck in her rearview mirror.

He knew where she lived. They would be back.

Her hands were shaking as she pulled into her driveway. She didn't lock her car, the vase left forgotten on the passenger seat. There were flowers on her doorstep again, roses with petals so red they were almost black. The sickly sweet smell made her head spin. There was no card.

Is this some kind of sick joke, she called out. She threw them across the porch. Just leave me alone!

She bolted all the doors and shut all the windows. Her husband wasn't in the living room anymore, the yellow lilies dried and scattered on the carpet. She ran into the kitchen. The flowers on the table were stained brown, heads drooping from their stems like penanced monks.

She called for him. No answer. She called again, starting when she heard a thump from upstairs. She climbed the stairs two

at a time.

He was in their room, his back to her. There were clothes piled on the bedspread next to a large, strapped bag. She stopped in the doorway.

What are you doing, she said. They followed me home. They're going to kill us. We have to call the police. You can't just leave me.

Her husband shoved another shirt into his duffle bag. It was already full, shirts brimming to the zipper, yet he still grabbed for more.

Please, she said. Talk to me.

He hesitated, the green sweater like a limp fish in his hand. When he turned the movement seemed slow and methodical. There was a hole where his mouth had been, seamless and gaping. He made a choking sound and gasped for air, hands scratching helplessly at his throat.

She screamed and sank to the floor in the empty room. A barred prison, a broken heart. She had six holes in her chest. She stuck her finger in the hole over her heart and felt for the empty space. Her husband lay beside her, his shirt stained like watercolor. The intruder hadn't missed.

Haley Stuart is in the undergraduate program at Texas State University in San Marcos, TX, with a double major in English and French Studies. She is currently studying abroad and, after graduation, plans to travel and pursue a career abroad either writing or teaching English. This is her first publication.

All Things Round

|Olivia Anderson

Blindness runs in my family, but I don't need glasses yet. My grandmum wears saucer-shaped, oyster-rimmed glasses so thick that I never could bring myself to trust anything she saw. She seemed to be forever swimming ten feet under murky seawater, the icy salt and seaweed stinging her eyeballs. All the while, she sent messages up to me as I floated calmly at the surface. "There's not a cloud in the sky today, Gwen," bubbled up from the hazy depths of my grandmother's oglization of the universe. But as soon as those bubbles hit the surface, they burst. I watched the dark clouds crawl along the sky's murky floor like cigar smoke in the air and then closed my eyes.

Grandmum's only son, my father, smokes cigars. He used to smoke them sitting at the kitchen table, a teatime ritual—sip, puff, sip, puff. He stared at the circles of smoke, counting them, I suppose, watching them fall or float away. I used to snatch unbelieving schoolmates home. We crept like caterpillars along the outside of the house and peeked our eyes above the windowsill behind my dad's head. Under our noses, the wooly bodies of buff-tailed bumblebees rose like soap bubbles wiping clean the scum of salt air from the window glass. Our green and round, awestruck eyes watched my father's smoke rings drift and morph into legends fulfilled.

But when I turned seven, Grandmum forbade Dad's smoking in the house. "You'll be the death of us all," she prophesied. Granddad died of lung cancer the year I was born.

"Why do you smoke, Dad?" I remember asking.

"Life's a lil' clearer with a cigar in your hand, Chip," he answered, puffing out an empty, sad "O" of smoke. I looked through that "O" like a picture frame holding my father's snapshot of the cold Atlantic's dark horizon. It was beautiful, but even more so because he'd captured it. But for Dad, the smoke rings were at one moment infernal circles of descent into black mines and the next, a clear magnifying glass suspended over reality. Reality must've felt

like a squirming insect pinned to a piece of driftwood in my family, because only Dad and I ever saw eye to eye. Grandmum looked at Dad merely to scold and me to inform. Mum only looked at Dad with distracted eyes that could never quite keep on target. She was mostly away from home anyways, traveling the world with her career. When she looked at me, it was always with a present in hand, a pair of polka-dot shoes from Tangiers, a geisha doll from the Far East. Mum's squinting eyes told me she loved me and was happy to see me, but her lips, forever twitching a smile, said that she didn't actually know who her tomboy daughter was.

She was home at the moment on vacation from work, and "happy for it." But her definition of home—"Huer House, Bossiney Road, Tintagel, England"—was vastly different from mine. My senses cried "home" with the heady taste of ocean air, the metronomic pounding of waves against my Cornish cliffs, and the roughness of the grays, blues, and greens of stonewalls patterned chevron by villagers centuries ago. "Home" wasn't an address. It definitely wasn't the house inhabited by my parents, my grandmum, and myself. It was the ruins of the castle where legend raised a boy King Arthur; it was my father's voice and the smell of cigars. Mum never really came "home."

Dad worked in the mines like many in this area. Before Grandmum banished him out-of-doors, he'd come home in the late afternoon, wipe his blackened hands on our front lawn, leave his mud-caked boots and worn tools on our slate doorstep, and sit down solitary at the kitchen table to drink in Earl Grey and black smoke. It was at that table that the universe was pieced back together by Tennyson's *Idylls of the King*.

Sometimes I watched him in silence, listening to time being ticked by with the chime of flipping pages. Other times, he read aloud, resurrecting the souls of King Arthur, Lady Guinevere, and the knights of the Round Table on our kitchen table like a doctor with a defibrillator. Dressed in medieval gauderies, they looked about, surprised at unromanced modernity. Dad's black hands and holey clothes, and my boyish trousers and prying eyes were particularly startling. They'd have almost reconciled themselves to Dad and I when the telephone rang. Then they'd stare with terror at

the binging, curly-corded creature having a spasm attack on our wall and be completely lost to us. Ours was a very un-castle-like house—not the stuff of dreams or legends.

We chose to leave reality indoors after that. We didn't bother telling Mum or Grandmum. Dad and I, we live out-of-doors now. We walk along the edges of earth and watch fisherman float free in unspectacular rowboats through the deep, blue universe beyond. Some evenings we watch the sea swallow and extinguish the sun without so much as a bobber lip, swollen from the sun's belligerent heat. During this conflict between the celestial and terrestrial, I let loose all of the questions my mind stored up throughout the day, and Dad answers them.

“Why can't I see past the horizon, Dad?” is my first today.

His answer has nothing to do with the roundness of the earth or the imperfection of eyeballs—the answers my teachers at school gave me. “Backalong when earth and humans were new, the Creator gave man limitless vision. Would you believe it, Chip, if I told you he could look up into the blue, afternoon sky and see all the way to the stars. If he were to squint, he'd see to Heaven itself.”

I believe it.

“We used to be able to peer out at the horizon and see all of the fishermen. No one was ever lost at sea since we could always find and save them.”

“How far could we see past the horizon?” I ask, screwing up my eyeballs.

“As far as America without even squinting and with squinting we could see as far as China. But people began to be discontent. They saw food that they didn't have, happiness that wasn't theirs. They saw mountains more beautiful than theirs, fields more fertile, houses more stable, wives who loved deeper, families which were built stronger. It became a curse to be able to see because they could gaze 'pon all the riches of the world and be 'minded of everything they didn't and never would have. Instead of taking joy in their vision as the Creator intended, instead of learning from places and people they'd never be able to visit in their lifetimes, they grew bitter with their lot.”

“They must've been dafter than a buzza,” my lips repeat one

of Grandmum's favorite sayings. The thought of her eyes doubling in size through the lens of her glasses brings a giggle like ambrosia to my tongue.

Dad laughs too. "Some daft is right, Chip. The Creator blessed the eyes of mankind with a curse. Each time they compare their lot to another's and become discontent, their vision grows dimmer and dimmer, their reality smaller and smaller."

I sit down on the bench, the Norman vicarage behind me with the remains of a Roman milestone and generations' bones, Castle Mount before me with its crumbling walls of legend. Dad's voice has taught me so much. There is a constant roar of water rushing through the cave beneath the mount—an island, really, attached to England only by a solitary wooden bridge.

A tourist family enters the garden of moss-covered, knee-high walls where medieval ladies once went to be enchanted by music and to overflow with poetry. Can the family's eyes see the gold and sapphire patterned walls, the exotic plants, and the peacock strutting through aisles of blooming vegetation? The peacock and ladies sway as a young servant-musician creates coded dialogue with the lute, and two pairs of eyes meet with all of the intensity of the wild waves eroding the unmoving shore below. Can the tourists see the very souls of those golden, phantasmal figures?

"Dad, how far did I used to be able to see?" I ask, watching the tourists and medieval ladies cross paths. The music of the lute comes to my ears like sirens now. I try to hear it for the entire world that maunders about without pausing to listen to the servant.

Dad doesn't seem to hear him either, but continues on in his ordinary, low, smoky voice. I strain my ear to listen to him over the roaring of music. "When you were a babe, you could see Heaven itself. But then you became enchanted by Nala's doll next door and Ted's new jumper at school and the tourist children's nice clothes and became jealous. Now you can only see the horizon."

"I don't want to be blind," I whisper. To my surprise, Dad can hear me above the servant's song.

"If you learn to love your lot as though it were the best the world has to offer, if you learn to love others so much that you are happy for them in their lots, if you learn to want the best for others

so strongly that you'd give of your lot to make it true, you'll be saved from blindness, Chip."

"How far can you see?" I yearn for him to describe the depths of the sea; what the planets sound like over the constant hum of the servant's song.

"I know there's a horizon," he says softly, "but some days it's hard to make out." He pulls glasses out of his coat pocket like a magician without magic. They are a bandaged pair of plastic, carried rather than worn for so long that they now sit crooked on his face.

"Do you know what these are for?"

"To see the horizon better?"

In another part of the castle, smithies are storing away weapons in an underground room shaped like a round tunnel that doesn't lead anywhere.

"No, to see what's right in front of me better." His cigar is short now and cindering scarlet at the tip. With one final sip, he extinguishes it like the sun on the grass beside us. There's a small pile of cigar butts to accompany this one, marking our favorite patch of cliff. The wind obliterates Dad's final, smoky "O" like the cleansing tide of the Spirit, and he confesses, "My discontentment has not only marred my view of the horizon; the Creator is taking away my vision of all that is before me. He's taking away the opportunity to appreciate my own lot."

The sun slips just below a cloud on the horizon, safe from the insatiable sea for one more day. I smile, feeling that we too are safe, and watch the tourists—who have overstayed their welcome in King Arthur's castle—file down the steps, over the wooden bridge, and back to England and the present. Watching the last go, the medieval lady runs heedlessly through sunset smattered hallways and back to the garden. Her heart races with mine as she stands at the window watching west. Behind her, shaking fingertips reach out to touch—

"We best get back to supper or your Mum and Grandmum will have my head." Dad stands and his voice breaks the spell, frightening those fingertips that disappear once more behind a wall of exotic plants. I sigh, yearning to tell the medieval lady that her lover has come; he hasn't forgotten her. But I blink, and when my

eyes open again, all I can see are crumbling ruins clothed with moss and spotted with wildflowers. Maybe tomorrow they'll try again.

Dad's hand, stained black from mines and cigars, takes mine, and we return home as the sea is swallowing the sun. But I have hope that the great waters, lulled by the servant's sad lute through the night, will be enchanted by morning time. Then Dad and I will see the sun, spewed out like Jonah, re-embarking on its journey round us again through clearer skies than today's.

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I Don't Want Anybody Else

| Zachary Kocanda

I look at the WebMD page for irritable bowel syndrome, then the Wikipedia page of the list of people who've disappeared mysteriously. My ex-girlfriend's there, disappeared on her way to my apartment five years ago. There isn't any new information on the Wikipedia page, so I go back to the IBS page, then the page for Crohn's disease. I have a problem with how much I've been going to the bathroom.

I haven't checked the Wikipedia page with my ex-girlfriend in a while. That's because I have a fiancée now. Her name's Chloe. She knows my ex-girlfriend disappeared mysteriously over five years ago, but she doesn't know I have a problem with my bowel movements. She moved into my apartment two days ago, so she's going to know soon. We're going to be married in six months.

I start to watch *Ghostbusters*. I don't know how long I'm going to be on the toilet. I like *Ghostbusters*, but not "Ghostbusters," the theme. I mute the movie during the theme.

Chloe raps on the bathroom door. "So are you a yes or a no on the party?"

I pause the movie. "Sorry, I'm a no."

Chloe thinks I hate all of her coworkers, but that's not it. I don't want to have to use the bathroom at an apartment that isn't my own. Twice—or more likely, *three* times.

"I have a lot of work to do," I say.

"Are you okay? You've been in the bathroom, like, *twice* in the past hour."

"I'm on my laptop," I say. "I was sending e-mails and then I started watching *Ghostbusters*. I have to watch it for the two of us."

"*Ghostbusters* can stay in the bathroom," she says.

Chloe isn't a fan of ghosts—or movies that have ghosts, like *Ghostbusters*—even though it's a comedy, an Oscar-nominated comedy. When I argue with Chloe, I play the theme song and she says, "Stop! Stop!"—because she knows the song is from a movie with ghosts—and the argument stops.

When she was young, Chloe's brothers scared her *every* Halloween by dressing up like ghosts. They're both assholes, so I accept her words as fact. If there's anything worse than a ghost, it's a ghost who's an asshole. I spit out my drink on our third date when she said, "Casper can go *fuck* his friendly self."

Chloe says good-bye and I open the bottom drawer under the sink, take out the small notebook I store there.

"Ten." I add a tally to the chart of my bowel movements this week. I started making charts two weeks ago. Ten is the most out of every day this week and last week. It's not even ten o'clock. I put the notebook back in its drawer. I have to schedule a doctor's appointment soon, but I'm busy with my work.

I open an e-mail from my friend David. There's no subject and, "Here's from the party," are the only words in the body of the e-mail. I open the attachment and look through photographs from a party at my apartment a month ago. There are shots of Chloe and me, pre-bowel movement problems, on the couch, having fun. A blur runs from my shoulder to the bottom right of the photo.

I zoom in on the photo.

It's Sylvia.

I work as a graphic designer, so I stay at the apartment all day. I look more into the photographs from the party after Chloe goes to work. Sylvia's in there, for sure. Yes, it's a blur, but when I zoom in, her face, her neck, her shoulders are there, and then her body disappears into the whiteness. She's only in one of the fifty-two photographs. It's the only one with just Chloe and me.

I shut my laptop, move to the living room, and sit on the couch, exactly where I sat in the photograph, with Chloe by my side. I put my arm up and over and rest it on the back of the couch—on Sylvia's side, the side where Sylvia is in the photograph. I pause.

"Sylvia."

I wake up sweaty at 11:52 p.m. with an upset stomach. I move to the bathroom, but stop when I hear a song. I hear a song at two o'clock in the morning. And it's "Ghostbusters."

I make my way to the living room and turn on the light. My laptop's on the table, iTunes open, playing "Ghostbusters." The

whole *Ghostbusters* soundtrack is on my iTunes, but I've never played the theme song. When it pops up, I always skip it.

I shut my laptop before I go to bed. I know. I always shut my laptop before I go to bed. I stop the song and close the laptop.

"Who the fuck's in here?" I ask. "Who the *fuck's* in my apartment?" I turn on the light in the kitchen and take a knife from a drawer. If you make me listen to the theme from *Ghostbusters*, you should be stabbed.

I move from room to room, knife in hand, echoes of "Ghostbusters" in my head. The front door is locked. The kitchen—no. The living room—*nada*. The bathroom—no. I use the bathroom and add a tally to my notebook. It's past midnight now, 12:02 a.m., so here's number one for Saturday. I go back to the bedroom, putting the knife under the bed.

Chloe's asleep. If there *had* been an intruder in the apartment whose *modus operandi* was playing the *Ghostbusters* theme song from the apartment owner's laptop, he totally would've murdered Chloe in her sleep.

"You're welcome," I joke to her.

Saturday morning, I use my phone and take a few photos of the couch in the living room. I don't know how ghosts work, but maybe Sylvia has to stay on the couch. Maybe it's a *hotspot*, as they say in the reality shows about ghost investigators. I zoom in on every photo. No Sylvia. But I can use these if I ever put the couch on Craigslist.

I sit on the couch and take a few photos of myself. Maybe she only shows up when I'm there. There's no Sylvia, but I look like shit. I delete all of the photos of me and the couch.

I open my laptop, the webcam running. I don't ever use the webcam. I exit out of the window. There's a photo saved to my desktop and I open it. It's saved as a number, no name. The photo shows the living room wall, the TV in the center.

The ghost looms on the far-right. It's Sylvia, the ghost of Sylvia, a blur that has her face, her neck, and her shoulders, again disappearing into the whiteness. It was taken at 11:57 p.m., as "Ghostbusters" played from the laptop. I open my iTunes and delete

the theme song from my catalogue.

I go to the bathroom and add another tally to Saturday.

If Sylvia's a ghost in the photo, she has to be dead. I sit in the bathroom with my computer on my lap and go to the Wikipedia page of people who've disappeared mysteriously. No new information. I Google her name. Nothing new.

I don't know why Sylvia would play the *Ghostbusters* theme song for me at midnight. Her one-word review of the movie was so-so at best.

"Meh," she said to me after we watched it. We sat in the couch in her apartment in the living room. "I'm going to bed," she said.

I said, "Fuck," over and over on the way back to my apartment. I was sure *Ghostbusters* had fucked up my relationship with Sylvia. I hadn't dated in two years, and now here was a woman who liked me, more or less, before I just *had* to play her an '80s comedy I liked more than I should. But an Ivan Reitman movie didn't fuck up my relationship with Sylvia. I don't know what it did. But two years later, she was added to the Wikipedia page.

I put down my laptop, take out the notebook, and add a tally under Tuesday, three for the day so far. 10:45 a.m. I can probably stay under ten today. Sunday was eight; Monday, ten. I'm going to schedule a doctor's appointment soon.

"Come over," Sylvia had said the day after we watched *Ghostbusters*. "But no *Ghostbusters II*, you nerd."

I was okay with that.

Chloe and I eat Chinese takeout in the living room. I only eat white rice. It's six o'clock on Wednesday and I'm at five in my notebook. There's a book from the library on the table, *Faces of the Living Dead*, a hardcover that, based on the card in the front, had not been checked out in over five years. I can't show Chloe the photographs of Sylvia in our apartment, but I can show her fake photographs from over a hundred years ago.

"They're just photographs, Chloe," I say. "Look, nothing bad." I open up the book to ghosts in photographs from the 1800s, mostly couples, but one of the two is a ghost, or "ghost."

Chloe stops eating, her chopsticks balancing a loop of noodles and mixed vegetables in front of her mouth.

“In the nineteenth century,” I say, “ghost photographs were faked with double exposures. The scam ended when the photographer started to put *living people* in the photos as the ghosts. So some dude would look at a photo that’s supposed to have a ghost in it and *bam*—he’s the ghost. He’s the dead person.”

“Please,” she says. “Put it away.” I nod and put the book away for now. “Where are all the RSVPs from your family? Are they even *coming*? Is our neighbor coming? The invitation says to RSVP by next week.”

I turn on the TV and there’s a reality show about a team of investigators—*ghost* investigators. I go to a basketball game before she knows what’s on. I don’t like basketball, Chloe doesn’t like basketball. But it’s not ghosts.

“I’ll ask,” I say. I have to use the bathroom.

Sylvia played the *Ghostbusters* theme last Friday. The party at our apartment was on a Friday. So there’s probably going to be ghost activity tonight. Maybe ghosts, like living people, have work to do during the week and they do what they do best on weekends. Chloe raps on the bathroom door. I’m at eight for the day. The Wikipedia page for people who’ve disappeared mysteriously is open on my laptop. Sylvia’s information is the same.

“Why’s there a notebook in the bathroom?” she says. “I was looking for a new toothbrush and there it was.”

“That’s for my work,” I say. “Ideas, ideas, ideas. I have the best ideas in the bathroom, isn’t that funny?”

“I read it.”

It’s 5:42, and Chloe’s meeting a friend, one of her bridesmaids, at a restaurant at six. She’s going to be late, and I say this.

“Is that how often you’re using the bathroom?” she asks.

“That’s not healthy. Your intestines are going to like, *blow up* if you don’t do anything.”

“This isn’t fair,” I say. “Now that you know what the notebook is, you know I’m going to be here for a while so you can

interrogate me. And I'm out of toilet paper. This is *entrapment*."

"By definition, that's not entrapment," she says. "You're not in the bathroom because of *me*. It's because of your, your—you haven't even been to the doctor yet, have you?"

"I'm working on it," I say.

"What if it's Crohn's disease?" Chloe says. "My brother has Crohn's disease."

"That's probably why your brother's such an *asshole*."

"My brother knows how to RSVP to a wedding on time."

"Chloe, there are more important problems than RSVP'ing to the wedding and how much I shit," I say. "There are *way* more important problems."

"Such as?"

I start to play the theme song from *Ghostbusters* from YouTube. Ray Parker, Jr., do your worst.

"This isn't going to work," Chloe says.

"Okay," I say, "you're not going to believe me, but you should know I have *evidence*." I stop the song.

"Go on."

"Sylvia's ghost is in our apartment." I shut my laptop. "Wow, I don't know if I've ever said *our* apartment before. Isn't it nice? *Our* apartment. But yeah, there's a ghost in it."

"Is this because of the wedding?" she says. "I wasn't sure if you were ready. If you're not ready, say that you're not ready so we can—*God*, you should get an MRI so we can know if there's something wrong with your head. A ghost? You know how I—okay, just take your shit and put it in your notebook and do a fucking séance with your Ouija board. Tell your ghost I say hi. I'll be back later—*bye*."

I don't have any toilet paper. I don't have a Ouija board, either. I add a tally to my notebook and put it back in the drawer.

Chloe's not going to be back for hours, so I use my phone to record a video and move from room to room looking at the one-and-a-half by two inch rectangle for any ghosts. And *voilà*, in the living room, on the hotspot, she's there.

Sylvia's ghost is on its side on the couch, her face turned

away from me, her form white and static, like I paused a movie, like I paused my VHS copy of *Ghostbusters*, but one of the characters is my ex-girlfriend.

My movement has no effect on her. She stays as she is. I move my phone from left to right, taking in the whole couch, all of Sylvia's body, pausing on her supernatural hips. I tip-toe over to the couch and throw the pillows away. I start to spoon her ghost, say her name.

I say her name twice. The ghost says nothing to me. I use my phone to look at her face and my stomach is upset, more upset than it's been from having to use the bathroom as much as I have. It's not Sylvia. The ghost doesn't have a face.

I pace back from the couch. The ghost's form becomes more static, there and then not there, like when there's a strobe light in a haunted house—or a haunted apartment. The ghost stirs, like it's been woken from a nap, and turns to me. It's not Sylvia. The ghost has Chloe's face. My phone dies and I throw it at nothing. I fall over the table in the living room and run out of my apartment.

I knock on the door of the apartment next to ours. The resident, Sam, holds a beer, has the usual *laissez-faire* look on his face. He gives me an upward nod.

“Hey,” I pant. “Are you going to RSVP to the wedding?”

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Girl Meets Death Meets Girl

| Eric Rubeo

The first time I met the Immortal Man he arrived at our family reunion unannounced and uninvited. I was eight. My great-aunt Aggie, the eldest, almost had a fit. *Not a peep of you in over thirty-five years!* she cried. *What makes you think you're still welcome here?*

The Immortal Man, made to look somewhat younger in his pinstripe party suit and a black bowtie, grinned a bright white immortal grin. *Oh Margaret, you old hag, you always know how to make me laugh.* He chuckled, perhaps amused by the irony.

Aunt Aggie gave him a look as if to ask *who are you calling old hag?* but the Immortal Man either ignored her, or didn't notice. He made his way over to the snack bar on her kitchen table, through the clearing made by a handful of his star-struck relatives and whipped out a bowl of exotic nuts he'd hand-picked somewhere in South America. He called over a cousin of mine, the one with the funny front tooth, and began launching home-roasted cashews into her mouth while Aunt Aggie and the rest of the family stood gawking.

From the far couch in the backroom, I watched, nose perched ever so slightly over my book and wracked with curiosity. After all, who wouldn't be? I'd heard of the Immortal Man but he'd been missing for quite some time. Aunt Aggie used to speak fondly of him. Now her tongue spit fire. *In my house no less!* she chastised, swatting the back of his head with a curled newspaper.

For a while I stared at him, unsure of which light and angle best captured his essence. Speckles of white teased his dark hair. Shallow crow's feet clawed at his eyes when he smiled. No matter how I looked at him, I had to admit; he was quite pretty for his age.

But like a bird scared of the flash, when my mother tried to snap a polaroid, both Aunt Aggie and the Immortal Man shrieked, and the festive atmosphere was sucked out like by vacuum. In the blink of an eye, the device was shattered on the tile floor, the negative was shredded, and despite Aunt Aggie's calling after him, the Immortal Man was out the door.

...

The next time I met the Immortal Man, he showed up at a family get-together for my mother's brother's birthday. Aunt Aggie's house again. I was fifteen. No one had seen him since the reunion.

My uncle, just turned forty, watched the Immortal Man step out of a deep blue Jeep Wrangler with half a wardrobe packed in the back seat. The nose of an upturned kayak strapped to the roof dipped in front of the windshield like my brother's bangs. Snow chains fitted around the front two wheels kicked up grass from the yard like soccer cleats. The Immortal Man approached the front porch with a small package under his arm. A present for my uncle, no doubt.

Where do you think he gets all that stuff? the cousin of mine with the ugly braces to fix the funny front tooth asked.

Dunno, I said, but reasoned an immortal man must have his ways.

Always vigilant, my uncle called for Aunt Aggie, who was upstairs taking a nap. She took a lot of naps in those days.

Look at you. Only seven years this time, she said, seething, as she limped down the stairs on her good foot. *If you tried any harder, we might've thought you loved us.*

I'm sorry. I skipped town for a while and forgot to tell you, he said as he passed her by. He handed my uncle the present which turned out to be a box of chocolate strips made from coco-beans grown only in the mountains of East Asia. He said it tasted as he imagined heaven would.

Aunt Aggie refused to have any herself, but when she wasn't looking, the Immortal Man, laughing, snuck a small piece into her mouth which Aunt Aggie spit onto the floor in disgust. When no one was looking, I picked it off the floor and ate that piece of the Immortal Man's gift myself.

...

The next morning, the Immortal Man surprised us both, especially great-aunt Aggie, when his car was still parked out front. I woke up early for school in the spare bedroom she'd furnished for me and found him frying eggs over easy in her kitchen. I don't think she believed me when I told her the Immortal Man was cooking

breakfast downstairs.

She must've been worried if she asked his plans he might up and leave on a moment's notice, so she never did and she asked me not to as well. Life continued as it had, only now Aunt Aggie had an immortal man living with her.

In those days, I stayed at Aunt Aggie's a lot, so I saw him quite a bit. He would often ask me: *How's the old hag doing when I'm not around?* quietly in the living room in the few minutes we shared before the hag in question would limp in to greet me after school. Most of the time I had nothing to say, though. As long as he lived with her, he was rarely not around. I was a little jealous, but I tolerated the extra company just to see Aunt Aggie smile.

One afternoon I was packing my bag to come home when my brother rang. Mom was on a drunken rampage. I unpacked my bag and stayed put for the night.

I didn't mean to peek. I swear. I was fifteen, and curious. I couldn't very well leave them alone.

As the daylight began to dim, I found the two of them sitting on the stoop of the back porch. The forested backyard cast long curved shadows that crept upon the house like sinister arms. They reached towards Aunt Aggie, steadily gaining momentum as the daylight continued to age and wither. From the window, I only saw her profile, but in the evening summer sun, just before all went dark, she was more beautiful than ever. To her right, the Immortal Man held a flask, unaware of the encroaching shadows. I perched softly on the couch and allowed the subtle breeze to carry their voices through the opened window.

We had some good times, didn't we? Some good adventures.

The Immortal Man took a swig.

Yeah. Some of the best.

You won't forget me, will you?

Of course not.

Slowly, as if they were the closet of friends, she leaned into him resting her head on his shoulder. He didn't resist. I might have thought he didn't notice at all, except he was careful not to buck her boney cheek when he lifted the flask to his lips and sipped, slowly, like it were the elixir of life and he had to savor the sweet

taste. When he was through he handed it to Aunt Aggie, who hadn't drank since before her first hair turned gray, and she took a swig, bittersweet, like a thirsty youth only too aware there's no more drink after this. That the buzz can only be carried so long. The night approaches. The liquor store is closed. This was all they had left to share.

Stay with me 'til the end? She said. It won't be much longer.

Promise.

The Immortal Man lifted the flask out of her hand.

Of course.

And in that moment, even I believed him, but by the very next morning, he was gone.

...

The last time I met the Immortal Man, he showed up at Aunt Aggie's funeral. I was still fifteen. I half expected he wouldn't show, but part-way through the service, I found him standing in the back, peering down his nose at the open casket in the center of the sanctuary.

I wanted to go to him. To say something or maybe hit him, but I couldn't. Not here in this chapel while we were supposed to be paying our respects to Aunt Aggie.

At the cemetery, after the service, her casket lay resting to the side of the grave, I again found the Immortal Man standing towards the back. His funeral black matched his equally black sunglasses, like Death watching from afar the results of his handiwork.

Even though all Aunt Aggie's siblings had passed and she never had any children of her own, members of the family pined to speak fondly of her. Almost everyone, even my mother, had something nice to say, but the Immortal Man remained silent.

And that silence spoke louder than anything else.

At fifteen, I didn't understand death, if it's something anyone ever really understands. I felt the hurt in my chest, of course. I felt the hurt of the entire family. We'd lost our matriarch. We'd never be the same. But there was more to it than that. With her went her home, and the haven it provided, and I didn't want to think about that. I was too scared to shed any tears. Instead I found myself searching desperately for the Immortal Man.

He had moved on, now standing behind my cousin with the formerly funny front tooth, hand resting on her shoulder. She was crying. She was crying the tears I wished I could cry myself and he was comforting her, whispering in her ear. I tried to read his lips, but I couldn't. They were moving fast and I could only see half his face and so all I know about what he said is that after a little while, the girl stopped shaking, and when she did, she reached up across her chest and touched the hand on her shoulder with her own.

Oh how I so desperately wished I was the girl with the formerly funny front tooth. The priest said one final prayer, and in a moment of silence, the casket was lowered into the ground. It was time for the whole family to say goodbye to the great Aunt Aggie. I finally began to cry, it clouded my vision, turning my whole world ugly, but when my mother stepped up behind me and wiped the tears off my face, both he and my cousin were gone.

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Faking It

| Ali Jenkins

There was an accident—it was Felicity.

She's gone?

She's gone.

I was running late, as usual. I'd changed my outfit at least a dozen times and had finally settled on the light, yellow dress with the lace crochet. It was late August and the early morning breeze caught at my dress, whispering distant promises of fall as I raced to my car. Kaci let me in once I pulled up and we traded morning stories of broken coffee pots and noisy cats. I wasn't particularly excited to spend the day a slave to retail, but I forced myself to stay positive. *Fake it until you make it*, I thought with a quick, rueful smirk. I skipped as we walked to the bank together. Kaci noticed and grinned.

"Someone's happy today."

"It's a good day," I replied. Then, more to myself, "It's going to be a good day."

Later, when my parents visited me, I smiled at the welcome surprise.

We're four and five—you six months older. Just a tiny edge that says you're better. It's our last Christmas at Mama Cleo's because next year she'll get pneumonia and our parents will use the words "passed away" and we'll question why that means we can't visit her anymore. We're in the living room, a huge place to our small eyes. We've set up sleeping bags next to each other on the floor, but despite the long day spent traveling and running around outside beneath the pecan tree, we're reluctant to sleep. We stay up whispering, giggling about the loose tooth you've been picking at all day. I hug my pillow to me, wishing I had a loose tooth to flaunt.

"Pikachu isn't the best Pokémon, you know," you say, pointing to my pillow. "Charmander is."

"Nuh-uh!" I retort, gripping the insulted party defensively. "My

Pikachu can take your stupid blue pillow, easy!”

We giggle hysterically as we fight for our pillows’ honor. But in the end, I am victorious when one good blow knocks your tooth across the room. You’re startled, unsure whether to cry or laugh, but I stand up, holding my champion above my head and exclaim with all the righteous glory a four-year-old can muster, “What do you think of Pikachu now, Hope?”

We joke about that night for years.

They took me to the break room while Kaci watched the front; we weren’t busy. I hadn’t noticed the red-rimmed eyes or the solemn faces at first; I had just been glad to see them. But now I recognized their loss, and fear turned my stomach. I scrambled to take control of the situation.

“Is Mark okay?”

“Mark’s okay.”

“Is Granddad okay?”

“Granddad’s fine. So are Mama Ellen and Uncle Tony.”

“Then what—?”

They made me sit down. They hadn’t wanted me to find out through Facebook on my break. They had only just heard. A car crash—an accident. She was only nineteen. My age.

She’s gone?

She’s gone.

By eight, you know what you want from life. We make clay sculptures when I spend the night and yours always look smooth, graceful and real while mine vaguely resemble lumps of multicolored clay. Your paintings look ages beyond your years and people always say so.

“She’s so talented!”

“That’s our Hope; she’s a thirty-year-old painter in an eight-year-old’s body.”

“Stunning.”

“Breathtaking.”

I become adept at faking smiles, at pretending your perfection

doesn't bother me. I take art classes because I want people to stare at my work like they bask in yours. Six months might as well be six generations.

I didn't leave with them; I dried my tears and I worked so it would all go away. *Fake it until you make it.* I shelved books and pretended it was a distant nightmare; I sorted labels and didn't think about how terrible I had been to her; I alphabetized and got lost in the cadence of mundane tasks.

But reality has a tendency to trickle back.

I saw it in the way Kaci shot me pitying looks or handed me work to keep my mind occupied. I felt it when a song said something just right or a customer told me to have a nice day. Kaci sent me home two hours early and I concentrated on driving, suddenly terrified of the other cars on the road, of myself. I shut myself in my room, waiting for sobs to burble from my core and tear at my throat, to be overcome by the same emotion that had overpowered my mother when she had tried to tell me. I was dry-eyed when Dad found me. He didn't know what to say.

We drove to my aunt and uncle's in silence broken by tentative small talk about how I listened to classic rock now instead of screamo and show tunes. I stared out the window and tried not to think about how fast we were going.

"She told your aunt she wants to go by Felicity now."

"What? Where does that name even come from? She's been Hope for twelve years."

"Felicity is her first name. I think some mean girls at school were making fun of 'Hope.' She's trying to be different."

"I think it's stupid. Who changes their name at twelve? What kind of name is 'Felicity,' anyway? It's weird."

"Be nice, she's your cousin. You used to get along so well. What happened?"

"I dunno."

"Well, do you know the phrase, 'fake it until you make it?'"

"You want me to pretend to like her?"

"Only until you actually do."

Strangers littered the house, making loud, unnecessary chatter that nauseated me. My aunt, uncle, and little cousins were no where in sight and I stayed a recluse, comforting my grandfather while my mother—ever the social butterfly—flitted from person to person, memorizing names. Women sought me out, asking me how old I was, if I was okay, where I was enrolled in school. I thought about faking interest, but I didn't have the energy. I excused myself and went outside.

The playhouse wasn't quite what it used to be: the bushes that hedged the path leading from the house had grown together and I had to duck to get by; the yellow slide was grimy and covered in leaves; the wood was rotting; the swings sagged, their chains covered in blood-red rust. I sat on a flat rock and surveyed it all, seeing our ghosts running around, pretending the other side of the creek was another world—a place where we survived on berries and the water we sipped from our hands. I felt her here.

I wondered if I should say something, but I felt like a fraud. I watched their dog run around in her pen. I couldn't remember her name; they'd had another dog before this one that had died and I always got their names mixed up. I had been careless, like in so many other matters.

A black dog appeared at the edge of the trees, solemn, like he was coming to pay his respects. I stood, suddenly a child again, like when we would pretend there were wolves behind every trunk and were spooked any time a twig snapped.

"I'm sorry," I murmured to our ghosts, but it didn't seem like nearly enough.

"She's leaving high school a year early because she got into Samford's art program. Look, she's calling herself 'Everyone's favorite high school dropout.'" I show my friend the latest selfie you posted to social media. My teeth grind together, because even though you aren't smiling, you are still prettier than me.

My friend shakes her head, "She seems weird."

I laugh. "She went to a fancy art school for a few years and now she's taking commissions. I swear, everyone's treating her like she's God's gift

to modern art.”

“Why don’t you like her, again?”

“We have nothing in common. Last Thanksgiving we were mostly on our phones—no, I take that back, we talked about Netflix. But even then, she has weird taste.” As I say the words, I think about how I enjoyed quite a few of your suggestions. Jealousy and bitterness lick at me like a forked tongue, but I flash a smile that I do not feel so I don’t come off as harsh.

We’ve been in the same grade our entire lives and now you get to go to college before me.

I wore an unremarkable black dress and simple flats. I wasn’t even going to wear makeup, but Mom insisted, saying she had bought waterproof mascara specifically for the occasion. My brother, Mark, drove up from Mobile with his girlfriend and we all piled into the car with tissues and silence. The burial was for family only and I was amazed how many strangers that entailed. Mom made it clear that my job was to help my grandfather make it through the day and I clung to his side while he introduced me to everyone as his “other granddaughter.”

“You look beautiful.” I looked to the owner of the voice and smiled at my aunt’s mother. I opened my mouth to thank her, but her eyes grew watery and she parted her thin smile, “And Felicity was in the business of looking beautiful.” She patted my arm and left. I stared after her blankly, wondering why she couldn’t have left the compliment alone.

We moved to a bigger room as still more family showed up and I never knew grief until I heard my aunt wail in utter desolation.

An old lady I had never met took my hand and squeezed sympathetically, “I’m so sorry. I know how close you and Felicity were.”

I only nodded and returned to my grandfather’s side.

It’s Easter, which means a long service at your church, then lunch at Granddad’s new house. I talked my friend into coming along so I wouldn’t be so bored and now she sits next to me on the couch and we’re

giggling about something we texted each other. You sit across the room, next to your brother, glued to your phone and I'm thrilled that—for once—I have some sort of upper hand. You don't even attempt to speak to either one of us and, after a while, you join our mothers in the kitchen like you're already a woman. Maybe you are. Six months never seemed like so large a gap.

Sometime in the last year, we stopped pretending we had anything but blood in common and now our exchanges include "Pass the bread?" and "How's school going?" "Well, thanks."

If I had known that was the last time I would see you, I might have tried.

We skipped straight to the burial: no open casket, no last look or final goodbyes. Just a graveside sermon and an attempt at closure. She'd had it rough coming up, they said. She had been picked on and had self-image issues, but, toward the end, she was finally, truly happy. She had started color guard at Samford and her art was taking off and inspiring others. She was truly an inspiration to everyone who had had the joy and pleasure of knowing her.

Something broke inside of me and, while they were talking, I felt it rattle and clang, noisy and abrasive. I could not comprehend my own detachment. I watched the mourners rather than the casket and noted tearstained cheeks and bowed heads. Whenever a particularly heart-wrenching tidbit of her life was shared, a new sob erupted from the group, triggering a chain reaction that spread like sorrowful wildfire. And I was just . . . hollow. Empty enough to hear the echo of my own thoughts as they resonated through my body.

When the group dispersed, a line formed leading up to the casket and I led my grandfather up to it, wrestling with words, with feelings I didn't understand. When it was our turn he cried, took a flower and quickly moved away, my mother rushing to his side. Uncomfortable, I reached out, hesitated, and touched the smooth wood, running a hand over it like I could comfort her. Like I could ever have provided her with true comfort. I stared at the flowers arranged on the casket in varying shades of yellow and removed my hand. I thought about saying something profound aloud, but

heartfelt soliloquies weren't in my nature. So I bowed my head and I did what I had always done best: I faked it. But as my own indifference pressed down upon me like penance, I knew I had never made it.

I took a flower, forgot about it, and it died in my car.

Ali Junkins is a junior at the University of Montevallo, AL, studying English with a concentration in medieval literature. She is the Social Chair of her chapter of Sigma Tau Delta and she hopes to make writing her career. "Faking It" is her first publication and is dedicated to Trevelyn, the freest soul she has ever known.

An African Silence

| Rachel Burns

It isn't the cries at night that hold me suspended above sleep: it's the silences in between. The coarse, organic sounds, so removed from being human, are more welcome than the blankness that follows. The silence never fails to bring a fearful metallic taste to my tongue.

I wasn't warned about the silences though I'd heard about the nocturnal calls. Some of them are ferocious. Others, mournful. And some only whisper along the savanna grasses like a ghost or a lullaby. Perhaps the ghost of a lullaby. We're all infants here, clutched in a cradle of honey-colored earth. It rises up on all sides almost smothering but for the sky above. This valley's sky is the freest thing I've ever seen.

But, there's still the silence.

Tonight it's louder than any howl, roar, hoot, or huff. It's louder than my own sounds, muffled by my pillow as I try to stop sobbing.

I shouldn't be here. I have no right to this place. It's been bred out of me, my genes wrung dry. As if I could matter in this place I have no real bond with. As if I could belong. I thought—hoped—I would.

There's the feeling that if I can only smooth my face, stop thinking, then the hippo-like sleep waiting below, girthy and immense, can swallow me. The grimace won't straighten though.

I can feel the many muscles in my face groaning as they maintain a gargoyle's sneer: my mouth drawn back, my teeth pushed out, brow so furrowed it feels as though my eyes have shrunk back behind my eyebrows. All this pressed into the pillow as my whole body shakes. The silence balloons, until—

heeheeeh—

The rubbery laugh of a zebra cut short. Silence is death.

Long moments pass and my Judas mind plays a lurid pantomime. Teeth on some warm and heaving neck. Shallow breathing. A final shriek. Loved liquid pouring out. Life in all its

fragrant horror, too delicious and striking to turn my back on. It's only a little death in scientific, logical terms, after all. I should be able to accept that. I study biology; I *understand* life.

My skin burns from the tears, already crusted into my newly sunburnt cheeks and lips and chest. In my unending vanity I'm glad I don't share my tent with one of the other researchers.

I hate the silence, but what will I do without its full, stagnant breath pressing in on my ear? What will I do without the dazzling explosion of noise, of vitality, of throbbing life that comes with the animal calls at night? But, how could I stay?

I blame the rain for what went wrong. I came all this way to study the interactions of elephants and for a month there's been nothing. That month of endlessly scanning the damp horizon got to me and now I have to leave. Leave the camp, the reserve, the continent, and go back to a life that's less real. Home. Home to the things out there is a nest, a herd, this valley scooped out by some ancient mahogany god. Home for the wildebeests and hyenas and giraffes and birds and lizards, the pulsing air, the half-dead trees, the metamorphic rocks, and especially the nursing river. They've imprinted on this grand mother and I had convinced myself I had too. But what would Africa want with me? She has too much on her golden plate without this little girl lost to look out for. I'm the zebra at the back of the herd, not wounded, not old, but too captivated by the mass of the great blessed sky to see the lioness between the grasses. Darwin knew what brings down beasts like me.

These thoughts are too much.

It isn't safe to be alone at night but as I unzip the tent I find grey-downed dawn beginning.

The stars are brighter than they are across the ocean. Here, they're manifold, like the city lights I saw while flying into Nairobi, just one of the big African cities no one shows on television. All they show are the hungry children and women or the tribes or the wildlife. Pieces of Africa, never the whole.

Gazing up outside my tent, I see Orion. Bow forever drawn. This earth will crumble and some new one will start and from that smoking, new-born surface you could still see him lying in wait. The astral man who never relinquishes his duty.

I'm desperate to see elephants cresting the hilled horizon, framed by a swollen sunrise their ridiculous magnificence swaying in silhouette as if they were heralds of the sun, trumpeting the news that the world had successfully spun itself into one more day.

In thinking this, I fool myself into hope but when I look east I see nothing. I can't let go of this burning ore, though—it's all I have left in the still and silent camp—so I follow the path up the closest hill where the burgeoning sun feels closer than I've ever been. Except for yesterday.

It's delusional to think that Africa made this moment for me. I treat myself to the thought anyway, letting myself feel mighty at the peak as I find the throne-like rock we sat on and settle in to watch the valley dust off the night.

Yesterday, in the amber light of the coming day some echo of elephantine musthe, of passion and percussive emotion, must have hit me to make me do what I did. It convinced me that I belonged here, my ancestry magnetizing my blood, my allure enhanced by the wild things around us. Surely, in Africa, my wide hips had purpose, my tight curls a measure of familiarity, my skin lapping up the missed ancient sun.

Before coming here I felt I was too Black to fit in. Now I know I'm too White. Everything is in me, but nothing in the proper measure. Everything isn't enough.

We watched the sunrise yesterday, my professor and I, to celebrate the end of the rains. He had spotted a small flash of white, a rare natural color in this landscape. It was the skeleton of a baby elephant. Tender but strong. The knowledge of its could-have-been future lounging in the shadows of the petit tusks and ribcage, rounded like cashews.

I can see it now, tucked in the grasses by the bend of the swollen river. The world isn't silent anymore as the wind picks up. The birds sing in their dawn-frenzy and the river hums along to a melody the rest of us are too young and unobservant to know.

The scene is so much like yesterday's that I feel split between times. My professor, his eyes blue in his ruddy skin, his curly satyr hair dark grey at the top and lightening towards the ends. He greeted the day with a lion's grin from this high-up hill with me. In

his casual way he said, "Elephants don't forget their dead."

I don't forget mine either, though the graves I've dug aren't for the people I've loved but the chances I've lost. The flitting could-haves, just as appallingly large and vanished as the hint of dead possibilities the elephant calf's skeleton holds.

Conscious of the weighty burden of choice, I put my hand on his knee, just below the end of his khaki shorts. I felt the tin-colored woolly hair that grows there. He was muscled, warm and living. For a long hot second I felt sharp and bright as a heated sword waiting for the smith's hammer to strike.

But then he picked my hand up, gently, and placed it back on my own lap with a vacant squeeze. From the corner of my eye I saw him stand and then look out and away before he left, framed by the sharpening light. My far Orion man.

I'm left on the anvil, abandoned to dull and rust and remain unforged.

Now, I shudder off the memory as the sun grows, expanding my vision of the earth and I see an elephant, just one. My heart grows wings.

She's angled towards the river, a weariness in her shambling walk. She stops and I know she's seen the skeleton. My newly winged heart pounds on the locked doors of my ribcage.

She stumbles to the white array of wasted life. I wonder if it's hers or just some little one she knew. Maybe she lost a baby like it or maybe she's just drawn to the sad dignity of the thing, same as me. Even from this far up I can hear her take a breath, like a sob, and gently pick up a femur with her trunk. For long, still moments she holds it and the copper light of the sun dyes her hide gold. A treasure.

She puts the bone back down and shuffles on to the river, following the broad curves of water dug out over eons. And I'm left alone in a silence that isn't a silence, not if you know what an elephant's love sounds like carried on an African breeze. How can I ever fear silence again if I carry that eternal sound in me, stirred back into my blood.

Rachel Burns is a senior at Winthrop University in Rock Hill, SC, where she is pursuing a B.A. in English with a concentration in writing. Her creative work has appeared in the past three editions of Winthrop's annual arts catalog, The Anthology, and in last year's edition of The Rectangle. She serves as vice president of the Iota Mu chapter.

Hollow: A Consumer's Diet

|Tess Gunty

These were the ingredients of your twenties: a plate of steamed polka-dots and deep fried books. Bottled answers and pickled formalities. Engineered sneezes and starched manners. 1,189 non-fat lattes, two engagement rings; one ground, one whole. Tequila. Generous amounts of tequila. Four cups of melted snow. Blushing boys and brash boys, beardless boys, bozo boys, brave boys, and finally the right boy. Man. Two clandestine packs of cigarettes. Eleven applications, all powdered and artificially flavored. One modish diploma, two congratulatory e-mails, and many cans of beige paint. Dehydrated cubicle light and finely chopped Excel sheets. All ingredients kept at high altitude in a temperate climate. Yes: you spent your twenties elated and elevated; facing north in your North Face.

And then you were thirty. Head in the sky, retinas domed by full price designer sunspecs. "Designer," because someone designed them; "designer" because they weren't vomited by some factory in passive voice, like others. You feel safer when both you and your world are filtered and tannish.

Behind the shades, you keep your eyes upped in your East Side, lowered in theirs, but today you are lost. Your iThings have died. You sit in your Porsche, nibble your manicure, sink in your seat. You find yourself in Spanish Harlem with nothing but electronic carcasses for company. At a stoplight you witness a drug deal. It is flagrant. Something bad and yellow sprouts like a dandelion in your chest. A voice drifts from a shock of kale in the backseat. Says: "Oh well." Your coconut water and pine nuts corroborate.

And you agree. You agree with your groceries. Because they are organic and vaguely labeled "local" and the man who sold them to you at Whole Foods was named Cyprus and he looked organic and vaguely local, too.

Red lights. Green is your favorite color. Avoid their eyes. Still red. Avoid their eyes. Green. Good. Go.

You park on Park Avenue, where you belong, where a penthouse belongs to you. When you rise up to your apartment this evening, you observe with grave disappointment that Marie Antoinette, your Persian cat, does not match the carpet as well as you'd hoped. Wash your hands.

Prepare the food that evening using a recipe your friend Clara said you simply *had* to try. I mean really, a recipe that requires liquid smoke. The pan splutters. Is butter *passé*? You open the cabinet, and spices wait like little witch-vials, menacing. Brow sweat doesn't become a young woman; dab your forehead—gentle, wrinkle-prevention tissue dabs. You compare the photo of the meal on your iPhone to the hissing lump in your pan, waxing-edible. Turn up the jazz, sip some Pinot Noir, chew a castoff mint leaf, light a candle. Fill up the kitchen, your mouth, your ears. Fill them all up full.

Your husband arrives home, fixes you a ginger cocktail. You like the way he looks in his loosened tie, but when he kisses you, he seems shorter. Invert your frown. Don't play the female clown. While dressing the table, you listen to Édith Piaf's "La Vie en Rose." You hum along, because it's the right thing to do.

The food is underseasoned and undercooked, and you either overdid or underdid the liquid smoke. Probably underdid. Problems are always underdone. In spite of this, your husband says "phenomenal" three times during dinner, and you love him for his gentle lies. His polite deceit. Afterwards, you brush your teeth with your new Supersmile paste. You floss, because that's the kind of person you are.

You examine your reflection in the medicine cabinet mirror. Whisper, "Le mur murant Paris, rend Paris murmurant." The words have ascended from a grave deep in your chest. Resurrected from some long-ago French lesson. Your husband hears you, touches your waist. "I love when you speak French," he says. Noting his restored height, you happily rise on your toes to meet his lips.

The murmurs are exchanged. The lights killed. The bodies lit. The shades drawn.

He doesn't use a condom, he doesn't pull out, and you climax concurrently. And even though yours was a hiccup of an orgasm, you are happy because in college, you once read that

the female orgasm increases likelihood of fertilization during intercourse, so you are happy. You are happy.

The previous Saturday, you had accompanied Clara and Lucy to a designer baby store, full of things that designers designed. The store was made of glass, and you quelled a primal desire to launch BPA-free baby bottles through the glistening sheets. You shrank away from the transparent periphery, searched for a lower level. There wasn't one. So you lingered in the well-stocked middle, observed racks of tiny fedoras and rows of tiny boat shoes and strollers of tiny humans, and these things filled you with a tiny sort of awe.

Once you were alone on the subway, you touched your flat stomach and felt hungry. Hollow. Perhaps it was the juice cleanse. But you felt full of nothing except the feeling that you needed to be filled. You hate the subway. You hate the rats. The drunks. The sordid vermin that breed in the bowels of the city. But that Saturday, as the train lights flickered, you thought about the perfection with which the subway fit inside its tunnel. The haunting, necessary beauty of it pricked each of your waxed pores. You imagined the tunnel without the train gliding inside it, and you felt sad.

You told this to your husband that evening. He hugged you and said, "Let's try."

"We're trying," you told your sister on the phone a few days later. You like this phrase. Its ambiguity seems accurate.

Now, after the sex, you fall asleep with your left hand in your husband's thinning hair. For a moment, you can't remember who had been on top, and this concerns you. But your floodlit brain soon dims; you sleep.

You dream that you are walking in a well-trimmed soybean field. Sloping downward, it has the humidity and fragrance of your Midwestern childhood, and you feel sticky. You misstep, trip into a ditch. Suddenly, bodiless hands are burying you alive, and the hands look like soil and the soil looks like hands. But you're calm as a cucumber, because you're wearing beautiful red heels made from baby alligator. And now, you are holding a baby—a human baby, a muddy one—and you think, "This is my baby." But it begins to speak in Spanish, and so you hurl it up to the hands, saying: "Catch. It's

yours.”

As soon as it's gone, however, you're flooded with a certainty that it is your baby after all, and that it must have learned Spanish because it is hyper-intelligent, and that you need it back. “That's my baby! That's my baby!” you cry. The hands do not listen.

“Preñada,” they moan. Now they entomb you in cabbage heads, Roquefort, organic vegetable chips, chunks of pineapple, live salmon, sprays of New Zealand white wine, garlic stuffed green olives, lobster tails. Last—a shower of condoms.

You can no longer see your beautiful red baby alligator heels and you can no longer breathe. Now there's Cyprus, towering over you, peering into the ditch. His facial piercings glint. As the moments melt from your grasp, he resembles more and more a starved crocodile.

“Would you like a bag?” he growls.

You wake.

Your husband's face is lax with sleep, his breathing thick as velvet. His chest falls, rises, rises, falls. Heart beating madly, you un-mummy yourself from the Egyptian cotton of your sheets, crawl out of bed, and move to the kitchen. Tiptoe, because the ebony floorboards are cold. Pour yourself a glass of chilled Perrier and sip it near the window, shivering. But you still feel unsettled, undone, like a thing that can only be described by what it is not. You slip on a pair of heels near the door, exit the penthouse, and climb the iron stairs to the rooftop.

Mount. Rise. Breathe.

Standing on the flat roof, you feel taller than your yawning city. You expect this to comfort you, but you wobble. The wind cuts you cold. You remove your high heels; shrink in fuddled gratitude. A spring dawn brims between the skyscrapers. Cement-clusters, stalks of glass, twisted sidewalks, broccoli-trees and insect-people—all competing for space, for air. Steel monster-cages stack, one on top of another. The Big Apple. Appetite City. Bursting with bodies and things, and thingified bodies, and bodified things. So full. So hungry. News, flower, and hotdog stands hatch like dirty eggs below. Hungry and full. Gulping your glass of Perrier, you sit down, note the rooftop grime. Public spaces always get dirty, you think. The

whole city is dirty, you think. “Quebec,” you mutter. “We’ll move to Quebec.”

What was it that Lucy’s fiancé’s best man’s brother had called you the other day? An “uppity yuppie,” was it? Yes. That was it. An uppity yuppie. How dare he. How could he.

Dispel disagreeables with thoughts of rooftop patio furniture, cushions, hammocks, grills, carpets, baby clothes, cradles, and potted basil. Fill your mind. Your body. You cling to these things, will them to anchor you in place. But these are thought-ghosts. They weigh nothing. You weigh nothing. Place your hand on your stomach. Make sure it’s still there. A cloud looms close to your head—glares at you, pulls you, pries you, lifts you. Up.

The sparkling water blooms pockets of air inside your body, and you grip the stairwell, for fear of floating away.

Tess Guntz is a 2015 graduate of the University of Notre Dame, where she studied English and drank a lot of coffee. Tess is currently pursuing an M.F.A. in creative writing at New York University.

Always on the Shore

| George Salis

At the beach he lay on a blue towel, his daughter up ahead. Beside him he had laid an empty, yellow-striped towel, covered here and there by wind-swept sand, and beyond that his daughter's plastic miniature chair. He had put the extra towel there simply out of habit. Fanning it out against a gust of sun-infused air, making sure it was as flat and stretched as can be, the sinew of muscle in his legs taut as he reached over to smooth it down. All of this had been just movement, something accepted as the natural course of a day here, where one remained between two worlds, the foreign and familiar, the dangerous and less so.

He spent most of his time watching his daughter. This was the best way to watch, not too close, not too far—her universe uninhibited by the adult world if only for a moment. She was constructing a sand castle. She had done it many times before, traditionally, ritualistically, each construction becoming larger, more elaborate and more beautiful in its childish way. He would never interfere with her art unless she asked. His job was to inspect it once done and give approval.

Looking for shells and other debris, she flowed back and forth on the shore, like part of the ocean itself. He couldn't decide where her tanned skin ended and where the light-flashed waves began. She was a foot or two taller now. She was growing up, not before his eyes, but faintly with each day. He was compelled to run toward her, anchor her to the sand, if not the earth. But when he lifted himself up, an arm stretched behind his back, he simply waved to her, and she waved in return.

After some time his vision blurred and his lids closed over slowly, not wanting to give up full consciousness, but the gentle brushing of waves, like the combing of golden hair, lulled him over the edge. Before he slept—or was it in a dream?—he heard the voice of his wife, “I love the beach,” she told him, “it reminds me of where I am.”

“Daddy look!”

He awoke. He probably hadn't slept but for a minute or two. His daughter was jumping up and down, waving her arms as if she were a castaway. It was time for him to approve the sand castle.

“This is your best one yet,” he said.

She smiled but did nothing else. She waited for him to look some more

Fragments of coquina had been stuffed into seven dome structures, half of a sand dollar was used as the gate of a wall fortified with the tips of cones and the tails of whelks. Such a sundry kingdom. He imagined, and he thought she imagined this with him as they both stared at the sand castle, that little beings of sand would soon march through the gates and fill every twig-turret, shell-barracks, and sand-home. And they would stay there. Not forever, but indefinitely.

He looked back up the beach, at the towel next to his. Half of it had blown over, limply folded like a withering palm.

The waves were a fair distance from the sand castle, but he could see how they would rise, and not destroy it, but simply wash it away. The shore would be new again, afresh, ready to have another sand castle built by another child. He wished, more than anything, that they both could understand this.

George Salis received a B.A. in English and Psychology from Stetson University. He is the recipient of the 2015 Sullivan Award for Fiction, the 2015 Ann Morris Prize for Fiction, and the 2015 Davidson Award for Integrity in Journalism. He contributes criticism to Atticus Review and journalism to Stetson Magazine. He is currently writing his first novel.

Split Ends

| Hannah Klapperich-Mueller

The ponytail lay there on the floor, limp and dark like a dead rat. She shut the scissors with a click, looking down at it, unsure what to do.

Her grandfather had died four days ago.

“Lil—come on downstairs! We’re getting ready to take this picture.” Her father stood at the bottom of the stairs, impatient, as he always was. She could hear his manicured fingernails tapping on the stair rail, counting the seconds. He behaved as if he’d spent the whole 15 years of her life waiting around for her. God, she hated him.

Lily looked up at the mirror. Her hair stopped at her ears now—the ends were blunt, choppy and uneven. She was surprised to see how big her eyes looked, missing their usual curtain of dark hair. She smiled, thinking how displeased her father would be to see this.

“Lily!”

She let the scissors clatter into the sink. Pushing some of the fallen hairs into a garbage can, she wrestled herself into her coat and rubber boots. She grabbed at the ponytail on the floor, stuffing it into her coat pocket.

She cracked the bathroom door to call downstairs. “Dad, I’m sorry, I’m not feeling good. I’ll be down as soon as I can!”

“Well come on, the rest of the family is only going to be here for a little while longer. People have to start heading home. The weather is getting really bad.”

Lily could hear the low hum of conversation from the living room as her aunts and cousins arranged themselves in front of the fireplace for a seldom achieved family picture. Nothing like a funeral to bring people together.

The window slid open smoothly, without a sound. Lily remembered last year when she had helped her grandfather put in the new ones. She held his notebook and wrote down measurements with the small chewed up pencil he always carried. She carried his tools and swept up the dust. And now she slid through the window

with relative ease, remembering the slope of the roof from climbing around on it during the installation.

Keeping her hand on the siding to steady her, she made for the drain pipe.

I hope this works like it does in movies, she thought.

The snow was heavy and wet; she could hear the flakes as they plopped down around her. Her right boot slipped, and she fell onto her knee, grabbing for some handhold. *Shit*. Her hands started to tingle from the cold.

Throwing her weight out and back, she inched her way down the drainpipe, sliding her boots against the wall. The screws holding the pipe to the wall shuddered, threatening to pull away, but held—just. Five feet from the ground, she jumped. The snow was several inches deep now, and some found its way over the tops of her boots and onto the sliver of ankle between her pants and socks.

She avoided the light from the living room window, choosing instead to stick near the hedge before turning out into the street. No cars were out, and she jogged down the middle of the pavement, her footsteps sounding loud in the quiet hush of the new snow.

Lily had lived with her grandfather since she was six years old. Legal mess aside, a divorce left her with the choice between a distracted father and a dangerous mother. Neither was a good option.

As she was growing up, Lily's grandfather would often braid her hair in pigtails, twirling the long ropes around his calloused fingers and, with a sad smile, remark on her resemblance to her mother. Patting her cheek, he'd remind her how important it was to know that as much as her mother loved her, she just wasn't able—well, you know. Lily had come to mimic this gesture when she needed comfort, wrapping her hair around her hands like a security blanket. Now reaching her hand up under her hood, Lily felt the short strands curling away from her ear; her hair wasn't the only thing that felt like it was missing.

She turned a corner onto a main street; here some cars were braving the weather, moving slowly in long lines of beaming red tail lights. She knew the route well, from years of walking twice a month

to the rundown trailer, to drink Kool-Aid and eat Kraft cheese sandwiches. Her mother wasn't much of a cook, but she could make a mean grilled cheese. Lily had never wanted to live there, to leave her grandfather's house for the small pressed-board room with only two windows; but she loved these hours when she and her mother would eat and dance and shake the peeling paint with their laughter.

Now things looked different.

Another turn brought Lily onto the familiar gravel driveway at the trailer park entrance. The thought dawned on her. *She doesn't even know.* In the rush and sadness of the last few days, no one would have taken the time to reach out to a black sheep sister, or ex-wife. Lily hadn't heard anyone make a call, and no one had asked her to. She walked a little faster.

No lights were on behind the faded curtains. She walked up to the front door and knocked. Nothing. The orange glow of the streetlight made Lily's shadow stark against the white walls of her mother's empty home. Her car was here, but gas was expensive and Lily knew she hadn't been driving much lately. She probably took the bus.

She lifted one of the windshield wipers from the growing drift of snow on the rusted hood. Taking the ponytail from her pocket, she placed it on the window and let the wiper snap back down. It looked so helpless, lying there in the nest of snow.

The wind had died down. In the thinner layer of snow on the windshield glass, she wrote a simple message: *we need to talk.*

Hannah Klapperich-Mueller recently graduated summa cum laude from Marquette University, with a B.A. in Writing-Intensive English and Theater Arts. Her work has appeared previously in the Marquette Literary Review, and she continues to write with Milwaukee's independent newspaper, the Shepherd Express, and on the blog A Real Character.

Breathtaking

| Sheri Walsh

I distinctly remember the sound of my mother's breath. I remember pressing my body into hers; not in the way her ex-husband, the preacher, had pressed into her, but simply to fuse myself with her and fill all the empty spaces. As I lay here reminiscing with the soft breath of my own daughter tickling my cheek, I wonder if my mother was aware of my attempts to match her breathing. The childish part of me, that part that is and always will be a scared six-year-old, still loves her and hopes she didn't know. After all, ignorance is better than indifference.

I learned early to feign sleep the moment I heard the clunking sound of the deadbolt unlocking, which was difficult because the sound inevitably seized my chest with fear. Honestly, I don't know how she didn't hear my thundering heartbeat the moment she opened the door to our bedroom. I would see the thin chasm of light separating the darkness into two parts. I fought to keep my hands from pulling the tattered sheets above my head and only allowed myself to breath once I recognized her small frame silhouetted in the doorway. The chasm would close, the flooding light would recede and I would be entrenched in darkness once more. Relief slowed my racing heart. I had made it another day without being found by the "them" she always spoke of.

Looking back, I remember thinking I would make a great actress. It took hours of practice to keep my body still and my face the perfect picture of tranquility. I knew how exhausted she was from carrying around the weight of a world that never lived up to her dreams. I didn't want her to feel obligated to ask me questions. Questions like, "how was your day?" or, "why are you still awake?" To prepare for my nightly performance I spent the lonely daylight hours studying the peaceful faces of sleeping children in my well-worn books. I mirrored them exactly. My head rested on its side, eyes softly closed, just the hint of a smile on my lips. Lithe and peaceful. She would look at me and know all was well. *No need to worry, Mom! Can't you see how goddamn serene I am?*

Since we didn't want them to know I was home alone, I wasn't allowed to turn on the lights and my eyes adjusted to the darkness long before she slipped into the room. I would peek through my lashes to watch as she peeled off her clothing. Some nights it was the retro-50s inspired diner uniform, some nights it was the cleavage revealing dive-bar attire, and on the darkest nights she slipped out of layers that never seemed to fit together. A sweater covering the kind of outfit only mannequins wear without blushing, even though it was still hot outside and I knew that sweater made her itch. Once she pulled on an old t-shirt, she would slip into bed as silently as possible, always with her back to me.

It didn't take long for her tightened muscles to ease and her breathing to slow. I watched the steady rise and fall of her shoulder and gently moved closer. I had to do this gradually because if I rushed the process some part of her would wake and she would shrink from my touch, a feeling like knives in my belly. But if I did it just right, I could wiggle my way close enough to press my face into her shoulder blades and even drape my small arm over her.

This was the moment I lived for. This quiet moment where she was all mine. I would take deep, soul-quenching breaths of air just to savor the way her long hair always smelled of coconuts. I would get lost in dreams of us standing in sand surrounded by palm trees. Even the sweaty smell trapped in the fold of her arm reaffirmed this island paradise where we could let the heat bake our skin and sing songs as loud as we wanted. On the rare occasion she came home early and wasn't too tired, she would regale me with stories of faraway islands secluded from the rest of the world. We would imagine our little hut under the shade of fruit-bearing trees and talk about the when, not the if. It was this oasis that I retreated to, nestled in the warmth of her back and the smell of her coconut hair.

With my dreamer's heart content, I would listen for the sound of the ocean within her lungs. Her breath became my beacon, my refuge. I would restrict my own so I could hold the unadulterated sound of her within me. Once I caught the rhythm I would try to breathe in time with her. Her heartbeat was the metronome and I counted the slow in and out beats. *In: two, three,*

four. Out: two, three. In: two, three, four. Out: two, three. It was steady. It was safe. Even when my lungs screamed I soldiered on, convinced that somewhere in her heartbeat-to-breath ratio was the secret to my happiness.

I think I could have lived my life content with my dreams and her warmth, but whatever contact my little body could offer wasn't enough. She craved a different kind of touch. She introduced him to me as a friend, but I could tell by the way she sat on his grease-stained lap, kissed his ugly lips, whispered in his too-big ears that he wasn't the kind of friend I wanted her to have. She was mine, what right did he have to steal her from me?

My nightly waiting game grew longer. Daylight seeped into our room hours before the door creaked open. The smell of coconuts and sweat was replaced by something repulsive and my island paradise was gone. It was swallowed by a typhoon, laid to waste by a man with the name Rick stitched into his shirt. And so was my mother.

My daughter shifts in her sleep and murmurs. I shake away the memories. Her warmth conjures a familiar image. A sandy beach flashes in my mind, catching in my throat. No, that was my old paradise. I push the thought away. Her little lips pucker and pout and she looks like she might cry. I kiss her forehead, smelling her curly hair. It is a mixture of Shea Butter and Johnson & Johnson baby wash. My aching muscles relax as I listen to her soft sleeping sounds. I can feel myself drifting. Sleep comes so easily now, but that wasn't always true.

Even on the nights my mother came home early, I stayed awake breathing her in. But if I was tired before, it was nothing compared to the insomnia that started the day we moved out of our old house. That was when Rick, the man my mother asked me to call dad, insisted I sleep on my own.

"It's unhealthy. She's eight," he said, "She shouldn't be in our bed."

"I know, but," replied my mother, "she's been through a lot. She has nightmares."

"June bug," he purred, calling her by that ridiculous pet

name. “We talked about this. How are we supposed to, you know, be together if she is always in the room with us.”

My mother giggled and I imagined him pulling her closer. I could hear the smile in her voice when she whispered, “I told you, baby. She is a really sound sleeper.” There was a pause and then she shrieked with laughter. “Stop, Rick,” she said breathlessly. And then I heard nothing. My stomach clinched. The lump in my throat tasted like bile. I knew they were kissing. Or worse.

That’s when my chest and throat began to prickle and itch. I snuck back upstairs, where I was supposed to be packing, and looked at the two boxes labeled Vesta. I felt the itching in my chest grow worse. A lot worse. I slid down the wall to keep from falling and put my head between my knees. How long did they think I would need to pack? Maybe they wanted me to overhear them. Maybe they wanted me to see them.

My eyes filled with tears and my breath came in shallow gulps. I felt the room tilt and then I was little again, standing in the house with the green tiles. The preacher picks me up and tells me I’m sick. He gives me medicine that makes me tired and I fall asleep in his lap. When I wake, I am in my own bed but everything is wrong. The colors are the wrong shade and the floor seems to bend away from me. My belly hurts and I hear a strange noise. I call for my momma. My voice is too small. I try to sit up, but I am sore, so I roll over and slide out of bed. My outstretched toes barely reach the floor. I feel like I’m falling and have to steady my hand on the wall. The hallway stretches out in front of me and I manage to walk to the kitchen, following the strange sounds. I don’t understand what I’m hearing, but then I see them. I see my mother on the kitchen table where I eat my Lucky Charms and the preacher is behind her. He sees me; he looks right at me, but doesn’t stop. Instead, he just stares at me and smiles. Finally, he closes his eyes and then stops moving. As he passes by, he tucks my hair behind my ear and pats my head. My mother turns around and sees me. She starts to cry. She cries harder than I have ever seen anyone cry before. She screams at me to go to my room, and I do, but I still hear her crying. And I can still hear her crying.

“Oh no,” I thought, “this isn’t good.” I told myself to forget

the house with green tiles. To forget the way he always smiled at me, even in my dreams. I remember trying to focus on the half-packed boxes, to pull myself out of the past, but seeing our room so empty sent me into a panic. My hands buzzed and my feet went numb. My heart was being squeezed by invisible hands and I was breathing much too fast but I couldn't stop. I couldn't breathe at all. The room shrank and the lights were like fireworks blocking out everything but the pain.

"Vee! Not again!" My mother's voice sounded metallic, like the taste of blood in my mouth. "Rick, get me a bag! Vesta, you have to slow your breathing!" She shouted in my ear, "Breathe. Just breathe!"

Oh, so that is what I am supposed to do?! Just breathe? I thought sarcastically. Why didn't anyone tell me? You're a fucking genius!

"Here," said Rick and I felt my mother slide behind me, putting a bag against my mouth. She thought it was the bag, that stupid brown paper bag, that helped. Really it was my ear against her chest. I closed my eyes and found what I was looking for. *In; two, three, four. Out; two, three. In; two, three, four. Out; two, three. In; two, three, four. Out; two three...*

"There, that's better," she said.

Rick touched my head softly. "I hate you," I thought.

"Is she okay," he asked. "She will be," replied my mother as she kissed me.

My mother rocked me from side-to-side until my hands unclenched and my clammy cheeks flushed. She grabbed my face and turned my chin towards her. "How about we go pick out some paint for your new room? Any color!"

"Yeah, Vesta. Any color within reason," Rick added, glancing nervously at my mother. "And some drapes for your windows." He knelt down and patted my leg. "Did I tell you your room has a great view of the garden? My mother and I used to..."

I buried my head in my mother's hair and stopped listening. I knew he was trying to help, but I only hated him more for it. I didn't want his help. I didn't want a painted room or a garden. I just wanted him to go away and never touch her again. I couldn't stand it.

As I think back, I know Rick wasn't a terrible stepfather. He took me fishing. Cheered the loudest at my science fair. Took me for ice cream when I brought home A's and scolded me when they turned into C's. Red faced, he went to the store and bought my first box of pads when I was too embarrassed to do it myself. Even shook hands with the blue-haired boy when I thought it was love, and put his arms around me when the same boy broke my heart. He was kind and I only remember him yelling at me twice: once when I got drunk at the high school dance, and the day I told my mother I never wanted to see her again. But for all his efforts, it wasn't enough. Just when I started to think I could love Rick, my mother would look at him and remind me of all I had lost. Her hands no longer trembled. At least in our fear, my mother and I were together. What was left for me? She was his, he was hers, and I faded into nothing.

"No. Bad!" My daughter cries in her sleep, pulling me back. "Bad, KeeKee! Noooo!" I whisper in her ear, "It's okay, the mean kitty is gone. Momma chased it away."

Her face softens and she takes a deep breath. She throws her arm behind her and it wraps around my neck. Her leg is on my hip. Her hair is in my face. This is the way we have slept since the first night I brought her home, bundled in pink and with my solemn promise to make things right. I pull the covers over us, knowing she will immediately kick them off. With my one free hand I locate *Goodnight, Moon*, it's under my leg, and *Moo, Baa, La La La*, the corner of which is wedged under her face. I softly drop them off the side of the bed into the mounting pile of bedtime favorites. I turn on the nightlight and turn off the reading lamp. I hold my breath and keep the unadulterated sound of her within me. Once I find it I let out a lungful of air and breathe again. Not in time with her, but in my own rhythm. Convinced that somewhere in our heartbeat-to-breath ratio is the secret to my happiness.

Sheri Walsh is a senior and the Sigma Tau Delta chapter president at Drury University. She is currently studying Writing and Political Science with the hope of going to law school.

Jurors

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.

Chris Blankenship is an assistant professor of English at Salt Lake Community College where he teaches courses in rhetoric, writing, and linguistics. His recent scholarship includes work on argumentation pedagogy, assessment practices, and labor in higher education.

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 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 composition, literature, and creative writing, and directs the Writing Center. Her publications include *Rediscovering Magical Realism in the Americas*, and recent presentations covered the American and presentation flags, patriotism, and superheroes. Her research interests include magical realism, the contemporary novel, and popular culture; a two-year research grant is supporting her writing her first young adult novel based on über-orphan Ernest Frankenstein.

Kevin Stemmler's 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. He is professor emeritus from Clarion University where he taught literature and writing.



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