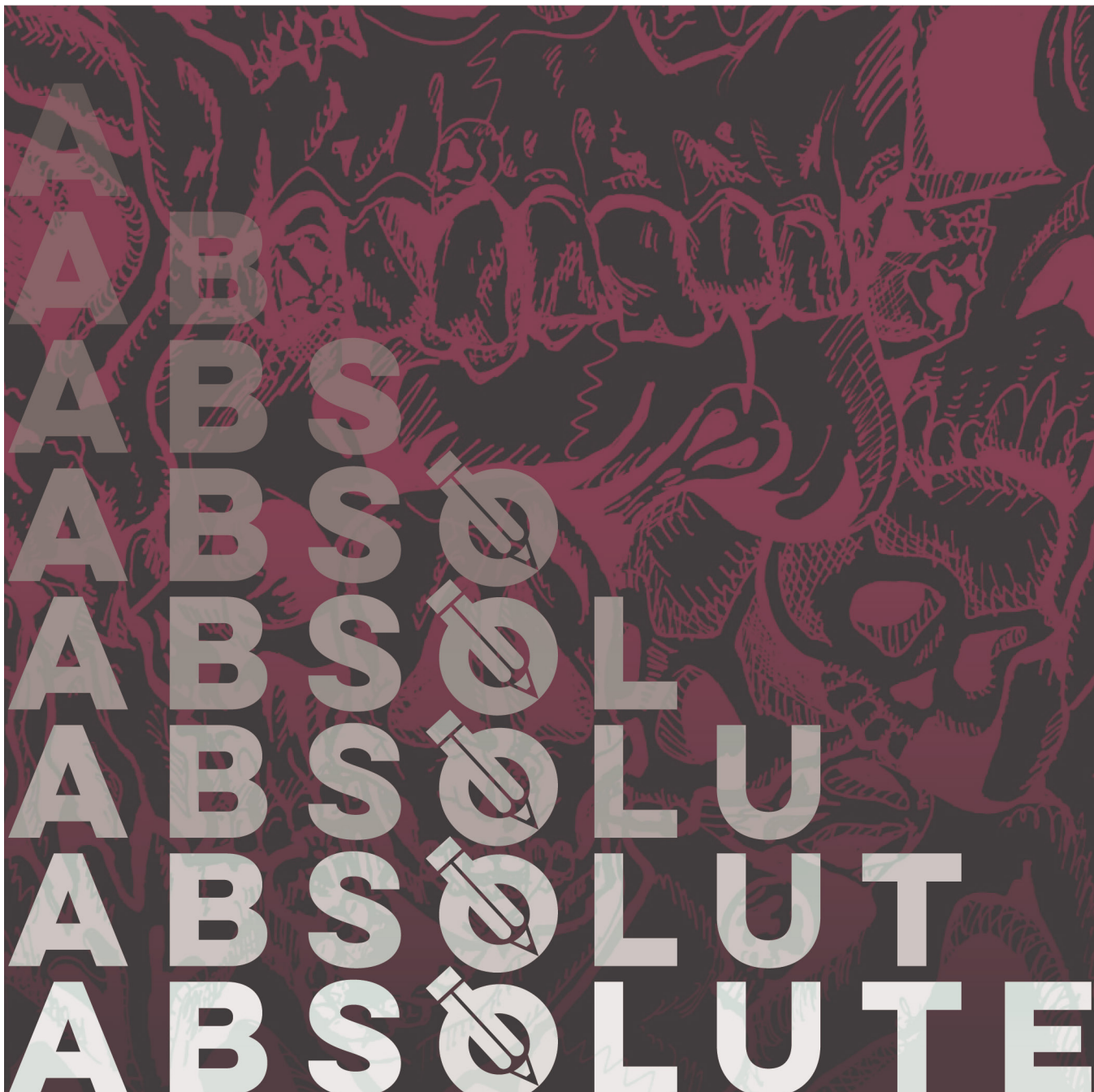


ABSOLUTE 2021

FICTION | NONFICTION | POETRY | ARTWORK | PHOTOGRAPHY





ABSOLUTE 2021

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Absolute is an educational resource published annually by the Arts, English, and Humanities Division of Oklahoma City Community College. All creative pieces are the original works of college students and community members. The views expressed herein are those of the writers and artists.

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OKLAHOMA CITY
COMMUNITY COLLEGE
ARTS, ENGLISH, AND HUMANITIES

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ABOUT ABSOLUTE

Absolute, OCCC's journal of art and writing, has been published annually by the Arts, English, and Humanities Division since the college's early days in 1972. The student editors seek online submissions of original poetry, fiction, nonfiction, artwork, and photography from students and members of the community.

HONORABLE INTENTIONS

by B. Diane White

June Smith wiped down the counters at McPherson's café downtown. It was Thursday afternoon. The noon crowd, if you could call five people a crowd, had gone and the supper crowd had not yet arrived. It was a hot and humid day, typical of western Oklahoma. She could see a handful of young boys playing in the empty lot where the volunteer firehouse stood just a week before. *Who figures a firehouse is going to burn down?* The boys were busy going through the rubble, pocketing the small bits of treasure they found. June recognized them all. Everyone knew everyone in this town.

Her boss, Mrs. McPherson, had gone for the afternoon to tend to things at home, and June was all alone. This was her favorite time of the workday; no one was around to disturb her thoughts. She put the rag in her apron pocket, poured herself the last of the coffee in the pot, and sat down on a barstool. One of the earlier customers had left a newspaper behind, and she turned to the crossword puzzle. She was reaching for the pencil behind her ear when she heard three short blasts of a car horn. She looked up and toward the big front window. Waving from the driver's seat of his blue and white '56 Chevy Bel Aire was Marty Miles. She waved back and smiled slightly. *Not too much*, she warned herself. *You don't want to give him any ideas*. She casually turned back to the puzzle, her back to the window.

"Marty Miles," she said, clucking her tongue. "Marty Miles."

Marty had dropped by the café this morning before the sun was fully up, as part of the early breakfast crowd. She had not seen him since he left for basic training two years ago. He was wearing his Army uniform, looking all the world like Elvis

Presley did in his. She saw her as he walked in, paused just inside the café door, took off his cap, and grinned. June returned the smile, gestured toward one of the booths where he sat down.

"Well, Miss Junie, I do declare, didn't you just grow up to be the prettiest thing?" he said when she approached. He grinned at her and whistled long and low.

"Oh, you hush your mouth, Marty Miles," she said. "It's only been what, two years? I was grown when you left for the Army."

"Grown? Hardly. You were just an itty-bitty junior in high school. You're still itty-bitty, but in a grown woman kind of way. Just as pretty as a picture!"

June blushed. "You always were a charmer. Welcome home, Marty. It's good to see you."

"Thanks, it is good to be seen. I'm sure you guessed I just got in," he said, indicating his uniform. "I haven't even gone home to see Mama and Daddy yet."

"No?"

"Nah, I wanted to give them some time to wake up. Plus, I was starving."

"What can I get you?"

"What's good here?" he looked at the menu.

"It's the exact same menu from two years ago. Same food since we were kids. You know what's good here."

He laughed and put down the menu. "Say, why don't you let me take you to dinner tomorrow night. Do you work tomorrow night? We could go see a show over in Shawnee. I heard that Lana Turner one is good or Rio Bravo. Nothing like a good John Wayne picture."

"I do work tomorrow," she said.

"Well, after then. We can just see the show first and grab a burger after."

"Marty, you are like a brother to me and..."

"A brother? Hell, you say. Ouch, that smarts."

"We've known each other since we were in diapers. Our mamas worked in the church nursery together. You are Bobby's best friend."

"We aren't wearing diapers now, Junie," he said. "How is old Bobby, anyway?"

June filled him in with some of the news of her brother. He had taken a job as an apprentice plumber in Oklahoma City and married a girl he met there. He has a little boy and comes to visit once in a blue moon. "He prefers to be called Bob, now," she said. "We don't see him much anymore."

"I've kind of lost touch with him, myself," Marty said. "The best I could do was send a postcard off to Mama occasionally. Men... we aren't the best correspondents." He pronounced the last word slowly. "Like that word? Picked it up over there in Germany." He grinned proudly.

"Oh, Germany! How was it?" June wanted to sit and talk with him, but she could feel Mrs. McPherson's eyes on her back. She pretended to be writing on her pad and pointed at the menu with her pencil in feigned helpfulness.

"Let me take you out tomorrow, and I'll tell you all about it," Marty said. "Come on, you don't look a bit like my sister, and you're twice as sweet as she is."

"Marty, I, I have a boyfriend. It wouldn't be right."

"A boyfriend, huh?" Marty raised an eyebrow. "Yeah, anyone I know?"

"Yes, I believe you know Don Phelps." She blushed, remembering the last night she saw Don.

"Old Donnie Phelps. You don't say." Marty looked down at the menu again. "I heard that rascal joined up."

"He did," she nodded. "He's in basic at Ft. Polk. He's due back in a few days." She blushed again.

"Boss is glaring at you. Don't want to cause no trouble," he said softly. Louder, he said, "Just give me the eggs and bacon, biscuits and gravy, coffee, please."

A few minutes later, she was back with his food. He reached down and played with her apron hem. It was an oddly intimate gesture, and June suppressed a gasp. "Sure I can't talk you into that show?" he asked.

"I don't think Don would like that," she shook her head.

"Nobody has to tell him," he whispered.

"In this town?" she laughed. "His mama would know before we got to the stop sign."

"I reckon," he said. Mrs. McPherson cleared her throat from behind.

"Listen, it was really good to see you," June said loudly, putting the check on the table.

"Thank you for breakfast," Marty said, touching her hand lightly as he picked up the check. "It was good as it always was."

June smiled, "Come by and see me again sometime if you are in the neighborhood. You know, uh, if you'll be in town awhile."

"I ain't going anywhere, Junie," he said. "And I *will* come by to see you again."

And he did. He'd driven by and honked four times since breakfast. This was the fifth. June smiled. She really was very fond of Marty, always had been. But he was like second family to her. She remembered when he had left for basic training. He and two of his friends had gotten caught stealing a couple of piglets from the farm outside of town. She wasn't sure why Bobby was not with them that night. Lucky for Bobby, he wasn't. Daddy would've skinned him alive. The teenagers had too many beers, and they all thought it would be the best senior prank to steal the piglets, put them in the trunk of Whitey House's Buick and drive through town. Whitey decided he was too drunk and told Marty to drive. The trouble was Marty was also too drunk. But neither was as drunk as Ed Montgomery. As Marty drove the Buick down Main Street, hogs squealing from the trunk, he swerved to avoid hitting Bea Dooley's

cat and smashed into the back of the only police car in town. Right there in front of what was once the fire station. The abrupt stop had sent Marty into the steering wheel, and he lost his front six teeth. Ed and Whitey fled the scene. But there had been witnesses, and it was Whitey's car besides.

This was not the first time Judge Parker had seen these three cut-ups in his courtroom. "Your Honor, we was just trying to save those baby pigs' lives," Ed was rumored to have said. "I swear, we had the most honorable intentions."

Judge Parker ordered the three boys to three months in jail and pay restitution for the pigs (they had gotten out of Whitey's trunk and were never caught) or to enlist in the armed services of their choice. Ed chose jail. Whitey and Marty left for Ft. Polk before either of them graduated high school. Whitey met a girl there and got married, and then he was sent to Germany with Marty. The Army gave Marty six false teeth, which being straighter than his natural teeth, made him even more handsome than before. June had to admit he was very handsome. He did look an awful lot like Elvis. *The girls around here will just die when they see him, and he stopped to see you first!* She shook her head violently and dropped her pencil on the floor. *Stop it! You have a boyfriend!* June directed her thoughts to Don and blushed again as she remembered their last night together. Don was going to basic training the next day. He had professed his love to her and said they would get married as soon as he got back from basic.

"Then, no matter what happens to me," he had said, "the Army will take care of you, June."

She was overjoyed. So, when he started his usual late evening overtures, insisting that it wouldn't really be a sin, since they were now engaged. Besides that, he reminded her that he was going away for a long time, and it would help keep her close to him. They'd been dating over six months, and she had successfully resisted his advances all this time. The memory of her sister Rose being shamefully shipped off to Wichita in secret three years ago was enough to keep her pure. When she returned, Rose had tearfully confided in her that she had been pregnant. Rose's boyfriend had refused to marry her, even after their father addressed it with his. Their parents sent her up to live with distant cousins, have her baby, and then leave her baby daughter behind. An unknown couple had taken the baby before Rose left the hospital. The adoption had been arranged by June and Rose's parents. Daddy hadn't looked at Rose the same since then. June was determined that would never happen to her. So, no matter how much Don cajoled and pleaded and promised, she had always refused.

But now they were engaged, and he was leaving, and it was only the one time. Everyone knew you couldn't get pregnant your first time. "Come on, June," he whispered. "I love you and you know I have the most honorable intentions." She had given in.

Don left the next morning. June continued to work at the café and dream of the day he would return. But apparently, one time is enough. She had received a few letters from Don, full of love and promises. He was due home this Sunday. He told her that, after checking in on his folks, he would come to fetch her. So, when she missed her first period and started vomiting in the morning, she wrote back to him and told him her secret.

"I know we didn't talk about starting a family right away, and I know you'll likely be going overseas," she had written. "But, like you said, the Army will take care of me, and now our little one as well." The timing would be hard to explain. *But babies come early all the time, right?* That is what she would say. The baby just came early, that's all. Don would be home this weekend, and they could get married immediately. No one would be the wiser. She would not have to see Daddy look at her the way he now looked at Rose.

Marty drove by again and honked. "That boy," she thought. She returned to the paper. As she worked the puzzle, a familiar face caught her eye on the opposite page. She blinked several times to make sure she was seeing clearly. But yes, she was. It was Don in his Army uniform; her heart pounded inside her chest. *Had he been killed? Oh my God, no, Donnie!* As she read the words beneath his picture, *Mr. and Mrs. Donald Phelps, Sr., are pleased to announce the engagement of their son, Pvt. Donald Phelps, Jr.,* she smiled. "How sweet," she said, but she hadn't told her parents yet. She hoped they wouldn't be upset. She continued reading: *to Miss Cynthia Donohue of Ft. Polk, Louisiana. After a brief honeymoon, the bride will reside in Ft. Polk with her parents while Pvt. Phelps carries out his commitment to the United States Army. The room began to swim. There must be some mistake.*

As the paper fell to the floor, she followed it. "No, no, no," she sobbed. Big choking sobs forced their way from June's throat and tears puddled the floor beneath her face. *How stupid of me. I never should have told him. I should have just... He wasn't ready to be a father, yet. I've ruined everything!* June's mind raced. *How will I tell my parents? What will I tell them? What will they do?*

June sat up and wiped her eyes. She would not live the life Rose lived. She would not go through life being ashamed. She didn't know whether she was ready to be a mother either, but that was her choice, not theirs. She would not let them decide. "I'll just leave," she said out loud. "I'll take my money and my things, and I'll go... somewhere." Her heart was shattered, but she had to think straight.

The cowbell on the door rang, and June realized Mrs. McPherson had returned.

"June?" she said, "What are you doing down there?" she came around the counter.

"Oh, I dropped a dime, and it rolled under the counter." June hid her face.

"Well, don't worry about that right now. We'll find it later. We've got to get the griddle heated up for the evening crowd."

June quickly wiped her face on her apron and stood. Mrs. McPherson was busy at the cash register and did not look up. "Let me go wash my hands," June said and hurried to the employee restroom.

"Don't be long," Mrs. McPherson said, counting bills.

"Get ahold of yourself," she told the reflection in the mirror. "The last thing you need is Mrs. McPherson asking questions. Just get through this next three hours."

June worked quietly and efficiently through the dinner crowd of two couples, the pharmacist, and three teenage girls. With few customers, Mrs. McPherson asked June to close for her and left. June cleaned up, stopping every so often to stifle her sobs. She simply could not have teary eyes when she got home tonight, and she had to have time to think.

She turned out the lights, flipped the closed sign over, and locked the door. The sun was starting to set, and the streetlamps had just started to buzz on. The boys that were playing in the firehouse lot earlier had taken their bicycles and gone home. June's house was a mile down the road, and she would need all that time to think and compose herself before arriving home. Mama would have her supper on the table and would likely be still sitting there, too, wanting to have a visit. "Oh, dear Jesus," she whispered to herself. "What am I going to do?"

Three horn blasts, and Marty's voice jerked her out of her thoughts. "Good evening, Miss Junie," he called.

"Marty, you scared me to death!" June placed her hand to her chest. "Don't do that!"

Marty feigned remorse from the window of the Bel Air. "Sorry, Junie." Then he grinned. "Can I give you a lift home? Maybe take the scenic route?"

"Marty, you know I...." Junie stammered.

"I have the most honorable intentions, Miss Junie," Marty flashed that Elvis smile and put his chin down on the window's ledge.

Junie put her finger to the side of her mouth and peered at the handsome young soldier in front of her. "You know, Marty, as a matter of fact, I just love the scenic route."

LUCKY SHOES

by Jazzy Burdick

I pull my Monroe High sweatshirt over my head and lace up my running shoes. The sole is falling off the left shoe, and you can just about see my black sock through a hole in the big toe on my right one. The majority of people I know tell me just buy a new pair, but I refuse because these are my lucky ones. Running cross country is no easy task, so when you strike a bit of luck, you hold onto it. Call me superstitious or a bit of a crazy person, but I have come in second place every meet since I bought these shoes. Second place, right behind my very best friend Dawn, who always takes the gold (*usually it's just by a few seconds, don't worry*).

We've become known as the running duo. You never see one in first without the other in second. It's become our unspoken victory for us to run and win every meet together. Since middle school, I have been running cross country and finally got Dawn to join the team freshman year of high school. I knew she'd love it; she just had to listen to me. We won our first meet halfway through the season sophomore year, and senior year has rolled around, and we are still on our winning streak. I mean, I would hope so because we basically train around the clock, per her request. I really don't know why she insists on going at five in the morning because eight would be just as beneficial, but here I am lacing up shoes for yet another early morning with the team.

"Sarah! Are you ready to go yet?" Dawn calls from the kitchen as I tie up my chestnut brown hair. I have considered just cutting off all my hair because what is the point of having long hair when all you do is put it up in a ponytail? I think I could definitely rock a pixie cut. I stroll out to the kitchen, rolling my eyes dramatically while dragging my feet to emphasize how much I would rather be in bed at this very moment.

"I'm here. I'm here." I rub my eyes before noticing the ecstatic expression on her face. Her tan skin radiates with joy, and her smile makes even the earliest of mornings bearable. Her passion is contagious. A soft smile tugs at the corner of my lips, and I giggle. "Are you even human? Why you are so happy this early in the morning, I still have no idea." She tosses me an energy bar and my travel mug full of black iced coffee, before forcing me out the door into the freezing cold. February in Michigan is no joke. Once we get in her car, I blast the heater and search the glove compartment for the gloves we always store there. I get one pair for myself before giving her the other pair.

We pull into the school parking lot and head to the locker room to meet the rest of the team. Few are talking, while most are pretending to be asleep hoping Dawn, as captain, will just cancel training. Despite the grumbling, training proceeds, and Dawn leads us all outside into the frigid weather. We begin warming up and then start on the scheduled run. Today is a long run, about eight miles in one go. This is Dawn's favorite training day; for everyone else, it is probably their least favorite.

An hour passes, Dawn and I continue in the lead. Dawn wanted to start training with the boys, once she realized that the girls were too easy to keep up with. She's always been the competitive type. Dawn really loves beating the boys; it's something she prides herself in. I couldn't care less. If it makes her happy then I'm happy. Dawn convinced Coach to let the boys and girls train together by claiming it will make us better. Of course, she was right. I'm sure we will all tell her that later, but right now with our lungs on fire, I would gladly like to take it slow. If Dawn is good at anything, it is her incessant fixation on improvement. If you want to be better, hang around her. I find that thinking really helps me when I am running because it allows me to think about all the other things besides my tired legs, screaming lungs, and shallow breath. They say running is good therapy. I definitely agree.

Dawn begins to slow to a stop signifying the end of training, and we all huddle together on the sidewalk in front of the school next to the stoplight to turn into the parking lot.

"Hey Sarah, do you remember middle school when training was running one mile and then calling it quits?" Dawn's boyfriend, Joe, says from across the huddle, a humorous edge to his voice. Dawn rolls her eyes in mock annoyance but chances a smile.

"That's probably why you're so slow," she chimes back with a mischievous smirk lighting up her face. "At least you're cute though." Dawn leans up and kisses him

apologetically on the cheek. I stick out my tongue, making a noise of disgust at their fuzzy relationship. It is sickening and it's so cute.

"Well, as much as I would love to stand and watch this for the rest of my very long existence, I am going to freeze if we stand out here another minute. I think my sweat is already freezing to ice." I turn on my heel back towards school and begin walking in that direction. I hear someone scream. I turn around to see a car speeding through the traffic at the stoplight, hitting five or six cars out of the way. We all stop, watching the scene play out in front of our eyes until I notice that the truck has jumped the curb. It's headed straight at us.

We all turn in a panic and start running in opposite directions, but the car is gaining speed. I don't dare look behind me as I hear the tires' loud screech.

"Sarah! Watch out!" I hear Dawn's voice in a blur before I'm shoved from in front of the car into the grass. I feel the stinging of scratched knees and feel the blood running down my forearm. I hear a bang and then a loud crack before looking back from where I was pushed. The car was still wildly out of control, hitting kids left and right before getting back on the road and driving away. I can hear faint sirens in the distance before I see the blood on the sidewalk. Blood. That's a lot of blood. A body lay face down. *That must have been the person that pushed me out of the way of the truck.* I get to my feet, ignoring the pain in my knees, and run over to the body.

No. No. No no no no. The toffee-colored hair. I shake my head vigorously trying to change the image in my line of sight. The meet sophomore year flashes through my mind: crossing the finish line, standing next to Dawn with our gold and silver medals.

No. No. No no no no. The tan skin. I fall to my knees next to the body refusing to believe the sight right in front of me. I shift my head frantically from side to side, looking around for anyone. My blurry, tear-filled vision sees the colors red and blue flashing at the stoplight, and I see men in uniforms running towards me.

No. No. No no no no. I turn over the body that lies limp on the ground and see those dark chocolate brown eyes that unmistakably identify my running partner and best friend. Dawn's once vibrant eyes now peer back at me, lifeless. I close her eyelids, my body wracking with a sob.

"Help! Somebody, help!" I cry into her body, holding it close to me before the police come and pull me away from her body.

They take me inside the school and make me wait in the counselor's office with the other people who survived unscathed. Survived. We are survivors. There are people who didn't survive. I flinch at the hand that appears on my shoulder. I peer up into the eyes of my coach, who looks down apologetically.

"We were just running. She... we... run... she was... push... Running." I shake my head, tears still streaming down my cheeks, unable to find the right words.

"I know... I know..." He leans down and hugs me while I cry into his shoulder. Soon he lets go to check on the other people in the room. I stare down at the ground in shock. I notice my black sock where the hole is in my shoe. I angrily begin untying them, and then rip the shoes off my feet. I get up and march over to the trash can and chuck one in the black can. My coach grabs my arm before the other one can get chucked in as well.

"Sarah, what are you doing?" He asks gently, looking from me to the trash can where one of my tattered shoes now resides.

"I'm throwing them away." I bite my lip, trying to keep more tears from falling.

"I see that. But why?" His eyes hold a sympathetic look, quite contrary to mine of blazing fire.

"I need new ones. My lucky shoes ran out of luck," I say before chunking the last one into the trash.

PORTRAIT OF AN ARTIST, ALONE

by Zoe Andrews

The sky over Arles is dark, but it bursts with color. Purple, blue, and black all swirl together in a loving dance, crystalline diamond stars scattered throughout. A dark, winding street unfurls before my boots so far below the cosmos. The cobblestones swim before my eyes, ochre splotches on a gray-painted street. The last glass of absinthe was too much... I stumble on.

Tall, dark green cypress trees reach up to the sky on both sides of me, bars in the cage of my life. The dreams of an artists' commune are fading, replaced by the old crushing loneliness. There is no love for Vincent Van Gogh in this town, possibly not in this world. The villagers even once petitioned to have me removed. Their faces take upon a grim visage as they watch me pass from darkened windows.

Gauguin has told me he is leaving again for Paris. Leaving me here, after only sixty-three short days. He is disheartened by this town... by me, perhaps. Our arguments are more and more frequent come each dawn break. There is a darkness in me, something wild and hungry. I have stayed up until the darkest hours of the night, painting reverently to fend this beast off, but my late hours and great passion have caused much stress for Gauguin. My troubles are too much for him... "An incompatibility of temperament," he calls it. I grip the razor blade in my hand until my knuckles ache. It seems to be the only solid thing around me, strong and inorganic in a world of almost too much color and light. The silver is cool in the November air. My mind swims from the drink.

Our house— my house, now, I suppose— stands sturdy and stalwart as always. Its yellow paint, generally inviting, causes my heart to ache. There is a great rushing

in my mind, a cacophony of emotion and troubled voices. The night sky swirls above me like reflections of light in a pond. A warm yellow light shines from the green-shuttered windows, and inside I see movement. My free hand trembles on the door handle.

Before I can open the door, the handle turns. The door opens inward, and before me stands Paul Gauguin, multiple bags tucked under one arm, a foldable easel under the other. There is pity in his dark eyes, and some surprise. His short black hair is mussed, and his clothes wrinkled – signs of a hasty exit. Doubtless, he had not expected for me to find him leaving so late. As I open my mouth to speak, he brushes past me. When I reach for his arm, he pulls it from my grasp.

“Vincent. You know why I must leave, and it is not with pleasure that I do so.” He steps away and turns to face me. “There is a passion inside you, and you are a man of great intelligence... but make my leave I must, and I will.”

The darkness of the night consumes him as he heads off deeper into town. Cold metal in my hand suddenly feels as if it weighs hundreds of pounds, and I begin to follow Gauguin. He glances back over his shoulder, and his pace quickens. I match it, my boots scuffing against the cobblestones as I drunkenly shamle forward. Streetlight glints off of my blade, gentle yellow and white on slate gray. He turns again, and visibly falters, having seen now what I hold.

“You can’t go,” I beg, feeling tears pricking at my eyes. “What of our dream? Of a commune for artists here in Arles, a place for creative thought to grow... You will abandon it?” I can feel the eyes of the villagers watching us from their windows burning into me as the sun burns over a field of yellow wheat in the summer, scorching and relentless.

Gauguin is still backing up as he speaks, almost tripping over his own feet.

“This was your dream, Vincent, and a noble one. But these demons that you face must be vanquished before your dream can become real.”

He is turned away now, running with as much speed that a man carrying all his worldly belongings can, and soon the darkness beyond the streetlights consumes him.

There I stand, in the dark, alone. I hear shutters closing as the townsfolk realize the spectacle is over. The dark night sky up above seems cold and cruel, unfeeling to my plight, uncaring of my sorrow. I feel so small that I could slip into the cracks of the street and Vincent Van Gogh would be no more. I find myself willing it to be so. But willing does naught for my anguish. I turn back to the yellow house, to the place I once envisioned as a budding flower of creative integrity and growth.

The living-room we shared is full of my paintings, strewn haphazardly about and covering the walls. There are spaces where Gauguin had once had his own, but they are gone now, and the empty spaces scream out violently at me. The room seems out of balance and claustrophobic, so I turn out the lamp that is sitting near the door and go up the stairs to my quarters. The single bed in the room is empty, red blanket neatly folded over and the single pillow worn and thin. I collapse onto the wicker chair beside it, holding my head in my hands. I feel older than I ever have, eternity's gate seeming closer and closer with each step.

The cold of the razor blade in my trembling hand rests against my brow. I can see it from the corner of my right eye, glinting cold as the moon and unfeeling as stone. The wooden beams of the floor swim below my feet, slithering hither and yon like the wicked serpent in the garden of Eden.

Ruby blood spatters onto the writhing wood as wine spills from a drunkard's glass. I cry out in pain as the razor slices through the flesh of my left ear, laughing and sobbing in tandem, my left side soaked now with blood, slicing until I hold my own flesh in a trembling hand. Dizziness overtakes me, and I grab for a shirt that lies nearby to hold to the wound. It seems that I go through thousands, blood soaking through each one entirely, my severed ear wrapped carefully in similar linens. Once the bleeding is quelled, I wrap the wound with clean cloth, change my bloodied clothes, and pull a cap down over the left side of my face. A calm has come over me, perhaps brought on by the great pain. There is a stillness in my heart, and a strange, rushing clarity to my thoughts. Blood pounds viciously in my head.

As I pass a mirror in the hallway down the stairs, I catch a glimpse of my reflection, wild-eyed and gaunt. My red-orange beard is grown long and unkempt. I am a man I barely recognize, but I don't linger for long, moving quickly on to my destination. The main room in the yellow house wavers around me like a waking nightmare. It is cold inside the room, but even colder as I leave it, hardly caring to make sure the door shut behind me. The ear, wrapped in cloth, fits in my hand like some bauble bought for a lady, wrapped and ready to be gifted.

To be gifted. *That's right. It will be a gift.* I nod to myself as I walk again down those treacherous cobblestones, passing my precious package from hand to hand. I'll gift it, a gift for a lady, something to remember me by. I won't be forgotten. I won't be cast aside. These thoughts rampage wildly through my psyche as the brothel comes into sight, doors thrown wide open and revelry audible even from down the street.

I take a deep breath. I must be composed.

Gabrielle's hands are the dry hands of a working woman but are delicate as lilies when I take them into mine to give her what I hold. She clasps her fingers over it, smiling with some confusion.

"Thank you, Vincent," she murmurs, her cheeks red with a blush- or is it just rouge? "So nice of you to bring me something, what is it?"

The deep crimson of the painted walls of the brothel where Gabrielle works as a cleaner are a shock against the ivory of her skin, lit brightly by the yellow oil lamps that line the room. The revelry dies down as the girls and their patrons lean in to take a look at what I've brought her, and her face begins to contort into a mask of pure horror.

I've already begun to run out the door when I hear the screams of the prostitutes and their cohorts, all revelry brought to an abrupt end. I flinch and run faster, heart thudding a rapid beat in my chest. My left ear, or lack thereof, aches. It is far overshadowed by the pain in my heart, a deep, cruel longing darker than the starry night sky up above.

STRANGENESS OF THE STARS

by Lillie Brewster

I am alone in my shuttle in the infinite black void. Outside the window, five other pods identical to mine move soundlessly through time and space. They are my teammates, my crew. I'm the engineer. My captain's pod floats up to the left of me, its red star mark distinguishing it from the rest of my team. Six weeks ago, we launched from Earth to study a supernova, but we are still a week out with little excitement to be had.

A voice comes through my coms.

"Captain, I'm getting a reading." It's Martinez, our navigator. This is the first sign of anything since the launch.

"What is it?"

"It's a cluster. It's headed right for us, sir." *Oh no.*

The captain's voice is steady when he asks, "Can anyone get a visual?"

I look out my starboard window, trying to see something, anything, but all I can see is black. My other crewmates give negatives. I am about to turn away when something catches my eye. I press the coms. "Captain, I have a visual! Starboard side!"

The cluster is coming fast, and our shuttles have limited maneuverability. "Captain, what do we do?" But I know there is nothing we can do a moment before

the cluster slams into us. The captain's shuttle is rammed, and I lose sight of him. Martinez and Red get hit, and Reynolds and Snap's pods are smashed to smithereens. Small bits of space rock pummel the side of my pod as I struggle to hold the bars on the walls for support. Then, out of the window, I see it headed straight for me. I tighten my grip an instant before impact and am sent hurtling off course into nothingness.

• • •

In their dark ship, the Kavari watch out of sight from the pods, waiting. The pods seem to be communicating—the Kavari keep intercepting signals between them. The scanners have detected strange creatures inside. They must be controlling the pods, speaking to each other. So, they are intelligent, seemingly. But their technology is not as advanced as the Kavaris'. They are watching stars away—the new creatures' tech cannot sense them.

"Commander, what are your orders?"

The Commander doesn't move. He just watches the strange beings with his yellow eyes as they float out there like they own this galaxy. But they don't. No one does. At least, not yet.

"Commander?"

That question again. "Eliminate them," he says. "They are primitive aliens. Might as well end their ignorance."

The lieutenant nods and relays the command. The cannon charges, a low grumbling that turns to a purr. And then—

BOOM!

The cannon deploys multiple blasts at the pod formation. If any of those aliens manage to survive, they would think they had been hit by comets. But he doubts any will.

The Commander watches unblinkingly as the pods are smashed and blasted away. "Survey the debris," he says. "Take any survivors alive. I want to know what they are."

...

It is dark when I wake up. Dark save for the red emergency light. My power is low, and I am about to run out of oxygen. My head throbs—I must have hit it on impact. I look out the windows, trying to catch sight of the rest of my crew, but no one is out there. The communication is down, too. I look around. My space suit is strapped against the wall. I propel myself over and start removing it. I stuff my body into the protective material and click my helmet in place. At least this wasn't damaged. Although, if I'm the only one left there isn't much point. I'm just prolonging the journey to the

I check the communications again, but nothing comes through. The scanner, however, is still functioning. It's been silent since the cluster, but suddenly it starts blaring. My heart plunges to my stomach when I read it.

I'm about to enter a black hole.

I check my propulsion systems, but they're offline. Nothing seems to be working. Air wheezes in and out of my lungs as I realize the severity of the situation. I am about to die.

My pod shakes as the gravitational pull of the black hole grows stronger, sucking me into its great abyss. I take another desperate look out the window, searching for anyone, anything, who can help me, but all I see is the dangerous, black beauty of space sprinkled with faint, twinkling stars.

And then something appears. Suddenly, as if out of thin air.

Funny, since there is no air in space. I begin to giggle; I'm losing it. Hysteria has set in. I'm about to die inside a black hole, light years away from earth. And now I'm seeing things. *But seeing what?*

The object grows larger—it is coming closer at a dangerous speed. As it nears my shuttle, the vague shape grows more distinct, and to my unbelieving eyes comes a ship. A spaceship. Like those from movies and books. I blink my eyes, thinking I am only hallucinating, but the image doesn't go away. It stays, coming closer and closer to my dying pod.

The walls around me shake violently, screaming at the oncoming inescapable death before me. And then the outside is filled with blinding blue light. The shuttle stops shaking. The only sound in my ears is the wheezing of my lungs and the violence of my heartbeat. Then there is movement. I look out the window and see that the blue light wrapped around me is coming from the mysterious ship. It seems to be dragging me away from the black hole. My pod is dead—not even the scanner is active. All is in complete silence.

As I am pulled closer, I begin to realize just how massive the ship is. Its belly opens like a hangar door on an aircraft, swallowing me whole. And then I drop to the floor. *Ouch*. They must have artificial gravity. The inside is dim, but I can see blurry shapes scurrying around the outside of my ship. I did not just get rescued by aliens. I must be dead. Or crazy. Or maybe I went crazy before I died. But I'm still breathing, my heart is still beating, and I was just saved from a black hole by aliens. *Brilliant*.

The minutes tick by. *How long will they make me wait?*

Something bangs on the shuttle door. *Or someone*, my brain tells me.

Another bang. I reach for the opening lever. There is nothing else I can do. If I stay inside, they'll just use force to get me out. Might as well just let them in.

The pod's hatch lowers. There is still little light outside, but the vague shapes are there, frozen, holding their breath as I do mine. I hear a low humming sound. Whoever they are, they seem to be forming words, using some sort of language to communicate. The humming varies with pitch and is punctuated with clicks and growls. *What are they saying?*

I take a slow step forward. The humming ceases. I take another step.

And then arms grab me. Multiple hands—I guess they're hands—clamp around my arms, dragging me from the shuttle. They are strong, and though I struggle, their grip is iron. Somehow, I manage to hit the flashlight on my helmet. I look up and am faced with a gray visage and glowing yellow eyes. My breath comes in gasps, my brain unable to process what my eyes are seeing.

Aliens.

I have been abducted by aliens.

I am thrown into what looks like a cell. It is even darker in here. The dim light from my flashlight reveals hard walls and bars that block my exit like a cage. I am wondering how long they will make me wait when footsteps sound to the right of my cell, getting louder and louder as they echo off the walls. I can see a light, too.

Three figures stand before me. One holds an orb of light in long delicate fingers. The second seems to be holding some sort of package, while the third just stares. He's the tallest of the three, but they all easily stand seven feet tall. They all have rough gray skin and bulging yellow eyes. They look eerily humanoid, with strange dark tentacles similar to hair sprouting from their heads. The tallest one, who I assume is in charge, hums what seems to be a command. The one holding the package comes into the cell. He walks toward me, one hand reaching out. I back against the wall, trying to avoid his touch. But then he starts humming, and suddenly I cannot move. I am paralyzed by the sound. He reaches for my helmet and starts to fiddle with it. Before I realize what he's about to do, he's already found the button and twisted off my helmet. I expect to start suffocating, but to my shock I breathe with little difficulty. I barely have time to register that the humming has stopped, and I can move before the creature reaches down and jabs a needle into my neck.

...

The Commander studies the alien. It's small, much smaller than he, and it stands frozen in fear in the middle of the cell. He can't see its face, only the distorted reflection of himself in the helmet. It needs to come off.

"Remove the helmet and give it the microbes," he says to the doctor. The doctor nods and enters the cell. The alien backs against the wall, refusing to be touched, but is soon stilled by the doctor's paralyzing frequency. He removes the helmet, revealing the creature's face. It looks strangely similar to them, only with smaller eyes, smoother brown skin, and finer hair. *How peculiar.*

The doctor quickly administers the microbes. The creature jerks away, feeling its neck where the needle was inserted. It makes a sound, but the microbes need only a few moments longer to begin the translating process. When the creature vocalizes again, the question is now understandable:

"What did you do to me?"

The Commander doesn't answer right away. He studies the alien a moment longer before saying, "What are you?"

The alien's jaw drops open. The Commander smirks.

He repeats his question, "What are you?"

The alien closes its mouth and makes a strange growling sound in its throat. Then it answers, "I'm a human. What are you?"

"We are the Kavari."

"The what?"

The Commander ignores the question. "Are you the male or female of your race?"

The alien pauses, squinting its dark eyes. "Female." She takes a tentative step forward.

Ah, so she's curious. "Where do you come from?"

"I'm not ready to tell you that yet." She takes another step. "What's your name?"

The Commander pauses. *She's trying to go on the offensive. Smart.* "Not important."

"You tell me yours and I'll tell you mine." The alien—or *human*—crosses her arms.

"Very well then," growls the Commander. "I am Commander Tryska Karone."

"That wasn't so hard." The human is smug. *Is the entire race that way?* "I'm Ridley."

What a strange name. The word *human* sounds strange, too—sounds *alien*. Whatever they are, they will have to be dealt with. The Commander can't have them scavenging the galaxy and sabotaging his plan.

Karone takes one last look at the alien. She steadily meets his gaze. She will be an interesting mystery to solve. He turns on his heel and walks away. He can feel her gaze on his neck.

As they near the control bridge, he turns to the doctor, "I believe it's time to experiment."

TEARS IN HEAVEN

by B. Diane White

A month after my mother died of breast cancer, in June 2018, I had a dream. It was one of those dreams so real that you're not sure you are dreaming or if you are awake.

In the dream, I was having breakfast on a patio that circled Heaven which was inside a transparent globe. Picture Saturn: the rings are the patio, and the planet is the globe holding Heaven inside. The patio was empty except for tables and chairs, but inside there were trellises with passion flowers, climbing roses and morning glories, their faces turned toward the light inside. It was obvious they were there for the enjoyment of the Heavenly residents but also to give me a small glimpse of the beauty there.

In the distance I saw my mother. She was on her knees tending to a garden that clearly did not need tending. It was filled with enormous peonies, gorgeous yellow roses, and other flowers I could not identify. Some were like hybrids of daisies and daffodils, while others were completely unidentifiable. She was of an age that seemed to change as I looked at her. She was very young and then middle age, then older, then younger again, but healthy at each age. A peaceful smile played around her mouth. All around, there were other people with familiar silhouettes and mannerisms but too far away for me to make out their faces. I tried to tap on the globe to get Mom's attention, but when my fingers made contact there was no sound. A sweet fragrance came to me as the globe shivered like a bubble under my touch. Then Mom rose and walked toward a cylindrical container. She reached in with her garden spade and pulled out a scoop of something from within the container. She returned to her garden spot and sprinkled the contents of the spade over the

flowers there. The flowers trembled and shuddered, then appeared to grow taller and brighter right before my eyes. It was like she had sprinkled a magic fertilizer on the flowers. Slowly, my mother turned toward me and smiled. She looked at the cylinder, then back at me, blew a kiss and waved at me before returning to her work.

"Mom!" I shouted. But while my voice made the bubble ripple, it did not penetrate. She did not hear me. Tears filled my eyes, spilled over my lids, and streamed down my face.

Suddenly Sean, my beloved childhood dog, was standing beside me. Sean had been my constant companion for fourteen years. He was my friend when friends had been hard to come by.

"Hello!" I knelt to him. "It's so good to see you. I miss you so much! Is this a dream?"

"Probably," Sean said. "But does it matter whether your experiences are during wakefulness or sleep? You still feel them. Why are you crying?" He twisted his head sideways in that charming doggie way.

"I want to talk to her," I said. "I want to hug her."

"You will one day, but it's not time."

"I can't stand it."

"Yes, you can." Sean licked my hand. "You are made of tougher stuff than you are allowing yourself to believe."

"I don't want her to think I've forgotten her."

"She knows you haven't forgotten her. No one forgets their mother. Children even remember bad mothers. Just because you get on with your life, doesn't mean you have forgotten her. She lived hers, did the job she was supposed to do, and now she's in her reward. You still have things to do, and you will honor her by getting on with those things."

"It's so hard," I cried. "And you aren't there to make everything better."

"I know," he said. "But she gives belly rubs almost as good as you." I smiled at him through my tears. "It's tears and burdens, by the way," he said.

"What?" I asked.

"You were wondering what Mom sprinkled on the flowers," he leaned in closer and put one paw on my knee. "Tears and burdens of loved ones. They are collected and used to feed the garden, turning sorrow into beauty. Tears can't remain tears in Heaven."

"That's so beautiful," I said.

"I know," he said.

"How did you get out here, anyway?" I asked.

He smiled. "Heaven has a doggie door."



THE BATTLE TO BECOME AVERAGE

by Jude O’Kain

I dedicate this writing to my foster grandma, who passed away this year.

We all face different challenges in life. Some challenges give you limitations but make you try harder. Other challenges force you to take a step back and appreciate the few things you do have. My challenges were unfortunate, but I did not give up. I was able to catch up in school and life after a long uphill battle.

For the majority of my early childhood, I lived with my foster parents in a rural farm village located in the Daxing District of Beijing in China. The village and many villages nearby contained mostly foster families. Each foster family would have kids with different physical or mental disabilities. In my foster family, I had a mom, dad, grandma, grandpa, and three brothers. The people in the village had little education, and they made a living through farming. My foster family had been assigned several acres of farmland, which they used to plant and harvest watermelons.

In the summer, I made sure to keep the birds away from the watermelons in the farmland—I was a human scarecrow. When I tried to record my favorite song playing on the radio with a cassette tape recorder, the birds would always make noise in the background. When harvest season came, my parents and neighbors spent days harvesting the watermelons. None of them had the money for farming equipment; all they had were a few three-wheel trucks and their own hands. I was too young to be helpful, so I just watched. In the blazing sun and the humid air, the farmers went to work. The sweat dripped down rapidly from their noses and soaked the backs of their clothing. Cutting, picking, and loading were repeated many times throughout the day. The conical hat served as a firewall between the sun and face. The birds waited

for their opportunity to dig in and to take a sip of the cool, sweet, and nutrient-rich watermelon juice.

At the end of the day, the farmers were exhausted yet joyful. I never heard one complaint from any of those farmers. Who would think that a farmer with nearly nothing is likely happier than a millionaire living in a mansion? Why are the farmers so content? Is it because their life was simpler? Is it because they appreciated everything, no matter how insignificant? Is it because they've learned to be satisfied in all situations? Is it because they've experienced so many hardships early that everything else becomes child's play? Is it because they can see, feel, smell, and taste the fruits of their labor? I don't know the answers, but clearly their joy was not due to wealth. After the farm work, I spent most of my days with my grandma and friends.

My grandma read pictured storybooks with me, where she explained each word in the sentence. That was how I learned words: observe the picture or drawing and try to make sense out of my grandma's explanation. Grandma taught me how to be strong. She welcomed me to a world that I didn't think I belonged to because of my physical disability. She was always there for me, even when I messed up. Although the family had little, I'm glad grandma lived a happy life. I am glad I got to see her a few years ago. I am glad of the time I've spent with her reading storybooks when I was a child. I am glad she was surrounded by family members at home during her last days instead of being isolated in an ICU with little time allowed for visitors. I am glad grandma is part of my story. May she rest in peace.

Other times, I played games with my friends, who were also orphans. We did a lot of stupid things together: captured insects and watched them fight, lit fireworks in glass bottles and let them explode, or poked beehives and ran for our lives. On some days, I watched TV. The TV was the only window to the world outside of my village; it provided an opportunity to take a peek at society, which the adults often mentioned in conversations. After a storm, the pictures on the TV became distorted or snowy. I would have to slowly rotate the 40-foot-long antenna pole until the images on the TV were restored clearly. Overall, I had a good early childhood until kindergarten.

I was six years old when I started kindergarten. The days in kindergarten were a nightmare because I discovered how different I was. I noticed the lookback rate of passing strangers was above average. I don't have all the fingers and toes everyone else has. I didn't have average feet: one was almost completely backward. Before

kindergarten, I thought the world had a balanced ratio of people who were physically normal and different. I was wrong. The ratio in my village didn't represent the world.

The school I went to had programs from kindergarten to middle school. My class group had special needs kids. We were the only group that stood out in the school, but I stood out the most. Kids in the school reacted with a mixture of shock, disgust, and curiosity as if I was some sort of alien creature from outer space. For a brief period, I believed that I was an alien whose only purpose was to cause unnecessary discomfort to the strangers near him. All the negative attention completely shattered my self-worth. Thankfully, I had my friends and grandma. They were always there for me. They helped me stay positive when I seemed to be an unwelcome guest of the world. My village, family, and friends were my shelter from the constant spotlight. In this shelter, I felt safe and valued.

I figured that to stand a chance in this world, I had to win the battle against myself. I fought through the school days and worked hard. I brought home all kinds of award certificates as a merit student, most improved student, and an outstanding math student. There was a wall in the living room of my home filled with my award certificates. I remember how proud my grandma was, and I decided right then that I was going to spend my life making her proud. As summer came, I waved goodbye to my classmates and teachers. Shortly thereafter, one unexpected event changed everything.

One day in the summer, a black van showed up at our doorstep. A small group of people came out of the van, and they had a serious meeting with my parents. One man slowly walked toward me and told me that my parents were my foster parents. I didn't know what that meant. He explained that my foster parents were not my biological parents. He told me that my biological parents abandoned me shortly after birth. I didn't want to believe it, but my grandma's eyes were filled with tears. I had never seen my grandma that sad before, not even when my grandpa passed away. As her eyes became red, I cried, and my heart was broken for the first time. I knew the van was there to get me. I knew that meant we would be separated and not see each other for a long time. I knew I was scared of what was to come. I didn't know why my foster parents never told me the truth, but I was sure they had their reasons. I hugged my foster parents and grandma one last time and told them how much I loved them. I sat in the van, and the doors were shut. As the van started to drive away, I watched my foster parents, grandma, friends, and village all fade into the distance. Along the way, I saw skyscrapers instead of farmlands, strangers instead of

friends, and normal people instead of disabled people. My life was gone just in a few hours, but a new one was about to begin.

I arrived at the orphanage. In front of me stood a large five-story white building. A castle playground with swings and slides was on my left, all built on grass. The entire area was surrounded by tall and sharp black fences. The orphanage could hold up to 500 kids from infants to fifteen-year-olds and around 250 workers. Kids ranged from having absolutely zero issues to diseases or conditions that shortened their lifespan. Inside the orphanage, kids were assigned into these four areas: Elementary, Rehabilitation, Treatment, and Student. Each area had a different purpose. The Elementary area provided care and elementary education to kids from infancy to age five. The Rehabilitation area developed unique rehabilitation plans for each kid in need and performed them daily. The Treatment area offered full care for kids who needed constant medical attention. The Student area provided resources for kids that are mentally and physically capable of going to secondary schools, which were outside of the orphanage. I was initially assigned to the Student area.

The Student area had around forty kids of all ages. Some were tall and big. Some were short and small. I was somewhere in the middle. Everyone seemed to have their friend circles; I was the new kid no one knew. It was then lunchtime; everyone stopped what they were doing and lined up from the shortest to tallest. Once the headcount was completed, we headed to the cafeteria downstairs via the elevator. There were many tables and chairs, the kind that you will find in a fast-food place. The moment we walked in through the cafeteria door, the smell of the food slowly entered our noses, leaving us wondering what we were eating that day. I sat at an empty table while everyone else sat with their friends. The workers started distributing food to everyone with a large bowl; we had rice, chicken drumsticks, and corn. We were given the same amount at first; once everyone got their share, we could get as much as we desired. After lunch, we have to take a two-hour mandatory nap. During our nap, most of the workers headed to their cafeteria or restaurant outside of the orphanage for their lunch. I was assigned a bed in a room with about 15 kids. The bed frame was made of wood, shaped like a rectangular box with an open-top and supported by four legs. The mattress on top of the bed felt half-empty and nowhere near comfortable but usable. I always found it hard to nap during the day, so I spent the nap time thinking. In the afternoon, I made some friends and played different card games with them. At night, we had one worker in each room monitoring us. They would make sure everyone was quiet at bedtime. Once everyone fell asleep, they got some rest too.

A few days later, school was about to start. I met with the secondary school principal to determine whether or not I could go to their school. I took the entrance exam, which tested one's ability to read and understand fundamental math. I aced the entrance exam without breaking a sweat; I was excited to show the principal just how capable I was. I went to the principal's office with great excitement but got the devastating news that I would not be able to attend the school because I might get hurt in PE class. I argued that I could just not take the PE class, but I was told that was not an option. I argued and argued as if it could change anything. I feared for my future; I knew at the time, without education, life would be hard to manage.

I imagined the orphanage as a deep well, where I was at the bottom looking up. In my view, I could see a limited part of the sky, but it was not enough for me to understand the world. In the well, I had what I needed to survive: food, clothing, and friends. However, I lacked control. I felt like a motionless particle that was propelled by others' breath. I felt like a robot just executing orders from some invisible hand in the government or management. I felt like a piece of waste that had been forgotten by society in a landfill. Was this going to be my destiny? No, far from it. I knew my curiosity was a valuable asset.

Moreover, my curiosity would be a crucial variable in the equation for my happiness. I decided that I would merely put it into hibernation and wait for the right opportunity to fully reactivate it. I tried to keep my curiosity alive by reading books from a limited selection in the common room, playing around with an old computer in the office, and watching TV with my friends. That old computer was where my interest in technology started. I was fascinated by its function, complexity, and design. I asked the orphanage workers, whom I was close with, to download video games and movies for me. Then, I played them repeatedly.

In the orphanage, I established myself as a leader of sorts, gaining respect from the kids and workers. There was a lot of physical bullying at the time, but I used my newly acquired power to address it by standing up to bullies and protecting smaller kids. I made many close friends in the orphanage, and some of us would die for each other in a heartbeat. I learned to read by looking up words on a flip phone that had limited internet. I adapted to a difficult life instead of letting it consume me. I had many obstacles, but I overcame most of them. After living in the orphanage for a few years, I finally received good news.

Because a child in China is ineligible for adoption once they reach the age of fourteen, the possibility of getting adopted had vanished from my mind when I turned thirteen. Despite the tight time frame, with a few months remaining for the adoption window, I received the news that I would be adopted by an American family in a week. I didn't know how to feel or react. So far, the environmental changes in my life hadn't been pleasant. Each big change had begun with sadness and uncertainty but had become sweeter as time progressed. Would it be different this time? This time, I might have the opportunity to take back control of my life. This time, I might have the chance to feed and unleash my curiosity, allowing it to become my compass. This time, I might have the opportunity to reach my potential. Adoption meant I could finally be freed from the cage, the orphanage, and be able to explore the world that the average kid has access to. Life after adoption would be an opportunity to reconstruct my old broken self, damaged in the negative spotlight of the world and the battles with my thoughts.

As I left the orphanage with a few photos and gifts from my friends, my new life started. I was shocked by the actual size of the world, and it took me a long time to put it into perspective. I was innocent enough to think the world was filled with caring people and that bullies were the only evil that existed. I was disturbed and confused by all the differences I discovered along the way. I had to accept this newly discovered world and learn to be part of it. Learning English was a major challenge. Without comprehending the things around me, I knew I couldn't make big progress or catch up effectively. I observed and listened closely whenever English was used. Then, I tried to find patterns in sentences and looked up the unfamiliar words online. That was how I initially learned the English language.

On Christmas Day, I received a laptop computer as a present. Since then, computers, technology, and the internet have helped feed my curiosity. The internet has been my mentor, and it allowed me to get caught up with education. Moreover, the internet has allowed me to explore the world of computers. I found my passions: computer programming and cybersecurity. I was amazed by the way computers think and the design flaws in software that make it insecure. My curiosity motivated me to work harder so that I can one day pursue my passions as far as they can take me.

I graduated from high school. I faced my fear of English class and received A's in community college. I had to work hard for an average grade, and I had to work even harder for an above-average score. My SAT experience was an example of extra effort. I spent hours studying daily for six months because I didn't have eight years

of education under my belt. I had to spend extra hours to build a solid foundation for both math and English. There were days when I wanted to give up, but I didn't. I reminded myself why I was studying for the SAT: I didn't like how I was represented as below average. After six months, I took the test and got the score I wanted: above average. Now, I am pursuing my passions. I know where I want to be, and I just need to figure out the path that gets me there. I am confident that I will find ways to overcome. I am confident that I will fully utilize future opportunities because I know what it is like to have no control. I am confident that I will work hard to improve as a professional and a member of society.

I am thankful for the people that have been in my life. Without them, I would be forever chained by the negative experiences of my past. Without them, my mind would never have reached a healthy state. Without them, my world would have no light. Nothing in this world can quantify one's value: not wealth, intelligence, status, or beauty. What I've learned is good things may come to an end unexpectedly. All we can do is be present for the people we care about. When things come to an end, we will have good memories of friendships, which will be the light in dark and stormy nights.

DO BUTTERFLIES MOURN?

by B. Diane White

My mother passed away one morning in July around 6:00 a.m., just moments before a thunderstorm woke me and I went to check on her. I think her spirit was still in the room when I walked in.

I miss her so dreadfully. I miss the smell of her, the light fragrance of her before she got so very sick. She wasn't someone who wore much perfume. She just smelled clean, like Tide mixed with a fresh bar of soap and warmth.

I miss her laugh. She didn't laugh without reason. She had a beautiful smile and a comforting chuckle that she shared generously. She saved her laughs for things that truly deserved it. It was as if she thought she had a finite supply and should preserve them for the treasure they were. When it was apparent that her smile could no longer contain or express the moment's mirth adequately, usually at a time in which she became the center of attention, and she was delighted and embarrassed at the same time, she would explode in a full belly laugh. I remember her birthday party at a Mexican restaurant when they came out to sing for her. They put a giant sombrero on her head and started singing, "Yay, Carolyn!" She laughed so hard she had no strength to protest or remove the enormous bejeweled hat. She covered her mouth tightly as if she was trying to keep all her joy from escaping. Her smile was so broad it might have split her face in two, but with her hands, she could hold her face together. The laugh took over her entire body, and she looked like she might literally die laughing.

I wish that we *could* die from laughing instead of from cancer. That would be nice.

Few things are more horrifying than watching the first person you ever loved, the first person you ever met, die. It is not just the moment of death but the weeks, days, hours leading up to the moment that are both awful and indescribably precious. To watch her formerly strong body that kept a household going, that raised five kids and a husband, become smaller and weaker with each treatment, while pleading with God to slow it down or speed it up, depending on the level of her pain, is not for the weak. But, when they put her tiny body on that gurney and moved it down the hallway, through the house, with the family lining the way, like some macabre parade without the ticker tape, I was crushed forever. As long as she still lay in her bed, she might wake up and smile. But now, all hope was gone.

I think of her every day. Every morning, for months following her death, I would wake up and re-remember that she was gone. She was my first thought of the day. Nearly every waking moment in the prior months had been about her, planning doctor visits, figuring out care shifts between my siblings and Mom's sister. It was strange trying to figure out what to do with that time now. Not a week goes by where the realization that she is gone doesn't hit me like it is brand new information, and I am unable to stop the tears. I sometimes think to call her. Her voicemail messages are still on my phone. There are six of them. They all say the same thing: "This is Mom. Call me when you can." She never wanted to be a bother. "Call me when you can." She should have been insulted that she even had to leave a voicemail message. Who was I not to have just taken the call?

Mom was not overly demonstrative with her affections. But she showed her love in subtle ways; the cooking, the cards she signed "Love M & D," the refusal to let anyone pay for anything in her presence, her fried chicken.

This fall, I canned fruits and vegetables from my garden, like she always did. The kitchen shelves are filled with strawberry, blueberry, and peach jelly. When I made her mother's pickle recipe, it filled the house with the smell of dill that brought them both back to me in such a strong way.

I hoped this activity said to her, "Hey, I remember how you showed us how to do this. I remember your apple butter recipe by heart. I paid attention. I didn't forget. I'll never forget you. Please don't forget me. Please don't forget me."

When I think of Mom in Heaven, she's outside gardening. She loved being outside. During the hottest Oklahoma summer days, people could drive past her

house, and she'd be sitting on the porch rocker admiring her lovely little yard and the garden she had created within it. A magnificent passion vine lined the fence and threw off an intoxicating fragrance. Large lacey peonies in shades from lightest pink to deepest magenta smiled up at her from their bed. Knock-out roses grew simply because she told them to.

Even at her sickest, she wanted to be outside. When she was no longer able to walk, when the cancer had made her bones brittle and painful and even holding her head up was difficult, she wanted to be outside on the porch. We would get her up in the mornings for breakfast. She would eat a few bites of raisin bran or an orange cinnamon roll and sip a cup of coffee. Then she would request to be taken to the porch. In the spring and summer of 2018, we spent a lot of time on that porch, just sitting. It is where she felt best and where we had some of our best conversations. We were forced to slow down and just be with each other. Visitors would come and sit with us.

That porch became a happy place in a horrible time. The passion vine was particularly beautiful last year; all her guests would comment on it. Passion vines have a symbiotic relationship with the fritillary butterfly, but almost all butterflies are attracted to it. She enjoyed them so much, and they seemed to enjoy her too. But during her final weeks, those butterflies were really making a show of it. They were everywhere, and not just the butterflies but their caterpillars too. Cocoons hung from every surface like strings of Chinese lanterns. My little sister commented that maybe all of us on the porch made them feel welcome. Yes, I like to think of butterflies as being a little vain. Such beautiful creatures must delight in having an audience to their beauty. Last July, they had an extended engagement on Mom's porch. Mom would point out how this cocoon was getting ready to open or look at that one just coming out. The butterflies would emerge, rest while their wings unfolded, then take flight. Sometimes they would land on us. Even when the cancer in her brain had taken most of her words, she still smiled at the butterflies. It was like they had a language with her that only she understood... and they understood her.

The sheer volume of butterflies on Mom's porch in July was breathtaking. I have never seen that number of them before or since. It was as if they had shown up purely for her enjoyment and then to escort her to Heaven when she was ready. How lovely to think of my mother being shown the way to Heaven by an army of fritillary butterflies. Two days before she passed, Mom had expressed concern that she would not know which direction to go when she passed through the door of this life.

Mom always had an anxiety about getting lost or being somewhere unfamiliar. Piglet and I tried to assure her that there would be happy familiar faces there to greet her and show her the way. But now, I really hope it was the butterflies who gently lifted her soul from her broken body and took her to the entrance to Heaven. How fitting for it to have been the butterflies who said to Jesus, "This is Carolyn, your good and faithful servant."

Mom's porch was barren this year. I might be imagining that the peonies didn't bloom as gaily or the roses weren't as plentiful, but the reality is my mother is not there, so nothing is as beautiful as it once was.

One Saturday in late summer the year after her death, while I visited my dad, I noticed the passion vine and inhaled to receive the fragrance. Something had changed. The scent was faint; there were only half a dozen blooms when last year there were hundreds. I saw a few caterpillars but no butterflies. This was July. This was their time. But they are not there. Did they fly elsewhere because the lovely keeper of their vine is no longer there to appreciate and admire them? Are her butterflies mourning, too?

THE GALAPAGOS DREAM

by Tessa Barman-Flannigan

I always save the reptile house for last. It's the best part of the zoo, even better than the sea lion show. It's where the turtles and tortoises live. I've loved turtles and tortoises with my whole heart for as long as I can remember. They're my favorite animals. And the very thought of seeing those giant Galapagos tortoises lounging around sends me bounding full speed toward the reptile house. My dad yells for me to slow down as he does his best to chase me while still pushing my baby sister Taylor in her stroller. But I don't stop until I reach the outdoor enclosure that encases the reptile house.

It's only when I stop to catch my breath that I realize there are no giant tortoises in their designated spot outside the building. My heart drops. But they have to be here! I came to see them! I stand there scanning the terrain for my large, shelled friends, hoping to find one hiding behind a bush, praying that I somehow just overlooked them, until my dad and Taylor finally catch up to me.

"They're not out here," I report to my dad, my tone utterly despondent. "They're not here. I don't see them."

It is then that my dad delivers the good news.

"They're probably just in the inside part today," he tells me.

"Oh yeah!" Relief fills me, and my excitement returns. "Let's go look!"

I race up the steep incline and into the reptile house. Dad follows behind me with baby Taylor in tow. I make my way through the building, stopping to marvel at

every box turtle, every brightly colored lizard, and every venomous snake. I follow this pattern until I reach the back of the building. Finally, the main event! Nestled in the back corner, just before the exit door, is the indoor enclosure for the Galapagos tortoises. And it's occupied!

Two massive tortoises stand mere feet away from me. All that separates us is a small stone barrier only a couple feet high. One is facing me, regarding me with mild interest, while the other has its back turned to me, going to town on a bowl of various veggies. They're both beautiful to behold. As I stare in wonder, I imagine once more how life-changingly awesome it would be to pet their giant shells and touch their disproportionate little heads. I've dreamed about it for years. If only they were closer to the barrier, I could just reach over and pet them. Or if I were...

It occurs to me then. A golden opportunity lies before me. Everything has lined up perfectly. I'm closer to the tortoises than I've ever been, and the indoor enclosure is so easily accessible. The stone barrier is exactly the right height for climbing. I do a quick scan of the building, checking if anyone is watching. Aside from my family, the reptile house is completely empty, and Dad and Taylor are still busy looking at the neon-colored poison frogs. The coast is entirely clear. It's as if the universe has aligned itself perfectly, just for me, just to make my dream come true. Who am I to refuse the will of the universe?

It all happens in one glorious moment. Before I can give it a second thought, I'm over the barrier and in the enclosure. The nearest tortoise is only a few steps away, and I cover the distance between us in one long stride. If he minds my sudden intrusion, he doesn't show it, hardly even looking up from his meal. For just a split second, I simply stand beside the tortoise as he continues to devour his vegan dinner, frozen in a state of shock and awe. He's huge! Nearly as tall as I am and just as majestic up close as I had always imagined.

The sound of footsteps wakes me from my stupor. I cannot waste this once-in-a-lifetime opportunity. I have to act before it's too late. Heart pounding, I reach out my hand and stroke the smooth shell of the magnificent Galapagos tortoise. I pause for just a moment to gauge the tortoise's reaction. At first, he remains stoic, merely diverting his gaze from his meal just long enough to grace me with a glance. But then, to my immense delight and disbelief, he lifts up his head and stretches out his neck as if inviting me to pet him. I slowly, gingerly touch the top of his head and pet his long neck.

Just as I make contact with the tortoise's rough skin, three things happen simultaneously. One: My lifelong goal is achieved. Two: I realize my dad must have found me as I hear him yell my name from directly behind me. Three: The enclosure's back wall suddenly opens, and two very angry people wearing Oklahoma City Zoo t-shirts emerge.

"What are you doing?!" cries the first one.

"You CAN'T be in here!" shouts the second.

I freeze. I have no idea what my next move is. I didn't actually think this far ahead in my plan. For two long heartbeats, I just stare at the furious zookeepers with my hand still resting on the tortoise's head.

"Tessa!" My dad yells again, and the sound of my name wakes my brain back up.

I drop my hands to my sides and begin backing away.

"He wanted me to pet him!" I explain to the zookeepers, still glaring at me.

One of them lets out a heavy sigh, and the other repeats slowly, frustratedly, "You. Can't. Be. In. Here."

I continue backing away until I'm within arm's length of my dad, who swiftly lifts me out of the enclosure and sets me down beside him. As soon as my feet touch the ground, I lock eyes with zookeepers, feeling much more confident now that I'm a safe distance away from their palpable rage.

I gesture to the barrier that's now in front of me once more and ask them, "Then why is it climbing size?"

I smirk at the zookeepers, certain that all is well now that I've presented this obviously infallible argument. But to my surprise, their faces contort, and I can tell the screaming is about to start up again. Before they can get going, though, my dad cuts in, first apologizing on my behalf, then telling me to go wait for him outside. Eager to escape any more yelling and still very proud of today's accomplishments, I make my way to the exit, smiling triumphantly all the way.

When my dad emerges with Taylor in her stroller a few minutes later, I know it's time to go home. My dad lectures me the whole walk to the car and half the drive home. But I don't care. Today, I lived the dream. Today, I jumped the barrier into an animal enclosure. Today, I pet a tortoise nearly the same size as I am!

And next time, I'm going to ride one.

THE INFAMOUS SHEEP SHIT HEIST

by Elizabeth Green

It's early July in 2005; I'm mopping the floor of the coffee shop where I work and, though I don't know it yet, this morning I met the man I'm going to marry. We met in a pub on the south side of a city that doesn't exist; both of us were pretending to be someone else at the time.

The pub in question is called The Punt Den, and it's located in the Southbridge district of World's Mouth, which is a fictional city belonging to an online, play-by-post role-playing game called Tazlure. Amateur writers from all over the world collaboratively contribute to this fantasy world, shaping it and changing it through their characters and stories, and I signed up to join them just a week ago. Right now, as I'm mopping beneath the broad skylight in the coffee shop, painting blue sky and clouds onto the tile, I'm thinking about the story I began to write yesterday and the reply my writing-partner left me this morning. I'm turning the lines over in my head, adjusting and editing, trying to find an interesting approach or a witty thing to say. I can barely hear the crowded coffee shop over the din of my own thoughts:

Author: Niccolo Alvero, Posted: Sat Jul 02, 2005, 5:28 pm

Stomping down the steps, Niccolo surveyed the scene before him. Gambling was not the most ideal of pastimes, but it did have two possible effects. First, he might actually win money, a rare thought indeed for the depressed young man, and second, he might meet a few interesting people while he plays. After all, he had a few coins... and the One knew he wasn't going anywhere anytime soon, for he had no home to speak of anymore. 'People that don't work don't HAVE homes, Nico! They eat what they get from the monks, and they live like dogs! Are you a DOG, Nico?!'

"Fair day, gentlemen!" offered Nico to the crowd below, the voices in his head already fading away in favor of the game before him. "I hope you've room for one more, for I'm of a mind to be fleeced tonight. That is if I can scare up a beer to go along with the fleecing."

This morning I read it once quickly and a second time more slowly, savoring the words. Once I'm done mopping, I'll put out the wet floor sign and go back to the kitchen to finish washing all the dirty mugs: swipe the coffee ring out with a cloth and then stack the cup in the industrial rack before pulling the big machine down to shoot red-hot water over everything. Washing dishes is a great way to think.

Author: Finley Ward, Posted: Sun Jul 03, 2005, 5:13 pm

The stairs down were not hard to find. It was the young man standing in the doorway below that irked him slightly. Finn eyed the back of his head for a moment, then remarked softly, "Fleeced, is it? Then the first beer's on me, if you'll be moving before the next winter..."

Those are the first words we say to one another, but it's another two weeks of fiction before we begin to speak. I find myself drawn to him in a way I can't describe. My heart tells me that we *just fit together*. I rationalize that this means we are meant to be friends because I've formed a few suppositions about Niccolo's author since I joined the site, and my suppositions are not romantic in the least. I imagine he is much older than I am, happily married with adult children, has a beard, and smokes a pipe.

The only thing I got right was the beard.

Author: Niccolo Alvero, Posted: Thu Jul 14, 2005, 9:29 pm

"The city uses bond houses. That means that goods shipped into the city go into a big government warehouse. You saw 'em on the way in, Finn... just inside Northbridge," Nico spoke quickly, his mind already turning over their chances. "Now, bond, it isn't perfect by any means... but it is secure since it has walls, and they don't let people inside too easily and without guards watching. So, what we do is this. Finn, you and me, we go grab us a wagon and an ass... it doesn't have to be too big. The wagon that is. Then we head south to the ranchers outside of town and buy some manure... enough to fill the wagon. When I bring the wagon

back to town tomorrow night, I won't have the fees to pay for the manure... the tax... so it'll go into bond until someone pays the bond tax. I'll leave the wagon, and I'll get a certificate of stock for the sheep shit I left in bond..."

The first few private messages we send are tentative, speaking only of the story we're crafting and the directions it might take, the potential pitfalls, and the opportunities we're presented. Then later, we meet in an internet relay chat channel – which is far less formal – and surrounded by the safety of other writers, we begin to build a friendship.

Because that's all it is, I tell myself. It's September, and I'm telling myself that more often these days: that we're only internet friends, the most tenuous of relationships. I don't know anything about him, not really, only that I like the way he writes. I like the way we write together, how our stories mesh like two sides of a zipper, the way our characters banter so effortlessly. I like the way our daily conversations run so late that when I look up at the clock, I find I should have gone to bed hours ago; he's American, I'm British, and our time differential is losing me sleep.

My sister notices before I do, and she isn't impressed. I'm telling her for probably the millionth time how much fun it is to write with him, how clever he is, and she rolls her eyes at me. "You have a crush on some guy on the internet?" she asks, but it isn't really a question.

I can feel myself blushing. "No, it's not like that at all! He's just a friend. I'm just really enjoying the story we're writing. That's all."

After that, I try not to talk about it anymore, even though this fizzy, excited feeling keeps bubbling up in my chest whenever I think about it.

Author: Finley Ward, Posted: Wed Oct 19, 2005, 7:23 pm

Finley breathed in a deep lungful of the fresher air and surveyed the view from the back of the wagon.

'Shit.'

He might have laughed at his own choice of words had this been any other situation. But it was not – he'd *suffered* for this, and the knot of anticipation in

his gut was still tight. Competing with nausea, maybe, but there, nonetheless. He viewed the yard with a certain resignation – struck with a vivid memory of the day before when this had all been merely theoretical. He could even remember his exact words – ‘...and fourthly, finally, and most importantly, you really think they’re gonna store a wagonful of shit with anything valuable whatsoever? They’re gonna store it somewhere well ventilated. *Outside.*’

But there was little pleasure to be had in being right. And there would be even less in taunting Nico with this fact later if Finn had just spent the whole night crouched under a heap of manure, being right.

The other writers on the website have noticed, too. Tazlure is owned and run by three Dutch ladies – Tanja, Sanneke, and Saskia, who sometimes call themselves the Three Witches – and Tanja is the one who forces our hands. She tells me she’s throwing a New Year’s Eve party in Leiden, and do I want to come? Steve will be coming. Wouldn’t that be nice?

Niccolo’s writer is called Steve, by the way.

It seems that somewhere in our fantastical writing, we’ve managed to conjure something real. The plan is simple enough: he will fly to England and meet me in London, where we’ll stop one night before hopping on a plane to Holland to see the Witches and celebrate the New Year on the edge of the North Sea. It’s just a party of friends, no pressure at all.

We don’t say “I love you” because we’ve never met in person. How can you love someone you’ve never met? We couch it in more sensible terms; “I really like you,” “we have so much in common,” “let’s see what happens when we meet for real.”

Author: Niccolo Alvero, Posted: Wed Nov 23, 2005, 11:34 am

“All night in a pile of shit, and you found papers? That’s a curious grab, Finn,” murmured Niccolo, taking up the documents and unfolding and reading them one at a time. “I had a little haul last night, too. A few crowns, anyway...head money for Tanaquil, though I bet we should use it to pay off Hart.”

Tanja is also the one who suggests we talk on the phone. I’m not sure why I hadn’t thought of it earlier, but she laughs when she finds out we’ve not spoken, not

yet, at least not with our mouths. Only with our fingers. The next time Steve is online, I give him my number, and that weekend we have our first audible conversation in my backyard, our voices high-pitched with nerves.

We don't say, "I love you," we say, "I can't wait to meet you in person."

Author: Tanja, Posted: Wed Nov 23, 2005, 1:45 pm

There were two pieces of paper, and although they were smudged with manure, they could still be read easily.

The first was a letter. It was dated a few days ago and addressed to Prima Constanza, Councilor, with a little scribble in a different hand, noting the councilor was not in World's Mouth and expected to return in about a month's time. Until her return, the package would be stored. The letter was small and businesslike, informing the councilor that her great-great-aunt Sybil had died and left her as her only heir. The inheritance was included.

The second paper read: Proof of Ownership - whomsoever holds this bond shall be declared the full owner of the Conte Estate, with everything held within.

It's late December in 2005, and I'm waiting at Gatwick airport for Steve to arrive. I got up early this morning so that I could spend two hours fussing over my makeup and my clothes, finding shortcomings with everything. I rode the train to the airport in my full regalia – a floral-printed dress; a pair of enormous, spiked New Rock boots; an oversized gray wool greatcoat; and a black silk tie. A stranger on the train decided to stare at me for a quarter of an hour. I am not sure if he even blinked once.

Now I am pacing back and forth in front of the arrivals gate, and my ears are buzzing. The airport seems too bright, too white. It's quiet, a weekday morning sandwiched between Christmas and New Year's Eve, and hardly anyone is foolish enough to be here. It's a little cold, and I am very, very nervous.

I can tell that Steve's plane has landed before he walks through the gate because I can hear the Americans coming. Big Stetson hats and loud voices drift through the doors, a contrast to the subdued British murmur which usually surrounds me, voices kept low to avoid any sort of social contact whatsoever. In an English crowd, I feel isolated all the time. I'm standing at the gate, craning my neck as if I

imagine Steve will arrive more quickly if I were just a little taller as if I think if I stop paying attention, he will not arrive at all.

When I finally spot him, I'm almost sure I'm mistaken. He's scowling and wearing sunglasses, which makes it harder to recognize his face. He spots me, then drops his head low and strides in my direction. It doesn't occur to me that he could be nervous, too. When he reaches me, he drops his bag and says, "Finley?" and his soft Southern accent betrays his fierce expression. He pushes his sunglasses on top of his head, and I can see that he's not angry at all. He's just tired.

"Yes, it's me. Hi," I reply, and it's not exactly the stuff from which romance novels are made. It's awkward and weird, and everything's too bright. "So, do I get a hug?" I'm trying to lighten the mood; I'm searching his face for the man I've come to know so well. I'm sure he's somewhere hidden in this gruff, tall stranger.

We hug, and it's warm and a little strange. He smells like Old Spice and recycled air and the leather of his jacket. But somehow, that clumsy hug makes everything better, perhaps because it's so perfectly awkward, so fallibly human that all our impossible preconceptions seem ludicrous, and suddenly it's just us, old friends who have never met before. Now we're smiling, we're walking side-by-side through the airport, and everything we have to say is falling out all at once like clothes from an upturned suitcase. We're talking as if we're making up for lost time.

Going to the pub is my idea because I'm British and our first instinct in hospitality is always either beer or hot tea. A long flight calls for beer. Neither of us knows of a local pub, so we pile into the nearest taxi, and the driver takes us to a place called Ye Olde Six Bells. We wait outside in the cold for a half-hour because the pub isn't open yet, and I field a call from my father, who wants to know what this American is about. "No, Dad, he's not a fifty-year-old balding axe-murderer," I say very distinctly, looking Steve in the eye as I do so. We share a private smile.

Inside the pub, we order food and then don't eat it; we drink our beers and talk about our stories and our lives, of travel and Holland and the website and our writing, about everything under the sun except the elephant in the room. Neither of us seems to want to broach the subject.

After a time, I get up to go to the bathroom, and when I walk back downstairs, I see that Steve has moved around the table to the chair next to mine. I think about

what this means as I cross the wooden floorboards and slide back into my seat, feeling that excitement in my chest bubble up once more.

And at that moment, I'm suddenly filled with a weird sense of *knowing*: I know that if I kiss him, he'll kiss me back, and then everything will become exponentially more complicated. A thing that started in fantasy will finally exist entirely. In fact, an international relationship that is going to involve far fewer imaginary cities and fictional pubs and a great deal more paperwork. Everything will change. My certainty of this fact is so solid you could build a house upon it.

It started in a pub, and it wasn't love at first sight. Was it love at first sentence? And it's going to end in a pub, too, or perhaps just begin anew: the next big adventure starts right here if I want it to. I ask myself silently, *do I want it to?*

Yes, I think I do.

So, I lean over, and I kiss him.

LUZ

by Paul Rousseau

CENTRAL AMERICA, 1977 –

I am a medical student working in a rural clinic in Central America.

Luz is a sixteen-year old refugee from El Salvador. She plops in the clinic's metal chair. Her eyes gaze at the floor; she picks at her fingernails.

"Tengo dolor cuando hacer pipi," I have pain when I pee. Her voice is reluctant, embarrassed.

Luz works in a cantina as a prostitute. The cantina provides a steady income as well as a squalid shanty that serves as her home. A year earlier, she attempted to reunite with her sister in the United States. She traveled a notorious trail through Mexico. The journey was dangerous, the trail besieged with thieves, gangs, traffickers, rapists, and murderers. Midway through Mexico, she was assaulted and brutally raped. Fellow immigrants heard her screams and scrambled to her aid. The rapists retreated. She did not notify the police. She was undocumented; they would have deported her. Or worse. She returned to the frontier—the border between Guatemala and Mexico—to secure money for another attempt. Prostitution was her only option. She has been at the cantina for ten months. She works seven days a week. It is a grueling, sordid existence.

I provide Luz with an antibiotic for a bladder infection. I schedule a follow-up visit; she does not return. Two months later, I visit the cantina; Luz is not there. The owner relates she left for the United States alone. I am concerned. Success is rare for a lone woman on the trail. If she had been caught and deported, she would have returned by now. I fear she has forever disappeared into the untamed backcountry of Mexico. Sadly, I will never know.

PETRIFIED

by Chloe Althouse

The overwhelming scent of a new rental car and Corn Nuts fills the small cabin in which my family of four has squeezed into. My sister is slouched in her seat and steadily gazing out the window into the bleakness that is the Texas Panhandle, earbuds at her disposal if my dad starts playing his favorite Western soundtracks again. Although I'm no western aficionado, I can appreciate the cinematic scores especially paired with our western setting.

My dad insists, "Megan, why don't you let me drive?"

He is surely exasperated over my mom's moral obligation to go exactly the speed limit. For a lady that speed walks and talks a mile a minute, this strikes me as being an odd trait. I watch the power lines above me in a transfixed state as they appear to be moving in a wave. I'm wearing an oversized t-shirt and hand-me-down shorts. *My back is sweaty, and I desperately need to shower the McDonald's quarter-pounder scent off of me.* After a heaping hundred miles down the road and spaces of thoughtful silence followed by the recollection of fond memories from past vacations, the Sangre de Cristo Mountains appear on the horizon. A chill fills the car as we roll down the windows and greet the crisp mountain air that smells of refreshing cedar and pine. My mother's will to abide by the speed limit is now appreciated as we cautiously traverse up winding mountain roads. I take a mental photograph of this moment and anxiously await the sign pointing to the direction of Taos.

Upon arriving at our New Mexican-themed rental, I collapse on my bed and stare at one of those bear carvings that hold signs saying, "Wipe your paws!" Wind chimes from the nearby balcony sing a comforting song. *Bliss.* Although my family

has always been partial to sleepy mountain towns, Taos could be described as a bohemian art community located in a sagebrush painted desert. Golden clay adobe with turquoise framed doors are sprinkled throughout the oasis, and hanging chili pepper ristras adorn any post available to the eye. Shaded alleys of vibrant art depicting Native American life and Southwest landscapes adorn serene galleries. Antique shops filled with ancient curios and authentic turquoise and silver jewelry present themselves at every passageway.

Another unique feature of Taos is the undoubtedly quirky yet loveable people who call it home. Despite the fact that we typically do not stray far from our beaten path, it is to my surprise that my parents insist we embark on an adventure with a shop owner they had just met.

"Robert knows of some hidden petroglyphs and acts as a sort of unofficial tour guide to visiting families," my mother claims excitedly.

*Do you all want to get killed? Because this is how people get killed. I was probably subjected to one too many episodes of *Unsolved Mysteries* growing up.*

In the spirit of adventure, I reluctantly agree to join my family to drive a few miles outside of town to trek up a mountain with an unofficial tour guide they met just yesterday. Upon exiting the car, I am hit with a gust of warm air that is unusual for a Taos evening. Robert waves hello and then points eastward, where the petroglyphs are located.

My mother asks how he came about these prehistoric finds, to which he plainly responds with, "I like to hike on my off days."

We follow closely behind Robert, and although I am slightly concerned with our destination, I focus on the thick mud produced by the afternoon rain, which is now engulfing my shoes and seeping into my socks.

My sister swats at clusters of mosquitoes, and my mother sympathetically states, "Oh, those things just eat you up!"

Carefully constructed mounds of animal bones lay on nearby boulders as if my fate is on display. A sharp turn into untamed vegetation prompts a flurry of butterflies in my stomach. *This is not a path well-traveled, at least to those not keen on animal sacrifice.*

Crouching down in a thicket of bristly weeds, Robert points out petroglyphs resembling deer and dancing men. I am still not convinced of our enigmatic tour guide as I spy a series of void-like caves above us. True Detective has taught me better than this. My parents take turns asking what each symbol represents as I notice the orange glow of the sun diminishing into darkness. I feel like a child again, trying to convince my parents of the boogeyman living inside our attic. *This is not a safe place.*

In an effort to distract my parents from Robert, I nervously comment, "It really got dark so fast."

Catching my hint, my parents seal off the conversation with our tour guide with words of gratitude. As we trudge down the mountainside, I reflect on how my parents have survived to this point in time. A sense of relief washes over me as I hear the clicks of our seatbelts and automatic locks on the doors.

"Well, we didn't get murdered," I say sarcastically.

My father swivels around in the passenger seat and reassuringly chimes in with, "I had my pocketknife on me the whole time!"

I knew I could trust them.



AUDIO WAVES

by Caitlyn Hackett

I'm replaying you in my head like an old favorite song,
something I can no longer listen to
because you're there again and again and again. . . .
My heart beating in time with your breath in and out
The tides of life passing us by while a little crab scuttles past
leaving tracks in the sand
with no idea what the world has come to or even what continent
it lives on;
What time is it? Does it even matter? This planet—what is it?
A rock floating through space dominated by people who don't know
what they're doing any more than the little crab
eat sleep reproduce eat sleep eat survive!
"Don't walk into the street without looking both ways"
or I'll get plowed down by futures I can't see coming:
Things that the universe doesn't want me to know until it's too late,
until the damage has been done and only the fallout of my choices remains.
Because really, what is life but a series of choices and
how many of them Matter and how many don't
And why does a society of others who don't know what they're doing
get to dictate what I do with myself
when I don't even know who I am yet
any more
than the audio waves of that song crashing on the beach
know that they're a song?

BANGS

by Bailey Battershell

He knew it was wrong

"Hurry! Hurry into the garage!" he yelled at me.

I was confused. Why did this feel wrong? He was my brother, after all.

I watched it all fall to the ground, like red and brown leaves during the fall.

If mom knew, she would kill him. He commanded me to stay still or he would cut me.

I felt the sweat pouring down my neck. His hands holding my face still.

He did not know what he was doing, but he persisted.

Buzz... the flies swarming around my ear, screeching, refusing to get caught in the traps hanging from the ceiling.

"Okay, no more," I mumbled. I couldn't handle anymore.

And just like that, it was over.

Ten minutes passed, my mom realized what had happened.

She went to inspect the scene, horrified at what he'd done,

Yelling and screaming came next.

All that was left were clumps of hair and a pair of scissors.

Bangs for everyone!

BEAUTY IN NATURE

by Trevor Crabtree

I walked upon a narrow path
The clustered clatter of the rocks rolling below
Beneath my feet the satisfying crackle of decayed growth
A mild hum of insects, their rattling cries tremor tightly amongst the brush
The light rays of sunshine embellishing my bones with warmth
Birds swoon by, their songs succeed in the serenade of stories untold
Tree limbs outstretched, sprawling forward like the fingertips of God
I take in the beauty of each birch
As I wonder of which I'll hang myself from

BOA

by Caitlyn Hackett

She sheds her clothes
like a snake shedding its skin,
leaving behind the remnants of
who she was today
before she crawls into bed,
closing her eyes
and curling herself tightly
around my heart;
she constricts like a boa,
filling every empty space
and swallowing me whole –
just a helpless creature who strayed
too close to her embrace.

BOCA RATON

by Nina Lucien

the heat
the crowds of sin
the razor blades on Fairway
breathe them in
exhale a joke
feet laugh and say
"this is movie shit"
on burnt soles
wade through the thick of palm tree-lined avenues
naked and packed tightly
a tacky tacky hotel adorned with button downs
draped over the edge of each bed
Florida snow, a mirrored tabletop
long-nail-scratched and mid-century modern
the key to the room a ringless finger
sunbaked, shaking
knuckles laugh
the breeze cuts a straw
introduces herself as Fear Walking
tight-lipped, she sucks her teeth and says
"you are fragile"
blows hurricane
wet spit hard-water-stains glass windows
cool slaps the heat
cheeks sunburnt
peeling bright pink against the clouds hanging bruised
above the marquee
sky inhales and laughs
"welcome to Florida, baby"

DAFFODIL

by K'Cee Scoggins

Tuesday morning, in West Yorkshire,
I quietly sit in the back seat of a black taxi.
The driver navigates a winding, narrow
road,
I look out the window studying the eerily
familiar moors
Pondering the significance of my journey.

The driver points to an abandoned house
up ahead,
And in jest informs it's haunted.
He doesn't know,
This land has haunted my wandering soul
for years.
Land written in detail,
read when I was emerging.

We finally arrive at my destination,
A stunning gothic church stands erect.
Surrounded by rain-soaked headstones,
covered in jade moss and hugged by
wayward vines.
Unkept.

I take a deep breath and thank the driver.
I disembark from the car, hearing a faint:

"Are you sure this is the address, miss?"

I give a quick nod and close the door.
I need to visit an American woman,
I know She will understand.

The stunning blue church clock ticks,
like it has a heartbeat of its own.
I find comfort in the solitude.
I seek a desolate pebbled trail—
I know it will lead me to Her.

Yellow daffodils sway softly,
Beckoning for me to continue.
I gasp, approaching Her gravestone.
The inscription shimmers
About a golden lotus.

Wiping a tear, I softly whisper:

"Hello, I promised I would come."

And I plunge my pen into the ground.

GHOST TOWN

by Madison Jones

Where did you spend your childhood?

I spent many days sitting behind an old wood countertop
Staring out into a different world tucked away in a building off Reno.
Wood floors that bent with the weight of the boots of the cowboys that tread them
Rows of felt and straw brims gathering dust
Ropes hanging from pegs next to saddles on stands
Old country love songs playing over the radio
Leather and shoe polish filling the air while the man shining boots whistled along
Some days spent from open to close next to my father shaping cowboy hats.
Steam wafting up from his hands as he bent hat brims
His own form of artistry.

I learned my manners there.
Yes sir, no ma'am, have a nice day.
Everything said by my father as he worked his days away.
I learned how to waste time.
Paper airplanes out of receipt paper while dad counted registers.
I learned to want more.
Dad cussed his job every morning.
He thanked God for it every night.
He left for better.

I go back sometimes to that small world.

The floors are worn,
The hats covered with dust,
Not a cowboy in sight.
They left for better.

GREY

by K'Cee Scoggins

A short draw of smoke
softened the ink on her fingers.
She turns her head and quickly
crumples the paper—
a paper full of letters
that sharpen the words
of a message
she will never send.

THE HINDU'S DUTY

by Zoë Blume

White knuckles gripping the concrete bleachers surrounding the Bagmati River
I choke on the chunky smoke forcing itself upon me
There is no eluding
The flecks of dust that I know are not *really* dust
But human
Ashing, burning, departing human
being sent off to their next life.

There is horror, but also beauty
As I witness this hourly occurrence of the Pashupatinath temple
Simplified, it's just the soul's last chore, the Hindu's duty.

As the ceremonial tools perform their play around the body
Family can be seen mourning with grave excitement
Decorating the corpse
Like a centerpiece created for an incredible party

The fluorescent dyes from the beloved's final outfit
blend themselves into the water the way that cream responds to a gentle spoon
when introduced to coffee

It was a loud kind of silence
Wrapping itself around the necks of the crowd
Whenever the torch met straw
The kind where nothing is being said
Yet every word imaginable could be found

The stories flowing through the Bagmati river
Are those of ceremonial beauty
They offer a full life of bounty

HOSPITAL ROOM

by Breanna Henry

Noise buzzes throughout the hospital,
from the hall, with nurses going
from one room to the next, to the TV,
volume lowered. The lone bed is unmade,
and has been for months,
since dad was moved here.

The drive up always comes
after the sun sets.
The chair I sit in, bedside,
leaves my back to catch on the rays
of a tall streetlamp.
To the smell of medicine, I love quietly.

A LATE AUTUMN DAY

by Lillie Brewster

The sky has grayed with a pallid chill,
Its hue now soft and silent and cold.
It refuses the earth the comfort of sun,
Instead, a damp that chills old bones
Has fallen in haze upon the ground.

The silence above in mourning cold
Battles the golden whispering leaves
Of trees that do not yet give in to coming winter's sleep.
"Say farewell," lullabies the gray to scarlet crowns below,
"Farewell to summer's blue relentless sun,
And greet nature's silent sleep that you cannot shun."

But oh, how fierce those limbs do fight,
They display their golden hands as shields in the dying light.
And though they fall, one by one,
And the blooms of summer's late flowers and autumn's mums
Cling to the misting light and fading warmth,
Still, they hold on.
"Not yet!" they cry. "Do not let us fall into sleep!
The time has not yet come for chilled wind and sunless days."

And thus is nature's battle with itself.
Thus hums the sky turned gray.
Thus is a late autumn day.

LETTER OF RELEASE

by Zoë Blume

I am writing you this letter to extinguish the guilt fueled fire in between us
I am writing you this letter to release us of the promises we made,
I am writing you this letter to emphasize objectively, the things we taught one another.
I am writing you this letter, lover,
to express my gratitude for words whispered under the covers

The fragile dignity of two people with their arms open wide
You were exposed and so was I

Your pride begged for you, like a puppy that hasn't been fed in weeks
My pride demanded to be felt in the rosiness of our cheeks

We did a very good job, at the end of the day
At keeping it pure, with over three years' worth of Fridays

I love you so much I could swallow you whole
But you're bad for me, like an oncoming train, three and a half seconds from losing control

I won't submit myself to your ego
Or the thought that I am young
You pull out the addict in me
And I refuse your black lung

It's been two months now, since I put my foot down
Sixty days since I took away your beloved playground
I promise I love you, in every sense of the word
But I can no longer be your sitting duck
Just waiting to be burned

I am writing you this letter to forgive and forget
I'll romanticize every nightmare
Until I run out of cold sweat

I am writing you this letter, with two last questions in mind
Where do I send the ring back -
And was it ever *really* mine?

MIDNIGHT IN SOUTHERN OKLAHOMA

by K'Cee Scoggins

Midnight in Southern Oklahoma
has a different vibe
The dirt is a deep shade of crimson,
and the keeper of family secrets—
But the stars shine wide
The air is thicker,
Just like the accent I try to hide

I left years ago, you see
I vowed that I would
And I never mind the cost
I was already lost and poor
Luck became the only currency
my stepdaddy couldn't beat out of me

Who am I?

I am the same wistful red dirt,
Southern Oklahoma girl
Who demanded better
I still catch a glimpse of her
From time to time,
I think of returning
Especially when the stars shine wide,
at Midnight

NARCISSUS

by Stefie Pinero

"Oh, how beautiful he is!" they say
These mere mortals are blessed
they are lucky to bear witness
to the vision that is Narcissus

He smirks at the sound
Of men complaining
How he steals their women
Leaves them waiting

He asks,
"How much do you love me?"
He teases,
"What do you guarantee?"

Yet, he does not care
For why should he love another
When he has himself?
He laughs at the suggestion that he could
love her

A beauty so extreme, it must be at the
work of the gods
Thick curls artfully styled
Chiseled features
As if molded by Zeus, mayhap an unknown
child?

It's an obvious thought
It's an obvious idea
The beauty he owns
Is to be regarded across millennia

Often, he finds himself
Staring at his reflection in the river
Lost in the beauty
In the depth of his eyes that glitter

But be careful, dear Narcissus
It is not all clear
Nemesis awaits in the woods
For when he'll lose all he finds dear

NOTHING IS EVERYTHING

by Kathrine Hughes

Trash everywhere and green lights, waiting on pizza. You drink and you talk, you talk about lots of things, lots and lots of things, dirty things only after midnight. Every car that drives past makes me nervous. I think she's sleeping but sometimes I worry that she might be dead, beautiful eyes, so full of life and recounting all the many facts. You're a flower, you don't even realize. Cats. Am I supposed to be the person who knows how to express her pain? I hurry home to check on you, not your day but secretly I worry that you'll be gone, lost to your grieving. I tuck it into my pocket, I leave it there, I want to write a song. Nothing is everything and silence is all I see. Maybe there is something wrong with me? High school football stands cheering into the night. I hear the roar and see the lights. I can hear them, but they can't see me. Sometimes I think I just distract Jayne, maybe everyone, a beautiful distraction, that should be my name. The world is so full and gospel songs play, I heard them today. I remembered when we were just kids and I knocked on your door, I was always late, and you reprimanded me. I knew even then how much I was worth, less than you. I proved it, again I will feel it. Locked doors out of fear, not knowing what you are. One after the other, I am the object of their rejection. I just accept it. Ears hurt. Hearts beat but even though they're thickened like arteries in years of people, lemons. I don't want to steal him, don't worry. I just sit on my bed wearing pink blankies and listen to street sirens as I wonder what it is supposed to be. No one to share me, I don't believe them when they say they are caring. Years and years of nothing more, how can you say what I deserve. I think it is nothing, no, I didn't mean boring. Would you even want to talk to me? I'm not even hungry.

ODE TO THE LAST WEEK OF SUMMER

by Laken Crane

Last week of summer, you stretch so far
Across pools, and parks, and neatly mowed backyards
You exist almost exclusively in the liminality of dusk
Just a taste of autumn on my lips, an ambrosia apple

Your air still thick and sweet from the balmy heat but
You carry the breeze and the syrupy scent of spiny sow thistles to cool me
The spicy green flora sporing longing inside me
Your trees harboring the song of cicadas, deafening the approaching night

Look at you, so calm and green, making me melancholy, while I'm trying to enjoy you
on the porch swing
Delighting in you, wishing you'd envelop all of my moments
You hold the stars down closer for me
You kiss my skin with your temperate lips

You have salvaged us from the dog days with your languid walks and creeks to rest
Virgo season, a suspended bridge
Wind rustling leaves to the ground, talking to me nonchalantly like you aren't
breaking my heart as you're walking away
Maybe if I sit here with you a while longer— the Last Week of Summer will stay?

ODE TO THE MANY SIDES OF YOU

by Abigail Cotner

Oh ye flaxen haired youth
brown eyes draw me to thee & promise
a future, erasing the past.
In your sweet embrace
I'll spend mine last.

Oh ye kindhearted servant
faithfully teaching, leading, guiding
in the ways of truth and just.
You've become the lampstand,
shining with radiant light.

Oh ye beefed up jockstrap,
you muscular meathead.
How do those steroids taste
when you're kicked
out of the big leagues?

Oh ye arrogant prick
flash the winning smile
strike the sexy pose,
it would be better with no clothes.
Oh look, you're merely an arse.

~ a former admirer of you

OVERTHROWN

by Philip Douglas

"This is how you do this,"
my mom said to me,
with a wink of conspiracy,
as if sharing a subversive secret
instead of just making the bed.

But palpable was her delight
as she gathered the sheets,
her allies and collaborators,
still warm from the lines
wave by wave into her hands
until at last she persuaded them
into gentle folds,
her outstretched arms describing a
curtain rod,
or the way the cross held Jesus,
the linens a luminous drapery.

Then, poised at the foot of the bed
she flung them out and over the frame,
a gesture of generosity and hope.
The bedclothes billowed, then settled
on the mattress
as if they were glad to find their
purpose and home.

Only much later I realized that,
under white starched supervision,
she must have done this same task
dozens of times.

It could have been drudgery.
Why did it fill her with joy?
A nursing student in the '40s
she taught me hospital corners
and how to navigate them.

Perhaps that was the purpose of
the conspiracy:
a skirmish in the revolution of joy,
subversion of all that would oppress
in a gesture of billowing delight.

PAPAYA AND LEMON

by Zoë Blume

My bare feet attempt a walking whisper
as they travel through the various hallways of homes that are not mine.
Wandering through the different cultures of each country I visit,
It is apparent to me that a single bathtub (or lack thereof) can teach me so much.

With my arms spread out wide
My fingers trace the walls of buildings that remind me how little I truly know.
Something as simple as a front door offers new perspectives that completely falsify my
current reality.

If one could can the essence of travel, I imagine it would taste a lot like a baby's first
experience switching from liquid to solid food.

The sobering intimacy of a shared meal or evening tea nurtures my mind more than I
can comprehend.

It is morning, and every songbird outside of my window knows it.
I wash my hair with the same bucket of water I previously rinsed wild berries in.
My gracious host is in the kitchen preparing breakfast,
humming a tune that sounds like the feeling of being safe.

She has no idea, as she squeezes lemon juice onto a freshly cut papaya,
Just how magical she is.
An overwhelming amount of gratitude for every simple beauty hidden in this moment
pours over me like the holy water in a baptism.

Physically, I am in the lush highlands of Papua New Guinea
Mentally, I am in a workshop relearning what it means to be alive.

PARADOX

by Philip Douglas

Within each secret self the soul resides
a seed that longs to sprout and come to light.
Who can without companions long abide?

Inside each human cell, its unique guide
Awaits the spark that wakes it to ignite.
Within each secret self the soul resides.

Is that person objectified, denied,
the space to grow, the nurture, and the sight?
Who can without companions long abide?

Hungering for the very bread of life,
and bounded by its neighbors' needs and rights,
within each secret self the soul resides.

Scriptures mark how prophetic sages died
to temper society's cleaving might.
Who can without companions long abide?

Would that each of us in perfect poise allied,
and in glad communion, share the day's delights.
Within each secret self the soul resides,
who cannot without companions long abide.

RED

by K'Cee Scoggins

When they come for me it will be because they figured out I listen to create expositions inside my head, when they come for me it will be because I wrote them off with a sleight of hand without mention of why my sigh demands no reaction, when they come for me it will be because they can't comprehend the labels of my existence, *wife-mother-daughter-friend*, more than that whispers more than that, when they come for me I will say I don't care comforting sparkling lies that's what I have always been good at biting my cheek has left scars, when they come for me they will accuse me of living amongst the stars too far too far girl settle now, when they come for me they will deliberately forget I wear this tilted crown in a ripped gown I can't be like them I don't know how, when they come for me they will demand off with her head (Is it wicked to let them bathe in red?) splice me with your splintered light and they will try, when they come for me I will ignite, flames caress bare feet as I chant out loud an ancient lullaby, when they come for me I will reminisce their obsession is entrenched in my oppression will no doubt leave burns forgiving is betraying when they demand a slaying, the rat-a-tat, rat-a-tat, rat-a-tat on my door is merely distracting.

THE SALVATION OF AN IDLE HEART

by Laken Crane

I must have been born of some wild thing
A hunter of Artemis, running rampant through green
Only finding comfort in the felicity of wide-open spaces

You came to me in a haze of purple light and cherry smash
Opening my heart,
A lover's feast

Now all I dream of is the smell of you
And the feeling of your skin enveloping me

SHIPWRECK

by K'Cee Scoggins

a sailor sails
a siren beckons
shipwreck

SMITH & WESSON

by Nina Lucien

Sweat beads
muscles roll under skin
in the car, shaking, you
take me and say
"How have I become this?"

&

"Who will you become in spite?" it
eats away at your belly // erupts hollow
sounds, you
suck smoke in through your teeth, blow
out, I say

"No one."

TREVOR CRABTREE WROTE THIS

by Trevor Crabtree

KNOWN

"I'll be famous!" He said with a cry.

"I'll write a novel they'll read when I die!"

"I'll write scriptures, make art, that'll live through the ages!"

"So, when my story ends, they will continue the pages!"

"My name will be known, never forgotten!"

"Even when my body lies cold and rotten."

"My name shall be remembered, of that, I am certain!"

"So, I shall fear not when death pulls the curtain."

-Unknown (TREVOR CRABTREE!)

TWO HAIKUS ABOUT MY FATHER

by Philip Douglas

Night, my father dies.
So kind, grief leaves his jacket,
a hole in his shape.

Toolbox hinges groan
Sawdust, sweat, and oil exhale
My father enters

UNLIKELY

by Philip Douglas

At mile marker 88 on I-37,
Where the transmission lines cross the highway
And splay themselves out to the horizon in both directions,
On the downslope of a rugged sandstone outcropping
That breaks the monotony of mesquite and prickly pear,
And signifies that San Antonio
Is just another fifty miles or so,
There,
Coming down that grade,
That's where we blew out the tire on our travel trailer,
A hundred miles from our house in South Texas,
Driver's side naturally.

I have seen that rough country arrayed in sweet desert flowers,
After the spring rains condescended to call,
And besprinkled the dusty dun of that landscape
All splendid with pinks and purples and yellows and whites.

That was not such a day. No, even midmorning
The sun beat down on us as relentless as the FBI
So that the pavement shimmered as if molten
And strained the aging trailer tire
Past the limits of its integrity.

Inspecting the shredded tire and ruined wheel, I surmised:
Too narrow, the shoulder to unpack our stuff;
Too steep, the grade to use the jack;
Too, too close, my tender form to the semis screaming by.

So we limped down the hill on the shoulder,
To exit 88, and took shelter beneath the overpass
In the relative cool and shade and quiet,
Save the random rumble and roar overhead.

And there, knuckles bleeding from a slipped wrench,
Sweating through my traveling clothes,
In that surreal deserted spot beneath the highway,
I felt more than saw the pickup cruise by,
And I sensed more than heard it stop and turn around,
And so was not startled to be addressed by two men,
Rank strangers to me:

"Looks like you've got a problem."

"I do indeed."

"Well, sir, what you really need to lift that trailer is a floor jack.

(Pause)

Good thing we have one."

Then with their clearly superior tools
And their clearly superior skill,
They changed our tire and set us on the road,
Hardly staying long enough to accept profuse thanks.

Some people talk about angels and miracles.
Me, I dwell on the unlikely.
Unlikely, yes,
But I attend the Church of the Unlikely,
a Disciple of Unlikeliness.

WANT TO BE A CIGARETTE

by Laken Crane

I want to be a cigarette
sitting in your pocket, touching you under your jeans
I want you to need me and I need you to want me
I want to make it hard for you to breathe
And every time you say you're done
You come running back and buy another pack

It's cold outside, you've got fifteen minutes for break and a craving so bad your teeth hurt
You pull me out and light me on fire
It doesn't even bother you that I'm burning
A funeral pyre for my self-respect, a light show made for only you to gawk
You breathe me in, I fill you up, but
You put me under your shoe and leave me on the sidewalk

You have me in the morning with your coffee black
By the roses outside your window
You dump my ashes all over them
And that makes me feel beautiful

We'll be sitting in your car
talking about things that make us sad
Like my dead dog and your dead-beat dad
And how you haven't felt like a whole person in a long long time
Then we will fog up the glass and you'll put me on your lips
My smell lingers on your clothes like smoke
Even after you toss me out the window onto the pavement

WARM ASPHALT

by Zoë Blume

When things here wrap up, and you've overstayed your welcome in this chapter of your life – go. Take your shoes off, get on your mark, get set... ready?

Run so fast your bare feet send tiny pieces of the warm asphalt below you into the air. Chase those visions you've tucked away in attempt at sensibility until you are only a finger length apart from one another.

Take your curiosity off pause, unquiet your mind and your concerns, scramble everything up from your kitchen of "should have" and "should nots" into a huge omelet of strange enjoyment and leave the dishes.

Let the stubborn sticky sap dripping from the trees you fly by make a mess of your hands and your hair, play in it.

Nobody's looking, yet everyone's staring. Twirl around unabashedly and enjoy the new perspectives you've gained from this chunk of time, click them into your goggles as extra lenses to use when needed, but leave some blanks for things you have not learned yet.

It is impossible to know now how many bottles of water you will need until you find the finish line, so leave room in your pack and unpack sack for only the things that contribute to getting you there.

Shake off and store all of the bugs and butterflies that pestered and adored you before, give them new names of selfless understanding and promise them reminiscent visits when the time is right.

Make note of that dull cramping in your legs and your stomach as you go on further because growth hurts, but it hurts worse when you try to disguise it and call it by a different name.

A WOMAN'S SMILE

by Nina Lucien

32 crooked teeth
loose from punches
purging
clenching at strangers
cloves and kale
stuck
in one or two.
this is the mouth
that made Adam.
a mouth that has
learned how to
hold its breath.
a mouth made for
smiling
swallowing
and teaching
other mouths
how to be good
through clenched
crooked
teeth.





Zoe Andrews
Lightkeeper (Colorized)
Ink on Paper



Rachel Potter
Untitled 3
Acrylic on canvas



Rachel Potter
Untitled 5
Acrylic on canvas



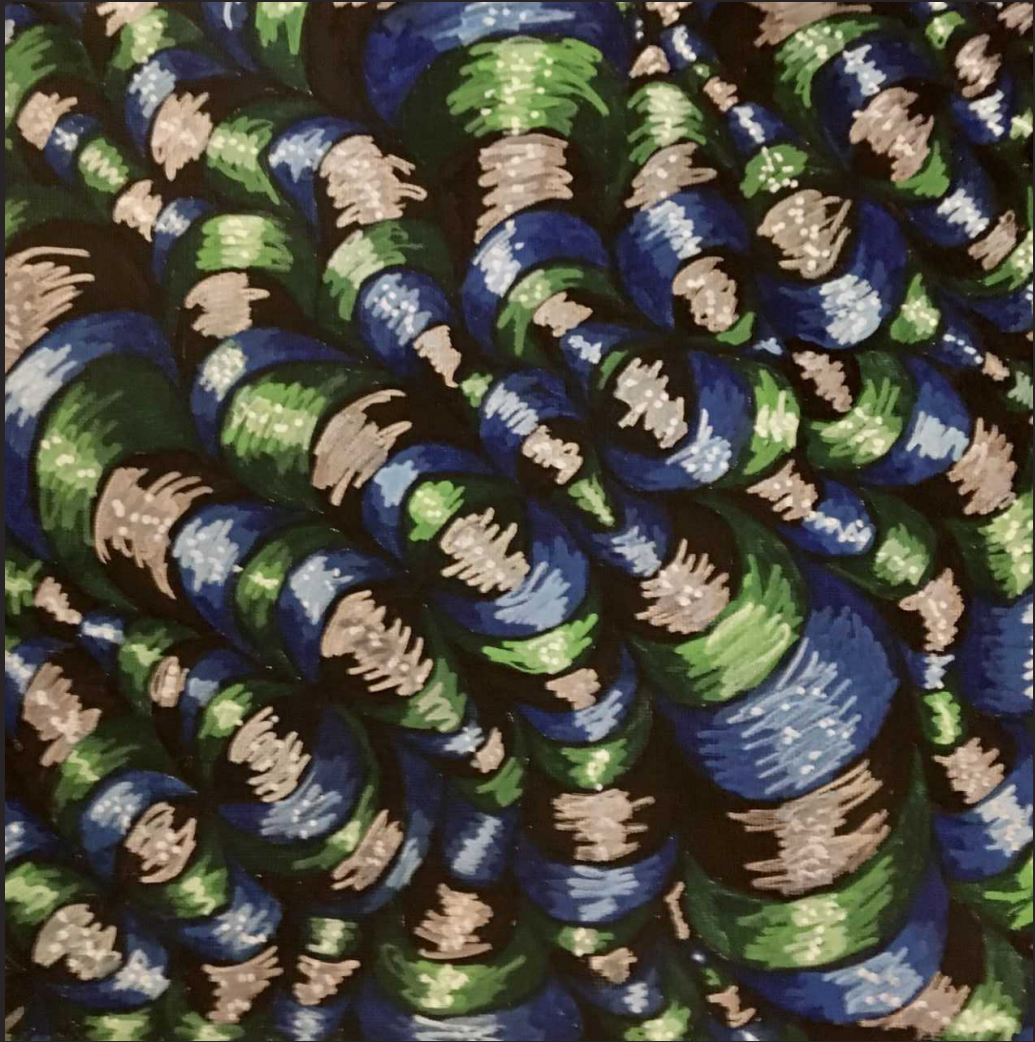
Rachel Potter
Untitled 9
Ink on paper



Rachel Potter
Untitled 12
Ink on paper



Rachel Potter
Untitled 18
Charcoal on paper



Rachel Potter
Untitled
Ink on paper



P
P H
P H O
P H O T
P H O T 
P H O T  G
P H O T  G R
P H O T  G R A
P H O T  G R A P
P H O T  G R A P H
P H O T  G R A P H Y

Bad to the Bone, by Tessa Barman-Flannigan



Paradise, by Warren Bishop



Untitled 6 (Ferris Wheel), by Rachel Potter



Unitiled 4, by Rachel Potter





**ART IS
NEVER
FINISHED,
ONLY
ABANDONED.**

-LEONARDO DA VINCI

UNTIL
NEXT
TIME.

ABSOLUTE



FICTION.

NONFICTION.

POETRY.

ARTWORK.

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