



13 *Absolute*

Poetry • Fiction • Nonfiction • Artwork • Photography

13
Absolute



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FICTION

Seeing Red *(And Wishing to Paint the Town)*

by Tiffane Shorter

He whistles merrily as he threads his way between the crowds saturating the main street. Small towns are always so busy when the sky is clear. Other men nod at him as he passes and he returns the gesture, taking off his hat if the other happens to be carrying a lady on his arm. He smiles to himself at that thought. He has a lady of his own, in fact, and is on his way home to see her now.

He smells the lovely fragrance of tulips wafting through the air and when he turns slightly to the left, there they are. He buys yellow ones—the colour is known to energise and fill one with joy. He has to restrain himself from running the rest of the way home, so great is his desire to see his love. He finally makes it to his destination and it is all he can do to keep from taking the stairs two at a time.

“Ah,” he breathes, entering the attic. He glances at his lady as he’s taking off his coat. “I bought you flowers today, Miss Rhodes. I don’t know what I was thinking bringing you chocolates yesterday when we both know you can’t eat them.” He smiles as she lifts her head weakly, showing him the cuts, the bruises, the deep gashes in her face and body. She was so ugly before, but he made her beautiful.

“I believe you like yellow, do you not?” He grins, holding the flowers to her. She doesn’t take them, she can’t. “Oh, how rude of me, Miss Rhodes, I forgot I had to tie you down. Remember why you are tied down?” The binds and blood loss make her head heavy, but she manages a single, small nod and he smiles tenderly at her. “You are so beautiful, Miss Rhodes, I love you.”

A thought occurs and his eyes brighten. “Do you remember when we first met? It was three days and six hours ago. You told me your name is Amelia Rhodes. ‘Miss Rhodes to you,’” he recalls, laughing, “And you were so shy, I knew you wouldn’t react well to the knowledge that I was with you at every moment, even when you didn’t necessarily know it. But I love you, Miss Rhodes, I couldn’t help but be with you.”

A tear escapes her eye and he wipes it away. The artistry of their story is so great, he cannot blame her for becoming emotional. However, it isn’t his fault when the salty drop goes into one of her numerous wounds. The sight brings the realisation that the painting has dragged on for too long. He takes out a Swiss Army knife and flicks it open, patting her hand silently to tell her to keep her hand perfectly still. Clarity is a virtue in the arts.

As he is working on her, new light enters his eyes. It’s hateful, it’s malicious, and it doesn’t particularly care for Miss Rhodes at all. He presses a little too hard, cuts a little too deep, and she groans a little too loudly. He doesn’t know he lifts his hand, he only knows the stinging in his palm and the red mark on her cheek and the tears in their eyes.

“I’m so sorry,” he tells her. She moans again and the soft, desperate sound goes straight to his zipper. He calms himself—he has time—but she doesn’t extend herself the same luxury. He breaks the second-to-last working toe she has. She screams, revealing bloody gums. Yesterday morning, she decided she wanted to be an animal, so he had to knock her fangs out. Unfortunately, all he had at the time was a hammer and some rusty pliers. It was an unpleasant experience for the both of them.

“It isn’t nice to scream.” He breaks the final toe to emphasise his point, but he isn’t angry with her, he’s never truly angry with her. It isn’t her fault she still reacts as a human would. “Now, Miss Rhodes, we don’t want to be in any more pain than we have to, do we?” She doesn’t respond quickly enough and he puts a single finger beneath her chin, gently lifting her face so that they are looking at each other—blue eyes meeting his. “Miss Rhodes,

do you want to be in more pain than necessary?" The thought fills him with sadness, but luckily she shakes her head.

"Good girl."

He finishes carving out the design: the missing puzzle piece of two hearts finally finding each other; Miss Rhodes is a canvas this time, patiently waiting for the pain to end. Well, he thinks with a chuckle, as patiently as one can wait when they're waiting for the grand finale. He doesn't pull on gloves for *The End*; it ruins the intimacy of the act and besides that, by the time they find his art piece, he will be long gone. His hands embrace her neck, and he gently squeezes. She cannot fight back, of course, and he kisses her forehead as her struggles begin to weaken. As she goes limp, he can no longer restrain himself and straightens. His hands begin to work his zipper and he allows a tiny smirk to grace his lips.

Now for the true finale...

"My goodness!" Mrs White cries out and her fellow church ladies come rushing from their conversations on the other side of the yard to see what the matter is.

"Dearie, what's happened?" This is Mrs White's grade school friend, Mrs Smith. (And as a friend, Mrs Smith will never confess to gossiping about Mrs White and her lawyer "friend," Mr Brown.) Mrs White merely points, white-faced, toward the ditch before her. Lying there is another dear friend of the ladies, Miss Rhodes, or at least, what is left of her.

Most of Miss Rhodes's long, blonde hair is missing, as is part of her scalp, and large black flies are taking advantage of this fleshy smorgasbord. Her blue eyes—that were too naïve to begin with, if you ask any of the ladies in private—are wide and reflecting the clouds above like morbid mirrors of the heavens awaiting us after death. Her slender, shapely body has been carved into something God never intended and her nails are bloodied

and broken, presumably from trying to fight off her attacker. Her arms and legs appear to be bent at odd angles as well, but as to whether or not that happened during the scuffle or to prevent escape, it isn't clear. Her left hand has a shape carved into the back of it: a small, bloody heart.

Miss Roberts (who has recently divorced her no-good, lazy, salesman of a husband, Hatfield, thank you for asking) has the decency to make sure the grass is dry and not muddy before fainting dead away.

"Oh that's just awful, poor girl," Mrs Cornwell declares, "simply, complexly, awful."

"I knew she had gone missing," Mrs Smith is always one for the news. "But I never imagined she would end up...I thought she'd run off with that charming Mr Doe. He always seemed so drawn to her. I'd assumed they were going to elope." She frowns. She doesn't like being wrong.

Miss Roberts suddenly comes back to life. "Mr Doe? He's such a lovely man. How I wish he would court me. I'd just about die of happiness!"

The ladies twitter on about charming, handsome Mr Doe, paying no more attention to the body in front of them, before Mrs Cornwell interjects with a great, "Ahem!" She looks down her nose at the other church women who roll their eyes discreetly. (None of them would have anything to do with Mrs Cornwell if she didn't give out the most darling little trinkets at her house parties.)

"Why on earth would Miss Rhodes elope two weeks after moving here? It just doesn't make any sense."

"Perhaps she'd gone and gotten herself pregnant by another man. Stranger things have happened," Miss Smith quickly tries for the most scandalous reason she can think of at the moment, regardless of that old saying about speaking ill of the dead. "Then Mr Doe flew into a tizzy about the woman he loved having a bastard child and immediately went to the pastor to see if she could repent of her wretched sins and still marry and live

happily with Mr Doe, but while he was gone the real father—whoever he was—burst through the door and demanded she run off with him instead; she refused of course, valiantly claiming to love Mr Doe and that their night together had been a mistake, so in a jealous rage, the other man fatally struck her and left the body here to bide himself time to flee the town!” There is a silence in which she tries to catch her breath.

“...That makes no sense; you’re making up stories again.” Mrs Cornwell waves her hand in angry dismissal. She cannot stand when Mrs Smith makes up stories. It puts the group in bad light.

“Don’t accuse me of making up stories!” Mrs Smith fumes. “You know I would never do such a thing!”

At this, all the ladies begin to fuss at each other, one always attempting to speak louder than the rest. They remain there in front of Miss Rhodes’s mangled, post-mortem body until the church bell tolls the start of the service. Of course, the ladies forget to tell anyone about the murder—too busy with bustling through the door it may be supposed—and it will be hours still before poor Miss Rhodes is laid to rest.

At the same moment, a man strolls out of the town limits, whistling another merry tune. Gradually, the notes begin to fade and then stop all together as a Cheshire-cat-like grin spreads across his face. “Come along, Miss Rhodes,” he chuckles to himself, patting his vest pocket. The maiden inside squelches slightly against his hand. It’s time to meet the canvas of my next masterpiece.

Home at Last

by **Brittany Williams**

Darryl Shiflett is being released today. Shiflett kisses the photo of him and his wife on the cold wall of his cell. In the photo, she is beaming, one hand on Darryl's shoulder and the other holding a shovel. Her overalls are spotted with dirt and there is a dark red rose tucked into her pocket. The photo shows Darryl's garden, which provides a backdrop of color and beauty. His body hums at the prospect of seeing his wife again and digging his hands into soil once more.

Carefully straightening the wrinkles in his blue jumpsuit, Darryl steps out of his cell. The bars fall shut behind him. A taciturn officer waits outside the cell, beholding Shiflett with cool indifference.

Darryl feels like a free man already. A pleasurable chill of anticipation settles in his stomach at the prospect of stepping into the sun and gazing into the distance without a fence to obscure the horizon. He imagines laying eyes on his wife on the other side of the fence, her blonde hair falling in bouncy curls against her shoulders, wearing a loving grin, glowing and beckoning for him.

Walking alongside Darryl, the officer asks, "You ready for this, Shiflett?"

"Oh, yes, of course," Darryl replies with a slight smile. "I'm ready to go home."

The officer seems less than thrilled and the smile melts from Darryl's well-worn face. The officers of Layne County Penitentiary despise Darryl. They grimace every time he tries to strike up a conversation or asks them about their lives outside the prison walls. When Darryl's case went up for appeal, tensions in the prison ran higher than ever – they all believed he was guilty.

Taking a long look at Darryl, he appears absolutely harmless, even gentle. Twelve years in Layne County have not hardened the gardener. His bright brown eyes are alert, but not suspicious. The wrinkles carved into his face give him a look of experience and fragility. His rotund body reminds many of their grandfathers and so does his broad, welcoming grin. Fellow prisoners dare not harass Darryl Shiflett, but only because he brings warmth into a cold world of guards and restriction.

Even Barry Fowler, who often claims that all inmates are guilty of something, vouches for Darryl's innocence whenever the men in cell block B quarrel. Darryl is known as the grandfather of the cell block and all treat him as such. No, not even the prisoners believe that Darryl Shiflett is guilty for the murder he was charged with.

Twelve years ago, the jury decided that Darryl took the life of another. The crime scene photos overwhelmed the emotions of the jury, and circumstantial evidence prevailed against the accused. Such a gruesome and violent crime merited a psychological evaluation, and when Shiflett was deemed mentally competent, the death sentence was issued. Years of legal battling earned appeal and, in a startling turn of events, Shiflett was determined not-guilty and was granted release.

Shiflett heard murmurs of evidence disappearing, but once the new verdict was in, he did not care how it came to be. The only thing that mattered was how soon he could change out of the blue jumpsuit. Shuffling absent-mindedly through the bone-white prison corridors, Darryl worries that the jeans he wore into Layne County prison will no longer fit.

The officer accompanying him – Officer Burton – is a slender man with a perpetual frown tilting the corners of his mouth. Burton's eyes seem small to Darryl, adrift on the tan planes of his youthful face. Darryl thinks that this is the last time he will see the grim officer and his heart twitches mournfully.

"I've become used to your grouchy old face, always watching me in the library and the dining hall." He lays a wrinkled, freckled hand on Burton's shoulder and the officer winces reflexively. "I'll miss you, brother."

Burton sighs and responds in a dull monotone. “Hold your peace, Shiflett. We’re almost there. I don’t want to have to cuff you.” The officer’s dark eyes stare straight ahead and Darryl chuckles.

“Good ole’ Burton, always frowning and grouching around in this place. I will miss you – I mean it.”

Darryl continues to chuckle quietly to himself, thinking fondly of the diverse and engaging personalities he has encountered during his twelve years in Layne County. Tears distort his vision as, across the hall, his good friend Ray waves goodbye from his cell. Darryl’s hand darts into the air and he waves back fervently, calling out, “I’ll see you on the other side soon enough, brother!”

“Quiet,” snaps Burton with a glare.

Darryl never loses his starry-eyed gaze or goofy, elated grin. Burton mumbles something under his breath about the nuthouse and Darryl only grins wider. He is not going to a nut house – he is going home, home at last.

Distracted by the inmates’ last farewells, Darryl fails to notice that they have steered away from the exit. Instead, Officer Burton is leading him toward the infirmary. “Are we going to say goodbye to Doc before I head out?”

Burton sniffs at the question. “Sure thing, Darryl. Just keep calm, alright? I don’t want to have to drag you.”

“Drag me?” chortles the older man. “More like slow me down! Burton, you have always been a strange character. I will miss you, brother.”

Inside the doctor’s office, Darryl shifts from foot to foot in pent-up excitement. Today, Doc seems tired. Eyes that are usually lit with enthusiasm are dull. Darryl cannot keep himself from smiling, and hopes that his happiness will spread to the elderly doctor. Doc shrugs into his lab coat and nods once at Burton, who is hovering near the door. Darryl tries to strike up a casual conversation about the stock market but Doc does not seem to be in the mood.

Officer Shuff, a red-faced blonde in his 30's, approaches as they leave Doc's office. Shuff is smiling and something inside Darryl leaps in excitement. Finally, someone else is looking forward to his release.

"How's it goin', old man? You ready to get outta' this place?" Shuff's palm lands hard on Darryl's shoulder, almost tipping him over.

"Shut up and leave the man alone," Burton scolds with a glower directed at Shuff.

"He's only excited!" Darryl defends with a laugh. "Thank you, Officer Shuff, for celebrating with me."

"Oh, I'm celebrating, that's for sure." There is a sharp glint in Shuff's eye that seems malicious. Darryl's enthusiasm is unwavering, though, and he attempts to engage Doc in a chat about pruning roses. Doc does not respond.

They stop at a room that lies deep within the belly of the massive prison. It is dark, except for a few fluorescent ceiling lights. Darryl squints at the door at the end of the hall, a bleak gray door with no handle.

"Is this the back exit?" he inquires of Doc with a perplexed quirk of his brow.

"Come with me," Doc grumbles and deposits a soft hand on Shiflett's shoulder to lead him. They progress forward, Darryl staggering stupidly ahead of Doc. The officers remain, standing stiffly on either side of the door.

Inside the room is a strange-looking table, and little else. Darryl stares at the machinery along the wall, at the large window shielded by a thick black curtain.

"This is where I leave you," Doc sighs. Two men wearing white scrubs grab Darryl's arms and lead him toward the execution table.

Dazed, Darryl falls back onto the table where they strap him down and secure buckles across his chest. The gardener's panicked eyes implore the doctor to come to his aid, to end the charade and lead him to the light outside the prison walls.

“What’s going on?” Darryl shouts as the curtain is drawn back and a small audience blinks at him from the other side of the glass. “I want to go home to Beverly! I want my wife!”

Doc’s eyes are weary. He paces to where Shiflett is restrained and places a shaking hand on his shoulder. “You killed her. I’m sorry, Darryl, but you killed your wife.”

“What?” he sneers, disgusted. “What? No! I was acquitted!”

“You imagined it all,” Doc replies, his tone as hollow as the look in his eyes. “I tried to tell you, but you couldn’t be dissuaded.” Addressing the men in white scrubs, Doc says, “I’ll be outside waiting.”

“No!” Darryl wails, even as the doctor leaves and the door shuts.

In the hallway, Doctor Graham removes his spectacles and wipes them with the edge of his coat. He does not want Burton and Shuff to see the tears gathering in his eyes but Shuff, being the bully, is eager to exploit any trace of emotion.

“Cryin’ for a killer, Doc?” Shuff snorts as, in the execution room, Darryl’s sobs go silent. “That old fool deserved to die.”

Doctor Graham does not expect the officers to understand his attachment to the delusional gardener. Doc watches his wristwatch – just six or seven minutes, and it will be over.

“I think he was a nutcase. How he passed the psychological exam is beyond me,” Burton says with a long sigh. “The other inmates took a liking to him, though. Strangest thing I ever seen.”

A few silent moments leave Graham to struggle with his thoughts before the metal door slides open. It is time for Graham to perform his part of this ordeal.

Burton and Shuff’s chuckles become muted when the door shuts and Doc is alone with the lifeless body of Darryl Shiflett. The plump old man slumps against his restraints and the doctor’s composure dithers. Hands trembling,

Doctor Graham presses two fingers to Shiflett's neck and waits for even the faintest throb. There is none.

“Time of death is 4:02PM,” he says to the men in white uniforms. He leans close to the unmoving form of Shiflett and whispers, “Goodbye, good friend.”

The Transported Man

by **Dantz Farrow**

I am the fecal matter that settles upon an unconcealed tooth brush. I am the ricocheted piss that decorates your naked thighs. I am the epitome of every nuisance and every pest that has ever called this dear earth home. A mosquito feeding off the veins of accomplished men, and I can't take it anymore. I am a pathetic excuse for a human being and today my name is Walter Morse.

Let me tell you what I know about Walter Morse. Walter Morse is your stereotypical attorney, residing in this mansion of an estate just west of Boston. He's divorced, paying child support on two kids he's never cared to father. All Walter seemingly cares for is the health of his already corpulent wallet, and his world practically revolves around it. He'd rather get someone off, than exercise any shape or form of moral commitment. Because to be honest is to be poor in this profession. Confined to a perpetual mediocrity. Of course, these are all biased assumptions. I don't sincerely know Walter Morse. Not on a personal level. Today I am just his personal parasite, sitting in the cockpit and evaluating his shallow character. God, I sound so intrusive.

Some people spend years trying to define themselves underneath all that flesh and bone. I, on the other hand, have spent a lifetime. Let's pretend that one morning you wake up as someone else. You get up, you stroll around the house, and nothing catches you by surprise. Not the children down the hall, not the wife lying next to you, etc... Let's pretend this happens often. So often, in fact, that maybe waking up as yourself (whoever that may be) would be considered... strange.

We're still pretending here, as you wake up one day as a man you don't mind to catch yourself admiring in the mirror. As you stroll around the house

piecing together your new life for a day, you can't help but to notice how much you envy every aspect of it. Maybe your four-year-old daughter hops out of bed and greets you in the living room and reminds you that today, Saturday, is the day that you promised to take her and Mommy to the zoo. Maybe you don't have the heart to tell your newly acquired daughter that you're not entirely sure how to get there.

So after a quick search on the internet, let's say you've constructed a relatively decent understanding regarding an appropriate route to the zoo. You climb into clothes you don't own, and you venture back into your bedroom in the attempt to awaken a wife you've never met. When she rolls over to face you, your heart begins to beat violently inside of your chest as you ponder the fact that she may be the most beautiful woman that you have ever woken up next to. Thirty minutes later, you're driving comfortably in a minivan, gathering context clues concerning your role as a father/husband, falling in love with the simplicity of your ephemeral family. So the next morning, you wake up in the same bed, but you're confused. Confused as to why you're still here. In this bed. In this house. In this body.

In a literal sense, you could say that I am a man of many hats. Wandering aimlessly from life to life, body to body. You see, I am afflicted with this god-awful disease. A disease that has pried every trace of hope and originality out of my hands and dangled it in front of me like some damn older brother—taunting me. My affliction? It's having a soul minus the refuge of a consistent body. Like a bird with no wings, an inferior pigeon. A passenger taking a backseat to the world while everyone else rides shotgun. It's the absence of having a family, a life, a purpose; of being loved, feeling loved, and all the additional attributes that accompany it. For the first time having all this for more than a day, it feels great.

Nearly a month has passed since you woke up to that spontaneous zoo expedition and you're starting to exercise a firm faith in the possibility that you may have finally shaken this wretched, interminable grief. Yet just as you begin to get completely acclimated with the American dream, the rug

is viciously tugged from beneath the tranquility of your planted feet, so to speak, and you are, yet again, sent back into that hopeless whirlpool of clouded direction. Today, it's just like it was before—a resurrected affliction pestering you through foreign sheets. Today I wake up in a mansion just west of Boston. With inexorable apathy, I adorn myself with the appropriate attire of a depraved attorney. Today, my name is Walter Morse.

When in the Course of Human Events...

by Thomas Hanna

The year was 1976. The nation was dancing a jig with a broken leg. We were celebrating a 200-year birthday party with an orgy of commercial hedonism that would've had Jefferson, the author of the document being saluted, turning rotisserie revolutions in his grave at turbo speed. All of this was fresh on the heels of the invisible forces within the Constitution that obliged a chief executive to abandon his office for abusing the power of the presidency. Madison would've smiled.

It was a presidential election year and the Democrats felt they had a lock on that office after the shameful conduct of the Republicans during the Watergate scandal. The Democrats could've run the archetypal yellow dog and, provided it could be proven that the pooch was in fact born in this country, Ol' Yeller stood a good chance of capturing the White House. In short, the election was the Democrats to lose. This created a dangerous situation. Teaming with hubris, it motivated both fringes of the party. The far right felt the climate perfect for a wheelchair-bound George Wallace to seize the nation's highest office. The left equally sensed that the time had ultimately arrived for a populist candidate like former Senator Fred Harris of Oklahoma to ascend to the chief executive's chair.

Louis Kennedy was a Fred Harris supporter.

It was Saturday morning and had been since one second past midnight. Louis couldn't sleep. He had trouble sleeping the night before too. He was weary on his feet, but charged up like nothing he had ever known before. Last night's pint of JTS Brown Bourbon couldn't deliver the knock-out

punch he had hoped for, but it did leave a reminder. Louis, though, woke with this reminder or one that reminded him of this reminder every morning. In that respect, it was just another day. But it wasn't just another day. The Democratic District Convention was today. Louis had his eyes fixed on this date ever since he received his formal invitation in the mail. He was not shy about sharing this notice with anybody in the mission who would listen and with many that wouldn't. It was the most spirited that he'd been in months. This morning he was aching but eager to get going. But Louis was a server and that pesky business called breakfast had to be served before he could leave home.

Home was a crowded room he shared with 128 other men in bunk beds. Life had, for a time, eased for him when he first came to the mission three months ago. An enthusiastic practitioner and tutor of the 1st amendment's right of free speech, he had at first found a placid audience. It wasn't long before he learned that freedom of speech also meant freedom from speech. Many of his mission brethren enforced their side of this constitutional guarantee with closed fists when Louis would espouse his leftist rhetoric. He considered them idiots. These were the very people he was trying to liberate. It only further reinforced the fact that the masses are hopelessly indoctrinated with conformist dogma. Today, Louis felt he had a chance to change that.

The once white index cards that were his checklists were quite worn by now. That was okay, though, because he took the precaution of hand printing a set, reliterating a cursive set and typing yet another. Still, all three sets were very much reviewed and frayed on the edges. Every item on these lists was weeks ago committed to memory, but he wasn't taking any chances today. He had peddled his food stamps for the last two months, and so had a little war chest to play with. Goodwill Industries had provided him with good prices on everything he would need to wear. One must be presentable when representing the next president of the United States. His corduroy jacket, replete with leather elbow patches on the sleeves, was one that a professor's wife most likely made him dump in favor of the new trendy tweed. Louis secretly fantasized that the jacket once belonged to a political science

professor: something he might have become were it not for that pesky business of earning a PhD. He chanced upon a pair of slacks that actually fit and didn't clash too horribly with the rest of his outfit. Argyle socks would sheathe the feet that he stuck inside his all but brand new Nunn-Bush loafers. In today's vernacular, his ensemble was stylin'. The left over proceeds from his food stamps afforded him enough for an expensive lunch. He thought it best that he pay, or be able to pay, for his own lunch. There would be others, undoubtedly, that would be eager to pick up his tab, but he should pay his own way he believed, lest he give the appearance of impropriety.

The hour was approaching. From his checklist, he rehearsed, one last time, his address to the convention that he would surely be called upon to deliver. He reread William Jennings Bryan's "Cross of Gold" speech for inspiration, stuffed the checklist index cards in his vest pocket and made out for the Red Carpet Inn. The bus schedule conceded to him some two hours of down time before the convention convened in earnest. He'd find something to do.

"And the convention will be in a deadlock bahtween...b'tween the two wight wings of the party 'tween Scoop Jackson and Wallace and we'll hafta reach out for a darz horze...ugh..."

"That's dark horse," I corrected.

"Yeah, you see, you understand," suddenly animated, "Goddammit. You see. You seeee..." The eye lids shut entirely at this point, his head tilted back, cocking his mouth open, and his neck did a slow arching motion to the left, resting his cheek just above his chest. With a hiccup-chuck, Louis deposited a bubble of breakfast on his lapel. He was out: gone south for the winter, or at least the rest of the day. Finally! No sooner had his chin brushed his upper chest, than Louis instantly began snoring. This was something he had done before. You can recognize pros. Like great athletes or musical virtuosos, the best make it look easy. Now, I was prepared to return to the convention hall and exercise my newly won status as a delegate when unexpectedly

from behind two mounds of freshly piled construction dirt came two voices shouting, “Louis, Louis, Leeeww-us. Louis Kennedy, are you out here?”

“Good Lord, Louis,” Ron said as he skip-slid down the red dirt mound and frowned on the heap of oozing boozing derelict that was Louis Kennedy. “Dammit! We were warned that he was smashed. Godammit, Louis.” Looking to me for validation, “We had a hell of a time finding him. Rick here,” indicating his associate, “suggested we find the closest place to score a beer. I had half hoped that he’d gone home and it was out of our hands. Neither of us was excited about trying to pry his delegate seat from him. He had so looked forward to this. For weeks at the campaign headquarters, he talked of nothing else. Damn him, he promised us that he wouldn’t drink until afterward.”

“So much for that, but I doubt that will be the only promise broken this afternoon,” Rick predicted sardonically. Patting the outside of his vest pocket, “Luckily I have his release proxy right here.”

He was pretty wasted, I agreed.

“Who are you anyway? And what are you doing here?” Rick asked. Ron moved his pitiful look from Louis and fixed a suspicious one on me.

“Yeah, just who in the hell are you and what are you doing here?”

Backpedalling, I confessed, “Well, I was elected as an alternate at our precinct caucus. I thought I’d be living in Louisiana by now and so I turned down the chance to become a delegate,” I explained. “My name is Tom and state pride more than anything made me a Harris supporter. I saw Louis in the lobby and.... Well, to put it delicately, he wasn’t exactly stockpiling good PR for the Harris cause or winning over any of the uncommitted delegates. You could smell the alcohol from a distance and after I saw him give the ol’ LBJ backslapping buttonhole treatment to a few delegates, I knew I had to get him off the floor before he singlehandedly destroyed the entire campaign. So, I worked with some others to find him and remove him from the floor. Did I mention that I saw this as my chance to become a delegate?” I added flippantly.

“How in the hell did you get him to leave the floor?” asked Ron. “This is the biggest thing to happen to him in years: perhaps ever. He’s never walked so tall. This was his big shot, his moment in the sun. He wouldn’t have traded this chance for anything.”

“Yes, well, as I said, I had to get him off the floor, so, we told him that Fred Harris was calling from Washington, DC, and needed to speak to him at once. I had the delegates holler this especially loud so that all the people around him would overhear. How could he, with this many witnesses, refuse his own candidate? Louis loved the attention. We ushered him to a row of payphones where I was standing at the ready, receiver in hand.” Feeling the creeping contempt of Rick and Ron, I spoke in rapid-fire fashion to avoid questions, “There was, of course, nobody on the phone line. I gave him some sack of shit excuse about overused communications lines because of the convention crap and a possible conspiracy that was probably afoot. I don’t remember. In any case, he bought it. Now that he was off the floor, I suggested that we not waste this valuable time. He was keen to my idea that we make good use of this opportunity across the street at the 7-11.” In my best Louis Kennedy impersonation, I slurred, “I can’t safford 7-11 beer, and it’s sonly that 3.2 bulls shit anyway.” Ron gave me his “don’t quit your day job” look.

“Where’d he get the money?”

“Consider it my small financial contribution to the Harris campaign. Do you think I can get a tax deduction voucher for that?” I quipped.

“Make out an expense deduction report in triplicate and submit it to the Democratic National Committee, smart ass.” Ron deadpanned. “In the meantime, we have a bigger problem here. We need to get Louis to sign this release proxy. It looks like we need his floor vote.”

“You mean I spent five bucks and a good slice of the afternoon getting this lush to pass out and you want to revive the old coot?” I protested. “Instead of waking ol’ Louis, just forge his name. Here, I’ve got a decent script, let me sign it.”

“You’re new to this game, aren’t you, dumb shit? Do you know what would happen if word of this got out, hot on the heels of Watergate no less?” Rick chided.

“It is bad enough that we’re getting his signature under duress, while he’s in an incapacitated state. If Louis were to sober up and challenge a forged signature to the credentials committee, they may censor the entire delegation and wouldn’t Fred love to wear that feather in his cap? What would happen if the snollygosters got ahold of this?” I leaned toward Rick, “Did he just say ‘snollygosters’?”

“Look it up, junior.”

“Think of the national implications. Are you willing to risk the charge of ‘voter fraud’ in his home state? Are you fucking nuts?” Ron admonished. “I would have been happy if Louis were a no show altogether, but my boss says we need the vote. I guess I’m the closest thing he has to a friend. It’s incumbent, that’s the word isn’t it: incumbent upon me to wrest a signature from the poor bastard. This is probably the most important thing that has ever happened to him in his miserable, meaningless, little life and now it’s incumbent upon me to snatch it from him.”

Following a heated argument, they managed to get him to sign the proxy and send a bawling Louis Kennedy back to the homeless shelter in a cab. The three of us looked at each other with disgust. Only a mirror could have petitioned more contempt from us—for us. Ron took it especially hard. I didn’t piece it together at the time, but maybe because Ron was black, he felt especially guilty about disenfranchising someone.

A delegate seat was secured for me and I robotically voted the Harris camp strategy. All in all, the whole experience left me empty. Because I was a committed delegate, I wasn’t solicited with bribes of money, women or whiskey. All things being equal, it was a bust of an afternoon. Worse still, I couldn’t shake the image of a broken Louis Kennedy limply collapsing into the back seat of that cab, crying like a baby. The absolute worst of all came

that evening while my girlfriend and I were dinner guests of my boss. With a well lubricated tongue, I shamelessly dominated the conversation with the sparkling description of how a clever cunning me hoodwinked an old wino out of his delegate seat. As is often the case, it was only later that I reflected on what an asshole I had been.

Three months after Carter was elected President, I chanced by Louis at a newsstand in a downtown drug store. I was living in New Orleans at the time and was in Oklahoma for only a short visit. Louis wasn't surrounded by a group of people as much as he had placed himself into the vortex of those gathered around the cash register. Some of the local businessmen, who were acquainted with Louis, were goading him on with mock interest while rolling their eyes. At his expense they passed among themselves satirical grins and harsh-toned giggles. The bastards!

"So, Louis, I understand that you were primarily responsible for Carter getting elected," baited one of the jerks.

"Without you he wouldn't have stood a chance, right?" giggled another.

"The convention did come around to my way of thinking, yes. But as far as getting him elected or even getting him the nomination..., well, people are going to say what they are going to say. I have no control over that," Louis responded with earthy dispatch. This triggered laughter from his detractors which Louis obviated with poise.

With my scornful eyes rigid on them, but my voice aimed at Louis, I gently prodded, "That must've been a really proud moment for you." His eyes dewed over as he drilled me deep in the eye and paused for a moment. Respectful silence reigned.

His chest swelled and his head tilted back, "Yes, it was." Adroitly he gripped the right lapel of his jacket with his right hand, fingers turned inside, thumb pointed skyward, erect. With his left hand he repeated this maneuver, covering a familiar stain on his left lapel. With prideful dignity he turned his glance toward the window, looking at nothing specific. At that moment I

thought Henry Clay himself could not have struck a pose with more Southern comportment than Louis did. With a fresh film of wash in his eyes he reiterated, "Yes it was."

Your Trip Ticket

by **Brenden Stovall**

The convoy pushes off, tearing toward the front gate. You're sitting in the backseat of a HMMWV—High Mobility Multipurpose Wheeled Vehicle (Humvee)—the lead truck of a five-vehicle convoy. The guard at the gate takes down the information called by the platoon sergeant, who relays information from the trip ticket: five vehicles, seventeen personnel, five crew-served heavy machine guns, and seventeen small arm rifles; the destination is a small outpost twenty-six miles away. The guard signals for the tank to move from the path ahead so the lead vehicle can take to the road.

You stare out the window, watching nothingness pass by. You watch for little things you don't realize you watch for anymore: a darting movement, a glint of light in the distance from a rifle, anything alarming. You have the headset on and listen without listening as others in the truck tell dirty jokes and bitch about the heat.

The road you are on is relatively safe, but everyone knows the checkpoint ahead leads to a more volatile path. The lead vehicle calls in a suspicious mound on the side of the road and swerves left to avoid it, with all other vehicles following his tracks to the inch. You inspect the mound as it passes by. Anything is dangerous when you are on the road; even pop cans and pot holes are known villains. Soldiers steer clear of dead animal carcasses, mounds, or anything possibly hiding a detonation.

While passing through the checkpoint, your body stiffens, eyes become more focused. Two miles past the checkpoint indigenous children run to the road waving, chasing the convoy. Children are a good sign; incidents are rare when they are out in bunches. Three miles later you pass by a small village; lining the roadside are men selling gasoline out of water bottles and jugs. Some

point at you, some wave. You listen to a call on the radio announcing that the convoy is approaching another checkpoint.

At the checkpoint, local police grip AK47s, nodding and smiling as the convoy passes by. Your driver jokes about running one over for fun. You straighten your back, which holds forty-five pounds of body armor, seven thirty-round magazines, a medical kit, surgical knife, and two grenades. The sand and trash and endless brown pass you by, and you can no longer remember what lush green looks or smells like.

The convoy stops. You hear on the radio that there is a suspicious mound in the center of the road. The truck commander of the first vehicle calls the mound to the six—the platoon commander—who in turn calls it back to the command at the FOB. Moments later the response comes back that there are no previous reports of a suspicious mound.

The mission is to escort the battalion commander to the outpost. Even though he's not the convoy commander, he exerts his position of authority over the platoon commander, ordering an on-foot investigation of the suspicious mound. He doesn't want to wait for EOD to show up. The platoon commander conveys the order to the platoon and you shift in your seat. There are four in your truck: a driver, gunner, truck commander in the passenger seat, and you, the dismount. You open your door, gripping the M-4 as you meet with the other five that will be investigating the obstacle.

The mound is packed sand stretching horizontally the width of the brittle road. The team walks in an inverted V past the first vehicle, breaking apart to move to the side of the road. You and another soldier inspect the ground near the road for wires, shovel marks, devices of any sort; you venture out further, sweeping the terrain while looking out into nothingness for signs of a triggerman, the barrel of your rifle moving in sync with your eyes. Nothing. Finally, you and your comrade yell "clear" and moments later soldiers on the other side of the road do the same. Everyone meets in the center of the road, twenty feet in front of the speed bump-shaped mound, waiting for what's next.

The next order is to move on foot to a house a quarter of a kilometer east to investigate the property and interrogate the owner. The platoon commander exits his vehicle and joins the patrol, bringing his interpreter. You move away from the mound and the safety of the convoy to trudge across infertile ground, past stray goats, up to the property gate. Your platoon commander yells at a child to approach the gate while your team stands ready to charge.

The interpreter tells the boy to open the gate, and he does as instructed. He runs inside the house to fetch his father, while the team sets up a three hundred sixty-degree perimeter around the platoon commander inside the property. The father meets with the platoon commander and his interpreter inside the perimeter, informing them he knows nothing about how the mound came to be. Your team is told to go through his house—respectfully; you and two others do as told. You clear the house room by room, finding nothing suspicious with the exception of an unloaded AK47.

The commander calls via the brick radio he carries on his vest back to the convoy that the house is clear. You return to the road where your team is ordered to inspect the mound closer this time. Your platoon commander curses, telling the team to do as told. He and the interpreter return to his vehicle. A sergeant from the fifth vehicle is frustrated and ranting; he's had enough of the country, the heat, and mysterious mounds that seem to pop up out of thin air. He storms to the mound and begins kicking it.

Ice flows through your veins as you watch. It is only a brief flash through your brain, but you can see his body flying in pieces all over the road; however, when the flash is over he's still kicking into the mound. You and your comrades follow suit, high on adrenaline as you join him, digging boot toes into the packed sand. Nothing; no wires, no device. Your heart is pounding but you don't realize it until you return to the vehicle. "All clear" is called over the radio back to headquarters, and the first vehicle rolls carefully over the mound while the others watch.

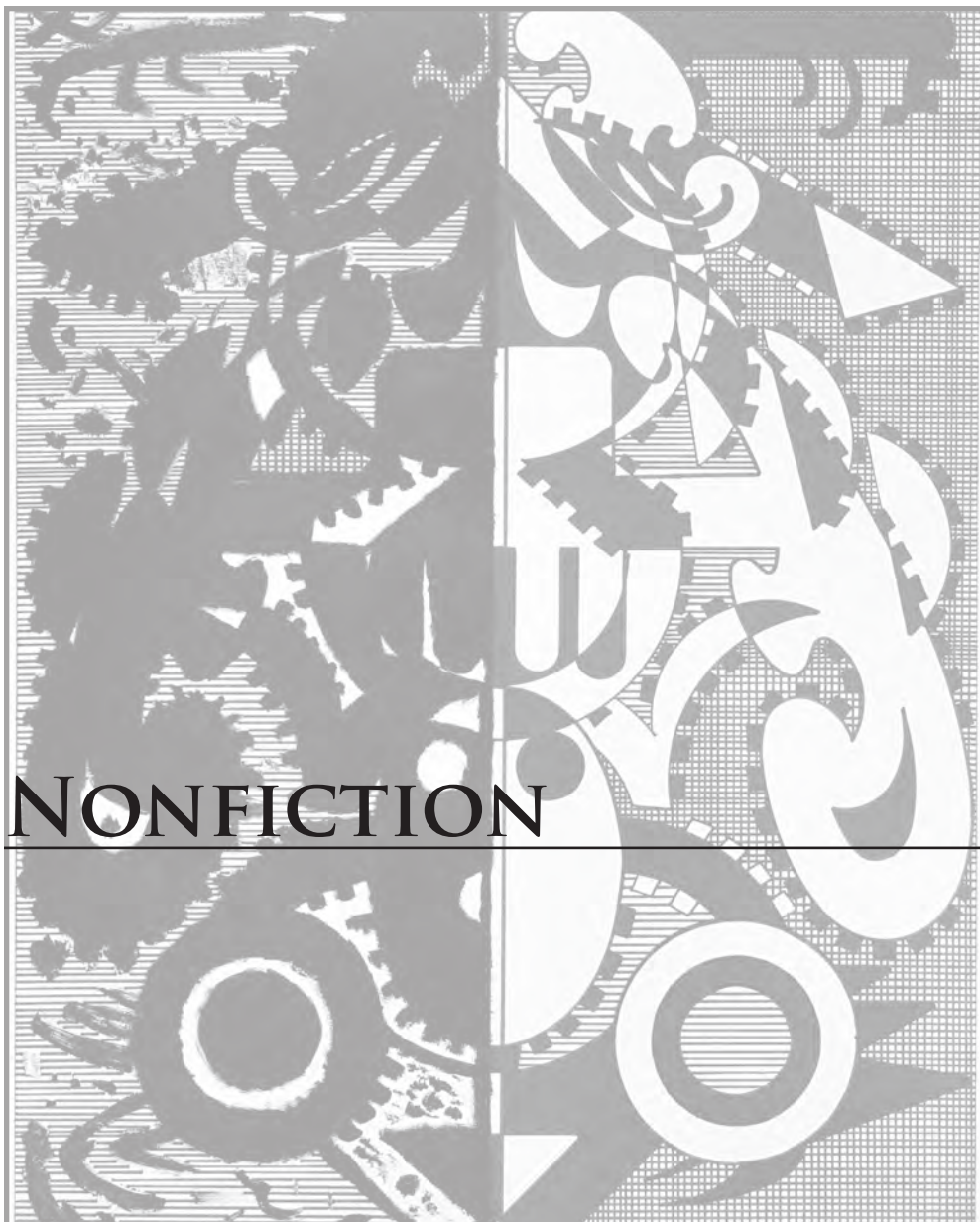
Miles down the road is when it hits. You see a flash of your own body being blown to bits, your family crying with a chaplain at their door informing

them their loved one perished bravely in the name of freedom. No one is joking over the radio anymore. You watch as nothingness passes by, while vehicles swerve from dead animals, children, pop cans and pot holes. After a few minutes your heart rate slows again to normal, and the joking on the radio resumes.

You reach the outskirts of the small city, knowing deep within is the outpost. You stay vigilant while passing buildings and houses, children running alongside the slow moving vehicles are screaming and begging for candy. When they discover your gunner has nothing for them today, they begin hurling rocks at the gunner, who curses, requesting permission to open fire. The truck commander tells him to keep his head down. The convoy turns right and moves through a narrow alley, buildings extending straight up on either side. You scan the windows, pushing past the claustrophobic feeling.

The convoy reaches the gate to the outpost, and the platoon commander calls in the information. The vehicles move fifty yards inside the compound, stopping next to the clearing barrels. Everyone exits the vehicles to clear their weapons; they remove magazines and dry fire into the sand-filled cans. Instead of reentering the vehicle, you grab the assault pack, moving on foot to the staging area, reaching it at the same time as the vehicles.

The battalion commander roams away into the air conditioned offices of the TOC while the platoon commander orders everyone to use the latrine, gas up the vehicles, and get ready for the next convoy brief in forty-five minutes. Like everyone else, you move through your routine, thinking not of the previous ride, only the next. You clean your weapon, listening to the sounds of the foreign city beyond the barrier walls. Your friends tell jokes and bitch about the heat, taking what little down time they have to not dwell upon what may be.



NONFICTION

Kidnapped

by **Brittany Williams**

“We can go get candy.”

The woman’s smile is plastic and her lips are hidden beneath a thick layer of magenta-colored lipstick. My sister claps excitedly but I eye the stranger in suspicion. Our mother is nowhere in sight. The woman stoops to our level, causing her brown-and-white pinstriped skirt to wrinkle. She extends a hand toward Stacia, my four-year-old sister, who takes it with a giddy gleam in her muddy brown eyes. The woman’s other hand extends toward me and I have the pervading sense that taking it could be a bad idea.

However, with the promise of candy, my inhibitions are lowered. After all, how terrible can a person be if they give candy to young children? I get into the backseat of a silver car and sit beside my little sister, who is smiling and kicking her feet in contentment. With the first forward surge of the car, the engine sputters and moans in protest. We wobble along the sunny streets of north-side Oklahoma City and stop at a convenience store for candy.

My seven-year-old mind does not register that something is wrong until the candy is securely in our hands and we begin to drive. We weave through the city streets, far away from where we left our mother. Panic blooms in my chest and I ask the driver where she’s taking us. She doesn’t respond, just stares ahead and guides the car farther and farther away.

Stacia has sour apple-flavored goo that she is choking down, while I stare down at a massive roll of blueberry gum. The feeling of being betrayed overwhelms me until I want out of the car so badly that my chest aches.

Stacia continues to slurp her candy in pure, ignorant contentment. Her happiness makes me angry.

“Don’t you see? She’s taking us away from Mom.”

My words are laced with poison, hurled at her with as much malice as I can muster.

It is as though her illusion shatters before my eyes. Once-smiling lips quiver and then slope downward into the saddest frown I have ever seen. Big, shimmering tears gather in her eyes. They spill over her cheeks and onto the black leather seat. Seeing my little sister sob noiselessly into the crook of her arm is enough to make hot spikes of fear sear across my face, burning all the way to the tips of my ears.

I have to be strong. I can’t cry.

The woman driving only speaks to us when she wants to tell Stacia to stop crying. In an act of vengeance, I chew a fist-sized wad of blueberry gum and jam it beneath the car seat. In the summer heat, it’s sure to fuse permanently. I imagine the woman on her knees, scraping at the gooey gunk hopelessly while the sun beats down on her.

The car comes to a halt and Stacia stops sobbing long enough to peer through the backseat windows and look around. We are in the parking lot of a behemoth brick building, with bricks the color of rust. For a moment, I’m hopeful that my mother is inside, waiting for us with open arms. For a moment, I think that I’ve been silly. I feel guilty for making my little sister cry, for shouting at the woman, and even for shoving gum beneath the seat. Just as I prepare to blurt out my hasty apology, we are led inside and immediately I know; my mother is nowhere near this place.

The air conditioning cools the sweat on my neck and the marble floors make our footsteps echo. The bones in my hand ache from the force of Stacia’s grip. I clutch her hand, too, and remind myself that I am the strong one. Everything around me is convincing me to collapse— to become comatose and completely unresponsive. I can’t, though, because Stacia needs me.

They lead us through a set of double doors and into a room where she gives us each a toy – identical Precious Moments dolls with pies sewn onto their hands. The woman disappears and we sit in the purple room for a long time, until she returns with a grim look on her face.

My palms sweat and I feel like a prisoner, waiting for the judge to deliver my sentence. I grip my little sister's hand even tighter. Someone enters the room, and that's when my shoulder is forced back, jarring both my body and my mind. Shock sends a protest bubbling to my lips.

My protest dies as a faceless, formless individual takes Stacia; their appearance is hidden behind the watery screen that clouds my vision. Wailing in terror, Stacia disappears behind the double doors. The tears begin to fall, then. I crumple to the floor and clutch my chest which, I'm certain, is caving in. The workers manage to bring me to my feet, but not without a fight. As I wobble and cry, the woman escorts me deeper into the orphanage, which they misleadingly call "the Shelter."

The man stays close by, to restrain me if I become problematic.

Walking through the humid halls, I don't think about how I'm only seven years old. I don't think about how my life is, most likely, about to change for the worse. I don't even think about my little sister, left alone with strange and compassionless people. Navigating brokenly through the undecorated halls, I only have one thing on my mind – I want my mommy.

This place is set up like a dormitory. The lower level is for recreation. A miniscule TV sits on a pedestal at the front of a vast, chair-filled room. Couches litter the various corners and spaces that are unoccupied by plants or coffee tables. The light is fluorescent and unnatural. A few ugly lamps are scattered around the room, but the warm glow they offer is drowned out by massive sky-lamps that bleach the air white. The carpet is made of short fibers in an uninteresting shade of blue.

I commit the drab surroundings to memory, looking everywhere but at my captors. The rows and rows of chairs placed before the television are

empty. The entire building seems vacant, as I'm guided through in absolute silence. It isn't until we mount the stairs and cross the landing to the second floor that I hear the squeals.

Children—some younger than I am, some older—come dashing down the hall toward me. My captor pulls me aside, to lean passively against the stair rail, and allows the hooligans to pass undeterred. Dumbfounded, my eyes follow the children as they fly down the stairs and toward one of the many closed doors on the first level. So I'm not the only one here. My morbid curiosity is sparked and, for a moment, all sadness is forgotten. I inspect my surroundings with new eyes.

Along the right side of the upper level I see numerous doors, some closed and some open. My door is just like the others. It's brown, with a simple metal knob. Inside, the room is dark and a massive window takes up one of the walls. The setup of the room reminds me of a hotel, or maybe a hospital. There is no TV, though, and the beds are crowded against opposite walls. The blankets have gaudy floral prints, which are colored teal and magenta. A single wooden dresser is crammed into a corner of a room that is much too small for two people.

The woman shows me which bed is mine and tells me that I'm free to wander around.

"Lunch is in a little while," she warns.

I try not to look at her because my eyes are filling with tears again. I sit on my bed and stare out the window at the cloudy summer sky. She leaves, eventually, and I am finally allowed to curl into a ball and expel all of the hurt inside me. I refuse meals on the first day, but by day two I am hungry enough to creep down the stairs and join the hordes of displaced children in the cafeteria.

After a couple of days, the adults working in the orphanage eventually stop asking me to participate in group outings and games. The days stretch

on and blur together. The adults are faceless, voiceless, and heartless. I determine that I have been here for months, maybe even years.

One hot summer day, a faceless government official takes me from the TV room, where the children are watching a movie that is inappropriate and riddled with profanity. I am taken to a room with chairs and a few cheap toys, but I barely notice the toys because inside that drab little room is my mother.

The emotions that once flooded me are replaced with questions. I ask her what happened, why they took us, when we can go home. She has answers for me, until my little sister is introduced to the room. She sobs and greets our mother with more emotion than I can manage and my questions are forgotten. In the midst of a tearful reunion, my mother communicates to me that my stepdad is in jail for what he did to me and that the state took us to ensure the safety of my home.

Our mother is removed from us and my sister is taken away again, but this time not for long. I soon find myself outside the restrictive walls of the orphanage, having meals with my grandparents and receiving gifts from distant friends. Eventually, I am allowed to go home to my mother and life returns to a state of semi-normalcy.

After interrogating my mother about my stay at the orphanage, I discover that I was only there for one week. I come to think of it as the longest and most perception-altering week of my life. We pick up the pieces and move on, adapting in a way that is purely instinctual. My life improves with each passing day, until I am the happy young girl that I am meant to be.

You've Come a Long Way, Baby

by Kelly Tanner

I grew up in Mayberry. Ward and June Cleaver were my parents. We moved to Greenway Terrace when I was three years old. Ours was the first house built on the street. Other houses sprang up quickly, and before long the block was full of young families who stayed and raised their kids together. People neighbored then. It was a wonderful place to grow up.

My dad was my hero. One of my first memories is of the two of us playing in a shallow hole he had dug in the flowerbed. I would jump in and jump out. He would jump in and jump out. That was great fun—for a three year old. He was always available for my sister and me. He played with us, built things for us, and helped us with our homework. Sometimes on the weekend we would pack a lunch, and he would take us on a biking or hiking adventure. He was also mechanically inclined, and when something needed repaired, he fixed it. My dad knew everything. I realized later in life, however, he could afford the time to be Super Dad because he was exempt from the grind of day-to-day household responsibilities. Plain and simple, he didn't do housework.

Mom kept the house, but unlike June Cleaver, she also had a career. She re-entered "Corporate America" the year I went to kindergarten. The plan was to work eighteen months to save enough money to buy furniture, but forty-two years later she retired from the same company.

She spent the majority of that time as a department head. She supervised forty women who gossiped, bickered, and tattled on each other like they were sixth graders. Her job description must have included terms such as

“playground monitor,” “guidance counselor,” “mediator,” and “shrink.” The needs of the young women under her tutelage varied greatly. Marsha, for instance, was involved in one abusive relationship after another. She often needed a strong shoulder and firm, honest advice. Shelly’s problems, however, were less severe. She lacked maturity and good judgment. One day she opened the office window and shouted, “Cute butt!” to a guy fixing the air conditioning unit. Shelly and Cute Butt got married two days later on her lunch hour. Who could forget Dorothy? Mom had to fire her for coming to work drunk. I remember Mom’s description about the way Drunk Dorothy entered the office that morning: “She was so happy. I swear her feet weren’t even touching the ground. Her hair was a wreck, and it had this big pink bow hanging by a strand.”

One day when Mom had been hassled to the point of an impending tantrum, she holed up in one of the stalls in the bathroom. After only a few minutes of vacation, one of her co-workers shoved a file under the stall door and asked for her signature.

Each evening my sister and I would watch silently as she went straight to her bedroom. Most days, she would say something to us like “Hi, girls, see you in a bit.” But other days, the days she came home flexing her jaw muscles and grinding her teeth, she would pass without a word. She would shut the door (sometimes it was a slam) and disappear for fifteen to thirty minutes. That was her “attitude adjustment” time. When the rejuvenation was over, she usually appeared to be refreshed and ready to begin her real job: mom and homemaker. That was where she excelled.

Mom taught us to be women. She was affectionate and loving—and tough when we needed it. She instilled in us a good work ethic and was a living example of what it meant to be a good wife and mother. More importantly, she was our friend.

We sat down as a family and ate dinner every night. This is something I not only took for granted, but mocked. I was a picky eater. There was never any argument about my likes or dislikes. I could eat it or leave it, but the rule

was no dessert until my plate was clean. I often tried to hide food under the rim of my plate or in my tea glass. I hated the formality of the whole affair: “Chew with your mouth closed, sit up straight, lean over your plate when you take a bite.” I found it especially offensive that we weren’t allowed to answer the phone or door until the table was cleared.

I remember the time I very dramatically chewed a single piece of meat the duration of dinner. It was my silent decree: “This meat is tough. I’m tired of slop!” Of course, Mom and Dad pretended not to notice. Dinner went on without me.

Mom was fastidious about the cleanliness of the house. Certain chores were done daily, but Saturday was officially house cleaning day. The festivities didn’t start until around nine, so my sister and I would get up early and watch Bugs Bunny and Scooby Doo together. We would snuggle down on opposite ends of the couch, each with a box of cereal. She would eat the marshmallows out of the Lucky Charms, and I would eat raisins out of the Raisin Bran.

Our tradition was to clean house to music—loud music. We had a hi-fi system that was built into a beautiful oak cabinet, which was about the size of a coffin. The top slid open at each end. One side held the turntable, radio, and control knobs, and the other side was packed with vinyl albums. Mom would pull out a stack of her favorites, thumb through them, and then thoughtfully choose the inspiration for the day: Mama Cass, The Fifth Dimension, Charlie Rich and Diana Ross were preferred choices. I still smell Lemon Pledge every time I hear “Ain’t No Mountain High Enough.”

Even though my sister and I moaned and groaned like we were slaves, we were only responsible for minimal tasks such as dusting, vacuuming, and cleaning our bedrooms. I’m sure we were a lot of help. In fact, thirty-five years later, Mom still razzes me about the time she found a bowl of six-month-old Jell-O in my dresser drawer.

One night I moseyed toward the kitchen to fix a bowl of ice cream but pivoted on my heel when the scent of Mr. Clean wafted to my nose. Mom

was already mopping the floor—I was too late. There would be no ice cream. Karen, our neighbor, was sitting at the bar talking to her while she worked. As I was leaving the room, I overheard the comment, “I can’t believe you’re scrubbing the floor at ten o’clock.” Karen didn’t work. She had probably mopped early that morning over toast, a cup of coffee, and The Phil Donahue Show. I remember thinking, Duh, Mom always mops the kitchen at night.

The inevitable finally came. Mom and Dad sat down and had a talk. He agreed it was right that he should help with the household chores. Several months later when Mom realized she was still flying solo in the cooking, laundry, and toilet-cleaning department, she reminded him of their agreement. He simply said, “I shirk my responsibility.” And that was that. Somehow that struck her as funny. My mother has a terrific sense of humor—I’m sure that’s why Dad is still alive.

Looking back, I can’t imagine how Mom did it all by herself. I was shocked when I discovered the amount of self-discipline, planning, and energy it takes to produce a nightly meal. My husband and daughter quickly became familiar with the delicious dish affectionately known as OYOs (on your own for dinner). We ate it a couple of times a week.

The road has been slow, but society has come a long way to ease the expectations on career women in the seventy years since Rosie the Riveter cried out to American women, “We can do it!” For one thing, America’s tolerance for filth has grown—I know it has at my house. Also, men have finally realized they have to step up to the plate and share the burden of household drudgeries. Dad even does a little house cleaning these days. Mom says he’s a vacuuming fool. My favorite testament to the change in times is found in the aisles of the supercenter. Every trip I make to Walmart I look for that man doing the grocery shopping with a basket full of kids. There is usually one. I pass him in the aisle and inwardly salute him.

I Never Knew You

by **Lauren Parker**

I remember when I first met you, we were eight years old, and you played with Barbies and I thought that was cool and you bought me a Spice Girls doll for my birthday.

I remember when I moved away and you sent me a letter that said you had a crush on me but signed it with “April Fools” but I forgot it was April Fool’s Day and so when I visited you I didn’t stand too close because, “Boys are icky!”

I remember when I moved back and I bumped into your mom and she said you were in the marching band, and she gave me your number and I was nervous but I called you and you invited me to a party. I don’t go to parties, but I went for you.

I remember when I had a crush on you and we were boyfriendgirlfriend for a month, but you wouldn’t hold my hand and one day we sat on swings and you told me you liked to wear dresses and that you liked boys so we became bestfriends, and you got a boyfriend.

I remember when you would spend the night and we would cuddle while we watched obscure indie films and then we tried a Ouija board once, but it didn’t work because my house was blessed by a priest long ago, and we would go to Target and we’d follow gay couples and cute guys and we followed one home once but then the rain clouded our windshield and we sat in the hail for an hour laughing, eating chocolate-covered croissants, without a care in the world.

I remember when you made a sex joke, which was weird because I thought you didn't know anything about it, and you came home from your boyfriend's house and you puked in my bathroom, but you said you were a virgin, and that night you fell asleep in my dining room, sober and scared, while I made macaroni and cheese.

I remember when we would tell each other our deepest-darkest secrets and you told me you didn't like boys or girls and I asked if you ever thought about sex and you said no and you said you thought you were asexual and you told me you cut yourself with scissors, and I told you I cut myself with razors. I didn't tell you to stop because I was given some advice once: "Just not too deep," so I gave to you the same self-destructive and far from helpful advice.

I remember when you told me you were going to take your dad's shotgun and blow your brains out and I told you, "I don't make suicide plans." But I told you not to do it, and I told you not to think about that sort of thing, and you never brought it up again.

I remember when you decided you only liked boys and we looked at a cute boy who sat on a bench outside the school and, distracted, you crashed your car and you mangled my face, bloody and swollen, and you didn't see me the whole week I was out of school and you didn't even call, and when I came back to school you denied the wreck and you said you didn't remember a cute guy and that I was crazy, and you stopped being my friend that day. After that, I ate lunch in the bathroom every day while you hung out with your new bestfriend, and after some time I made some new friends but never a new bestfriend, and I never forgot about you.

I remember when I heard you dropped out of school, and I called you and tried to be your friend again, so we saw each other and you told me you liked boys and girls and didn't elaborate on that confusion and you never said sorry for hurting me in the car wreck that made me scared of cars and caused me to not even get my license until I was eighteen because I was too scared to get into a car, and then you didn't talk to me ever again.

I remember when I tried to forget about you until I heard you took your dad's shotgun and blew your brains out, but I didn't cry, I mean you were just an old friend, right?

I remember going to your wake and your brother and your mother remembered who I was but I didn't know what to say to them, it had been such a long time, and there were pictures of you with all your friends and I was not in any of the pictures, which told me you cut me out of your life and you stopped being in my life and you would never be in my life again. And then I tried to stop remembering. I mean, I never knew you, after all.

More Than He Paid For

by Crystal Witt

I used to love going to the movies! That is, until the fear of facing huge embarrassment while I was there for enjoyment began haunting me. This fear would creep into my dreams at night. I'd just settle into bed, all snug in my double-sided comforter with the sheets tucked in around my toes. Then, as I'd drift off into sleep, dreaming about parking at the movie theatre, walking through the right door (because the left one won't work), and buying my ticket, it'd hit me. That moment that will forever remind me of how clumsy, ditzy, and practically blind I really am.

It was a normal day. My mother, sister, and I had decided to head to the nearby town to catch a flick. We had also decided to meet my sister's friend, Kyle, there. Now, my family is all about the movies! We are literally never late. It's like my mom always says, "It's better to be an hour early than even one minute late." No, Mom, it's really not. But, I learned if you're going to the movies, this saying really does hold true.

The drive to Altus takes twenty minutes and this day in particular, we'd left enough time, or so we thought, to stop by Walmart to pick up some cheap snacks to sneak into the movies. We arrived at Walmart, walked in, took our time picking out exactly what we wanted, and went to check out. But, there were fewer checkout lanes open than there were people checking out and because of this, we had to wait some time before leaving Walmart. By the time we did leave, we knew we would probably get to the movies in time to see the last of the previews, if that.

We pulled into the parking lot, jerked the car doors open, and slammed them shut. We jogged to the theatre doors and rushed the ticket man to give us our tickets and direct us to our seats.

This movie that we now knew we had arrived late to was a newly released scary movie. In addition to this, it was one of those movies that are practically always set at nighttime, unrealistic, and because of this, the theatre was, for the most part, pitch black. I was only fourteen at the time, so I was in that awkward stage where I didn't really talk to guys and if I did, I came off sounding like a complete and utter idiot. Also, I hadn't fully grasped my body and was extremely uncomfortable in it. In fact, I had been told that I walk like a man. I'm still told that today. So, there's that, too.

We had just gotten our tickets and were about to head into the movie when my mom and I decided we needed popcorn. If I would have thought that those two extra minutes spent on getting popcorn would keep us from the speckle of light that illuminated the movie theatre one last time before the movie started, I think I would have skipped the popcorn. Or, at least I would have skipped the movie theatre butter! But, how was I to know my fate?

My mother and I proceeded to enter the concession stand line while my sister left us to go find her friend and hope that he had managed to save us seats. We got the popcorn, with extra butter, and paid the ridiculously high amount for it. Next, we handed the usher our tickets, received our stubs, and were informed that our theatre was down the hallway to the right.

One may think that I would remember what movie we saw, but I believe that while trying to block out every disturbing moment from that day, I somehow blocked out everything unimportant and only kept the memory of embarrassment; the one memory I meant to trash.

We opened the double door to find that the movie had already started. Great, I thought. I am already basically blind, utterly clumsy, and extremely ditzy, and now we are in a pitch dark theatre? There was only one aisle and it sat on the right side of the theatre. I led the way in and my mom trailed

behind. She whispered my sister's name as quietly as she could while still being loud enough to hear the "Shh!" from our peers. I found this out later, that my sister held up her phone and shone the light from the screen so that we could find our seats. I, however, was unaware of this golden opportunity and missed my chance at sight.

I wandered down the short aisle and, while turning around, asked my mom, "Do you see her?" However, whenever I finally reached the full turn around, I saw that my mother was nowhere to be found.

"Mom?"

"Over here!" she loudly hissed.

From her voice, I believed I could make out exactly where she was in that theatre. I pinpointed a row and stood at what I believed was the edge of this row, though I still couldn't fully make out the seats and, for that matter, my mother, sister, and her friend.

I'll just feel my way around, I thought to myself. It seemed like a sure plan. I mean, my vision was shot, but I still had hands to feel my way around! I faced my back to the row of seats and began shuffling my feet as I moved further down the aisle. I should use my hands too, I thought to myself again. I stretched my hands slightly behind me in hopes of getting ahold of an arm rest so that I would know exactly where I needed to sit. I only shuffled my feet about a foot when my left hand detected an arm rest. Ah ha! I stretched my right hand back as well and found the other arm rest. I thought if I had found two arm rests on opposite sides of each other, then surely there was a seat just waiting for me in the middle, right? I sat down on the cushioned seat; even did a little wiggle of my tush to really get comfy. I can finally start watching the movie, I thought to myself, before being rudely interrupted by a handsy chair. Whoa, what the..., I started to think but again was interrupted, this time by a man's voice.

"Nope!" I heard as my arm rests attached themselves to my hips, lightly picked me up, and set me down in the next row forward, in an actual seat.

What just happened? What did I just do? Did I just sit on a stranger's lap? You've got to be kidding me. I felt my cheeks get hot, and I knew they were revealing a bright shade of red, but thank God for the pitch black theatre now, because no one would be able to see these red cheeks of mine. The cheeks on my face that is, not the ones that had just sat on a stranger's lap.

I attempted to turn my head back just enough to give an apology but instead of doing this, my head was frozen in its place, staring straight at the screen.

"What's wrong?" my mother whispered while offering me some popcorn.

"Um...I just sat on a guy's lap," I said while I grabbed a handful of popcorn and launched it into my mouth, as if thinking that maybe shoving the popcorn down my throat would lead me to choke and die so that my cause of death wouldn't be from utter embarrassment.

"You...you what?" my mom asked while trying to hold back a laugh.

"I sat on that guy's lap! I couldn't see and thought he was a seat! He picked me up and moved me to this seat," I loudly and harshly whispered to her.

My mother, who has never been one to hold her emotions of any kind in and who was sure not going to hold them in now for my benefit, began laughing uncontrollably. When I say uncontrollably, I mean that kind of laugh that you and your friend do in that class with the strict teacher and you know you're supposed to be doing your work, but instead, you and your friend have been making jokes and all of a sudden they are the funniest things you've ever heard in your life. That kind of laugh that you know will be heard by everyone so you try your hardest to hold it in but instead, it just comes out gaudier, and it may even involve a few twitches and a slap on the knee. That's the kind of laugh my mom had. It was evil. It was cold. But, she's my mother and she has the right to laugh at the many embarrassing moments I encounter.

My sister was the first person to hush us. Her friend was the second. Next the row behind us, the row with the stranger who just got more than he paid

for, and then the row in front of us. By then, I was even laughing along with my mother!

I couldn't tell you how long we laughed during that movie. Every time we would think we had finally got all the laughing out of us, we began to laugh again. Many people left that movie confused I'm sure, wondering why the two freaks near the middle thought seeing blood and guts was just so gosh darn funny.

During the movie, through the on and off again laughter, I had formulated a plan to tell the man how sorry I was and that I would be getting my eyes checked as soon as possible and leaving earlier to get to the movies on time in the future. When the credits started, I forced my head to turn to the man and tell him these things. But, to my surprise, the man and his girlfriend had just got up from their seats and were heading for the door.

After we walked outside of the theatre we were free to laugh as obnoxiously as we wanted to. We did just that. I told my mom the full story, including all the details and all, while my sister said good-bye to her friend. I'm sure she apologized to him as well for the childish behavior from her mother and sister.

To this day, I try to make sure that I arrive early to the movies. But, if by some act of fate I arrive to a movie that has already started and is practically pitch black, I wait in the aisle of the theatre until a light appears for me to see again. What other choice do I have, sitting on another stranger's lap?

The Problem of Evil

by **Caroline Hill**

I'm going to break a lot of rules in this essay. This is an obvious fact from my first sentence. I'm writing in first person, I'm going to be speaking from my own personal experiences, and I'm not using the usual structure I've learned to use in this type of essay. I will, however, not be abandoning the assignment altogether. Everything I'm about to say is going to be informed by John Hick's use of bios and zoe.

The reason I've chosen to write the essay like this is because the nature of the assignment troubled me because I don't know which of the arguments we studied that I find most convincing. So, I looked at the discussion questions at the end of each article and had chosen to write about John Hick's ideas in the context of the myth of Adam and Eve in Christian tradition. I wrote a brief outline before going out with my brother and planned to buckle down and write the essay when I returned home.

When I got home, I realized that if I wrote the essay that I had planned, it would have been a terrible one. Sure, technically, it might have been a good essay. I hope I would have been able to make my ideas clearer than I did in the last one I wrote for this class. I think I would have been able to back up my assertion(s) well. And, I know I'm a good writer so I'm pretty sure it would have been a clear and interesting read. However, it wouldn't have been an honest essay.

I recognize that to some people, my standards for writing this essay are, to put it kindly, somewhat odd. In fact, I honestly think they're a bit ridiculous. This essay is meant to show that I understand the material we've been studying. I'm supposed to show a high degree of critical thinking

skills. If I decided to write about how I think C.S. Lewis made the strongest argument and did it well, I would have done what I was supposed to do. That's all that was asked.

But, the topic is theodicy. It's about evil. It's about attempting to reconcile the fact of evil with the hope of a benevolent deity or deities. This is a subject that keeps people up at night. This is a subject that makes people walk away from their religions. This is a subject that had my brother burying his face in his steering wheel and sobbing.

In class, it's easy for me to step away from evil. I can bring up genocide and murder without blinking. In academic settings, I try and step away from my emotions and focus on logic and reason. Although I'm hardly completely successful in this aspect, I'm easily able to look at complicated and messy subjects without really putting myself into them. I'm able to think and talk about these ideas we talk about without thinking something is truly on the line for me. I can do this because in a setting like this, for me, they aren't. I haven't spent a lot of time struggling with how to accept the fact of a benevolent god with the fact of evil. Philosophy is a new area of learning for me. I don't have emotional or intellectual attachments to philosophical ideas yet.

But, I do know evil. Evil was my father walking into my room when I was five years old and raping me. Evil was me blaming myself for this. Evil was my brother screaming at me that I should hate him because he couldn't protect me the night I wrote this essay. My brother was four when my dad was raping me. Evil is my brother hating himself because he didn't have enough power as a small child to save me. Evil is my brother not being able to understand that it wasn't his fault. Evil was me having no words to comfort him. Evil was him looking at me and wondering how I could stand to love him.

I wanted to talk about bios and zoe. I wanted to talk about how people need to struggle to develop into something that can connect with God on a meaningful level. I wanted to talk about how maybe God created human

beings because he didn't want to be alone. That's why Adam was given animals and then Eve, right? I wanted to talk about how maybe the only way sentient beings can overcome loneliness is by choosing to connect and love each other through the agony of evil.

But, when I closed the door to my brother's car and walked to my house, that belief in me was shaken. The dysfunction in my family has created a man who doesn't believe he deserved love. That man is my brother. I thought about talking about bios and zoe to him. Those words felt empty in my head. I had nothing to give to him but three words (I love you) that he couldn't accept.

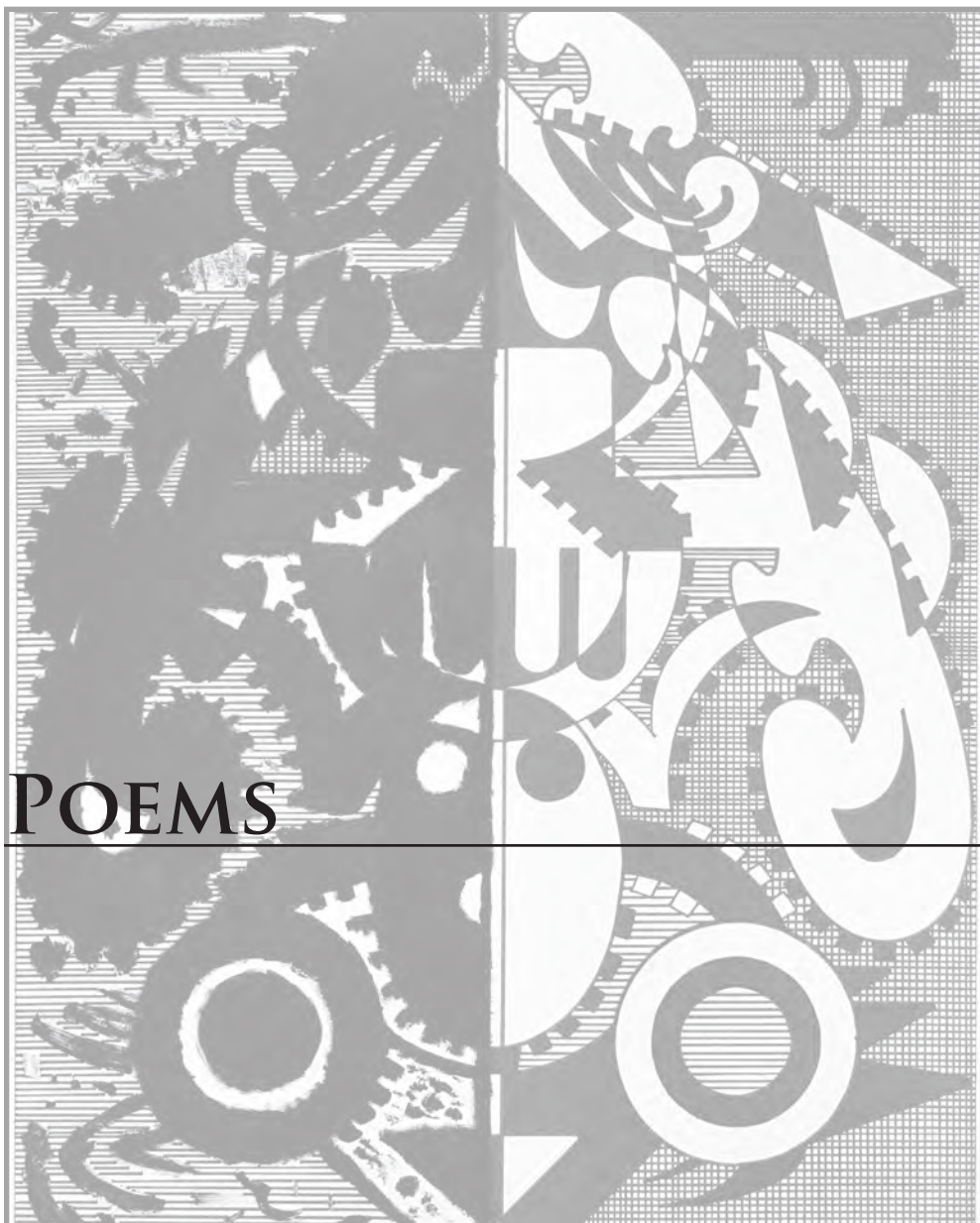
I don't know how to write about theodicy when my brother's cries echo in my mind as I sob. I don't know how to defend or expand upon any ideas that we've studied when my brother is suffering so much. I also cannot reject the idea of theodicy because my dad raped me but I've found a way to see so much goodness in the world and I've been able to do this, in part, because I do have a God that I believe is good. I just don't know how to argue it yet. I still need to think on it.

I simply cannot step out of myself and my life in order to write about what we've studied. Not for this subject. Perhaps I have failed in the first thing I was supposed to do in this class: to be objective about these ideas. Evil is just something I cannot be objective enough about in order to write an essay on. I know myself enough to know I can't engage critically in these ideas when I simply don't know where I stand. Not after evil touched me again when I spoke with my brother.

If I hadn't talked to my brother, I would have written about John Hick's bios and zoe. I would have talked about how bios means the biological instincts that make up human beings and how something within human beings makes them want to move above them and how that process is called zoe. I would have interpreted the story of Adam and Eve through these ideas. Maybe I would have come up with something profound.

However, I did talk to my brother. I saw his tears. I heard his screams. I felt the tension in his body when I touched his shoulder. I was completely powerless as I struggled and failed to comfort him.

I realized I have no real clue how to reconcile the fact of evil with the belief in a benevolent God. If I tried, it would be a lie. I simply don't have the stomach to lie about evil when I was just reminded that evil isn't a word with a definition, but an integral part of the world I live in that does things like break my little brother into pieces.



POEMS

The Five-Pointed Gun

by Arif Khan

Knuckles erect like mountains busting through skin.
Green veins flow with red knowledge.

This fleshy pen of blood and bone will both
bed the dead and awake the living.
These palms are battlefields battered with blisters and sweat.

When these spider legs curl in to prey
around a pen, a fist full of red
dynamite ignites.

To stroke a pen is to stroke a trigger.

Reincarnation

by Lyndsie StremLOW

Staring at this face, I am faceless in the sink.
I could stand in the mirror
for twenty years waiting
for one sound.
The bell at the bottom
of the sea rings and no one
hears it.
The sound.
Remote perfection.
Great, quiescent waters.
Far-off and hoped for is the soul.

I loved you, an effigy.
Beneath my hands
you were an even
piece of granite,
I saw a saint where a man
stands. In the faces of all
men I recognized you.

Lying dread-heavy,
sleepless most nights.
My trembling body
under the awful firmament
Each evening I gave
myself to pleasure.

You are the anchor
that weighs me
to a cool, dark sleep.
I know you and I wake
as a new form each morning.

Hungry World

by Jordan Appleseth

In a small apartment on the third floor.
Awoken by the slam of a door.
Sunlight pours through the window,
onto faded linoleum and yellow-tinged walls.
The sound of heavy traffic ringing loud
along with voices of people passing by.
Going places.
Day passes.
Night pushes away the sun.
Streetlamps send a steady orange glow,
bleeding through the blinds.
Lines across the ceiling.
The occasional sound of traffic,
or a dog's howl,
along with faint, muffled sounds.
Night passes.
Over and over again.
Light dresses his room.
Sounds of the city find his ears.
People pass by.
He sees the world from his window.
A passionless disposition.

In the Kitchen

by **Robin Olson**

Don my apron, tie it tight.
Wear my pearls around my throat.
Curl my hair like a doll's.
Knife in hand.
In the kitchen.
Barefoot. Bare soul.
Beautiful arrangements on the tables.
All sorts of foods on the menu.
As I toil.
In the kitchen.
Barefoot. Bare soul.
Pluck out my eyes like cherry tomatoes.
Bitter apples between my teeth.
Smiling stiff.
In the kitchen.
Barefoot. Bare soul.

It's Something Cosmic

by **Heather A. Skiba**

Sometimes, the stars align and you can't help
but follow the path beneath them.

It's the call of something good. Hope, that comes when things feel as though
they're going at a flow that is seemingly magical. It moves so well and
so quickly that the world becomes a blur. You miss the clues; the obvious
warning signs; dark shadows in the wilderness that have been surrounding
the path, and you, this whole time. They were there in the beginning... and
you missed them, because you were looking at the stars.

And only now do you see the darkness,
once all those bright beacons of light have faded away.

Tones

by Rachael Privett

The leaves are fighting the season's change.
My bones are fighting it too, and I don't know why.
The wind shakes me. I don't know why I'm crying,
but the sun it cuts me as I shrivel and die.

Some days I'm fine and others I'm breaking.
I'm not manic enough for this insanity, and
my vision it doubles and blurs, and
all I want is to drift to the ground,
orange, or red,
and die with dignity.
Instead I'm just brown and crunchy.

I'm just the same kid with the pen sitting in the corner,
and I'll pour my heart onto paper and hope someone listens
and gets it.

Instead I'll crunch under your shoes
and become shards in the grass,
lusting after tones I cannot have.

The Other Place

by **Robert Smith**

Cold steel door
Six inch window
Walls painted gray
Standing in open field of clover
Deep green with brushes of red
Honey bees
Faded with time
Chipped and peeled
Layers of light blue, green and gray
Within shapes of rabbits
Squirrels and clouds
Snow-capped mountain
Looks transparent on the horizon
Stream cascading
Feeding the lake below
A herd of elk
Blackjack, oak, hickory trees and berry shrubs
Reds, blues, yellows, pinks and whites
Wildflowers of all kinds
Two flat steel beds
Bolted to the wall
One above the other
Stainless steel
Toilet sink combo
Window with thick bars
Bolted to the floor stool and table
Standing on a porch
Looking in

Monster

by Rachel Cuevas

I see you Monster
Coming up my stairs
Footsteps like thunder
Under muffled breath

I hear you Monster
Your conscience all but gone
Hiding a tar-soaked heart
Under a smile so long

I feel you Monster
Hands as cold as ice
Making my skin crawl
A million little knives

I hate you Monster
You've taken all I own
You took my inner peace
My heart a cold dead stone

I've killed you monster
You no longer have your hold
I've beaten back my demons
And regained all my control

Men of War

by Michael Stratton

You are here to help others, they say
I am here to help others, I say
Courageous am I to venture in such a territory, and in such a way
For helping others is hard, harder than steel, in many ways impossible
The first day, like hell on earth
The sun, so bright and piercing, reflecting upon everything and everyone
Walking off my winged chariot, I am blind
Blind to both matter and man, I carry on, adjusting slowly to the new
surroundings
Among many I march on, while off in the distance, so near a distance,
thunder rolls on
Boom turns to clank, and clank to whoosh, and soon in the heat of the storm
are we
Looking out across the no man's land, I can see the eye of the storm
The thunder strikes close now, creating a massive burst, we all fall back
Dazed, confused, I try to stand. The pain now unimaginable as my bones,
none brittle, shatter
My sight back, but hearing gone, I see another storm flurry heading my way
My trusted companion, through thick and thin, do not fail me now, I beg you
Action without thought, a preprogrammed machine, I respond, my storm
now equally as fierce
On autopilot, without thought but full of reason, I quell the coming storm
clouds, nine of nine
Our falconer has called forth a falcon
Up ahead, a majestic bird flies past, its mouth agape and smiling
Its voice, so still, and its laugh, so deep and penetrating, my very soul shakes
loose
Thud upon thud, clank upon clank, the remnant storms are no more
Looking around I see that many are now few

My brothers in arms, now gone, their blood having run true, have now
returned to their maker
My attempts to arrest them, failures, I can do nothing else but wallow in my
remorse
To the few left, I had helped, but to the many now gone, I could not. The
gods of man cruel
The light outside grows dim now, yet the sun still shines
I am cold now, for in my duty, my blood too ran true. The sun sets, there is
darkness
I awaken now, there is metal upon my chest. One piece silver, the other
purple
They say I did well, that I helped others. Perhaps so, but now it is me who is
helpless
I am lost. Who comes to help the helper?

I Am the Truth

By: Yvoone King

Whispers in the dark, thoughts
that make me question my sanity.
My eyes have been wide shut
to this cruel and unjust world.
I'm prejudiced against myself because
ridicule and judgment linger all around me.

I'm the shame in my own voice when
I fail at a task.
Truth is...I'm but a figment
of my own imagination, and
the little white lie that could
tear a family apart.

I'm part of the past that
was beaten with whips.
The color of my skin made me
nothing more than property.
I'm living proof that faith and
persistence can free a man's
mind, body, and soul.

I'm the generation that
forgot the truth, and
will be swallowed in
a pool of lies. If I
forget the truth I'll forget
what I was, and where I came from.

Truth be told...
I'm the smell of freedom.

Thirteen

by Erin McCoy

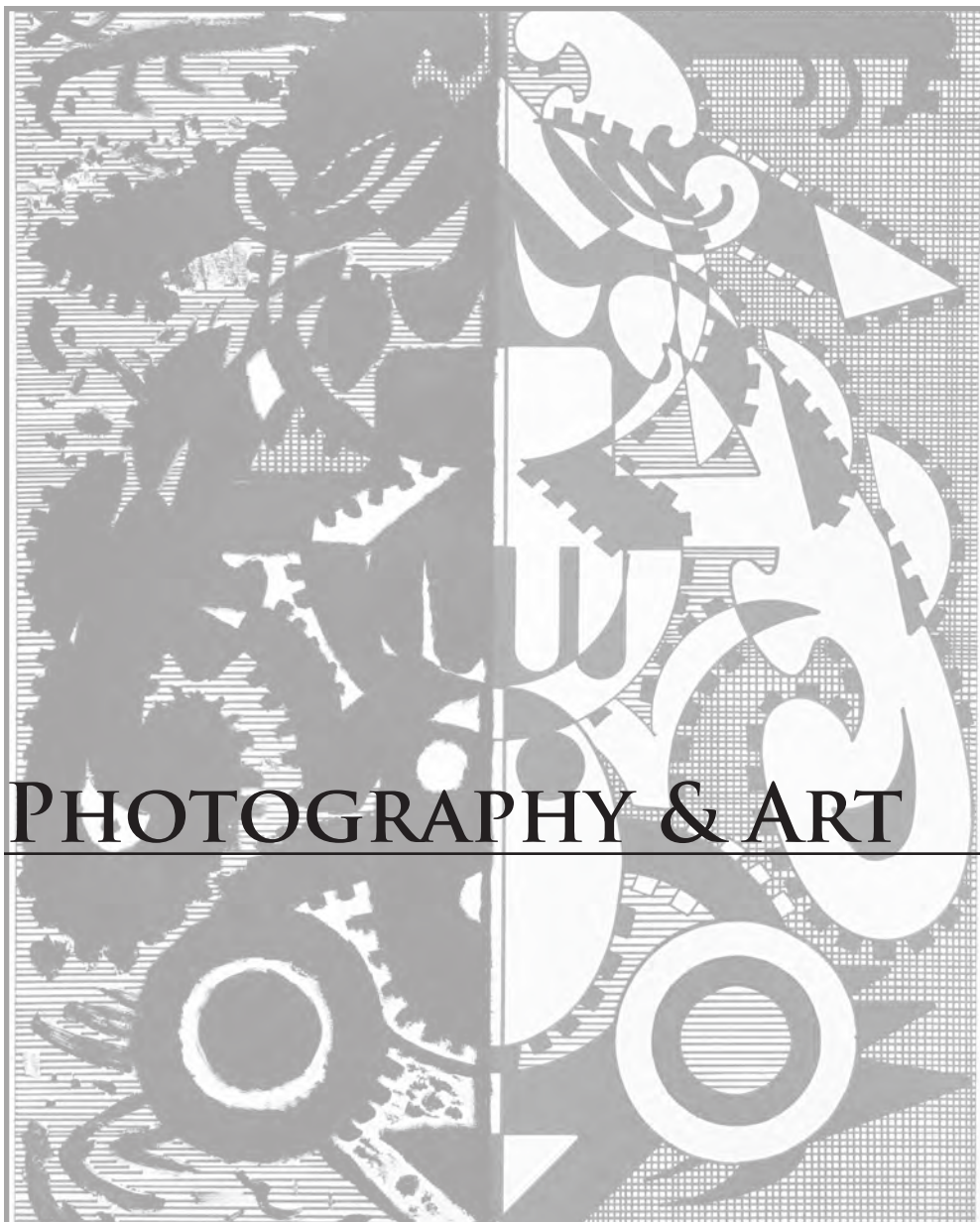
The boy in the convenience store
was staring at a display of cigarette lighters
orange, blue, red and green
like a plastic zoo
and wondering if he would get caught.
The woman behind the counter didn't notice.
She was smacking bubblegum like an underfed cow
painted nails tapping the glass
in Morse code.
The boy gripped a half-gallon of milk
and shuffled his feet
and watched dust unsettle.
He was remembering last year
when the days tasted like rubber
and smelled like watermelon.
There was no stepdad or
responsibility.
The man at the Slurpee machine noticed the boy
red cap on backwards
hands buried in shallow grave pockets
and remembered when he was thirteen
and clucked his tongue
but he didn't point him out
to the policeman walking by outside
when the boy reached out his hand
and let it hang in the air
like the moment a skydiver jumps
and is still.
The fluorescent tubes above

revealed a new freckle
just above his pinky finger knuckle
and he thought, maybe it was God
just hinting at a friendly hello
reminding him
of his mother
pacing the kitchen like a pale bird
waiting for him
to bring her the milk for her lumpy cake batter.
He touched the lighter
and it felt like a pop song
an electric buzz
sweet and sour
dampening with his palm.
So he put it in his pocket
and walked out the doors
inhaling the metallic air.

Night

by **Kara Smith**

Bitterness creeps along the spine, across nerve endings, haunting the heart
Beating silence in proximity, heated arguments between dear friends
Striking matches against starlit backdrops, eerie promises unfulfilled
Relative rationalizations under moonlit heard it all before small talk
Taking back stolen emotions, valid and true
Faking tolerance and know-how, turning it upside down
Unbearable
Unstoppable
Uncontrollable
Naked anger, propped up by self-assurance, reluctant to sing



PHOTOGRAPHY & ART



Dorothy's House

Brenda Breeding



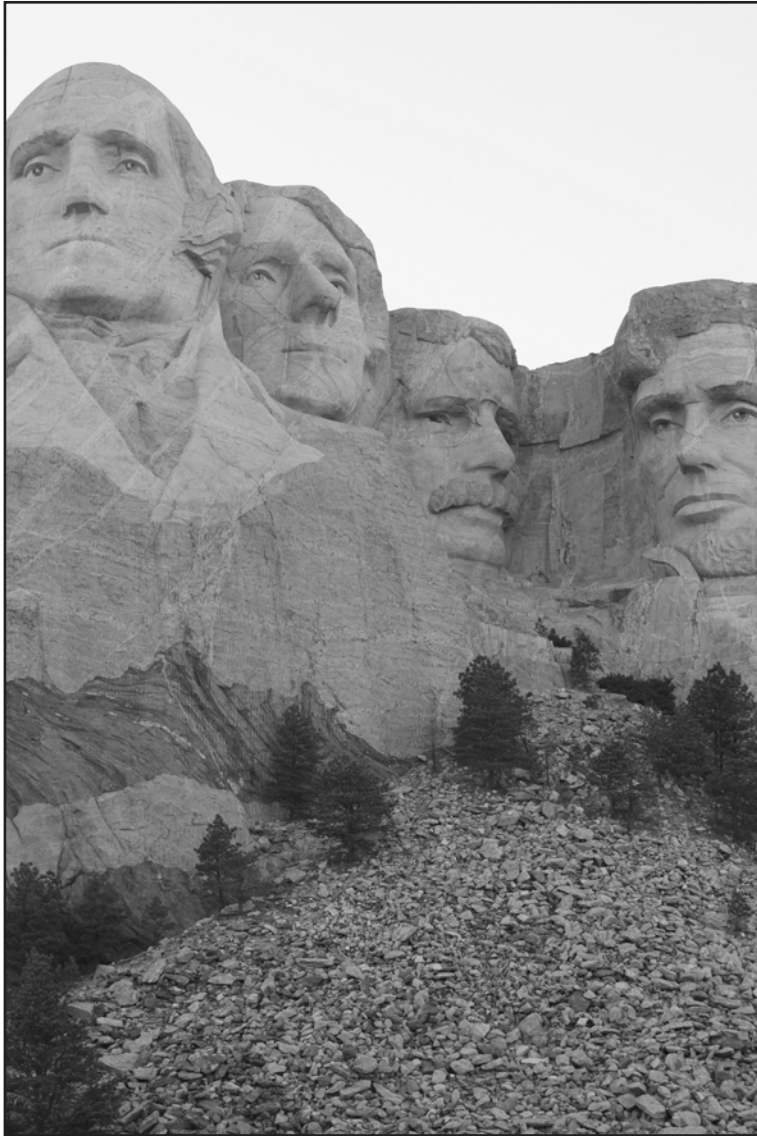
Lake Hefner
Kristi Hendricks



Capitol View
Chris James



Native Woman
Joie Liscano



Presidents
Melania St. Onge



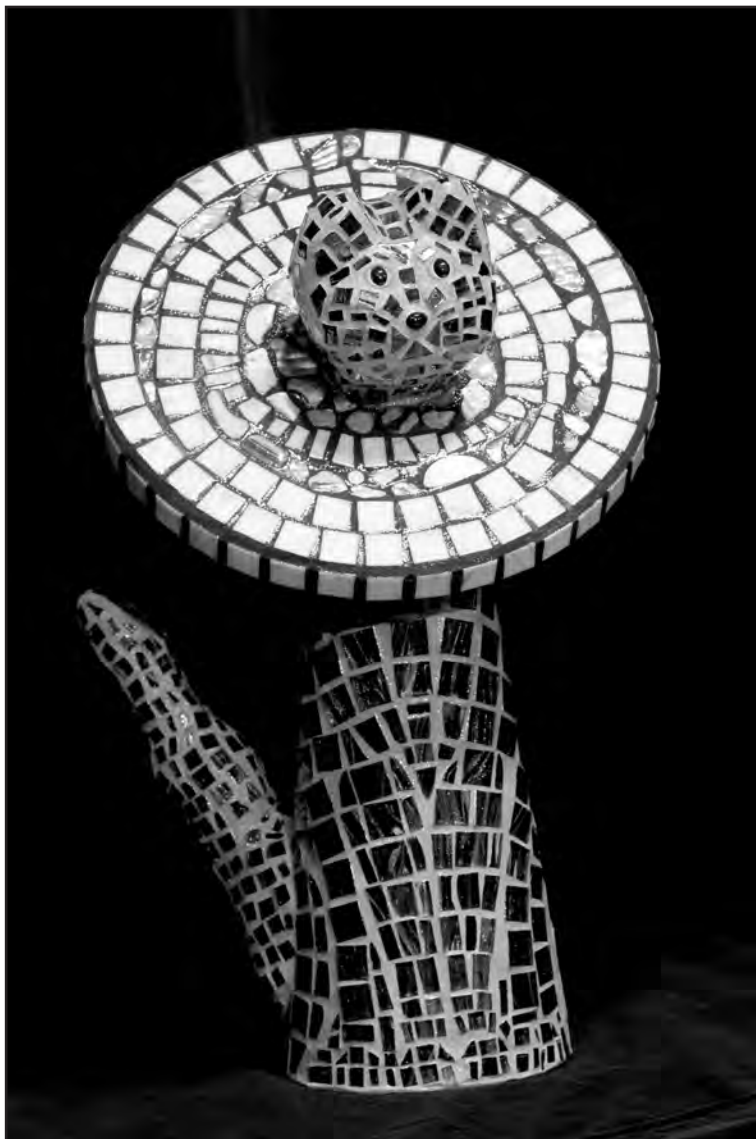
Tyler, Kitchen Lake
Bobbie Hill



Knightfall
Heather Skiba



Six Finger Wonder
Kelsey Vander Bloomer



My Mistie
Gina K. Boerner



Serious Mixed Media
Scott Paul Obregon

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