

# *Absolute*

Poetry • Fiction • Nonfiction • Artwork • Photography

*Absolute* 14



### **Absolute 2014**

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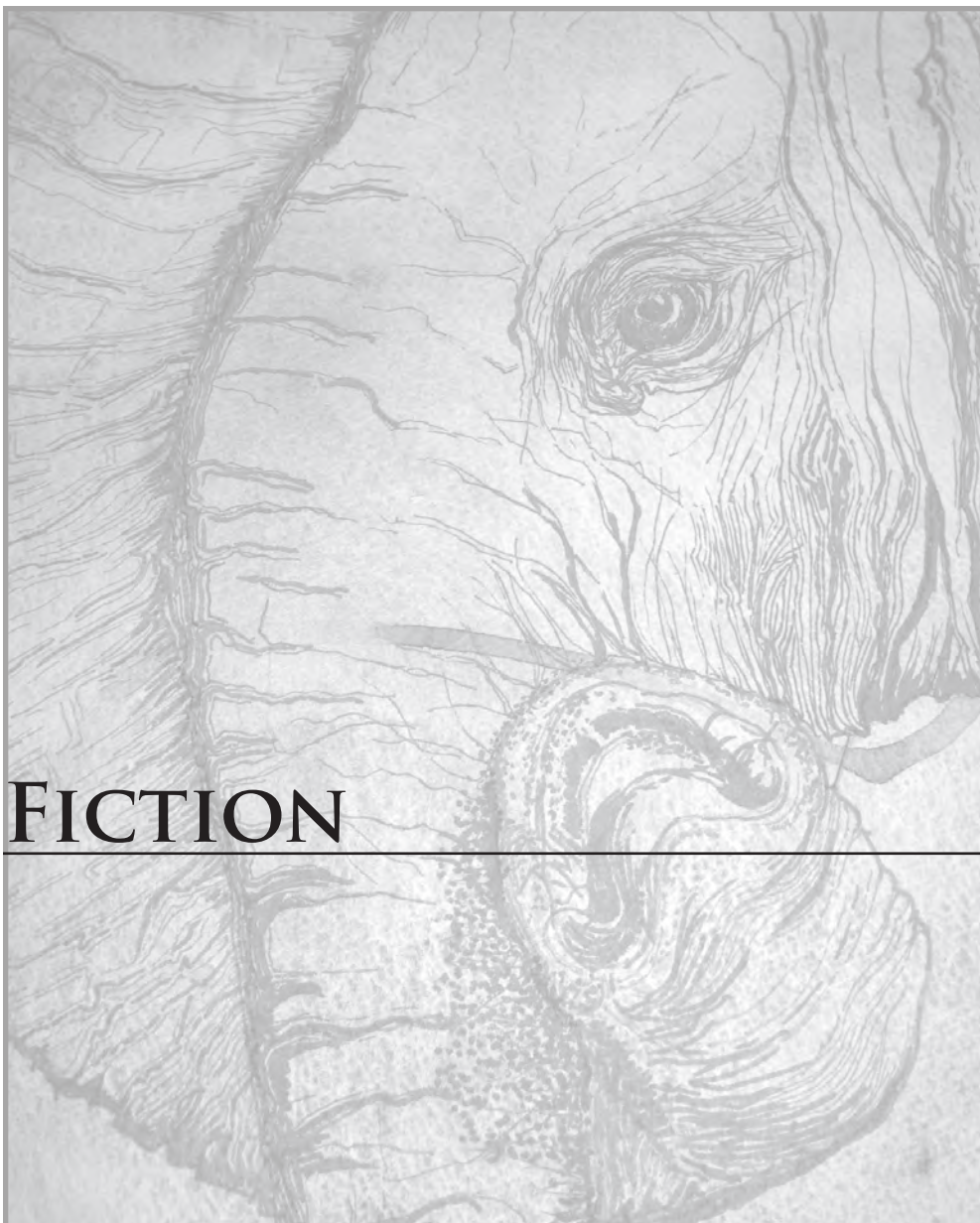
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# *Las Nubes*

by Colton Sullivan

Exes can't be friends. It's awkward, like cats sleeping with dogs. People think you're a cute couple dating, 'til they approach and find out you are just former lovers and now just semi-awkward friends. But I never once thought I'd be on the uncomfortable side of a relationship where the two people just don't have enough sense to put a few hundred miles between them and part ways. Technically, she broke up with me. I might be a little bitter, but I'm so over it I think I'm going to kill her.

"If only I could go back in time." That's what she said to me!

I remember when we first started the mission. We met in a bar on the beach of Padre Island to discuss our capital ventures for the next few days. I remember how beautiful Emily looked with the wind in her hair and beautiful brown eyes. We always had a really spectacular time when we were together. The job was routine. She would distract the mark. I would make a quick entry and a clean getaway.

Two days later I picked the lock on the back door. I had one hour 'til the mark returned. I moved upstairs. Slowly, walking in the shadows, I made my way to the vault. Most thieves liked to crack safes; however, I liked to do it the easy way. I had Emily put a camera on the dial so I could record the combo. Two turns to the right...stop at seventeen, back to the left...stop at thirty-five, and finally to the right...at twenty-two. The door clicked open.

I swear, when the door swung open angels sang as gold light filled the room. But I didn't even get a chance to look inside.

I was interrupted when Emily and the mark walked into the room. Guns drawn. Turns out I was the new mark! Double crossed. I hated public parties. I was trapped, thinking of ways to get out, if only I had one second...but I didn't. I was beaten.

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Then the mark said, “Emily, take him to the car. I’ll be there soon. We don’t have time to kill him now even though the thought is tempting.” He said this with a sarcastic smile.

She walked me down to the stairs in silence. That was okay! I did not want to talk to her anyway. I didn’t think I could kill her, but the old mark was not so lucky.

Stairs. I had to get away. My brain began to race with possibilities, actions, and time all coming together in an instant. I had a plan. I pulled out a small experiment, a little explosive. It wasn’t lethal, but it was bound to stun her. Step, step, two more, step, breathe. I dropped the device. It blew before it hit the ground. I turned the corner as a bullet whizzed behind me. I ran through the kitchen to the stove, turning on each burner to fill the room with gas. She would not dare shoot me now. I hit the door. Thirty yards to safety.

I made it to the woods as Emily burst out of the house. I turned around, aimed for the light bulb in the kitchen, and took the shot that would set the spark. Boom! The house was instantly enveloped in flames.

That’s our story. What a bitch, right? But I’m past it; I decided to be the bigger man. I did a job in Brazil, and another one in Las Vegas. It’s been eight months. Then one day I heard she was back in town and trying to pull something big. This chick was turning around and trying to work my town right under me! So I went to pay her a visit.

When I got there, it looked like a mix between Halloween and an awful surprise party. I’ve never seen so many guns and ugly people looking at me at the same time. Guess who was hosting: the mark from the Padre job. The one that got away, looking slightly more crispy but still alive, with his hands around Emily’s waist, surrounded by ten douche bags in collar necks.

This was about the time I started to imagine the ways I could kill the two of them. It kept me going while they tortured out of me bank numbers, vault combos, passwords, even my stupid social security card number.

I was in a sticky situation, but maybe I had a shot. I was in some kind of boat chained to a wood bench and I pretended to sleep as I picked the lock. It was time for my second meal at this fabulous resort. It was so kind that a

man in camo walked in and poked my back with his gun just to let me know that it was dinner time. I remember thinking how some girls just send text messages about let's just be friends. Or maybe even key my car, but how did I not see how bat shit crazy she was? Inhale, exhale. Just remember... to... breathe. The handcuffs came off and in one smooth motion I grabbed his trigger finger, stomp-kicked his right knee, and finished with a quick knee to the temple while he was falling. Keeping the gun pointed at the ceiling the whole time, I cocked the gun and walked out the door.

I felt the rocking of the boat. I always liked the water, but Emily couldn't swim. I tried to teach her a few times but she never listened. I liked thinking about what would happen if she fell overboard. Which made me think we couldn't be far offshore. I was going to swim east, once in the water I'd be free.

As I snaked my way through the corridors and up the stairs I encountered two distractions. One went lethal, but I made it all the way to the deck without setting off any alarms. I looked around and saw the two smooching through the window of the captain's chamber. It was actually quite a ramshackle boat. We were still moored to the dock.

I could have shot them cold, but this was personal. No one knew I was free, I had full reign of the boat. I ran to the fuel room. It took me a little while to siphon a few gallons of gas into an open bucket right next to the fuel intake. I ran and grabbed a candle off the table in the next room. I used a shoe lace to hold the candle over the bucket as the candle slowly burned the string. It would safely give me a minute but it was iffy, so I ran upstairs as quickly and quietly as possible to the dock.

Just before saying my goodbyes and thanking my guests for the lovely trip, I accidentally cut the tethers and watched the boat slowly float away from the dock. I was just thinking it was a beautiful night for a swim as I got the faintest whiff of smoke.

So, like I said, killer break up. Way too much drama. I mean I'm sure she thought she loved me. After all, I'm a lovable guy. But it was never going to work out, she always had a problem staying tied down.

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# *The Gruesome Tale of Prince Charming*

by Jacqueline Campbell

## *Prince Charming:*

I woke in the predawn light, my alarm beeping quietly on my bedside table. I lay quietly, reveling in the silence. The anticipation of today started to build in my body, beginning in the pit of my stomach and spreading until I could feel my hands trembling. I wasn't nervous. I was beyond excited, thrilled for this day.

Unable to stay in bed any longer, I flung the blankets off my body and moved to the en suite. My bare feet slapped against the cold tile as I hurriedly made my way towards the spacious glass shower.

Turning on the water, I glimpsed myself in the mirror. I shifted and admired my bare body. I knew I was perfect, but it was satisfying to be reminded by my reflection.

I sighed with contentment and stepped under the spray, eager to get on with my plans for the day.

I dressed casually and comfortably in a loose silk shirt and black trousers. Leaving my feet bare, I left my rooms. The door to my rooms was at the end of a lengthy hall, with three doors lining either side. Idly, I trailed my hand along the wall as I walked down the hall towards the staircase at the other end. Each door was marked with a gold plaque, engraved with ornate lettering, showing the name of the girl I would be keeping inside until she was ready.

The first door I came to, the one marked *Sleeping Beauty* was the only one occupied at the moment. My lovely Rose, my first princess, lay inside; I imagined the graceful blonde sitting at her window seat, too scared to sleep. Her long blonde hair curled at the ends, sending waves flowing through the golden locks. I stroked my fingers across the door, wishing for her silky hair. I closed my eyes and recalled her beautiful violet eyes, shining with tears and terror. Smiling, I tapped on her door.

“Wake up, my princess! I have a present for you that’s to die for!” Hearing her move to dress for me, I smiled in satisfaction: She knew that I would never allow her to ever look anything less than a princess in my presence, and learned quickly to dress in the extravagant dresses I provided for her.

I continued down the hall to the stairs, needing to feed myself and prepare Rose’s breakfast as well as her present. I jogged down the stairs, elated.

*Sleeping Beauty:*

Startled at the tap on my door, I waited for my breathing to calm before crossing the room to the closet. Under different circumstances, I would’ve relished in the large walk-in closet full of expensive gowns. Five weeks of the Prince’s terror had cured me of such feelings, like happiness, wonder... and hope.

Numbly, I dressed in one of the blue gowns, once my favorite color. I knew that nothing short of a miracle would save me from this disaster. I sat on the window seat and stared at the trees in the yard, the tops bright and new in the spring sunlight.

“How can anything be so beautiful when life is so cruel?” I whispered, my breath frosting on the glass. I heard the door handle turn and *he* walked in carrying a silver tray that held my breakfast and a rose in a crystal vase.

“Good morning, Rose darling. Won’t you come over and enjoy your breakfast with me?” He spoke slowly, eloquently, coaxing me off the seat and over to the small table where we ate together.

Timidly, I picked up a piece of toast and nibbled on the corner, hoping he’d go soon and leave me in silence, peaceful silence.

“Come on now, hurry up and finish. Today is a big day for you.” The Prince sounded excited, and I glanced up in surprise. “Oh yes,” he continued, eyes gleaming, “Today is the day of your departure, my princess.”

I dropped my toast and gasped. I couldn’t believe what I was hearing. I’m *leaving*? My miracle had come. “D-do you mean it?” I asked, my voice rough from lack of use.

“Yes, princess; I promise that you leave today.” He smiled coldly, and the hair rose on the back of my neck. “But first, we must do something. Then you may leave.” He clasped my hands in his and pulled me up from the couch. There was a look in his eyes that made me want to squirm in terror.

“What must I do?” I asked, feeling cold all over. His grip had not loosened.

“Take off your dress,” he commanded, “And then lie on the bed.” The Prince tilted my head up to look me in the eyes, eyes that were quickly forming tears. “There’s no need for tears; remember, today you depart.”

I nodded silently, dreading what he had in mind. The Prince left the room and I disrobed quickly, laying the dress on the window seat. I stood in the sunlight for a brief moment. Remembering the Prince’s demand, I nearly ran to the bed, leaping onto the duvet just as the door opened.

“Oh good: you obeyed.” The Prince strode in carrying a basket with him. I scooted towards the middle of the bed as he approached, drawing my legs up around me.

“Now, now. There’s no need to fret,” the Prince soothed, stroking my forearm. His touch made goose bumps rise on my skin, a shiver trickled down my back.

Abruptly, he grabbed my wrist and flung me back onto the bed, holding my hand above my head. I was too startled to even struggle as he drew a silk scarf out the basket. I lay there, paralyzed by fear. The Prince bound my wrist to the bedpost, all the while whispering endearments. He moved off the bed, taking the basket with him. I shook off my paralysis and began to use my free hand to claw at my bound wrist.

I felt the Prince’s hand close around my ankle and drag it across the bed towards the post. That’s when I began to scream. I screamed, knowing that no one would hear me. I screamed, hearing my blood pounding in my ears. I screamed, as the Prince bound both my ankles to individual posts. I screamed as the Prince ran his hand up my legs, stopping at my knees. I screamed hoarsely and tasted blood; with my free hand I grasped at my throat in horror, listening to my screams weaken and disappear. The Prince reached over and gently pulled my hand away from my throat to the last bedpost, securing it. My eyes welled and spilled over; I mourned the loss of my voice, and what was to come.

The Prince moved off the bed again and I cried, straining at my bindings. I felt the Prince’s weight return to the bed, and he was holding a roll of fabric; when it shifted, I heard the chime of metal against metal.

The Prince neared me and I shied away, as far as I could. He reached a hand out and touched a single finger to my stomach. I stilled instantly, too terrified to move while he was touching me.

“Oh Rose, you are exquisite,” he said, tracing his finger along my stomach. I whimpered. “Hold still, princess. You don’t want this to be any more painful than necessary, do you?” he asked in a low voice, his eyes sweeping my body. Mutely, I shook my head.

“I thought so, darling. Let us begin.” The Prince straddled my waist, relying on my terror to hold me frozen.

He leaned over to his bundle of cloth and unraveled it. Gleaming inside was a set of thick needles, each four times as thick as a normal needle, about a foot long and wicked sharp. I swallowed the mixture of blood and the bile that rose at the sight of the needles, inwardly wincing.

“I thought you were going to let me go home today,” I rasped faintly, my ruined throat protesting the use.

“My dear, did you really think I’d let you escape me?” At my blanched face, he laughed, “You did, didn’t you?” He leaned forward bringing his face close to mine. “Darling Rose, today is the day you depart this Earth and return to whatever god you choose. Today is the day you die, my love.” The Prince closed the distance between us and kissed my blood tainted lips. As he sat up, his words sank in. I was about to die.

The Prince picked up a shining needle and traced it along my sides, my jawbone, and my arms. He stopped suddenly and stared at my left hand, so I followed his gaze. I couldn’t feel either of my hands anymore but I saw the pooled blood tinting my fingers purple.

The Prince leaned forward and pricked the index finger of my left hand. Blood dripped down my wrist and trickled down my arm. The Prince continued until all of my fingers were dripping with blood. He held the needle in his hand and looked me in the eyes. His eyes were wild. His teeth were bared in a fierce smile.

The Prince pressed the needle against my side, slowly increasing the pressure. I felt the needle pierce my skin and I rediscovered my voice, listening to it disappear completely. The needle slipped deeper into my skin, through muscle, past bone. I felt the tip of the needle prick my kidney and I opened my mouth wide in a silent scream.

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He picked up another needle and pressed it against the inside of my elbow. He pressed the tip against the blue vein and slid the needle into my skin. The tip pierced my vein and blood seeped past the needle and down my arm in rivulets. Tears leaked out of my closed eyes and I drew in ragged breaths. Pain came through me in flashes, blinding me so my world narrowed to only the pain. I felt the blood draining out of me; the life draining out of me.

I felt another pinpoint of pressure as the Prince pierced my skin with a needle into my other elbow. I barely felt the pain. My arms felt cold. The numbness induced by blood loss washed over me, sending me towards peaceful darkness.

But before I got there, the Prince yanked out the three needles, sending new waves of pain crashing over me. My eyes flung open, but I had tunnel vision. Through the haze I saw the Prince smiling, his perfect teeth a feral display.

Using the last of my strength, I flung the blood and saliva that had pooled in my mouth out and onto his perfect face. I sneered, happy with my last act of rebellion. The darkness dragged me under, relieving my pain. The last thing I heard was birds chirping in the morning air.

*Prince Charming:*

Her breath staggered and stopped. Her eyes fluttered closed, and she died. I levered myself off of her waist and staggered to the adjoining bathroom. There I stripped myself of all of my clothing and stumbled into the shower, rinsing myself of her blood. It swirled down the drain in a rosy spiral.

I finished washing off her blood and wrapped myself in a towel. I walked out to the bedroom and gazed at Rose's still form. She was even more beautiful in death.

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Realizing my next move, I ran back to my room and threw on the first pair of pants that came to hand. Quietly admiring the luxurious feel of expensive linen on my skin, I raced back to my princess's room, still holding my damp towel.

I blotted up what blood I could off of her body and then carried her over to the window seat. Gently, I laid her down on the cushion, moving her dress out of the way. Her wounds still seeped a little but they had slowed substantially. I walked back to the bed and tore the blood-soaked sheets and blankets off. I piled them in the middle of the room and ran to get the new sheets, the ones specially made for today. They were pale blue silk and a long, deep blue cloth that would cover her from the waist down and drape off the bed.

I quickly made up the bed and carted the soiled sheets out of her room, dumping them into the hallway. Then, I slowly walked over to Rose, tracing my finger up her arm. I delicately dressed her in her gown, smoothing out the wrinkles and cleaning off any blood that still flowed. I hugged her limp body to me, soaking up the fading warmth of her skin. I carried her from the window seat over to her bed and laid her down, pillow underneath her head, and smoothed her skirt. Her feet stood straight and pointed and I clasped her hands on her stomach, holding a rose. Fanning her hair on the bed, I admired the contours of her face. Straightening, I pulled the blanket over her body and kissed her forehead. She was my first princess, my Sleeping Beauty, and mine forever.

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# *Paradise*

by **Rachel Schutte**

The old man, wrinkles at the corners of his eyes and snow white hair cascading in a braid down his back, decided it was time to leave. Taking the final step off the cliff, he waited for the wind to catch in his wings, soaring off across the jungle valley. They said between the two mountains, where they dove into the earth together, one would find paradise. After two hundred years of war, paradise sounded pretty good.

Sebastian was a simple man. He loved the air, where everything was peaceful. With the wind rushing past his ears and tearing at his clothes, he could forget the blood on his hands that stained his heart. His land had been at war since he was a child, and he had tried for so long not to get involved. Eventually he was dragged into the army. He blinked away tears, felt them stream across the sides of his face before they disappeared into the wind. He did so many horrible things in the king's service. Not at first, of course. He had remained true to his morals for a time, but the lines began to blur, as they often do. The atrocities got worse, and before he knew it he was a monster. He hated himself. He needed to escape. Now, wind in his wings, headed for paradise, he could.

As the hours stretched on, and the mountain slowly crept closer, Sebastian began to tire. He willed his wings to stay open, the reds, blues, and yellows of his feathers pressed against the vast blue sky. He blinked hard, balling his hands into fists, as if he could fight away the fatigue with his hands. It was an absurd notion, of course, and he knew that, but he had to make it. Maybe if he closed his eyes for just a moment, he could summon the strength to keep going. He let his heavy eyelids drop shut. When he opened them again, he felt his heart clench. The ground was rushing towards

him, and the western mountain was looming above him like the top jaw of a creature's hungry mouth. He fanned out his wings to try to slow himself, but the air pushed at them, batting at him like a cat. He let out a shout of desperation from his wind-dried throat as he crashed into the mountain, rolling through the snow. He rolled to a stop, groaning softly. Easing himself into a sitting position, he flexed his wings cautiously. They were damp from the snow, but other than a little soreness they seemed unharmed. He stood, cringing as his left ankle protested under his weight. Taking a few experimental steps, he decided nothing was broken. His wings were unfit to fly, so he began his trek on foot, limping across the base of the mountain.

As darkness crawled across the sky, the sunshine that was keeping the cold of the snow in check was gone. Sebastian's wings refused to dry in the cold, and he had to flutter them to keep them from icing up. He sighed as he concentrated on putting one foot in front of the other. He longed to rest his weary bones somewhere peaceful. It was the first time in so long that night had fallen unaccompanied by screaming in the streets, but the horror of war had been replaced by the desperation of cold numbness in his legs and wings. In leaving, he found his soul, but that didn't change the fact that he was lost. He glanced toward the jungle just below him. The last cries of small animals warned him to stay away, but the warmth he could practically see beckoned him closer. If he could thaw his wings, he could try again to fly to paradise. He stopped, looking to the curve of the mountain that dipped into the valley, then to the dark jungle. He shook his head at the absurdity of his choice, then headed down towards the jungle.

As he approached the black-barked trees, covered in shimmering gold leaves, he could feel the chill in his body melting away. In its place an ominous chill crept into his soul. The warm wind gusting out from between the trees felt like the hot breath of a hungry creature, ready to devour him. He shook his wings out, trying to use the warm, sinister wind to his advantage. There was a deep, vague noise leaking out of the forest, beckoning him into the warmth. He didn't so much hear it with his ears, though. It seemed to

crawl in through his skull. He tried to resist it, staying just outside the edge of the jungle, but the more he ignored it the harder it stabbed at the insides of his ears. He clasped his hands over his ears, trying to ward off the beckoning. It did nothing to stop the gnawing in his mind, however. He had no choice but to flee to the mountain. As he turned away, whatever was beckoning him grabbed on tighter. Every step he took made it harder to breathe. His throat was tight and his head was burning. His feet were heavy, but as his vision began to cloud, he could see the sparkling snow illuminated by the moon. When his foot touched the snow there was one last head-shaking shriek, then silence. The pull stopped, and he fell face first into the snow. The silence was as deafening as the shriek had been. Sebastian could feel himself melting into the snow. It cooled the burn of the jungle away and cradled him as he slipped into unconsciousness.

Hot sun on his wings was the first thing he was aware of. The second was a face full of snow. How he hadn't suffocated, he didn't know. What he did know, though, was when he stood he had light dry wings, itching to eat up the sky. With a hop, a flap, and a grin, he rose into the air. He stopped to glance around, from the jungle, to plateau that used to be his home, then to the mountains that supposedly held paradise. He prayed those stories were true. Waving goodbye to his past, he flew towards his future. Sebastian soared around the mountain, less ominous now that they were on equal ground, both poking at the sky. As he rounded the corner, a sparkling point of light appeared in the valley. One last flap sent him gliding towards the twinkling beacon, coasting down, watching it grow closer. Before he could reach it, however, he hit the ground, stopped by a wall of rock. He fell to his hands and knees, peering through a crevice, the source of the twinkling. Down below, the ground opened up again into a sprawling cavern. There were bubbling springs, shining white buildings, and people milling about. It was agonizing to be so close, and have his paradise still be out of reach. He stood, his feathers bristling. Kicking at a rock angrily, he turned in a little circle, trying to think. He had to find a way in. Maybe if he could make the hole a bit bigger. Or maybe he could find an opening. He pressed his face to

the crevice once more to savor the sweet, cool air, then rushed off along the line, winding like a river, to look for an entrance.

It was only a few moments before he came upon the opening of a cave. A man in silvery robes sat on the ground. He had ivory skin and deep ebony hair, and he smiled gently up at Sebastian. The man's eyes crinkled at the edges, and his voice was rough and warm.

"My, my, my, it has been a very long time since I've seen a traveler. Welcome, winged wanderer. Where are you going?" The man let his head tip to the left, awaiting Sebastian's reply.

"I," Sebastian started, but his voice was hoarse from travel and disuse, and it croaked roughly. He accepted the man's offered drink, then started again. "I was trying to get here, sir. My people are war-torn, and we have long told stories about the paradise between the mountains. I was hoping maybe you would allow entrance to a weary man trying to be free." Sebastian let his eyes drop. He realized now what an absurd request he was making. He was asking these people to let a stranger into their oasis. They didn't know anything about him. He had no right to ask this of them. He couldn't bring himself to meet the other man's eyes and see whatever kind of disgust or disapproval that might lie in them. His gaze was brought up, however, by the man's gentle reply.

"Of course you may enter. All are welcome to come and go as they please. Would you like a change of clothes?"

Sebastian looked down at his beige, sun-bleached rags, hanging over his shoulders and tied around his waist and feet. He smiled humbly. "I would very much appreciate that, kind sir. My name is Sebastian."

"I am Charon. Come, let's get you some clothes."

Sebastian followed as Charon led him into the round, cream-colored cavern. In a small niche in the wall stood a stack of neatly folded silvery clothes. Charon handed the pile to him with a warm grin. The clothes were

heavy in his hands, but light on his shoulders. Charon had made small holes in the back of his tunic, and Sebastian's colorful wings slid through easily, contrasting sharply against his clothes. Charon smiled and nodded his approval.

"Come with me. I will take you down. We will find you a home."

Charon led the way down the tube that sloped gently downwards. It opened up into a cavern so vast and so well illuminated that it felt like a city in the open air. Sebastian looked up at the ceiling. He could see the sliver of blue sky along the center of the ceiling. The main road ran underneath that crack, with dozens and dozens of roads running off of it, snaking between hundreds of houses the same color as the wall and ceiling. Lush foliage was everywhere, and there were people all around. Some of them stopped to gaze at the winged stranger standing in the middle of the road, colorful feathers tucked tightly against his back. Most, however, just carried on with their business.

"Sebastian, this way." Charon was heading down one of the branches. He glanced over his shoulder, flashed a warm smile, then headed up to a house with blue flowers and grand pillars on the portico. Sebastian followed him up the steps in awe. It was a humble abode, but it was beautiful. Charon gestured for him to enter.

Every aspect took his breath away. There was a garden in the backyard for his food. There was a pile of lovely feather pillows for his bed. He was starting to believe this was indeed paradise.

"Will this do?" Charon's silky voice pulled Sebastian out of his awed stupor. He nodded, and Charon turned to leave.

"Wait," Sebastian called. "Who's in charge here? I'd like to thank them."

Charon smiled at the man, shaking his head. "He is not taking visitors at this time. Perhaps after you rest."

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Sebastian nodded, letting himself fall into the soft pillows. Their coolness surrounded him, cradling his body like a mother would. He was at peace.

Meanwhile, in a far off land that stood atop a towering plateau, a house had been burning. A man lay under a beam that had fallen, both the wood and his clothes letting off wafts of smoke. The corners of his eyes were crinkled in a soft smile. His wings of red and blue and yellow were twisted at odd angles, and feathers littered the floor around him, bringing color to the soot. His braid had come undone, hair sprawled around his head like a halo. The fire that had been tearing through the building had been extinguished, leaving behind a smoldering skeleton. A young girl with small green, fire-singed wings crept inside the house. Her soot-covered fist held a flower. It was small and ragged, but it was the best she could do for her savior. She laid it in his hair and left quietly. Free from the war, Sebastian dreamed of paradise.

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## *Tenth Christmas*

by Jessica Hough

Gramma died a few weeks ago. She went into the hospital and didn't come back. I was really sad. Gramma was gone, but she also didn't get Christmas. She really wanted Christmas this year. It was supposed to snow. Really snow, like when she was a child. Enough snow to sled, to have snowball fights and build forts. Enough snow for snowmen. I'd never seen a snow like that.

When I was ten, Gramma told me the story of *her* tenth Christmas. She got only one present that year: a silver top. She *loved* that top. But she lost it playing in the snow one day. She was building a snowman and when she went inside, the top wasn't in her pocket anymore. She even waited until all the snow melted, but she never saw the top again.

That Christmas after Gramma died was supposed to be filled with snow. Snow up to my waist! Gramma was excited, I was excited. Then Gramma died and I was sad. Then Christmas Eve was bright and sunny and dry, and I was sadder thinking that Gramma wouldn't get her Christmas.

I went to bed sad that night. I was so sad I couldn't sleep, so I got up. Gramma was in the living room waiting for me! She silenced me with a gesture and motioned me closer. She handed me a box. I looked at her curiously. In the box was a silver top. I looked at her excitedly, but she wasn't there. It was Mom waking me up. I was sad, but then Mom said it had snowed! Two feet!

I was too excited for presents. I went out to play in the snow. I built a snowman, like Gramma had. When I was done, I sat and admired my work. Something glinted at its feet. I picked it up. It was the shiny, silver top.

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## *What Does the Fox Sell?*

by Juilan Ayar

*K*nock, knock, knock. The door to Little Timmy's house rocked in its frame as an uninvited guest struck it repetitively from the other side.

"Co-mi-ng!" Timmy called. The knocking persisted until he unlocked the bolt of the front door and opened it. There, to his disbelief, stood, on his hind legs, a fox in a suit.

"Hello!" the fox greeted, grinning mischievously. "May I interest you in this astounding product I have here for you today?"

Timmy stared at the shiny, obscure object he held. He couldn't quite make heads or tails of it. But he wanted one.

The fox bobbed it up and down in his paws. "I call it," he announced, "the Jiggimahickerydoo 5000!"

"Oooooo!" Timmy cooed, "...What's a Jiggimahickerydoo 5000?"

"What a silly question," the fox snickered, "A better one would be, what *isn't* a Jiggimahickerydoo 5000? Nothing!"

"It's nothing?"

"No, you fool, it's everything! One cannot simply comprehend the limitless uses of a Jiggimahickerydoo 5000! It's the second coming of the rubber band!"

Timmy poked at the Jiggimahickerydoo suspiciously. The fox swatted his prodding finger away, grunted indignantly.

"I know what you're thinking," said the fox, "'But Mr. Handsome Fox, sir, what does it do?' *Wonders*, my boy. Whatever you normally don't not

do is what the Jiggimahickerydoo does for you! For example, with it, you can scrape the dry paste off of a toothpaste tube! Scrape the dry spit off your chin! Run! Clean! Dry! Cry! Learn Mui Thai! Detect a lie! Shake and bake a cake or pie!” Suddenly, he pointed one tiny claw in the air in front of Timmy’s face. “BUT WAIT! If you buy it within the next thirty seconds, I’ll throw in this Whatchamacallitometer for free!” He reached into the inside of his suit and pulled out a tiny pencil sharpened up to the eraser.

“But it’s just a pencil,” said Timmy, poking his finger on the tip.

The fox gasped. “*Well*. I suppose you don’t need this fabulous, mysterious tool meant for only the most amazing people, then...”

“For amazing people?”

“But of course! Didn’t you know? Only the greatest mathematicians would use this! Forget endless nights on your math homework, this will get the job done in a jiffy! Calculate! Philosophize! Speculate! Anatomize! Measure *anything*! Measure meters! Measure miles! Measure feet! Measure toes! Measure anything in any way you can’t immediately think of off the top of your head! Like the number of cats it takes to put in a heating lamp! Or the walking distance in between Neverland and Narnia! Or the number of sparkles in Edward’s chest hair!”

“I want it!” Timmy shouted, excitedly jumping up and down.

“And you can have it! As long as you grasp this opportunity by the throat and be among the first to own both a Jiggimahickerydoo and your very own Whatchamacallitometer for free!”

“Yeah!” Timmy shouted, reaching out for the Jiggimahickerydoo and the Whatchamacallitometer, as the fox suddenly pulled them out of his reach.

“Ah, your thirty seconds are up.”

“W-Wha-?” Timmy stuttered, “B-But I wanted a free Whatchamacallitometer!”

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“I understand your pain, but the deal was only for those who qualified, and unfortunately you no longer qualify.”

“B-But I thought I was special...”

“And you most certainly are! In fact, just because I like you, lad, I’ll throw in this free pencil. Just for you.”

“Yay!” Timmy cheered. The fox pulled out a clipboard from underneath his suit and gave Timmy the pencil.

“Now I just need you to sign here, here, here, here, here, here, here, here, over here, down here, fingerprint in blood right here, and pay no attention to the small print as you sign here.”

“Okay,” said Timmy, scribbling unintelligible nonsense all over the paper. “Let me go ask my mom for some money to give you.”

“Money?” the fox sneered, “You mean that dirty green paper that I mistook for lettuce on your table when I snuck into your house last night for food?”

“When you what?”

“Nothing, nothing. No, I will not accept your filthy colored inedibles as payment for such a revolutionary product.”

“Okay, but how do I pay you then?”

“It is to my understanding that you have roast pheasant in the fridge?”

“Yup, my mom cooked it last night.”

“That will do. Here’s my card if you have any questions.” From his suit, the fox pulled out a small scrap of paper that said, “1-800-Thisnumberisfake.com” in sloppy print. Timmy cheerfully hopped back into the house and pulled out the roast pheasant from the fridge and brought it back to the fox. Salivating at the mouth, the fox snatched it from Timmy, tossed him the Jiggimahickerydoo and the free pencil, and scampered off on all fours with the poultry in his mouth.

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Timmy carefully observed the shiny little rock in his hands, and suddenly, it clicked. “Hey,” he complained, “This looks exactly like my brother’s Superdupinator 3000!” Little Timmy raised the glittery rock in his hands up to the sunlight. “I can’t wait to show him how much cooler my Jiggimahickerydoo is!”

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## *Before the Storm*

by **Katie Chestnut**

**I**t started subtly. It wasn't anything I thought of as out of the ordinary. I wasn't aware exactly when it started, but when it did I chose not to tell anyone. Looking back, I realize that it was irresponsible of me to keep it hush hush for all those years. If I just admitted I needed help then maybe I would still feel like a whole person, an entire being. All I feel now is a heavy numbness, like an elephant sitting on my chest and I know that I will never be able to get up again. Maybe I shouldn't just blame myself; the doctors all said that there wasn't much they could do. If only I said something earlier, then maybe I could have spared everyone else the lingering pain that made it seem like it came from nowhere. If maybe I warned them, then they could have been more prepared for the imminent conclusion we all eventually faced. I thought that at first I was sparing their feelings, protecting them. I never thought that they would resent me for hiding the truth. Well it's too late to change anything now. I can hear the rain outside the window and I look over towards the dull gray and stare as the water runs down the glass in intricate tiny rivers that ceaselessly join together until they reach the bottom of the windowpane in an endless cycle.

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It began when I was in my late twenties and it was one of the happiest times in my life. It was several years into my marriage with my wife and four young daughters. It was a family full of women who were all dependent on me. I couldn't have been more grateful that my career finally started taking off and that we were able to move into a bigger house. I was in a constant state of fatigue, but I attributed it to long hours in the office. Having success usually meant losing out on basic needs such as sleep, for there was always

something that had to be done. I figured I was just getting older and it was normal, until food started becoming a problem. It was usually something spicy or red meat. Eat one bite and it would send my stomach into a gurgling rage and off I would be into the bathroom for long chunks of time. My wife would worry that she gave me food poisoning or that she was a terrible cook. When I carefully walked out of the bathroom, I would tease her but just play off that it must have been from lunch earlier that day. I would get myself to my chair in front of the TV and gently wrap my arms around my stomach and hope to get lost in another mindless program as my stomach would slosh like waves.

For the next ten years my stomach and I were at a never-ending battle. I would always just softly smile that I was simply sensitive to food and learned how to escape any room unnoticed as I became reacquainted with the bathroom once more. There was blood now, always there like I poured the darkest of red dyes into the bowl to watch it swirl until it was gone to the metal web down below. It left me feeling weak and sore, desperate for relief but not knowing how to find it. I threw myself into work. Every distraction was welcome and I had never been more productive in my life.

Through the drowsiness I pushed forward, finding a new hobby in carpentry to keep me on my toes. My wife would be surprised to come home after grocery shopping and find that she had a new coffee table or after getting her hair done a new dining room chair set. I felt that I was finally winning and started to concentrate less. I became too familiar around the circular saw and my fatigue crept up on me once again. As I was splitting a board in half, I couldn't help but yawn and the saw drove straight over my thumb. In utter shock I looked down and the tip of the nail and thumb was gone and on the other side of the saw. After a shout and the whole family to take me to the hospital, the thumb was sewn back on and I was forbidden by my wife to ever use the circular saw again.

It was probably for the best, for I was increasing in fatigue. I hardly felt like moving anymore but would force myself to get up so no one would be

alarmed. It became the family joke whenever they would find me fast asleep with the newspaper on my face or falling asleep at street lights while driving. It would be considered as a facet of my personality, that I was laid-back and enjoyed leisure time. But really it was because I had a bad flare up, or lost more blood than usual. I started to lose weight at an extreme rate. I was always on the heavy side, so it was welcome in the beginning. People started to comment on how great I was looking and asked what my secret was. I would say that it was watching what I ate, which was half true at least. Then twenty pounds turned into forty, then sixty in the course of six months. It was getting harder to get out of bed in the morning and my wife would look at me sometimes like she could tell I was hiding something. Instead she would brush my hair off my forehead and wish me a good day at work. She started making more soup based meals and was always getting me cups of coffee. She would never mention any of my odd behaviors, but I felt that she was never more than a room away.

I was processing papers at work one day when I got up too quickly to file them. Dizziness struck me and a blanching white then soundless black filled my vision as I felt the quick breeze upon the left side of my cheek and I landed clumped together on the floor. I could only hear screaming and the shuffling of feet, then later the blaring sounds of a siren as I felt myself drift away in the darkness. I groggily awoke to a ceiling of tiled lights, buzzing bleeps, and sniffles to my right. My wife and daughters were all sitting along the window and looking at me like they didn't even recognize me. The girls continued to sniffle as my wife told me what the doctors said. I didn't have long, maybe a couple of weeks, and a fractured skull. I didn't realize I hit my head that hard until I reached up and felt the fluffy gauze beneath my weak grip. I wouldn't be leaving the hospital, and I truly felt then the mistake I made by not telling my family.

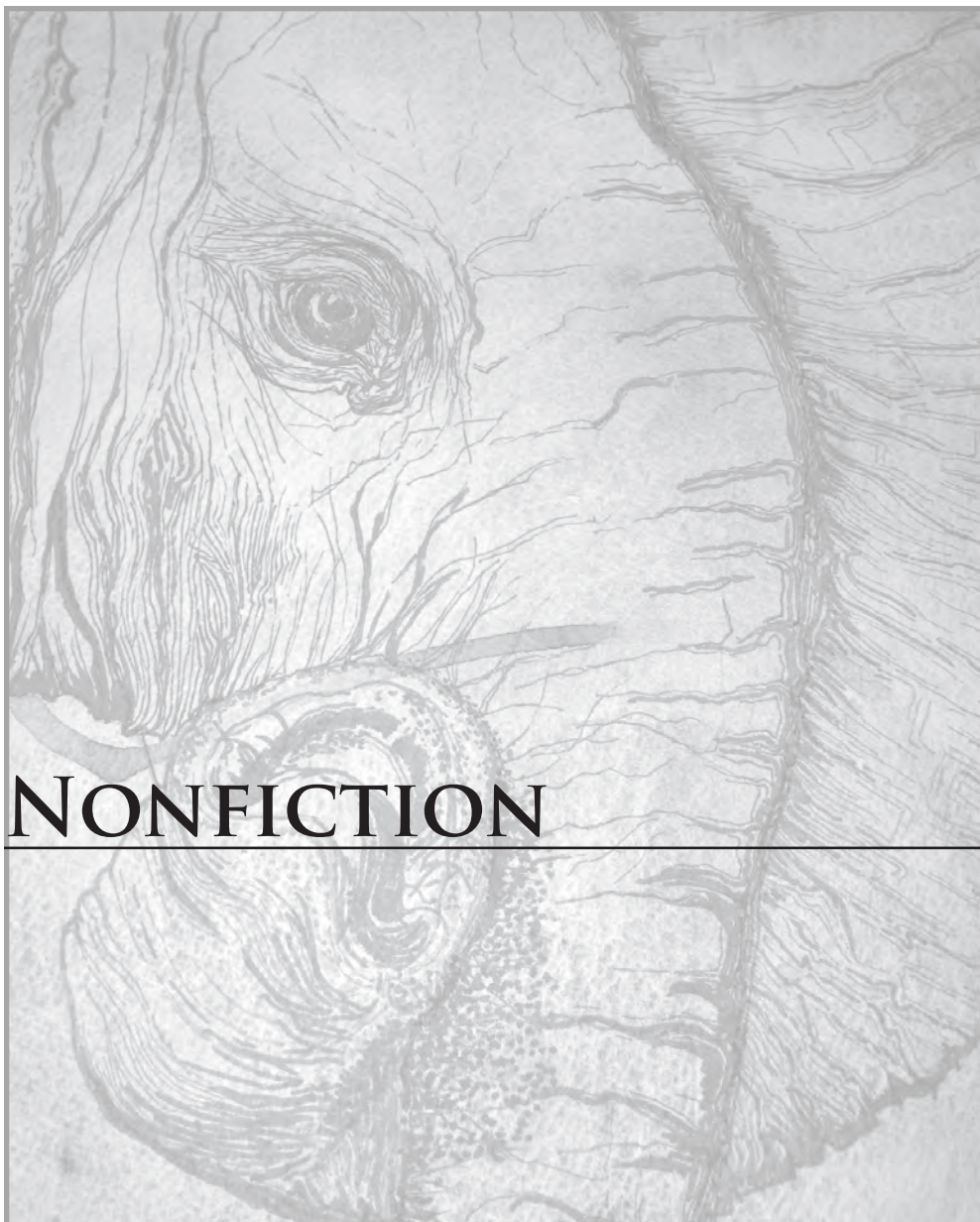
Once visiting hours were over, my family left for the night. I started to feel the creeping nausea approach and buzzed for the nurse. She rushed in and wave after wave of pain shot through my stomach and throat

simultaneously as I bent over into the bucket placed in front of me. I felt all of the pent up emotions leaving my body and instead of relief I felt shame and defeat. Here I was, a man in my late thirties, and I felt as if I jumped over the middle of my life to reach the finish line. It was a race I never wanted to join but had to finish. Every regret started bubbling up in my brain and panic started to take over as I thought of my wife and children. What would happen to them? My wife didn't work and I only saved up so much money. It wouldn't last them forever and I felt the tears rise and pour over my face as I lay back down and curled into myself. I started going through lists of people I needed to contact to get my affairs in order as I felt sleep start to take over once more.

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It has been two weeks and it's raining outside. I am able to talk to some people while the kids are in school. My wife helps me sign papers as it is difficult to grip the pen. It has been a couple of days since I last ate anything, for nothing is staying down. My wife is always by my side handing me some water or ice chips to suck on. The doctor knocks on the door and asks my wife to come outside to talk. She looks over at me and gives me a small smile as she kisses my forehead and gets up to leave the room. It is late afternoon and the lights are off. The pitter-patter outside my window is soothing and for once I feel calm from the loud storm that lately is going on inside my head. I hear their muffled voices through the door and then a quiet rumble from the rain outside my window. I have always enjoyed the rain, and as I look out of the window I feel all at once the coming and going of each day. A moment drawn out as it continues to repeatedly drip-drop and I feel myself go still as my eyes stay open and it all becomes just a wet blur upon the window.





NONFICTION

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## *Sunflower and Sandstone*

by Nathaniel Tucker

Robbie smiles at me and I smile, reflexively, as he compliments me on my sculpture. We have been taking this ceramics class together for three quarters of the year and he always talks to me when no one else will and compliments my artwork. His feathered golden hair shows more work than the average hairstyle sported by other guys in the school. His clothing, as always, is audacious and flashy. He favors yellow in his outfits and much of his own art. Today he is wearing a button up shirt a size too big, in a cute way, like one might see on a child wearing his dad's work shirt. Making up for the bland white of the shirt are his pants: brilliant yellow which reflect the white lights of the room smoothly, like chrome, and capped off at the bottom with platform sandals which glitter in the lights. Robbie always seems to smell of fruit, distinctly unmanly as does befit his general look and more feminine personality.

Unlike him, I am something of a creep: quiet and hidden behind a constant look of general apathy and always dressed in whatever Walmart brand my mother can afford to dress me in on a single mother salary. Seeing Robbie smile at me is one of the few things that causes me to smile. He is working the clay as he chats with the girl who sits next to him. I can never quantify how I feel about him, exactly, as it always seems to be a mix of excitement and discomfort at the excitement, an uncomfortable churning of emotion I am rarely subject to. I am not the type to form attachments to people, generally, so when this feeling crops up it always seems to unbalance me. Yet his smile and his words always reach through and open me up to talking to him. We chat about sundry things for the period as we work on our projects, him complimenting my work again. I blush and avert my eyes,

getting mad at him for making me feel vulnerable and worrying that I look like a fool to those around me. I hate feeling vulnerable. As always, I silently forgive him in the same thought, as I always do.

He stands up, chuckling, "I need a break. I am going to the bathroom."

The rest of the class passes by, uneventfully, but Robbie remains gone for the duration, the odd castle thing he is working on drying on the table top. Near the end of class, I ask to use the restroom. *It isn't like you are going to check on him, as that would be weird for sure. You just need to use the bathroom and wash your hands before the next period starts up.* I walk from the noisy ceramics classroom and make my way towards the bathroom down the long hallway when I hear a noise in one of the alcoves. The classrooms are set aside along the hallways, into alcoves, two doors to each alcove leading to two classes each.

As I pass one, I look to the right, to find the source of the noise. I see the flashy yellow pants, allowing my gaze to shift upwards towards the face of the wearer, but already knowing who it is and what I am going to see. Robbie is there with a girl who is comforting him, his eye now red and swollen as it has been here and there through the year, tears causing his makeup to streak down his cheeks a bit. That is life for guys like him. When a man dresses or acts in a feminine way it has always been a violation of the unwritten male code and, in doing that, the perpetrator is directly attacking the ego of those whose sense of self is built on their gender. I pause in my walk and look on, unable to continue forward and just ignore him.

What is this feeling welling up in me? *This guy compliments you and is nice to you. He is one of your few friends. Go over there and comfort him. Tell him it is going to be alright or something.* The girl turns towards me, a Latina whose face quickly twists into a grimace of anger as I stand, silently watching. I am transfixed and trying to sort through my feelings, trying to find something to say to her that will diffuse her anger and explain my gawking. *Calmly explain the situation to her and comfort your friend.*

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“What in the fuck are you staring at, *pendejo*? You not get enough?”

Embarrassingly, despite growing up in Arizona I have learned little Spanish but still enough to know that when someone angrily calls you a Pen-Day-Hoe it is time to break eye contact and get out of whatever situation you have blundered into. She turns to face me fully, getting angrier by the moment, and I suddenly realize she thinks I am one of the guys who did this to Robbie. *Just calmly explain it. Say, “You have me confused for someone else, ma’am, I am this gentleman’s friend.” What are you waiting for?* I try to speak, but I can’t, freezing up and stuttering at her. I never talk to people, preferring to keep them at a distance, and can’t explain myself or plead my case. I want to comfort Robbie, but she advances a step and I quickly move away as she shouts more expletives in Spanish at me. I retreat to the bathroom just down the hallway, unable to look back over my shoulder at Robbie, ashamed of having left him there.

I feel tears welling up as my mind grapples to figure out what I am feeling and then express it through my clumsy, Garfieldian exterior in a way that won’t have me vomiting blood or having to purchase a high powered rifle and climb up on a water tower. My stomach feels like I have swallowed a hot coal, the burning pit of frustration radiates out and tenses my body up. I am angry at myself for being unable to express my emotions like others can. I feel like some poorly programmed computer where every basic function returns an infuriating error message. *You should be feeling sadness here but, after searching through your emotional capabilities for the “sadness” file, we have discovered it is either missing or the file is broken. Would you like to channel that emotion into “shame” and “misdirected rage” instead: Yes or Yes?* Some portion of my brain decides that the best way to alleviate the pressure is to attempt some amateur carpentry on the bathroom wall using my bare hands. I proceed to punch the wall of the bathroom hard enough to leave blood on the white concrete and blue tiling.

I leave the stall after a few minutes, walking over to the sink area and choosing the one where the mirror doesn’t work so I won’t see my reflection.

Actually, the mirror does work, somewhat, but someone in the school must have decided to take a knife or sharp rock and deeply scratch charming words like “faggot”, “nigger”, “white power”, and “spic” into the mirror over and over so many times that it is virtually impossible to see any sort of reflection in it outside of general shapes. I can tell it is the work of one guy because it is all written in the same child-like handwriting, sort of how I imagine Lennie Small from *Of Mice and Men* would write when he isn’t busy killing small animals with his bare hands. *Did he even know how to write?* My mind wanders as I wash my hand of blood, the pain of the cold water sending shockwaves through my hand that feel somewhat soothing, if painful enough to make me wince.

I have walked away from someone who cared enough about me to compliment my work without comforting him when he needed it. Catholics like me are no strangers to penance and, for me, self-inflicted physical pain has always been my means of assuaging or punishing myself for failing to act in a noble way. I notice the white of the mirror’s many scratches darken a bit and jump as arms encircle me and tug me backwards, jerking me out of my egotistical self-pity and back into the real world. My hair stands up and my heart jumps, but the familiar scent of fruit quickly calms my initial reaction, transforming it into an oddly comfortable confusion at what is happening.

“It’s alright.”

His slender arm snakes along under my left arm as I lean back against him a bit, feeling his fingers push along my wrist, through my palm, hooking up between my own fingers. His words tickle my ear and his hands are soft as his slender fingers carefully hook up through my own, coming up over the back of my hand but he gently avoids the red, ragged spaces on my knuckles. His golden fingernail polish matches the banana bright yellow of his pants. His right arm hooks around the front of my chest, draping from one of my shoulders to the other, and I feel myself relax in a brief instant as the discomfort and confusion wash away to simple relaxed mindfulness of

the situation. He meets the relaxation of my tense, broad shoulders with a light chuckle that I can feel through my back and his words softly echo his previous sentiment.

“It’s alright.”

I lean back a bit more and he rests his head on my left shoulder, my own hand now grabbing at his forearm around my chest. I tilt my own head into his, reflexively. *I apologize for what happened in the hallway. I wanted to stop to comfort you and thank you for being such a good friend over this year despite my being a freshman and you being a junior but I got bashful and that girl seemed mad at me. That isn’t a good excuse, I know, but I just wanted you to know I care, you know?* I inhale his scent and my lips part as I begin to speak aloud my thoughts to him.

“I just... I... I wanted to just tell you that... You know... Hnnh...”

Not quite how I imagined it coming out. I definitely don’t remember punctuating the statement with that less than masculine cross between a moan and a sigh at the end in my head. His fingers trace the crucifix hanging on a chain beneath my shirt, a gift from my grandmother, and I tremble against him, turning red again and getting warm. *I am sorry for how you are treated at school and home. I am sorry your dad makes you feel like shit and keeps threatening to kick you out. I wish I could help alleviate your suffering.* I’d like to, except I am a coward. The tears well up again and my breathing grows slightly erratic now as I stifle and try to hide it as best I can by clearing my throat.

My eyes are open wide, filling like kiddie pools, and I struggle to see through the blur, struggle to keep them open to prevent myself from showing tears which will surely form if I close them, even slightly. Robbie is a good friend. *I am so shy about my work and never show it off but you make me feel almost proud of it and I know you don’t have to do that but you do and I appreciate it.* This is ridiculous. I have to say or do something or this will start to get awkward. Time to man up and do the right thing.

I turn to face him now, silently thankful for the bigot who decorated the mirror with his litany of idiocy as seeing a reflection of me in this moment will certainly make me too self-conscious to try this. *You are a gifted artist and fun to talk to. I really admire your work, even though I never really directly say so out loud. I think you have such pretty eyes.* Jesus, don't say that! *Look, I really want us to be friends and I know you can't usually trust straight guys, so I will understand if you say no, but I am offering to be your friend.* In the awkward pause of me putting thoughts together, he softly whispers, "Don't worry, I can tell. It's alright."

What in the hell is that supposed to mean? What can he "tell"? I am so good at playing dumb I have even fooled myself, perhaps. My confusion and discomfort over the situation mount. *Get away from him or you are going to start crying.* He gives a mischievous smile and rests his chin on my shoulder. I start choking back sobs, but he shushes me, gently, drawing his fingernails across my back. We hold each other awhile longer, seconds passing into minutes, until the class bell rings. He goes to slowly pull away, looking up at me with an oddly sad look just beneath the comforting smile that hides the glimmer in his eyes. Instinctively, I pull him back to me and smile.

How many have cared for him in secret only to push him away publicly because they were fearful of what people thought of him, I wonder. He often discusses such interactions and relationships done in secret with a big smile on his face. I realize that it has been an empty smile; he has been hiding, just like me, all this time. Older men and peers who seem gentle and sweet in private pretend they don't even know him when other people were around. He pulls back a moment, his eyes wide in surprise at my sudden initiative as I stand there, ignoring the guy who walks past us on the way to the stall in the back. He realizes I don't care if others see me holding him, his eyes now becoming glassy as he presses his face into my chest and whispers, "Thank you." I return a smile, not of reflex, but of joy as I feel that, for the first time all year, I have returned the favor he has given me so many times before.

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## *An Artist's Adventure in Lima*

by **Stephanie Emperly**

“**S**tephanie, cheer up or I’m gonna leave you in Peru. N-ow.”

Mom looked at me with one of her trademark harsh expressions. The tour bus full of church members arrived at its last destination in Lima before we would head back to the airport. I toyed with the crystal quartz around my neck as I stared back with a blasé look on my face. I turned away from her to look out the window at the ornate statues on the strangely chipped facade. For some reason, I found myself both saddened and awed. It was not until the tour that I began to realize why.

The tour started out in the commons area where the tour guide detailed the intricate connections that the city has with the monastery that resides there. Ugh, yawn. I wanted to throw up as references to Christianity were mentioned at several points. It felt like Mom was drilling me on the Bible after going to church to make sure I “learned something” from it. As soon as the tour separated into two different parts, I left with the group that did not involve Mom so I could get over this bad mood influenced by her parental nagging and harsh piety.

I was playing with the crystal quartz pendulum I got at the bazaar the day before. I had inserted a chain into the loop and was wearing it like a necklace, much to my mother’s chagrin. My mind flashed back to my hippie best friend talking about how crystal pendulums could answer questions and “channel spirits.” While I found that concept interesting, I had a hard time believing that spirits would want to use a shiny stone as a way to talk to people. However, I have a thing for pretty and shiny stones, so I jumped when I noticed the shiny pendulum at the bazaar.

As my group toured the cathedral with its guide, I could not help but gaze in wonder at the intricate splendor inside the hallowed walls. The shrine inside with all the golden statues of dead Christian saints and martyrs, the library's architecture and design seemed to have leapt from a fantasy movie, and the sheer magnificence of the sanctuary all spoke in terms only a young, budding artist like myself could understand. I had no idea that a building as beautiful as this existed in Peru, much less an extremely historical one. My interest increased as the guide mentioned that the church was the final resting place of the famous conquistador, Francisco Pizarro.

All too soon, we reached the underbelly of this beautiful building as I realized an underlying sorrow I had been feeling from this structure. It had been coming from the entrance to the catacombs. As we descended to the entrance, I saw that there was a bloodied, chipped, life-sized crucifix of Jesus on the wall. I asked what it was doing there and the guide stated that this building had suffered a bombing 13 years prior to the visit. One of the churchgoers immediately asked why the building's outer damage had not been fixed. It was met with a reply that all of their finances come from the Vatican. Feeling the crystal for the seventeenth time, I felt a sense of sadness for this structure, as it seemed to be a work of art and a very important historical relic, abandoned by the world. At least to me, anyway.

As we entered the cool and dusty catacombs underneath the earth, the mood seemed to shift as we passed through corridors of nothing but bones in large, stone coffins. Femur, pelvis, scapula, clavicle, every single kind of bone in the human body was in at least one of those age-old coffins. Aside from the guide, everyone, including me, was unnerved by the sight. I gripped my crystal pendulum as if it would somehow provide life support for me. Bones, the very structure of our bodies, were disconnected from their deceased owners and placed in separate coffins as neat as clothes in a laundry basket. Even if you were to look for a certain bone that belonged to you, you would likely never find that piece of you ever again. I didn't know why, but that unnerved me for some reason. It did not help that the sense of sorrow from earlier had been increasing.

Finally, we got to the heart of the catacombs. On the north end was a giant stone well with some stone bricks moved aside to provide an opening. Inside the well were skulls. Hundreds of skulls were arranged in a circle. If I didn't know any better, I would have said that there were thousands more hidden underneath the neatly arranged walls. The guide talked about how the catacombs were sometimes used for corrupt purposes like hiding murdered bodies. A thought came to me: *What happened to the people that were murdered in there? Or buried alive? If the killers were never brought to justice...* It was at that point that the sensation I had been feeling reached its apex, like my insides were revolting against me. I did my best to hide the mental onslaught, which was pretty easy to do since the group had already left. As I regained my senses and brought my thoughts back to reality, I thought I'd try something I saw in one of the bazaars. I pulled out the crystal quartz pendulum, held the end of the chain in my index finger and thumb, and let the crystal drop limply. I then asked the crystal a simple question:

“Are there spirits in this church?”

The crystal swung toward my face and away repeatedly. The aching feeling lessened. I asked my next question.

“Are any of the spirits upset by what has happened to or in this church?”

I received my answer with the harshest pain in my back I had ever felt in my life. It felt like someone had shoved a dagger in my back and was twisting it around slowly. I was frozen in place. *Thought so.* I kept the crystal up and steady, despite the pain. Whoever was holding the “dagger” was clearly furious. I took a deep breath in the mental vice and said the only thing I thought whoever was there wanted to hear: “I don't know if this will help, but I'm sorry for whatever happened to you and I hope you're happy wherever you are.”

And just like that, the feeling stopped. Whew. Maybe that was all whoever was there really needed. I left the catacombs and rejoined the tour group, relieved that whatever sensation that was there had left me.

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As the tour ended, I left the beautiful cathedral with a relieved smile and started chasing pigeons in the fountain square. I guessed some things just couldn't be explained. Mom came up to me and asked if I had any fun or learned anything during the tour.

“Well, it was interesting, to say the least.”

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## *The Irishman and Kipling*

by Jeremy Cloud

I was fourteen when my grandfather had a mild stroke. Up until then, I'd been living with my Nana and Papa for nearly a year at the time, acting as a caretaker and helper to Nana. The trailer home they lived in had been quietly falling apart for years, slowly outstripping my aging grandparents' maintenance abilities and the yearly repairs my uncles took turns performing. Nana, always an active and restless person, had been trying to hang a painting when she'd put her foot down wrong and stepped through a heating vent in the floor. Years of ballet training in her childhood and teens allowed her to take the fall perfectly to save her legs and hips; osteoporosis took out her shoulder anyway, shattered when she smacked it against her entertainment center on her way down. While I'd been stepping and fetching for Papa too, the stroke eventually made it impossible for a young teen to handle all the care they now required.

So my family moved to a bigger house, and the grandparents came to live with us. I continued to act as caretaker to both of them, as I had developed a rapport with them that my other siblings couldn't quite match. Nana's need for someone to just sit with her quietly and keep her company so that she had arms and legs available to her when she grew restless wore on my more active siblings, who preferred to be outside and running rather than sitting and reading, as I did. Papa's caustic temper, salty language, and kilowatt strength glare sent all but two of my other siblings running. Of those two, only my older sister and I could stand up to Papa without being shouted down as a "smart aleck" and she was busy helping Mom look after the other kids.

Now, Papa had always been a great believer in self-sufficiency. He'd raised ten children, made a living as a salesman, undertaker, groundskeeper;

if it could support his family, he did it. So the loss of function in his left side was not something he was equipped to deal with.

In typical fashion for him, his solution was to alternately ignore his condition, or complain about “being a cripple.” He’d beaten alcoholism cold turkey, feared almost nothing, and taken on (and taken out) men twice his size in his lifetime. He was the classic smooth-talking Irishman, able to charm the birds out of the trees, or cuss the paint off the walls as the mood took him. He was ridiculously strong his entire life to the point that even after his stroke, he ripped the front door of his trailer home out of its frame when I didn’t get it unlocked fast enough for his liking. He refused to continue physical therapy after the doctors released him, and his already hot temper flared more often than before as he lost a little bit more every day.

By the time they came to live with us, his staunch policy of ignoring his therapy and condition was starting to catch up to him. He needed help bathing and shaving; he needed a cane or support to walk short distances, and help getting out of chairs or his bed. For any distance of note, he had to have a scooter to get around.

This did not sit well.

While we all shared the caretaking duties, I was more often than not the one assigned to help Papa and Nana. I did my school work on their couch, spent most of my day with them, and acted as their runner and go-to gofer. Because of that, Papa’s temper was directed at me more often than anyone but my mother, who wanted him to go back into therapy and get better.

For three years, I fought the man almost every day, forcing him to accept help. And for three years, he fought right back. On bad days, he actually fought in anger, cursing me or ignoring me. I once stood between him and the television for half an hour while he pretended to have x-ray vision, staring at the television through me. Another time, he started inventing curses on the spot, getting sillier and more ludicrous until Mom came in and told him that if she heard the younger kids using that language she’d cut off his tea.

On good days he fought with that Irish charm of his. If he was feeling ok, he'd make things difficult in a teasing fashion, to keep up appearances. He had given up alcohol for the most part, due to the way it triggered his temper, with the rare exception being when Nana gave him a drink, or told him he could have one. But until the day he died, Papa had three vices: cigarettes, Constant Comment tea, and cookies of any sort. With any of these three things in hand, Papa could be bribed. And, more to the point, expected to be bribed.

He'd sit in his chair and make a show of it, whining in a way that could not be taken seriously by anyone that heard it. He'd make faces, pop out his dentures to accentuate the stubborn thrust of his jaw, tilt his head and widen his eyes so his glasses would magnify them to cartoon proportions. The arguments were the same: "I'm a grown man, I don't need any help" or "You make me feel like a damn useless cripple." But with the faces and the tone, it was hard not to fall down laughing. Gods help you if you didn't keep a straight face, however; it was a game that could only be won by playing along.

Patience and a firm refusal to laugh would be rewarded by ever more ridiculous faces until finally he told you what he wanted. "Just let me have a cigarette first," he'd say, or "maybe if I had a pot of tea." Or, and this always with a crafty look that could sit proudly on Wile E. Coyote's face, "Didn't I see some...cookies the other day? Whatever happened to those?"

No matter how he fought, though, there was one constant to our banter that puzzled me. On good days and bad, when conceding an argument, he would look at me and say the oddest thing: "You're a better man than I am, Gunga Din." He even took to calling me "Gunga Din" at times, usually when greeting me in the morning after he'd slept well, or when I brought him tea or cookies without being prompted. And, this most especially, when I'd managed to get him up, dressed, shaved, caffeinated and fed before he was awake enough to fight back.

I recognized the speaking cadence well enough to know he was quoting something; my mother used the same lilting speech to quote the Bible, or

when she read aloud. But, despite reading being my passion throughout my childhood and teenage years, the reference escaped me. Finally I broke down and asked my mother what it meant. She laughed and told me it was a compliment, and to accept it. So I did.

After three years of near daily combat, Papa died. He'd developed a host of issues arising from his stroke and its effects on him due to his age, and one of them required surgery. After the operation, he took a turn for the worse, his body unable to come back from the trauma. He was in and out of consciousness for a few days, and I stayed with him for most of it. My mom saw something that gave her warning, because she sent me out on a two-day sleepover trip the day before he died.

Afterwards, I was out of it for a couple of weeks. The first week Mom was a wreck, Nana was a wreck, and Dad was experiencing friction with his company and couldn't take much time off. My older sister and I were trying to keep things running quietly until Mom could get back to her schedule. The second week, Mom got us back on track, homeschooling and putting the chore rotation back into play rather than my sister and my more pragmatic "do it because I said so or else" approach. By the third week, a sense of normalcy was returning. And with that came the regular weekly trips to the library, my only source for the internet.

I can't remember why I hadn't looked it up before then. I knew what Google was, and as the son of a programmer I was well aware of the wonders of the internet when it came to research. But, as I sat in the library fiddling with the internet for the sheer joy of using something I could not have at home, Papa's quote and nickname floated up in my mind. After a few dozen misspellings, I finally found it. It was from a Kipling poem, "Gunga Din."

I burst out laughing for the first time since the funeral when I read the stanza the quote came from.

"Din! Din! Din!

You Lazarushian-leather Gunga Din!

---

Tho' I've belted you an' flayed you,  
By the livin' Gawd that made you,  
You're a better man than I am, Gunga Din!"

Though his pride often wouldn't allow him to openly show gratitude for the help I gave him, or apologize for his occasionally atrocious behavior, in his own way Papa had been both thanking me and apologizing the entire time.

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## *Dear Princess Celestia...*

by **Daniel Baird**

Here I sit in near complete darkness, the dim glow of my computer monitor casting my shadow across the room. What I am about to do can only be done under cover of night. I navigate to YouTube and hit the search bar; my typing is slow and deliberate as I punch in the name of my query. Success! I open the video and spend a moment staring at the blank player. My cursor hovers over the play button, uncertain. I glance over my shoulder once, twice, three times. When I'm certain there are no potential witnesses to my next act, I hit "Play". Cheery music flows from my headset and is quickly joined by an elegant voice: "*Once upon a time, in the magic—*"

Ah! But we're getting a bit ahead of ourselves, aren't we? Let's start at the beginning. Gather 'round children, as I regale you with the tale of my descent into Technicolor madness. This is the story of how I took my first steps on the long road of the brony...

"Sigh," I sigh to myself, "I can't believe it's second semester already." The second semester of my senior year to be precise; in a mere five months I'll be graduating and thrust out of the shelter of the public education system. Oh well. No time to worry about that now, Sociology's about to start. This should be a pretty easy class, and it might even be kind of interesting: maybe I'll actually learn how to interact with other human beings!

"Sigh," I sigh to myself for the second time that hour. This class is so boring. Same ol' first-day-of-class syllabus stuff. And there's not even anything interesting in the course outline either. Crap, he's giving us homework on the first day? Ah well, how hard could it possibly be?

Alright, hold up a minute. Our first assignment is to watch a *cartoon*?

Seriously? I mean sure, we have to write down the moral it teaches to little kids, but that stuff's always obvious. I briefly consider winging it and just tapping my memory for things I learned from cartoons as a kid. Then a thought hits me. A silly, stupid thought. A thought about something I've been seeing turn up all across the internet for the past two years. A thought about ponies.

For the past couple years I've been seeing *My Little Pony* popping up absolutely everywhere: *Know Your Meme*, *deviantArt*, even some gaming sites like *Kotaku* and *IGN*. I'd be repulsed if my curiosity didn't goad me into learning more. See, apparently there are grown men who are huge fans of *My Little Pony* now. Like, a lot of them. They call themselves "bronies" and have apparently gotten a hat-tip from the show's creator herself. The idea of guys my own age watching this show makes me gag a little...but if I'm being honest, it also gets me really curious. What does this show have that appeals to guys like me? Guys who were raised by *Dragonball Z* and *MEGAS XLR*? Unfortunately, there's only one way to find out: watch the show and see for myself.

My decision is made instantly. We're being graded for watching a cartoon? It might as well be one I've never seen before. It might as well be one that's been festering in my head for the past few months. I've been making excuses for not watching it so far; now here's an excuse *to* watch it. Well, I better clear my schedule and bury what's left of my dignity. Tonight I'm watching *My Little Pony: Friendship is Magic*.

Naturally I wait 'til after dark. Or more accurately, 'til after my parents have gone to bed. I'd prefer there not be any witnesses to this. I already know where to find my prey: the wilds of *YouTube*. I'm quick to locate a full version of the first episode; hell, the entire first season is here. I feel my heart racing as I contemplate that little grey "Play" button. Am I seriously about to do this? Am I seriously about to watch *My Little Pony*? I am; I hit play.

The tinny credits music fades out. I groggily glance at the computer's system clock and do a double-take. Is it really two in the morning already?

I quickly run a count: six episodes watched, at about twenty-two minutes apiece....I just watched two hours' worth of ponies. And holy crap, did I enjoy it! That realization hits me like truck. I actually enjoyed watching *My Little Pony*. I slump back in my chair. Where do I go from here? Am I one of those "bronies" now? I have two choices before me: I can turn in my assignment and never look at another brightly-colored equine again, or I can watch through the rest of the series and see how deep the rabbit hole goes.

It's been two months since that dark night. Two months since I stepped into Equestria and never looked back. Not only did I blow through the remainder of Season 1, I got caught up on Season 2 and kept going with the weekly episodes all the way up to now. Here I sit, letting the credits for the Season 2 finale roll with a big, dweebish grin on my face. As the music fades and the screen blanks, I pause to reflect on these past couple of months. I can't deny I'm a brony now; I've come too far. I've bought the merchandise, read the fanfiction, and even attempted to sell my best friends on the show (without success). I chuckle out loud at myself. If ten-year-old me knew he would be watching *My Little Pony* in eight years' time, he would've launched into a rant about how "only little girls like ponies!"

But I feel like my eyes have been opened, just a little. Now I realize that I've always been quick to put labels like that on things: "this is for girls and that's for boys." Quick to judge shows, games, and movies based purely on title, even if that title is just inherited. My friends are still like that, refusing to give *Friendship is Magic* a shot because it's "a kid's show." I know differently. I know that *Friendship is Magic* is a whole different beast from the ponies I grew up hating. I don't know if any of the lessons *My Little Pony: Friendship is Magic* has put on display have stuck with me, but there is one lesson from my childhood it's dug up and put on display: You can't judge a book by its cover.

*"Once upon a time, in the magical land of Equestria..."*

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## *Journey's End*

by Lauren Romero

It is late May, on the very eve of June, and in the wake of the recent storms the weather flourishes in the last voluptuous burst of spring. I am celebrating my first summer break as an official college student, and already my skin has turned a warm olive hue with brown freckles sprouting across my face. On the drive to Will Rogers airport, I stare into the golden Oklahoman afternoon and wonder if there could have been a more perfect day for the arrival of my grandparents, who have travelled from the dry heat of New Mexico to celebrate their eldest son's forty-sixth birthday. My plump abuelita greets my sister and me warmly and inquires after her husband, who is riding out on his Harley Davidson. My father reassures her that my mother is waiting at home to greet him when he arrives, but she shakes her head dismissively and carries off with, "*Aye that man.*" Grandma fills the car with her frivolous chatter as we wind our way back home. My father perceives a tall dark wall of clouds creeping in from the distance and mutters, "Those weren't there before." We temporarily forget about the looming harbinger for as soon as we pull into the driveway we spot Grandfather's Road King sitting boastfully in the open garage. Soon the entire family is lounging in lawn chairs on the front driveway, some with Dr. Peppers and some with open cans of Bud Light, and we catch up on lost time under a gorgeous developing lightning storm. With the suddenly cool air whipping around us gently, and with the dusky statuesque clouds forming above us, we welcome the pleasant weekend that lies ahead.

All at once, the evening takes an altogether different turn. We watch with piqued curiosity as one by one the neighbors around us pack up their cars and leave, each with hurried movements and a sense of restless worry. One

woman stops long enough to explain that the news stations are warning of a large tornado heading this way and that the best course of action would be to vacate the area. Now more than slightly worried, we rush inside to turn on Channel 4 and sure enough Mike Morgan is showing a map of a large developing tornado headed east along 1-40 and right in the path of our suburban home. "Get underground or get in your car and leave, folks. You are running out of time." Mike Morgan's voice haunts us as the reality of the situation slinks like cold mushroom soup into the pit of our stomachs. We make a drastic decision. Since my grandparents are elderly it would be impractical to force them into the vertical storm shelter in our garage, so we gather our things to leave. The German Shepherds are regretfully locked away in our laundry room and the crockpot full of warm fragrant pot roast is left to sit uneaten on the counter as the six of us pile into my parents' Honda vehicles. As we make our way south toward Mustang, I peer over my shoulder through the Civic's back window to where the ominous tornado is tearing its way to our home. It is enormous, larger and more terrifying than anything I have ever seen on television. My face falls as the colossal scale of the storm turns my veins to ice.

Our fear shifts to frenzy as the evening rapidly turns into something out of *Twister*. The roads are packed with fleeing civilians, the cars like crowded pigs to slaughter as we observe with horror the multiple circulating clouds above us. "There is more than one," my mother remarks from the front seat. We slowly push our way east along Highway 152. At the same moment my grandmother points outside our window to vertically flying debris, the radio blares with warnings that a tornado is spawning directly over our heads. Quickly, my mother phones the other car where my father, grandfather, and sister are driving blindly ahead of us and shrieks, "*We have to head back!*" We all make swift U-turns and head west along 152 toward the larger tornado in hopes of turning left and south away from the chaos. As opposed to the street we just left, this direction is frighteningly clear. As we wind our way through the back roads the trees around us begin to flail violently in the wind, the rain lashes across our windows like whips, and the small car lurches and

shudders in protest. In the turmoil we lose sight of my father's Ridgeline truck and all cell service is ironically cut off. When we near a dip in the road, a deer jumps across the pavement before us and my mother suddenly jerks the car to a stop. Her voice is unnervingly steady as she orders us get in the ditch. I bolt out of the car and across the street to crouch among some jagged rocks. As I cover my head with my arms I feel my grandmother's steady hand grip my shoulder reassuringly. A gangly man, who had pulled his car over behind ours, trudges farther ahead of me and calls out that the dip in the road is actually a bridge. A surprising number of people follow us down into this dark muddy cavern as the thunderous sound of the wind thrashing branches, uprooting trees, and tossing power lines on the road above deafens our ears. Covered in gritty dirt, mud, and rain we crowd in closely, duck our heads together, and await the impending impact in petrified silence.

As I sit here, huddled under an aged bridge surrounded on all sides by strangers with one hand clenching the rusted metal of the bridge beams the other around a quivering shoulder of a young girl, I am consumed by a sense of calm. "This may be it," I tell myself, "I might die here, just like this." For the first time in my life, I find that this idea does not disturb me. My mind clears of all thought and I raise my head to look out into the violent storm, to look my Grim Reaper evenly in the eye. A peace settles throughout my body, and in this moment I accept death with grace. I let go of my worries, my pain, my fear, and just listen to the roaring sound of the turbulent wind and savage rain. As time stands still, I simply wait.

The end I am expecting never comes, and as the world rages around us the atmosphere between strangers becomes more relaxed. In the dim grey light we share names and stories about how fate led us all to the same unusual location. Some members of our odd entourage even take pictures to post on their Facebook walls. I am astonished to shake hands with several Red Cross disaster relief volunteers who have travelled great distances to aid with the recovery efforts from the recent Moore tornado. As we talk, the once steady trickle of water at our feet now erupts into a raging flood. We are driven back above ground into the freezing rain. By the time we

reach the shelter of our car, soaked and shivering, we notice with dismay that the trees around us had been ripped apart, many lying across the road along with downed power lines. We drive the humming Civic around in circles, backtracking and retracing our steps several times due to flooding or dismantled debris, our anxiety growing as the near-empty gas tank slowly runs out. Owing to the pure grace of blind luck we stumble our way into a 7-11 gas station and are finally able to contact my missing family using our nearly-dead cell phones. The 7-11 is closed due to the storm, but the lot is packed and the power is on. We wait under the eaves, next to a closed pump in thankful relief until my father arrives to take us to the church where he, my sister, and my grandfather have been hiding warm and dry all along. My mother's valiant vehicle is left in a vacant parking space until we can return to revive and recover it. The six of us, united again, sit exhausted in the near-darkness of the powerless church with many others fleeing from the storm. As we wait for news of the roads to clear, friendly church volunteers supply us with tiny flashlights, water bottles, and spare clothes for those of us still soaked with rainwater. The hunger has become a dull ache in my body, and I wonder absently how long we have been out in this mess.

Sweet relief floods us all when a burly volunteer approaches us with a smile and says, "The roads are clear to Yukon!" We thank them all kindly and promise to return the borrowed clothes. The six of us squish together inside my father's now hail-dented truck. Too weathered to even bother stopping by the 7-11 to retrieve my mother's Honda Civic, we slowly make our way back home in the eerie darkness of the powerless city. By the time we all stagger into the house and look at the casually swinging pendulum clock on the wall we are shocked to discover that it has only been a few hours. The power here is, thankfully, on and we release the distressed dogs before making our way to the kitchen. We thank Mom's forward thinking for making pot roast in the crockpot, and the warm juicy meal fills our hollow stomachs as we each regale our own experiences of the night. Then, sore and beaten, we all separate to our inviting fluffy beds to collapse and put an end to this adventure.

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A most magnificent spring morning is born from the remnants of that harrowing night. I stumble out of my bed sheets in a daze, hardly daring to believe that I am in my own home, still alive in my own body. I shuffle into the living room where a warm glow tumbles in through the large square windows. Luckily I have awoken before the others, so I walk barefooted out onto the front porch to sit in the pleasant sunlight and sort through my disconcerted thoughts. With my head resting on my bare knees, I recall the events from the night before. Prior to that moment under the bridge I never seriously considered my own ending, not really. The stomach-turning inevitability of death and the frailty of human life became all too apparent when I believed I had run out of time. How quick and sudden the end comes, unanticipated and unable to dissuade once it has shifted its hollow gaze to consume you, is downright terrifying. In the beginning I thought of all that I was leaving behind, of all that I still needed to do. Yet, when the time came, when I almost was taken from this world, I felt ready to go. As the crisp wind tosses the chestnut hair around my face, distant sounds of muffled chatter from inside pull me back to the now. I realize suddenly that I am no longer afraid of death, or afraid of dying. I believe that when my time comes, I will finally be ready to take my Reaper's hand in my own and walk alongside it with my head held with dignity. Life is flickering, sometimes brilliant, sometimes stale, but every moment should be seized and appreciated for its immeasurable worth. After this ordeal I aspire to lead a good life, a whole life, no matter how short it may turn out to be. I know that if I live in this way, I will welcome my journey's end when it arrives. As the low hum of sleepy voices grows with tinkles of laughter I stand to return inside to greet my family with pure affection. After all, we might just have today.

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# *Siberia*

by **Hannah Youngblood**

It's just another boring day at Wright's Family Market, or as the town of Norman, Oklahoma, knows it, The Old People's Grocery Store. Still being paid as a minimal wage cashier, I perpetually check the clock to see how much time I have left. I notice that it still says 7:45 p.m. since I last checked 30 seconds ago.

"Hannah, do you mind filling up the ice machine outside?" my manager asks, as the store is a ghost town at this time of evening. After securing my register, I walk into the back of the store. I notice a few of my co-workers standing in the corner next to a stack of milk crates. I eavesdrop on a few of them talking about how they don't remember half the crazy things they did over the weekend. Details of their nonsensical lifestyle go through one ear and out the other.

"Hey, Hannah." One of my co-workers greets me. I can tell by the tone of their voices that they don't want me to hear what they're talking about.

"Hey," I say back, waving at them with a phony smile. I don't want to get caught up in their nerd herd. Reaching for the cold, sticky handle of our ice freezer, I give it a good, forceful tug. I'm instantly taken back by the gust of chilling breeze smacking me in the face. Tiptoeing towards the back of the freezer, I try not to bust my ass on the cold, hard ground. I start to transfer twice my body weight in bags of ice from the shelves onto the trolley. My hands hurt as they turn red, and goosebumps appear on my arm.

**BOOM!** I jump half out of my skin to hear the loud slamming of the door being violently closed behind me. Then, in an instant, my surroundings become pitch black.

Mortified, I stand frozen by myself. I can hear the loud whirling of the fan, sounding like a helicopter taking off.

*I'm only 18*, I think to myself. Holding my hands out in front of me, I try to creep back up to the door. I feel my hands getting tingly, and my legs start to feel like two strings of spaghetti as my anxiety starts to infect my body.

*I'm only 18*, I think to myself again. *I still have so much life to live!*

\* \* \* \* \*

I see my mom in the kitchen, cleaning dishes after my dad has eaten his pre-dinner hotdog. He sits on the couch watching “Unsealed Alien Files” on The History Channel. Unexpectedly, the phone rings, and my mom picks it up. Her world stops for a second, and the plate crashes to the floor from her wet, soapy hands. Her vision becomes a wet blur as her breathing becomes short and frantic. My dad rushes to her, fearing the worst.

“What happened?! What happened?!” my dad asks with huge eyes and paralyzing fear.

“They found Hannah’s body in the freezer,” my mom barely manages to say, running her fingers through her hair. Her body heaves with broken sobs. My dad’s eyes well with tears as his throat cramps up with sorrow.

“No!” he thinks to himself, looking into my mom’s eyes; hoping this is some cruel, sick joke.

“The paramedics said she died of hypothermia.” My mom’s legs are too weak to handle this much grief, and she falls to the floor.

\* \* \* \* \*

Slowly making my way up towards the door, I feel my fingers tighten into the palms of my hands, and my body concaves itself, securing the little body heat I have left.

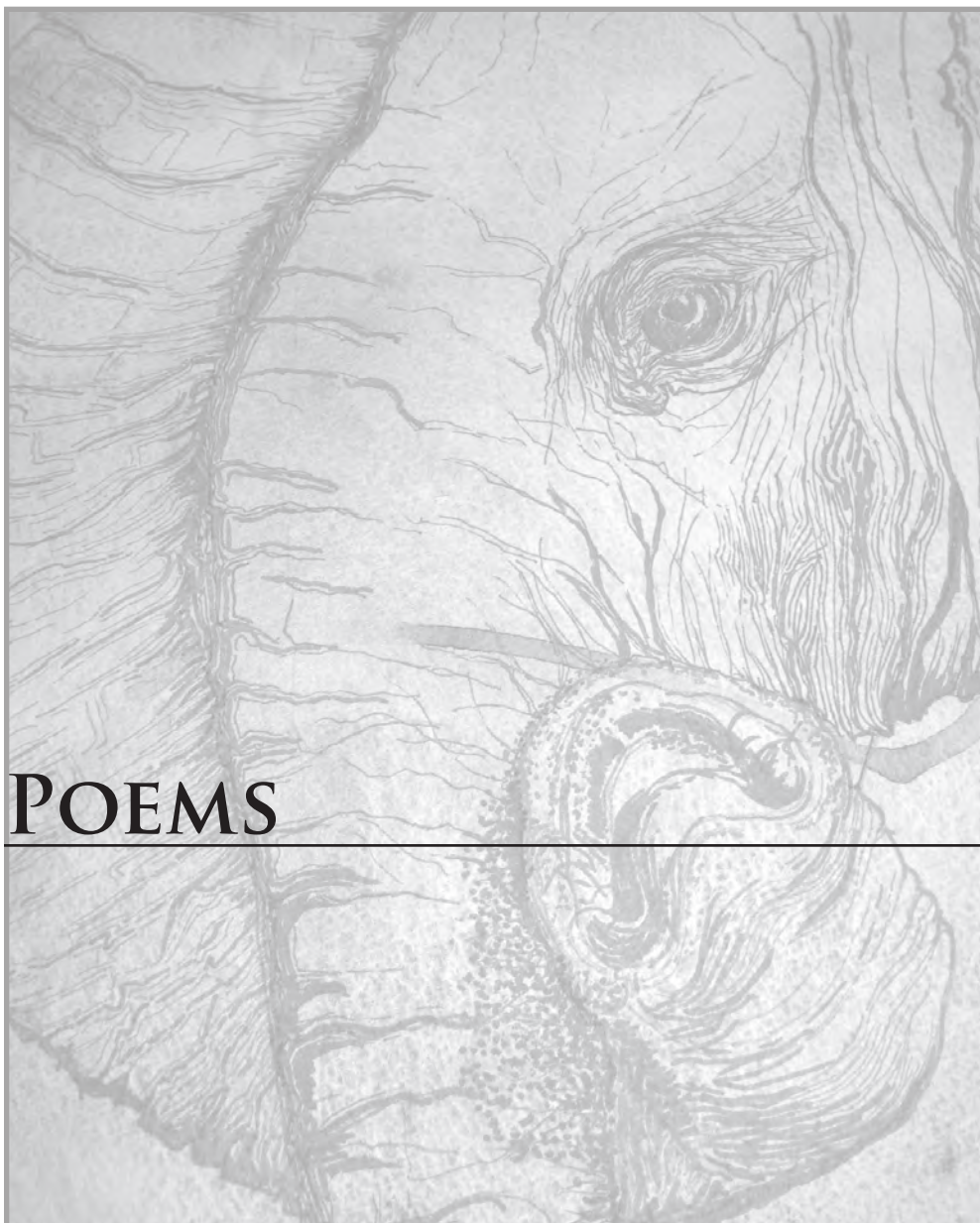
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Starting to think into the future, I'm overwhelmed with the thought that I never got my dream job of sharpening pencils, or the fantasy of marrying Joaquin Phoenix, Ryan Gosling, Will Chase, Prince Harry, Prince William, Adam Levine, Tyson Beckford, Darren Criss, Robert Pattison, or Shia Labeouf.

Finally, I make it to the door. I feel the cold metal icing my already frozen hands. I can barely see the door handle; the handle that will save my naïve, young life. Pushing the handle, I see the light. Not the light that will lead me to the next life, but the light to the back of the store.

*I'm almost free!* I say to myself, in relief. I push harder on it, and the door opens just enough for my weak body to exit. The warm air from the heater welcomes me back into its arms. *Oh Wright's! I've never been so happy to see you, and your outdated ambiance.* Worn out from the near disaster, I look at my watch to see if it's time to go home. It's 7:47 p.m.





# POEMS

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## *Eulogy for a “Best Friend”*

by **Samantha Perry**

Condolences and farewell to the long forsaken you  
Your submissive treason, buried in a putrid heap somewhere  
Decomposing with your pedestal and sincerest scribbles too

Odd, you bear resemblance to a brilliance I once knew  
One with which I never dared reality to compare  
Condolences and farewell to the long forsaken you

Unfortunate, that you’ve lost your radiant defining hue  
At the heart of your naïve and mindless disrepair  
Decomposing with your pedestal and sincerest scribbles too

Just a liar, knowing I store faith in a discriminately elected few  
You lied about ice skating, love, New York, and everywhere  
Condolences and farewell to the long forsaken you

Little bleeding minutes, dull aches, each enlightened breakthrough  
Regarding two confounded adolescents and an accidental affair  
Decomposing with your pedestal and sincerest scribbles too

Please, laugh at my persistent grudge, call my acrid position askew  
But at end, I am still me – yes foolishly amative, but aware  
That no part of who I so unapologetically adored has made it through  
Condolences and farewell to the long forsaken you  
Decomposing with your pedestal and sincerest scribbles too

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## *September Blues*

by **Shanice Hills**

A deep and groggy-lighted day  
Under a hollowed tree line sleeps  
A young man, in his hammock, sways.

With the hiss of cicadas that say,  
Good morning, as the gentle rain weeps  
A deep and groggy-lighted day.

In his dreams the browning leaves stay  
Sour green. And in her arms, keeps  
A young man, in his hammock, sways.

Into the wind where chimes are played  
As she strokes his face, her heart speaks  
A deep and groggy-lighted day.

Entangled close as lovers lay  
Where hearts make giant bounds and leaps,  
A young man, in his hammock, sways.

The sun's bright beams refuse to stay.  
Two sets of eyes now greet  
A deep and groggy-lighted day.  
A young man, in his hammock, sways.

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## *A Superhero's Tea Party*

by **Blake Hettick**

I sit at a small table set for four,  
with only silence to keep me company in this colorless place.  
Still dressed for the occasion, I pull my cape around me for warmth,  
staring into the delicate cup placed before me, half full.  
All around me are remnants of a time since past.  
When this place was filled with music and wonder  
of when our imagination was the only limit.  
A time when I was still a superhero.  
My memories take hold of me and send me back and if I close my eyes,  
for just a moment I can still hear the music playing, the joyful sound of  
laughter, and see the color.  
I can still see you all as you were, sweet and innocent,  
with smiles on all your faces,  
and I can see me in my silly costume,  
wearing my purple and green badges with pride,  
because each one means I kept you safe.  
In this sanctuary we would play, sing and dance all day  
without a care in the world.  
But on the outside, I knew my duty.  
I had to keep watchful eye and never blink,  
because when you called for me to save your life,  
I knew what I must do, no matter what it was,  
nothing was too small and no price too high.  
When you were lost and all seemed dark  
I would swoop in and carry you into the light,  
because that is what superheroes do.  
When nightmares became reality, my body would be your shield and hold  
back the monsters from the dark, because that is what superheroes do.

---

And when you were all alone, devoid of friends, I would sit at your tea party,  
that is what big brothers do.

Something warm runs down my face, bringing me back.

I open my eyes and notice the ripple in my cup, realizing where I now am.

Those memories were of a life ago.

Now you all are all grown and have left me, taking the color away with you.

The music no longer plays and the tea ran out long ago.

But still, every day, I put on the costume in hopes  
to hear one of you call out for me.

Because, no matter how far you go, or how old you get,  
if you ever seem lost or if nightmares creep up around you,  
I will be there, ready to earn back my faded badges.

Until then I will sit here all alone in my colorless kingdom,  
wondering when the music stopped,  
when the games got put away and... when did I blink?

---

## *Moon in Minor*

by **Mike Hardt**

Perfect. The miniature waning crescent  
Dabbled in soft dawn light  
White framed by window  
Cut into four squares above the open door

Fresh angst, cut by pure rosed thorns  
She is not what she seems  
The wind whispered  
But you will find your way

My hand held close to my own heart  
Desire is a stranger, barging in  
Who steals your thoughts?  
Who feeds your head?  
She is not what she seems  
The waning crescent said  
But you will find your way

As the moon fades into April's last day  
I am not in pain  
I find comfort in my own soliloquies  
Where questions have no poise

---

## *Schizophrenic Ball*

by **Ronald P. Wiskup II**

On one special night, called the Schizophrenic Ball  
all the world's lunatics gathered in a dining hall  
during the reception cocktails were served,  
soon everyone was unleashed and unnerved  
Doctor Paul was the first to emerge,  
under the suit his personalities had converged  
medicine was no longer what the doctor did know,  
he became an entertainer and put on a show  
with shouting from the crowd and complete vanity,  
he danced across the bar while losing his sanity  
Cowboy John was the next to come forth,  
he said he could only visit and must continue his journey to the north;  
there he would stand atop the world and dig a hole to China,  
all while using power from the sun,  
he promised to come back and talk about it when he was done  
Lawyer Bill then started to contemplate,  
he had thirteen different arguments over his dinner plate  
meanwhile Writer Artie was jumping with joy,  
he pulled out the pen; his favorite toy  
on all the napkins he did write,  
a secret code about the night  
then all of a sudden, without a trace  
all the guests vanished into outer space.

---

## *Definition of Me*

**by Jenny Harris**

You ask me who I am, but I am not just me.  
I am defined by something more, my heart splits into three.  
I can't remember life before, but still I am amazed...  
I look at all their faces, I'm gonna miss these days.  
Walking here beside them, I wish they were still small.  
They're almost on their own, they almost do it all.  
It's all gone by so fast. Why can't I slow it down?  
"Mom! Come on, let's go!"  
No, please....not yet ....not now.  
Can't we all just stay here?  
In this moment, let's stop time.  
When they all move on, how will I be defined?

---

## *Sonnet 1*

**by Eve Summerton**

I want to write a sonnet just for you  
And in language even Shakespeare rise above,  
To join the other martyrs bold and true  
And stand upon the scaffold of my love;  
But knowing how to pen your subtle grace,  
The loving wit with which your words are held,  
Cannot find sim'lar bearing on this page  
So by this verse you might be quite repelled;  
But humour for a moment my delight  
At finding such a creature who mirrors  
My every hope and dream, esteem and fright  
And glosses over all my evil errs;  
So though from me poetic words withhold  
Now does unspoken love feel thus consoled.

---

## *The Great Replacement*

by Bryce McElhaney

Always distant but close enough to reach  
Like a sincere relative looking after me  
You took his place with a confusing pride  
Are you supposed to be the great replacement?

Like a rocky mountain road, you can be unpredictable  
Yet stable enough to trust  
Enigmatic enough to misunderstand  
You are the strange replacement

Now that I'm older, I can see through you like the glass house we lived in  
A foundation of morals and respect, yet fragile and easily shattered  
You took me as your own, you are the pillar of my foundations  
You are the replacement

Looking back now, I see that you were the best thing to happen to us  
You've done the impossible, filling unfillable voids  
You are the hero without a cape, dressed instead in dirty work clothes and  
callused hands  
You are the great replacement

---

## *Going Home*

by Chiaki Troutman

When seashore villagers watched from the hill,  
the land and the sea became one in hell,  
and the rushing water covered the cities,  
pushing cars, houses, and people toward them,  
many miles away in a quake-proof structure,  
workers picked up papers scattered on the floor.

By the time others went back to work  
an anxious soul had left the building,  
with her young daughters on her mind.  
Commuting trains stopped; the phones were silent.

By the time the city streets became full  
of wandering refugees the woman had followed  
the railway to the east with a map in hand;  
walking for three hours, going home.

Under the evening sky, passersby with empathy,  
without words, glanced at each other.  
However, everyone, exhausted, had questions.

At a taxi station were long lines.  
Strangers shared a ride gratefully.  
She forced her way into the crowd  
and waited for an open space.

By the time the taxi arrived at her building,  
her neighbors had gathered in the night square.  
She stepped out of the car; her girls rushed up to her.

Heaving a deep sigh of relief, happily home  
she started fixing a simple meal.

---

## *Painting a New Life*

by **Chiaki Troutman**

A dream comes true, and here it's begun  
I see an abstract where the bluebird may be  
When I stop painting a picture it's done

Once I met a wise man, knowledgeable one  
and began wanting to be a woman who is free  
A dream comes true, and here it's begun

I traveled abroad and felt free being no one  
and hoped I would dwell somewhere over the sea  
When I stop painting a picture it's done

I read a story of love, courage and bond undone  
and found a new idea of my relationship key  
A dream comes true, and here it's begun

My wishes naturally come true in the long run  
My life isn't still; the canvas is blank in my gallery  
When I stop painting a picture it's done

What do you want to be; I ask myself in the sun  
and I pick up my palette, new colors to see  
A dream comes true, and here it's begun  
When I stop painting a picture it's done

---

## *Allusive Alliteration*

**by Jeremy Cloud**

Attend, acquaintances, an anecdote:  
Awesome, albeit abnormal.  
An author's attempts at articulating abstraction.

Before building beautiful poems and books,  
Bunches of botches are bound to be blurred  
Belittling and burning the builder's self belief.

Sadly, such sordid scenarios are standard  
Storytellers stalling, settling for simplicity.  
Striving for success, sans structure or salience.

Objective observation offers one opinion:  
Obsessive oration obliterates order and  
Overbearing ornamentation obscures openness.

Likewise, letting lines loll  
languidly, linking  
loosely? Lacks lustre.

Ultimately, unleashing unique understanding  
Uncoupled from unctuous, ugly ululation,  
Underscored by uplifting urbanity,

Trumps titillation in text every time.  
Though training takes tremendous tenacity,  
The talent, once tapped, triggers transcendence.

Eh. Editorializing elucidates elegiacally.  
Ending eccentrically as ever  
Ere the emergence of egregious elocution.

---

## *Dear Heart*

by Lyndsie StremLOW

*“I know nothing and my heart aches.”*

—Fernando Pessoa

Wicked, skinned pigeon.  
You floundering fish.  
You falsified witness.  
I have subdued you  
for the sake of sanity.

Wet, unready runt  
withering outside the litter,

arranged in a cave.  
You wax lantern.  
I am your lukewarm  
mother.

Could you think, you would cease to beat.

---

## *Kool-Aid*

**by Aaron Vardasebi**

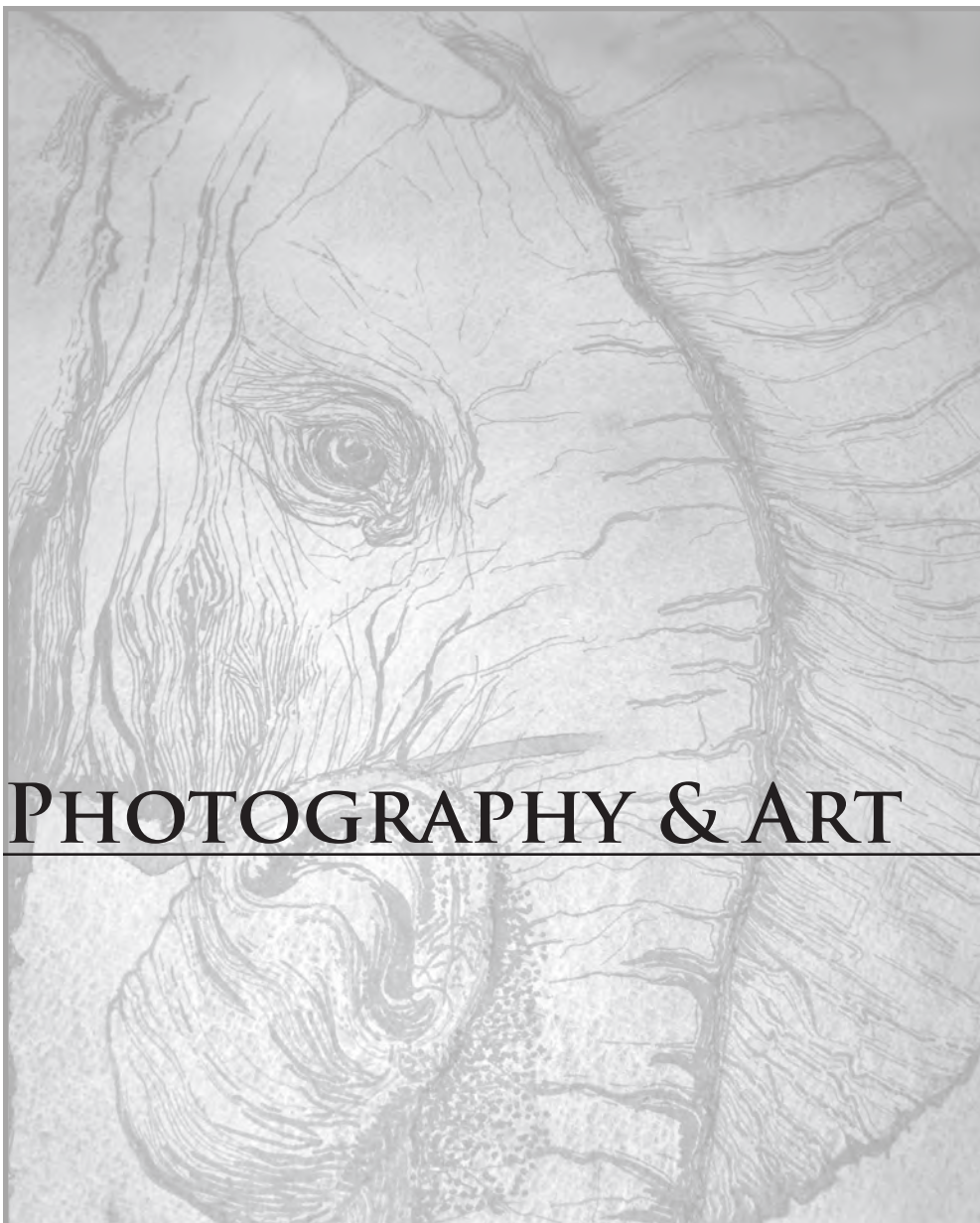
I don't know why these people try to change me, the initials read A.V., it's not money I'm chasing but it's part of the reason I'm racing. Six speed combined with two doors, please come forth, and feel all 300 horses when I transition from third to fourth. On the highway to hell or heaven I speed, they ask me do I believe, what do you think? They reply with a sigh, and once again I'm criticized, but who am I to a critic's eye? I have no reason to cry, because I am the owner of time, I fast forward when I need, all they can do is rewind. I press record and live for right now, they press stop 'cause they're stagnant and nervous wiping sweat from their brow. I'd rather have high self-esteem than none, they would rather have 3 or 2, but I'm gunning for 1. Anything is possible, I proved it time after time so even YOUR thoughts are plausible, you can't fit in my shoes and you can't wear my socks, and even if you somehow get them on you can't tie the knots, lace yourself before you brace yourself, I've never been afraid to ask if I needed help, if you're always looking at me you can never see yourself. I take trips to the moon, you take trips to the zoo, I'm out in space while you're looking at a lion in a cage, funny how I'm like a lion while you're in a cage you built yourself and if you say otherwise we all know you're lying. I'm cold like Pluto, but think like Plato, your mind is malleable similar to Play-Doh, particularly the color green due to all the jealousy because you want to be me, I don't mean to mix the blue and yellow because you're a fine fellow, as I sit back I honestly can't blame you and the best thing is I have nothing to prove. There are no rules in this new age, with that being said, I suggest you don't drink the Kool-Aid.

---

## *For My Mother*

**by Rachael Z. Ikins**

She lies now  
in a clear plastic place.  
Tubing, chemicals, drug-dreams, pain.  
She wishes she could out-fly  
her hollow bones' brittle truth.  
She dreams of flight.  
Scars, skin stretched shiny  
as feathers, a caged bird. Hear  
their blue-black satin rustle.  
Do you see her wings?



# PHOTOGRAPHY & ART



*Chihuly*  
Brenda Breeding



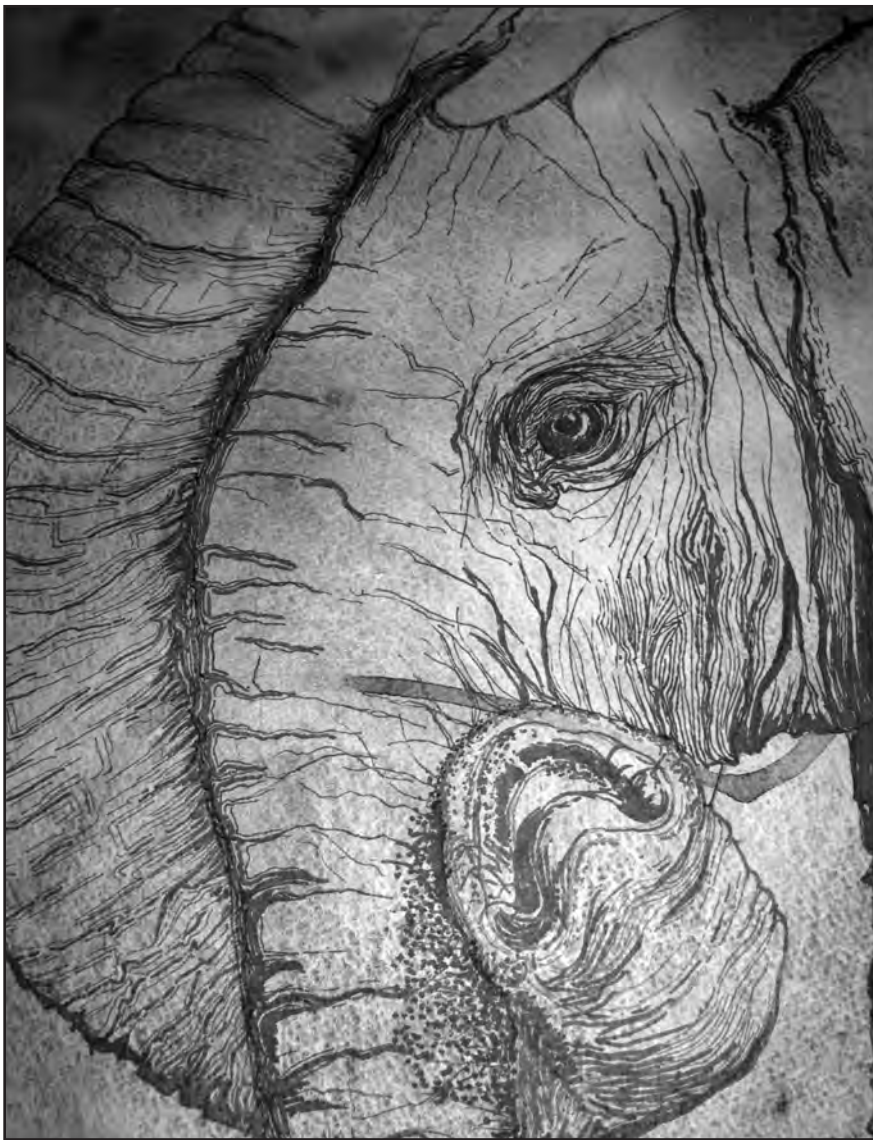
*Flare Detonation*  
Jeremy Cloud



*Temperature Matrix*  
Jeremy Cloud



*Winter on Horseshoe Lane*  
Bobbie Hill



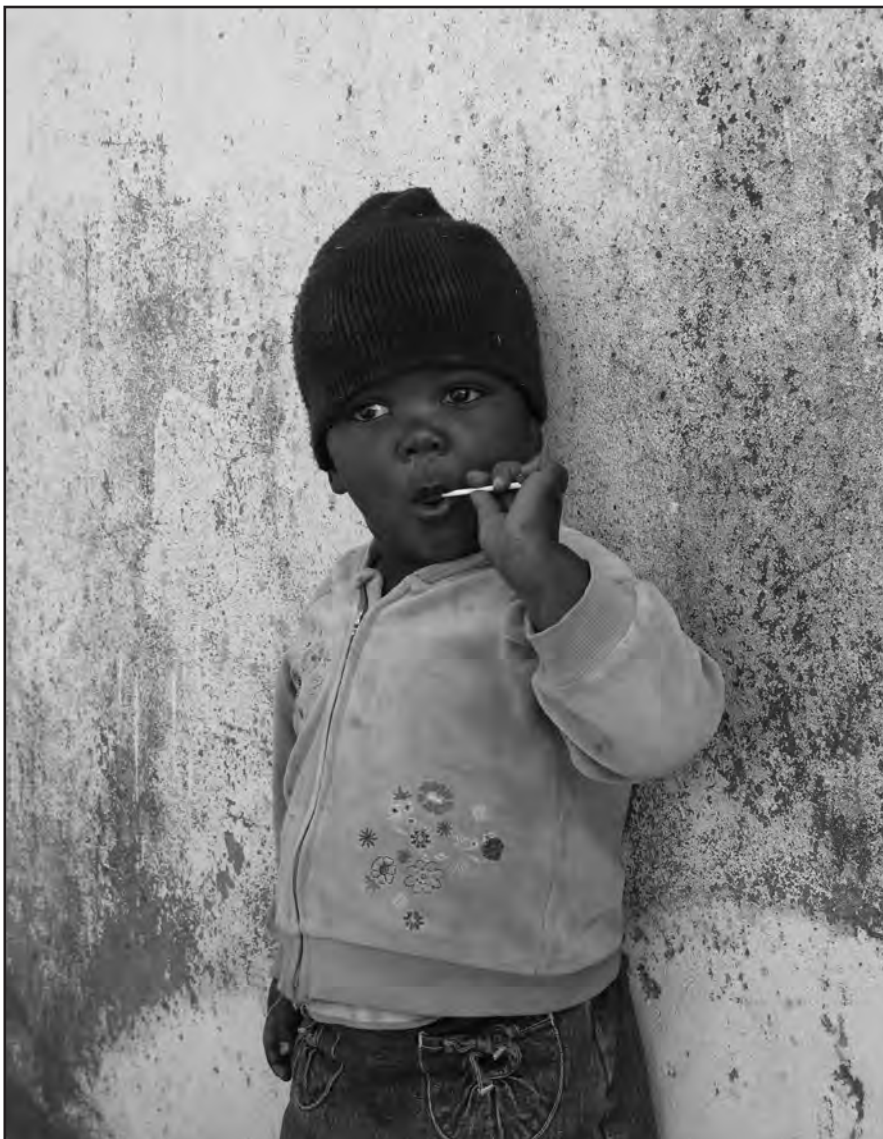
*Shelter*  
Rachael Z. Ikins



*Waiting*  
Rachael Z. Ikins

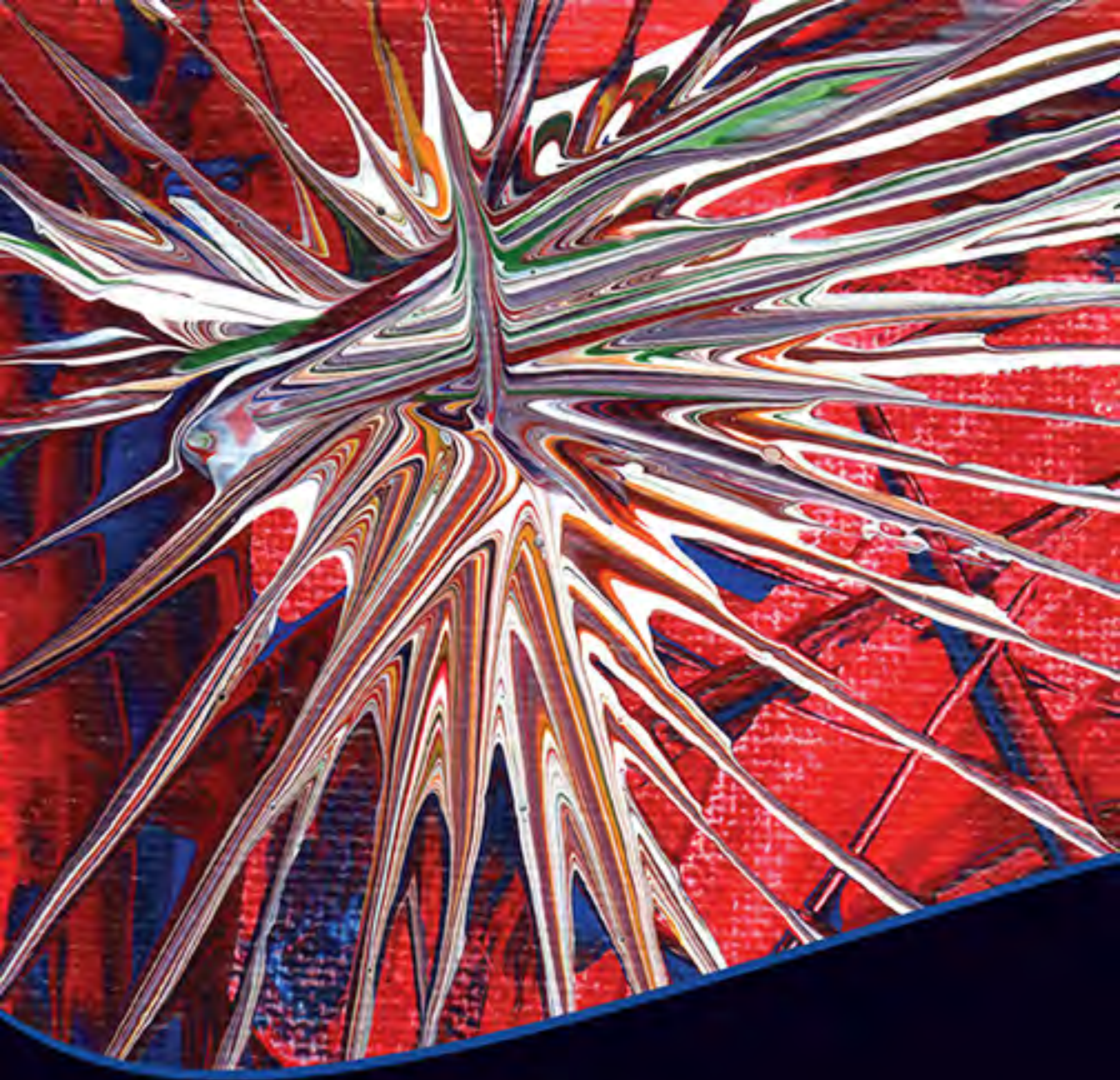


*Lost Eyes*  
**Elizabeth Reed**



*Unfocused*  
Elizabeth Reed

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