



15 *Absolute*

Poetry • Fiction • Nonfiction • Artwork • Photography

15
Absolute



Absolute 2015

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CONTENTS

FICTION.....3

- “May December”* Hannah Hellstern
“A Little Kindness” Stephen Huggins
“The Puppy Thief” Jared Lemmon
“Wondering” Jeffery Moore
“How We Came to Be” Karsyn Taylor
“All in a Day’s Work” Tiffane Shorter

NONFICTION30

- “When Colin Met Kylie”* Kylie Combs
“One Day” Joshua L. Sewell
“Hands” Andrew Kern
“Chains, Cuffs and Muffs” Priscilla Segroves
“The Map to Candy Land” Mariah Rivera
“It Left Its Mark on the World” Caitlin Connell

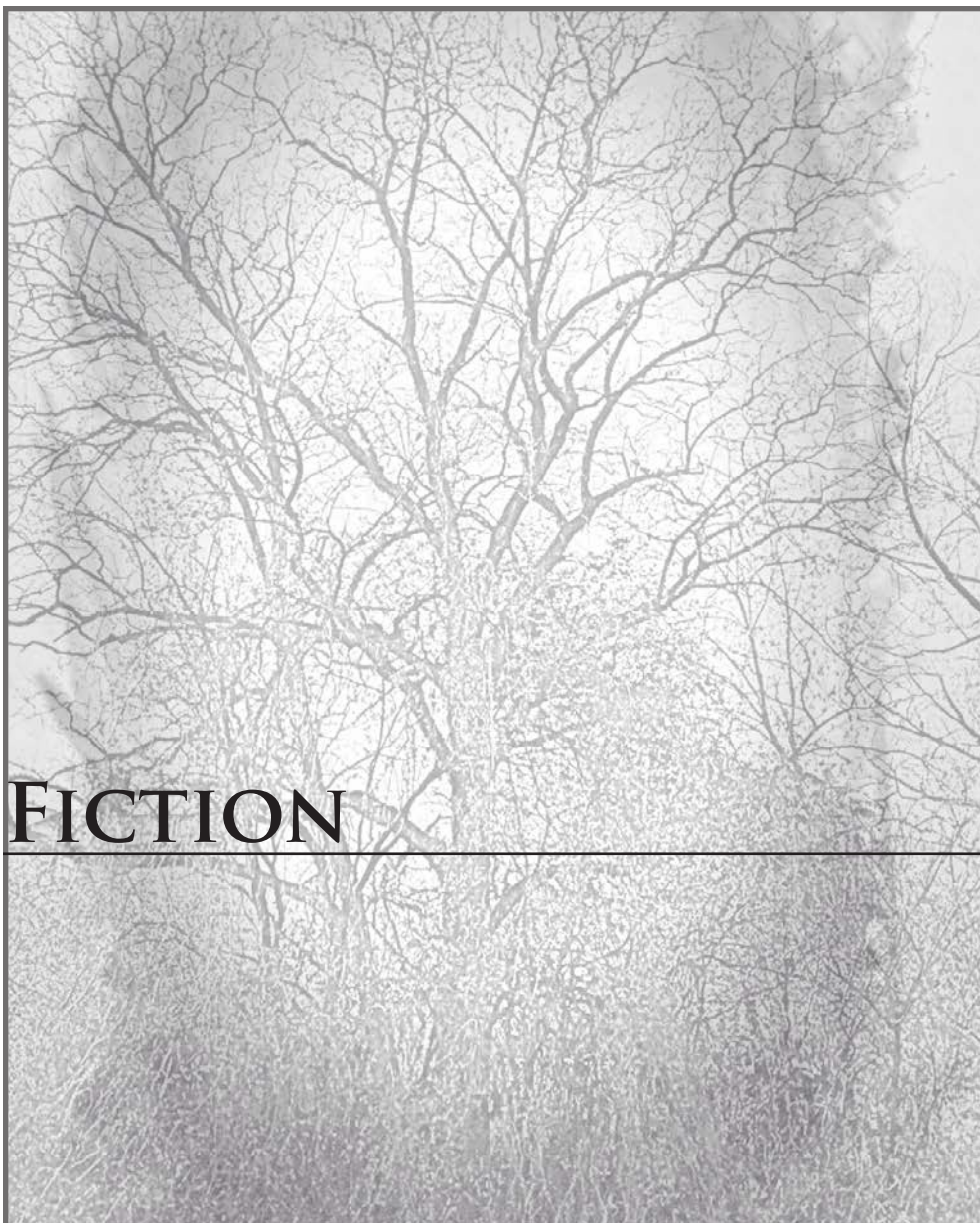
POETRY54

- “Somewhere in the Middle”* Saraa Kami
“Cedar Creek” Amy L. Phelps
“Who Threw the First Rock?” Liam Whinery
“Will You, Won’t You?” Tiffane Shorter
“Traveling” Sarah McKenzie
“you ring wedding bells in my chest” Imani Edmond
“innocence” Imani Edmond
“Of Dragons and Other Mystical Guardians: a cat’s night diary”
..... Rachael Z. Ikins
“Looking Backward, or Forward” Linda J. Rother

<i>“Mixed Feelings”</i>	<i>Kimberly Ray</i>
<i>“Sonnet 2”</i>	<i>Eve Summerton</i>
<i>“The Garage”</i>	<i>Danny Grajales</i>
<i>“Sad Woman’s Blues”</i>	<i>Andrew McQueen</i>
<i>“Questions Before Death”</i>	<i>Julie Denton</i>
<i>“Love Alone”</i>	<i>Haley Cates</i>
<i>“If & Only”</i>	<i>Damien Lykins</i>
<i>“Forceful Change”</i>	<i>Sara Long</i>
<i>“#nofilter”</i>	<i>Kari Reichert</i>
<i>“Woody Guthrie”</i>	<i>Ethan Woodard</i>

PHOTOGRAPHY & ART.....78

<i>“Whiskers”</i>	<i>Brenda Breeding</i>
<i>“Awakening”</i>	<i>Rachael Z. Ikins</i>
<i>“Dormant Walnut Tree”</i>	<i>Rachael Z. Ikins</i>
<i>“Owl”</i>	<i>Cathy Bowman</i>
<i>“Warrior”</i>	<i>Priscilla Segroves</i>
<i>“I Need My Space”</i>	<i>Rachel Schutte</i>
<i>“Saunter in the Park”</i>	<i>Marqueon Tramble</i>



May December

by **Hannah Hellstern**

December. Not as other states know it, but December in that Oklahoma way where summer and fall seem to alternate days. I built a fire this morning, not because it was particularly cold, more that I wish it was. I find myself sitting in front of the fire, shorts and t-shirt, swirling the past year round and round in my glass of brandy.

It was never supposed to be anything. Mentorship maybe. Nothing more. Staring at the end of my forties. Lost somewhere in her twenties.

We met in other seasons, it had always been nothing. The enjoyment of each other's company, engaging conversation, a sympathetic ear. Never anything serious, even if the subject matter was. I like making people laugh. I liked the way she laughed. I liked the way it felt to make her laugh.

It was autumn, when we first met, and I was married. The next time it was spring, seven years later, and I was divorced, but now she was married. There had been one moment in between, one brief moment in summer, passing each other's grocery carts. That summer I was single, she was single, but neither of us had brains or courage to seize the moment. Sometimes that's all you get, not a lifetime, or even a season, sometimes just a moment. A moment when, yes, it would work for both. And we didn't take it.

Last year, winter, we met again. I was divorced again and now she was divorced. Freshly divorced. Newly divorced in that scattered way that makes even stable people wonder who they are and what they're about. It was hard to see her flounder like that. She was sweet and kind, good to others, feisty and playful. I didn't know any of the specifics, but I'm a patient sort of curious, and we weren't really close, not friends who share things like that. She would either tell me, when she was ready, or she wouldn't. It was harder to make her laugh that spring, but I got her to smile sometimes.

We met again. We met in May. She wore a flowing, sky blue dress with bright yellow jewelry. I'd never seen her so colorful before, a blues and grays sort of woman. She was lovely in a way that epitomized summer days. This

was no quick pass in the grocery aisle. Intermission at an outdoor theater. My date was MIA. She was there alone. Her smile when she saw me was probably the most wonderful compliment of my life. Her laugh came easily that summer. I sat with her for the second act. I walked her to her car. It was her first kiss in the rain.

This time, for the first time, we both had the brains and courage to seize the moment.

And I did find out what happened to her. Mistakenly believing the best of everyone, she found herself in over her head with a man who had more issues than she had resources. He shouted, he threw stuff, he cheated, he leaned on her until she broke. *Even the nicest people have their limits*, she read once.

She was a survivor. Bravely recovering from the stretching life had demanded of her. Her resilience, though hardly faultless, was admirable. I couldn't help but wish I had recovered with such a spirit as hers. She was a survivor, but she was wounded and she was weary. She was often quiet, especially after we made love, or in the quiet of a rainy night. She seemed, for a long time, to be working through it all in her head. Constantly rebuilding, consistently healing, she was committed to living without bitterness and resentment.

Whatever this was, it was good for both of us, just in completely different ways.

It was so hard at first. I knew from that second moment in summer that this was different. But having been wrong so many times before, it was nearly painful to be so happy. And that's the word for it really, what she did for me. I felt happy. Solidly, strangely happy. That Christmas she met my family. Not the ones I have around all the time, the ones I can't get away from. She made us Christmas dinner. I'll always love her for that.

Over that winter she even learned to fight. Sounds bad, but it was so good. To feel secure enough in herself to stand up, to have enough trust in me to be honest and open, to have enough comfort in the relationship to have at it without worrying it will blow away. She always trembled when she

fought. Said it made her sick to her stomach. As if I wasn't feeling just the same. Fights never lasted long, though. It wasn't in her to leave things badly, even for a day. There was always a call, a kiss, a hug to set things right again.

In so many ways she turned out to be the woman I'd wanted for years. Easy companion, patient and compassionate. The nurturing type that would have made an amazing mother. Spontaneous and playful. In the summer evenings after dinner, we sat out on the patio and talked and laughed over Coronas. She loved my randomness and tolerated my vanity. She was thoughtful in a brilliant way. She even loved the rain as much as I did.

She reminded me of desires of earlier years and seasons. It was like finally finding the missing piece to a puzzle you've long since thrown away. Meeting a need I'd outgrown. Through the haze of happiness I could see the distance, could see it like a crack that eventually leads to a canyon. It was there from the beginning. But although I could see it, I couldn't help but fall, faster than I expected, harder than I knew I should.

I often felt I was watching the blossoming of a flower, the thatching of a new creation. To have been as cramped and stifled as she had been, she transformed into something I can't name or describe. She was something, standing in unblemished skin, marveling at the newness, the beauty, and the strength of her own wings. It was an honor to watch, and I was blessed to be in her life while it happened.

By the following spring I knew I was looking at the most beautiful woman I'd known. The kind of beautiful that spills out on everyone she meets. I'd given up on the lazy cynicism of thinking that people just aren't like that. She was. And more often than not she received good from others in return. People in my office even said I was nicer to be around, though she never stepped foot in the building. *Grace should be as contagious as it is stubborn* was another quote she loved.

At the end of the spring she finished her masters degree. In the summer we took the vacation we'd joked about since before we got together. Sitting on the mantle above my fire now is the shell we found in that perfect place in Mallorca.

In August she got the job. It wasn't the sort of offer you pass up. It was good for her. It was worse than out of state, it would be a new life. She cried when she told me. She wanted the adventure, but she wanted to hold on. I felt like the sleeper who knows morning is coming but dreads the dawn and secretly craves to stay in the dream. More than half honest, I told her how thrilled I was for her.

I knew, I'd always known, it needed to happen. It was painful, but I knew it was right. I think we both recognized it. The natural end. The change in seasons. Protecting us really. We had a great thing, but we both knew, yet never said, it wasn't everything. It couldn't be. She was too young not to want to be a mother. I was too old to start all that over again. She was that missing piece, but I no longer had that puzzle. She had needed a safe place to heal, but she no longer needed healing. Now she needed flight. We both knew it.

September came and left too quickly. October I saw her to the airport. She was scared. I felt as though someone was about to knock the air out of my lungs. But she never knew. That last push. I encouraged her to go. She's resilient, undaunted. I'm happy to see her fly.

She'll write. She'll call, stay in touch. I know she will. She'll meet someone. She'll marry, start a family. I know she will.

It was never really our season, but I have no regrets. *Whatever falls from one place is carried on the tide to another*: another saying she loved. She had places in her life she hadn't gone yet. Places I'd already been and couldn't go back to. Places she needed to go and I couldn't take her. It was never our season. That's the difference, the distance, that separates us. It's natural. The distance between May and December.

A Little Kindness

by Stephen Huggins

Mike Rogers raked back the bolt on his M4 carbine rifle and chambered a round. The weapon was new, a replacement from the Border Patrol office for the old rifle that had jammed on him twice the prior month. He turned the gun over in his hands and admired the untarnished black metal, then placed the weapon back into the front seat of his white SUV.

He stood outside his vehicle and peered over its hood at the blue-green Rio Grande waters running below his vantage point, a perch on the rise of a low hill surrounded by plowed fields just greening up in early May. The river was quiet and empty in the late afternoon, but that might change soon when the sun sank below the dusty bronze horizon.

Illegal entrants to the United States preferred to cross the meandering river waters in the dead of night, and nighttime operations had always set Mike's nerves on edge. His brown hair had gained a smattering of gray after sixteen years working for the Border Patrol, but in all that time he had never shaken the clammy hands that started when the sun went down.

The one thing he did look forward to in the darkness, though, was relief from the heat--Laredo, Texas, baked in the mid-nineties during the early part of the year, and a blanket of high humidity had settled on the area. The green bulletproof tactical vest hanging on Mike's broad shoulders had turned his chest sappy with sweat hours earlier.

His hand-held radio crackled to life and Peterson's electronic-tinged voice issued from its tiny speaker. "Anything?"

Mike grabbed his binoculars and scanned the brush—the green stands of swaying willow and mesquite trees, and low clumps of thorny snakewood bushes that lined the river banks. Nothing moved in the foliage.

He keyed his radio. "No, honey, nobody is home down here."

Mike liked to poke fun at his patrol partner of three years, Peterson, after the man began to remind Mike of his wife, Deirdre. She was always the

worrier at home, pawing at her long brown hair over daily concerns such as bills, and Mike's job with the Border Patrol had made her anxiety worse. He had reassured her, whenever possible, that the work was safe, but he never mentioned the occasional armed detainee he encountered.

Peterson called back on the radio. "Very funny. One of the overheads spotted a boat in the water ten minutes ago, so call in if you see it. A silver flat-bottom."

"Copy that."

A helicopter support team had swept the river during the afternoon after two other Border Patrol agents had reported an increase in boat activity early in the week. Boats might carry drug smugglers with cocaine or bails of marijuana, and sometimes the smugglers came heavily armed to protect their cargo.

Mike preferred to deal with the people crossing the river on foot instead—most of them were compliant with his orders to stop when he found them.

He had even detained one skinny kid named Jorge four times in the past three years. The teenager was usually dressed in a thin yellow t-shirt and a well-worn pair of Levi's jeans, and Mike had always offered him a candy bar and a bottle of water while waiting for the dark blue bus that returned detainees to Mexico.

Jorge had sat with his face fallen in disappointment during the bus waits, but he had always said "thank you" in broken English when he received the candy bars. Mike had talked with the teenager enough during the border stops to learn that he came from Anáhuac and wanted to work—Jorge never carried illicit items during the river crossings.

Dim twilight turned to a cool, cloudless evening, so Mike opened the SUV door and pulled his thermal camera from the front seat. He swept the camera along the river banks and stopped on a pair of lanky, orange forms that had risen from the water on the United States side of the Rio Grande and started the climb up the river bank toward him. The thin bodies probably meant a couple of kids.

Mike grabbed his radio and began to key the transmitter when he spotted five more amorphous orange globs on the camera screen, but these shapes moved on the opposite side of the water.

He panned the thermal imager and recognized the dim outline of a flat-bottom boat where the men worked in the dark to load cargo. The boat sped up-river a moment later.

Mike whispered into his radio. "That flat-bottom just loaded up and is heading upstream. Three on board, two on foot Mexico side—"

He paused and scanned the U.S. side of the river for the other two orange outlines he had spotted, but he couldn't locate them in the thick brush.

Mike panned back to the river with his thermal imager. One of the orange globs was prone on the ground next to what he assumed was a man holding something to his eyes. If these men were drug smugglers, what were they doing?

A white flash appeared on the thermal camera screen and he blinked to clear his vision, but then his skin went cold.

A muzzle flash.

Mike ducked behind his SUV just as its front window exploded in a shower of glass, but dropped the radio in his haste.

A low, thundering report boomed across the river and rolled up the scrub bushes and trees around him. His pulse pounded as he crouched and leaned with his back against the vehicle's rear tire. The radio lay in the dirt by the front bumper.

Another rifle round plowed into the SUV and blew out an exit wound in the passenger side door, a blossom of shredded metal protruding from the vehicle's white skin. The boom of the large caliber rifle firing on Mike's position followed.

His heart jumped up into his throat, both from the shock of the weapon fire and from the flash of Deirdre's face that appeared in his mind. He forced himself to take a great gasp of air and lunged for the radio in the dirt, but a sledgehammer landed in the middle of his back and blew the air out of his lungs. The dim, plowed field behind Mike's SUV was turned on

its side, and then the farmland rolled toward him. In a moment, he was taken by darkness.

A short stab of pain snapped Mike's eyes open.

"Agent Rogers?" A young blond nurse in purple scrubs peered into his eyes. She hung a bag of saline on the metal floor stand next to him.

"You're a little dehydrated."

Mike's government identification card and brown leather wallet rested on the nearby wooden table, and his cracked green tactical vest lay on the white tile floor.

He blinked and focused on the blue curtain that surrounded his bed.

"Where am I?"

"Laredo General. This is the emergency room. We've called your office at the Border Patrol and they put us in touch with your wife—she's on her way. Somebody named Peterson is coming out, too."

The gunfire near the river snapped into his head. "But how did I get here? Did someone from my office bring me in?" He shifted in his bed, but groaned when a burst of pain shot through his shoulder blades.

"They didn't look like government types, if that's what you mean. A couple of young Hispanic guys." The nurse pulled a yellow paper pad from her scrubs pocket and scribbled on it. "I'll give you a pain reliever—that bruise on your back is the biggest I've ever seen."

"Thank you." Mike gritted his teeth and sat up. "Hispanic guys? What did they look like?"

She handed him the prescription slip. "They were both pretty skinny—showed up sitting in an open truck bed, carried you in and took off. One of them said his name was Jorge."

The Puppy Thief

by Jared Lemmon

There goes a German Shepherd, he's probably worth about \$200 if I can find the right country family for him. I stir my coffee, take a sip, and continue staring out the window. Whippet puppy, 2-3 year old Boxer, and a young Beagle (\$450, \$125, and \$300). Ahh, now there's a beauty, a Maltese puppy. She's probably worth about \$1,000 but I'll have to find a lonely wife with a rich husband or spoiled daughter with her father's credit card. I used to be the latter, but suddenly one day I received some abrupt news which caused my descent into canine larceny.

"Bianca, we're going to have to cut you off," my mother snarled at me through the phone.

Unwilling to let this happen, I pleaded my case: "But, Mom! You know I need my maid and butler around, what am I going to do without them?"

"I'm not just talking about your servants, I'm talking everything. Bills, rent, car payment. You're on your own, Bianca. Your father almost went to prison for insider trading! You can do without all the things you're used to."

"Are you kidding? Do you know how expensive my water purifier filters are? And it's about to be fall! I can't be running around in summer clothes all the fall season can I, Mother? Let me talk to Daddy." My father was my last hope, the proverbial Hail Mary in my attempt to keep my gravy train moving.

"Hi, honey. Your mom's not lying, we don't have any money to give you. What with my fines and lawyer fees and bribes, I had to pay off half the city not to end up in the poky. You'll be alright, you'll find a way to pay for all the stuff you're used to. A little hard work never hurt anyone."

I hurled my phone at the wall upon hearing the news, unaware that this would end up being a \$600 mistake. I absolutely refuse to leave this lifestyle behind, and I'm going to do anything necessary to keep it. Hard

work is out of the question. My manicures alone sometimes can top four-figures, and I'll be damned if I will pay for one of those bad boys twice because I chip a nail cleaning out a tortilla chip hopper. Who would want to go to work for 40 hours a week when the option to lie by the pool with a martini all day is in the cards if you play your hand right? I decide to go to bed and as I pull on my silk sleep mask I take the night to think about my plan of action.

The sun shines through my mahogany blinds (\$899) onto my 5000 thread count sheets (\$750, duvet cover not included) as I wake up, and I still have no idea how to get the money required to keep my lavish lifestyle afloat. My bachelors degree in Pre-World-War-II Southern Italian Fashion History (\$65,000) doesn't have many job offerings. I am going to have to check the classifieds like a common peasant. God help me.

I pull on my Versace coat (\$475) and walk down the stairs of my penthouse to the Starbucks on the bottom floor. They have papers here, I think. The last time I read a newspaper was sometime before I had a smart phone, so I'm not exactly sure where to find them anymore. Luckily, Starbucks does have a paper (\$6), and I grab my trenta iced white mocha (no whip, non-fat, \$9.50) and sit down to scan through the classifieds.

Do people really do these jobs? It's always befuddled me. Who in their right mind would take \$7 an hour to make burgers? These people should just go become nurses or car salesmen or whatever it is poor people do for money. I can tell you this much, I won't be asking anyone if they want fries with that. Right as I'm about to give up on my classified ads, I notice the section selling pets. A woman is selling French Bulldog puppies for \$2,500 per puppy. I vaguely remember learning dogs have litters of 25 to 30 in my biology class, or anatomy class, or something, I wasn't really paying attention. A subtle smile comes across my face, and I think I've found my new gravy train.

It almost seems too simple. It seems like it should have been the plot of some terrible movie with Steven Seagal. A puppy thief? Is there really such a thing? As I weigh my moral flexibility against my very urgent and

pressing need for money, I quickly consult Google to see if “puppy stealing” is actually a thing, or if I’m going to be the first. Google doesn’t seem to know of any recent puppy thefts, although it does recommend me to both PetSmart and PetCo. I feel as though these companies wouldn’t like this fact, but nonetheless, it seems as though I’ve found a niche in the criminal marketplace.

Here’s the way I figure it: If I can steal 3-4 puppies per day, and sell them for \$2,000-3,000 apiece, that’s \$9,000-12,000 a day, and roughly a quarter of a million dollars per month. This should be a more than ample revenue stream to continue to pay both my butler and maid. This will be like taking candy from a baby.

There’s both a subtle brilliance and stupidity to this plan, I’ll have to walk a fine line. On the one hand, puppies run away all the time and aren’t that closely guarded (not like a child, or jewelry, or even a television.) If you have a dog (or any pet really) think about it: How hard would it really be for someone to steal it right from under your nose without your noticing? You let your dog out at least 4 times a day, and you don’t watch it the entire time. If someone were to come up and steal it, you’d probably just assume it had run away if you didn’t catch them red-handed. You might walk your neighborhood and put up some flyers, but that would be that. I would have your puppy forever, and you’d probably just assume he had run off.

Police won’t be bothered to look for a lost dog. Not with all the other things they have going on. Even if on the way back from a heist I got caught blowing through a stop sign with a back seat full of puppies, no police officer would know. It’s not as if a dog can tell you he’s been stolen. As long as I don’t get caught with my hand in the cookie jar by the owners, I see no flaw in this plan. And with new potential owners seeking their own new puppies all the time, I have a fully developed demand for all of my entirely free supply.

The first week of the plan goes splendidly. I’ve made more than enough to continue my lavish lifestyle, and probably only had to work about 10 hours. Dogs are easy to persuade, and a half pound of bacon goes a long

way for use as dog bait. I go up to the fence, let them smell the bacon, and wrestle them into my bag. Easy as pie. As soon as these dogs are posted on Craigslist for rock bottom prices, they fly off my shelves. I haven't had to keep one of these mutts around for more than a day. I'm literally in shock that some mafia guy hasn't thought of canine extortion. I wonder if I could patent this somehow.

The second week drags a little bit, but business is still proverbially booming. A Dachshund for you, a Pit Bull for her, and a wad of cash for me. I've figured out that if I don't feed the dogs it cuts down on my costs and improves my bottom line by about 4%, so I've cut that out of the budget. I still use bacon to lure my new merchandise in, but I'm looking into a cheaper alternative.

By the third week, I have to rent a store room downtown to hold all of my extra inventory. I like this area because there's not much foot traffic to hear the little beasts yell and howl because of their growling stomachs. I also buy an industrial deep fryer to make huge portions of bacon. The bacon brings home the bacon, you could say, and I need as much of it as possible to get these little devils in for fresh stock.

I've scouted a perfect location outside of town to pick up some fresh meat, a puppy farm with a few new litters. I drive to the downtown store room to fry up some bacon for my upcoming big haul. I decide 12 pounds of bacon should be enough, and I dump it into the fryer to begin its cooking. The bacon pops and hisses as it hits the hot oil, angry about its current situation. These damn dogs are no different, barking and barking and barking because they smell all of this delicious bacon. You'd think they'd be scared of bacon because of the situation it got them into. Dumb mutts.

The bacon seems to be hissing more than normal, and as I go to check the industrial fryer I hear a deep rumbling coming from within the machine. Before I can turn to escape, a huge grease bubble pops and I am covered with hot grease. Flailing about as the grease boils my skin, I accidentally knock into the dogs' cages, and one by one they topple over, freeing every last mutt I've captured.

As I'm lying on the ground with first degree burns all over, covered in bacon grease, I finally open my eyes to see the pack of dogs forming a circle around me, slowly closing in. They smell bacon. They haven't eaten in days.

Wondering

by Jeffery Moore

Somewhere in a rural farm house, a mother kneels to pray at her bed as she does every night in recent months. She prays to God to please keep her son safe from harm and to bring him back to her as he left. She prays to her dear Lord to bless him in all that he does and to keep his spirits high. To keep his head up high and focus on his day, even when he has seen the worst of men. She finishes her prayer, as she does every night praying in Jesus's name. She wipes the tears not yet lost from her eyes and climbs into her bed. In the minutes before sleep falls upon her, she lies in her bed as her mind begins to wander. She wonders what her baby boy is doing at that very moment and if he is well. She wonders if he is getting enough sleep and enough to eat and all the other things a mother worries for her child. As she wonders these things sleep takes hold and for today her wondering is done.

In a foreign land far away, a soldier sits in his barracks. He is just finishing up checking his gear for his long and grueling day ahead. He has checked all of his supplies and made sure his rifle is in perfect operating condition. He looks at his watch to check the time and sees he has almost twenty minutes before he must be in formation for his patrol today. He leans back against his bunk bed and closes his eyes, so that he may try to calm his nerves. As he always does to help him relax, he begins to think about life back home. He thinks about his girlfriend, and how he never realized just how much he loved her until he got here. He wonders when the next time he will get to hold her in his arms will be. He wonders if she misses him as much as he does her and then quickly tells himself not to dwell on any negatives. He drifts back into thought and thinks about the last night they spent with each other and how they both didn't want that night to end. He thinks about how all of that stuff seems like an eternity ago and aches for that feeling to go away. He leans up and checks his watch and notices it is time for him to head to formation and begin his day. He kisses the picture he has

of her in his bunk footlocker before heading out the door with all his gear. As he heads to meet his patrol sergeant he wonders what their mission will be for the day and hopes, whatever it is, that it be an uneventful one.

Off in a small quiet suburb of a small Midwestern town, a little boy wakes from a very bad dream. With tears in his eyes and a panic on his face he cries out for his mother. His mother responds quickly as all mothers do when they hear their child's cry. She sits on his bed and asks him immediately what is wrong. The little boy, eyes still red and teary, looks at her and tells her that he was having a terrible nightmare. She holds and comforts him as they sit in his bed and asks him what his nightmare was about. Eyes still red but tears dried away, he looks at her and begins explaining his frightful dream. He tells her about a monster that was trying to get him inside their house and that he was crying for Daddy to come and save him. His mother looks at him and asks him if Daddy came and saved him in the dream. With a sad frown on his face the little boy tells his mother that Daddy couldn't because he was locked outside and couldn't get in despite his tries. Still frowning from his very bad dream, the boy says to his mother, "I wonder when Daddy will get to come home again." With a tear in her eye the mother thinks to herself that she wonders the same thing every night as well. She tells her son that Daddy will call as soon as he is able to and not to worry about him as much. She tells him that Daddy is safe and that he will be home before he knows it. As the little boy begins to fall back asleep she sits there with him and watches. As he drifts off to the land of dreams, her mind starts to wander. She wonders what her husband is doing right then and when the next time she will get to hear his voice will be. She hopes and prays he is staying safe. She knows she is powerless to help because she has been through this many times. Wondering about him only causes worry. So, she blocks him from her mind and goes back to her half empty room for the night.

Elsewhere in a dry and mountainous land, a small military plane is landing on a dirt airstrip next to a small military base. An airman steps out of the plane's door with his head hung low and a look of sorrow upon his face.

Today he has seen a lot of death and he is very tired of doing so. Head rattled and stomach feeling sick from the events of the day, he gathers his equipment and starts to walk back to his squadron's building to debrief his mission for the day. As he walks along the hangars he stares at the mountains and land all around him. He thinks about how foreign it all looks and that he hopes it never starts to look normal to him. He wonders why so many men had to die today and if there was anything different he could have done to prevent just one death. He wonders if tomorrow will be another day like today and hopes desperately that it will not be so. As he reaches his destination he puts on his best professional face and heads in the busy building to finish his duties for the day.

At a cemetery near a large east coast city, a wife is handed a folded American flag. Surrounded by a large gathering of friends and family, she tries to stand tall and keep her head held high as tears flow down her cheeks. She watches the soldier who gave her the flag. Standing just in front of her, he salutes the flag she now holds. She thinks about how final all of this feels and how she didn't quite believe it was really true until now. She wonders how she will ever move on with her life and if it is even right for her to do so. She also wonders if her sadness will ever end and if she even wants it to, afraid of losing her picture of him in her mind. She puts on her best face as many friends and family come by to pay their respects. She finally feels the full weight of the day as she sees her young son standing by her side begin to cry. She hugs him as she never has before, hoping she can make just a fraction of his pain go away. Placing her unsteady hand under his chin, she lifts his head to give him words of comfort. Before a single word is uttered she fully realizes just how much he looks like his father. Noticing that gives her comfort that her memory of him will never fully fade and there will always be a piece of him left behind. Looking her son in the eyes, she tells him to be strong like his father would want him to be and hugs him one more time.

Seven men dressed in their best blues stand in a line formation off to the side. They raise ceremonial rifles in a cadenced formation and each man fires off three shots into the air. As the formal ceremony ends people begin to

leave. After some time the wife, still standing and still clutching her flag tight in her arms, grabs the hand of her son and begins to walk away. As she walks she still wonders how her life will go on. She thinks about all the sleepless nights she spent in thought over her lost love. No more will she wonder if he will be home for Christmas, a birthday, or an anniversary. She will not wonder if he is safe or thinking about her and their son. She only wonders how she will live without him in her life.

How We Came to Be

by Karsyn Taylor

“Am not!”

“Are too!”

The two voices rang clearly throughout the little room. Their argument carried bitterly down the long corridors and reached the ears of a tall slender figure, annoyed at their behavior. The figure would rise, pattering down the corridor following the echoes of the arguing duo. She knew she would be in for a headache, especially when dealing with these two.

“What on Earth could you two possibly be arguing about *this* time?” Giving a sigh she then seated herself to face the tiny pair; her long legs gave her quite a height advantage over the ruffians. She was irritated by their constant bickering, which left a near permanent scowl on her face. The pair, now wide eyed with fear, sniffled and hunkered closer to the ground, hoping she’d go easy on them.

“W-well, Aristocrat s-said that I was from Mars,” sniffed the scrawnier of the two youths. He had not been in the compound long enough to have made proper friends. The elders had hoped that by pairing the two together it would help him gain the confidence he so desperately needed and it would teach Aristocrat some manners she so greatly needed. Aristocrat’s fiery spirit may have proven too much for the smaller hound. But neither of the two were fit for any of the other groups within the compound, not yet anyway.

“He must be! I mean, just *look* at him!” Aristocrat sniffed indignantly. “He’s so scrawny on those short limbs of his, and just *look* at those pointed ears! And then there’s his thick red fur and that weird curly-corkscrew tail of his!” Aristocrat sat in a huff, among old pillows that had been chewed to shreds, by naughty puppies no doubt. The “princess” had drawn her delicate paws up beneath herself as if she were afraid to even touch the poor pup seated next to her.

The figure sighed. She had her work cut out for herself tonight.

If only Aristocrat knew how special the boy truly was, then maybe she'd understand. The older hound was tired, but her thoughts clicked away, aiming toward some solution to keep the pair from bickering so much, a near impossible task. "Tsk. Aristocrat, mind your manners. Scoundrel is *no* different than any of us here." How was she to make the little whelp see this? She furrowed her brow in frustration as she studied the pair.

"But he looks *nothing* like me! I mean look at how silky and well kept *my* fur is," Aristocrat beamed, "Even its coloration is different. I mean white and brown is much better than red! And my tail is so long and silky, like yours! Not some weird little curled *thing* like his! And my ears! They may not be the longest, or most extravagant, ones in the compound, but they are muuuuch better than his short pointy ones! You *cannot* tell me that I look *anything* thing like *him*!" The dignified little voice gave a dramatic snuffle as she concluded her speech. She did ring true in her observations, but that was not the point. How do you explain to a child that even if you appear different on the outside you are exactly the same on the inside?

"T-tikva, where do dogs come from?" Poor little Scoundrel's feelings were obviously hurt, but the tyke was trying to move on without dragging Aristocrat through the mud as well.

"Maybe a story *would* do you pups some good." Tikva smiled, settling in between the now silent pups. The Saluki knew that she'd best get comfortable and try to finish this tale before their bedtime. "In the beginning when Terra was new..." came the sighthound's silky voice, briefly before it was interrupted.

"What's a Terra?" Scoundrel piped up. Tikva should have known better than to use the Old Language. He was much too new to the compound to have picked up on any of it from the older dogs, or even the more learned ones.

"It means Earth, stupid. Now be quiet. I want to hear the story!" snarled Aristocrat before Tikva even had a chance to respond to the poor boy's question.

"Enough!" Tikva's voice may have come out a tad louder than she meant it to, because both pups nearly wet themselves as they cowered down

beneath her. Normally it was *not* her job to tend to the young ones, so her patience was too thin for this nonsense.

“Now where was I...” She began again when she knew both pups would keep their muzzles shut. “When the Earth was new, it was La Hayat.” Tikva paused, realizing she had used another word from the older dialect of the Ancients. “Erm, I mean, when it was devoid of life. No animals roamed over its surface, no plants grew from its rich soils, and most importantly it was flat. It had no mountains, no oceans. It had nothing. It was nothing. It was just a round sphere floating about the heavens. “Then one day the Goddess Sitka...”

Both pups leaned in closer at the mention of their beloved Goddess. Aristocrat even forgot how she didn’t even want to touch little Scoundrel, and she put a paw on his back, in excitement, and Scoundrel happily wagged his curl-corkscrew of a tail.

Tikva smiled as she spoke, stories of the old always seemed to do the trick. “...came down to this devoid, lifeless, ball of nothingness that we know today as Earth. She began using her powers to create plants. She began creating everything from long trailing Ivy to tall delicate Roses. She made the smooth world a place of beauty, a safe haven of sorts. An Eden, as humans tend to describe it in their texts. And each and every day the moon goddess would come and walk amongst her creations, adding a little here and there wherever it suited her. Then each and every night she would return to her home in the sky to admire her work and to rest, because even Gods and Goddesses need their rest.” Tikva paused again, giving the pups a knowing look. In hopes they would soon get the idea that it was time for them slumber as well.

“Then one day Kon, God of the Sun, spotted Sitka wandering about what used to be an ugly lifeless ball. He stayed up all day watching her create and tend to her plants. He was curious, but also outraged that he had not thought of this first. But, of course, we all know that Kon is the jealous type, and that his temper is even shorter than a grumpy bear’s.”

Both pups broke out into a fit of uncontrollable laughter, rolling

around on the floor together as they pictured the mighty Sun God stomping around like an angry bear. Tikva had to wait for them to settle down again before she could move on. She was quite pleased that the pups were soon forgetting their differences.

“That night Kon snuck down to Earth while Sitka was resting in the sky. He wanted to create things too! But bigger and better things, living, *breathing* things. He started out small at first with Beetles, Spiders, Grasshoppers and other senseless things of the sort. But he quickly grew bored with these tiny creatures. So he began creating much bigger creatures, like Snake and Hawk. Not all very successfully, mind you. Most were failures, doomed from the very moment of their creation. But Kon didn’t care. And the next day he returned to the sky to rest.

“Sitka would descend to Earth, again, to spend time in her beloved Eden. But to her surprise it was filled with thousands of little buzzing creatures. She was fascinated by these little creatures. So fascinated in fact, that she began to make her own living and breathing creatures. She made Dragonfly and Mouse and Deer and Zebra. Sitka was the first to create larger creatures, magnificent creatures. Then that night she returned to the sky once more in order to rest again.

“Kon was very angry when he returned to Eden that night. How *dare* Sitka create larger beasts than he! Enraged, he tried to make a larger creature, so he made Man, an awkwardly furless creature that stood on two legs. A mistake, in his eyes. So he moved on, tossing Man aside without a second thought. He created Crocodile, Bear and Lion. Yes, now he *knew* his creatures were the best. They were the largest and the mightiest creatures of Eden. And this pleased Kon very much. Then as day came he happily returned to his home in the sky to rest.

“When Sitka awoke the next day horrid creatures were stomping around in her precious Eden. She told herself there was nothing to fear in these creatures, but she still disliked them very much. She had her hand in creating more pleasant creatures that day as she waited for night to come in order to confront Kon about the terrors he had unleashed among her beautiful

plants. When Kon returned that night, their confrontation only turned sour. Kon did not like being told what he could and could not do. They argued for days and days, and as they argued the sky grew dark. Dark with clouds, and thunder, and lightning. These things had never happened before, since the start of Earth's creation. And these new phenomena scared the creatures of Earth; even the mighty Lion and the mighty Bear were frightened. Everyone wanted to hide, but there was nowhere to go. A few of the animals, like Gopher and Rabbit, burrowed under the Earth's smooth surface to wait out these storms, while others, like Ant and Owl, hunkered down inside of trees for safety. But most of the other animals had to just huddle together and hope for the best.

"Kon soon took his temper tantrum to the skies and created rain and hail. He made a storm so torrential that it nearly destroyed all of Sitka's beloved plants and drowned most animals. Everyone ran to try and escape this storm. But as Kon's temper grew, so did his winds and his rain. He created Tornados and Hurricanes, trying to wipe Earth's surface clean.

"Sitka feared the worst for her beloved Eden, and for every creature that lived in it, even the scarier ones. For in the beginning no creature was mean, they didn't know who Hate was, only Love, and none had to eat the other to survive. Hunger did not exist yet, nor did Pain. So the garden truly had been an Eden. But Fear and Death were quickly becoming commonplace due to Kon, and Sitka knew she had to do something. So she dove beneath the Earth's surface to avoid Kon's anger.

"For many days and many nights Sitka pulled at the Earth's surface, creating craters of various sizes, and then she pushed as hard as she could against the surface to form Hills and Mountains. This in turn captured the Great Waters falling from the sky and created Oceans, Lakes, and Streams. Some of the animals even took to these bodies of water, with the gift of fins and gills, preferring the safety it offered as Kon continued his storm.

"Death was new in the world, and Pain was still non-existent, but this gave Sitka little comfort, so she returned to the sky, leaving a Rainbow in her wake as she ascended. Sadly enough, during her absence her beloved plants

had learned to adapt to the Sun's rays in order to grow, which broke poor Sitka's heart."

"But I thought plants needed sunlight in order to grow, how come they had to 'adapt to the Sun's rays'?" protested Aristocrat. Well someone was listening during her studies. That was a good sign at least.

"Yeah! And water!" interrupted Scoundrel as he scooted closer, a scowl line nearly slicing his forehead in two.

"Yes, yes, plants need both of those things in order to grow *now*, but in the beginning plants thrived on the full Moon's glow each night because they were Sitka's creations. And since the Moon was always full it was the best source of nourishment. Now the Moon rarely stays full, due to Sitka's broken heart, so the plants would not be able to thrive on such a small amount of enrichment each month. Sitka can barely stand to look upon her Eden any more, without wanting to cry, but she fears flooding the Earth again with her tears.

"She had left a Rainbow as a sign of peace as she ascended into the heavens. This distracted Kon enough to stop his destruction and investigate this new sight. That's when he noticed Sitka's Mountains and Craters, and they made him even angrier.

"He then gave each of his most beloved creations a gift. He gave Bear sharp claws, Lion sharp fangs, Crocodile a thick hide, Hawk amazing eyesight, and Snake enough venom to take down even Lion. He then saw weak and feeble Man in the corner of the world. He laughed at Man, as he was a furless mess and completely helpless. He decided to also give Man one gift. He gave Man Fire. He figured Man would burn the world to the ground before Sitka even realized what was going on. Kon then released Hunger, Famine, Pain, Disease, War and Greed. And he taught his creations how to hunt Sitka's creations in order to survive in this new world, before he left to confront Sitka in the sky.

"Sitka had known Kon would do what he did, because Kon was more predictable than he realized. So in secret, she had given her creations a few gifts to protect them from their newest threat, Predators. She gave

Deer agility to outrun her pursuers, she gave Zebra stripes to confuse his predators, she gave Mouse a wonderful sense of smell in order to detect all of the creatures around her. Then she taught them each to eat her beloved plants in order to keep Hunger at bay. Sitka even created a few poisonous and unpleasant plants, like Poinsettias and Briars, to try and trick Predators. Sitka would have done anything in order to protect her beautiful creatures. Anything except directly kill any of Kon's creations, as that just wasn't her way.

"Lastly she felt pity on Man, so she created one final creature, her favorite one of all. She gave this creature Stamina, Wisdom, Loyalty, and Kindness. And she told this creature all of the secrets of the world. Dog was this creature's name. Sitka poured her soul into this creation. She created Dog to protect her Eden. And she knew that this creature would make her proud. She created 15 different breeds of Dog, including Wolf, the Saluki, Shiba Inu, Afghan Hound, Akita Inu, Alaskan Malamute, Basenji, Chow Chow, Lhasa Apso, Pekingese, Samoyed, Shar Pei, Siberian Husky, Shih Tzu, Tibetan Terrier. Each with its own strengths, and each now renowned as the Ancient ones.

"Dog was also to protect and guide Man, forever and always. Sitka knew Man needed aid in this scary new world, and she knew Dog could give it without asking for anything in return. She then wished Dog the best of luck and gave him Hope, Friendship, and Forgiveness to share with the world, before returning to the sky.

"Once Sitka reached Kon in the sky she told him that she wanted to make peace with him, but in order to do so they must go to the far reaches of the sky, far from Earth. And to prevent further destruction, she took Kon eons away, dropping little specks in the sky as they went. We know these specks to be Stars. But Sitka created these Stars as barriers between the Gods and Earth. Forever trapping herself in the sky, far from her beloved Eden in order to save us all. But she also trapped Kon far from us as well, saving us all from his fiery temper." Tikva smiled at the now slumbering pups, "And when Dog dies he goes to join Sitka's army of stars, to continue his job of

protecting Earth from harm. And that is how we came to be, and why I am no different than you, and he is no different from she,” Tikva whispered to the children, who were slumped over onto one another, as they should be, sound asleep.

“It’s also why Dogs howl at the moon. As a way of reminding Sitka that we are still here for her and have not forgotten...” Tikva detangled herself from the slumbering duo and tried to quietly slip back to her post, but before she could make it to the door Scoundrel mumbled something in his sleep.

“Tikva, is your name from the Old Language?” mumbled the Shiba Inu, who could barely keep one eye open, let alone raise his head in order to ask the Saluki the origin of her name.

“Yes it is, little one; Tikva means Hope...something my mother thought the world needed more of. Now go to sleep,” she quietly hissed. She watched as the little red pup snuggled into his larger Borzoi companion, before turning to leave the sleeping orphans alone once more. Then she disappeared into the maze of hallways that formed the compound in which they all lived.

All in a Day's Work

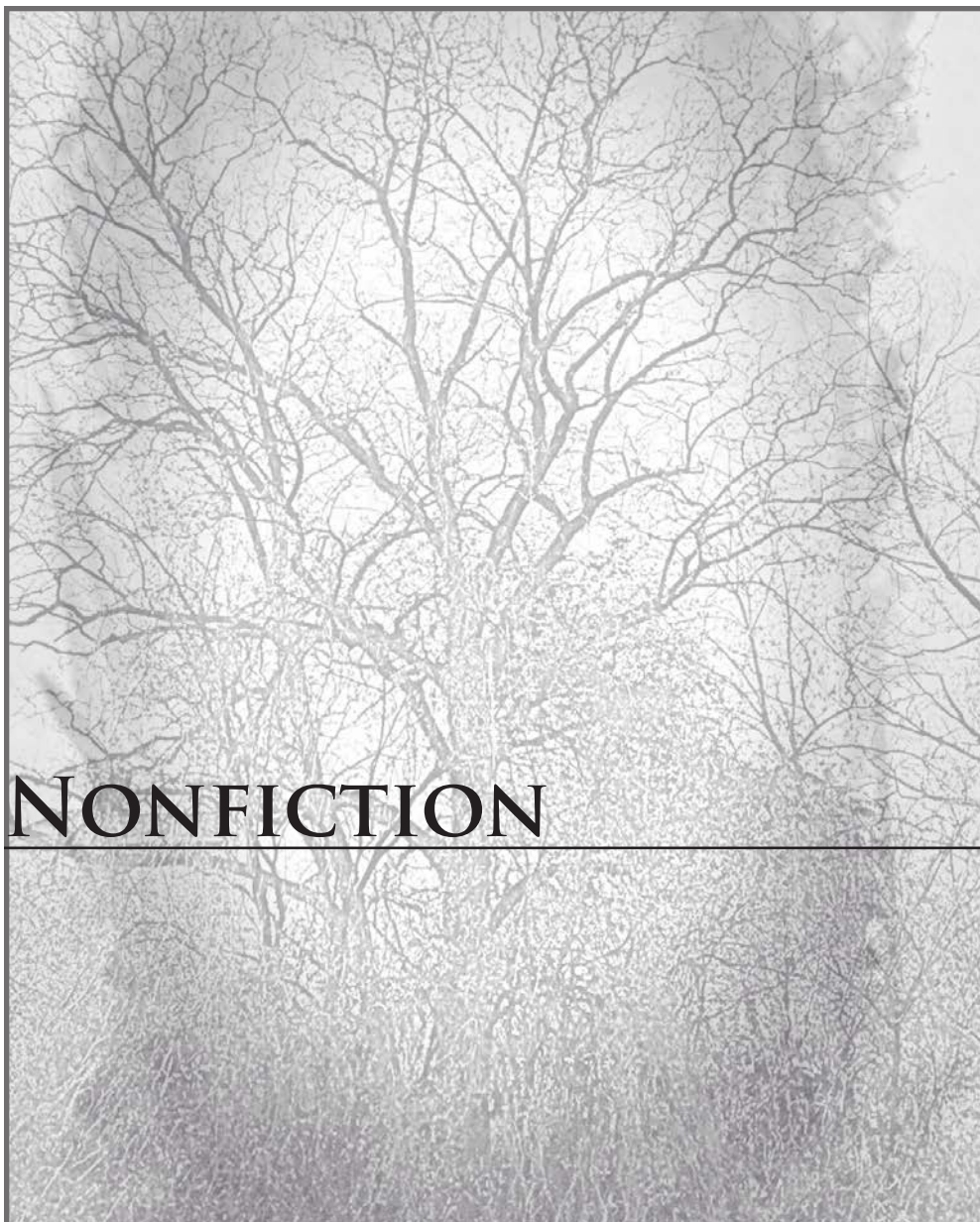
by Tiffane Shorter

The heat was unbearable that day. That was all the young woman could think as she struggled up the field. The sun blazed overhead, burning her body and making the air too thick to breathe. Her family had fallen behind her, partially hidden by the menacing plant that snatched at their knees and forbade any of them to escape the torture.

The air was sliced through. *Keep working!*

Some unfortunate soul fell victim to the short plant beneath, but no one offered assistance—they had to keep moving. The stern pair of eyes were ever watchful of what went on in the fields and every so often the air was wounded again as another person bowed to the surrounding tyrant. Never the girl's own family, but always someone she knew.

And the sun continued to glare down on the workers.



NONFICTION

When Colin Met Kylie

by Kylie Combs

Sometimes you have to destroy everything to create something new. Death can bring new life. Luckily, I'm already dead. I've lost my name, my home and my job. They are all replaced with new versions that don't fit as well and simply are not as good. I try to shrink myself. If there is less of me, then there can be more us. Once you finally get something you've wanted your whole life, it's never really what you thought it would be. Just because it's not as perfect, or even good, that doesn't mean it's wrong. Right?

But I can't be dead. I'm only 22 years old.

Some people count sheep. I swim myself to sleep. To me, swimming is how I fly. My body is weightless, strong, and free. My only limitation is oxygen. I never feel more alive than in those few seconds when my lungs scream out and I have to breathe. But I push for just a few seconds more, and then crash through the surface, gasping for air and life. When I swim myself to sleep, no oxygen is required. I never have to scramble for the surface.

Now, when I lie in bed at night, I beg for sleep to come to me as quickly and fully as it does for Him, my husband asleep next to me. Instead, all I see is dark, green water. I'm completely submerged, my feet cemented to the muck and tangled in the weeds in the bed of this foreign body of water. I'm not drowning, but trapped. There is no surface, no light, no escape. I hear no sound. I make no futile effort of freedom or detachment. I am here, and here is where I shall be. Never fully dying, never truly living.

The change in my nights is brought about by the change in my days. My metamorphosis takes millennia in comparison to His. His complete transformation takes less time than it takes a caterpillar to become a butterfly—all that is necessary is a ceremony and less than 24 hours to alter Him into a new creature. A stranger. I drown in his clear blue eyes. The same eyes that saw me so clearly now see through me instead. He is completely blind, suddenly uncaring and cruel to me standing, silently pleading, right

next to him. If He can't see me, this man who chose me to love for the rest of our lives, how can I see myself? If He can't, how can anyone else? They say love is blind, but I don't think they meant like this. It should come as no surprise that other people can see you, but it does. Especially when it's another man you barely know.

That's what happens when I meet Colin.

It is just another mind-numbing, day-dream filled day at work when I see him walk up to me. I swear it's just like a movie. Sunlight crashes in from the floor-to-ceiling doors and windows behind me, casting light on him like the leading man from a romantic comedy. His dark hair is a perfectly created mess. He's wearing a button down shirt with pearl snaps and skinny jeans, a combination that should never actually work, but in practice makes me swoon when pulled off successfully. The strangest thing is, I feel like I already know him, met him before. But that can't be true, I would remember. Then it strikes me, almost sucking out my breath. He is the exact image of the love interest I've created for my heroine protagonist in the book I'm writing. But this guy is actually real. Or, at least I hope, rather than a sign I am finally going crazy and literally bringing my characters to life.

Regardless, I can't help but smile.

By some mystery I will never solve, Colin and I become friends through the sparse and infrequent conversations we steal time for at work. Far more mysterious than that is the fact that I feel myself starting to come back to life. Slowly, I start to see something else when I close my eyes in bed. I'm still entangled, still submerged, but I can see the surface. It's still far off; the water is slightly blue but mostly a clear green, instead of dark and menacing. There is a small beacon of light, just beyond my reach. I strain to be as close as I can to it, finally trying, finally feeling, and finally breathing. I can almost reach it. I wave my fingers at the light, feeling it tickle the places in between them, inviting it to come closer, save me so I can save myself.

Colin helps me save myself, too. He does so by not finding me boring but interesting. So interesting, in fact, that he wants to introduce me to his friends. My first introduction to them is through his recountings of their

nights. They drink like whales, smoke like fire, and generally don't give a fuck. My life is the exact opposite. I try to go to bed early, never drink alcohol or smoke anything, and give far too many fucks for my own good. The stories of their nights of debauchery at first alarm me. How can they still be alive? Functioning through college and life? Or, at the very least, not arrested? They become more like rock star myths to me, rather than your run of the mill college kids. Meeting them is like meeting my favorite Disney characters at one of the parks, except they look nothing like I expected. They are better.

I'm meeting them at an outdoor concert on campus at OU. I'm alone and lost. I've lived in Norman for over a year, but I've never really explored it. It's still an allusive labyrinth, and campus is its heart. Getting lost comes naturally to me. It can be fun sometimes. You find places that seem like a secret meant only for you. But most of the time, the only thing I find is my fight or flight instinct and slowly increasing panic. Somehow, I find a place to park, praying I'll be able to remember later, and head towards campus. The possible realities and expectations of my night wail at each other like enraged fighters in a ring.

I find the stage, which turns out to be far simpler than I expect. There are people packed everywhere. I wonder how I will ever find Colin, but find the crowd can be useful camouflage to hide me from Him. He uncharacteristically is coming to the concert, too. I haven't seen Him in the two weeks since I left, and this is not my ideal situation to do so. He will get the impression that I'm on a date, unfaithful, after a mere two weeks of trial separation. My mother follows suit when I vent my fears on her. She believes that I will throw myself at this new man that I must think will save me from my last, and surely I am going to have sex with him. Apparently, if you have slept with one man, you are bound to do it again, and with anyone this time. I am a bouncing, trembling ball of nerves.

By mere fate, and with immense aid from technology, I do find Colin. He is with Duffy, AKA Michael Duffy. He and Shulke go by their last names for some reason. I'm not sure if anyone really knows why. I am relieved they don't try this out on me, since my name is in limbo. Every time I hear Colin

say Duffy, I always imagine the female, one hit wonder of a few years ago, and the song “Mercy” is mercilessly stuck in my head. Duffy looks nothing like her, of course, but instead, he looks exactly like yet another of my exes. Justin, from OC, who always pulled my head down when we were making out so I would give him a blow job. I never did, and he was still heartbroken when I broke up with him that summer. Now is not the time to run into him. Before Colin can say Duffy’s name, or maybe he does, but in my blind fear I hear nothing, I lean in and say, “Don’t I know you?”

Bewildered, he says, “No?” And upon further inspection, no, I do not. They say first impressions are the most important, and I nail that one.

As we make our way into the crowd, Colin and Duffy seem to be pulled by an unseen force that brings us to the rest of the large group. I’ve never met this many people at once in my life. I’m not great at meeting people, as we might have noticed. I stray behind, coming to a stop at a respectable distance when they do, and look into the crowd as Colin points out his friends.

Shulke is the first one I see. Colin mentioned to me before that Shulke is gay, but it doesn’t appear to be true at this moment. He is dancing to music that I never imagined you can dance to, and so much closer to a girl than I maybe ever was to my husband, especially not in public. They appear to be making out every once in awhile, their hips melding into each other. I am beyond a little confused. I literally bump into him later as I bend over to pet a dog. I am afraid this will cause me to become the next girl in his world that I don’t understand, but he reacts exactly the opposite of me, and fails to even notice the contact.

I am introduced to even more people after the concert. It’s late and I’m at an after party. I think we even pregame before, a term I didn’t even know existed until after I take my first shot of my life. It is whiskey, the thing I always understood to be harsh, killed Hemingway in my personal opinion, and a drink for men. I muster all the strength and bravery I have left for the night, and take it like communion juice at church. After I stop breathing fire, I find that I actually like it. I almost immediately want another.

It feels like there is the same amount of people in this apartment as there were at the concert. I remember only Colin, and follow him around like a lost puppy. He never sits still, and I hate how dependent and boring I feel clinging to him. I try to keep as much distance as I can muster, talking to whomever I get introduced to, although I immediately forget their names and am struck with facial blindness.

I figure out that Shulke is in fact gay. I meet both him and his dance partner. She is equally affectionate with everyone, even me. I feel surprisingly jealous when she's around Colin. My true introduction to Shulke, and his sexual orientation, is proof of my own horrible stereotype ringing through, but I have appallingly limited experience around gay men. He shouts out to me across the living room of the party: "I didn't like your shirt at first, but then I saw the back. I like it okay."

Okay...

Now Colin invites me out most weekends. We always start and end at his apartment. It's just a typical guys' place, almost exactly like you see on TV. There's no couch, but a frumpy, overused futon in its place. The back of which is adorned by a blanket with a large hole cut (or torn, it's hard to say which) in the middle, so it could theoretically be worn as a poncho. There are empty, or mostly empty, cans strewn about that used to hold any number of liquids, but most of all beer. There's a collection of seemingly random empty bottles, and used plates on top of TV trays. Of course, there's the complimentary, didn't-know-it-could-get-so-dirty bathroom that comes with every single male's apartment. And I'm in love with it.

I'm the only female in a seeming mass of males. Really there are only about five of them, but more keep pouring in. We are going to yet another party, where we will trek like nomads to the next and next. We never seem to stay in one place for long. I have a new black dress, and for once, I feel confident. Pretty, even. Finally everyone arrives, and we take off, on foot, to stake our claim on the next location.

We have to cut through a fence, and for the first time, my new short, black dress becomes a liability. I don't want to find a different way, I don't

want to call attention to my predicament, and I don't want to ask for help. I decide to wait for everyone else, climb through using the most lady-like technique, and try my best to not flash anyone. I twirl my gladiator sandal-clad foot in the grass, apprehensively waiting for everyone ahead of me. Then, the tallest guy I have ever encountered in my life is standing over me. I sheepishly gaze up at him.

"Can I carry you through the fence?" my knight in shining armor asks. I agree in the smallest voice that has ever come out of my mouth. My mind spins as he easily scoops me up, holding me like I'm a Disney princess. I wonder how I will ever explain to my future children how I met their father. "Oh, kids, he just carried me through a fence because my dress was inappropriately too short to do it myself. Oh, no, I actually didn't know his name yet. Isn't that romantic?"

He must see the fear in my eyes, or read the sentences running through my brain, but all he says is, "I'm Quin, by the way. And I have a girlfriend." I praise the heavens, and make it through safely with his help. Sometimes, people have to carry you for just a little while until you can find your feet again.

One Day

by Joshua L. Sewell

On the day that will change the course of my life, I spend the morning in my bed thinking about the bright, hopeful future ahead me. I have just turned nineteen and like every other nineteen year old, I am excited, confident and optimistic about the road ahead of me. I just received my acceptance letter to the University of Oklahoma and I am looking forward to my audition to the School of Music. Simply put, I love music and I dream every night about being able to share my craft with others. I have a real need to fill souls with the medicine that is music. My goal in life is to become a great trumpet player and I want to be able to teach and try to fill others' lives with the passion that I feel about the trumpet.

As I get out of bed, still halfway dreaming about my goals in life, I start my morning routine by brushing my teeth. After brushing my teeth, I start to rinse the toothpaste out of my mouth. As I am swishing, I notice that the left side of my mouth will not hold water. I spit out the water and look at myself in the mirror. I notice something different about myself: the left side of my face is not working. Panic starts to set in; my left eye is not closing. I try to smile and the left side of my mouth stays down and droopy. I think to myself, "Am I having a stroke? What is going on?" I begin to think about the symptoms of a stroke so I try the function in my left hand and foot. It seems I still have perfect dexterity in my hand and foot. Why is my face not working? I immediately call my physician and schedule an appointment for later in the day. After my phone call to my doctor, I rush back to the bathroom and look in the mirror. With desperation I verbally speak out loud, "Left eyelid, close." My eye does not shut. I say, "Move, left nostril." It does not move. I tell my face to smile and the left side will not move. I start to notice that I kind of look like the Batman character Two Face.

For the first time in my life, I feel insecure and scared about my future. I awoke feeling hopeful and assured and, suddenly, I feel terrified

and shaken. I feel as though my world has ended overnight. As soon as the time arrives for my appointment I feel anxious and nervous. Within hours my doctor diagnoses me with Bell's Palsy. According to him, I have inflammation on my seventh cranial nerve and the inflammation causes paralysis on the left side of my face. He says with high doses of steroids and antibiotics, I should regain facial function in three to six months.

I arrive at my house and realize that my audition for the School of Music is seven days away and I am just not going to be able to play trumpet for my audition. Even after three to six months for my facial function to come back, my doctor says I will have to relearn how to play the trumpet. All of my hard work has been flushed down the drain. My dream has been shattered and I feel like my insides have just exploded. I slip into depression and give up on my dream. Tears fill my eyes and I cry myself to sleep.

On another morning ten years later, I open my eyes and roll over and give my beautiful wife a kiss. I go into my bathroom and start brushing my teeth. I rinse out my mouth. I look at myself in the mirror and I have completely restored facial movement. I still notice something missing. My wife joins me by our sink in the bathroom. She gives me a concerned look and asks me, "Are you okay?" I look into her eyes and tell her that I feel like something is missing. I have never told her about what I went through and what my real dream in life was. After hearing my story, she gives me a big kiss and hug and tells me to go for it.

I travel to Norman, Oklahoma, in search of my favorite music store I used to visit frequently in my youth. I walk through the doors and as fate would have it I see my old trumpet teacher. It seems that after his ten-year absence from Oklahoma he, too, has decided to come back. I tell him my story and ask if it is possible to take lessons from him again. He says he is not taking any students; but since I was his student from his early college years and I have an uphill battle relearning how to play the trumpet, he wants to help me on my journey to become a great trumpet player.

As I look back on the last three years on my trumpet journey, I am still taking lessons from my private instructor and with his help I am now playing in a community band. I am very glad to continue my journey as a musician.

I am learning so much about the art of trumpet playing. I now put in an average of three hours of trumpet practice per day. I am starting to unleash the sound locked in my head, and having it sing out of my trumpet bell. I have put in a lot of hard work with my teacher to make me the player I am today. My instructor has developed my musicianship to the point that I can now teach my own students. While I am nowhere near the end of my quest for knowledge, I am glad to be good enough to share my music and inspire others to reach for their dreams. I am very thankful for my family giving me the courage to be able to chase and make my dreams a reality. I have learned that life is not easy. I have learned not to take circumstances in my life for granted. I know that with hard work and dedication that my goals, while postponed, can still come to be.

Hands

by **Andrew Kern**

As I walk home from school I slip further inside my own head. This has been my usual routine for most of my fourth grade year. Every day I delve a little further into my thoughts on life, love and happiness. I am ten years old and with a lot of growing up to do but that comes with time, this I know. I cross the fields and the parks on my usual path towards home. I will be the first one home, I usually am. I stare upward, thinking deeply of what my place is in all of this and feel comforted by the thought of some helping hands; though I have never seen the hands themselves I have always felt they were there. The air feels clean like it always does after the first of the season's rains. It really is a nice day. I cross the strip of grass between the walkway and the fence of my home. I unlatch the gate and cross into my yard where I am met with an unexpected sight. My parents and sister sit on the brick wall between the upper part of the yard and the lower portion. I feel the weight of something unknowable and immovably heavy come over me. I feel as though there is a storm moving over my family and the helping hands are pulling away.

My mom and dad ask me to sit down next to them on the brick barrier, but I feel apprehensive. Maybe if I just stand here I will never have to know what is happening. If I can just stand still I will never have to deal with this. Someone must have died. I have never seen my parents' eyes sink so deeply. But who could have died? My grandmother already passed away last year so it cannot be her. This looks too serious for it to be anyone that isn't in my immediate family. I have still not moved; I cannot bring myself to move. The wind carries little helicopters from the trees above, a clear sign of the change of seasons. I can feel the breeze carrying me away with the little helicopters. But the breeze is not taking me into spring, bright and warm. I'm being carried into the darkest and coldest winter of my life. I still have not moved. Only a few seconds have passed but I feel as though I have been stationary for hours. My legs feel heavy and the sky above me yawns deep

and wide. Is this what my life has been leading up to? For a moment I begin to wonder if maybe I've died and this is me moving on. My parents haven't moved, nothing has moved and then I take a step forward.

I sit down between my parents and they put their arms around me. The feeling is less comforting than it is intended to be. My mom tells me, "Bailey is sick." I look over towards Dad and there are tears in his eyes. I hear the back door of the house slam shut. Bailey has gone inside. I am only ten years old but I have seen enough television to know that this is bad any way you spin it. The word is heavy in my throat. "Cancer?" I ask. My mom begins to explain through staggered breaths and watery eyes what is happening but I cannot grasp it. I can feel myself sliding into a haze. My vision narrows and my body feels weightless. The breeze becomes everything. There are no sounds but the soft moving air around me. All things become one sound. It is as though the world itself is groaning along with the death rattle of the spring of my young life. This must be some kind of mistake. I can feel my head becoming foggier and my heart falling through my body. Bailey has cancer which means she is dying. There is an embrace but I cannot tell where my arms end and my parents' arms begin. I can only feel four hands. Where are the others that I felt so sure would be there? Maybe the hands of God move slowly. I find myself moving towards the back door of my parents' home. I open the door like I have every day for the past five years of my life. The breeze slams the door behind me and I swear I can hear the clatter of prison bars. The house feels still as though waiting awkwardly for someone to speak first on the issue at hand. This home will become a cage. We are all on death row for unknown crimes we never committed, waiting to be proven innocent.

My mother and sister embrace each other in the kitchen to the right of the back door. I can feel myself coming out of the tunnel, back to the situation at hand. I am flooded by emotions as the news of the fate of my family begins to sink in. I am spilling over with remorse and a painful feeling that I am not in control of anything. I have always felt every event in my life has been perhaps a chance occurrence but always had a greater purpose. Now

I'm not sure of that. What could this situation give me that I do not already have? I feel a thousand miles from home. I do not know for sure if I am even at home. Surely I have woken up in someone else's life today. Or perhaps this is just a dream. I will wake up in my bed and this day will begin all over again. Minutes have passed and nothing has changed. This is real life. I have been standing still for far too long now. The feeling in this house is beginning to suffocate me and my eyes are becoming misty. I am ten years old. This is not fair. My sister has never done anything to hurt anyone. My family does not deserve this. No one deserves this. Why is God doing this to us?

I slouch down the hallway of our home, past the walls lined with family photos of bright outfits and bad haircuts. The eyes of our past selves peer through the glass of the frames, unknowing of their impending fate. These photos are stills of scenes from our lives now past. They only now serve to foreshadow the current state of things. I walk into my bedroom and stand in the middle with my arms at my side and my palms facing out, awaiting the comforting touch of hands. I reach into my dresser where I keep my Bible and I feel myself begin to unravel. I clutch my chest and break down into tears. I tear through my drawer, looking for that which holds the answers to my unasked questions I cannot vocalize to God. I cannot say anything out loud. I finally find the Bible and the coin with the mustard seed in it. Gripping these sacred relics, I begin to flip the pages of the little Bible, believing that what I need will just fall out between verses. My eyes hunt ravenously for key words. I expect to just see "It will all work out" or "Everything is going to be okay" in bold letters on one of the pages. This is why people believe in all this stuff—because it really helps. Does it not? It has to help or no one would do this. My vision is blurred by tears and all I can hear is my heart pounding in my ears. Bleary-eyed and woeful I stand up with this book in my hand and look up to see myself in the mirror. I see one reflection looking back and it is me. I stare toward the ceiling and see no opening in the empty space above me. There is no voice from above, nor a hand reaching out to console me. My eyes fall back toward my reflection and

tell me the same thing I have already realized. I am completely alone. We are all utterly and irrevocably alone.

I walk out of my room, back down the hallway to find my family. I find them around the kitchen table discussing the long road ahead. I am saying nothing. Things begin to stabilize in my mind. My vision returns to normal and my heart takes on a more stable cadence. As I look into the eyes of my family who appear just as wholly discontent as myself, I realize that I am not alone down here on Earth. My parents hold me in a still embrace and tell me softly that “everything is going to be okay” and “it will all work out.” I have never been alone and I will not be alone for as long as I am alive. I have always waited for the sky to split and light to rain down on me, for a voice to call out from across oblivion. This must be what everyone always meant by God. I am now sure God only exists right here inside of what I already love. God exists inside love. God is love. God is without form because it is everywhere and nowhere at the same time. There is no book that could tell me otherwise, no person that could convince me. The universe is not out to get me or anyone because the universe is without feeling; it is cold and unfeeling. The God I need is right here with us, in my family and everything we experience together. No matter what happens it will always be there. When I look into the eyes of my loved ones I truly know what it is to stare into endless love. As I sit here pondering oblivion and the future of my family, I feel the warmth of those helping hands wrap around me in a still embrace.

Chains, Cuffs and Muffs

by Priscilla Segroves

I see life without worries or responsibility. I can carry out my actions and my words as I please. I have no self-control and I exercise my voice to manipulate and control who I want, when I want. I walk with pride because of who I know. I feel like I am going to be young forever, as I am laughing and cracking jokes with my home boys in a hotel room in El Monte, California. I know when it is time to have a straight face and when it is time to put my head down; making eye contact or not is very important. One slip up can be life or death. The big dogs carry guns and are here to handle the drugs, while I kick it and represent for the power of drugs and money, but most of all power and control over someone's life. I love being tweaked out for days. I am dealing methamphetamine to the neighborhood and I get respect from people through fear and who I know. This is a lifestyle that I earned. Getting high, smoking blunts and doing dope is the life that I live; it is all that I know. It is who I am.

As I cruise in this ride, I drive it like it's mine when in fact it is not. I throw my head up high to show off that I am down for my neighborhood. When I hear the cops' siren, my heart drops and I feel as small as an ant, so I drive faster. I make the cops chase me for a while. As I am getting chased I stash some drugs on me and I pour the rest of the home boy's pound on the street, so it's not in the bag and it's scattered all over the ground. I am hoping I didn't make it obvious to the cops that I'm throwing drugs out my window. A helicopter appears over me and now I know I am not getting away, so I smoke the rest of my blunt, snort a fat line, and then I decide to surrender. I have gotten away so many times before, but for some reason this time my luck has run dry.

I am cuffed with my arms and hands behind my back. I am not really thinking of what is ahead because I am so spun out that the red and blue

lights are putting me in a trip. I don't know why I am getting arrested. All I know is that the hotel room is in my name and this car isn't mine. Cruising in the cop car is not comfortable at all because the back rest pops outward, so my hands have no room and it really hurts. I finally get to the jail house and as I am looking around this small room there is no bed, no seats, only a toilet and I am tweaking. I am the only one in here.

Hours have already come and gone and no word from anyone. I don't know what to do, sit or stand. At this point I have never feemed for a cigarette so bad before in my life. There are no words to describe the true feeling of what I feel, because today my freedom is stripped away from me. As I pace around the room it starts to hit me and I realize that I must really be in trouble. I haven't felt like this since I was a kid and my mom would get on me for not making my bed before school. I have this heart dropping feeling in my chest and it won't go away. I finally sit down and put my head on my lap, and as I feel lost, alone, afraid and guilty, I fall asleep.

I am in a deep sleep until I hear the cell door open and the deputy yell, "Segroves, 5987066, you are next." I am in an unfamiliar place, that at one point was an empty room, and now I am surrounded by people I don't even know. I wake up and it's time for court. I got busted on Friday, so I have to process all weekend, going from cell to cell with all the cells being holding tanks only, so there are no beds in them.

The twin towers in Los Angeles, California, are packed because most of the crimes happen at night on the weekends. There is sitting room only. There is nowhere to rest my neck. So as I stand by to stand by, I have to start adapting to the jail house lifestyle. I finally see the judge and he slaps me with a county lid, which means one year. I am so happy for this sentence because I know the cops didn't find the pound I poured out on the street because if they had I would have received a longer sentence. My heart drops as I plead guilty to a crime I did not commit; narking on the big home boy is like committing suicide. As I feel drained of my dignity and freedom, I feel like a number or a statistic. Inside I am crying but on the outside I hold my face proudly with attitude, angry at the world and hungry for drugs. The

cuffs on my hands and the chains around my torso are now my devastating reality. It's my life. It is who am and who I am choosing to be. After the three days of processing, the next step is taking a shower. I finally get out of my street clothes. Taking a shower with women from the streets in a huge room with two women to a shower isn't really a shower to me. I feel violated and degraded as I stand naked.

I am getting yelled at by female cops that look like buff men with mustaches. I have to dress in an inmate uniform. The large coarse scrub-like material falls loosely around me and my figure disappears. I am in a room full of different types of women. There are homeless women, prostitutes, thieves, crack heads, dope dealers, creepy people with crimes as small as petty theft to women who kill their own children. This is new to me. It seems like I am now surrounded with all the people I deal with on a daily basis, but they are all coming down and we are all having to live together and get along. I have to be hard here because the first sign of weakness can get me beat up or feeling terrified for my life. I now have to choose who I am going to hang with and it's tough because I trust no one here. I end up sticking to myself.

I act like a jail house clown because it shows I have no fear. It is putting me in my own cell, and at this point that's what I want. I don't want anyone around me asking for my store or asking me for anything. I know I am going to be here for a long time. One day in jail feels like a lifetime. I choose not to call family or friends. I am isolated to the world in a two-man cell with a sink, a toilet, two beds, and a two-inch window, no one to talk to, and a lot of time to think. *Freedom* is a word that I took for granted before. I start day dreaming of the life I will live once I am freed from these walls. I realize that when I thought I had nothing, I really had everything, or rather, every opportunity. My mistakes were not worth my freedom. My life is not my own, and my repercussions are all I have. Every day off of my sentence is another day closer to my freedom, and an opportunity to live a meaningful life. Having full custody of my son and being the example of a loving mother is what I desire more and more each day.

The Map to Candy Land

by **Mariah Rivera**

I was on one of my evening walks when reality began biting at my heels like a Rough Collie. It was a reoccurring realization, but it hit with the same ferocity every time it reared its ugly head. I was eighteen, a legal adult in American society. Yet, this fact was not what bothered me. What bothered me, though, was that I would be starting college the next day. It was like my first huge step into adulthood. The whole day I had been hit with nostalgia and was struggling with coming to terms with letting my childhood go. The threshold I was about to step through was a tough one and it felt as though I was slamming the door on my childhood's face. I was not ready to let go, by any means; however fate has a funny way of looking upon people.

The last of summer's heat was a miserable mistress, but I endured her chiding because nothing stopped me from taking my evening walks. That particular walk had been full of contemplation and dwellings of the past, but it was also on that particular walk that I rounded a corner and saw a little girl drawing with a stick in the dry dirt. At the time, I did not think much of it—little kids often do such things and do not pay much mind to adults such as myself. If anything the little girl would ignore me or run inside; stranger-danger is usually implanted in their minds at that age anyway. It was safe to say I was taken aback when that child came up to my side and addressed me with doe eyes, "Do you...do you know how to draw a map?" Well that was an uncalled for question...did I even know how to draw a map? Should I even acknowledge her with an answer? Would it look scandalous to her guardians if I, an adult, were talking to her? I put the little girl's feelings first before my own. "Uh...yeah." She handed me her stick. "Can you draw me one?" I was still skeptical, but how could I say no to her? Besides, the stick was already in my hand and the dirt was below me; the earth was my canvas. I crouched down and began drawing a map. As the girl watched me unskillfully drag a stick across the dirt, she exclaimed, "I need a map to get

to Candy Land!” To Candy Land, huh? I could remember that game from when I was a kid. I gave her a wry smile, “Oh, really?”

The little girl began to tell me of the adventure that lay before her in all its sugary glory, while I continued to draw whatever she requested of me to draw in the ground. “Sounds like fun!” I was humoring her, but at the same time, I felt a pang of bitter-sweetness eat at my heart. To her, the adventure would seem so real and nothing would bring her down—except for maybe her parents calling her in for dinner. I can still remember that feeling, even to this day; having nothing to worry about and nothing to tell you to stifle your imagination. I tried to put the stick down, but every time I stopped she asked me to draw something else, “Uh-huh, I’ll have a fun adventure!” We continued to draw until the sun was hidden behind the trees in the distance.

Eventually, we parted ways; she to her toys and I to my pondering mind. I picked up where I had left off on my walk, still smiling from my encounter with the little girl. But my mind began to venture back to its original train of thought. I was eighteen, a legal adult by society’s standards. I would be taking a huge step into adulthood, because I would start college the next day. Ultimately I was going to have to kiss my childhood goodbye. It was as if fate had given me one last chance to be a kid with that little girl before I grew up. But then it hit me: I had to grow up—that was for sure. But could I not still be me? The me that still loves Pokémon and wigs out over a new episode of ThunderCats, the me that was still a child at heart? Now that I think about it, it is funny how we all fuss over trivial things such as “steps to adulthood”. All we really need to remember is to be true to ourselves and keep moving forward.

It Left Its Mark on the World

by Caitlin Connell

Every week I come to their house to pick up the kids where I'm greeted with the sound of babies crying, people laughing, little feet running to the screen door, and then clack! I see the screen door bouncing back as the kids rush towards me. But today I hear nothing. Chills run up and down my spine as I walk slowly towards the brick, cramped, dirty home. I know it must be very bad and I want to get right back in my car and drive away. But I keep moving. "Silent as the grave" is no longer a metaphor to me.

Eryn and Taylor, my co-workers, are standing beside me as we knock on the door. Someone opens the door, but I can't see their face for my eyes are adjusting to darkness. As the dots leave my eyes, I see several adults sitting in the living room. Shallen is crying and talking angrily to Betty, her older sister. A friend is sitting there, too, and trying to interrupt Shallen. I look around quickly; hoping for a sign that one of the kids is there, but to no avail. *Tara. She's not dead is she? Surely not her.* Tara is the first child I met from this family, and she has become my favorite.

I jump when Shallen calls out, "Tara! Get in here! The Bible Club teachers are here." I know now there is hope for this family. All three of us hug Tara. We go outside with her since the adults are yelling. Tara begins to cry, so Eryn puts her arm around her, and Tara leans into the hug.

She struggles to get the words out, and eventually manages to say, "Junior's dead, baby Rose is in the hospital, and we can't find Destiny, Terra, Alexes, or Uncle Timmy!" Panicking she says, "They think that the dead guy found in the river's Uncle Timmy." With big brown watery eyes looking up at me: "Someone told me one time that if I'm ever stuck in a-a-a current, then I should float on my back. I remembered that so I laid on my back until my head hit a rock. I got out and climbed up onto the road."

"What road?" I ask.

"On the side of the highway. Someone saw me and helped me call the police." It's amazing that in the midst of screams, water rushing, and

a current pulling her under, an eight year old remembered some advice a person gave her years ago. I lean forward to hear because Tara's covering her face. "Timmy died because he tried to save Destiny and Terra!"

We go back inside because Shallen is quiet now and we need to talk to an adult. Eryn asks everyone what happened. Shallen says, "On Friday we were all sitting around the TV listening, and Mike Morgan—the meteorologist—said to get underground quickly. Alvin wanted to go in the closet but Tim said we should hide in the storm drain close to the house. We found out later that right after we left the newscaster warned about flash flooding." She throws her hands up and shakes her head.

"We could see the tornado coming down behind as we ran to the drain. It was empty except for a few puddles. Then the water rushed in. It was cold and rose so quickly we didn't have time to think, so we grabbed the kids and held on. We tried to escape the tunnel but it was too dang late! Betty held onto Junior, and made it out of the river with him, but he was already dead." She pauses to argue with Aunt Betty about what happened next.

Junior. I can hear his voice. "Hi Mish Catlin!" He's wrapping tiny arms about my neck. That baby voice gets me every time. His little, brown curls seem as if they are attempting to bounce away when he throws his head back for a laugh. I'm touched by his huge smile, which is so contagious it forces a smile onto my own tired face. But that's only a memory and will forever be nothing more.

"Where is Virginia?" says Eryn.

"She's at the hospital with her boyfriend Alvin. Baby Rose ain't doing well and they're staying with her. Anyway, the current took us through the drain and out into the Oklahoma River. Now they can't find them! I just know they're out there, because I can feel it. We all need to go out there and look!" Aunt Betty says a search party will gather by the river in a few hours, and we tell her we'll be there.

In the evening a whole crowd of my co-workers show up, and we sit with the family as they speak with the reporters from News 9. I can hear them telling Karl Torp the same story they just told us. The cameras follow

as we walk along the river, craning our necks for any sign of the kids. We discover everything of unimportance and nothing of importance. The whole river is scattered with torn shirts, kitchenware, empty bags, balls, and so many things. But there are no babies, curly blonde heads, or shy little girls.

Destiny's smile is so bright and her angry frown so dark. Destiny is a dramatic little girl, and everyone always knows what's going on in her little curly, blonde head. Every time that we sit down to listen to a story I feel little fingers pulling on my hair, trying to free it from the ponytail. I see Destiny behind me, and she smiles back mischievously.

She knows she should be sitting with her hands in her lap and looking at the teacher. I touch her arm to gently guide her next to me. The instant I turn my head Destiny's right behind me again. When it's time to stand up, I always have a tangled rat's nest on top of my head to fix, but I don't mind. Right now that lively little bit of sunshine is lying at the bottom of a river amidst the trash.

Poor little Terra. She always seems to be afraid of something, because Terra is a shy three year old. She always hides behind Junior and expects that his huge smile will make up for her absent one. Her wide, brown eyes and quivering lips make me think of a faun caught in a trap. I can't let myself think about what it was like for her when they were all pushed under the water.

As we search, Shallen, Betty, and their sister Faith say that they know we will find the kids. Shallen sits down, "I feel like Junior's telling me they're right there." She points to the river. Her voice is hoarse but growing louder, and breaks into a sob as she says, "I can feel it. We need some people to get out there and look!"

Everyone is thinking, *Why is it just us out here? Where's the search and rescue team?* We're sitting down, water bottles in hand, discussing what to do next. My boss, Valerie, is here and decides she's going to ask more questions. She sits next to Shallen, who has her head in her hands. Valerie rests a hand on her shaking shoulders and speaks softly, so that I can't hear

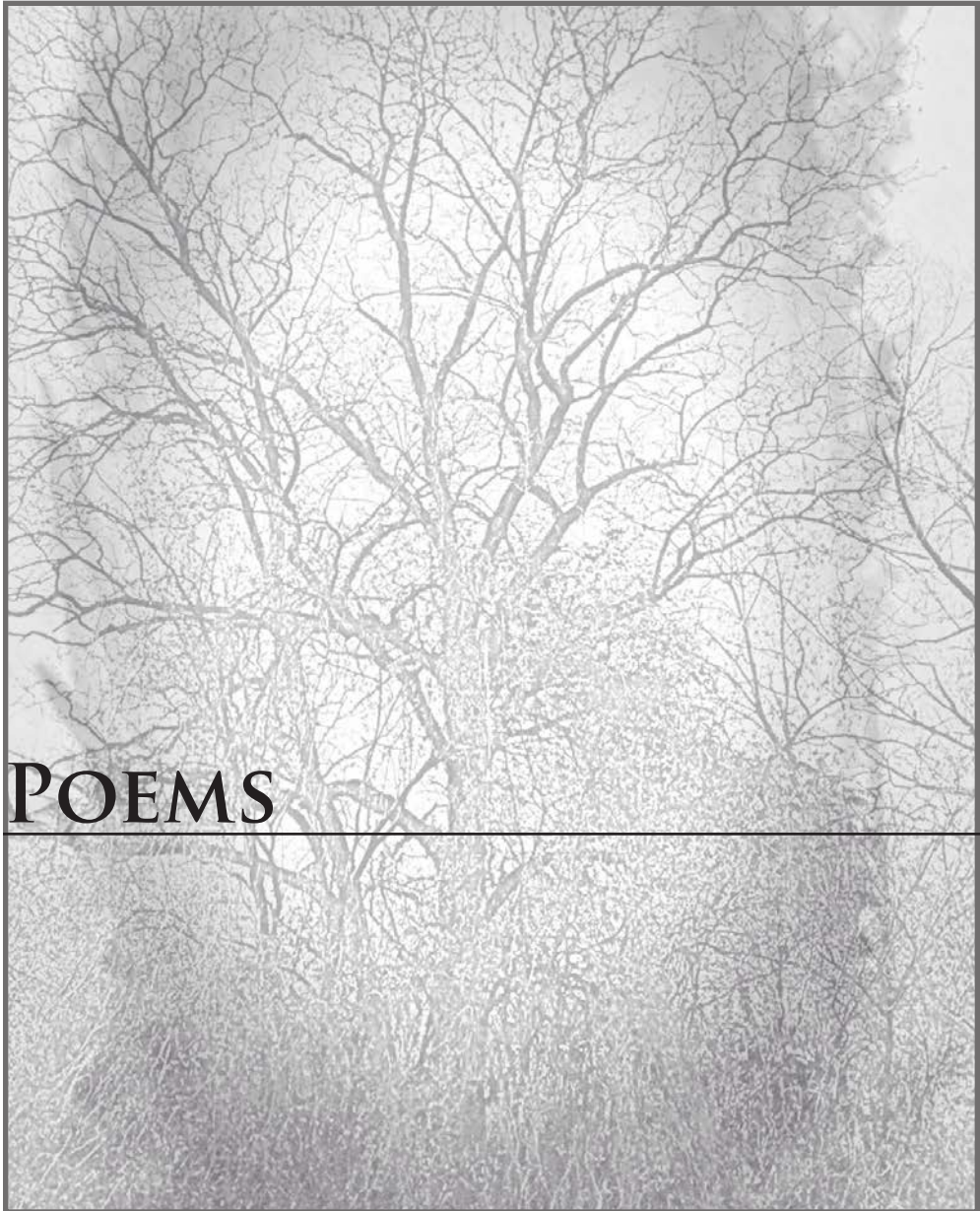
what she is saying.

I watch as Valerie comes back from talking to Shallen. “The search and rescue team have already been out here, but they can’t dive into the water because it’s too dark to see.” We all look at Valerie as she talks but no one responds. I am useless. Even I had hoped they might be out there, but I know that’s useless now.

I’m sitting in a pew, with my black dress on, listening to the preacher. They found Destiny’s body hooked onto the dam on Wednesday. I don’t know where they found Terra. Their bodies are lying in caskets now, but none are open, because their poor little bodies are mangled and bloated. Never did I expect to attend a funeral with five caskets sitting at the front. Four people are lying in those caskets, and one of the caskets will never be filled, because they can’t find baby Alexes.

It’s so sweet listening to Austin, Tara’s older brother, sharing about Destiny. It is a struggle for him to get through every word written down in Destiny’s honor. I hear the sound of one little girl’s crying. Destiny and Terra had a little friend, Kamorah, who often lived with them and comes to our program almost every week. They were her closest friends. The tittle sobs are coming from Kamorah, who is resting her head on her mother’s lap. She looks up for a second and the pain etched across her face breaks my heart.

I know the kids fought against the current, fought for life, but they lost the fight. I don’t understand the reasons why, and no one else seems to either. Someday I want to see them where they are safe, happy, and perfect. That is all we can hold onto when we’re drowning in our tears. We can make jokes about tornadoes, and laugh about the silly stories, but we can’t ever forget the tragedies—the mark that the tornadoes make on this world.



Somewhere in the Middle

by **Saraa Kami**

One-half African
One-half Sioux
Hair with kinky ringlets
Betray the worst kept secret.
To the Cush I'm rotted yams
To the Sioux I'm tainted soil
Brown gums
Wide hips
Honey colored eyes
All rolled up into a 5' 10 frame.

In my dreams, I run with the buffalo
Or chase the gazelle in the bush.
I am both herdsman and winyan,
Ayo and Ehawee are my crowns.
Bowing low before my elders
I drink from both cups,
And smile.

At the Pow Wows I sit with my Unci
At Funeral Rites I stand with my Baba
I oscillate between the richness of each culture
And pray to one day master them both.
For somewhere in the middle
Is where I was born to reign.
One-half African
One-half Sioux
100 % beautiful,
100% me.

Cedar Creek

by Amy Phelps

In the woods, a quarter mile behind our house,
A small creek flows.
As children we used to run there
To fight imaginary battles,
And capture fantastic beasts.
By beasts I mean:
Arachnids.
Crawdads.
And frogs.
The clear water surged up past our knees,
And oft carried sailboats,
And sometimes our dreams.
As teenagers, we snuck down to that creek at night,
The rocky muddy shoal hosted old lawn chairs,
A single lantern, and a blue cooler full of contraband.
By contraband I mean:
Playing cards.
Candy bars.
And a beer or two.
At night the water seemed smooth as glass,
Reflecting the stars above,
And sometimes, still, our dreams.
As an adult I sit and think with wonder,
What it would be like now to run to the banks of the creek,
And with sticks fight all my battles.
Or sit at night on the rocky shoal,
And gaze downward at the stars.
I sit, and I wonder how that old creek flows
past many a farm, and country road.
And how it carries, still, my old dreams,
And where they might go.

Who Threw The First Rock?

by **Liam Whinery**

Who is it that divided the land,
drew a line in the sand; built walls and fences?
Who threw the first rock, and who murdered the first “man”?
Who was the first to lead a raid, to enslave, and to rape?

What was the first “material” item?
Was it shiny, was it finely crafted, was it worth stealing?

Who was the man to first invoke the gods?
Who were the first slaves to their words, these middle-men,
that stood between the common folk and the divine?
Who were the first suckers?

What was the first story? Was it a peaceful one?
Probably not, that isn’t much fun...

Who was the first hero that we respected and aspired to be?
Who was the first to exemplify the teller’s idea of humanity?
How many times has their name been changed throughout history?
How many biased amendments and revisions has been made to their epic story?

How long must we say the same words, and do the same things?
How many times must we rebuild the same places, and,
how many times must we fight the same wars?
How long will we walk in circles and pretend we know what we are doing?

For how long, and how many more times?

Will You, Won't You?

by Tiffane Shorter

We dance across the stardom dust
And talk to hope and dream of love
And how forever is not enough
To fall in and out of reckless trust.

And what can cause our mouths to sing
If not the rare and simplest of things
When we fancy ourselves a king and queen
And we hold the world upon a string?

We dance across our breathless dreams
And talk of hope with ripped, frayed seams
And how forever is filled with schemes
To climb a broken ladder of reams.

For what else allows our eyes to laugh
And take the more forgotten path
And turn from hate and scorn and wrath
If not for tit and not for tat?

We dance across our faith renewed
And talk of hope and past debuts
And how forever is never true
To schemers and dreamers and me and you.

But what will cause our feet to dance
When there is no hope or love or chance
And nothing but a backward glance
Will save us from the cruellest trance?

We dance across our failed extremes
And talk of hope that can never Redeem
And how forever remains unseen
To climb silver stairs of shadowed moonbeams.

Traveling

by Sarah McKenzie

Throw caution to the wind with me. We're on a
Rescue mission to save ourselves from the familiar.
Adventure is what we crave. Let's
Vanish among the bustling markets of Ghana.
Escape into the world of art inside the
Louvre. Acquaint ourselves with the pubs of
Ireland. Together we can spend our
Nights throwing back pints of
Guinness with verve. We've saved ourselves.

you ring wedding bells in my chest

by Imani Edmond

who knew that
the color of
god's laughter would look like
you?
you have made a garden
out of me.

even the backs of my knees
have daisies.

innocence

by Imani Edmond

born as a thing of violence
your dearest years decorated not
in cotton socks and a childhood crystallized
in summer colors that remind you of
your mother's eyes, fireworks, candy skies
little wings on your back that carried not magic, but knives
and a princess in your mind that wore not
dresses
of silk and pearls,

but muscles of thorns.
still a thing of blood
and beauty,
with war torn streets for hands,
abandoned playground for a heart.

Of Dragons and other Mystical Guardians: a cat's night diary

by **Rachael Z. Ikins**

When Mom settles book
on her chest, I climb her collarbone.
It is night. Lamplight shines,
words she reads. One hand
strokes my spine, again and again.
I purr. I know she likes my purr so I purr
loud. Her fingers find their blind blunt
way along my ribs' paths,
my curled fur. I needle her neck-skin.
Not enough to bleed, she laughs," Ow!"
My dilated pupils erase eyes' blue, see midnight
monsters she cannot.

Page corner bent, place held, she slips her book
between pillows. Our bed is in an east corner,
this darkened room. Sister joins us. She gnaws
a rubber toy for 15 minutes. Doggy relaxation.
Mom flips switch. Moonlight flows
freed of boundary, window-half undraped.

I listen to Mom's heart bustle, a small strong mouse
that tunnels. Sometimes it pauses, nose, whiskers
tremble for threat. I prick her neck skin, one claw. Mouse-music
scampers on. I scent her dreams, her skin, slip off her chest,
back to back with her, nose to tail with Sister.
Mom curls, a sleep-wrought snail,
Sister and I, her shell.

She complains from night's deep dream when she wants
to leave the bed. A necessary acrobat, over and around us.
She does not know (wonderful human mother)
we are dragons sent by God to protect her from the night.
Monsters swim on clouded purple rafts. They wait.
We lie between her body and night-sea-life :
no harmful hearts can reach her.
I dare one
to try.

Looking Backward, or Forward by Linda J. Rother

Oh, for the times the future was a haze
Never knowing the now was there to take
Looking backwards to those glory days

Angst of teenage years creates a maze
Navigate the minefield that we make
Oh, for the times the future was a haze

Ivy walls don't always give out As
Persevere, reap all that is at stake
Looking backwards to those glory days

Long gown of white, a fresh-faced bridal gaze
Ties that bind and cutting of the cake
Oh, for the times the future was a haze

Children come; then go in such a blaze
Loneliness lands loudly in their wake
Looking backwards to those glory days

Years to come are spent in such a daze
Recalling pasts with just a little ache
Oh, for the times the future was a haze
Looking backwards to those glory days.

Mixed Feelings

by **Kimberly Ray**

It's what destroyed us.
A feeling of immortality
Mixed with fear of
No tomorrow.

They're what destroyed us.
A feeling of surveillance
Mixed with the force of
Free choices.

You're what destroyed us.
A feeling of ecstasy
Mixed with the argument of
The day.

I'm what destroyed us.
A feeling of satisfaction
Mixed with the fact that
I'm miserable.

We won't let it destroy us.
Not now.
Not ever.

Sonnet 2

by Eve Summerton

Can I ignore your light and stunning grace
And choose a path more sensible and sound
And act as blind to halos 'round your face,
Or crash from Cloud Nine to this trait'rous ground;
Can I ignore your wit and noble heart
And cast you from my side and bosom's key
And loose you from bonds of my dreadful art
Or love you 'til worlds rip your arms from me;
I must ignore your kind and gracious love
And shun a tangled, torn, forgotten path
And cut these wings that make me soar above
For is this weeping tit not fit for tat;
For 'tis better to have loved and never told
And never know the broken heart once bold.

The Garage

by **Danny Grajales**

Where cold stone meets cold steel.
A motor bleeds on each wheel.
White walls with black hand decor
encloses oil, glazing the floor.
Fresh fuel mixture in the air.
Three pistons left in despair.
Surrounding walls hide creation,
of lifeless things, born from imagination.
Where wounded creatures of metal I restore,
can live again as I replace the core.
Hand built shelves hold tool by tool.
Shade tree mechanic, yeah, old school.
Armed with parts of old and of new.
How many more tweaks? Just a few.
Old motor out to put the new one in
Kick starts a new heart for the body of tin.
Underneath the exposed ceiling
defines accomplishment as my feeling.
I wear its blood and it wears mine.
Much like the monster of Victor Frankenstein.

Sad Woman's Blues

by Andrew McQueen

It was Friday
I came to the Vibezelect Café
jus' me, myself, and I 'til my
boys came and said hi
D'angelo's sound had me feelin' down
bass, cello, piano, and drums went through my
ear hole to my soul
Later, a diva with mocha latte skin with a drop of
Latin flavor came to the stage with some soul to savor
Cello took the lead
others followed soon
She sang with a passion while her fashion rang
through the place, her style put a smile on my face
Her blues were a story of a week she went through
with love, heartache, and what she did for the sake of
her heart
The trumpet was to start a motion of emotions like a
wave of an ocean
It was like poetry, it had such beauty as she
As it was lower, my spirits went higher from
lower
I realize now that I can sympathize with her the
Latin mocha angel with blues of a sad woman

Questions before Death

by Julie Denton

What is life after death some have asked.
Heaven or hell is all I've been told.
But does it have to be a choice so cold?
Can my soul not be free,
To fly over the empty blue sea,
Or float among those white fluffy clouds so high in the sky,
Maybe explore the darkest nights of time
Only to find myself feeling alive?

Have I not yet lived a life so full
That my soul must go on living?
So shall I rest only a minute to waken again?
A child I will become with a new mum,
And hopefully a dad.
Oh how I will grow and so will this soul
With no memories of this life,
That I'm leaving behind.

How do I say goodbye
To kids and grandkids alike
With those same beautiful brown eyes?

The question
What is life after death?
Yet that is not the question I ask.

Love Alone

by **Haley Cates**

How did you know for sure that I'd fall? Electric shocks like
A firefly pulsing inside my heart. You stole the show,
Love; you were ten feet tall. Seven years later and you won't be
Erased. A scar from an old wound, you have disfigured me, and
Yet you bless me with character. Oh, how I love to love you! Ice
Cold veins unfrozen. Sad eyes lifted. I want you to stay,
Always stay. Fighting, loving, laughing, crying, sitting, dreaming,
Talking, playing, dying all with you. To love alone is not the
End. Hope springs eternal and your love is my hope. Leaving me
Small won't stop my falling.

If & Only

by Damien Lykins

Sickly yellow, orange, glistening
on rain-slick pavement, I'd sooner
forget than
give it the
unnecessary
attention.

In a better place it would smell
like rain, I think that's what
they'd say, if only.

If only, it isn't.

If is a dangerous
word in the right place,
wrong place, my place.

It's only beautiful
when there's no one here.

It would smell like rain
if only it didn't smell like
smoke and piss.

I couldn't miss it.

I'd ask how you could if,

If only I didn't know.

I do, though, I've got
ears and eyes, a
mouth with a tongue inside.

All the equipment and no
desire, no love.

Not for a monument
to the dead, being

dead.

Just like you've got
feet and nowhere to go,
no will to carry and
no, just no.

Forceful Change

by Sara Long

Yesterday he waltzed in standing proud
With a twinkle in his eyes that belong to a young man.
Even though middle aged with no hair left
The world was still at his feet
The shadow of youth still clinging on.
The youthfulness of a twenty-something wouldn't
Couldn't... Last forever,
And with a last snip of the scissors
Much like the first one that brought him into this world
He was thrust into old age. For sometimes,
Little boys will stay little boys
With that youthful charm still clinging to their toes
Until their world shatters
Like that pane of glass from the front door
When my father broke in
To his own mother's house to find her there
Lying in her bed dead.

#nofilter

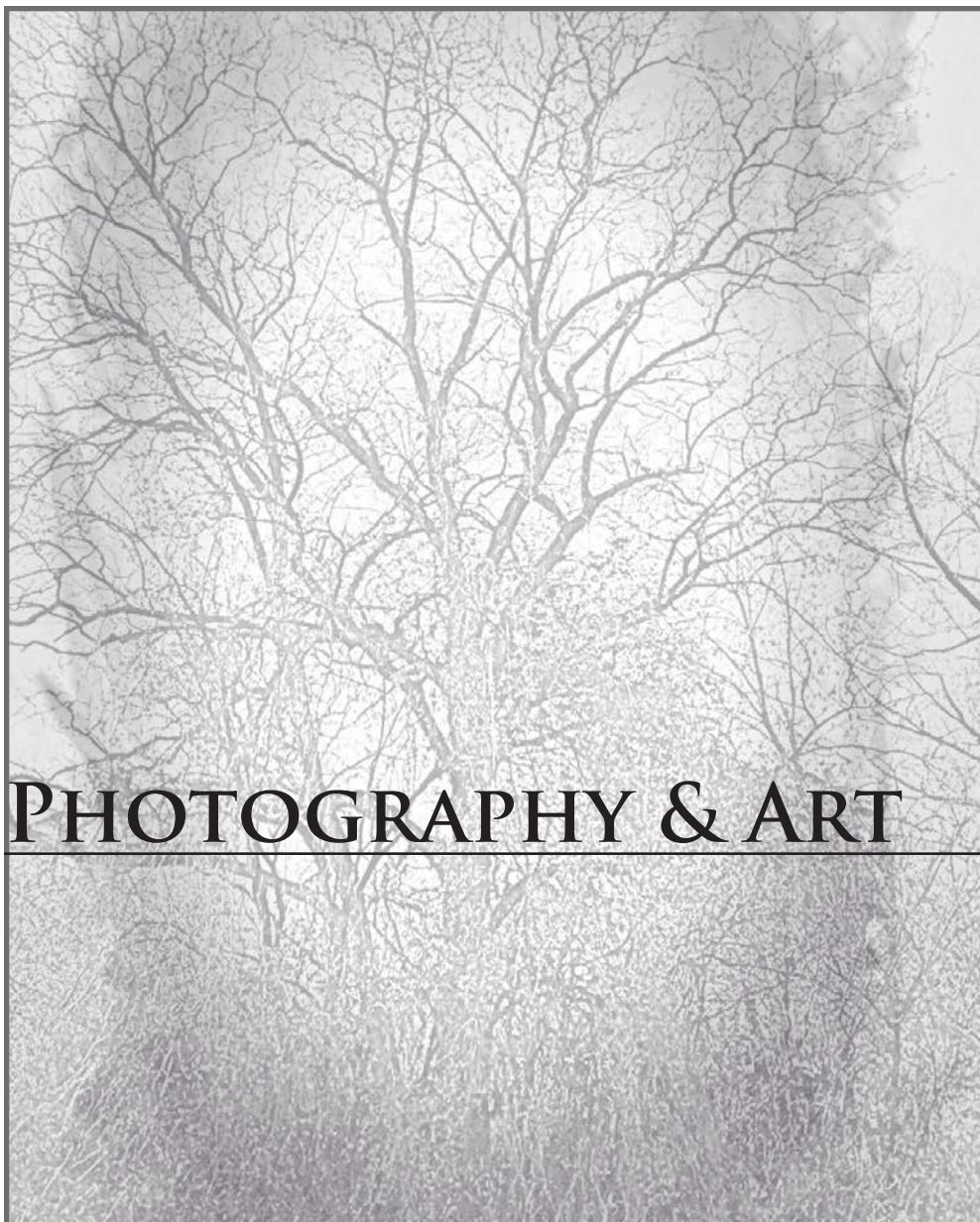
by Kari Reichert

When we left the restaurant in Pasadena
the sun had already set behind the foothills,
and the typical Californian sunset I had grown up with
was in the air; peach and cream colored clouds
merging with the polluted cerulean sky.
The peach and cream clouds had darkened edges,
they continued to darken until nightfall—
all while losing their vibrancy with every passing moment;
darkening until they disappeared,
only to be reborn for the next sunset.

Woody Guthrie

by **Ethan Woodard**

1931 Okemah
a boomtown gone bust;
Woody hit the road
covered in dust.
Route 66 was the road he took,
rough and worn,
like the strip on a matchbook.
A ramblin' man, he sure was,
hitchhikin',
freight hoppin',
lookin' for his cause.
Far out west,
California he went,
singin' in a can
with his Okie accent.
Across the states,
his dustbowl blues were heard,
fighting corruption with powerful words.
Long and hard,
he lived his life,
playin' old-timey tunes of
struggle and strife.
Gone but not forgotten,
his words still ring true.
Looks like I'll be seein'
some hard travelin' too.



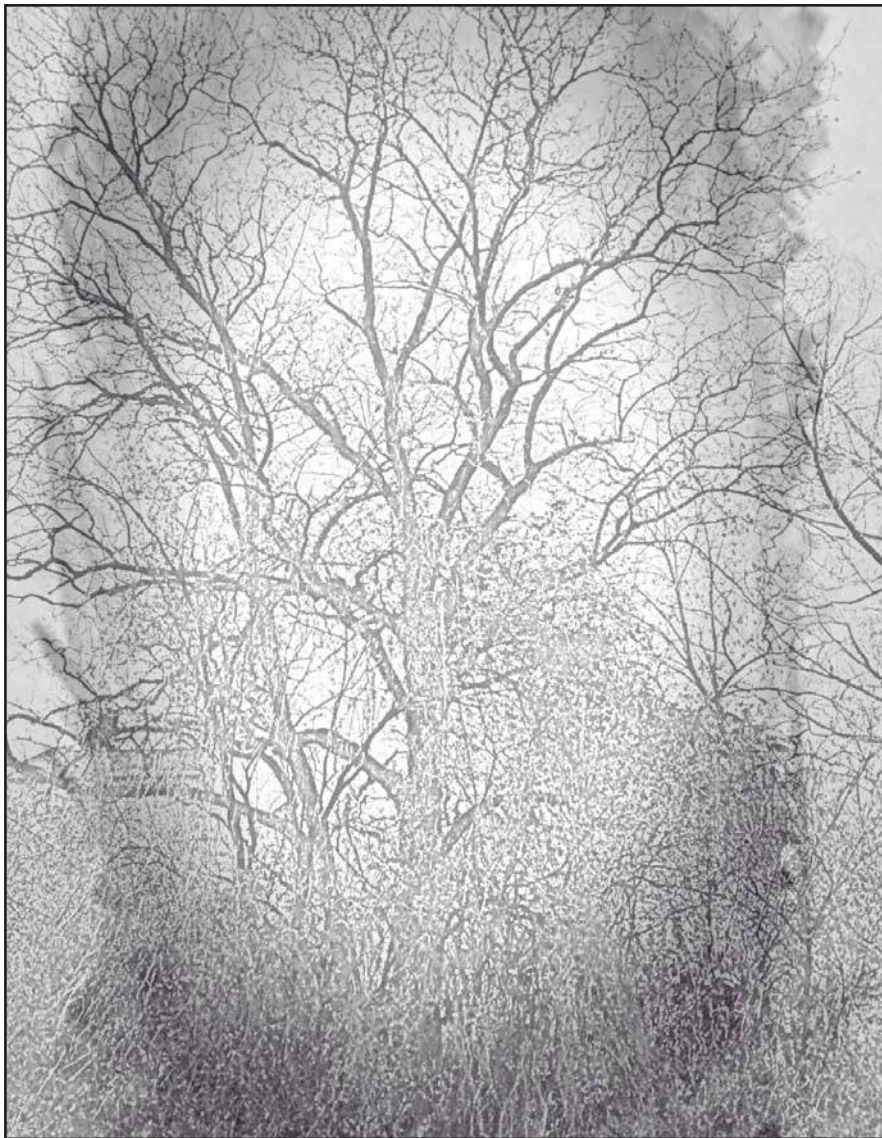
PHOTOGRAPHY & ART



Whiskers
Brenda Breeding



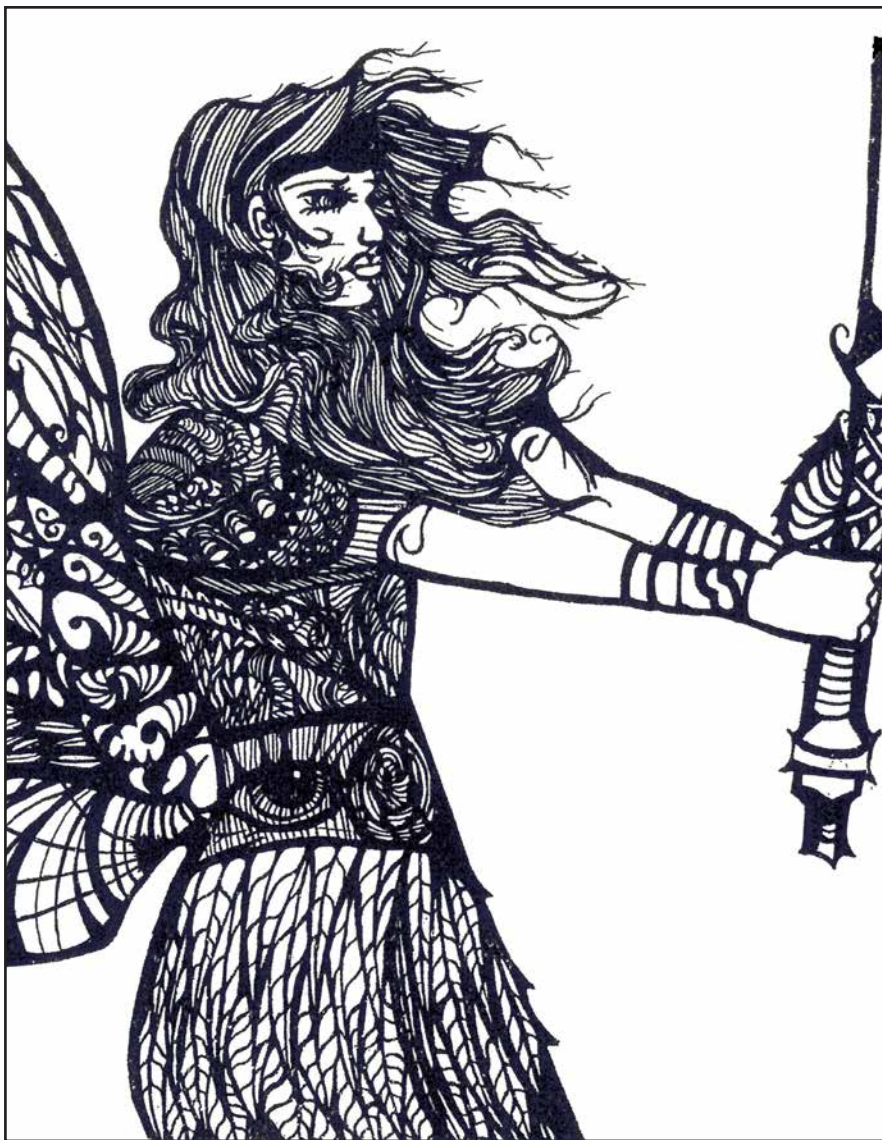
Awakening
Rachael Z. Ikins



Dormant Walnut Tree
Rachael Z. Ikins



Owl
Cathy Bowman



Warrior
Priscilla Segroves

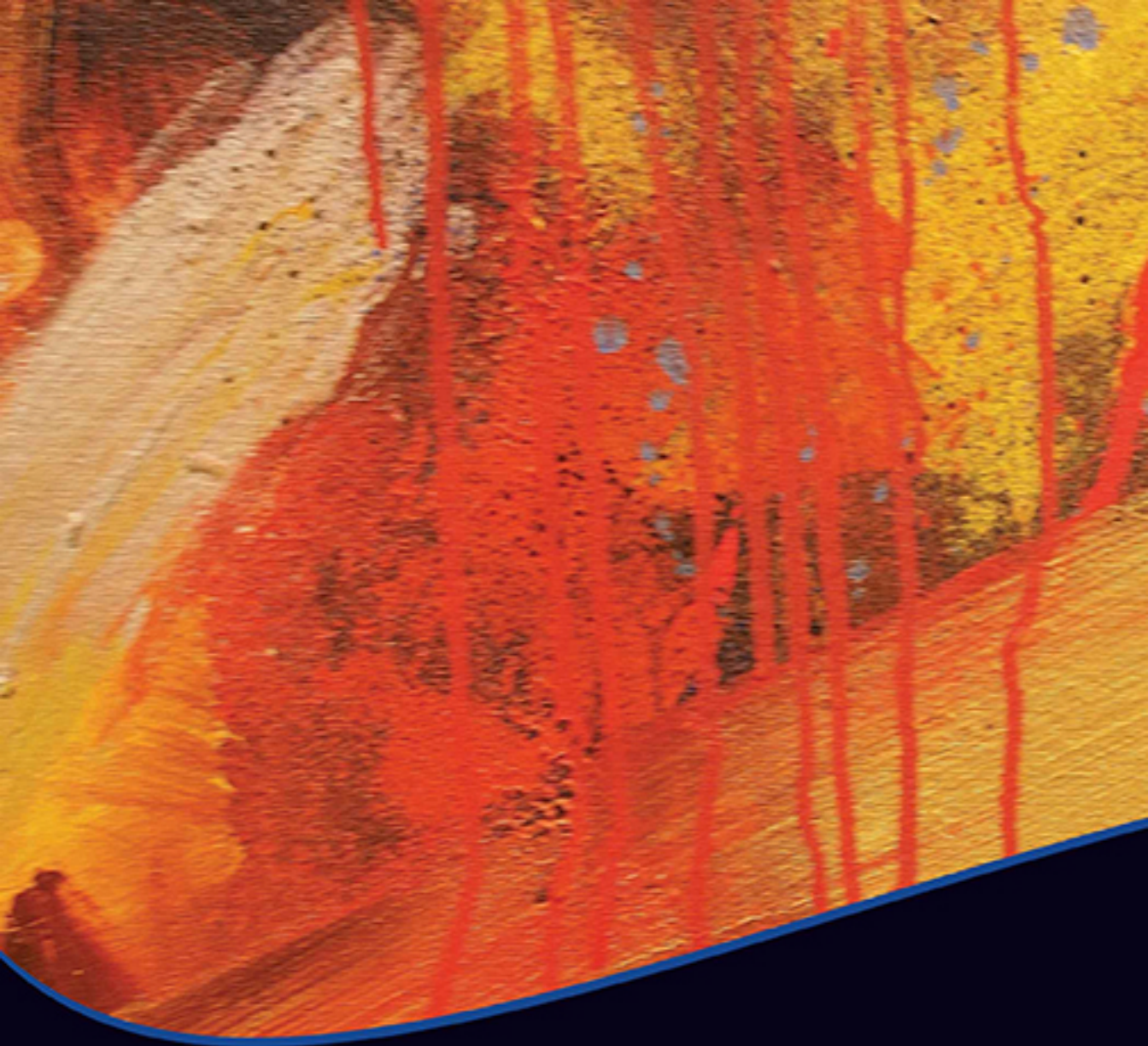


I Need My Space
Rachel Schutte



Saunter in the Park
Marqueon Tramble

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