



16 *Absolute*

Poetry • Fiction • Nonfiction • Artwork • Photography

16
Absolute



Absolute 2016

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

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FICTION



Sunder the Stars

by Lauren Romero

Kansas City was finally settling into a quiet slumber in the crisp hours of the early morning when Adelaide glided her UPS skyraider northward through the skeleton streets. As she ran long fingers through her curly caramel brown hair, she noticed thrumming pockets of vibrant night life scattered throughout the metropolis. With a heavy yawn, she guided the humming vehicle into the UPS parking garage off Guinotte Avenue and coasted past rows of identical slumbering trucks and concrete columns. When she found her spot, 4A2, she carefully slid the bulky truck between the two glowing parallel lines on the floor. It had been a long day. Above the steering controls, she grazed her sluggish fingers over the holographic console commands to park and kill the engine, wondering idly why she had been given such a random assortment of package drops. Sure, travelling across various parts of the system on a single shift wasn't abnormal. She had made eleven trips to Mars in the last month alone.

Adelaide thrummed her finger nails rhythmically on the synthetic leather of the steering wheel as she thought, her dark brows furrowed. But this had felt deliberate. A single delivery in four different locations across human-occupied space; in cities that contained not only the most technologically advanced security credits could buy, but also some of the most intelligent minds in the 23rd century. The words her boss had spoken to her that morning now echoed in her mind. "Off the record," Eddie had said while handing her a coffee, his large mouth set in a lop-sided grin. She chastised herself for foolishly agreeing to take up this assignment, even though it did mean more credits than usual would show up in her account this week. A lot more credits. It was difficult trying to force her sleepy mind to concentrate, to find some pattern connecting it all.

Her fingers stilled. With a sharp sigh she thought, *Adelaide you are reading too much into this*. Peace time was a hard thing to get used to. It was only five years ago that the American government had declared armistice

against the Russians. Yet, she still had to constantly remind herself that there weren't spies and sleeper agents lurking in the shadows.

With a click she released her harness and dropped out of the driver's side of the truck. Slinging a duffle bag over her bare shoulder, the young woman made her way languidly across the dim parking garage, listening to the sound of her combat boots echo across the vast and desolate space. The pressure of a Koles military-grade pistol pressed up against her ribs with every other step. It had taken some clever and semi-illegal moves to sneak the gun, hidden now between her civvies in the bag under her arm, past building security. For the past three days it had felt as if unseen eyes had been stalking her footsteps, even within her own apartment on the far east side of the city. The gun might simply be an extension of her lingering war-time paranoia. It might be completely unnecessary, but it certainly made her feel more confident walking alone so late at night.

A smile then pulled at Adelaide's lips when she thought of the lecture she would receive from Cyrus, her pet chow, when she would finally walk into their apartment at two in the morning. It never really mattered what time she would come home because he would always, without fail, snap his chops at her for staying away for so long. Then he would feverishly paw at her until she petted and smoothed his fluffy cinnamon coat.

Without warning, all the lights in the parking garage simultaneously blinked out. Adelaide dropped her bag in surprise, a gasp catching in her throat. Her muscles tightened in a familiar response, a gift from Parris Island, and adrenaline began its steady rush through her veins. Just as her cool grey eyes began to adjust to the sudden darkness, a large blinding light flashed on before her. She hissed in pain and shielded her eyes with an arm. The excruciating sting crawled its way along her skull, making her eyes water. Then followed the sound of several other lights clicking on – one behind her, two on either side – and she could feel their heat scorching her exposed skin.

"Adelaide Winters."

It wasn't a question. The voice was synthesized – a mashed up collection of sounds and tones making it completely anonymous.

Adelaide tried to orient herself, tried to calm her heaving lungs and conjure the marine training she had (until this moment) been struggling to bury. She noticed that the voice seemed to be coming from all around her. Speakers then, perhaps on mobile or synthetic units. Accepting the fact that she might be surrounded, she tentatively moved her left boot out in a slow arc. Her hands ached for the weighty feel of her pistol between them – for some sense of security.

“Yes,” she replied steadily, as if challenging the voice.

“Where is your partner?”

Eddie, what the hell have you gotten me into? she thought before vocalizing, “I don’t have a partner. UPS drivers work alone, not in pairs.”

“Your cooperation is necessary, Miss Winters.”

Her foot encountered nothing and she bit back a curse. Gradually, she lowered her arm and with her eyes still pinched shut she took two steps forward.

“Am I in some kind of trouble?” she asked defiantly. “And by whom? The government of the American Alliance? The IUN? The Russian Monarchy? Who are you?”

There was a brief hesitation.

It then repeated, “Your cooperation is necessary, Miss Winters.”

With another step her right foot met something soft. As she wiggled the toe of her boot she could feel the plastic of her lunch box through the thick fabric of her duffle bag. She pinched the corners of her mouth with her teeth to keep from smiling. Carefully, she raised her hands up above her head and opened her eyelids slightly.

“I just want to know why I’m being questioned. I don’t want a fight.”

“Please get on your knees and put your hands behind your head, Miss Winters.”

A shiver ran through her body. This wasn’t a simple interrogation. But why was she in this position at all? As far as she knew, her only illegal activity was tripping up the security sensors when she passed through them this morning to sneak her pistol in. Security would never have cracked down

this hard on her for that, especially with her being a military veteran. Now that she thought about it, no security or police force she knew of even used tactics like this. Who were these people and what did they want from her?

Did it have something to do with those identical packages she dropped off today?

Her heartbeat was racing so fast she could hear the blood sloshing violently in her ears. She had few options. Adelaide sucked a breath of air through her teeth as a decision clicked in her mind. Slowly, she began to lower herself to her knees.

Her foot slipped and she released a surprised gasp as all sense of balance was lost. As she fell, bare palms scraped to catch her weight and her chest crashed painfully onto the duffle bag.

“Miss Wi—”

Cramming her fingers through the lip of the bag, Adelaide seized the grip of her gun. Her index finger flicked off the safety. In a swift motion, the pistol arched out and four heat-seeking bullets burst forth in quick succession. A cacophony of ear-splitting bangs followed as each light fixture exploded in a shower of sparks. She stood and took the moment, chest heaving, to raise the pistol once more to take aim at a faceless adversary.

She felt surprised at how well that had all worked out. He— or they— could have easily taken her out when she reached for the gun, but didn’t. And even though she had made an impressive display, she still could not see anything beyond a five foot radius. Their hesitance concerned her.

The dim glow of the overhead lights in the garage revealed vague outlines of several rows of men standing in formation around her. It was difficult to tell how many made up their number since their forms seemed to melt into one another. But the wicked orange glow from their raised assault rifles and the faint glint off their high grade ceramic armor made their intention obvious.

Now she knew why they hadn’t put a bullet in her head when she had been on her knees. This private army had enough firepower to shred her body until it was just another Jane Doe in a faceless forest of back alleys and

muddied river banks. There was no need to be in any hurry. They would get the job done regardless.

The hand holding her pistol trembled slightly. She knew that she was going to die and she didn't even know for what reason or for what cause. Switching the heat capacitor on her pistol to charge, Adelaide felt it warm up against her sweaty palm. These may be her last breaths, but she wasn't going down alone.

There was a sigh beside her, a soft exasperated sound exhaled over her shoulder. Adelaide's head turned sharply, brows knitting in surprise and horror that someone had snuck up on her. What felt like a strong arm then wrapped around her waist and drew her tightly against something hard, like metal plating. Glancing down, her breath caught and a shrill panic flared across every nerve when she saw nothing there.

There was a pull, a lurch somewhere around her stomach area, and the scene before her began to spin like a fair ride. Adelaide swallowed the rising bile in her throat, squeezed her eyes shut, and cupped her hands over her ears as a kaleidoscope of images and sounds assaulted her senses. The hand, or what felt like a hand, *oh God*, that gripped her hip remained there until the world began to decelerate. Distantly, she could hear the sounds of a dog barking. The vise released and Adelaide crumpled like a carcass onto the cold tile floor of a kitchen -- her kitchen.

Nausea overwhelmed her and she struggled to prop herself up before the violent putrid waves shook her chest. When the heaving stopped, Cyrus was beside her, his blue tongue lapping at her pale and pasty face. Feeling shaky, she forced her heavy head up to look around the room.

There was a shimmer in the air in her living room -- a spot that glistened with reflected lights from the city below the large apartment windows. It swelled and when Adelaide blinked wearily it was replaced by a tall hooded figure. Moving around the room in long strides, it gathered an assortment of objects that Adelaide had scattered about haphazardly. She tried to get a better look at the figure, but the room was too dark and her eyes were too blurry and unfocussed.

The figure sighed, and Adelaide placed the sound as the same one she had heard moments before in the parking garage. From under the hood it murmured in a low tone, “How very human. Casual murder of your own kind.”

The cadence of its words was strange, like an unfamiliar accent. Normally Adelaide would dismiss it as a foreign dialect that she simply didn’t recognize. Well, that is if it weren’t for the unmistakable bass-like reverberation that accompanied the voice, as if two people were speaking at once, and the low vibration that quivered through the air with each word. What surprised her the most was that it sounded completely organic, unlike the macabre synthesized mash of a voice she had heard back in the hollow UPS parking garage. Her head was swimming as she thought, *It doesn’t sound human.*

This person— or creature or whatever— turned to Adelaide then and threw her forgotten duffle bag at her feet along with some spare clothes, her datapad, a medkit, and a weapon whose design and make were completely alien.

“Clean up and pack up. We need to move.”

A New Sunset for a Cowboy

by Leland White

We thought of ourselves as cowboys. In LA, that translates into “cocaine cowboys.” Over the years, an indulgent and pleasure seeking lifestyle had caused my associates and me to develop a longing for drugs along with the other good things in life—cars, clothes, social acceptance, etc. And we knew one thing: all it took was money. Lots of money. Much more money than our jobs provided.

While we didn’t see ourselves as bad, in reality we were. As time passed, my friends and I developed an organization of car thieves that was good. I mean really good. Combine this with connections to crooked parts dealers and we thought we were on our way to millions. Here’s why.

Car theft can normally be divided into two areas. First, most cars are stolen for parts—not for the cars themselves. They are taken to crooked auto repair shops (“chop shops”) and disassembled into various parts that are in demand. Unwanted components are junked. The serial numbers are removed from the parts wanted by an unscrupulous mechanic. The part is placed on the car being repaired and the customer is charged a huge, and I do mean huge, markup. American and Japanese cars such as Toyota, Honda, Acura, and General Motors cars have a high resale value and their parts are normally in great demand.

Secondly, certain luxury vehicles—referred to as high end vehicles—are sold intact. When I say luxury, I do not mean the newest Cadillac or Lincoln Continental. I am referring to cars such as a half million dollar Lamborghini or something similar. They are then shipped out of the country, many times to Mexico or Latin America, and sold at a great discount to a corrupt buyer.

The bottom line was easy to see. My friends and I wanted money for drugs and had discovered a crime that was hard to prosecute and quite lucrative. We were auto mechanics and had the training and experience

that we needed. And we all rationalized it away as something that would be passed along to insurance companies. What would it really hurt? Insurance companies were all crooks anyway weren't they?

The prime time to steal an "everyday car" was normally between 2:00 and 5:00 A.M. Most people were asleep then and many cars were parked in areas that were not well lighted. I had uncovered a way to obtain the registration number and the VIN from corrupt state officials. With this in hand, my associates would approach a dealer of this make of car and order a key for the vehicle. Of course, this was under the table and everybody along the line expected a payoff. With the profits we were making, this was not a problem.

Many times, after an evening of partying, we would ride around areas of Los Angeles late at night looking for a car that would appeal to one of our "parts men." And one evening we found one. The car was a late model Toyota Corolla that appeared to be in mint condition. I accordingly set the process in motion.

The registration and the VIN for the vehicle were obtained and we had keys in no time. A Tuesday night (or really, early Wednesday morning) was chosen for our little project. We approached the car parked in the owner's driveway and noted an alarm decal and signal. Fortunately, this alarm was a cheap model that was easily deactivated by smashing a rear tail light. Of course, we had to move quietly. With the alarm out of the way, we opened the Toyota, cranked it, and quickly drove away.

I had heard many times from many vehicle thieves one principle: Never steal a car unless you already have a destination arranged for it. And I had one. I was to take the car to a corrupt mechanic and he would have the parts distributed with two weeks. As long as we made it to our destination, we were almost certainly in the clear.

We did make it and, about a week later, we settled with the mechanic for a profit of \$3,000 each for myself and crew. Not too bad for about 7 hours of work for each of us.

So there we were, riding around, having fun, and finishing some of LA's best marijuana. I arrived home at about 5:00 am and saw that the

answering machine on my telephone had a message waiting. Little did I know that my world was about to turn upside down.

It was my X-wife, and since we didn't talk that much, it had to be serious. Our daughter, of whom she had custody, had become very seriously ill and had been rushed to the hospital while I was "making my rounds" after the Toyota. According to my wife, she had developed a blood disease and urgently need a blood transfusion but she had a rare blood type—AB negative. She of course wanted to know if I knew my blood type (I didn't) or if I knew someone who had it and would be willing to donate on an emergency basis. Of course, I didn't know that either.

I tore out of my living room, jumped in my car, and drove to LA General Hospital at over 90 miles an hour. Why I was not stopped I do not know. I ran in the hospital entrance and was able to reach a night physician who was about to leave for the day. He suggested that I give a blood sample to determine my blood type and explained my daughter's situation. My daughter needed a blood transfusion but it had to be of a rare blood type. Unfortunately, when they finished typing my blood, it was not a correct match.

Then came the most difficult questions of all. What could be done to locate an individual with such a rare type? The physician said that they had a network of individuals with rare blood types who would make themselves available for an emergency donation. The hospital would begin contacting these individuals during regular business hours. How much time did my daughter have? Only about 20 hours without the blood transfusion.

Only 20 hours! That's less than a day. My God why! What had my little girl ever done to deserve a fate like this? I went into my daughter's hospital room and met with my X-wife. She had spent the night in my daughter's room and looked bad. With tearful eyes, she confirmed what the doctors and nurses had told me—my daughter needed a blood transfusion and she needed it fast. Without it, she would be dead in less than a day.

I had been a street fighter and had run with gangs since my early days. I had been in many fights as a young boy growing up in Los Angeles. Yet no punch had hit me like this. It was almost as if Mohammed Ali had

landed his hardest right in the middle of my stomach and knocked every ounce of oxygen out of my body.

Time began to pass—about four hours. Then, in desperation, I did something I had not done in a long time. I prayed. I prayed that, if God would somehow spare my daughter's life, I would try to straighten my life out. Sarcastically, I prayed that I would forgive the Lord of the unjust fate that had befallen my little girl. I briefly opened my eyes and then, overwhelmed by fatigue, I fell asleep in the lobby chair I had been using.

I was awakened by a nurse who shook my chair. Another four hours had passed. But the nurse said she had good news and knew that I would want to hear it.

“Sir,” she said, “we’ve located a young woman who states that she will be here as quickly as possible. She has the rare AB negative blood type and fits all our qualifications for donation. I know it’s hard but don’t give up hope.”

Blow number 2 from Mohammed Ali. Los Angeles traffic is notorious for congestion, accidents, and road rage. What if she doesn’t make it? Who else could be contacted? What could be done? I felt as if I was totally paralyzed from the waist down and trying to move but couldn’t.

Another five hours had passed. Again, I prayed, God please help me.

Then, things finally began to fall into place. Another nurse came by and stated that one of the individuals they had contacted had just walked in the hospital and they were taking blood samples for the transfusions my daughter needed. But was she in time? I tried to hope.

I went toward the room where my daughter was staying and, as I approached the door, I saw a doctor and a nurse running toward the room with a blood transfusion container. I decided not to go in. A few minutes later, the doctor emerged and gave me the greatest gift of my lifetime. He told me that my daughter responded well to the transfusion and that he felt confident she would recover and be able to leave the hospital in a couple of days.

I felt so encouraged that I almost wanted to jump out of a window

and try to fly. What could have changed my outlook? Then it happened.

The doctor left and a nurse came by with a message. She stated that the young woman who had donated that blood was recovering and wanted to meet with me for just a second.

No problem, I thought. So the nurse took me to see her. Then she spoke another message that will stay framed in my mind forever.

“Sir,” she said, “I am really sorry I took so long to get here. I knew it was urgent. But something happened. Someone stole my car. It’s a Toyota Corolla and the police are looking for it but they don’t have any leads.”

Knock-out punch from Mohammed Ali. I began to shake and perspire in a cold sweat. What about my prayer? What about what I had done? I was at a loss at to what I should do.

I thanked the woman thoroughly for coming by, especially under the extreme circumstances she described. Then, I walked toward my daughter’s room and, as I entered, she smiled at me and motioned for me to come close. My X-wife joined me and we both held our daughter’s hands. I did not know what this event would cause in my life. But I knew one thing. My life would be different from this day forth.

Captain's Orders

by Rhiyana Furniss

The ship swayed and rocked with the rhythmic pulsing of the ocean. My feet were sure, though. After growing up on the sea, my balance was rivaled only by tightrope walkers in traveling shows and those who had the same love for the sea as I did.

The White Stalker had been under my command since my 18th birthday, when my father had gifted her to me, if a little reluctantly, after I had successfully taken her over. A young woman commandeering a ship and her own crew was still strange, but not completely foreign, and I had argued that if Aunt Anne could do it, so could I. Beside the point, Captain Katarina sounded nice on my tongue and I was just as good a pirate as my brothers.

My father, not exactly biological, had picked me up when I was 6, believing me to be a round faced boy. He decided to keep me when he found out I was worth something, and I proved my usefulness day by day. I was strong for my age and gender, and I wasn't afraid to give the crew what for when they were out of line. I was a good cook, seamstress, and soon found out, pretty good at wielding a cutlass. A sailor's mouth was nothing like my pirate mouth, and soon I was just like any of the young boys milling about the ships. Gaining my own ship wasn't hard when the time came to it.

I was young, to be sure, but I was fierce, and my crew took every word I said as holy gospel. Not only did I have a well pitched voice, it was loud after many years of yelling at my father and fighting for my right to sail by him. I had started as nothing more than a cabin girl, but I had worked myself up to Quartermaster, and when we finally captured a vessel worth my while, I begged my captain and father for it with all my might and fought one of the other older pirates. I was good with a blade, but my gun hand was quicker and he hadn't expected it. A quick bullet to the center of the chest was a quicker way to die than the first man I killed.

The salty air whipped my face as a strong wind blew in from the

south. My quarters were very well protected from the howling of any storm and I was almost surprised to see the black clouds ominously advancing towards us.

“Avast!” The closest crew stopped dead in their tracks and their eyes glued to me instantly. I had been overjoyed when my father let me pick my own crew from some of his own men. “Put up those deadlights and bring down those sails! We’re sitting through this one!”

“We can’t outrun her, Kat!” Bellamy Green was only three years my elder, and had been sailing with my father since he was 16. He had volunteered to join me as soon as I had my own ship and became my Quartermaster. He made sure my crew knew their place and everyone had their fair share of work.

I shook my head. “She’s fast, Bel, but that storm is faster. Buckle everything down and hold onto your stomachs. Get the riggers down as quickly as you can. She’s going to be a rough ride.”

I stayed with the crew on the Quarterdeck as the storm quickly passed over. The boat was thrown violently to all sides, and we even felt it start to tip under the waves that threatened to swallow our ship whole. Men were praying to their gods and some even slipped into native tongues while they held the ship steady. She slipped through the haze of the aftermath and we all let out a breath we had been holding for the past thirty minutes.

The clouds behind us still rumbled with thunder when a sailor ran up to me, ringing out his vest and placing it back over his shoulders. “Mum, there’s a ship off the port side. What say you?”

I took the scope from my pocket and calculated the distance. “It’s the Queen’s ship, boys! She sent some navy officers to make friends!”

The crew cheered.

I turned to Ballamy and smiled cheekily at him. “Get the dress. Time to sing a siren’s song and use the best advantage we got. Take the crew and wait below deck for them to board. The ship looks ragged enough as it is.”

The ship got to us quickly, but I had time to change into a torn, weather worn dress. I stooped at the bow and clutched an old Union Jack to

my chest like a good little British girl and began to weep what would seem almost inconsolably.

The Quartermaster yelled across to me. “A’Hoy! Lass! Are you just coming out of that storm?”

I cried and flung myself to the side of the ship. “I can’t find anyone alive, sir! You have to help me! The captain’s hurt bad in his cabin!”

“With your permission, we’ll board the ship!”

“Yes, sir. Please, sir. Hurry!” I wailed.

They crossed over quickly and men came around to comfort a fear stricken girl. They, being too overcome by the thought of a lone surviving girl, didn’t hear my men scurry up from beneath and overtake the navy officers. My crew was vicious and fighting the officers was no problem for my honorless lads. The Queen’s men fought by the rules while my men cheated and found loopholes big enough to fit their swords or flintlock pistols into. I was proud when we overcame their men and looted their ship. It was supplies to one of their West Indies trading companies and had enough gold to repair my ship and food to last my crew a few more weeks.

Bellamy had the captain by the scruff and had his hands behind his back. “What should we do with him?”

“Dispose of him, we don’t need his ship and it’s been ridden of anything worth a cent. We’ll sink her with him tied to the mast.” I walked back aboard my own ship while my crew carried the loot over. Bellamy would divvy it up later. For now, we had a ship to sink.

Gunners filled the twenty-four and thirty-two pounder guns, as I brought The White Stalker around. It was like shooting fish in a barrel after that. Our aim was true and the captain with a few other men sank down to Davy Jones with cries of “honorable deaths.” I swept away to my captain’s quarters for a glass of brandy and a good swig of black spiced rum. It went down smooth as I smiled at my day’s work.

Clown Portraits: *A Harlequin Romance* by Betsy Blair

A lack of ethnicity led to Jane's decision to become a clown and join the circus. Her dogs would also be joining the circus with her, because in the circus life dogs were part of an open enrollment plan—much similar to the drifters' life in which beauty and talent were trumped by warmth and a general need to have somebody to take care of. Jane realized early on in her career as a writer that she had no story to tell. Her job at the library led her to this decision, as she compulsively read the bios of famous writers: "Spent his childhood on an Indian Reservation in Spokane, one of six children. Born with hydrocephalus and teased unmercifully for his enlarged head at recess". Or this one: "During an acute crisis, he poured acid into his ear, leading to a hearing impairment which was further aggravated when he was beaten by police in 1979. Before the end of the war, he became a Buddhist monk."

With no acrobatic talents to speak of, though being quite limber in the cab of a Dodge pick-up monopolized by stolen tools, Jane thought the only way in is to proposition the ringleader clown with an honest commitment to scoop up poop at minimum wage. "Surely, they provide room and board," Jane thought to herself, as she found the clown rather incongruous, being that he was roguish and ruddy and bearing a striking resemblance to Ian Anderson of Jethro Tull. Jane straightened her back out on the stands and ran her hand through her long white hair. She was an albino living in a sunny state, and she liked the idea of the spotlight on her white skin. Yes, she had made the decision then and there as she held her bare corn dog stick, as she watched the Italian boy in the red vest with his hair slicked with pomade that made him look as glossy as a figurine, herding the goats into the ring—This is the next chapter.

The history of the Zoppe' Circus could be traced back to a boy and girl falling in love. "Napoline Zoppe' was a French street performer who

wandered into Budapest, Hungary, looking for work. It was there, in the streets of Budapest, when he first saw the beautiful equestrian ballerina, Ermenegilda, who captured the minds and hearts of the adoring crowd with her grace and showmanship.” Jane jabbed the straw further down into her Diet Coke, then glanced up from her phone as the standard poodle made a second jump through a hoop that looked much smaller than the poof-poof of his body.

There were two women who would run into the ring to set up the see-saws for the terriers, then quickly run back in to take them down. “Ermenegilda’s father did not approve of the romance between Nino and his daughter because Nino was a clown, leading the young couple to run away together to Venice, Italy.” The younger girl was decidedly neither Hungarian or Italian, a pitiful stick with limp hair and she seemed worn by the peasant top and lace-up vest more than wearing them. After the show, Jane asked the other girl, the one who later rode a horse bareback on her hands, where she might apply. “So, you want to run away and join the circus?” the girl asked, smiling and looking Jane up and down. Jane was briefly unpegged by this, but put her hands to her hips and continued, “I am a very hard worker, very strong. I can clean up after the horses, clean their hooves, put up their tack, whatever you need me to do.” “Well, you can apply online, but that’s for artists only, and...” Jane leapt on this, as if artist was a different category than performer—as if artist covered her somehow in an invisible cloak of the arts. “I’m a writer,” Jane offered up as a useful preoccupation.

“Now, why would we need you to write about us? How do you not know that we are writing about ourselves, considering that this is our life, not yours?” It was the clown who spoke to her. Sans clown make-up, he appeared ghostly in the dark out from the row of cedars. Again, briefly unpegged Jane repositioned herself to gain more traction. “I could be put to good use, I promise you. In the evenings, I will record my day. The story will be mine, of course, but I could be loyal to the cause of highlighting the beauty and class of the Italian circus.”

The clown’s name was Giovanni, and he seemed *je ne sais pas*, more French Canadian than gypsy and Jane thought gypsy might be a dirty word to

him. It was then and there she saw a portrait of a man floating through a rain driven street in Montreal with a red umbrella, his clown shoes like two small boats carrying him to work--two drops of rain running through the paint and on his cheeks before he had the time to open the umbrella. He floated down the hill, until the water slid into the storm drain, and he stopped there and looked at Jane. Artless, but for her platinum hair. He imagined her in white paint and spoke, "You meet us in Chicago. One month, two shows and I will be watching."

She brought up the dogs. "One is blind, the other deaf-but they get along fine with others. My blind dog, Spy, likes to ride, so you could put him in a cart-like small chariot driven by the doberman. He can be very Commodus, if you require a darker element to the show. Tito is large-very smart and kind, and you could put a small saddle on his back and let a monkey ride him."

Giovanni began backing up into the circus tent, tripping on the round head of the metal stake bobbing up from the soaked ground. The lights danced. He told her no new parts would be written for the dogs, but they could join her if kept out of the way. He would live to regret this decision.

Jane fancied herself receiving a writing fellowship, like the one offered by Amtrack in which hundreds of poets compete for one spot riding the rails for one year and writing about it. She imagined acrobats in the cornfields of Iowa, the elephant next to the Big Texan sign in Amarillo, or the blue whale of Catoosa. The dogs in full costume, dining al fresco at a bar in Santa Fe. She imagined Giovanni the clown at the top of mountain, in the snow, crossing a bridge over a frozen creek like the woodblock print that hangs next to her front window in the living room year-round. That is, it did hang there until being taken down.

Jane arrived in Chicago with Spy and Tito, checking in to an Econolodge and leaving the TV on Animal Planet as she left to follow the scratched directions because she couldn't drive and wear her readers to read the phone.

This is Jane's first entry into her journal:

I was shown to a trailer to pick up the outfit I should wear for the

show. Inside a dark woman sat on a plaid sofa covered with a gold satin comforter. She was looking inside her tea cup before she noticed me standing there with the door open, a little boy with one foot out the door letting the poodle out who he followed. She told me I was too big and that none of the women's clothes would fit me. I asked her could I try but she said "No." She handed me an outfit hung together on one hanger. It looked like one of the acrobat's outfits, not for a woman but for one of those Italian boys who hold the ropes. I zipped up the cigarette pants, which pinched into that extra inch I could now grab since Neal's death. The sleeves of the white shirt were too short, so I rolled them and slipped on the red bolero vest. I left the skinny tie on the hanger and unbuttoned the white shirt one more button down. I had french-braided my hair in the expectation of the peasant girl outfit but now I looked positively masculine. The woman pulled out one boot then another from a cardboard box on the rolling rack of costumes—men's boots, short black zippered boots. Beatles boots. She never spoke to me, she just opened the door to the trailer as I walked back out and wandered away.

The one elephant the circus owned was a trade made 40-something years ago, in which a Shriner sought to learn the secrets of the clowns in Zoppe' and thought the elephant to be an even trade. The poor thing had conjunctivitis and needed his eyes wiped after standing in cloud of dust and animal hair. This task was assigned to Jane, along with the feeding of the goats and the cleaning of their pens. The elephant reminded Jane of those biographies of writers who escaped lives of torment or toil to write poems that were as heavy as the morning fog, until the words pushed on through. The elephant's name was Picasso and he was dressed in a painter's white frock with a small red beret taped to the tiny hairs on his head. Picasso painted pictures of clowns with his trunk, clowns with little triangle hats and big blotches of pom-poms running down their skinny bodies. Skinny French or Hungarian clowns, who could run around the edge of the ring, jump down and bow to the audience with a giant squirting flower. The flower would squirt then droop lifelessly, then the clown would ask to be kissed by a pretty girl in the audience, giving rise to the flower again. At night, Jane

would rub Picasso with olive oil, then return to her hotel room with a bag of hamburgers.

Jane's second journal:

I've noticed outside people going into Giovanni's trailer as I'm stacking the buckets and hanging up the lead ropes for the day. I stepped into the shadows to watch two heads move past the yellow window cut out of the trailer. As I stood there watching, Giovanni's clown silhouette passed the window along with the silhouette of a woman. When the shadows passed the window again, both silhouettes were clowns.

Jane set up Picasso's paints, turning them in the dirt to make sure they didn't tump over in the melee of dogs running circles around Picasso as he painted his portrait. At the end of the act, Jane would run out and lift the canvas up with a small pulley, revealing Picasso's work to the ooh's and ah's of the fair people. Jane would wave up and down the canvas, then outward to the right to Picasso's gallery of original paintings awaiting them. Pride was not a fault an elephant could subscribe to and Jane thought how different it must be to create art without desire or even knowledge that art existed. She watched as one couple didn't get to the less runny painting as quickly as the other couple with the giant stuffed panda. "An elephant would accept this defeat more graciously," Jane thought. She thought of desire being beaten out of a poet or an elephant until it becomes a ghost in a roomless room. It was to be this kind of travelogue.

Jane's third entry:

I have yet to share a meal with any of them, not that I can most of the time because I have to walk Tito back to the hotel over the hill to check on Spy and let him out. When I pick up my first check, I smell the garlic in the sauce and suck my cheeks in to keep from drooling. Giovanni tells me I can stay on one more month without looking up from the checkbook that he isn't writing in. He seems to read my desire well, understanding that what is unacknowledged leads to control that leads to desire—though he was uncaring in that respect.

"Everything is—Tenuous," Jane thought as she watched Giovanni

reach for his red hat on the top of the broomstick he carried. It was part of the act, reaching for the hat instead of lowering the broomstick. He would ask for a little boy's help with that, and Jane liked to wager with herself which boy from the audience that would be. Jane thought her life to be like a circus act, one in which the audience laughed as she reached for the hat at the end of the broomstick. She had two weeks left unless told otherwise, but no one spoke to her really but Picasso who curled his trunk into her pocket. She rubbed him between his runny eyes, then sat down on a bucket with a six-pack of Bud Light she bought at the convenience store across the busy street from the fairgrounds.

It was late, but she didn't want to go home to the Econolodge and stare at the blank screen of an unwritten story, or at Facebook or the list of Groupon ads and online degree programs in her inbox. Tenuous. The wind picked up in the night, and Giovanni appeared from the shadows, crossing in between the trailers to his, briefly looking over to Jane. It was difficult to read a clown with his makeup on. He closed the door to his trailer, leaving Jane alone again. She twisted off the cap of her third beer and watched his silhouette--the right hand coming up to remove his nose, the left removing the little round bowler. She had never been in his trailer, every night though watching the silhouettes change from women to clowns. She stood up, and as she did the breeze caught Jane between the buttons, like a cold snake finding its way inside her.

She knocked on the trailer door. It was desire, a desire to see Giovanni without his makeup. She thought of all those men in the past with their masks on and how she never, not once, asked them to remove them. He opened the door to her, ghostly in his bare face with the traces of white. His eyes were light and she saw him walking on the other side of the street from her in Portofino, as they crossed paths, but not really—one side of the street were sea glass wind chimes, the other beer bottles gathered in the hands of a healthy Italian girl with dark rounded shoulders. Jane returned to the story. "Yes, well, I am at the end of my time with you and I have yet to write a story, and I wondered if I could interview you—if you could tell me a few of your circus stories." Jane swayed back like glass wind chimes, or the

gathering of beer bottles at closing time.

“Come in, I want to ask something of you myself.”

Jane entered. Clowns, the walls of the trailer were papered with portraits of clowns. Portraits of children in clown makeup, of housewives and gypsies, stogie-legged men and nubile young girls--all painted, but from the neck down most were in their street clothes. All of the clowns looked dark, as if they had emerged from the line of cedars like Giovanni. It was a house of mirrors. Jane should have been afraid, should have turned away, but she was drunk with a darker desire.

“Could I put a nose on you?” Giovanni asked Jane--and then he smiled, like a cracking facade, a teasing facade that she could pick at. She agreed to this, and he told her he wanted to see her white shoulders in the photograph. She sat on an ottoman under a studio light. He unbuttoned her white cotton shirt, raising it up then pushing it down like a cloth around the bust of her. “Close your eyes.” Jane felt her face being stroked with a small cold wet sponge, so lightly like rubbing alcohol on a face full of small injuries. Cool air next, then he traced her lips with a pencil, then from the corners she felt herself smiling again.

*You are just a clown! on with the show, man,
And put on your white-face.
The people pay you and you must make them laugh.
And if harlequin should steal your columbine, laugh,
You're Pagliacci, and the world will clap for you!
Turn into banner all your pain and sorrow,
And with your clown's face hide grief and distress...*

Jane's last entry:

I never shared a meal with any of them, never heard their stories though I heard them laugh, in silhouette. Giovanni the clown gave me a mask and I thanked him for it. It will last through the car ride home, when my dogs are gone and when I follow. I knew I could find someone who would see through me.

Jane threw the second corn dog stick in the trash and walked home.

The Sounds of Touch

by **Hannah Vander Bloomer**

He was an ordinary man, nothing special or of particular importance to the daily happenings of the world. This ordinary man woke up to the gentle sounds of his bed's navy blue sheets in which he had cocooned himself during the night, the soft cotton, worn pajamas he wore and the bedroom's stale air on his face. The sounds were delicate and lulling as he lay in bed, eyes half open, gazing at the early morning glow coming from the window pane. "How odd, how lovely," he quietly thought to himself. From the red numbers on his alarm clock, he braced himself for the familiar blaring noise to emit, but to the man's surprise the noise was not as blaringly loud as he remembered, compared to the symphony of sounds that played as he sat up. The shifting of his cotton pajamas, the linen, the familiar black plastic of the alarm clock, he could hear it all, the odd and lovely sounds of touch.

The sounds had a light and bright pace to them as the man got ready for work. He couldn't help but think of the mysterious appearance of these sounds as a good thing. The man had a slight grin on his face as he headed out the door; suit case, door knob, keys. He felt enchanted, like he possessed a secret power.

The hard pavement under his shoes and the scorching sun on his skin, the sounds began to crescendo with each step toward the train station. The uneasy sound of his suitcase's sweaty leather handle made his stomach turn. Bumping past stranger after stranger, his shoes meeting the dirty train floor, the man heard the climax of sounds filling his ears and he knew he had to act. He leaped from the train just before the doors shut. The harsh wind whipping his skin and fleeting pavement beneath his shoes as he ran out of the station. The sounds were in chaos. It was the first time that day the man thought to himself, "There must be something wrong with me."

The man tried to catch his breath, wiping the sweat from his face with the back of his hand, and taking a seat on the curb of a quiet street. The cool

pavement on his bottom, the city breeze on his skin, the sounds had slowed as he gazed up at the blue sky. He wondered why he was experiencing these sounds, and if they had made him skip out on a day of work for a moment to look at the sky.

The man got up and began to stroll. The occasional passing by breeze and his shoes on the sidewalk one foot after another; the sounds had relaxed in pace. "What to do now?" the man questioned himself.

The man strolled on until he came to an antique store filled to the brim with picture frames, furniture, clothes, jewelry and knick-knacks. In the window was a chair made entirely of a single piece of dark wood, the seat of the chair was completely smoothed and rounded, whereas the legs of the chair were sharp and twisted. The man wondered what the chair would sound like, so walked in and gently touched the back of the chair. The sound was deep and earthy and filled the man's ears for the brief second his hand touched the wood. "How interesting," the man thought to himself. Then a small metal toy painted to look like an elephant caught his eye, he reached over to pick up the toy. To the man's surprise it gave off an even deeper drumming sound. He couldn't help but laugh as he set the toy down. Suddenly very aware of himself, he noticed the shop keeper giving him a strange look and thought maybe he should leave. But then someone entered the store, a lady with billowing curly brown hair, she had a sketch book in her hand and a wooden pencil tucked behind her ear. As she passed the man the pencil fell from her ear. So he bent down to pick up the pencil, but the lady had gone for it at the same time and for a brief moment their fingers touched. The man had never heard a more beautiful sound; it was electric, but soothing and warm. The man thought to himself for the second time that day, "How odd, how lovely."

Coma

by Alexis Carney

“Alicia! Are you gonna come help your daddy mow the lawn?”

I groan inwardly, burying myself further in my comforter.

It’s Sunday. Can’t I just live my life?

“Alicia!” he yells again from the hallway, making his way to the garage I assume.

Grumbling, I roll out of my bed on the floor. I examine the ceiling, dreading the upcoming task. A sudden realization dawns on me.

This floor... isn’t so bad. I slowly begin to close my eyes only to be pulled back into this sleepless reality.

Alicia!

I pause for a minute, something nagging at my memory following a migraine. After a moment of recovering, I shrug. Weird...

This old man...

The lawnmower roars loudly as he begins cutting the front yard... That gives me time.

We have a deal, I’ll mow the back and he mows front. Being the youngest, I am not gonna be seen mowing the lawn by my friends... Not that any stay in my neighborhood... Still. I was already given grief about being a tomboy in middle school. Of course that magnifies in high school, unfortunately for me. Why do teenagers try to grow up so fast anyway? What’s all this crap about not just being friends with the opposite sex? Ugh... Teenagers.

The lawnmower roars and rumbles outside my window. Jeez, he moves fast...

I hurriedly throw on some old clothes I don’t care for anymore and run outside.

Just in time too. He pulls the gate to the backyard open, assuming I have decided to sleep in.

I did once... Felt terrible about it all week... Not this time, Father.

I squint suddenly, chest aching slightly.

Ignoring it, I take my opportunity and push the lawnmower past him, mumbling a raspy “Thank you, I got the rest.”

He smiles and nods, going into the house to wake my mother, I presume. She gets to sleep in. Guilt free. Lucky woman.

It takes me an hour to mow the backyard. Fifteen minutes to get my ish together, ten to wake up... again, and twenty-five to stop blundering around and actually mow.

As I push the dreaded contraption back into the garage, I smell the only thing that makes up for me having to wake up this early on a Sunday.

...Or any day really.

Food.

Alicia...

Breakfast specifically. I let the garage door down and walk into the kitchen. Fried spam, scrambled eggs with cheese (sunny side for the old man, weirdo), buttermilk biscuits, grape and strawberry jam, and orange juice.

Oh my.

“Thanks for helping your daddy!” He grins widely, as I sit down.

“Yeah, yeah, old man. You know I wouldn’t let you do it alone.

Unlike, someone. Ahem.”

I raise my voice as I look at Ma sideways as she sits down.

She shakes her fork at me threateningly, smile playing on her lips.

“You stay quiet, l’il girl,” she says giggling.

Have I mentioned that I love my family? Well I do... A lot.

Alicia, please... I grab my chest as a sharp pain pierces it.

What the hell...

The pain hurts physically, but...

I look to see if they notice, trying to play it off.

I smile as they start to speak about their week. These days, they both work so much that the only time we get to spend as a family is on Sunday. Throughout the week, I come home and make dinner. Ma comes home next and we wait until Dad comes home. We eat then it repeats. Dad leaves before I wake up, and Ma leaves before I walk out to the bus stop. I miss them all

the time.

It's been three months...

We take it easy, lazing around the house all day until, "Let's go for a ride."

Ever since we moved out of state, we like to ride around aimlessly. No destination. No time limit. Just road and exploration. One thing Texas is good for is a good breeze.

We pile into the blue Tahoe, head towards the highway.

Of course it wouldn't be a ride if the old folks don't play their old school music.

I don't mind as I lean on the open window. Dad sits in the driver's seat, Ma sits at his left with me in the back seat behind her.

Not many cars are out... They usually aren't this late. Luckily for anybody in Texas, the traffic dies as the sun goes down.

"Babe! Pay attention to the road!" Ma exclaims, pointing out the front window. Dad swerves back into the correct lane, replying with his signature, "I know how to drive, woman!"

I snicker at the scene. They always bicker like this. They're a cute couple. Dad adores Ma so much she doesn't notice how much he likes to stare at her while they talk to each other. It's adorable as hell. He does this all the time... Unfortunately, even while driving. So she stops talking to him, claiming she distracts him. The silent treatment doesn't last long though. They soon pick up the same conversation, her resorting to just trusting the stubborn old man. All is good again.

Alicia...

A semi passes us. It's a little close, I'm not gonna lie.

I let it go without complaining to the driver and go back to daydreaming, blurring out all the sounds and visuals around me.

Please...

A scream rips me out of my reverie, turning my attention toward the front window, where a blinding light is headed straight toward us. Everything slows and panic sinks in as Dad outstretches his arm in front of Ma, trying to

shield her and me. The light gets brighter and horns blare loudly until...

Everything is white.

ALICIA!

"Ma...?" I try to move, but my body is like cement. Opening my heavy eyelids, I find my mother lying on me, eyes wet with tears, vignette with white. I blink more and the vignette disappears revealing a hospital room full of family and friends.

But... Where's Dad?

"...Dad...? ...Dad? Ma, please tell me where Dad is!" I say to her, hysterical. The room stays quiet.

No.

"DAD! DAD!" I scream repeatedly, struggling to get out of the bed.

"Alicia, please calm down!" My older sister pipes up, concerned as a nurse enters the room.

"Mommy, please!" Tearfully, voice breaking as two nurses wrestle me back down into the bed.

"She'll be fine. She just needs to rest," a third nurse says as she shuffles in, injecting something into the IV in my arm.

My body begins to go to numb, turning into jelly as I stop struggling, reaching my hand out towards Ma.

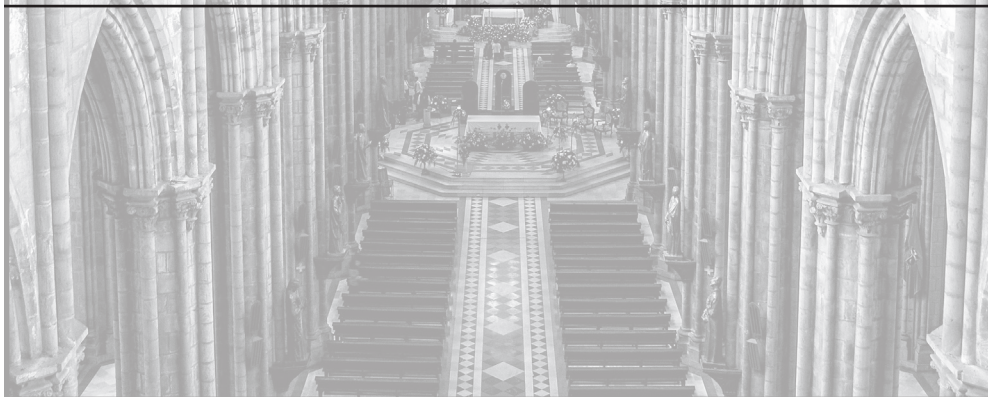
She grabs it, massaging it gently, whispering an "I love you." A black vignette fades in until...

Everything is black...

"Alicia! Are you gonna come help your daddy mow the lawn?"



NONFICTION



For The Sake of a Young Man

by Leland White

His name was Emmett Till. He was a young black man from Chicago who was accustomed to a much different set of attitudes concerning interactions and relations between the races. The year was 1955.

While visiting relatives in the small southern town of Money, Mississippi, Mr. Till supposedly “flirted” with a white young woman and she told some white men about his actions. Was it a wink, a whistle, or a tip of his hat? No one knows for sure. But the results are certain. Mr. Till was later assaulted and bludgeoned to death in one of the most brutal murders in the history of the United States. To date, no one has ever been convicted. He was only fourteen years old.

A murder so brutal and so unjustified caught the attention of local newspapers and TV reporters. Additionally, it did something far more momentous and far reaching than providing news. The murder of Emmett Till mobilized the African American Civil Rights Movement in Mississippi and the United States.

Seven years later, I was traveling with my father on a shopping trip. We had stopped for sodas at a small country grocery store at the edge of my hometown, Greenwood, Mississippi. While we were in the store, my father motioned to me to come over to where he was standing. He was in front of a large window overlooking a cotton field.

“Leland, I want you to look at this and remember it. This is part of a bygone age and it’s something that’s about to totally vanish. You will never see this when you reach my age.”

What was he talking about? Some large trucks were stopping on a gravel road adjacent to the cotton field and unloading black farm workers. The cotton had already bloomed and the field was white as snow. As the workers left the truck, they put on hats with huge brims resembling Mexican sombreros and got large sacks. In the scorching heat of the Mississippi Delta, they began doing what many generations of African Americans had

done before them—picking cotton. I was confused and failed to appreciate what my father had told me. But I watched just the same.

As a very young boy at the time, I was confused by the movement and the dissatisfaction of blacks with their position in society. Yet, certain southern customs struck me as odd: stopping for white funeral processions but not for black ones, water fountains separated as colored and white, blacks being only allowed on separate floors in segregated hospitals. Why?

I wondered.

The Civil Rights Movement and the related protests intensified both in Mississippi and the United States. On another occasion when I was out with my father, we passed a procession of blacks protesting discrimination in a picket line. One of the protesters, a brave young woman, waived a sign at our car: “Bullets won’t stop us.” I wondered at that time if she really understood the sacrifice she was endorsing. Again, I wondered.

I also failed to grasp the legal ramifications of the times. In 1954, the Supreme Court had issued its history-making decision striking down segregated schools in *Brown v. Board of Education*. Then, in 1962, a federal appeals court ruled that James Meredith must be admitted as a student to the University of Mississippi. When Mr. Meredith arrived at Ole Miss, a mob of more than 2000 people rioted. Two people were killed. In June of 1963, Civil Rights worker Medgar Evers was shot and killed in his driveway as he left his car. Dr. Martin Luther King made his “I Have a Dream” speech two months later in Washington, DC. Finally, a year later, Congress officially made discrimination illegal with the Civil Rights Act of 1964.

I was confused about all the changes occurring in America at that time. Certainly, I heard racists’ and segregationists’ jokes and stories about black Americans. At that time, some southern whites would not even enter restaurants where blacks were served. Why? Was custom this powerful?

In the deep south, racial tensions continued to escalate. Some vandalism occurred. A racist business owner described a broken window at his business with the use of the “N” word. Comments in the local newspaper column called “Bo Weevil” were often racist, sent in by white

segregationists. Hospital security was tripled due to fears of an attack on the newly desegregated sick areas.

Time passed.

In 1967, I was scheduled to continue my education in junior high school—i.e., the seventh grade. One brave young black girl (the daughter of the local head of the NAACP) came forward to integrate Greenwood Junior High School. At the time, I was instructed not to speak to her or be friends with her. Again, I wondered why.

Then, the final test of the Civil Rights Movement came. In April of 1968, while I was attending the 8th grade, our principal suddenly came over the radio and announced that Greenwood Junior High School should be immediately dismissed but he did not say why. What was going on? No holidays had been scheduled. What was happening?

I gathered my books and ran outside. Then, I saw my mother and her car. Without any communication, I walked hastily toward her and jumped inside. Then she broke the news to me.

“Leland, Martin Luther King was shot in Memphis. I think he’s dead. We’ve got to get home in a hurry.” We were both speechless as she sped toward our house.

The strangest thing then happened. My little town, Greenwood, Mississippi, was quiet. Unlike many towns, Greenwood had no rioting. But the quiet was accompanied by an invisible tension that was like the heat of the sun. Everyone seemed afraid to say anything to anybody.

Both my parents began to change their tones. “That wasn’t right,” they said. “That wasn’t right. Martin Luther King was someone’s father.” And, gradually, my outlook on the Civil Rights Movement began to change as well.

In the meantime, the United States had gotten bogged down in the no-win war commonly called Vietnam and the Civil Rights Movement was given a backseat to foreign conflicts. Even so, protests against discrimination continued.

Of course, the local high school in my hometown was integrated

and, for the first time in my life, many of my classmates were black. On one occasion, I was discussing civil rights with a black classmate and he made a startling statement to me that changed my outlook on the movement forever.

“Leland, you’ve missed an important point about the movement,” he said. “Civil rights are for everyone—not just blacks. And that includes you.”

His statement hit me hard—really hard. I felt stupid. A whole group of people had wanted to be part of my life but I had excluded them. Ignored them. Mistreated them. For a moment, I felt really, really bad.

Time passed—a lot of time.

I returned home one time on the request of my mother who had fallen ill. I was quite concerned about her because she had been transported to an out-of-town hospital via an ambulance. I anxiously awaited the doctor. Then, he came by.

He was a tall and young African American man who was organized and professional, and he assured me my mother would be all right. His calmness and assurance will remain in my mind forever as a symbol of what civil rights and freedom are all about—giving.

Today, many things have changed in Mississippi. The murderer of Medgar Evers was finally convicted in February, 1994. I read an article recently that the young girl who integrated Greenwood Junior High is now living the American dream in Dallas with a loving husband and a beautiful family. It appears that, in the end, bullets never stopped the movement. For the sake of Emmett Till, I hope nothing ever does.

Poetic Justice

by James Knoll

High school's Hell. And Hell is other people (as the saying goes.) For years, day in and day out, my public school experiences have left me ruining days full of mistakes and regretting getting out of bed. But today? Today isn't one of those days. Today is the exception.

I've been struggling with health complications that have kept me out of class a full third of my senior year, and if it weren't for the medical compliance paperwork I'd have flunked out years ago. All my classes have been a struggle except the one light in the darkness: English. English is and always has been the one class I have hands-down. I failed Algebra, dropped Sociology, and spent Chemistry staring at a grade hovering precariously at 60. English has been a breeze ever since my junior year. The worst part of classes had never been the work; it had been the uninterested and terribly distracting people set on dragging the world down with them, and signing up for Advanced Placement classes had been my saving grace. Every other class was still a trial, but AP English was the class that stood tall above the rest. The important part and the point of reasoning which tipped the scales and led me to take the jump into AP classes at all had been the greatest piece of news in all high school to that point: in the fourth and final AP English course, for the all-important senior year, there was a poetry unit. A poetry unit! I can't and couldn't bring myself to suffer through any more gruel-flavored prose or softball teen dramas propagated by authors who think "suicide", "guilt" and "obesity" are valid substitutes in their own right for the word "quality". And AP English, I knew, wouldn't let me down. While the English classes I once languished through are being forced to half-listen to poorly-aged novels read aloud by a full fifteen of thirty students incapable of caring, in AP English III I'm reading the foundations of cosmic horror in blissful silence. Never again will we swap off paragraphs on yet another story about how parents suck and humanity is capable only of misery! Never again are we forced to listen to

the dullest of narrators snore into a cassette tape with all the enthusiasm of a three-toed sloth. We're free. I'm free.

But freedom comes with a price. The price has a name, and that name is Colton. Wheresoever Colton walks, the fun and color in life is swept away and replaced with a distant grinding sound and a monochromatic hellscape. Whenever Colton talks, it's about himself and his fantastic life that any objective listener would silently wish he would return to. Whenever I have Colton in a class, I know there are two things I can always expect. The first is that Colton will find some way to turn every single topic into being about himself, his political beliefs, and his religious beliefs. (Not "or" his religious beliefs. "And" his religious beliefs.) The second is that everyone will pretend what he says is actually interesting, because Colton frequently exercises the one talent he possesses: whining and twisting facts to people of authority until they do what he wants, and what he wants is to punish anyone who doesn't live to serve him.

It doesn't help that he has the absurdly nasal voice of a plucky 1980's coming-of-age film protagonist without the upside of learning and growing as time goes on. I'd had a class with Colton my freshman year, and I had thought myself free of him. Yet there he is, the first day of AP English III. Five different shifts of it exist and somehow fate decrees that he and I will breathe the same air for an hour a day, five days a week. And as luck would have it he is, somehow, randomly assigned to the seat directly in front of me. Some days I wonder what formless evil I angered that cursed me with this fate.

Through all of our junior year, Colton's a festering boil. When I offer an idea about a topic, Colton is the one to tell me how wrong I am. When I raise a complaint with any of his completely off-base theories ("No, Colton, *The Yellow Wallpaper* is very clearly not about the homosexual agenda") his face puffs up grotesquely and turns the color of a rotten tomato and then the whining starts. He declares I hate him. That I'm terribly unfair and he can't deal with how harsh I am.

It should be noted in high school I'm not particularly rude. I'm not calling him an idiot (in class, to his face) and you cannot hang a man for his

thoughts. Colton somehow takes phrases like “I don’t think you’re right, there” or “It seems to me it’s more like this” to mean “You are a vile evil that God Himself considers a mistake” and “Til my last breath I swear blood vengeance upon you, Colton!” He’s not a reasonable person, is what I’m getting at.

Well, surprise surprise, when I move on to senior year and my long-awaited AP English IV, Colton’s there. Once again, out of five different classes of AP English IV he’s somehow with me yet again. Our teacher, Ms. Page, is a delightful woman who I am convinced is incapable of hurting the tiniest creature. Were it not for her apparently impeccable cleanliness (and the industrial-sized antibiotic gel dispenser that never leaves her desk) I’d think her too kind to murder bacteria. On top of her finer qualities, Ms. Page has the unfortunate (for her) ability to sense hostility in others, and it’s not a week before Colton’s exiled to the other side of the room from me, near Ms. Page’s desk. I consider this an act of mercy bordering on saintlike. I hope I’ll now have peace. I’m horribly wrong: Colton gets louder. Driven to the brink of madness by this unfathomable horror, with my freedom snatched from me by his baffling immunity to any sort of discipline or punishment of any kind, I begin to plot. I observe my nemesis, for that is what he’s made himself. The final straw’s the day he calls me out in front of the class as a terrible writer. As someone with unoriginal ideas. That’s the first semester.

I’m quiet, from then on. True fury, the sort of rage that poisons the eyes and taints one’s view of the world, is completely silent. And I’ve seen red for far too long. I consider my options. Fist-fighting him’s not one, as in the eyes of authority I’d be at fault. There’s nothing I can say which would hurt him worse than his retaliation; my less-than-stellar academic record has me on the ropes already. But through silent observation I’ve learned a few things about him. First, at the start of every single day he stands by Ms. Page’s desk to prattle on at her. I suspect she has been so late in returning to class the entire second semester because of this habit. I have listened in on a few of the conversations, as they are. (Typically an instance where one person talks and the other nods sometimes cannot be classified as a conversation, but if that were always true then I doubt Colton has had even one in his entire life.)

Second, Colton fancies himself the best writer to ever live, a true genius of his field, master of the art. He is, he's unshakably certain, headed for a life of luxury upon riding the success of the novel he's totally writing, any day now. Third, Colton will immediately jump to making himself sound better than anyone else ever and always. At anything. Think you're a great chef? Colton totally learned a recipe from his great-grandmother that'll trump anything you can make. Ever play a video game in your life? Colton's above wasting his life like that, he'd rather watch reality television. Think you wrote something decent? Wrong. You made complete dreck compared to what Colton wrote. He completely lacks the senses of irony, sarcasm, empathy and decency.

With this knowledge in hand, I bide my time. With each new essay assigned and every new book we read, Colton digs the ice pick in deeper, chipping away at the dignity and sanity of everyone around him. With his tyrannical grip on the powers that be, he's immune. But that changes.

We start the poetry unit. Sixteen poetry prompts and assignments. We are given the final three months of the semester to do it and Ms. Page, saint that she is, announces she'll give extra credit if quality poetry is turned in early. My heart leaps in my chest at that, because in that moment I know how to get the pettiest vengeance that ever was, and is there any better sort of vengeance? I raise my hand.

"James? Do you have a question?" I throw on my biggest fake grin, playing every bit the mindless excited student.

"Ms. Page, I was wondering, would you award extra credit if it were turned in tomorrow?" Surprise spreads across her face.

"Well yes, I mean, you'd need to make sure—"

"I'm turning mine in tomorrow then, Ms. Page!" I hear Colton yell across the room in his nasally voice. He giggles, looking around to all those seated near him, then he looks at me. He gives me a look that says "Don't even bother." That is when I know I have him. The bloated, rotting fish has taken my bait and the line is irrevocably set. The gauntlet has been thrown down and I know that there is nothing he can do to stop me now.

After class lets out, I go on to the next. I am the teaching assistant for

the art class that hour, which in theory means I help with chores and tasks needed done. In practice it means I do homework and anything else I like as long as I don't bother any art students. And in that classroom is a single computer the teacher never uses. I sit down with the packet of prompts, pop in ear buds, flip on an instrumental song to write to and go to work. In fifty minutes I complete every single prompt, creating in a manic frenzy some of the greatest poetry I've ever written. My senior year's masterpiece is finished.

I transfer it to my flash drive, then copy it onto my second flash drive, and when I get home I print three copies and copy the files to every hard drive in the house. No power failure, broken equipment, house fire or tornado can take my victory from me. And I know it'll be a victory, because if Colton is anything he's a bullshitter. Sure, in two weeks he'll have a finished draft of some of the poems and he'll flaunt how well-prepared he is. But not this time. I'm positively giddy through my first three classes, all the way to fourth hour. AP English IV. For once in my career I hurry to this class, wanting to beat Colton there, and by some magic twist of luck I manage it. I grip my packets of papers and suppress the insufferable smirk I feel in my soul. I stand near Ms. Page's desk, and as Colton walks in I nod politely at him. He narrows his eyes. Suspicious. This is not my domain, it's supposed to be his. Why am I here?

"Why are you standing here?"

"I'm waiting for Ms. Page, Colton."

"Why?"

"I want to ask her something." His glare continues, unabated, until more students enter the classroom and his usual demeanor takes over. He rests one hand on a hip he's cocked well out to the side, tapping his phone against his leg and popping his gum. I realize I'm smiling when one of the poor souls cursed with a seat near Colton's haunt gives me an odd look. Then Ms. Page walks into the room. I'm so close. I turn and face the bins where papers are usually turned in, and I pretend to be looking for something. I wait and listen for her to sit down and I hear Colton talking already.

“Ms. Page, I was thinking I should do my poetry assignment about the way I feel about things,” he says, possibly one of the dumbest things I’ve heard a human being say this week.

“I see,” she replies.

I save her. “Ms. Page, I have a question.”

Colton turns to look at me, hurt welling up in his face. He’s about to bitch me out for interrupting him.

I don’t give him the chance. “Where should I turn this in?” I continue.

“Oh, what is it?”

“My poetry assignment. It’s done.” I look Colton in the eyes, my face a mask of innocence, ever-so-slightly changing my tone to be more similar to his. “Colton, where’s yours? We can turn ours in together!” He chokes. A casual observer might think he is coughing, but I can see his eyes bulge. I can see his chest heave as he inhales his own spittle in shock and outrage. Ms. Page looks almost as surprised and not the slightest bit upset.

“Is your name on it and everything?”

“My name’s on it and everything,” I say. “You alright, Colton? Didn’t you say you were bringing yours today?” He turns and walks back to his seat without another word. He hands his in the next day, of course, but by then the damage is done. The entire class knows that he wasn’t the first to turn the assignment in, and even better is that he knows they know.

The final day of the semester, when grades are finalized and nobody can fail me anymore, Ms. Page pulls me aside. She tells me she picks the poetry of one student from each of her classes to send to the principal to showcase that she’s doing a decent enough job teaching. She asks to use mine. I agree, far happier about this than I am about graduating. It’s then that I note I have a 94% overall in a class I’ve been out sick a full quarter of the days of. I look for Colton, because I have one last thing to say to him:

“Hey, Colton? Why is it that you had a full day more to spend on that little poetry thing and yet mine’s the one Ms. Page is using as an example of the best the class made?”

It’s a shame he’s absent today.

No Hablo Ingles

by Jairo Flores

It is a warm day in Mesa, Arizona. It is usually quite warm in this state but the mornings are not as warm. My family and I recently moved here around two weeks ago. We are staying with family until we settle down and find a place of our own. My parents have enrolled me in a new school here because they do not want me to fall behind. I will be going to Adams Elementary and will be enrolling in the third grade around two months after the school year has begun. My cousin David, who is a year younger than me, is telling me about how the school I will be going to tomorrow is. He tells me that the school is somewhat old looking and that it is quite big. I do not know how to speak English, which is the language that most people speak here in the United States, and that makes me feel uneasy about tomorrow. Since I do not know English I am worried that I will not have a way to communicate with other people if I need help. I am not interested in learning English, but I feel like that might change depending on how tomorrow goes.

On my first day attending Adams Elementary, I feel nervous about being there but knowing that my cousin David will also be there makes me feel better. My aunt is driving my cousin and me to school. We get in the back of the van and wait to leave. My mom is tagging along as well because she needs to do a few things at the school. My mom tells me that I have to go to the office first to get some papers. It takes about an hour to get everything done.

I walk to my classroom slowly because since I am already late; I do not feel like I need to hurry. As I walk by some classrooms I look inside them to see how they are. I see that they do not look all that different from the classrooms I used to be in, and that makes me feel more comfortable. I get to my classroom, but there is no one in there. I look around for a bit until a faculty member comes to me and asks me what I am doing out of class. I

do not understand him, so I try to tell him in Spanish that my class is gone. It takes him a while but he figures things out because of my body language and the hand gestures I am making. He takes me to the gym which is where my class is since apparently today is the day they have P.E. class.

As I enter the gym I can feel the eyes of the kids looking towards me. Their stares do not bother me, so I look around for a bit. The gym is big and the floor looks like it was recently cleaned. I see that the faculty member is talking to a woman, whom I assume is the teacher, and a man who is obviously the gym teacher. I can tell he is the gym teacher because of the blue gym shorts he is wearing. I look back to where the other kids are and see that they are sitting in a circle on the floor. I notice something that I did not see at first when I entered the gym. They are all holding a part of a rubbery-like cloth that is very colorful and big. The cloth is separated into sections that are the different colors of the rainbow. The gym teacher comes my way and, in Spanish, tells me to go sit in the circle with the other kids. From how he pronounces things, I can tell that he only knows a bit of Spanish. The gym teacher tells us to pull the cloth up into the air and make a tent out of it. We all pull it up and then before it starts to come down we get inside of it and sit there as the cloth stays up like a tent. The kids play for a bit before we have to go back to the classroom.

On our way back to the classroom the kids talk to each other and have conversations, but I cannot join in because I do not know how to communicate with them. In class I have to find a place to sit, but I do not know where. The teacher tries to tell me where to sit but I do not understand her, so she points to where I should sit. She points to a somewhat small table that is by the entrance, separated from the other students, that has two chairs. I sit down and then a tall woman with short hair comes in and talks to the teacher. The tall woman comes over to me and talks to me in Spanish. She tells me that she will be an assistant to the teacher. She is also going to translate what the teacher says and teach me English. She tells me her name is Mrs. Torrez and that she will do her best to help me learn English. She sits with me and gives me some papers with basic English phrases and words.

We are going to go over the papers until it is time for recess.

As the bell rings, the kids leave for recess but I have to stay inside a bit longer. Mrs. Torrez tells me that we are going to the library to check out some books so I can read at home. In the library I find some books that catch my attention. I check the books out and I can finally go to recess. As I go to the playground in the back of the school I look around to see what people are doing. I decide to look for a place where I can sit and read my books. I find a place to sit that is by a tree and read the books I checked out. As I try to read my books I overhear some kids from my class talking. They are not that far away from me so I can make out what they are saying. They are speaking in Spanish, but once they notice I can hear them they start to speak in English. They say some things and look over at me and laugh. Since they are speaking in English I cannot understand them, but I can guess that they are making fun of me. There is one thing I can somewhat make out, so I write it down so I can look it up later. The bell rings and recess is over.

Back in class, I show Mrs. Torrez what I wrote down during recess and ask her what it means. She tells me it says, "It's okay he doesn't understand us." I thank her for translating it and get back to the classwork. Instead of feeling sad or mad, I feel determined to learn English as soon as I can. I used to not care about learning and felt that school work was boring. Now I want to learn so that I am never left out and made fun of. I want to learn to become better than the other students. I keep working on the classwork until school is over for the day. At home I start working on my homework and work on it for the rest of the day. I finish my homework for today so I get a head start on the work for tomorrow. I will learn English as soon as I can.

For three months, I do nothing but study during my free time and it pays off. I now know how to speak, read, and write in English. The principal and my teacher call me to the office and tell me that they are really impressed that I learned English in less than three months and that my test scores are excellent. They ask me if I want to join an advanced program next year. It will be more challenging and more work will be required, but I will learn

more. I tell them that I do want to join it, so they give me the paperwork to give to my parents so that they can look it over. Even though at first I did not want to learn English, learning it has opened up a lot of opportunities for me. Learning English has made it so that I never feel like I am a lesser person than someone else. Learning English is the first step towards learning so much more.

The Kidney Stone Paper: Or, a Look into Why Everyone Should Pity Tyff's Bitchy Attitude and Why God Apparently Doesn't Exist

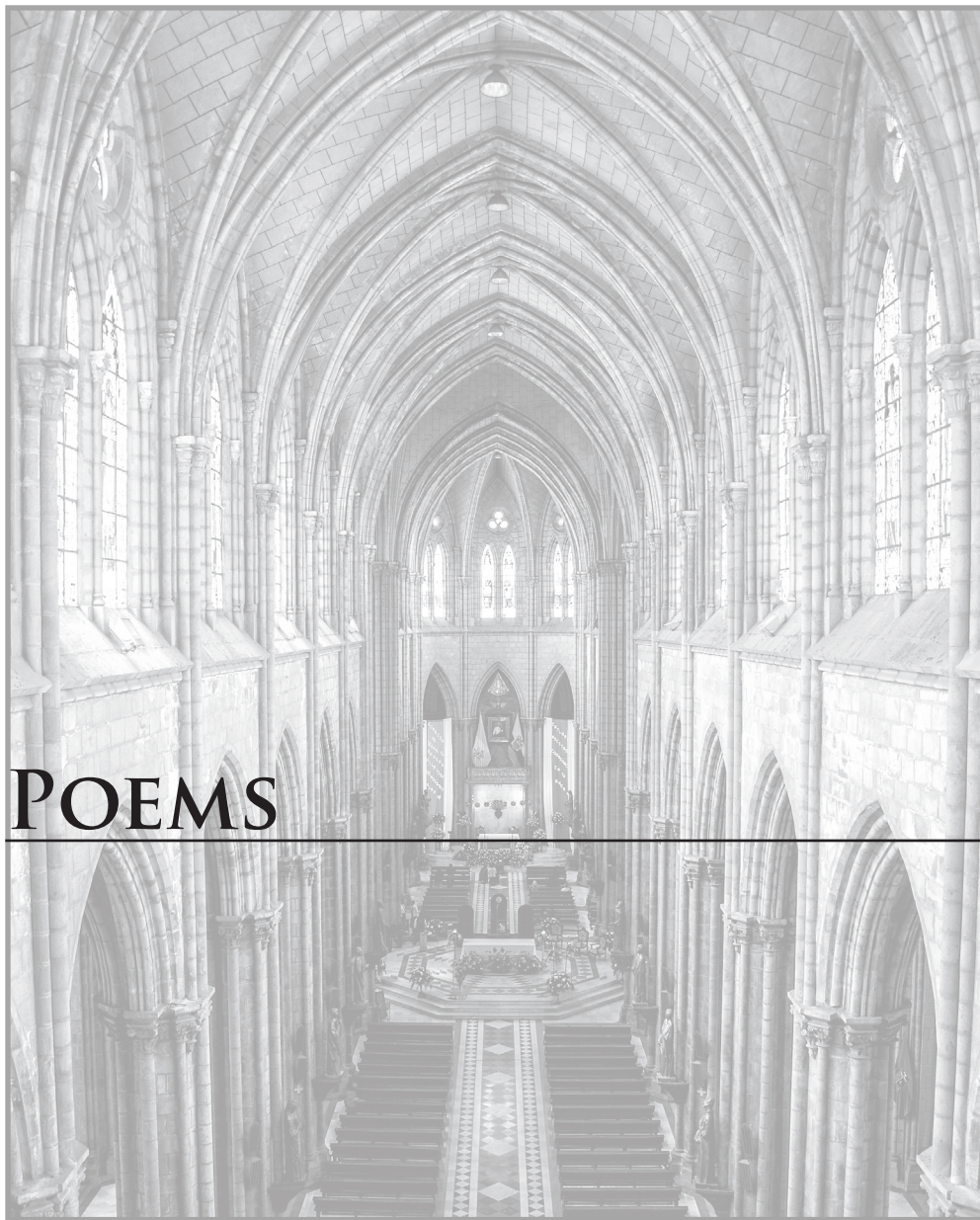
by Tiffane Shorter

When you're nauseous (and in Wade Wilson-level pain...hyperbole? Whatever, it still works), it's really hard to fucking write. That's what they don't tell you when they put you in meds. ← See? You even start to mess up which preposition is supposed to be there. It's a shit-storm. It's a big fucking mess.

And it sucks, it really sucks when you have ideas in your head and you have inspiration, but your hand muscles say "Oh, what? You actually have time to write? Nope, sorry! We've decided to be dumbasses today...!" Assholes.

It's like everyone in whe (← what the hell is this word?) the world have suddenly decided to hate me. I can't even frickin' READ because my frickin' eyes want to frickin' fall asleep. Everything is saturated in darkness and apathy. Nothing will be light again. God Himself mocks me in His abandonment.

I don't like Mondays.



POEMS

Cricket

by Betsy Blair

A hull loss brought down on the dyne,
now with the plush fingertips *Salaam*
Alaikum
of a velvet spider crawling over the dead in the
middle of the seasonless, the desert of Sinai
of whose shape is like an arrowhead's

Facebones used for arrowheads
Suitcases raked together, dropped on a dyne
 Cricket's hull a cigarillo in Sinai
 Cricket's hull a string of deaths
An infant's touch like an insect's, its fingertips
drew, "Peace be unto you, *Salaam Alaikum*"

The splintering of a phrase, *Salaam Alaikum*
A mother running through the sky like an arrowhead
Circadian, the crash is washed away like fingertips
Umm kunya Darina, the Mother of death
The force required to accelerate, on a dyne
Back to where their last joy's now buried, in Sinai

Every grain a piece of chatter in Sinai
A phrase for all religions, *Salaam Alaikum*
It whistles through the wind, on a dyne
My shadow like a plane crossing death
Broadheaded spear, my arrowhead
I scan each black line with plush fingertips

The black boiling tea I hold burns my fingertips
Imagine silkwrapped horns aboard the plane from Sinai
No longer attached to a spear, this arrowhead
It lies in a pile surrounded by death

Salaam Alaikum

Black tea made of crushed crickets, spilt on a dyne

Ten months old, Darina presses against the beginning of dyne
Against the glass, insect prints—his fingertips

“Peace be unto you, Darina.” *Salaam Alaikum*.

The tea makes me sing a little morning song of death
Night time, a nightingale across the sands of Sinai
Flies straight as an arrowhead.

A hull loss brought down by broadfaced arrowhead—
Its hull whistles in the wind, dropping through the dyne
Cricket’s song, black on my fingertips.

The Speed of Processing

by Betsy Blair

Meat must be processed on the same day as
the Republican debates. Everything must run on its own schedule.

Dear Candidates for My Affection,
It is smell not sight that is closest to forming a memory.

—Drunken pet adoption not being out of the question
for you and we took the two puppies to the river
to run about, but they just sat there as if all alone.

Caught by a vast and yellowing dead space, by the sweet smell
that came over the hill and touched us.
And could you really not
come by the word for it? Did you pretend not to?

Your friends remarked, “Their paws are huge, can
you imagine what they will grow into?”
Truly, you were never completely sober when you told me
“I need something to care for.”

The neglected dogs coughed up pigs’ ears and a bag’s worth
of candy-striped rawhide bones you gave them before
you exited to another night’s campaign of endearment.
“Good Luck, Guitar and Truck” in the lightning storm
and flood, in all our torrential weather—

The dogs were oddly shy, and
almost childlike in their lack of expectation—

I thought your play too rough, and it must have been
that way for them also.

Coupled up with the cigarette smoke you kept me
and the dogs in, though I later tuned
into the electric energy of that awfully fine trim body--and
the way in which your silver hair stayed
in perfect flat layers on your head as you made that almost perfect love--and
the way in which you didn't tell me where to touch you.

After your death, I've turned away, nearly deaf.
I occupy myself with watching my old dog,
content and consumed with the tender grass.
If I can't catch a candidate's scent on the wind--
...I thought I heard you say,
"All the better for it."

Memory of scent is, after all, the opposite of freedom.
Only death gives us the choice not to use it.

The others continue dueling--as the recollection of your many texts
belonging not far from the end of chemo.
Everything, you said, was running on "Schedual."

Scent may still, after all, come into play.

Dear Society

by Redeana Ramsey

Stop trying to sober us up.
We are drunk on life like the night of our 21st birthdays.
We're young and bright
and beautiful and loud.
We will light up every
corner of every room
and still shine brighter
than the sun.

Stop telling us to cover up.
We will wear little black dresses
and bright red lipsticks,
leave lip-stains all over
your precious little world
and look so good doing it
that you'll have to look away.

Stop telling us to slow down.
We live and love with so much
power and strength that we
cannot stop for you
or anyone, for that matter.
Every day is our day
and the world, our oyster.

Stop telling us we're useless.
One day, we're going to run the world
for you; going to be soldiers, doctors

writers, artists, speakers of the truth
and the truth is that we're alive
and strong and here, and
you cannot control us.

From carefree millennial feminists everywhere.

My Corner

by Neha Pullela

There was a corner
Between the wall and the electrical box
Out behind the old strip mall
They didn't know about this corner

About how if you folded your legs just so
No one would be able to see you
Unless they stood right next to you

About how when you were shaking to pieces
The walls would close in
And cradle your shaking bones just so
Until you could breathe again

About how when you held a lighter
To the end of a pure white cigarette
The smoke would curl just so
Weaving around the cracks and disappearing into the air

I went back to that corner
Just a few weeks ago
And I felt the same comfort
The same protection

But I no longer need it
My bones do not shake
I don't need to hide
My lungs do not crave
The smoke that curls just so

I suppose it is time for me to speak
About my little corner
For while the corner remains
With the cigarette butts
And the electrical box
My half of the puzzle is missing
I no longer need my little corner
Between the wall and the electrical box
Behind the strip mall
To feel complete again.

Snapshot

by Terri Lynn Cummings

“Try to pass ten thousand years in one thought.”

-- Zen Master Shih Shaung

I open the picture album
and let myself into my ghost,
a girl of nine, all knees
and elbows, twirling
a silver baton.

Mom dances the Irish reel.
My new puppy circles
inside the basket, a present
from grandparents settled
on our sofa. Seated
beside them, a frown
pinches Mother's forehead.

I listen to pictures
voice their events:
thunder bangs its fist
on our house like
an angry father,
sister's melody
lures light through
our bedroom window.

My hand swings the door
wide to open and closed
faces, family secrets and
songs scattered on the page

like seed. Seed that sprouts
and spreads or withers and
dies on the trail of my life.

I finger bare pages,
picture events wandering
a desert, lost and forgotten.
Release me from this mountain
where I view time running
for miles. Help me remember
what growing up feels like
by inches. Witness the hand
of this moment glue the
broken doll in my arms.

Cast Away

by Terri Lynn Cummings

A world lives in the meadow.
Flowers open their eyes
to the sky whether or not
the sun shines. The stray
tree houses the busy bird.
It does not betray her.

When trampled, grass pushes
up on elbows, stands, and
spreads his arms. He greets
the living and the lost.

The meadow's harmony
is as alluring as a flame.

After a fire feasts, the meadow
settles into earth,
 then rises like the sun.
It does not point a finger at
the stray match.

Why does man weigh
mistakes on a scale of love?
We fill one side with blame
and the other with excuse,
then choose to leave when
anger settles into stony weight.

And when we leave,
we move to another world
where windows stare,
doors ignore, and concrete
covers trampled feelings.

Alone, we turn toward
the wind, stroll in the mist,
lie on the grass. All for
the solace of touch.
When loneliness licks
the soul, we push up
on elbows, lift our faces
and beg the sun to rise.

Some stand and shiver
in the cold, longing for
the mantle of love. Others
flee to other worlds for
warmth. And if not found,
they settle on a street where
nothing blooms.

Sonnet: Futility in Immortality

by Austin Peden

Man looked upon himself and saw his face,
“Why should mortality deprive this earth,
And starve this forest of the human race?
We will show time itself our treasured worth.
To the marble, to the stone, erect this,
Our infinite glory and mighty strength.
For all shall see and know that they witness
The never-ending echo of Man’s length!
Gawk at the buildings, show awe at the stone,
See how Gaia herself has bent the knee.
Hold fast fellow man, our race stands alone;
The fields and forests before us do flee!”
Man stood tall, but in an ironic way,
Vulcan unleashed hell, so ended Pompeii.

Epiphany

by **Lindsey Burbridge**

Out of my mind rolling in bed
5 AM and struggling to tell what's real
The lava lamps and eerie shadows they cast on the wall
Real
The lock jaw and jittery teeth
Real
The waves on the ceiling
The voices
The slowing of time
My mother walking in with a face of disgust
Braless and red eyed and claiming to know what's best for me
My father grabbing and holding me in the air
When I tried to leave home kicking and screaming
All for a stupid boy
All for a stupid high
My sister told me I was selfish
What about my niece?
What would she write in my eulogy?
She told me I was a liar
I was a brat
I was going to kill myself
I didn't care
I didn't care
I didn't care
My niece crying at her mom to stop yelling at me
A stupid toy she found defining forgiveness
I could have died
I would have died if not for what I wanted least
to happen

The Mint Green Room

by Alyssa Cawthon

high at the top of a grand hotel, there was
a small room painted mint green.
and oh if only these walls could talk, they'd
shed secrets you would never believe.

a vast array of human kind, dazzling and drunk
with cheeks bright pink, hollow and ready,
young and in love, all spent many a night in the
room of mint green

pictures of birds hung in golden frames,
through cold winters and back-breaking heat.
people in suits and skivvies alike, opened
windows and let in the sea.

talks of the future and what was to come,
hung thick in the air so sweet. shaky
limbs with glasses of gin, danced around
in the room of mint green.

some came to forget, some came to forgive
others sought out a hidden retreat.
with sheets like silk, and crystal lamps,
they'd whisper of god and lust and dreams.

though walls cannot tell of faces or names,
nor of what they came here to seek, they will
cling to the laughter and stories told here
forever, in the room of mint green.

Spaces

by Alyssa Cawthon

but we loved in closets, through secret
back doors, and notes passed like
middle schoolers.

i despised the idea of a life absent your light,
though we lived in shadows, and i didn't know
you much, and you didn't know me, which is
what made such beautiful magic. madness and
guilt and your tongue on my teeth.

we became the spaces between the words that you sent to your girlfriend on
friday nights:

"i'm out with friends" "i'll be home soon" i felt for her, really i did, as i
moved her

sweater from your passenger seat and molded myself into the shape of your
soul.

"how could i?" well, because she didn't know.

she didn't know about the fingerless gloves and the cold mornings and the
shots of

bourbon and the pizza that tasted like gold.

she didn't know how i felt when you told me,

"she'll never know" and

she never would.

for we had become nothing but the spaces between the words you sent to me
on saturday morning:

"sorry i had to leave"

"one day i won't"

The Seaside Hatter

by Thaddaeus Charles Marshall

As he walked down the way
he thought of the day
when he came to this town by the sea.
Worn out without hope
no reason to cope
with a life that was misery.
His head was slung low
as he decided to go
to a little bright park down the way.
There he saw dressed in white
a wonderful sight
a bride on her happiest day.
As the couple walked off
with heads held aloft
he started to wander away,
but was stopped by a man
with a touch from his hand.
He was turned back around
and looked down at the man's bright white hair.
As the stranger looked in his eyes
the man started to cry,
"I remember when I had that look,
a lack of a reason
to face any season
or even to go get some work,
but I finally found
a reason to bound
through the air

like some loony old bat.
I was found by a man
who lent me a hand
as I got back up off my butt.
Now I run his shop,
and if you're willing to mop,
I'll teach you the trade of a hatter."
In truth the offer confused the young man
as he looked in those kind aged eyes
and he started to cry
whilst wondering why
this man would help a stranger.
A tramp off the street
the man happened to meet
at the wedding of a friend
who the tramp didn't know.
To shorten his tale
this I will tell
his work for the seaside hatter went well,
and now as he walks through the town
he keeps an eye open for those who are down
those who may need a helping hand
from him, the new hatter
of this small seaside land.

Fire

by Catherine Katey Johnson

The ominous crackle
Shook our country solitude
A breeze rose up mighty
Sixty-mile winds
Fire blazed across the land
Stirring up the pain
The long grass turned
Into whirling dark red hair
Quick with sparks
Cedars exploded
Consumed in a hellish
Blast furnace
Houses became charcoal mounds
Flames climbed saplings
The ominous crackle spread
Across ten thousand acres
Nothing left but barren clay
Twisted coiled Christmas tree skeletons
Charcoal pubes
Mother earth
Red swollen
Raw and burnt
Offering
Nothing but loss

I drove up on the site
The house down to three-feet
The top of a hot cage cooling
Where my parrot lived

Stood above the brick border
Of my window sill

On the floor of the cage
A Chore-girl-scrubbie of ash
With gray wings of powdered bones
Spread wide on each side
And I couldn't breathe either
In that one long
Grass fire swept afternoon

Lies I've Told

by James Knoll

I hate you
I wish I were dead

I'm hungry
I've never wanted to drink
I don't write
I'm better than this
I'll miss you
I enjoyed high school
I have faith
I've never been a racist
I've never been sexist
I've never been homophobic
I'm not biased against religions
I don't believe in God
I believe in God
I believe you
I don't care about the drugs you're on
I'd cross the country to save you
I'd drive hours to save you
I'd lift a finger to save you
I like your music
I respect you
I've got your back
I never want to see you again

I'm glad I'm still alive
I love you

Afghanistan

by **Charlene Burrows**

Sounds of mortar fire over my delicate hut.
I get no sleep. Wake up.
The sand seems to be protecting the sun
from us. I cannot see.
We all feel trapped at the base of this mountain.
The heat. It scorches.
The deafening engines of fighter jets as they
take off. Land. Repeat.
The unfamiliar smells stifle our senses.
Goats. Lamb. Pungency.
Crowded in this rec-room like sardines.
We call loved ones. Faithfully.
Make up fantasies and lies of optimism.
“I’ll be home, Mama. I promise.
Just wait. I’m coming.
It’s so beautiful here, Mama.
You should see. So peaceful.
I’m not working too hard,
I sleep, Ma.
Tell Dad I miss him and his barbecue.
Yes, Ma, I know.
I promise I’m fine, Ma, I really like it here.
No, Ma, no danger.
I’ve got to go, Ma. Yes. I love you too.”
We disconnect before our uncertainty is recognized.
These sandy graves.

Le Faux Frog

by Robert Herman Broyles

She was browsing for interesting wines.
I was after that elusive species,
The inexpensive but intriguing Shiraz.
Red wines, poetry and art
Were the subjects of our conversation.
The key seemed and seems to be,
How to have a creative outlet
Without all that need for validation.
“Do you have the balls to let go
Of your testosterone, Robert?” Or what?

So, Carol said,
“Are you going to retire?”
And I said,
“I don’t know—
Maybe I’ll conspire to retire.
My insurance agent called
Just the other day –
Thought maybe we should
Talk about it.”
Emotionally, I may be there.

She didn’t say it, right out –
But the question was there....
“When are you going to realize
That your life is yours
To live...now, to savor...now,
To possess and create...now...?”

“I’m partial to sonnets,” she said.
“I like the form,” I said and tried
To remember exactly what the form is:
A dozen lines – or is it fourteen? Iambic pentameter, for sure....

So, I looked up ‘sonnet’
In the encyclopedia.
At first turn, I got
‘Spanish American literature’ instead,
Then ‘skin diving,’ and ‘sod house’
And ‘sodium.’ Sodium is interesting –
An alkali earth metal, soft, explosive
When in contact with water – So it’s
Stored under kerosene; we used benzene,
In a hood, in the Wake Forest chem department.

Except Stanley who liked to play with it –
A Master’s degree student, my T. A.,
Liked to toss small chips of sodium
Into a large beaker of water and watch
As the sodium chip fizzed and zigzagged
Around the surface like a mad motorboat.
One time he chipped too big a chunk,
Yelled, “Oh, shit!” as we bolted for
The door, ahead of the explosion...
And made me swear not to tell....

Anyway, I remember my favorite sonnet type,
At last: the Elizabethan/Shakespearean type,
Rather than Italian or Petrarchan,
And the feel of
The Iambic pentameter rhythm,

But most of all, the grab,
The passionate squeeze of that
Magnificent rhyming couplet at the end:
"Makes you wanna holler 'hye-dee-ho,'
Burns your tummy, don't ya know?!"

"So, Robert, are you going to retire?"
"I don't know...maybe so...."
"You don't love me, this I know.
Don't need a Bible to tell me so."
If I could write songs like Emmylou
And have people listen to 'em
There comes that validation need –
Or is it the other thing that I have needed
All along: To be part of the conversation,
To sit at the table ... with Steve Allen & Leonardo?

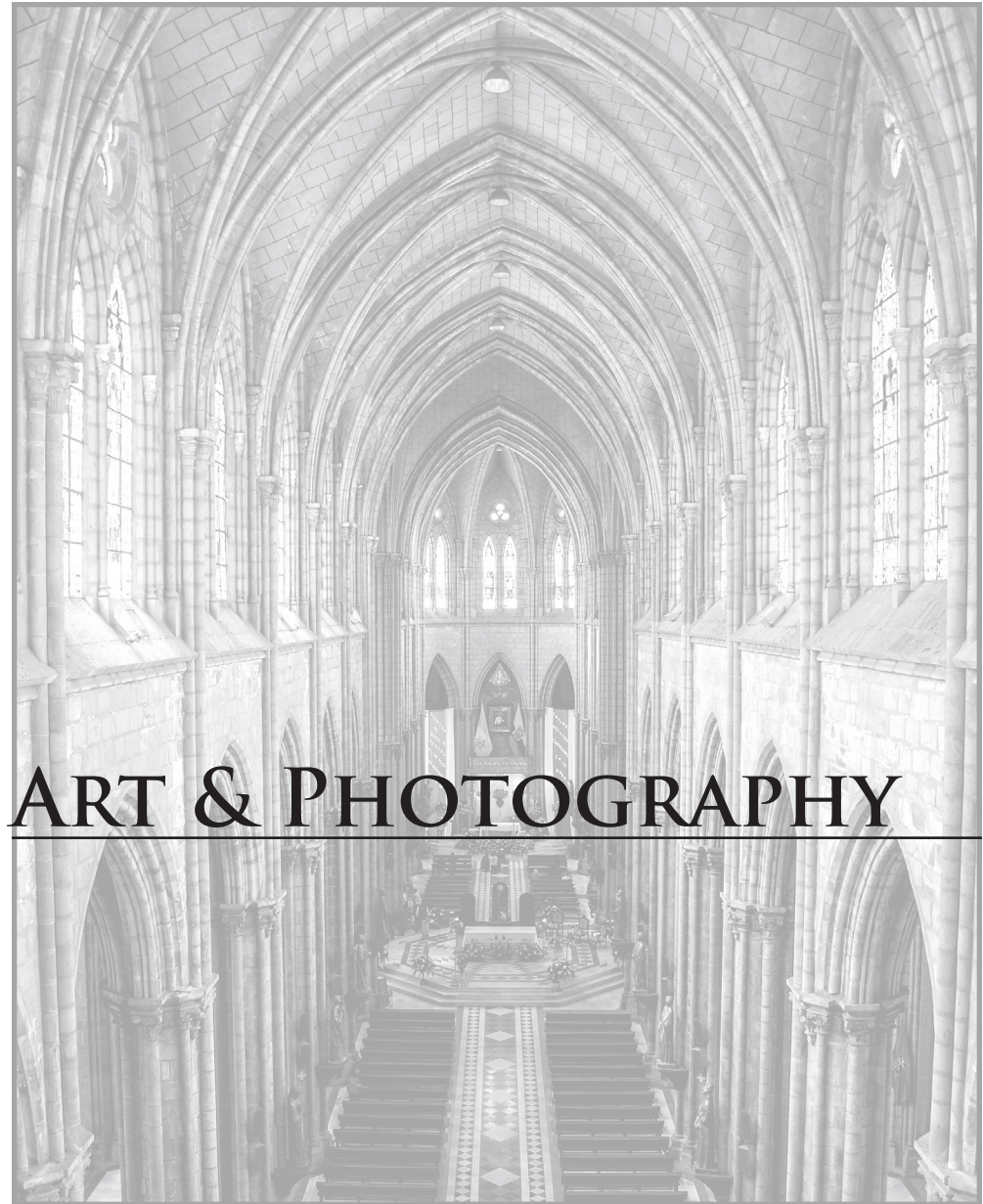
Be Bold

by Eve Summerton

Be firm rather than fickle
Though friendships may be few
The pressure that constricts you
Is nothing you can't out-do
The old moon for you is waning
And soon you will pull through

Be bold rather than cautious
You have less to lose than you think
The shadows that surround you
Will vanish if you blink
A new day for you is dawning
You stand upon the brink

Be kind rather than selfish
And lend an able hand
The desire that torments you
Will make you understand
A new world for us is forming
If only you command





Spiral
Rachael Z. Ikins



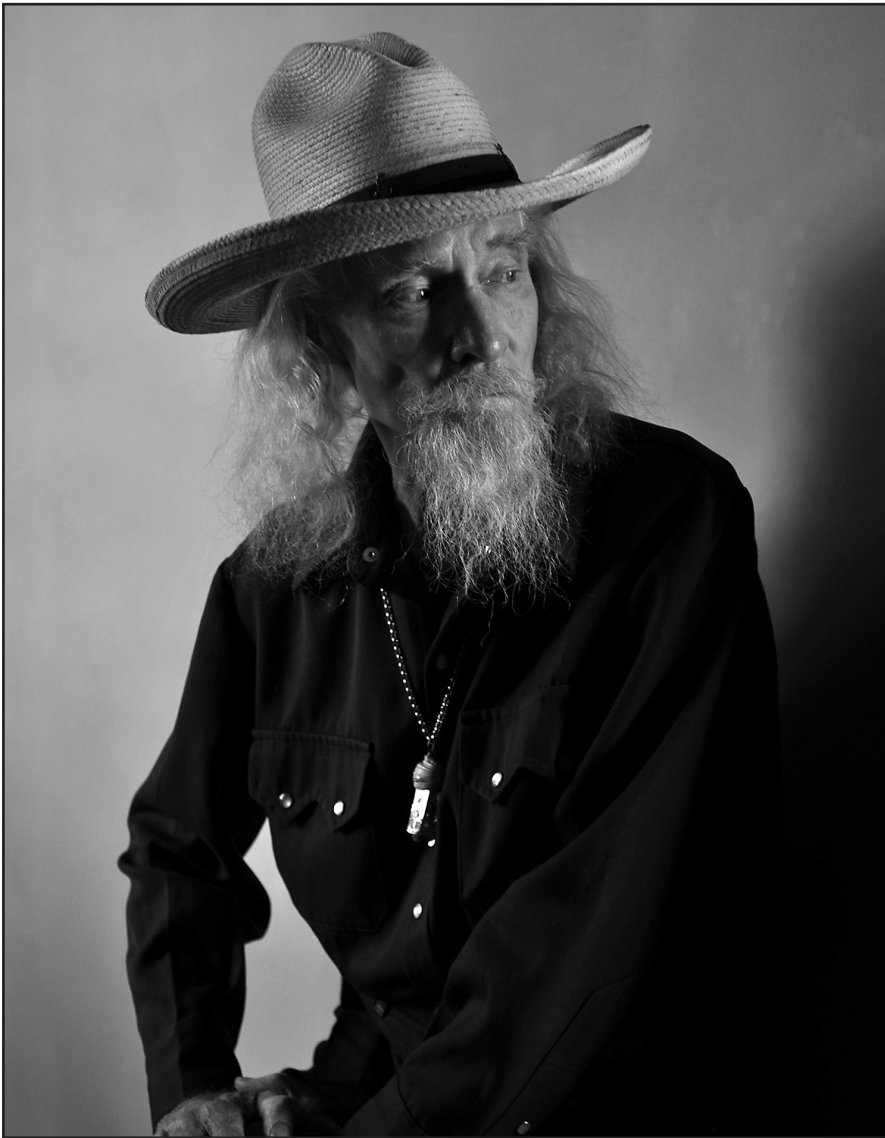
Quito Basilica
Brenda Breeding



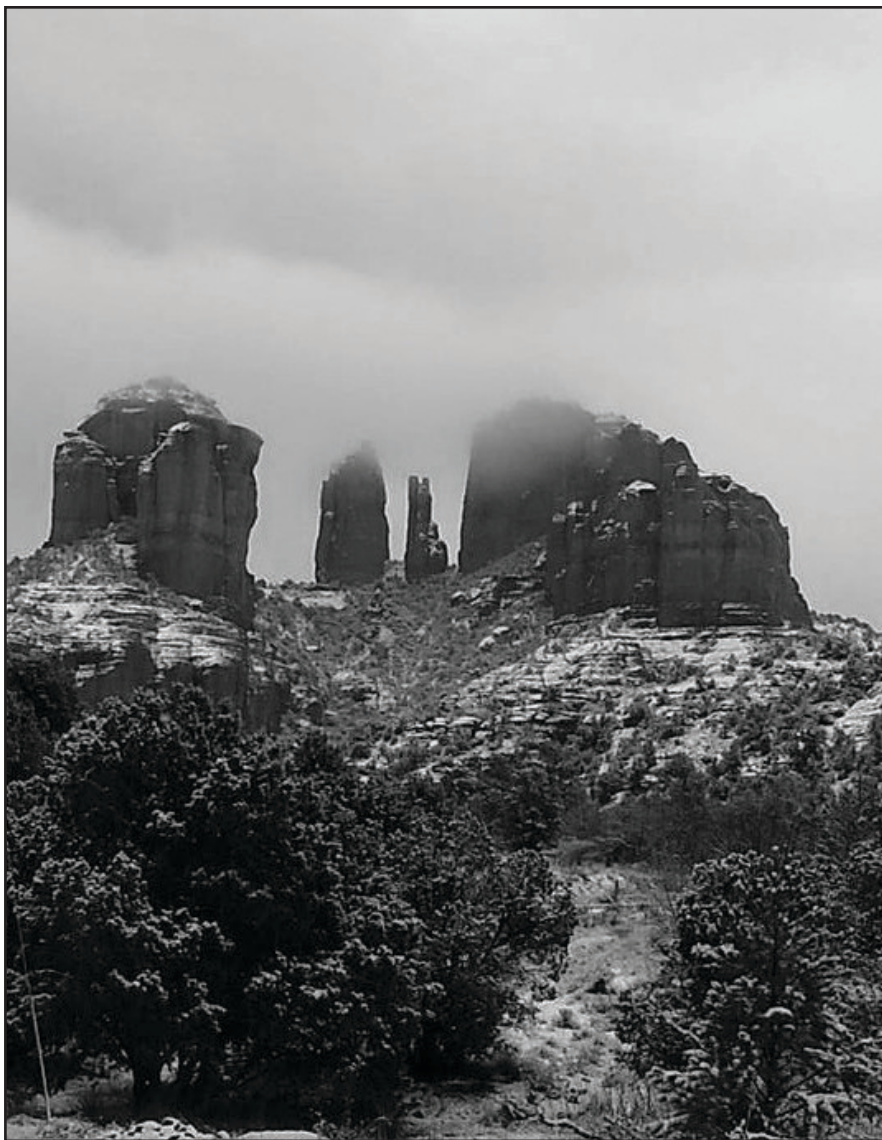
Clematis in B&W
Kari Grant



Mayan Dancer
Kari Grant



Donald
Matthew Meason



Arizona Winter Morning
Robert Schultz



Knap Time on the Rez
Robert Schultz



Bakken Sunrise, North Dakota
Robert Schultz

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