



17 *Absolute*

Poetry • Fiction • Nonfiction • Artwork • Photography

17
Absolute



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FICTION

Stars

by Alexis Cummings

When I think of you, I think of stars. I think of the back of my truck with pillows piled high, with the warm summer breeze and the stickiness of the night air. I remember the crickets and the laughter and our two favorite songs replayed over and over, the soundtrack to our summer. I think of whispers and secrets and kissing lists. I think of too-short skirts and high heels and dark lipstick. I think of our mothers shaking their heads as we giggled our way out of the kitchen, clanking bottles together behind our backs. I think of being inseparable and going somewhere without you only for people to ask where you were. I think of plans and promises and adventures. I think of my other half, but mainly I think of stars. They were our audience that summer, silently watching over us. It was almost as if they knew it was only fleeting. I think of you often, even though I do not know where you are or where life has taken you. I like to know you are looking up at the same stars each night as well, and maybe some nights you even remember that summer. I hope you remember laughter and love and friendship and me, even if the only thing connecting us now are those silent, watchful stars.

Better Not Call Saul

by **Kenneth Williams**

Saul opened his eyes. He looked without turning his head to the clock beside him. “3:00AM” it read in bright red segmented figures. He usually recalled the night he was brought to the orphanage on nights when it was time for him to go to the river. His mother getting shot by a mugger, the injustice of the one-year prison sentence, the helplessness Saul felt due to his circumstances. These moments remained with him always, shaping him into the strong-morals, hardworking individual that he had become. He sluggishly pulled himself off the floor, resembling a moldable mass rising from the earth and taking shape into a man. He grabbed his canvas jacket, put on his steel-toe boots and walked out his apartment door, but not before throwing a not-so-empty garbage bag over his shoulder. Once he got out on the street, he opened the door to his taxi parked right outside the building door. Ms. Goldstein was nice enough to give him a reserved parking spot, considering he’d been a tenant for three years now. She knew that with the money he’d been making he could move out, so he figured this was her way of trying to get him to stay. He appreciated the gesture from the sweet old woman. He threw the bag in the back seat and drove through the noisy, yet empty streets of his neighborhood. The nice thing about living in his corner of the block was that it was only a few minutes’ walk away from the life of the city, but no one had any reason to come to his street across from the train tracks. The combination of non-busy streets with the noise of city life coming from a few streets down was just perfect for him.

He arrived at the edge of the lake which had a bluish-green tint at the moment. Ever since he found out about the Lady in the Lake, Saul never missed her biweekly visits (every other week, not twice a week). He walked towards the water’s edge while dragging the bag behind him. He opened it and

pulled out a severed finger. He rotated it a few times between his thumb and forefinger noticing how hairless the knuckle was. With a chuckle and a smirk, he gave the finger an underhand-toss into the middle of the lake. The bluish-green light emanated brighter and began foaming and boiling intensely at the spot that the finger had entered the water. The green dominated its brother's half of the light spectrum as a bubbling liquid pillar rose out in the water. Once it reached higher than the looming trees surrounding the lake, the veil of water splashed away, revealing the decrepit back of the Lady in the Lake. Saul always had a slight fear of this next part but admittedly got a bit of an adrenaline rush from it. She looked over her shoulder at him with those large empty eye sockets. After she had slowly turned her whole body to face him, she let out a howling cry and thrashed her arms and body in a fit of restlessness of being bound to this body of water. After a few seconds of hearing the soundtrack to hell the Lady of the Lake's large figure positioned its large skull-like face a few inches away from Saul, awaiting the rest of his delivery. Saul dumped the rest of the contents into the water. He covered his face with his sleeve to guard himself from the splashing foam and boiling water that resulted from his gift. The large body sticking out of the water rose up slowly and leaned back as though testing the quality of tribute. Almost like a food critic mulling her dish over on her palate before swallowing. Once satiety was reached, the Lady leaned forward again, stopping inches before Saul's face, looking him over as if to determine whether she wanted to continue this ongoing process between the two of them that had lasted for a little over three years. She reached up with her right hand, bits of dull multicolored skin still hanging on, and placed her palm on Saul's head while the fingers went down the length of his body. With this contact Saul saw his next sacrifice, a black woman who lived a few blocks down from him. Saul recognized her; he had seen her often in the neighborhood. He always obtained a notion as to why the sacrifices were demanded, what sins they had wrought to deserve the form of justice approaching them. He received no inkling as to why he should end her.

"Wait, why her? What has she done?" Saul shouted, but to no avail, as she never spoke. The Lady responded with a silent stare, displaying no urgency to address his inquiry.

On the drive home, Saul debated with himself over this conflict of interest. On the one hand, his sacrifices had always led to good fortune with him, as was the way with these things. He delivered what she asked for and within the next few days he received whatever it was that he'd desired. For most people their reward would be money, possessions, or their pick of the finest of individuals of worthy personage. Saul never had interest in these things. He liked his space, his quiet and the simple things in life. If a couch worked just as good for a bed, why get a bed? This was his thought process on most matters and explained the bare yet practical state of his apartment. No, it wasn't materialistic or social greed that Saul was after, but the desire for the world to be a better place. His favorite reward was the sentencing of the senator who had his relations with his assistant's middle school son exposed. However, after the exposure the trial went terminal after being held up for weeks with useless litigation review and monetary influence being exchanged under the table. In order to make the sentence go fully through he had to deliver more bodies. Also, the life of the man that Saul had taken in order to make the sentencing go through was just as deserving of his fate in Saul's opinion. He was a crooked landlord extorting his tenants and even accepting "alternative" forms of rent from a pair of female college students, one blonde and one brunette. This seemed to be the case with all of Saul's victims and this is how Saul had never lost any sleep over his actions. He saw what he did as a public service which began an even greater service for reward. On the other hand, Saul always had a gnawing feeling that the service he was offering was somehow unforgivable. Not necessarily in the righteous aspect of practicing forgiveness and giving everyone a chance at redemption for their actions, but more in a betrayal sort of way. He felt as if he was betraying all of humanity by offering a few of its members to this unearthly creature. Killing out of passion or calculation was understandable, perhaps. But this, this felt as though he was destroying his soul with each delivery.

Saul woke up with a jolt. He usually dreamt about his time at the orphanage on nights before he fulfilled the retrieval of his victims. He grabbed his canvas jacket and black leather gloves before leaving his apartment.

“Oh hello, Saul! How are you doing today?”

“Fine, Ms. Goldstein, thank you for asking.” Ms. Goldstein was always so sweet and patient and the closest thing to a mom that Saul had ever known. He was always careful to make sure that he didn’t make too much noise for her, considering that she lived right under him. In fact, he had switched places with the prior tenants since she was always complaining about how much noise they would make. He considered making them into a delivery but judged against it, seeing as how being a nuisance to an old woman is not good enough grounds to end the breath in a person’s lungs.

“Very good, dear, glad to hear it. Come inside, I’ll pack you some breakfast before you go, it’s never a good idea to start the work day without eating and I know you’re always too busy for it.”

“Thank you for the offer, but I really need to get going.” He gave Ms. Goldstein a hug and kiss on the forehead before continuing down the stairs. “By the way, have those rent checks been coming in on time?”

“Yes, son, they have. I don’t know how but they seem to make it every time. I guess someone upstairs is looking out for me.” She pointed her trembling finger upwards and gave Saul a wink. He smiled, keeping the secret to himself. With a wave and swift “Goodbye” he continued on his way.

That night came by especially quickly. Saul had hoped to have gotten some reading in before settling in for the night but the day was as good as gone. There was still some magenta and violet peeking over the buildings visible from his window, but he had to get up early tomorrow to make his delivery. Lately Saul hadn’t been doing much besides going to work. The last two weeks seemed to have crawled as slowly as he’d ever experienced, just pulling themselves by their forearms across the ground and just making it past the finish line. He was glad to get the body out of his freezer, it had taken up space preventing him from attaining some perfectly good groceries. He took the pieces out a few at a time and put them into a garbage bag. As he handled her left foot, he remembered this is what he was holding as she yelled, “No, please stop! Why are you doing this!”

“A necessary sacrifice,” he thought to himself. He pulled out part of her torso from the freezer, noticing the bruise that he had left when he beat her with his brass knuckles. He disregarded whatever few guilty feelings he had left in his body with a smirk. He shoveled the rest into the bag without care, put the bag beside the door after tying it up and turned off the lights to go to sleep.

Saul woke up a few hours later and headed down to the lake with his tribute. He had noticed how strong his tie had become with the Lady in the Lake. The more he had been visiting her the more he could feel her presence. Not exactly a presence as though she were in the room with him, but more like a thread made of spiritual energy that would always lead him back to the lake, a calling almost. Once he had gotten to the lake, he gave the water a taste of a bit of what he had in store this morning. Once the Lady had revealed herself with her eerie grandeur he dumped the rest of the contents of the bag. Saul was waiting for the Lady to reveal her next desired sacrifice, but she just waited. He looked in the bag to see if there was anything that he had left but there was nothing inside. He turned it upside down but came up empty again. She just stared in his direction with her empty eye sockets and few gray strands of hair moving with the breeze. She slowly began to sink back down. “What? No! Give me something, anything!” Saul hadn’t realized how much he had become dependent on this task of drawing blood. Its development went completely unnoticed, veiled under, what he considered, the necessary public duty. “Give me something! I’ll do anything!” he shouted but to no reciprocation of recognition. The Lady continued to sink. Upon reaching low enough for only the top of her head to poke out, she allowed the water to swirl into her eye sockets before finally sinking all the way down. Saul lay at the edge of the lake with his hand spread open, reaching out to the water. The next day Saul got in trouble with his boss Mr. Mooney for being late to work. “Six years and you’ve never been late once. What’s the deal, Saul? You moonlighting or something?”

“Sorry, sir, it won’t happen again. I’ve just been having some trouble sleeping.” Saul had spent the entire night waiting for the Lady to come back

up and give him his duty and his reward. Falling asleep near dawn, he had missed his regular clock-in time. Saul had been an outstanding employee at the Moonlight Mooney Taxi Cab Service company for six years now, he hadn't realized how little the management valued him considering this was his first offense. Saul went outside and stepped into his taxi, tossing the warning slip into the glove compartment. Two more of those and he would be fired.

It had been a week since Saul's latest unsuccessful tribute to the lake. He attempted to offer tributes twice since then even though he hadn't been summoned. Saul figured that perhaps bringing multiple offerings all at once would draw the Lady out. First time he brought three: a crooked cop, a drug dealer, and a man who lived next door who beat his wife and kids. Second time he brought five, all worse than the previous three. He couldn't figure out what the problem was but if his bouts of killing weren't going to be rewarded then he figured he may as well work on getting over it. It was getting to the point that innocent women, children and the elderly were starting to look like possible prey. A nun even crossed his mind. "There aren't enough Hail Marys in the world," he thought to himself as he left that idea behind on the intersection of 1st and Crosswell.

Saul stopped to pick up a customer. It was a little black boy with khaki pants, a red sweater and a white dress shirt underneath. Saul pulled over.

"I don't normally see you on this route," Saul said to the child as he stepped in.

"My mom used to take me to school."

"Why not today?"

"I don't know. I haven't seen her in a long time."

"Hmm," Saul mumbled to himself. He'd spent so much time going after deadbeat dads that he'd forgotten that moms could be terrible parents as well. "When was the last time you saw her?"

"A week ago maybe." The boy turned his head and just looked out the side window. It was clear he didn't want to talk about his mom. Saul felt for the kid. Of course, he couldn't feel what he was going through exactly. Saul

had never grown up with parents, so he didn't know what it was like to be abandoned by one. But he was pretty sure he had a good enough idea.

"What's your name, kid?"

"David. I'm nine."

"Oh, are you now? Well, David, I hadn't expected to run into such a well-dressed gentleman on my route this morning. Where can I take you?"

"I need to go to school."

"Alrighty then! Next stop, P.S. 118! Please keep your arms and legs inside the vehicle at all times and save your questions for the end of the ride." Saul could see in his rearview mirror that his attempt at Disney conductor style antics was doing little to cheer up David. "Gee, tough crowd. Alright then, if it's silence he wants I got more than enough for the both of us," Saul thought to himself.

The ride to David's school became quiet but every few moments Saul could catch a glance from David in his mirror. Although words weren't exchanged for the majority of the those few minutes, the message was somehow communicated through glances and silence that David appreciated someone reaching out.

"How long have you been driving this taxi? Do you like it?"

"It's been some time now, I like being able to drive around. I'm the best parallel parker on this side of the Hudson. You need any vehicle to fit into any spot, I'm your man, kid," said Saul as he made a fist with his right hand and stuck out his right thumb to point to himself while throwing a wink towards David in the back seat. They continued the rest of the drive talking about various topics, the strangest things Saul had seen on the job, what the latest Pokemon evolutions were and how David planned on getting the ultra-rare Charizard Evolution X holographic cards from the other kids by trading them his Japanese text Eevee.

"Alright, kid, here's your stop."

"Thanks a lot, Mr. Saul! Have a good day."

"Wait now, hold up! I ain't done talking to you yet, buddy. What time does your school let out?"

“2:15.”

“Well then, what do you say to me picking you up and bringing you back home? Do you have anyone else to get you?” What kind of a question was that; of course he didn’t. No nine-year-old who takes a taxi to school unsupervised has an adult in their life. Not an adult who cares about them anyhow.

“Sure thing, thank you!” shouted David excitedly, the sparkle in his eyes barely visible with how high his cheeks were being pushed up by his smile. “I’ll keep a look out for you after school!” Saul continued on his route for the rest of the shift.

When 2:15 rolled around Saul was at the school right on time to give David a ride home.

“How was school, buddy? You get the cards you wanted?”

“Yeah, it was awesome! I saw that Geoffrey had a Japanese Bulbasaur so I made him add that to the trade!”

“Wow, looks like I got a real shark in this cab! You’ll be hitting up Wall Street in no time, kid, just keep sticking to those studies.” David held most of the conversation during the ride, Saul was glad that David was finally able to open up and be comfortable. Saul looked out his window and saw it. The spot he’d been dreaming of all day during his route. The alley that he’d done a few of his jobs in. He could bring the kid in there and no one would know the difference. “His mom isn’t even taking care of him anymore, who would come looking? What kind of life could he have in front of him? You’re doing him a favor, a civil service.” Saul felt the pull of the wheel axels turning the car towards the alley. Almost as if the Lady herself had possessed the car and was trying to persuade him to make this move. “Nah, what am I thinking? Being a hitman for an other-worldly apparition is one thing, but killing kids? Now I know I’ve gone insane.” Saul continued through the alley and came out the other end.

“Why are we going this way?” David asked, peering over the edge of the window.

“Don’t worry about it, it’s just a shortcut.”

The pair reached David's house a few minutes later, to David's despair, to Saul's relief. David jumped out and asked, "How much do I owe ya?"

"Don't worry, kid, it's on the house. You got anyone that you can stay with?"

"The landlady is taking care of me for the time being, but if Ma doesn't come back soon I don't know what I'm gonna do."

"You ain't got no other family that can take you?"

"No, my mom was all I had. We were really close, I don't know why she left." David looked down, unable to look Saul in the face for fear that looking at the first parent figure he'd seen since his mom disappeared would only remind him of what he'd lost, and he'd start to cry. He didn't want to leave that kind of impression, especially considering this was their first day getting to know each other.

"Hey, kid, seeing as how tomorrow is Saturday, you want to come along with me to work?"

"You mean it?"

"Yeah sure, it would be nice to have the company. We could even get some hot dogs."

The next few weeks helped Saul to foster a relationship with the boy. David had definitely been cheerier the more often they spent time together. He and David were practically inseparable. All the guys down at the office knew him and they would even let him have some of the cake when it was somebody's birthday. Saul was noticing a positive change in his own life as well. He barely felt the need to kill. He acknowledged that what he had been doing was wrong and that there was no way in hell that he could ever be fogged into taking up that sort of lifestyle again. Taxi driver by day, serial killer by night. Saul was so stricken with guilt and remorse by what he had done that he had almost turned himself in a couple of times, but he'd figured those were the actions of a different man. The man under control of the Lady. Besides, the fact that he'd felt bad enough to almost turn himself in was practically as good as turning over a new leaf. "It's the thought that counts, right?" he thought to himself on the matter. Despite this lack of taking

responsibility, Saul truly had turned over a new leaf. He was more chipper and less angry at the rest of the world. He no longer had a problem with young people and their pop culture. If that was their interest, he simply found no reason to have an issue. Life was good, and Saul had found someone worth living right for.

The pair walked down a few city blocks to the busier part of town one evening. David balanced himself along a raised edge of the curb and right as they turned the corner he pointed to a square floor level office window with a black canvas overhang. "This is where my mom worked, she would plan events for people and they would always give her the food that was left over. That was my favorite part about coming here. One time a guy even gave her a ruby ring. She said it wasn't real but Ma always wore it since it was her favorite."

"No, this can't be. I must be remembering wrong." Saul stumbled, as he tried to contain his posture and balance, he propped himself up against the wall.

"Saul, are you okay? Do you want me to call someone?"

"No, Davie, I'm fine." Saul stood back up straight and looked into the eyes of the boy he had grown so close with over the past few weeks. The boy who had pulled Saul out of the destructive cycle that he had found himself in. The boy who had become like—

Saul finally admitted to himself that this was the spot where he killed her. The woman that he offered to the lake a few months ago was David's mom. That was the corner of the building that she was holding onto trying not to be pulled away. That construction area was where he remembered dragging her and doing her in. It was all swirling to Saul, the realization of what he had done and whom he had hurt. He always thought that his victims deserved what they received, but if he was so wrong about this then what more could he have been wrong about with his other sacrifices?

Just then, a gust of wind blew across the neighborhood and towards the lake. It rustled the reeds jutting out of the side of the ledge where Saul usually stood when delivering his offerings. The movement loosened an

object that was caught in the reeds; a hand with a ring containing a large imitation ruby in the setting. Finally, having received the full tribute that it had asked for, the lake started to bubble all various colors and foamed intensely. The Lady burst out of the center as if all this time in hibernation had made her more powerful than ever. Her influence had been unable to reach Saul until the entire sacrifice was given. Finally, the pent up energy was released and reconnecting with the servant. The spiritual thread that was once severed snaked its way out of the lake and found its way towards Saul.

The connection felt so powerful, he could actually hear the Lady speaking to him. For the first time breathy straining words made their way into his head from her own being.

“Kill him. Bring him to me, I must have him.”

Saul saw his next target, and it was the same face he’d gotten to know for the last few weeks.

“Oh shit.”

Baking Lessons

by Lydia M. Rucker

First bowl. Combine flour, salt and baking soda. *Check, check, and check.*

In a separate bowl, combine sugar—*check*—brown sugar—*check*—vanilla —*where’s that teaspoon? Oh—check* and eggs—*where?* “Dang it.”

I swung open the back screen door, only to have it stick in place. *Tell him to fix that.* After grappling with it for a minute, I headed to the hen house.

When my husband first told me of the benefits of farm life, he included the following list of facts: the air was healthy and robust, there was always room for kids to play, and fresh eggs and produce were always on hand. This, of course, sounded good to a girl from the city who proclaimed that she wanted to live life close to the earth.

The day Harry and I met. *This is a good story.* We were at a church social, which is basically a gathering of eager young people looking to hook up with other eager young people. I made my special cookies that day. They were sugar, which is common enough—except that I always added nutmeg to spice them up.

Harry paid three dollars for a dozen of my cookies and then asked me to go on a date with him. It took a little convincing, but I finally said, “Yes.”

We sat at the Big T Drive-In wrapped in each other’s arms in the bed of his ‘68 Chevy pickup truck. It was that same night when he suddenly informed me how much he loved my cookies and how, when we were married, he wanted cookies available all the time.

“When we are married?” I said as I inched away from him. “We just met.”

He said nothing, just pulled me back close to him. “See, that’s what I’m gonna call you—Cookie.”

From that day on, cookies were everywhere. *Everywhere*. Three batches a week. The cookie jar was always full.

My boobs were cookies.

My lips were cookies.

And one day, he promised my “love-box” was going to be full of cookies too, but that never happened.

I lost the first one at 17 weeks, the second at 19, the third at 24. *He almost made it*. And the last, *Isabelle*, she took a nap and never woke up.

I reached the coop and unhooked the wire twisted around a nail to get inside the hen house. I coughed when I inhaled the mix of dust and hay. I could see their particles floating like fairies in the beams of light that chinked their way through the building’s aluminum roof. The hens’ nests were vacant, so I slipped my hand in each darkened hole and felt around. *Nothing*. Then the next—nothing again. *There’s one*. The third successfully yielded a medium-sized brown egg.

One more.

I searched the rest of the nests but there was nothing.

You’ve got to be kidding me.

I looked around, *Perhaps I missed one*. Yet again, there was nothing. *Damn*. I must have that egg. *They have to be perfect*. I looked toward the hen house door, under the perches, everywhere, but there was nothing.

It was the entrance of Fanny, a little Rhode Island Red, from behind the nest box that caused me to check one more place.

I flattened my back against the wall in order to see behind it better, and I noticed that in the back corner, bathed by one of those same beams

of light, was an egg. *Yes. Thank you, God.* I shoved my arm between the metal wall and the box, scratching myself on a protruding nail. *It hurt.* I didn't care. *You need that egg.*

Then, I had it. *Victorious!* It was a creamy white and smeared with chicken poo, but I held it close to my chest and carried it, along with the other, to the house.

I washed them gently, making sure that each one was pristine. *You are all I have.* I cracked the first into the sugar bowl, and it drooped sloppily across the sugars, its yolk coming to rest in the dark pool of vanilla. Then, I picked up the second—cracked it and slid my thumbnails into the fracture, pulling the halves apart. *What the... Oh my God.*

I looked at it in my bowl, draped limply across a pillow of swirled sugars. Its sparse feathers wet with what life-giving substance was still left protecting it from the elements or whatever might harm it. Its belly was round and full—its short wings were pinned tightly to its sides. *A couple days more.* What? *And it might have made it.* That's what the doctor said.

I closed my eyes *and you shook your head.*

Leave me alone.

I can't. You need me. You'll lose your nerve. And for God's sake stop crying.

I can't.

Yes, you can. You get to make the choice.

Go away.

Did you choose to lose who you are?

No, that was taken from me.

Did you have a choice when child after child was ripped from your womb?

No. His boots did that.

But her life...

Isabelle,

Was ripped from you while you watched her dreaming.

I didn't want to wake her.

Look at that chick.

The batter is ruined.

You can't even get your own death right.

Shut up.

The plan was simple.

Was it really?

Make cookies.

Yeah.

Crush some pills.

Uh-huh. The Belladonna was going to be a nice touch.

Then eat the whole damn batch yourself.

Well, I wasn't going to share.

I know you weren't.

Besides, he already found some new cookies.

Jenna's cookies.

Yeah.

She buys them pre-packaged.

Fake bitch.

...It's not fair.

No. It's not.

Does it hurt bad?

Yes. But I can make it stop.

Can you?

Yeah. Because I can still save it.

Yes, you can.

Not the chick—it's dead.

Oh right.

See, I cup my hands under it.

Into the sugar?

Yes.

Now what?

Roll it back and forth between my hands.

Oh yes! Let the sugar fall back into the bowl.

There. I'll add applesauce—it'll be fine.

Where are you going?

To put it in the trash.

Why?

It's dead.

Don't waste it.

What?

Put it in the flour.

Really?

Yeah. Now add the sugar mix.

But it will be all wrong.

Does he deserve perfection?

No. He doesn't.

Just do it.

How many of these?

Half a bottle should do it.

I should crush them. You think he will notice?

No. He just wants his cookies.

Now we blend to a creamy mixture.

Oooh. That's loud.

It's the bones.

Yeah, but it's really smooth.

Now, we spoon onto an ungreased cookie sheet approximately one inch apart.

Cook at 350 degrees for 15–20 minutes.

I'm glad that you pay attention.

I like baking with you.

And when they're done—

I hear the roar of the one-ton truck at the end of the drive—a familiar signal to Harry's arrival home. The sweet smell of baking fills the air, and the green numbers on the stove count down the time to baking perfection.

The door of the truck slams, and I hear Harry clearing his throat as he stomps the dirt off of his boots on the back steps. He opens the screen door, and it creaks—and sticks.

He mutters curses.

I smile.

Harry doesn't "do" imperfection.

The buzzer on the stove sounds, *They're ready*, so I take them out, and I use a spatula to place them delicately on the plate.

I feel him behind me. His calloused hands wrap over my breast. "Mmm, cookies," he moans. I close my eyes when his hot breath falls across my neck.

"Them fresh?" he asks me.

"And warm," I reply.

Then I lift my gift to his mouth, "Just like you like them."

Putting on a Show

by Kiana Lysinger

Since I was eight, movies have been my castle and characters have been my mote. My grandma used to watch me, and the first movie she ever showed me was *Psycho*. My parents weren't too happy with her because a week after that all I'd say was "Mother wouldn't like that" anytime I was asked to do something. So out of respect for my parents we started watching fewer thrillers and started watching films like *Pretty Woman*. My grandma was banned from showing me movies for a whole month when I came home and asked my parents if Mom was a hooker before Dad paid her enough to marry him. Still, I love movies in every way, shape, and form they come in.

Today my mom insists I visit my therapist. My mom and dad got me a therapist after my grandma died three years ago and they kept him because they started having marital issues and use it as a reason for me to be somewhere else for an hour while they yell at each other. I don't mind my therapist. His name is Alexander Herts and, yes, I've already made joke after joke about his last name. For example, one time he asked how I felt and I told him, "Well, Herts, it herts, but not as bad as having the last name Herts." Now he insists I call him Alex because every time I would make a joke he'd make me stay an extra five minutes. The only thing worse than being stuck with a therapist for an extra amount of time is being stuck in his office. He doesn't own any bookshelves, which is a bad move on his part because the columns of books stacked against the walls could use a better home. All of his books are old and used, so the smell of hundreds of people's hands that once touched each page lingers in his dimly lit office. There is also an odd smell of burnt coffee that hits me every time I enter the room, and the weird part is he doesn't even have a coffee maker in his office, nor does he like

coffee. Not to mention the fact that his office walls are the color of unhealthy urine and that he only has windows and a desk lamp to light his horrid office. I've gotten used to everything in there so all the smells and colors are familiar to me at this point.

As much as I bitch about his office I actually love seeing him once, sometimes twice, a week. He talks to me about movies and even though he is my greatest enemy because he is one of the many that squawk "The book is better" I still enjoy talking to him. My parents never like talking to me about movies or anything for that matter, that's why I always loved talking to my grandma but when she died my love of movies died a little bit too. After my dad told me I didn't cry, but instead I watched *Casablanca* on repeat for three days. That was her favorite movie. Every Valentine's Day she'd make me come over and we'd watch it and quote every line. When I re-watched it after she died, without fail I cried every time Humphrey Bogart uttered those famous words, "You'll regret it. Maybe not today and maybe not tomorrow, but soon and for the rest of your life." My grandma was a quiet woman but when it came to her love of movies she would never shut up and I loved that about her. My parents eventually revoked my privileges of watching that movie because they thought it was causing me too much pain. I didn't mind, though, because watching movies without her didn't seem fun anymore. When my parents realized the slump I was in, not only did they get me a therapist, they enrolled me into an acting class at the college in town.

This is where I truly shine. My grandma and I loved to try and remember movies word for word, so remembering lines is never a problem. Plus, I know the entire lingo when it comes to acting. My class is pretty small. It's in the basement of one of the college buildings. There's a leak in the ceiling and it smells musky and moldy. The tile floors are a beige color but sometimes I wonder if they were actually white before all of the college students' dirty sneakers ruined the clean look. There's a huge mirror lined against one of the walls and there are no windows, but unlike my therapist's office, there are actually lights. Not counting me, there are exactly eleven people in my acting class. My friend, Ashley, is super nice and probably the

funniest one of the bunch. Then there's Mitch and his boyfriend Phil. They go to the college together and thought it'd be nice to take an acting class together even though Mitch can't act to save his life. Finally, my favorite person of the group is Chester. He is probably the tallest one in class and that's not hard to be when I'm about 5'5" and everyone else is that height or shorter. Still, he is quite impressive to look at. He has tan skin, the brownest eyes I've ever seen, raven black hair, and a jawline that would've put James Dean outta work. We've started doing romantic scenes and every time our acting teacher Mrs. Karch asks us to volunteer my hand shoots up and so does Chester's. Which is good, considering half the class is over the age of thirty-three and the other younger men are gay; I'm thankful and so is he.

So today I am in a particular rush to get therapy over with because Chester and I have been paired up to do a scene in front of the entire class, and I'll be damned if I let Herts keep me from smooching with the sexiness that is Chester. Walking into his office, I put down my things and we talk for over an hour. He tells me about his day and I tell him that my mom called my dad a "poor excuse for a man" last night while I was watching *Edward Scissorhands* and he tried to evaluate it as me using movies to escape my parents' drama. This idea makes no sense because all movies involve drama. I just shake my head and agree as I start to head for the door.

"Jenna."

I turn around and see that Alex is standing against his desk, which is odd considering I've never actually seen him stand until right now.

"I'd like you to try something for me this week until our next session."

I turn my head and look at him with questioning eyes. "Okay, Herts, whatever you need."

He smirks and takes his seat behind his desk. "Try not watching any movies for the entire week."

At this I laugh because I believe he has truly gone mad. "Um, me? No, I can't do that."

Alex stands up and walks towards me.

"Jenna, I think you use movies and acting as a mask. It hides you and

keeps you safe. Behind these things you don't have to deal with anything you don't want to."

I stare at him with my mouth open.

"No I don't," I snap at him. "Movies are movies and they're just something I do for fun." He grins at me again and this pisses me off. How can he be so smug? Acting like he knows.

"Just try it," he turns around to go back to his desk. I open the door and pull it shut behind me as hard as I possibly can.

A mask? What the hell is he talking about? Drugs and alcohol are things people use to hide or deal. Movies are just fun and acting is a hobby. He's just angry because he sits in that pee-stained office of his... Then again I could be wrong. That can't be the case, though. Still, I wonder if that educated baboon is right. I'll try, not for him but for me. I can prove him wrong. I love movies but now I am ripping off the mask and proving that I can face things without them. If Alexander Herts wants me to try something new and keep from watching movies, then I'll do it, even if it hurts.

Roses

by Elizabeth Rogers

Deep in a forest that smelled of musty oaks and spicy cedars grew a trailing rose briar. Like the sunsets that flickered through the canopy, the eye-catching flash of its blushing petals dotted the shadowy undergrowth with unexpected color.

Sometimes the rose lost one of its blossoms to someone bold enough to leave the deer path. They would fight through the undergrowth woven with brambles to rip a blossom from the stem for themselves. Eventually, the rose briar was stripped of all its blooms but one, and its stems were misshapen, abused by careless hands.

One misty evening, a slender young woman stumbled along the path as though she was barely able to carry the weight of her own body, taking each step with a shaky breath. A bramble tangled around her feet, and she caught herself on an oak sapling. Looking up, she saw the rose briar. She clung to the little tree for a moment, her gaze fixed on the last blossom. She carefully picked her way through the brambles, although she did not seem to notice when a thorny stem tore into her ankle.

She came close enough to the rose to reach out her hand and touch the velvety, blood-red petals of the solitary blossom. She sank to her knees, muddying her long, flowing skirt. A tear sparkled on her cheek but she quickly brushed it away and lifted her chin as though she was afraid to let the rose see her cry. She knelt there by the rose until she looked up, seeming to sense something. The trees above her melted into the sunset as the sky faded from shades of red into indigo. The light that remained was creeping toward the west, leaving only darkness and faint moonlight behind it. The young woman stood, brushed the mud off her skirt, and made her way back to the deer path, going back the way she came.

Several days later, she returned appearing more composed outwardly. Then she caught a glimpse of the rose, and suddenly she was shaking, inhaling in ragged gasps as though the trees had begun to take all the oxygen for themselves.

“No...” she breathed, fighting through the brambles that grasped at her skirt with thorny fingers.

The last blossom was gone. The rose briar was nothing more than a snarled green stem, spiked with needle-sharp thorns.

The young woman reached out and touched the smooth, cool stem and fell to her knees. Her shoulders shook with unshed tears until she sat limply huddled beside the rose. Then she wiped her eyes with the back of her hand. Pulling a knife out of its scabbard at her waist, she studied the rose briar for a moment. Swiftly, she cut off a long piece of the stem.

“I’m sorry,” she whispered, as she watched the sticky, colorless sap drip from the open stem, glistening like her own tears. “It will heal.” She wiped her cheeks with her skirt and left with the piece of the stem.

She did not return for a few weeks, but then she appeared again. In one hand she carried the rose stem she had taken, now nestled in some dirt and wrapped with cloth. In her other hand was a watering can heavy enough to knock her off-balance with each stride.

Again, she crossed the brambles to get to the rose briar, not caring that they grabbed at her ankles, bringing blood. She set the watering can down, and then propped the rose stem against it. Kneeling down beside the briar, she sank her fingers into the soft, dark soil and pulled it aside. Gently, she nestled the new rose stem into the hole and pulled up the loose dirt around it. She stood, brushed her hands on her skirt, and lifted the watering can with both hands. As the water rained down and coaxed the scent of forgotten trees out of the soil, water dripped down the young woman’s cheeks, too. She stood back to admire her work.

“There,” she murmured. “Because no one should have to be alone. No one.”

She made her way back to the deer path and then turned back to look one more time. A smile curved her lips, and the dappled sunlight reflected off the path her tears had taken down her cheeks. She turned, watering can in hand, and disappeared into the forest.

Playing by the Rules (Tends to Make You the Last One Picked)

by Tiffane Shorter

George sat by his window, watching the rain pour outside. He loved the drops for what they brought: water for the people's crops, cleansing of the air, and rainbows. Even storms harbingered these things. Some thought the rain was an inconvenience or a burden God had punished the people of Earth with, but he knew different. Rain was not the enemy in his mind.

A knock sounded at his chamber door.

"Your Majesty?"

The young noble reluctantly pulled himself from his window and his thoughts and opened the door. "Yes?"

"Your mother requests your presence." The lady-in-waiting curtsied low, averting her eyes. George grimaced slightly but was luckily able to hide it with a charming smile before lifting her chin.

"I understand." Their eyes met in a glance. She quickly looked away again and blushed. "Thank you."

He walked away before she had a proper chance to respond.

George tried to ignore any pitying looks as he made his way towards his father's chamber. Since his father became sick a few weeks ago, the servants and the guards and everyone else always told him how sorry they were and how brave George was for handling it all so well.

But the truth was, George wasn't handling it well at all. He didn't want his father to die and he didn't want his mother to be alone, and he didn't want, as selfish as it was, for anything to change. He wanted both of his parents. He didn't want anyone to be alone.

Please, Lord, the words flowed through George's mind as organically as if they were spoken aloud. *Let my father be okay. For my mother's sake. For England's sake.*

For my sake, he couldn't help but add. *In the precious name of your holy son, Jesus. Amen.*

George hoped the small prayer was enough, but that was all up to God now.

It didn't take him long after that to reach his destination. He saw Princess Augusta of Saxe-Gotha waiting for him outside the room. He smiled at her, but she didn't return it.

"Your father is on his last breath, George."

She wrung her hands and couldn't quite look her son in the eye. "He's not long for this world." George blinked once. Twice.

"Am," he blinked once more. "Am I able to see him?"

She shook her head. "He's not awake." She looked at him then. "Oh, George, you're going to lose your father. What will you do?"

George smiled softly at her and took her hands in his own. "It will be alright, Mother, everything that happens is per a Will greater and wiser than our own. We may not understand it now, but we'll be fine."

Augusta smiled then as well, though hers was watery. "You are a strong child in the church, George. I know you'll be an even stronger man." She choked on the last word. Quickly, she covered her mouth and walked away.

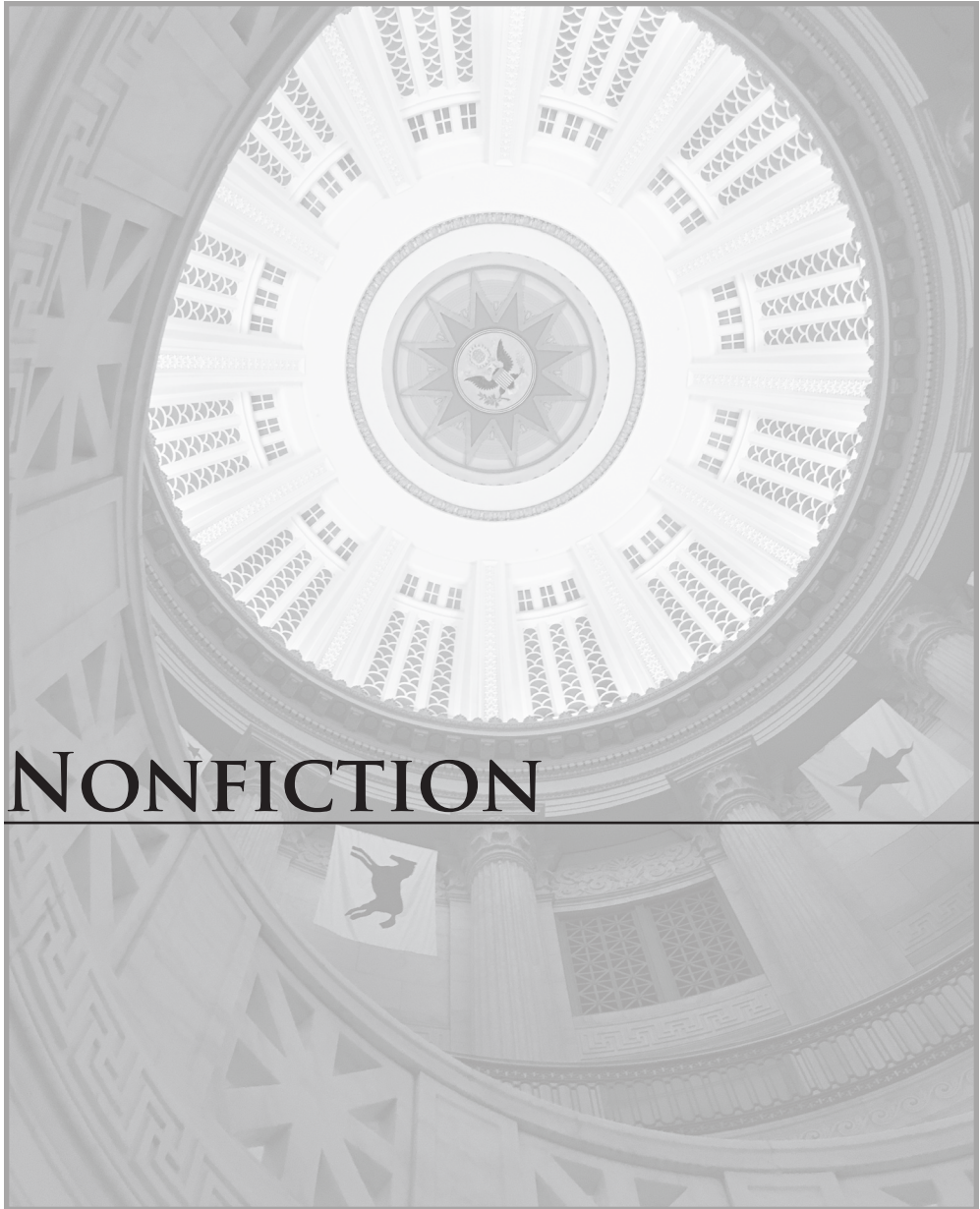
That was when George's smile fell. He wanted desperately to believe the words he spoke to his mother, but only one phrase repeated itself in his mind: *We may not understand....*

He *didn't* understand. How could God take his father? How could He then rub salt into the wound by taking his father right after George asked Him not to? Was this a test? Punishment? Was God even up there to listen to prayers from gullible boys who believe Sunday morning sermons...?

It was at that moment the door to his father's bed chamber opened and the doctor stepped out.

"He's gone."

It took two words to shatter George's idyllic world. The twelve year old knew then he was no longer "George." He was—unofficially—"George, Duke of Edinburgh, heir apparent to the throne of the Kingdom of Great Britain."



NONFICTION

Both Snakes and Kittens Hiss

by Sabra Estill

Tears streamed down Brittany's cheek as she sipped her cup of chocolate coffee and took a long drag from her menthol cigarette. She had called me earlier that morning claiming that she needed a friend, someone to talk to, because her ex-husband was fighting with her again over their daughter, Lanie. As we sat on her porch and watched puffs of our frozen breath tangle with the wisps of cigarette smoke and chocolate steam from our mugs, she snuggled deeper into her Indian style blankets and took a shaking breath. "I wish I was more like you," she said, "You're strong, you never cry. Teach me to be like that." Her words took me by surprise, and suddenly I was struck with a memory. Looking at the sparkling dew on the grass in the early morning light, I remembered a different morning from when I was a young girl.

"Sabra!" my mother yelled, "Hurry up! You're gonna be late for school!" I ignored her as I crawled on my hands and knees under my parents' bed. I was trying to be as quiet as I could because I didn't want to wake my father, who was still asleep. Ever so delicately, I pushed aside some boxes that were stored beneath the bed, and that's where I discovered them. Four newborn kittens were mewling and clumsily nursing at the belly of their mother. "EEEEPPPPPP!!!!" I squealed, "Mom! Popcorn had her kittens!" My father groaned in the bed above me and I could hear him push the pillows over his ears to mute my excitement. My mom stomped in the room with one of my brothers hanging on her leg and the other squalling in her arms. "What did I say?" she snapped, "Get your shoes on and get your butt in the car, NOW!" I groaned and complained to my mother, "I can't go to school, Mom! Popcorn needs help with the kittens! Please let me stay home with her pleassssssss, Mom! Please please please! Pretty please with cherries on top!"

My mother shook her head, “No, baby, the kittens will be here when you get back, I promise. Now let’s go!” I moaned and reluctantly obliged.

The day seemed to drag on forever, until finally the last school bell rang. When I got home I sprinted inside and ran straight into my parents’ bedroom. I crawled under the bed, and to my dismay, the kittens were gone. *Dang, Popcorn must have moved them.* “Here kitty, kitty!” I yelled until my fat cat appeared at my legs and began rubbing against them. “Where are your babies, girl?” I told my cat, “Show me where you put them.” Popcorn was no help. She loudly meowed at me and pawed at my legs with her stubborn lazy manner. I searched for hours, anywhere and everywhere that I could think of. I looked under the couches, behind the washer and dryer, I looked under my bed and in my closet, the pantry in the kitchen, and I even looked through my dirty laundry basket. Wherever the kittens were, they were well hidden. I finally admitted defeat as I wiped sweat from my brow. My efforts exhausted me, so I decided to grab a popsicle from the freezer. I dragged my step stool across the linoleum kitchen floor, I padded up two wooden steps and I opened the freezer. A whoosh of cold air hit my face, but that’s not what had me frozen on my stool. I stood staring in disbelief at the kittens, all four of them, and their tiny frozen bodies. Tiny paws jutted out crudely, tiny tongues stuck out stiff on their tiny kitten lips, and I stared at them, truly heartbroken for the first time in my life.

Brittany startled me from my memory back to the present. “Oh my God, Sabra, did you just say that the kittens were put in the freezer? Why the hell were they in there?” I laughed at her shocked expression as I explained that my father had just bought a pet snake for my younger brothers. “I guess my dad thought that they would make good snake food.” Brittany’s knuckles were white from her grip on her coffee mug. She set down her mug and grabbed a green pack of smokes. “That’s fucked up,” she said as she lit another cigarette. “Yeah, it’s fucked up,” I agreed. I tried to change the subject but Brittany wasn’t fooled. “So... then what happened?” she asked timidly, “What happened after you found the kittens?”

That night, I heard my mother angrily whispering to my father. "John," she hissed, "You put those baby kittens in the freezer! How could you?" I could hear my dad's low voice as he answered, "Tonya, relax. That cat will be pregnant again in a month. I haven't had the time, or money, to drive to Tulsa to get any rats for the snake, I didn't know she would find them in the freezer." I heard the freezer open and shut. My mother snapped at my father, "What are you doing?" My father sounded irritated when he replied, "I'm feeding the snake, Tonya, what does it look like?" I peeked around the hall into the kitchen as I watched my father place one of the stiff kittens into the microwave and hit the defrost button. The glow from the microwave made my mother's piercing glare look like the face of a demon. I was terrified for my father, but he didn't seem concerned. Instead, he ignored her and yelled, "Hey, boys! Do you want to watch me feed the snake?" My mother stomped off into the next room so that she could call my grandmother and complain. I heard my brothers excitedly yell from their room behind me, "Yeah! Awesome! We want to watch!" My brother, Cody, saw me crouching in the hall. "Sabra! Did you hear? Dad is about to feed the snake! Come watch!" I didn't want to watch, but my father saw me hiding in the hall and he said, "Yeah, come on, Sabe, I want you to watch."

The microwave made the kitten's body soft. Its lifeless body flopped uselessly from my father's hand. My brothers and I were seated next to the big aquarium that contained my brother's pet python. My father lifted the lid and dropped the kitten into the tank with a thud. My brothers and I all pressed our faces against the glass to watch. Slowly, the snake lifted its head. Its long tongue flicked in and out while otherwise, the snake held perfectly still. Suddenly, with a violent and graceful strike, the snake bit the kitten and wrapped its body around it. The snake squeezed the already dead kitten, and then released the tiny corpse, unhinged its huge snake jaw, and began to swallow the kitten whole.

My brothers and I watched as the sleek wet-looking scales of the snake stretched with each thrust of the kitten down its throat. The heat lamp from the tank made the snake's body glisten with each new contortion of its body.

I pressed my hands against the glass as I watched, wide-eyed and fascinated by the horror, and by the beauty, of this terrifying creature.

My brothers, who had previously been so excited, began to cry and they both ran to the next room to be comforted by our mother, but I stayed. I watched the kitten until it was only a lump in the snake's belly. I should have hated the snake, I should have hated my father, but I couldn't find it in myself to hate either of them. The snake could not help the fact that it was a monster, nor could my father. I understood, even at a young age, that sparing the lives of the kittens would have starved the snake. In spite of the traumatic events of the evening, I loved the snake for the beautiful and terrifying creature that it was, and I loved my father despite his cruel and rough nature.

Brittany stood from the chair and stretched her muscles "I'm going to get more coffee," she said before abandoning her heap of blankets to walk inside. When she returned she asked, "Do you really not hate your father? After what he did to you... How could you not hate him?" I took a drag of my cigarette before answering her. "No, I do not hate him. My father taught me a valuable lesson that day. Some people are like kittens, innocent and sweet, like my baby brothers and you. Some people are like the snake, unintentionally cruel, like my father and your ex. I learned that day to respect what I do not understand, and to try to see the beauty in every situation." Brittany nodded and asked, "Which are you? A snake or a kitten?" As an answer, I curled back my lips and playfully hissed at her. She giggled and said, "Both snakes and kittens hiss, you idiot." I winked at her and gave her a coy smile. "I know."

Death for Honor

by Christopher Seeds

We just got back to Forward Operating Base (FOB) Shinwar after a long day's mission. The FOB is as usual super dusty and hot, which is a typical day here in Afghanistan. We left for our deployment on Jan 01, 2012 and have been here for almost two months now. The days consist of the same routine. We get up super early and then set up for the day; we have a mission briefing and then off we go. The country is not an area of beauty but still attracts attention with so many things to learn and experience. The threat of enemy contact is all around us, yet we have not seen it; everything seems to be going smoothly other than the fact of time creeping by for this long endeavor. This is all wrong from what we have been trained about with deployments, but, hey, better for us.

Once we park the vehicles on line, the usual has to take place, which is downloading all of our gear: weapons unassembled, rounds locked up, trash thrown away (which for some reason we make plenty of), bags taken out, and all of our heavy body armor. I walk back to my hooch, carrying my un-godly amount of stuff so that I can begin cleaning my weapon. Cleaning my weapon is a necessary thing to do but it never is something I like to do; it is like having to clean my room when I was a kid; I just did not want to do it. I scrub away at my weapon when I am told the unit is meeting up for a briefing from the commander. This seems odd but I have been in the military long enough to know nothing seems too odd. Our squad walks to the chow hall, goofing off, throwing rocks and being overgrown children. I notice it literally is everyone all together; nobody seems to know what the purpose of the meeting is. I take this as an opportunity to brag about the missions I have gone on lately and how simple this deployment has been so far. The higher-ups finally enter the room with the "important information." The commander expresses there is no

easy way to put what has just happened. Everyone looks at each other with confusion; the commander takes one big sigh and says, "Born and Conrad were killed a couple hours ago." The news hits me right in the chest, shaking my inner bones with no way to process what is being said. The feeling of the room has changed and everyone has this blank look of denial; this is not what we expected at all. After the news is given, we all leave for our bunks, walking in silence, still trying to understand what has just been told to us. I make it to my section of the room, sit down next to my weapon and just begin to cry. Everything was working so smoothly until now, why did this have to happen now? I think about their loved ones and how they do not even know yet about the tragic deaths Conrad and Born have endured. The next few days bring a sense of sorrow and gloom; the mood is set that this is definitely the real deal. We are in a war.

The next month carries on fairly quietly; we go out on mission day after day on and off the FOB. We know that it is all too real that we can die at a moment's notice, but when people do the same thing almost every day, it becomes a normal part of life. Our truck is a three-man team in a convoy of four trucks. My driver is SPC Rodriguez who we call "Rod" and our team leader is SGT Pronzati who we call "Zati". The team is pretty good together, but we have our moments where we piss each other off. I am getting pretty good at this being a gunner and carry almost a sense of cockiness inside of me. The mission we have for today is a typical route clearance mission, which consists of going down some dangerous route and searching for I.E.D.s (Improvised Explosive Devices). I hate these missions because the possibility of being blown up is always so high. Rod comes up to me with his usual sense of humor, telling me to put some size on because I am looking puny. Zati, on the other hand, has a habit of double checking everything I do and being grumpy. We receive our mission brief, which is just a bunch of fancy military talk about what we will be doing for the day. I always hate this portion because I feel it is just a reason for the leaders to show off what skills they think they know. I am being my usual self, goofing off with Rod, when we hear the words, "Mount up." Zati turns around and

says, "Get in the truck and stop playing around!" This is Typical Zati; he means well, but that still does not change the fact that sometimes I want to knock him upside his head.

We finally start rolling out, into the unknown world of Afghanistan to find another set of bombs. This seems pointless just so the Taliban can plant more in their place. The area is full of local people; every time we pass their eyes are staring at us like we are aliens from another planet. I tell Rod, "There are probably terrorists hiding in the crowd staring at us and we cannot do a thing about it." Once we reach the actual route it changes to farm land; the road is made of boulders and I only see the occasional person. The smell of the air is filled with cow excrement and trash that has been rotting for who knows just how long. I stay in an open turret on the roof of the truck, so smell is one of the luxuries I have. I tell Rod, "Hey, guy, you are missing out on a life time experience." In return I get his longest finger as a reply. It does not take long before we come across our first I.E.D. planted in the ground. I feel good because for one, we found it and for two, I get to video the blast from it. Blowing the bomb in place usually is the safest way to get rid of it. Rod hands me his camera so that he, too, can get a memory of what we have down here. The day carries on for hours like this: finding bombs, harassing each other and singing ridiculous songs only young teenage girls would probably sing. I tell Rod, "You are probably the worst Katy Perry singer I've ever heard." Deeper and deeper into the route we drive; it feels like this day is never going to end. While finishing up on yet another I.E.D., some chatter comes across the radio; it comes back from the base that we should probably start heading back. There are rumors of people talking about all the bombs we have destroyed, and besides we have been out for eleven hours already. The sun is setting and most of the guys do not have any issues with calling it a day. We turn around and begin to travel back the way we came since it has already been cleared.

All I can think of is how hungry I am and that I really want to eat something; my stomach is talking a foreign language and needs fuel. The sun begins to set quickly and we still have much further to go. Like all

super high speed military leaders, ours find this as a great opportunity to test out the night driving equipment on our trucks. We kill all the lights on our vehicles and begin to travel in the dark with only our night vision to guide us. The moon is bright but it only presents shadows and a sense of eeriness; I can feel and hear the wind shifting the trees out in the barren fields. The only thing that breaks the silence is Rod and Zati arguing over how the equipment works and who knows more about it. Our rate of travel is slowing down and I fear that dinner is not going to happen.

I stare into nothingness when all of a sudden a huge flash of light catches the corner of my eye! A large boom follows, which stops the entire convoy. Zati stops arguing and says, "What the fuck was that?" The radio keys from another truck beginning to ask what just happened when another blast happens. Gun shots start to zip past our trucks all over the place; it is an ambush and we are under attack! I stand frozen, still trying to make myself as small of a target as possible. The wisp of bullets zip past my head and hit the armor of the truck. Zati is yelling at me to hit any possible enemy threat that I can identify. Every bone in my body aches; I have goosebumps feeling frozen inside yet I am dripping sweat. I think to myself I do not want to die, not this young. I have a wife back home. After what seems like hours of arguing with my own self, I stand completely up and decide to take my life into my own hands. I rack the weapon with every muscle fiber of my upper body and start searching. I look for the flash from the enemies firing their weapons and begin to fire multiple rounds.

My weapon is an automatic machine gun that sprays an unbelievable amount of hot lead bullets at an alarming rate. I lose a sense of myself, just pouring every bit of emotion into my rounds being sent to the enemy. I tell myself, "Shoot until you are killed, give them everything you have got." The truck closest to me begins to fire as well. We are experiencing something a person only sees on television; war is real and it is consuming every part of my life at this very moment. Zati begins to yell, hitting my leg with excitement. I am unsure if he is upset until I hear his cries, "You fuck those motherfuckers up, Seeds!" I let off the trigger and notice a difference. The battle is over;

the sound of explosions and gun fire has stopped. Everyone is silent for a few minutes, just taking in what has just taken place. The radio keys back up; the trucks are checking with each other to see if everyone is ok.

The entire convoy makes it. We are all alive and in one piece surprisingly. The next step involves having another convoy come out and check for how many enemies we killed, what weapons they had, and who did they belong to. These are typical military operating procedures that are conducted after every conflict. Our truck fills with joy and happiness, not only are we alive but we kicked some serious butt. I lean against the side of the turret and think to myself, "What a ride, I cannot believe I survived this." We wait for hours so that they can do their investigation, I have given up on being hungry and all I want now is sleep. The radio keys up from the convoy that they are finishing up their investigation, they explain that we can leave in a few minutes. All that is left now is for the Afghan Police to discard the bodies so we will be good to go. I look over the side of the truck and see a horrible sight. Pieces of arms, bloodied dead corpses are being dragged past our convoy and thrown into the back of pickup trucks. I stand back and almost vomit; I feel as though I can almost pass out from the thing I have just witnessed. The bodies are so bloody and ripped in strange unhuman ways.

We travel back to the FOB in silence; part of it is due to shock from what happened and also just because we are so tired. I download the truck as quick as I can and tell Rod I will see him in the morning; I need sleep. The next day comes and I feel like everything that happened was a dream; it all hits me at once and it turns out it was anything but that. We quickly eat breakfast and make it out to the trucks. We clean up the mess we made in them yesterday. While cleaning up, news comes to us that it is unclear whether our attackers were true Taliban or were farmers forced to attack us, otherwise their families would be slaughtered. I feel a large lump in my throat and do not really know how to take this news. I begin to think that we shot rounds at someone else's father, brother, son or husband.

While I am standing by the truck, trying to process what just happened, our squad leader comes over and pats me on the back. He says, "Good job,

Seeds.” I look at him a little lost as to why he is congratulating me. He goes on to tell me that it is confirmed that one of the guys killed was by my weapon; I am the only one who carries 7.62mm rounds, and one guy had a gut full of them. I look down at the ground in shame. He asks, “Aren’t you glad you killed one of those fuckers?” I know I have to answer him because he is one of my superiors; I swallow the lump and say, “I’m just glad all of our guys are safe and alive, Sergeant.” The look of disgust on his face says it all; he storms off muttering about how there is something wrong with me and about how I am a soldier who is trained to kill no matter what. Zati looks back at me and tells me to continue cleaning up the truck. The rest of the day we stay at the FOB, resetting our trucks and cleaning our weapons. I contemplate over and over what I have done and search for whether or not what I did was right.

I know that joining the military meant a good chance of deploying and in basic training they teach us about killing. The real thing is so much more overwhelming than what I see on television. How do I accept the fact that I ended another person’s life? I know I did what I was trained to do but this is about as clear as mud. What if this guy was truly innocent and I killed him? Being a soldier and killing for honor is so much deeper than what you read. The deployment brings a new feeling after that night; I feel like a part of me is left there and I am lost in the twilight zone. I still try to act like I did before, but when I am by myself, I deal with these internal demons. My nights of sleep are not what they used to be; I produce tears wishing I could piece this nightmare together. I am a soldier who did his duty, which meant inflicting death for honor.

The Door with a Zipper

by Trena London

It's a lovely spring day at the lake. I take a much needed breath in and exhale slowly, I need to breathe, I remind myself. The weather is perfect; the sky is blue with just a few white clouds added for contrast. The grass is green and the trees have regained the luster they lost during the winter. I let my eyes fall back to the grass and follow it down to the water. The camp is set up next to an inlet, almost as if the lake decided to yield a part of itself for our pleasure. Kendall is standing at the water's edge, poking it with a stick, almost amazed at the simplicity of the rippling effect. He looks relaxed, though I know he's afraid, we both are for that matter. I start to walk towards him, but then decide I should let him alone with his thoughts. I turn back towards the tent, my new home. I am still amazed how this all worked out; trading a pair of binoculars for this tent. It is dome shaped with two zipper windows and a matching door. It's just tall enough to stand up inside, if you stand in the middle of course. It has a pocket on each side of the mattress, which I refer to as the night stands. We have a lantern hanging from the loop in the middle, as that will be our only form of light after the sun goes down.

We found the perfect spot to pitch the tent. We actually had our pick of the place since it's April and a weekday. We set up camp about a hundred yards up from the water; our door faces the lake, allowing for a picturesque view. We are settled right in front of two oak trees spaced perfectly apart to allow for a clothes line, which was very generously left by the campers before us. Set further behind, the trees grow ungroomed into thick woods that make for a lustrous backdrop. It is all a far cry from the nasty stale hotel rooms we have been living out of previously. I am lost in thought until Kendall interrupts me with excitement.

“Hey, check out what I found,” he says. He is proudly holding a shovel. The bottom part of the shovel looks fine, but the top third of the handle is missing. Nonetheless, he is proud of his treasure.

“Awesome,” I reply. “Might come in handy seeing as how we may be here awhile.” He puts the shovel down and we sit down at the concrete table. “Want to talk about our plans?” I ask.

He looks at me and then down at the ground. “Not now,” he says. “One step at a time. I’m not quite ready to think about the future.”

Sleeping is difficult these days; you would think we would be ready for sleep after being awake for nearly a year, but such is not the case. The crickets have ceased their lovely chirps and are replaced with a breeze whipping the leaves of the trees. I like neither sound more or less than the other, as both take my mind away. Kendall is sleeping. I’m happy he can rest, I know he needs it. I can’t help but notice the change in the wind as it seems to gain momentum. Then I see it, a flash of light followed by a loud boom. I need not wake Kendall, for he is already sitting up and alert, “What was that,” he asks, “thunder?”

“Yes,” I say alarmed. I’m rather nervous as I really don’t want to be in a tent in the middle of a storm. As I hear the rain start to drop on the tent in an even pattern I ask Kendall if he would like to go to the car to ride it out. “I’m really afraid of the lightning,” I say, remembering we are directly under a couple of very tall trees. Before he can answer the storm emerges upon us. The wind picks up to the point of nearly folding the tent flat. The lightning is lighting up the sky with bright flashes revealing the gust strength of the wind. The combination of rain, wind, and thunder is so loud that we have to yell to hear each other, I am terrified and shaking. “Please, can we go to the car?” I cry, “We can wait it out inside.”

“I can’t,” he yells back. “I need to stay with the tent, I don’t want it to blow away; but you go ahead,” he pleads. He does not have to ask me twice. The car is only about 20 feet away so I decide to make a run for it. I quickly unzip the door of the tent and run to the car through the torrential rain; the sky flickering with lights to guide me. I open the door and hop in as fast as

I can, I feel much safer in here. The weather continues to beat us as I watch the tent blow and fold, well aware that my friend is inside.

The storm ends as abruptly as it began. I get out of the car and walk back to the tent. The wind is still and the rain has stopped; the ground, however, is saturated. I unzip the door of the tent. Kendall looks exhausted; I know I am as well. We lie down onto our wet bedding. Sleep finds me and I surrender to it.

My home has been a tent for ten days now, but even with that, rent is due. I read in the paper that Nonna's in Bricktown is looking for help in the bakery. I have a dress in my bag that we keep in the trunk of the car; I guess that is somewhat like an armoire. I choose the dress with the playful swirls of greys, tans, and black. The bathroom with the shower is a bit further down the road. I drive rather than walk, otherwise I'm already in need of another shower by the time I get back to camp. Nonetheless, I'm glad the park ranger told us about the heated showers, even if it requires pushing the button every time and only getting a few seconds of water. I take my time getting ready. I carefully apply my eyeliner and lip gloss, wanting to look anything but homeless for my interview.

Because we only have one car, Kendall drives me downtown to Nonna's. He drops me off at the door. "Good luck, babe," he says, though I hardly hear over the nervous pounding of my heart. I walk into the restaurant and present myself to the General Manager as best I can. I have to fib about my address and my past work experience, but how can I write down "Site 14 Lake Thunderbird?" I'm not sure that would make me look very reliable; it must work because I am able to secure the job.

We drive back to the tent, feeling a bit more encouraged than we have in a very long time, as we have established an income. We celebrate by stopping by the plasma center to donate plasma. We have to pay rent for the camp site tomorrow and I will not be drawing a check for at least a week. Donating plasma is not my favorite thing to do. It's not the 16 gauge needle they use, or the idle time waiting during the process, but it is the pre-evaluation that is so tedious. There have been numerous occasions that I have not been allowed to donate because I did not weigh enough, even

while wearing a belt and carrying coins, keys, and a phone in my pocket. But, whether I like it or not we have to stay afloat, I always sleep well after donating anyway.

I wake up refreshed the next morning, as the sun casts a shadow of leaves upon the top of the tent. I watch the leaves dance around as if they were put on the tree just to perform. Sleeping in late is not an option these days as May is hotter than April and the tent can get quite muggy in the mornings. Not to mention the horrible birds squawking “Kahkah,” “Kahkah,” “Kahkah,” relentlessly at the first break of dawn. Kendall has been making calls looking for a job connection. Working part time at Nonna’s is helpful, but isn’t getting us out of here anytime soon. Hopefully he will be able to find something; it’s been three weeks of living in a tent. We have made friends with Kate, the park ranger who comes to check on us from time to time. She is a pleasant lady, with ash blond hair she pulls back into a pony tail. She collects our payment and warns us of any impending weather. It is May in Oklahoma, so we have had to go to Walmart twice and hang out while waiting for the tornadic weather to subside, hoping our tent and few belongings don’t blow away. It’s funny how our tent and our shovel, along with the ice chest we acquired after someone left it one weekend because it had a broken hinge, mean so much to us; it’s really all about perspective. In addition to the newly acquired shovel and ice chest, I have to buy clothes for work. The attire at Nonna’s is a white shirt and black pants with rubber soled shoes. I already have a pair of black pants folded neatly in my armoire (trunk) but I am able to pick up a white button up shirt and a pair of rubber-soled black shoes at the thrift store. Even if they are half a size too big, they suit me just fine. I appreciate the fact we are able to afford to do laundry at the laundromat, though we’ve had to use the sink and the clothes line in a pinch.

Today is our 28th day living in a tent; however, I must say I find the experience to be a great deal better than living in the bondage of addiction. It’s a nice day out, just a little overcast, which allows the temperature to be more comfortable. We are gathering sticks in hopes of building a campfire tonight, though we can never completely count on it due to the unpredictable

Oklahoma wind. I bend down to pick up a piece of wood, keeping mindful to watch for snakes, when I hear the phone ringing on the concrete table.

Kendall reaches down and picks up the phone. I watch and listen as I try to figure out who he is talking to. “Yes, I’m interested,” he says. “Yes, I’m living in the Norman area,” he adds, obscuring the fact he is currently living in a tent. “That sounds great,” he says, “I can start as soon as possible.” Kendall hangs up the phone and looks at it a moment longer before he places it in his pocket. He looks up at me, “That was Coach Wright from the University; he asked if I would be interested in coming on as a lay coach.” I stand motionless, trying to let it sink in. I feel as if someone turned on a light at the end of a tunnel; I am overcome with emotion as he wraps his arms around me. We are fully aware that most people don’t survive the battle of addiction. As evening falls upon us, we unzip the door and crawl onto the mattress full of air; tonight I fall asleep thinking of all life’s possibilities.

In the morning Kendall is on the phone with Coach Wright, working out all of the details and asking if he possibly has any connections to a place for us to rent. I am hoping the answer to that is yes, as a bead of sweat drips down my brow. It seems that each day in May is hotter than the previous. I can see that Kendall is off the phone and walking my way.

“Hey, you,” he says. “How would you like to go to town and get out of this heat for a bit? I have something I want to show you.” We get into the car and head towards town; I am enjoying the cool air. “I talked to Coach Wright this morning,” he says.

“Yes, I know,” I reply.

“Well,” he continues, “it seems that he has a place for us to rent and I thought you might like to go see our new home, that is, if we want it.” I am beside myself with excitement as he explains all the details.

We turn down a street lined with old houses that look like they have been kept up over the years. The trees all along the road form a canopy over the sidewalk as if creating an umbrella for the passersby. We pull into the driveway, the house is old and white and perhaps needs a painting. There are wooden stairs that are built along the side of the house, which allow access

to the upstairs. I take one step and then another until I reach the top. There is a covered porch with a lovely view nestled under an old oak tree. I am sure this tree has heard many stories living so close to a college campus. I turn back towards the door and watch as Kendall puts the key in the door and begins to turn the knob and then stops.

Still holding the knob, he slowly looks up at me. “The door doesn’t have a zipper,” he says. I reach down and place my hand upon his and we turn the knob together. We open the door, cross the threshold, and step boldly into our future.

And I Took That Goddamned Punch

by Sam Pender

It all started when some kid saw *Thunderdome*. I don't remember who it was, but if you told me it was John or Wes or one of those other asshats, I'd believe you. I get it though. A movie like *Thunderdome* full of wasteland warriors, a big tough Mel Gibson hero, and cartoonish ultraviolence is bound to give ideas to the impressionable. Am I saying that an eight year old shouldn't watch the thing? Absolutely not. What I'm saying is: be prepared for consequences.

In the movie, the hero is forced to fight to the death against I-don't-remember-who in this giant steel cage; the Thunderdome. My elementary school playground had a giant steel jungle gym. You see where I'm going with this?

In hindsight, getting involved with the whole thing *was* my fault. Back then, I was one of the good kids; I never said bad words, never smoked (which was an accomplishment at my school), and freaked out if I got an assignment back with anything less than an A- sharpied on to it. There's no reason I should have been hanging around the Thunderdome kids to begin with. But curiosity, or something deeper, took over when I saw the first crowd form around the jungle gym. Even then I was attracted to danger, I guess.

I crept up to the bars and wiggled my way into a spot between two other onlookers. I was paralyzed with shock. Manny, the biggest kid in my class, was sprawled out in the dirt with a bloody nose; his shoes were off. Luke, a lice-ridden bathroom wall defacer was in a fighting stance above him. Was Manny just punched out of his shoes? What was happening? Then the crowd let out a near-deafening cheer as the two combatants got out of the cage; Manny had to be *pulled* out.

How could the teachers let this happen? I got my answer almost immediately when I saw a bunch of kids sitting on top of the jungle gym, using their bodies to block line of sight to the benches where the teachers on recess duty sat instead of patrolling the playground like they were supposed to. These kids were crafty.

Two more fights happened before the back-to-class whistle was blown, and with the good trainwreck that this whole situation was, I couldn't look away. Once we were back in class it was all I could think about. I couldn't concentrate on my multiplication table worksheet and ended up taking it home to do that night. Even then, the fights were all I could think of. What psychotic muse dickpunched the idea into those kids to begin with?

The next day, the Thunderdome fights continued. Eight bloody bouts in total; I was mesmerized by the carnage. After recess the teachers started to get wise that *something* was happening; there were too many bruises showing up to just be normal playground injuries. When they asked us if we knew anything, John or Wes or one of those other aforementioned asshats made up some story about a soccer game getting a little rough. The teachers bought it--I'm not sure why they bought it since nobody was playing soccer that day, but they did. Maybe they just believed the convenient excuse. Anyway, they banned soccer on the playground and the kids were in the clear to go on beating each other up.

I passed another day's recess watching the brawls. The crowd had swelled to the point that the teachers must have been willfully ignoring us. It was getting more and more brutal too. Some kids got rocks and sticks. One kid lost a tooth. It was at this point that I should have left, I know that now. But just because I was studious back then doesn't mean I was smart--I kept watching. Pretty soon, the idea that everybody in the crowd had to fight at least once started to spread. I really should have left when I had the chance. Everyone was on board with the idea; I even pretended to be cool with it in some childish attempt to save face, but I was terrified on the inside. Most of the people there had already fought, it'd be me soon.

The whistle blew and we all went inside. Once again, but for a very different reason, I couldn't concentrate on anything but the Thunderdome fights.

It didn't even occur to me to tell my teacher or my parents what was going on. I know that's surprising considering that the good kids are usually suckers for adult approval, but let me explain. A year or so earlier I actually did tell a teacher that another student had broken my pencil, or something equally as trivial. He got punished for it, sure, but the look the teacher gave me was enough to make me never inform the authorities ever again. That nonverbal message: "You happy now, you tattletaling fuck?" did it. There was no doubt in my mind that this battle was mine alone.

The next day, I managed to keep low on the playground. I stayed far away from the jungle gym and was optimistic that everyone had forgotten about me. Maybe this problem would work itself out. It wouldn't. Wes caught me in the halls after school that day and let me know that I was the only one who hadn't fought. He said he looked forward to seeing me in the Thunderdome tomorrow. The way he smirked when he said it made my stomach turn.

Obviously, I pretended to be sick the next morning so I could stay home from school. It was Friday, and I thought that if I didn't show up, then nobody would see me until Monday and everybody would forget about the whole thing. It was a decent plan, and might have worked, but my parents saw straight through my bluff and sent me to school anyway.

I thought about what would become of me for the entire first half of the day. I just sat, staring off into nothingness; I didn't do any of my classwork. By the time recess came I had accepted my fate. I had envisioned all the possibilities. I pictured myself with black eyes, broken teeth, bleeding from countless wounds. No matter how gruesome the injuries of my imagined future were, I knew that it would be better to get them over with than to postpone the inevitable any longer. I was the first one to the jungle gym at recess.

One by one the crowd assembled. After everyone had gotten situated to witness the final moments of my life, my challenger appeared. Oh God no; it was Luke. He had flattened Manny, and now he was going to flatten me. I was staring death in the face.

There was something predatory about him, like a lion ready to pounce. He oozed menace. But I didn't even have time to soak the intimidation in; he was on me instantly. Faster than I could blink he punched me square in the face.

And I took that goddamned punch like a champ.

Pain didn't register. Was that all he had? He swung again. What was I worried about? That was nothing. Another flurry of blows came my way and I ate 'em like Oreos. One after another; I didn't budge an inch. I never swung back, but I didn't need to. Concern was beginning to register on Luke's face. The kids surrounding us started chanting "Brick Wall, Brick Wall!" I was passive to the point of superhumanity. Luke had nothing on me; I *was* a brick wall.

After what seemed like a decade, Luke backed off. Sweat beaded on his forehead and his breathing was heavy. He looked at me, then the crowd, then exclaimed, "Fuck this shit," and left the jungle gym. There was a long pause, and then Wes shouted, "Luke forfeits!" A few kids cheered, there was a clap or two--I don't care how halfhearted that celebration was, it was for me. I had won.

After that, the Thunderdome fights stopped, most likely due to the weird conclusion that I had caused. It wasn't the least bit climactic. Everybody lost interest. The teachers never found out. We all went on with our lives.

Tragic Decisions

by **Stephanie Mae Smith**

It's a cold rainy night, April 17, 2010, to be exact. My husband Alex and I are attending the house warming party of one of his coworkers in Norman, Oklahoma. I look over and can see my husband standing around a couple of his buddies after the grand tour of the house. Alex is twenty-one years old with light brown hair and piercing blue eyes. He has a boyish face that would attract anyone and a charm to keep them interested. As I am admiring his appearance, I catch my own reflection in a mirror over the fireplace. My muddy green eyes seem to look brighter and my light blonde hair shines in the lights from over the kitchen bar. I am way too much of an introvert to enjoy a party, but I do meet some new people that I am not sure I will ever talk to again. We leave the party around 1:00 AM, in our blue F-150 STX single cab. I am the designated driver since I am nineteen years old and under the drinking age.

"You should let me drive this thing more often, we've almost been married a year for crying out loud."

"Nah, there's no reason for you to drive when I'm perfectly capable. You wouldn't be driving now if my policy weren't 'don't sip and drive.' I'm a better driver anyway."

"Says you! Well, unless there's going to be food magically ready when we get home, we need to stop and grab something, I'm starving."

"Sounds good, Taco Bell?"

"Sure, the usual?"

After a stop off at Taco Bell we get on Interstate 235 in Oklahoma City heading to our apartment on the north side. The roads are still damp from this evening's rain and there isn't much traffic because it is so late. A car in the middle lane is going incredibly slowly for seemingly no reason, so I pass it

in the left lane. The glow of the driver's phone removes the wonder from my mind as my husband says, "Idiot, that crap is what gets people killed." The road is lit by street lamps on this stretch of the interstate, giving everything a nice creepy glow in the mist. While in the middle of telling Alex to get out of the Taco Bell sack, I see headlights in the distance.

"The curve in this road sure does have a creepy effect," I say as we head into the bend, the other vehicle closing in fast. "This guy's flying."

"Maybe it's a cop," he says as he starts looking in the sack for the hot sauce, "maybe you should try slowing down to the speed limit." Looking off into the distance my intuition begins to kick in, the feeling in my gut prickling.

"Is it just me, or are those headlights in our lane?"

"What?"

"Yep, it's coming right at us!"

Everything becomes a blur. Without thinking I switch lanes in a hurry, moving over just in time to miss the other vehicle flying past, avoiding the collision by seconds. The truck begins to lose traction on the wet road. I'm trying to keep it in control but it's hopeless. We're spinning in the middle of the road, time seems to have stopped, and the brakes are useless. The front end of the truck is skidding towards the concrete median barrier, going fast, the passenger side of the front end angled right at it. I'm still holding the steering wheel, trying to do anything to make it stop. All I can think in this moment is "Oh shit, his side is going to hit first!" In what seems like a lifetime the truck hits the barrier hard; so hard that it is forced up on top of it. The airbags deploy, filling the cab with dust. As we slide backwards, Alex has ahold of my shoulders, trying to protect me from the spare tire sitting loose in the truck bed in case it comes at the rear window. The truck slides into a street lamp, forcing Alex's elbow into the rear window, shattering it onto both of us. The fixture falls out of the light and onto the left lane of the interstate, shattering everywhere. The truck is now facing south, rocking side to side on the barrier like it is going to roll over and the spare tire is now missing. Alex is yelling "Get out of the truck" over and over.

I hop down out of the truck and try to flag someone down for help. Alex finds my phone before he gets out of the truck, since his phone is upside down inside of a cup of Pepsi. His side of the truck is up higher because it is sitting at an angle, so he has to jump down out of it. His forehead is bleeding and his elbow is cut and swollen. He hands me my phone and tells me to call 911. I try explaining to the dispatcher where we are, but I'm not really sure. I can't remember what the last sign said and who knows how far we went in the blur. She is telling me to calm down, that she's tracing our location and is dispatching a first responder. She is also sending an ambulance because I am worried about his head bleeding. I, on the other hand, feel, well nothing. I'm too shaken up and trying to process what just happened to feel much of anything. A cop car is coming down the road with its lights on and Alex flags him down, thinking he's looking for us. As if it's possible to not notice a truck sitting on top of a barrier.

The cop stops and asks, "Are you okay? What happened?"

"We were trying to avoid a vehicle that was going the wrong way in our lane, but the truck lost traction," I inform him.

"Well I'm on my way to a really bad accident."

"Oh, well I just called, I bet you're looking for us."

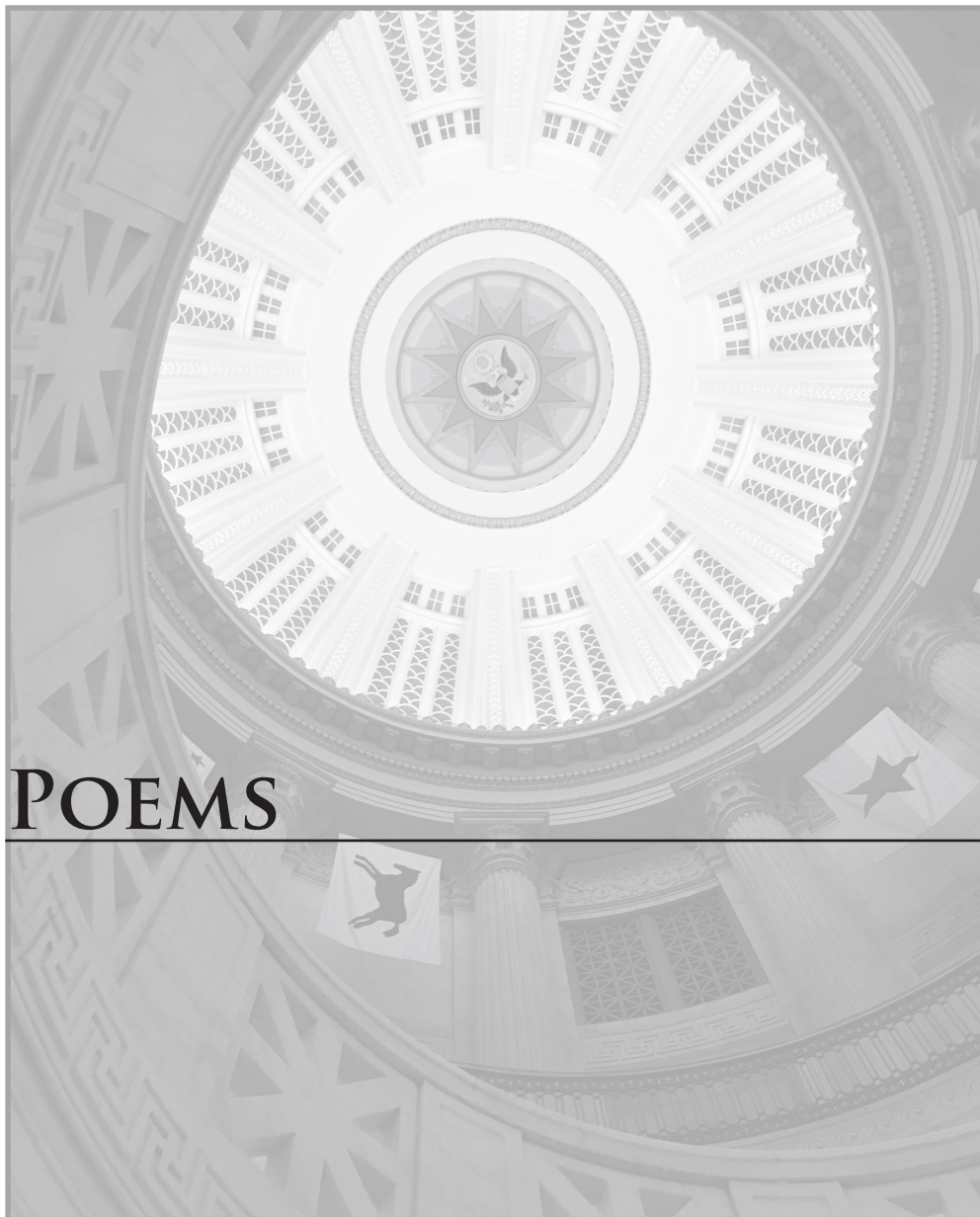
"No, the one I'm looking for is about a mile down the road, it's a fatality accident. It sounds like the same vehicle may have caused it. From what I know it was a head-on collision, caused by a driver going the wrong way."

Once the ambulance arrives, the cop sends Alex over to get checked out while he takes my statement first. After I get out of the officer's car and try to push myself up and over the barrier to get to the side of the interstate that the ambulance is on, I realize as I put pressure on my left wrist that it is now radiating with excruciating pain. The paramedics look at it while the cop takes Alex's statement. The paramedics decide to take us to St. Anthony's Hospital to have my wrist x-rayed and to see if he has a concussion.

After being looked over, they inform me that my wrist has a bad sprain and that he has a minor concussion. The cop is at the hospital with us, getting our official written statements. He is updating us on the details that he is

allowed to give of the other accident. They are the same details that they generally give to the newspaper. He looks over our written statements one last time to make sure we put all of the necessary details and the correct location. He informs us that it has to be indisputable for court, as the drunk driver will eventually be on trial for causing a fatality. He also informs us that they searched for our spare tire, but it was never found.

From the details we were given, from both the cop and the local news station: the couple in the vehicle that was in the other accident, were on their way back from a performance in Norman. The driver of the vehicle that was going the wrong way was out drinking to celebrate the end of his probation from a previous DUI. And then there was us; even though we had been at a party, we were responsible and I was the designated driver. After I avoided colliding into the drunk driver, he continued in the same lane going the same speed until he came upon the other couple's vehicle. The details were vague, but instead of it being a head-on collision, which was the original conclusion, the drunk driver's vehicle had swiped the couple's vehicle, sending their vehicle into the barrier. The drunk driver tried to leave that scene too, but his vehicle was too damaged. The woman in the passenger seat of the couple's car was the fatality. All I could think after hearing the details was that it could have easily been one of us that had been killed. And he might've gotten away with it if he could have driven away. The height of our truck compared to their car could've been what saved us. In the end, however, the responsible choices of two drivers were outweighed by the irresponsible choice of one. A life was ended because someone decided to drink and drive.



POEMS

Black Lives Matter?

by **Dontaye Abram**

What do they do when that black boy doesn't listen?
Don't suspend him, don't contact parent(s).
Hold him in detention.

Pass him along. Give him a diploma he didn't earn.

"I want to be educated. I was brought here to learn."

Sit down! Close your mouth.
Young man; you've got some nerve.

When it comes to sports,
Black boy channel that anger.

"What happens if my dreams don't?"

You'll become society's danger.
Easily avoided, yet highly surveillanced.

You'll become a walking target. Black boy,
Learn the virtue of patience.

It's hard to explain especially if no one listens.
Days like these remind me of the Dred Scott case.

"My people are not considered citizens."

Whether crimes are committed or not,
Guns are still drawn.

Hands held high, we die submissively,
No intentions of bearing arms.

When we act like fools while achieving all love for the vine.
Escalates into a breaking news segment.

“To the store and back!”

Yes ma’am.

“Recording live Channel 9.”

Ridiculed, mocked.

The race card.

Affirmative action.

It’s all used for leverage?

The evidence is clear as day.

My man was gunned down holding only a beverage.

Another man choked, pleading,

“I can’t breathe.”

Another man; similar situation.

Only difference he would have been charged with possession and intent to sell.

He had a handful of cd’s.

I’m tired of hiding pain. I’m overwhelmed with begging for change.

Eyes twitch, losing the ‘sane’.

Blood on the concrete; an un-washable stain.

History on our back.

NO records nor REMAINS.

Truth is hidden, explain to me what is the gain?

We have to research.

We have to fight. We have to place the idea in our hearts.

We have to UNITE.

The oppressor will not stop until we START.

We HAVE to WANT OUR LIFE.

Carrying You

by Alexis Cummings

It's the flicker of recognition
that plays on someone's face
when they seem to know me from somewhere,
somewhere they can't place.

Some say it's my smile,
some say it's my eyes,
either way they see you in me,
something I despise.

I carry you in my features,
but you are far from my heart.
Although we are so similar,
we couldn't be farther apart.

You are the ragged scar
that never seems to go away.
It's in the way you left,
that always seems to stay.

Ode to the Angry Customer

by Ashley Trumbo

Oh dear hungry customer,
I really must say,
I want to take care of you,
In the best way.

But first you sit down,
As I come to ask,
What would you like to drink?
It's not a hard task.

But then you stare blankly,
As if I make no sense,
Aren't you asked this anywhere?
You seem very tense.

I go fetch your drink,
And come back for your order.
Everything seems great,
But you don't know if you can afford her.

So I try my best,
To give you a good deal.
Even give you my discount,
So you can afford your meal.

You still yell in my face,
Tell me this isn't fair.
But you ate all the food.
And the prices on the menu were there.

So you walk out,
And I receive no tip,
But I make 2.13 an hour,
Shouldn't I throw the fit?

C'est la Vie

by Antonio Guardado

C'est la vie, c'est la vie.
Grim belief of those
Whose heartbreak rose
From what once was glee.

C'est la vie, c'est la vie.
Cruel soul piercing phrase
That slowly wilts away days
From a melancholic memory.

C'est la vie, c'est la vie.
Relief is petite,
But desired as I repeat:
C'est la vie, c'est la vie.

Her Yard Is a Chapel

by David Guest

Mom used to play organ
For a little Methodist church
For years.
Now, in latter days, she conducts
An orchestra of colors,
Blooms spring forth from her nurturing hands;
Her yard is a chapel.
She is wise and diffusional,
She tends the members and holds them holy,
In labor and secret knowledge
She blesses and caresses them.
God moves into and through them
With truth and love,
Blesses Mom and waters her land, her soil, her soul,
Waters all her congregation.
She sings now, like a soloist tempered
For just a few to hear.
Mom is a variety of choirs
And her flowers sing lightly unheard.
She has so much love to give,
And so much to receive.
Mom is inspiration,
Her grace a true fellowship.
Like a family huddled around an antique radio
Mom holds dear and seals her heart
With a private vision.
Mom is mother and child,
A pieta together and apart;
I love her.

II

Her yard is a chapel
Where sparrows land to pray,
And the squirrels chitter like deacons
As the Yorkies stir the garden up.
One light, one dark
Like the Spirit lights up souls on fire.
Gazing balls and trellises
Wrought iron fence and the wild wood beyond,
Where the serpents and coyotes live,
And a rusty sundial collecting the days.
Making the days in mud and handfuls of roots,
Mom dreams them out with little fingers.
As the days grow longer, she grows a little more tired.
She sighs more than the past,
Tired more, back aching,
Sweating in the afternoon sun,
She keeps the seasons.
When to plant and when to remove,
Wrestling with the elements,
The flooding and the drought.
Gathers up her precious lambs;
A judas squirrel steals the seed for the birds.
The sun and the rain are blessings gladly received.

III

She officiates and watches over his flock.
When she is tired she gets cranky,
But it is work, a work she knows well,
And she is able.

Comes the scepter of the King,
Mighty, mighty Lord.
Marshaling the captivity,
He rides in with lightning and thunder,
His winds bend the branches and part the grasses,
Holy, Holy, Holy.
The birds are singing in high holy places,
In the choir loft of trees.
Holy, Holy, Holy,
The angels far above the trees.
High Holy
Presence in this place,
Her yard is a chapel.
I love her.

To You, Old Friend

by **Marissa Cooper**

For a while I only wore black.
Colors reminded me too much of before.

I saw faces of people pass,
felt like I needed to put my brain on tour.

Let them see what you did to me.
Let them know the fear

Tell the whole world my story,
create cause for laugh and jeer.

Your body on mine, despicable,
I was not more than a child.

Maybe then my mother would understand
my somber personality, once wild

So here's a toast to you, old friend,
may you never be at fault

For even though I was only eight,
you never thought to halt.

Never thought what it could do,
to hurt a child so young.

But even now, so long after
your name is still on my tongue

And you've grown too, you have a little one
a girl, and I'm sure you've taught her

To stay away from men like you,
those who will hurt your daughter.

In summation I can say
I want to change the past

But my story will be used, one day
to help the lowly outcast

If she is like me, knows what I know
maybe in worse shape

It's probably because no one believed her,
and blamed her for her rape.

Cyrano

by Tiffane Shorter

What makes a person—
good?
Is it generosity?
Giving your last dime to someone?
Giving your shirts and your skirts
and all your time to someone?
Kindness?
Comforting a small child?
Making them forget of their pain for a while
achieving that tiny, gap-toothed smile?
Beauty...?
Loving someone who's loved by your girl?
Giving your all when someone else is her world?
What if your world falls for the words she's heard
(but those words were thought by *you*
and her happiness is to never know the truth)?
A rose is still defined by its thorns,
music is still resigned to its score,
and the pen is more beautiful than the mighty sword.
That's why the penman is tainted by that final chore
of what *goodness* is when you get down to the core.

Indigenous

by Kylee Robison

I am in awe with the Earth
Near the ground I feel the growth and hum of her womb
Decomposing the old to bring forth the new
I am in tune with her rhythms
Gravitating towards my ancestors' paths
Earth resembles our mother
Now we give thanks for her love
Our hands stretched out
Underneath the realms she provides
Stars communicate her smile

Dreams

by Duane Howell

Our dreams once beguiling have come to die,
Cardboard structure riddled with decay.
Childish aspirations a mere glimmer in my eye.

Once motivated to aspire toward the sky,
A careless grip as they pull away.
Our dreams once beguiling have come to die.

Reality's whisper so deep and wry,
Mocking my pain upon display.
Childish aspirations a mere glimmer in my eye.

Ripping and tearing for the reasons why,
My life's purpose now unmolded clay.
Our dreams once beguiling have come to die.

Wasted contemplation of fields barren and dry:
A fruitful harvest of brown and gray.
Childish aspirations a mere glimmer in my eye.

What will come of such want and hereby
Resurrecting the spirit of this lost yesterday?
Our dreams once beguiling have come to die:
Childish aspirations a mere glimmer in my eye.

Poetry is Broccoli

by **Rachael Z. Ikins**

Poetry is broccoli.
Lots of people won't eat it.
Even a pig demands cheese
drizzled before he'll lip it into
his rubbery mouth.

Lavish green,
frothed purple flowers,
flatulence and a metaphor
for tree.

Unromantic. Chocolate--love,
erotica melt in the hot fist
that clutches. A high.

Poetry grounds the garden.
Row after row,
forest of
top-heavy soldiers.
Vitamin B, muscular and
calcium and other essential
nutrients. Stuff of neuron, axon-
Chocolate, of breaking hearts.

Fibrous stems, a molars' mouthful. Poetry
soaks up water, blasts through.

Poetry is broccoli.

She Said No

by April Trumbo

She sits in a stark white room
The chill of the air as cold as their words
“Were you drinking?”
“Have you hooked up before?”

He sits in an office
Hand on his shoulder smiles on their faces
“Don’t sweat it son.”
“It will be all right.”

It doesn’t matter
She said no

She shows them the bruises on her neck
Indentations on her back
“Did you lead him on?”
“Have you had one night stands before?”

They joke about the numbers he got
Talk about his stats
“Keep playing football.”
“Just keep living your life.”

It doesn’t matter
She said no

Attention all around them
Their young lives put on hold
Now twelve will decide
If it really matters
She said no

I Want to Know

by **Nicholette Inocente**

If I had never moved from my birth place,
if I had stayed complacent in my home,
would you still have come to love my face?
If I were born as a frolicking deer,
if I leapt and bound in the wood,
would it be your mating call I hear?
If I could no longer show you my smile,
if it got lost and eroded away,
would you still stay awhile?
If I could no longer embrace you,
my arms dangling as branches by my side,
would you know that I love you like I do?
If I no longer possessed the words,
would you know without a doubt,
that I'd sing your praises like morning birds?
If I left and went miles away,
would you follow me fearlessly,
or would you simply stay?
If it would have been you and not her,
if you left this world before your life began,
would I love another?
If I were ever to lose you,
damned to venture alone,
I don't know what I'd do.

Freedom

by Amani Rashaad

The sun has turned in for the evening.
I imagine it's had a long day.
Haven't we all?
Gray serenity now fills the sky,
dimly lit with stars
that have come out from hiding.
I pick a seat on the rocky bed
overlooking the calm water.
With a pencil
and a notebook
I begin to release what I have kept hidden
today, yesterday, last week.
A crow flies over my head,
wings spread,
wind overtaking his body.
He can go anywhere.
So can I.
As he flies,
and I write,
we are both experiencing
freedom.

Muddy Water

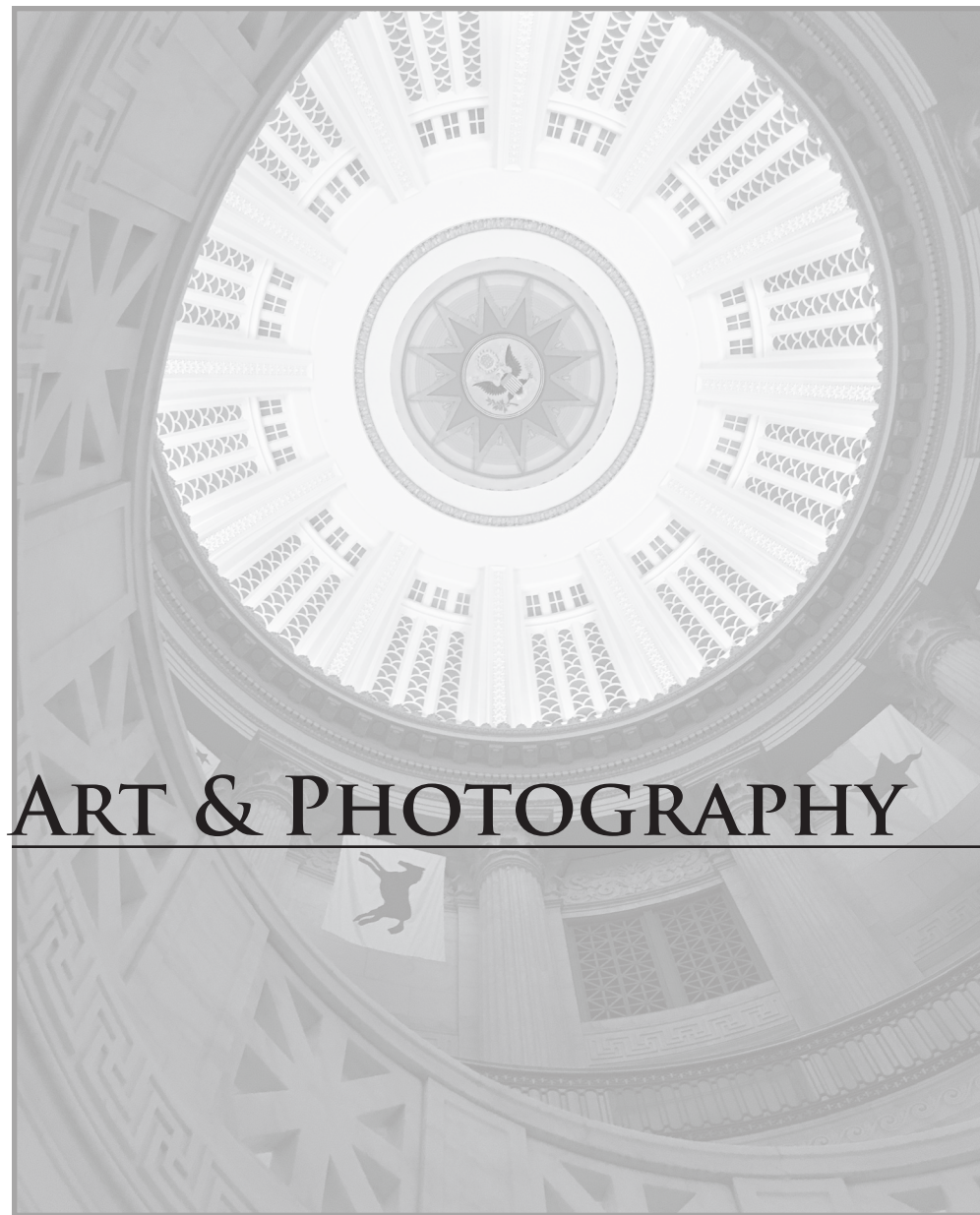
by Amani Rashaad

My foot instigates your ripples
I apologize for waking you
in the solitude of the silent forest
Must be a nice place to live
You cling to the bottom of my foot
gritty and cold and brown
wanting to join me on my journey
because you live a dull life
I insist that you are better off
Dull sounds like peace
Dull sounds like sanity
I wipe your remnants from my skin
and continue on
Sorry to leave you behind
but I have my own filth to deal with

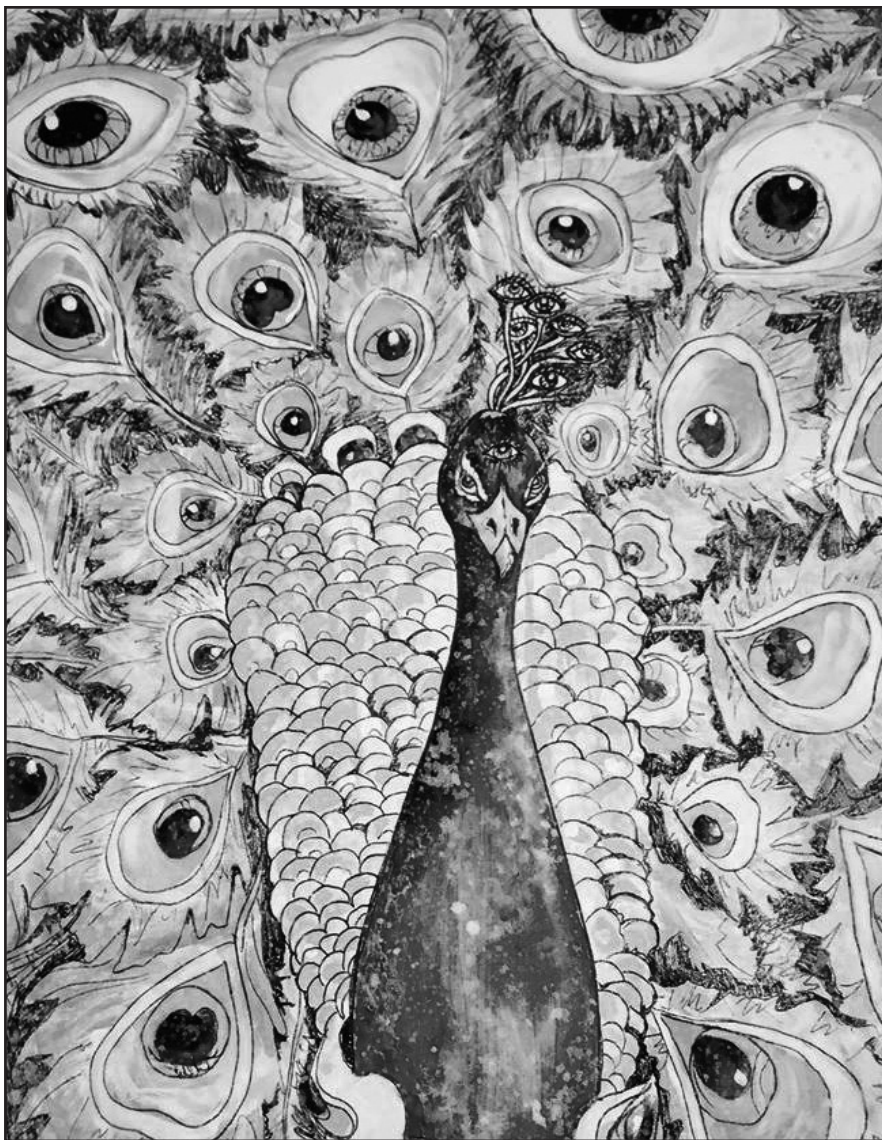
Depression

by Eva Waswo

Sometimes at night I lie awake
And wonder when I ceased to feel.
How did I end up feeling blank?
What happened to knowing I was real?
As though my soul were a page erased,
The imprints of feelings that should have been
Are smudged unclear, cruelly defaced,
And the paper itself is worn painfully thin.
Come morning I put on my mask,
Prepare myself to face the world.
Of course I'm fine, I say when asked,
But really I just want to hurl.
Sometimes, the most egregious lie
Is telling someone that you're fine.



ART & PHOTOGRAPHY



Feather Eyes
Sabra Estill



Dragon Eye
Sabra Estill



My Husband's Ashes
Rachel Potter



Summer
Chloe Elimam



Pitcher and Glass
Matthew Meason



Okapi
Anastasia Woosley



Jellyfish
Jennifer Sanmiguel



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