



# 18 *Absolute*

Poetry • Fiction • Nonfiction • Artwork • Photography

Absolute 2018 is dedicated to  
**Nina Garner Smith**

*Absolute* 18



## **Absolute 2018**

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

## **Editorial Board**

### **Student Editors**

Piper DeMoe

Sean T. King

Philemon Kurian

Brenna Rethford

### **Faculty Advisors**

Jon Inglett

Marybeth McCauley

### **Publications Coordinator/Graphic Projects Manager**

April Jackson-Rook

### **Cover Art**

“Rise” by Rachel Potter

### **Divider Art**

“Rise” by Rachel Potter

### **Special Thanks**

President Jerry Steward, Vice President of Academic Affairs Greg Gardner, Associate Vice President of Academic Affairs Kim Jameson, Dean Thomas Harrison, April Mitchell, and Rochelle Mosby

# CONTENTS

---

## FICTION.....

“The Fox and the Pack”	Sean T. King
“She’s Deserving”	Victoria Kathryn Coggins
“Friendly Fire”	Kristen Klingensmith
“Sleeping Beauty”	Ronnie Shorter
“Adventures of Meatpie and Lambchops”	Kelli Kaubin

## NONFICTION .....

“How an iPod Saved My Life: The Story of Dave”	Allison Wilson-Burns
“Near Fall”	Sean T. King
“Hi, Who Are You?”	Brooklyn Gonzalez
“Just Another Day”	Elizabeth Rogers

## POETRY .....

“Some Feelings Refuse Translation”	Terri Lynn Cummings
“Ode to Jefferson”	Camirye T. Brewin
“Understood”	Angeles Maestre
“Peonies”	Betsy Blair
“My Soul”	Ryan Schwimmer
“Blocked”	Catherine Katey Johnson
“Lessons from a Seed”	Elizabeth Rogers
“Thank You”	Christopher Tomlin
“Ode to Anxiety”	Kristen James
“Misfit”	Chelsea Whittington
“A Mother’s Christmas Lament”	Victoria Jaczko
“Smell Mail”	Robert Herman Broyles
“With Tired Eyes, Tired Minds, Tired Souls, We Slept”	Brooklyn Murdaugh
“Summertime”	Eve Summerton
“Forgotten Beauty”	Angela Meade
“Questions to Answer”	Rebekah Browne

## ART AND PHOTOGRAPHY .....

“Reminder of Terror”	Michael Reeves
“America Proud”	Michael Reeves
“Kitt”	Bethany Hill
“Winter’s Confection—Arizona”	Robert Schultz
“Whatever the Case, Please Don’t Forget Me”	Evelin Alvarado
“Adult Shovel Nose Snake—Arizona”	Robert Schultz
“Ceramic Face Jug”	Hattie Kennedy







FICTION



---

# *The Fox and the Pack*

by Sean T. King

The harmonious howls raced across the clear, night sky. Fox's stout ears perked up and searched back and forth for the origin of the calls waking Fox from his slumber. He knew this choir of howls; he could differentiate each one. The long, highest pitch belonged to the female of the pack, Silver. Grey and White communicated virtually identically; however, Fox had trained his ears long enough to identify that Grey's was a bit raspier. The lowest, earth rumbling pitch was exerted from the giant of the pack, Brown. Then, there was Nightshade, who had a perfect, dominating howl; it emerged as the commanding, epitomic call of the bunch. It was Nightshade's pack after all.

Fox extended his dark furry legs and lowered his shoulders, arching his orange hind in the air. *We may be in for a long night.* He pulled himself forward and dropped his rump. He could not permit any unnecessary cramps to develop. The pack would be depending on him. Now, he just had to locate them. *Just follow the howls like always.* He dashed. His black paws kicked up pine needles and dirt as he let his nose and ears lead the way.

Not a single cloud hindered the great, white Eye in the Sky. It looked over the pack fully open that night; a great night for a hunt. Fox shot left, then right, swerving between the massive sentinels. He leapt over a root that tangled in and out of the dirt, debris of bark cascading from his orange fur as he soared across the stars.

He arrived at a plateau. His nose informed him that they were close. Perched on the edge overlooking a clearing, his ears saw them before his eyes could. His heart began to race, pounding faster and harder. His yellow irises slivered with their black pits expanding as he witnessed the pack burst out of the tree line and into the clearing. At the apex of the "V" the pack formed a wolf as black as pitch led the way—Nightshade.

Fox slipped on the edge of the plateau, but caught himself and pulled back. Every hair on his body stood up. He descended the slope and caught the end of the pack just as they reentered the army of trees. Nightshade dictated from the front while Fox took up the rear. There was much honor in being at the tail end of the pack. You were responsible for surveilling the backs of your brothers and sisters. *The last line of defense.*

The wailing wind was absent that night. Only the pack could be heard. And even then, they would vanish before an alarmed rodent or bird could spot them. The Eye in the Sky watched over the six running in unison. These were the nights Fox lived for. Grey, who was just ahead of Fox, peered back. Fox nodded in greeting. Grey regarded Brown sprinting by his side, the exchange causing no hindrance or delay in their stride. Brown peeked back as well.

Fox nodded to his other brother.

Brown howled a call to the rest of the pack. The pack came to a sudden halt. Fox reared and leapt to the side to avoid crashing into Grey. *Is there a catch?* Fox peered about his surroundings. Neither his ears, nor his nose could locate prey. Silver and White stepped to the side to let Nightshade pass. Fox looked to his left, nothing; to his right, nothing. Nightshade towered over Fox. Fox searched the sky-blue eyes of Nightshade for answers.

Nightshade snapped his giant fangs at Fox, causing Fox to pounce away. The warning sent a chill through Fox. Nightshade, turning his back on Fox, started for the front of the pack. Fox went to retake his place at the back of the pack, his head lowered in inferiority, but after just one step, Nightshade bore his teeth again, this time followed by a long, low growl. Fox cowered away with his side to the pack with quivering, retreating ears. Nightshade retook his place at the spear point of the pack. Then, they were off again; except for Fox. *It will be different tomorrow night*, as he always told himself.

The following night, Fox came across a tree with ashy soot at its base. Fox decided that it appeared close enough in color to some of the pack. At least, it would cover up his orange. Fox dove in and rolled around in the

smut, some of which filled his nostrils. He sneezed out a grey puff. His tail and legs were naturally dark. It was his orange body and head and white chin and underbelly that needed masking.

When he finished, the howls began almost on cue. Fox found his pack lapping from a shallow cold stream spotted with boulders varying in size as small as Fox to as big as Brown. Fox emerged from the darkness of the pine trees and into the line of sight of the Eye in the Sky. The sprawled-out Silver glimpsed Fox first. He greeted her with a nod. She followed his approach toward the rest of the pack. His brothers' attentions gravitated to him one by one and he greeted them accordingly, except for Nightshade, who continued drinking from the stream apparently unaware.

Fox got within a tail length behind Nightshade when the black wolf spun and snatched Fox up by the scruff of his neck. Before Fox could assess the situation he was sailing through the air and plunging headfirst into the brook. The cold seeped through his fur and pierced his skin. He splashed out of the watery hell and onto the largest boulder and shook his body from nose to paw. A dark cloud thinned in the water. *The soot.* Fox noticed his wet orange and white fur betraying him. Nightshade and the pack howled in laughter. Fox leapt from the boulder to the other side of the brook. He departed into the night alone, again.

The Eye in the Sky cried fiercely the next night as Fox lay in despair under the cover of branches that fanned over the forest floor. Fox had his large puffy tail laid over him for extra warmth. Every night he had followed Nightshade among his brothers and sisters and every night Nightshade had tested Fox, but nevermore. Nightshade need not worry for Fox would spend his remaining nights in solitude.

*Crack.* Fox heard the breaking of the twig through the roaring thunder. *Someone is here.* Two red eyes hovered in the darkness. He readied himself on all fours, the rain spattering his face. Lightning flashed to betray the darkness and thus the intruder. *Silver.* She let loose a wail that silenced the storm. Fox

only stood with his paws in the mud. She darted a few tail lengths away before stopping to look back for Fox. He remained motionless. She waited. *She wants me to follow her.* He approached her side with caution. When Fox reached her she sprinted off and he followed with a matching speed.

The drastic weather made it feel as though they had run enough tail lengths to cover the entire forest twice over before they finally reached their destination. A roaring waterfall attacked a stony lagoon below; a wall of stone and starkness rising as the waterfall's backdrop. Fox spotted the rest of the pack keeping guard at the coast of the lagoon. He felt melancholy and fear in them, but it was neither the lightning, nor the thunder that frightened them.

Nightshade stood above the others on top of a cluster of boulders at the base of the cliff, solemnly fixated downward at his front paws. Silver waited at the base of the hill of rocks as Fox made his way up, boulder by boulder, passing Brown and Grey and White. At the top, Fox failed to steal even a brief look from Nightshade. Fox found a small and narrow hole at Nightshade's feet. Fox approached with hesitation. Slowly, the pit of the hole became more and more visible. Then, at the bottom of the pit Fox understood. He realized what had captivated Nightshade's focus: a pup.

The tiny, black pup with red eyes yelped. His forelegs scratched at the wall, one of his hind legs trapped between two rocks. Rainwater formed a miniature waterfall which rapidly fought to fill the pit. *There isn't much time.* Nightshade and the rest of the pack were too big to fit, but Fox could. He squeezed and pulled his way down to the bottom of the black hole, where he arrived muddy and bloody. Both he and the pup were drenched. The Eye in the Sky provided their only light, reflecting off the watery blacks and into the frightened pupils of the pup, his head almost entirely submerged. Fox dove underwater, bit on to the pup's hind leg, and yanked it free.

The rising water triumphed over both of them now. Fox grabbed the pup by the scruff of his neck and extended his retractable claws. Fox clawed his way up the face of the hole. Rushing mud and slosh shoved and battered

Fox while the water below dragged him down, but Fox fought; he fought for every tail length, every one of his four legs was exhausted, shaking and aching and numb. If he could only get one more tail length closer Nightshade could fit his head in and take the pup.

Fox's muscles burned as he battled his way up, one paw over the other. He covered the needed tail length; Nightshade swooped his head down and snatched the pup up and out into safety.

Now, Fox had to get himself out. Only half a tail length more was needed to escape the pit. He battled, but Fox's body no longer listened to his spirit. *It's okay*, Fox thought, *at least the pup is okay*. His claws retracted, his legs collapsed, and his now weightless body fell back from the wall down into the dark pit below.

Only for a second, though, before Nightshade took him by the scruff of his neck and pulled him from the pit.

The next night, and every night to come, Fox ran at the end of the pack. There was much honor in the taking up the rear. Nightshade looked back at him and nodded in acknowledgment. Fox followed with a nod of compliance. He was part of the pack now, not *despite* the fact that he was a fox, but *because* he was a fox.



---

## *She's Deserving*

by Victoria Kathryn Coggins

As I sit down on the uncomfortable chair in the waiting room of my new therapist's office, I drop my purse on the floor. I pull both of my legs up, sitting cross-legged on a chair that would have been too small to fit in several weeks ago. I pull my worn copy of *The Scarlet Letter* into my lap and I try to read the words. I run my hand through my newly short hairdo and wipe my nose on the worn sleeve of my sweater, not caring that the lady sitting across from me gives me a look of disgust, when all I want to do is scream. I lose myself in the page in front of me, eyes blurring with unshed tears. Suddenly overwhelmed by the past few weeks, I find myself reliving the most horrible night of my life.

\* \* \*

He had been begging me to go out with him since the beginning of the semester. Initially, I kept turning him down, not because I wasn't attracted to him, because that was definitely not the case, but because he was my only friend in the class and if things ended badly, there would be no one to study with, let alone lean on if I missed a class. Eventually, after a very long and grueling session in Advanced Physics, I finally said yes. I had aced our final and from my experience with him, he was a really nice guy that I could see myself wanting to spend more time with. He and I had hung out before, mostly in studying sessions and things of that nature, but getting to know him in a less academic manner seemed like it could be fun.

The night of the date, he picked me up promptly at seven. I let him in the doorway while I put on my coat, the chill in the air fiercer than usual. We chatted lightly as I locked the door behind me and we walked to his car. He opened the door for me and I felt a sudden warming as I thanked him for his kind gesture. When he climbed in the other side, his hand brushed my

jean-clad knee in a way that seemed to be accidental. He smiled at me as he removed his hand, placing it on the gear shift, explaining how much I would love the Italian restaurant he was taking me to. The longer we talked and the closer we got to dinner, the more the confusing thoughts of his unwanted hand faded.

When we arrived at the restaurant, I couldn't help but be surprised. It was a cute little hole-in-the-wall, the kind of place I would never expect to see him in a million years, yet there we were. When we walked in, his tone of voice to the host when she seated us was a little sharper than necessary and kind of rubbed me the wrong way. Yet, the way he pulled out my chair for me and immediately handed me the wine menu to pick from, I couldn't hold onto something that I felt I probably imagined.

I sipped slowly on my wine, making sure to take drinks of my water and bites of the appetizer intermittently, so as to keep my wits about myself. When our salads arrived and he wanted ground pepper, I physically bit my tongue as I heard the snap of his fingers to get the server's attention. After getting his precious pepper, he came to realize that most of my red was still in my glass. He explained that I could order another glass when our meals came and I didn't have to milk one glass all night. At first glance, this seemed genuine and even generous, but something about the way he said it made me feel as though I should decline.

A giant pile of fettucine alfredo was placed in front of me and I couldn't help but smile at my plate. He was telling me about one of his classes, something "interesting" he heard in economics today and how I really need to make better investments. He continued talking about himself as I slowly ate my thick, gooey pasta, feeling perfectly content to listen because it meant I didn't have to try to speak with my mouth full. When I felt full and pushed my plate away, I noticed him watching me. I smiled, hoping there was nothing in my teeth, and felt grateful when he returned my grin. He paid for the meal and I thanked him immediately, feeling like gratitude is the response he ordinarily received when he picked up a forty-dollar tab in the past.

Back in the car, I climbed into the passenger seat, waiting for him to come around, fiddling with the contents of my purse for something to do. He fell into the driver's seat, and after switching the car into reverse, rather than placing his hand back on the gear shift between the two seats, his hand came to rest on my upper thigh. I felt my heart rate pick up and I couldn't decide how I felt about his hand being there. On the one hand, we were winding down a nice date and it shouldn't be weird to have some sort of physical contact towards the end of the night. On the other hand, his hand was really high and I didn't feel comfortable with the placement of it. Trying to be subtle, I shifted slightly out of easy reach and pretended to look something up on my phone. When I recognized the turn-in to my street, I put my phone away and felt a sudden ease overtake me.

Immediately upon arriving at my house, he was out of the car, yanking my door open. I couldn't help but laugh at the chivalry act and recognized that he was the same dork I had studied with all semester. Standing on my porch, I saw him go in for a kiss, and as I looked at his dorky smile, I met him in the middle. I intended for the kiss to be brief, to be sweet and innocent in a way that almost said, "to be continued", but as I felt him reach around my waist and a hand rest on my jaw, I felt myself lean into the kiss. It had just been so long since I had kissed anybody and something about that warmth made the frigid outside seem less cold.

When I pulled away, I kind of laughed as I said goodnight. I was halfway in my doorway when he asked if he could use the restroom before he started his trek home. Everything about the suggestion seemed normal and who was I to tell someone they could hold it or go use the 7-Eleven down the street? He came inside and I directed him toward the guest bath, heading into the kitchen to grab myself a water. Without having heard a flush, I felt arms wrapped around my waist, causing me to gasp and slosh my water all over myself. I looked down at my soaked shirt and felt a moment of irritation glaze over me and all I wanted was for him to leave. But, when he noticed the wet stain and how it turned my shirt see-through, he leaned in to kiss me once more, and I was like putty.

I let him kiss me and I let him shove me up against the counter. I let him lift me so I was resting on the place where I liked to cook dinner. I let him pull my damp shirt over my head and kiss my small exposed breasts. I let him remove his shirt and watched him throw it across the room. I let him pick me up, legs wrapped around his waist, and let him carry me to the nearby couch. I let him hover above me and kiss me, but I did not let him unbutton my pants. I did not let him pull off his belt or allow him to feel my insides with his fingertips. I did not let him enter me with such a force, I couldn't help but cry out. I didn't let him, but he did.

I said "no." I said no with my eyes and with the shove of my hands, but it didn't matter. I said "stop" and I begged and I pleaded with him, but I knew I was at his will. He called me a tease and said I owed him for dinner and for the entire semester he carried me through Physics. I said "no" over and over in my head, but out loud, after he refused to stop, I took it. I lay silent, taking every thrust with a grunt and a tear, saying nothing until he was done. As he climbed off of me, he reached into his wallet to pull out two things, the first, was an old receipt I watched him write his number on, indicating he wanted me to call him when I wanted to get laid next, and forty-five dollars. Just enough to buy a Plan B pill, since he didn't use a condom. I had never felt more like a whore than when I saw the money on the table.

\* \* \*

The sound of a pen dropping to the floor pulls me from my thoughts and I can't help but reach for my purse, needing the tissues I have wadded up within. The woman sitting across from me glares as I noisily blow my nose. I hear my name being called and I stand to gather my things around me. I start to follow the receptionist back into the room where I will meet my new therapist, but suddenly I can't move. I'm frozen in place and the only thing that is running through my mind is *his* coarse and unrefined voice, whispering in my ear, telling me I deserved it.

Somewhere in the room, I hear someone call my name again, but I turn in the opposite direction of the voice. I retrace the steps out to my car and

---

slide in the front seat. I throw my purse in the passenger seat and slam my fists into the steering wheel as hot, fiery tears stream down my face. At the top of my lungs I scream. I scream because I thought I did everything right. I dressed the way I'm supposed to dress on a date, I didn't show too much skin or leave too much to the imagination. In the car, when his hand gripped my thigh, I readjusted myself, brushing his hand aside. When he insisted on one more glass of wine, I held firm and resisted my favorite red. I didn't get drunk, I was so careful, and he seemed like such a nice guy, but he wasn't. He took something from me that I can never get back and it feels like my fault. As completely messed up as it sounds, he was right. I teased him all semester, I must have. He did help me out a lot in Physics and there is no way I could have passed without him, so I did owe him something.

Taking a deep breath, I put my car in gear and back out of the space. I drive back towards home, the place I have barely been able to leave since *it* happened and I cry. I cry for my innocence and for my time lost. I cry for my defiled body and I cry for myself because everything about this makes me feel like it is my fault and I don't deserve help.

---

## *Friendly Fire*

by **Kristen Klingensmith**

The M855A1. A 5.56 mm ball bullet, capped with a steel penetrator atop a solid copper slug. Capable of penetrating a  $\frac{3}{8}$  inch thick piece of steel from 400 meters. Most importantly, lead-free. The Army's answer for going green, with all-new eco-friendly executions.

I glance at the spent casing on my nightstand. The brassy shine is mostly gone, worn off by the mindless hours I spend rotating it in my fingers, staring at nothing. I can't even tell how long it is when I go to that place. My girlfriend eventually comes home, takes it out of my hand, brings me back.

I hate her. She's fuckin' crazy. Spoiled and psychotic sheriff's daughter from a small town north of here. Follows me to the lake on Sundays in her black Lincoln Navigator because she never trusts I'm where I say I am. Makes me send pictures to prove my location if I dare play Xbox with my buddy. Threatens suicide if we fight. Faked a pregnancy once. Still haven't figured out where she got two positive tests. Fuckin' crazy. But she knows how to bring me back from myself. And there's never silence.

I'm gonna propose to her this spring. Can't do it in winter, I'm never any good in the winter.

\* \* \*

I open my eyes in the middle of the night, and he's there. Seated in the corner of the room, bent forward. Elbows to knees, he gazes at me thoughtfully across the room. I would know that face anywhere. They slid his photo across the table to me back when the investigation was open.

Lacey's blonde head is barely visible above the covers. She's sound asleep. I turn my attention back to him, hoping it's just a nightmare. It's not. He's still sitting there. Wearing the same fatigues he was in the day he died.

"Why were you back there?" I bark. Nobody had an answer back then. Chalked up to a tragic accident; some fucker deciding to take a walk right behind the army range.

He looks at me with sad eyes. Bates. That was his last name. Just about the only thing I found out. Private First Class Bates, walking in the tree line just beyond the range as a full unit was practicing. I had to be the lucky bastard that wound up delivering a perfect killshot to the wrong target.

"It was an accident. I was just taking a walk to clear my head." I see his Adam's apple bob up and down in the dark. "Had a fight with my girl over the phone. Just needed to clear my head."

"Behind the range at 12:30? Congratulations, fucker. You really got your head cleared!" I retort hotly. He just looks at me with those sad eyes. I hear Lacey stirring.

"Eric, who are you talking to?" her voice is unsure. Her fish lips glimmer in the dark as she licks them nervously. I point to the chair, but it's empty now. Of course it is.

"No one. Just had a bad dream," I say gruffly, and punch the pillow as I settle down to sleep.

\* \* \*

I got medically discharged only a few months after the *incident*. The MP's all determined it was an accident, in no way my fault. But it was enough to put me permanently out of commission. I started having night terrors, sleep-walking around the barracks, and breaking shit with my eyes wide open and remembering nothing. During a training in the middle of the night, I let out a yell in my dead sleep, got up, and started running for the



trees. Took two lieutenants to chase me down. Had no idea what happened, but I could see it on everyone's faces. I was cracking up.

The diagnosis that got me discharged was vague. Recommended therapy through the VA but I was never much interested in having my head examined. Bought a dog, a tiny house, and started working as a foreman in my buddy's construction company. He introduced me to Lacey, an act which I'm not sure I'm all that thankful for.

"Were you dreaming about... an accident?" Lacey is in front of me, and I eye her warily over my cereal bowl. She's on her way to work, but I know I won't get off without some questioning. Unbidden, my fingers find the bullet casing in my jeans pocket, and I stroke it.

"Nah, nothing like that. Just a run-of-the-mill bad dream." I can tell she doesn't believe me, but she lets it go.

\* \* \*

I open my eyes and he's back again, this time by the window. The blue light filters in and catches his features in profile as he stands there. Christ, he was really just a kid.

This time he speaks first, turning his dark eyes away to me as I sit up in bed.

"It was on purpose. Like Russian Roulette. Your piss-poor aim was my loaded chamber." He turns his eyes back to the window. "My girl was leaving me for another man. My high school sweetheart. Knew that girl since we were kids. Thought we'd make it."

"For some girl? All that mess for some two-bit back home?" I throw back the covers and stalk towards him. "My Army career gone, down the drain. Couldn't keep myself together after it happened!"

I go to poke my finger in his chest, half expecting my hand to go right through him. Instead, a warm, sticky wetness meets my fingers. A sharp metallic scent fills up the room. There's dark red blood running down my fingers, and I

can see it puddling on the floor as it gushes out of his chest. He says nothing, just watches me impassively as he bleeds out all over my pine floorboards.

“Jesus, man!” I yell, and grab the throw blanket off the chair to try to stanch the bleeding. With a grunt, he falls to his knees. His eyes are blank, face unresponsive. I’ve got him half-cradled to my chest as I press the blanket to the gaping bullet hole. There’s blood everywhere. “Come on, come on!” I grit through my teeth.

A hand clamps down on my shoulder. Lacey. I look at her, my vision tunneling through adrenaline and panic. Still, I can see the horror in her face.

“Eric, it’s a dream. You’re dreaming,” she says. I look down. No Bates, no puddles of blood. I’m on my knees, clutching a blanket to my chest. Sweat pours down my back in rivulets.

I don’t know what to say. I can see on her face she thinks I’m cracking up. Hell, I’m being haunted or hallucinating or something. I’m obviously cracking up. Words fail me.

“I’m sorry,” I finally say. After a long minute she reaches down to help me up, and we move to the bed in an awkward silence.

As we slide beneath the sheets, Lacey fixes me with her *let’s talk* look. “Eric, what is this all about? What are you dreaming about?” I just shake my head.

“It’s old Army stuff, Lace. I don’t want to talk about it.” The silence between us is thick with tension as we settle down to sleep. I barely get a wink in the rest of the night. I keep waiting for him to reappear, but he doesn’t.

\* \* \*

The only people who know about the incident were my CO’s and the MP’s who investigated. I never told any of my friends, my family. I didn’t see a reason to tell Lacey when we started dating. Just something I want to forget. Now I’m wondering if I can pull it together, figure this out before I have to tell her. Makes it more real.

She's looking at me over the kitchen counter, keys resting between us. I know she's going to get more angry the longer I wait, but I just can't bring myself to it. Her eyes are practically burning a hole in the side of my face, but I keep studying my cereal bowl. Finally, she storms out in a huff.

Left to my own devices, I start Googling. I bounce from articles about ghosts and hauntings, to vivid dreams. I briefly wonder if that godawful chicken mess Lacey made a few days ago is causing hallucinations. I read forums for veterans and PTSD survivors, looking for some kind of reason that this is happening to me. A theme slowly starts to rise from the muck. *Make peace*. I wonder if Bates is coming around because he has unfinished business. That is, if he's real and I'm not just the newest resident of the looney bin. I know that if he comes back tonight, I'll prepare myself. I'll get to the bottom of this, for both of our sakes.

\* \* \*

I'm ready when I open my eyes and he's there. I figure I don't need Lacey interrupting us, so I slip out of bed as soon as she falls asleep and go downstairs. I sit in my recliner and wait, and wait. Eventually I nod off.

The first thing I notice is the TV clock when my eyes snap open. It reads 3:10 A.M. The second thing I notice is the figure of Bates standing in the corner, staring out the living room window at the treeline on the edge of my yard. I wonder if he's remembering his last deadly stroll.

I stand immediately, and square off. "Why are you coming around here?"

Bates cocks his head at me, a wry smile tugging at the corner of his mouth. "Isn't that obvious?" he asks, turning from the window to face me.

I screw up my eyes as I say my next words, feeling dumb as hell. "Do you have unfinished business?"

Bates gives a squawk of laughter at that. "What the fuck, man? Unfinished business? You've been watching too much 'Haunted America.' Fucking unfinished business." He sobers up and points at me. "But you do. I'm here for you."

My eyebrows soar. “What unfinished business? I can finish all my business, I’m not the dead one!”

Bates looks at me as though I’ve grown two heads. “Sir, with all respect *this* is your unfinished business.”

The bluster goes out of me, just like that. I sit down on the couch heavily. I know he’s right. “Fancy that. You being the one who kicked it and here I am feeling sorry for myself.” Bates doesn’t say anything to this, just companionably moves to sit on the ledge of the fireplace. The silence stretches on for a minute, before I can collect myself. Finally, I look up into his blank eyes. There are no whites. Just dark eyes, stark against the too-pale skin of his face.

“Why were you back there, Bates?”

He just stares at me with that same blank look, then a sad little smile tugs at his lips. “It doesn’t matter.”

“Of course it matters! You weren’t supposed to be back there, you must have had a reason!”

He shrugs one shoulder. “Nope.” I want to strangle him in that moment. *Why won’t he just tell me?*

As though he can read my mind, he continues. “It doesn’t matter why I was back there. I could have been back there for any fucking reason under the sun. I wanted to die, there was a girl, I was just in the wrong place at the wrong time. You’ll never know for sure, just like you’ll never really know whether I was here or not.

“I was back there. You had shitty aim that day. I got shot. For all the reasons in the world you can’t change or justify or make yourself feel better that I was back there. You have to accept it and move on.”

Silence descends. He’s got a kind look on his face as he says it, but his words are hitting me like bullets. Friendly fire.

“How?” I finally say, the corners of my mouth tugging down as I fight tears that rise suddenly and unexpectedly. I lower my head, ashamed. I haven’t cried since I was a teenager. A wave of guilt and despair just collides into me. It’s been nipping at my heels for years now, as I think and then spin away from the idea that I ended a life, that for him there will be no girl, no promotion, no kids, no house. Shit, I don’t know that I’d wish Lace on any man but he doesn’t even get that.

“My straw got picked that day. You weren’t the one who picked it. That was the Man Upstairs,” Bates says. He reaches out and puts his hands on my shoulders. They’re warm and solid. “Now you have to accept that and move on. I’m not mad at you. I’m not anything. One day your straw will be up, too.”

The weight of his hands disappears and I know when I look up that he’ll be gone. I know it’s the last time I’ll see him, whatever he is.

I sit in the darkened living room until the sun rises. Lacey is still sound asleep when I steal into the bedroom and pick up the well-worn casing from its spot on my nightstand. I rotate it in between my fingers as I quietly open the back door, steal down the hilly acre of my yard towards the creek that runs through the trees just south.

I stand next to the creek for a moment, listening to the burbling water and watching it rush over the sticks and stones protruding from the mud. The scene is idyllic and peaceful, and this is my favorite spot to come think.

Bates’ words echo in my mind, and I take a moment to look at the shell casing in my hand. When the first murmurs of trouble stirred the range, and our CO barked at us to put up our weapons immediately as men started running toward the treeline. I saw him stagger out, just to the right of my target clutching his chest and I knew without a doubt that my last shot had killed a man. I’d clutched at the ground for a long moment just to feel something steady as it seemed at the time that reality had quickly departed. My fingers had closed around the casing, and I’d begun rotating it in my fingers as I watched the chaos at the edge of the range unfold.

---

The casing is dull and tired now. My eyes drift towards the water again, and after I close them and offer a silent prayer I pitch the casing as far from me as I can. It gives a *plink!* as it hits the water and sinks.

I stand there another moment, paying my respects to Private Bates before turning on my heel and moving back towards the house. I reckon I'll start with Lacey, and tell her what happened. I have a feeling the load will get lighter with someone else to help bear it.

---

## *Sleeping Beauty: Beauty Goes Farther Than the Skin*

by **Ronnie Shorter**

*[Takes place in a world where the super-elite, such as the 1%, have widened the gap between themselves and the “99%” to the extent that the 1% have dubbed themselves the Society and rule over the rest of the global population. Plastic surgery and/or reconstructive surgery is not only allowed, but encouraged—if the elite don’t feel beautiful enough, or find beauty in the desolate, it’s taken from the original owner and given to a member of the elite. Trash from elite cities are dumped into impoverished compounds. This takes place about 500-600 years into the future.]*

Some say to be ugly in this day and age is a blessing. In a time when capitalism and financial elitism have been bastardized to the point of thievery, I’m not sure if I can even partly agree with this statement.

I had a plain sister a year ago. She was the prettiest member born into our family in two generations. Looked rather like my grandmother if we were all being honest with ourselves. Don’t get me wrong—she wasn’t much to look at by the Society’s standards, but around our neighborhood, she was like a fairytale come to life. I might have been jealous of her if there was something I could do about it, but there wasn’t, and that’s the way it was.

She had long, flowing, mousy brown hair, pale skin with redness in only a few places, and a lovely, calming demeanor. The best feature of hers, however, were her beautiful, mint-green eyes. From the moment she was born, in our old bathtub with help from an elderly neighbor, everyone on the block knew she was going to be special. Because of this, they kept her



hidden from the prying eyes of the Society, and I grew up foolishly believing that ugliness *was* a blessing, and being anything more from the slums was as good as house arrest.

As we both grew older, boys began calling. Most came to find out if the legends of my sister's beauty were true. Others came for me, if only because I was the only one of the two they'd seen outside of the house. The appeal of leaving our home was something my sister yearned to discover not long after, the dirty streets outside singing her name through the windows. Begging her to heed the warnings of our parents, I thought I'd convinced her to stay put, but awoke a couple of weeks later to find her room empty with the neighborhood in an uproar to find her.

Eventually, unfortunately, we *did* find her in a nearly-forgotten alleyway just outside our compound borders, rags torn beyond our repair, wrapped in a moth-eaten, old blanket to battle the chilly November frost. She'd been missing for six days. She seemed skinnier, malnourished from her station in life, but also from not being properly fed the last couple of days, at least.

The adults shooed me away before I could see much more than that, scooping her up before I could even tell if my older sibling, the one I had looked up to, was *alive*. It took much convincing from my parents and well-meaning neighbors, before we all got the story of what had happened to her...

\* \* \*

*"I snuck out of the house to experience something, anything, outside of the four walls of the house. I'm sorry, Father, I know I was wrong, but the streets seemed glorious and exciting, even in their decrepit state. And you know something? I was right! They virtually glittered underneath the grime and the stains of past decades. The trash scattered about must be so awful for everyone here, but I couldn't stop breathing in the air outside of our home.*

*"It wasn't long until I found the bordering wall. A small voice, the angel on my shoulder, fallen or virtuous, told me to turn back. It told me*

---

*that it was time to go home and to bed. But I couldn't. Please, Mother, you have to understand. At first, I was content to run my hand along the battered, rotting wood as I walked the perimeter. But it was almost as if Fate was tempting me, testing how far I would go to experience something other than my usual mundane life. A hole, a break in the structure just big enough to squeeze through it if I decided to try—and I did. I'm so ashamed now, I only wish you all can forgive my disobedience.... The view that found me on the other side, though, I thought it would make it all worthwhile.*

*"The grass! You can't imagine the smell of the green grass just outside of this place. It's as though our poor, desolate little huts are cursed to bear nothing. But the plants and buildings don't have that problem, Father. The grass is so green I nearly cried just to touch it. The buildings were made of the stars themselves—their glass shone like the gates of Heaven. The air itself had a smell of freshness and love that you can't believe. I could finally understand why we're left to rot in our poverty. It's the difference between singing in the choirs and wailing for salvation from the pits. And even as I could comprehend the fact that I didn't belong in their world, I longed to touch it. I thought if I could caress one of the beautiful buildings, I could bring it back for the rest of us. I could steal away some of the happiness and attractiveness for the neighborhood—just a little.*

*"As I approached one, however, doors opened in front of me like a beast trying to swallow me whole. The light was so bright, too bright to see anything else. So bright, closing my eyes did nothing to shut it out. I felt arms grab hold of my own, and I struggled so hard, you all would have thought I'd been fighting all my life. Ultimately, though, something struck me from behind, and on the second blow, everything went dark.*

*"I'm not sure how long I had been out, but when I reopened my eyes, yet another light was shining above where I lay, not quite as blinding as the other, however; it still took time to adjust to. As I attempted to sit up and look around this new scenery, I found myself strapped to a table, unable to*

*break from my leather bindings. Trying not to panic, I glanced around from side-to-side, looking for anything familiar to me. I caught sight of human-shaped figures above me—not really shadows, but too far in front of that excruciating light to make out. A long, horrid-looking needle was presented and soon after pressed into my neck.*

*“Much of what happened next is a blur. I think they’d given me a pain-killer, but I remember that it wasn’t very effective. When they forced my eyelids open with their forceps.... I can still recall the feeling of those instruments digging into my sockets, dragging each of my eyes out one after another, until I was blinded. I think I went into shock or passed out afterward, because the next thing I can remember is crashing into the pavement while a vehicle sped away. Not knowing if I was on the street or on a sidewalk, I took my chances, creeping along the asphalt, fighting through the pain, until my hands hit a solid wall. I continued along it, searching for any kind of refuge, any place of sanctuary, I could find.*

*“That’s when I found the alleyway. They had wasted so many more products than we could ever dream of throwing away. I felt the blanket in the dumpster the second night—or maybe third, I got confused with the passing time—and curled up. My only hope those days was for something to take pity on me and take me somewhere warm, even if it had been Death himself to do it.”*

\* \* \*

Although I know she won’t notice me if I do, I do my best not to stare at my sister—it’s not polite. Her only crime was curiosity. If being inquisitive is a punishable offense, all of humankind would be guilty. But not all of humanity had such beautiful eyes as my sister, and not all of humanity had to look at the empty, ragged sockets the Society left when they ripped those orbs out, and not all of humanity had a family too poor to mask them.

The days that followed are more-or-less a dark haze for me, but I do remember the rage. It built within me day after day, every night that I could hear my sister’s soft sobs of fear and knowing her own wretchedness. It

---

built within me week after week, every day that I walked out of my front door, greeted by the familiar sight of our forsaken neighborhood filled with the scent of looming death. It built within me every time I looked out of my bedroom window, only to take in the sights of the nearby city, knowing that the leaders who had abandoned us to our despicable fate—not to mention, the bastards who'd stolen my sister's vision—lived within, waiting for their next victim to be born behind the walls of our compound.

Two months ago, I glanced outside my bedroom window and noticed the mounted advertisement screen in the city had given a slot to some business I didn't look at the name of. The business itself wasn't what had grabbed my attention anyway. It was the model. She was glaring down at me from her lofty billboard and its image sent a chill down my spine, etching itself into my brain. For weeks afterward, I found trouble sleeping as the memory of the beauty ad greeted me each time I closed my eyes. To this day, I've been plagued by the nightmares of those eyes.

Those beautiful, mint-green eyes.

Some say to be ugly in this day and age is a blessing. But in a world where beauty holds a horrific price and the broken remnants freely roam the streets, all I can see that world for is the ugliness it despises.

---

# *Adventures of Meatpie and Lambchops*

by **Kelli Kaubin**

Once upon a time, there was a magical doll named Meatpie. She was the loveliest little doll in the whole world. She had short, black hair, glittering brown eyes, and a smile that lit up the world. Meatpie stood tall at a whole three inches and had tiny, plastic feet that would pitter-patter all over the hard surfaces. She wasn't allowed on the floor too often because of her small size. Her mother and father would always worry. As regular sized humans, they would always handle her delicately, so she wouldn't get smashed or fall anywhere. They both loved her very much and she was always safe. Meatpie was the only doll in her parents' modest home, along with her pet lamb, Lambchops. Lambchops stood only slightly higher than Meatpie and was made of cotton and white synthetic fur. She and her family always did everything together.

During the day, Meatpie and her mother would always sleep or watch television, while her father went to work. At night, her parents read her all kinds of different tales. Although she always cherished these moments with her parents, she loved staying up to watch movies and sneak out to go on adventures with Lambchops. They would play super hero, where she would always be the hero and Lambchops, her trusty side kick. They referred to themselves as The Main Course.

Meatpie and Lambchops were always lively and happy and both were usually looking to get into trouble. Her parents called it mischief, but they just called it adventures. One morning, her father had left for work and her mother was still sleeping. While finishing breakfast, Meatpie and Lambchops decided to sneak out into the garden to pick a flower for her mother before she woke up.

“Come on, Meatpie, hop on my back and we’ll jump out the kitchen window. Daddy forgot to close it. Now’s our chance!” said Lambchops, pointing at the small window above the kitchen sink.

“Okay, Lambchops, here I go!” said Meatpie, running and leaping onto Lambchops’ back. “Giddy up!” yelled Meatpie, as Lambchops leaped from the dining table onto the counter where they raced over to the sink. With one final, big leap, Lambchops jumped onto the window sill and jumped out of the window into the bush in the backyard.

“Weeee! That was so much fun!” said Meatpie, jumping off Lambchops’ wooly back and wriggling her tiny toes into the cold, dewy grass.

“Meatpie, why didn’t you wear shoes?” asked Lambchops, panting to catch his breath.

“Mommy and Daddy never let me walk on the floor. I want to feel what the ground feels like between my toes!” she said, holding her little, plastic foot up to Lambchops, revealing her dirty toes. They both busted into laughter and began making their way toward the flower beds.

“Meatpie, Mommy likes those yellow ones over there. Did you bring the tool?” asked Lambchops, as they approached the towering flowers.

“No, I thought you had it,” replied Meatpie. “How are we going to get them down?”

“They’re so tall!” said Lambchops, staring up at the yellow lilies.

“Just use your teeth and bite them down!” laughed Meatpie, as she walked up to the flower.

“Well,” said Lambchops, “I guess I could give it a try.” Lambchops walked over to the flower and took the stem between his teeth and began to chew. The yellow flower started to sway in all different directions.

Suddenly, they heard a voice yelling from beyond the flower beds.

“Hey! What are you kids doing?!” the angry voice shouted. Meatpie and Lambchops looked up to find a bumble bee flying toward them in a rage.

---

“That’s my flower! You can’t take it!” yelled the angry bee.

“Who made *you* the boss of my mommy’s flower beds?” yelled Meatpie.

“Get out of here or I’ll sting you!” yelled the angry bee, buzzing about.

“Lambchops, hurry!” said Meatpie to Lambchops. With the one big final chomp, Lambchops snapped the flower stem at its base and the flower fell over.

“No! Lily, my darling!” cried the bee, as she buzzed wildly in the cool morning air. Lambchops grabbed the petals of the flower while Meatpie grabbed the end of the stem. They both began to run back toward their small house.

“Meatpie, run faster!” yelled Lambchops, as he galloped ahead.

“I can’t! I have small legs!” Meatpie shouted, as she flew up and down while holding onto the stem. She looked back as the angry bee darted at them with her stinger ready.

“How are we going to get back to the window?” cried Meatpie in a panic, dodging the angry bee and her stinger, shining in the morning sunshine.

“I’m crazy! I’ll do it and I’m not afraid to die for Lily!” yelled the bee, jabbing into the air around them.

“I’ll help you,” said a jolly voice from above them. Meatpie and Lambchops looked up behind them and saw a big, black bird sweeping down. They both screamed as the bird swept down and grabbed the stem of the flower.

“Hold on tight!” the big bird said, as he lifted the two of them as they both held on tightly to the stem of the flower.

“Oh no you don’t!” said the bee, buzzing toward the bird. The big bird threw Meatpie and Lambchops into the window, both of them tumbling into the kitchen sink.

“My goodness!” cried the mother, startled as she sat at the kitchen table. “What on earth are you two doing?” she said, rushing over to the sink. She looked outside the window.



“Ooh, that bird is fighting with something, we should close this window,” she said, while returning to Meatpie and Lambchops with her concerned face.

“Mommy!” they both shouted.

“We went out to get you this flower, we thought you might like it!” said Meatpie. The mother stood there with her hands on her hips, tapping her foot.

“Oh, I can’t stay mad at you two,” she sighed, while leaning over to pick them up for a hug. “And what a lovely flower! I hope you didn’t go through too much trouble for this,” she said warmly, holding them up to her chest.

“Nothing The Main Course couldn’t handle!” said Lambchops winking at Meatpie. They all laughed and made their way to the comfortable couch.

“Well then, let’s watch our stories now,” said the mother. They all snuggled on the couch and enjoyed the rest of their day.



---

## *How an iPod Saved My Life: The Story of Dave*

by Allison Wilson-Burns

When I was 16 years old, I spent a month and a half in a psychiatric ward. Times were tough and it was tragic. I was young, angsty, and dealing with a severe mental disorder poorly. I could go on about the struggles I faced during that time, but this is not the place for that kind of talk. This is not that story. This story is about Dave.

A lot of times from my life at that point are hazy for me, but that day I can not forget. It was the beginning of November and the air felt heavy with fog and icy rain. I had been at another psych unit, and was being transferred to a long-term facility. When I went outside to my parents' car, it was the first time I felt fresh air in over a week, and yet I knew it would be much longer before I felt it again. Let me paint you a picture of my admission at Children's Recovery Center: Hair messy and overgrown, sweatpants on, and me sulking in the corner with quiet resentment. The overwhelming emotion I felt was rage. I didn't feel like I belonged here in this place and I was scared to be away from home. I cried bitter tears, resisting the hugs from my parents as they admitted me. I was initially told I would be there for two weeks, and then it was two months. I tore at my hair and shook with anger. I moped and restlessly shook my leg with tense energy as my new therapist told me this.

In the midst of this, I crossed paths with someone who would bring light to my misery. I remember our first encounter well. The room we were in was small, windowless, and covered in some cheap wooden paneling that made me feel like a trapped animal. It smelled stale and sterile, perhaps something like the smell of an old building mixed with the antiseptic tang of a hospital.

Dave was a counselor, and he looked to be in his mid-fifties. He wore a polo with outdated, pale washed jeans and sneakers that were too clunky. His hair was white and his mustache was large and in all respects, he looked to be an old man. His eyes, however, contained the vigor of a man much younger and there was a vivaciousness in his step that cut the heaviness of the environment around us.

He asked me conversationally, “So, why do you think you’re here?”

There was a smirk on my face and a small laugh that indicated, *this is bullshit*.

“I’m only here to get my meds adjusted. I should only have to be here for a week. I don’t understand why I need to spend two months here,” I said, with a razor edge of hostility.

I was expecting some clinical, condescending response about what was good for me but instead he replied genuinely without question in his voice, “Very good. You shouldn’t be here long since that’s the case.”

I stared at my hands intently, trying hard to blink away the harsh tears of frustration forming in my eyes and counting the tiles on the floor.

All of a sudden, he asked, “What kind of music do you listen to?”

I felt myself opening up. Slowly at first, then all at once like a sunflower turning to meet the sun’s gaze. We began talking like old friends. It was as if the formal sterility of the room melted away into some comfortable coffee shop. We discussed The Velvet Underground and how strange the Pixies were. We spoke about King Crimson and obscure bands that I didn’t even realize other people knew. He leaned forward with interest and laughed when I cracked a witty remark. For the first time in a long while, I felt as someone was seeing me for who I was. From then on, an understanding was formed. I was myself and I could talk about anything as long as Dave was around.

---

The routine in a psychiatric facility is severely structured. After a sad lunch of an industrialized slab of chicken fried steak eaten with a plastic spork, we had recreation time. "Recreation" was hospital talk for "Tossing around a half-deflated beach ball." The one thing I always looked forward to during this time was Dave. He brought his iPod classic that was loaded with music that all the other kids could take turns playing music from over a speaker. It was pop and rap mostly. Songs that normal fourteen-year olds and sixteen-year olds would want to listen to. To my dismay, there was no music that I wanted to listen to. My music has always been a great comfort to me, and in the hospital, there were no comforts. Dave took my concerns to heart, and downloaded all of my favorite bands onto the iPod. I spent four minutes of my bland and monotonous days listening to my songs and singing along.

That frigid, lightless rec room became my sanctuary in his company. Dave and I would sit on the edges of the room with its dingy tiles and menagerie of group therapy art projects and I would talk to him about all the things I felt nobody else in the world would understand. I told him about my family, my relationship struggles, and all the gory details of my mental illness. He did the same thing he always did. He leaned forward with interest, and he laughed when I cracked a witty remark. His eyes were always smiling, even when his mouth was not, and when he was around, the air somehow felt warmer. Something about him turned this place that had stripped me of my identity into a home and his presence turned my stained tee shirt into a warm sweater. I was not simply a patient. I was a multi-faceted kaleidoscope that only Dave bothered to view. He made my humanity feel known when he looked me in the eyes as I spoke.

Dave, as all the other friends I had made while I was there, rejoiced for me when I was discharged.

"Best of luck to you. Be good," he said to me, with a friendly twinkle in his eyes.

---

This was a generic phrase that had been said to me many times, but his words carried the sweetness and good comfort of a warm summer breeze. A year or two later, I was in Wal-Mart one afternoon, and saw him in the gardening section. My hair had grown out and my face had become healthy and freckled, and the childish hostility that I once carried had dissipated into a calm contentment. His mustache was still large, his hair just as white and his blue eyes just as kind. I saw him and I gave a gentle wave and a smile. He did the same. As always, Dave saw me, and I saw Dave, and as we locked eyes, I think he knew that everything was just fine.

---

## *Near Fall*

by Sean T. King

*F*ish, is the first thing I think of my opponent before we step on the mat. His body is pink and doughy; mine is lean and mean. His skin is moisturized; mine has hairs sprouting over my singlet and a face that I shave every day to avoid penalization. How this kid became varsity, I don't know. He is definitely a freshman, so am I, but I'm a varsity caliber wrestler where this kid is clearly... something less. He's probably a nice kid, but this is a wrestling match, and my coach, AKA my father, watches and judges from my corner.

I grab the flabby freshman who impersonates as competition by the back of his neck and arm. As I pull him in, an un-bathed odor comes with him. I chuck him down to my feet on the cellophane rubber mat. He reacts exactly as I plan, and with a yelp, pops his head up. *Slap!* My bicep connects with his cheek and ear as I throw my arm across the room. I pinch his tricep and throw him over my hips. During a wrestling match, you can usually feel your opponent's weight, but, there's this small window, this very brief second in time, if you can get them airborne that the gravity and intensity in the atmosphere disappears and everything around you becomes tranquil. You are in complete control. There's no feeling like it in the world.

We land on the mat with a loud thud. His back is immediately flat. The referee slaps the mat and blows his whistle. I have won. I stride to the center of the ring, kneel down, shed my Velcro color band, and toss it in the ref's direction. The ref takes hold of my wrist; the kid still sulking over to the center of the ring. *Really, kid? What did you honestly expect?* Usually, a time keeper comes out with a scrunched, rolled, and taped up rag that they hit the referee with to signal the time has expired. Today, I don't plan on needing them at all.

Finally, my opponent and I shake hands and the referee raises mine, declaring me the victor. I jog over to the young, clean-shaven opposing coach and shake his hand. "You could have let it last a little longer." The coach shakes his face with disapproval. *Have I done something wrong? It's not my fault the kid sucks.*

My defeated opponent shakes my father's hand, who smiles graciously and gives the kid his famous, encouraging slap on the back. I return to my father and he congratulates me, but before I can get a word out to rejoice with him, he begins critiquing me. *Right on cue, Dad.* From what little I gather he appears to side with the coach.

"You should have let the match go on longer," my father pesters me in a raised whisper. I sit on the bottom row of the gymnasium bleachers, remove my head gear, and pull down the straps of my singlet. I look up at my austere father as he continues to lecture me that the kid is a freshman and how I have to work harder and how if my opponent were a better wrestler I would not win so easily. His lecture makes my fist and jaw clench and his words become unintelligible to me.

"I won," I interrupt, speaking over the wrestling filled gymnasium. "I pinned him in like thirty seconds." *Isn't that what you wanted?* "Can't you just be happy for me?"

My father only replies with silence. I pull my shirt over my head and by the time my head comes out my father has vanished.

By the end of the day, I have a heavy, gold medal hung on a blue ribbon around my neck, but my father, with his gray goatee and blue hat, which is as attached to his head as his ears, continues to torment me with lecture. I got first place. I guess it is foolish of me to expect us to be able to celebrate a victory.

It is the Tuesday before the dual meet against Freedom High. I wrestle around in practice with my twin brother Shane, who if my parents can be believed is my fraternal twin brother; if popular opinion is the determinant,



we are identical. The day before a dual meet we never give it a hundred percent because we want to reserve our energy for the match.

On the way home from practice our father tells us, “Always practice as if you are wrestling the best.” I bring up Max Ryabtsev, another freshman, but a junior varsity wrestler. Every week he challenges me for my varsity 125 pound position and every week it is the day before I have to wrestle in a dual meet. It’s not his fault, that’s just the day the challenge matches fit into the schedule. Regardless, I still have to waste energy on him. Every week I win, but that doesn’t stop him. I respect his perseverance, but it doesn’t help either of us to waste energy on a challenge match of which we already know the outcome. I tell as much to my father, but of course, he defends Max’s right to challenge me.

When my twin brother, my father, and I return home, my father requests that my brother and I practice for a few more hours in the garage. My garage used to hold cars, but not anymore. Now it holds anguish. My father has turned it into a wrestling room. Mats bolted on the walls and covering the floor just like our school wrestling room. My dad also contributes a wrestling dummy, just in case my brother or I are not present or able to wrestle; the dummy ensures there is no excuse. Every other wrestler puts in their three hours of practice and gets to go home and rest, but not for us. We are “Kings.” Not in the meaning of nobility, but of our family name. My father always emphasizes how important the King legacy is.

Well, tonight I’m not having it. I have taken first at a tournament this weekend. That’s not good enough. Even when I pin an opponent my father wants me to stretch out the match and wrestle longer. In practice he demands that I wrestle harder with my brother like it is a real match, even though it’s not and if I exhaust myself too much I won’t be able to give a hundred percent for the dual meet. I also have to deal with a futile challenge match every week. And now at home, when sane people eat dinner and relax from a long day of work, Shane and I are punished and guilted into taxing ourselves even more.

---

“No,” I say. “I’m done for the day.” *Cue the speech.* He presents the scenario of what real champions are doing after practice.

“They’re champions because they put in the extra time,” he always says. I don’t allow his masked insults to get to me. But he has convinced my brother to participate, either through guilt or reason, I can’t say. Shane makes his way through the darkness and into the garage. As I head into the house I hear thudding from Shane tossing around the dummy.

The next day the bright gymnasium lights and clamors of shouts bounce off the hardwood floor and bleachers. The maroon and silver fans of Freedom High School opposing the blue and gold of the Warriors, divided by a giant blue mat in the middle of the gym. The mat is empty, except for the green and red ankle bands waiting in the middle for their hosts.

An assembly of Falcons face down us Warriors from across the cellophane battlefield. The shouts begin to soften as I walk down my team of gladiators. Their faces are red as they slap my back, behind, and headgear around my ears. They chant encouragements that come through clearer than the barrage of screams from the bleachers. At the end of the wall of Warriors, my father and Head Coach Mayes equip me with words of confidence.

We are down one point as a team. Before the dual meet a random weight is pulled. The weight pulled is the first match of the night and it goes up and cycles back down. The first weight pulled is the 130 pound weight class, my brother’s, which is one weight above mine. He wins his match. But because it cycles through the weight classes, it puts mine as the last match of the night; and the wrestling gods, with all their cruelty and jest, determine that the entire dual meet, not just my individual match, but the victory of the team will depend on me.

I visualize in my mind how the match will go. I will throw him in a head-and-arm and be done with it. It is simple and deadly. It is my favorite move, my best move. There is no coming back from it when I have somebody in it. I have to beat him. If I beat him, I win, and the team wins. Everyone’s eyes are on me. Everyone is relying on me.

---

My opponent is Chris Cooper, two years my elder, half a foot taller, much lankier, and about a hundred shades darker. I have visualized my victory. Now is the time for execution. I step onto the mat. We approach the center, put our ankle bands on, and shake hands. The whistle blows.

A wrestling match is a strange thing. Time simultaneously rushes by and slows down. You can't remember the move you just did, but you know every move you are going to execute, whether reflexively or cognitively. A blend of what is and what was becomes a third opponent.

Two and a half periods later, my plan is failing. I haven't been able to hit him in the head-and-arm. *He knows I'm looking for it. He's not going to let me get it.* I take him down in a fireman's carry, but it is too easy. I'm on top and in control, but I know time is short. I look up at the clock. Less than thirty seconds remain. He is up by one point. *So that's his plan.* He is going to stall it out. I have to turn him to get near fall points; otherwise I will lose. I can taste sweat. Muffled and distorted shouts from every direction fill my plastic-muffled ears. Whether the language is English or some foreign tongue, I cannot say. Blood made of fire scorches through my veins and muscles, numbing my joints. I manage to get my left arm around his head. *Now the leg.* I grab his leg and desperately reach my hands together. *I have to clasp my hands.* If I can lock my hands together, he won't be able to break them and then all I have to do is turn him. I feel his body resisting, but I grunt my way to success. I have a lock. The time keeper approaches, brandishing her rolled up rag. She starts towards the referee, who is down on all fours, prepped with whistle in mouth.

Time is short. I only have a matter of seconds to finish this. I dip my head and dig it into Cooper's side. I drive his head towards his knee. I fight to get his head tucked under the mat, because at that point he will roll over as easily as an egg. Little by little I feel him start to weaken; inch by inch his head starts to tuck; second by second I get closer to victory. I'm so close. *Just.. one...more...* A screeching whistle pierces my ears.

The match is over. I have lost. My team has lost.

I sit curled up against a wall of cold lockers. I smother my red eyes and sweaty head in my arms and knees. I have thrown my headgear across the filthy, tiled floor. My emotions combat each other as I disintegrate into bitter anguish. What I sought, I lost. What I was, I am no longer. What I dreamt before is now a nightmare. I am a loser, a failure.

I hear the sound of heavy doors open. I hear two voices. I recognize them. They are my father and Head Coach Mayes. I can't make out what they are saying, but then Mayes says something that comes through with perfect frequency. "He has nothing to be ashamed of."

*Is he talking about me? He can't be.* My eyes are on the pool of tears forming on the tile between my feet. I hear them turn the corner. I can't look at them. "That's the best match I've ever seen you wrestle," Mayes says. I hear his footsteps depart.

My father sits down next to me. I just want him to leave. I don't want to hear his lectures. Not now. He puts his arm around me. He pulls me in close. He tells me he is proud of me. He assures me that everything is alright; and he is genuine. After all the matches I have won I have never gotten this form of positive feedback. Typically his feedback is criticism and punishment. But now here he sits, supporting me. Then it hits me. He isn't just *now* starting to support me. He has *always* supported me. What I perceived to be his dissatisfaction and cruelty, my dad meant as support and wisdom.

My father is proud because I gave it a hundred percent, but I lost because I didn't challenge myself before and leading up to the match. Champions do not take shortcuts. They push themselves everyday as hard as they can, so when the time comes they can claim victory.

Later, my brother and I talk about the upcoming tournament that weekend while we practice our moves and throw around the wrestling dummy in the garage.

---

## *Hi, Who Are You?*

by Brooklyn Gonzalez

I had been working as a housekeeper for Crescent Care Center for about six months before I met Shirley. Of course, working as a housekeeper in a nursing home hadn't been my dream job. Far from it. However, in that small Oklahoma town there wasn't much else to choose from when it came to employment. It was either that or the grocery store. It just so happened that the nursing home called me back first.

Crescent Care Center was not impressive in the slightest. It was a rundown building that hadn't been remodeled since my grandmother had worked there years ago. The tiles were dull and dated with scuff marks. The furniture had seen better days and the chipping paint job gave away the building's age. Despite its looks, it had an inviting atmosphere. It was small, it had two halls in total and about twenty-five residents at any given time.

I quickly found my place at the nursing home. It was a bland job, pushing around a cart full of trash and dingy mop water, but it was simple and it didn't require much thought. The job consisted of mopping the floors, taking out the trash, cleaning the bathrooms, wiping up spilled coffee, and making small talk. I managed to make friends right away, not only with the staff but with the residents as well.

Crescent Care was a quiet and calm setting, just like you would expect any nursing home to be. That is until the day Shirley moved in. She was a plump elderly woman with a wrinkled face and white hair. She wore glasses and she had a couple of missing teeth in the front, it always looked like she was snarling. She was non-compliant from the moment she walked through the doors.

The first thing I learned about Shirley was that she had Alzheimer's, the second thing I learned was that she was not happy. "Please take me home!" she yelled. Instantly my heart broke for her. "What kind of family leaves their poor confused mother in a strange nursing home?" I thought angrily as I watched the nurse try to comfort her. "Please, I wanna go home," Shirley continued to cry desperately.

This innocent, vulnerable, and defenseless lady was so devastated and lost. I just couldn't understand at first. That inability to see why the family had made the decision to place her in a nursing home quickly vanished after a couple hours. When Shirley realized that nobody was going to allow her to go home, she decided that her best course of action would be to repeatedly ram her walker into the glass double doors while she yelled profanities. I was in love with her from that moment on.

Shirley was constantly trying to leave the building. She would wait in the lobby until somebody opened the doors and then she would shuffle over with her walker in an attempt to get to the doors before they closed and locked once more. Along with trying to run away, a few of Shirley's other favorite activities were swearing and making bomb threats. Or threatening to burn the nursing home down, or threatening to shoot us all.

The other residents would stare in disbelief when Shirley would drop the F word three to four times in any given sentence. Then the S word and every other word in between. I adored her but I could tell the nursing staff had started to lose their patience with her. For them it was no longer heartbreaking when she cried to go home or screamed wildly in the showers. Instead it was becoming exasperating for them.

I think that's where some of my love for Shirley came from. While the CNAs saw a combative resident, I still saw a sweet little old lady who wanted to go home. At the same time, though, I didn't have to bathe her, feed her, or fight with her to get dressed. I still had plenty of patience for her. On many occasions I would stop what I was doing to sit with her in the lobby. I would always say, "Hello, Shirley, how are you today?"

---

She would look at me and say, “Hi, who are you?” I would tell her my name and she would ask me a number of questions, always the same. “Do you know how to get out of here? They won’t let me leave!” she said outraged. I could only shake my head sadly at her.

“No, they won’t let me leave either,” I would tell her, not wanting to be the bad person. She would sigh, get up from the sofa, and shuffle back down the halls. She would do this while I ate lunch, while I cleaned the dining room, and while I mopped the halls. Sometimes she would even ask me if she could go home with me instead. “Of course you can come home with me,” I’d say, knowing that she’d forget my promise by the time I was meant to clock out.

While Shirley’s behavior grew worse, my love for her grew stronger. It took some time but I finally discovered something she enjoyed. Food. Every day I would put a dollar in the vending machine and buy her peanut butter cups. We’d sit at the table and I’d watch her eat them with a smile on my face. I didn’t care that she didn’t know who I was or that she’d never remember my name, just watching her happy and distracted for a moment was enough for me.

Shirley liked to rip down any holiday decorations that were put up and she also liked to infuriate the other residents while they played bingo on Fridays. “Bingo!” she would yell from across the dining room. “I25, nobody likes this game!” she yelled, not even playing anymore. I found it hilarious; however, I seemed to be the only one. Even my best work friend, the second housekeeper and a girl around my age, was tired of Shirley’s antics.

“Shirley’s in the front hall causing mayhem again,” Lydia mumbled one day when we went out for a smoke break. “I swear to God I’m gonna open the door and let her out,” she mumbled. I laughed but in the back of my head I was terrified. I could only imagine Shirley outside. There were so many dangers for her, cars, getting lost, any number of things could hurt her. Lydia’s comment wasn’t nearly as funny as I let on.

When the weeks turned to months, Shirley's agitation only escalated. When I came into work one day I realized Shirley was nowhere to be found. When I asked I couldn't believe the answer I was faced with. "We had to call the police yesterday to restrain her. They took her to the hospital, she's gonna stay in the mental ward for a while," one of the CNAs said.

"Are you serious? You guys had to call the police on a woman with dementia in her late seventies?" I asked almost angrily.

"We aren't allowed to restrain any resident, if a resident needs to be restrained then the police have to be called," she said with a shrug. Part of me understood, it was protocol, it was to keep not only them safe but Shirley as well. But another part of me was frustrated at their frustrations. This woman couldn't hurt anyone if she tried. Was it really necessary to get the police involved? I felt like they just wanted her in the hospital so that they could have a break from her.

Looking back now, though, I see how miserable Shirley must have been living in a constant state of agitation, restlessness, and confusion. At the time my viewpoint on things was different. Regardless of how I felt, Shirley was in the hospital for weeks and the nursing home was silent once again. Nobody was screaming or swearing or threatening our lives. It was just as bland and as boring as it had been when I started.

Finally, the day came when Shirley got to come back. I was elated, I made sure I had cleaned her room first, that her bed was made, and that everything was in order. Except the Shirley that returned was not that same woman who had left. The spark in her eyes was gone and she was no longer using her walker but was in a wheelchair instead. I could tell that they put her on some kind of sedative. She reminded me of a zombie. Her eyes were dull and her expression was blank. My heart sank but I smiled brightly at her. "Hey, Shirley, I'm so glad you're back. I love you," I said softly.

"Hi, who are you?" she asked tiredly. She rarely ever said "I love you back" and I knew today would not be one of those days. Shirley's daughter



came to visit for the first time since she'd dropped her mother off. I had to stay out of the dining for a bit, I knew I wouldn't have been able to stop myself from giving her a dirty look. I was still angry at them for leaving Shirley. I often asked myself why they could not have been less selfish. I would never put my mother in a nursing home. How could they?

Shirley slept more and more as time passed. I would find her asleep in the dining room, still sitting in her wheelchair. Her hair was thinning and she had certainly slowed down. Not entirely, though. She still shouted and swore, she would even call the staff a handful of names. Shirley was different but inside of her was still that familiar spark I had found so endearing.

When Shirley was awake she would ask to be pushed around in her wheelchair. She'd want to go down the halls, then back up the halls, then to the lobby, then back to the dining room. It was almost never ending with her. There were very few times that she was content with where she was. But we made the most of it. Every so often, I would take a break from cleaning only to sit with Shirley in the dining room.

Nobody seemed to mind that I had stopped cleaning only to visit with a resident. I was keeping her occupied and she wasn't making demands or yelling, it was a win-win. I'd find Legos and Play-Doh for her to tinker with. At first she would always seem interested but she quickly grew bored with it. The one thing that seemed to hold her attention for longer than five minutes was coloring.

I would pull her out a couple crayons and find a coloring book for her to work. I would sit with her for a bit, watching her work. Her artwork was made up mainly of scribbles and single colors. They were never inside the lines but I enjoyed them anyway. One day when she was coloring the outline of a princess I pointed down to the picture. "She's like you, you're a princess," I said before grinning.

Shirley looked at me with an almost pleased look on her aged face. "Then bring me my sword," she said and I smiled from ear to ear at her.

She wasn't just a princess but she was a warrior. Fearless and brave despite everything.

After that day I fondly started to refer to her as a sleepy princess. When she was awake she was loud and brash, shouting and putting up a fight. I noticed, though, that she was awake less and less. I tried to push my worry away and instead focus on the upcoming holidays. Every couple of days the people in charge of recreation would have the residents do an activity. Even if it was just arts and crafts.

Of course, Shirley was included, not necessarily happy about it but present. I watched as all of the residents made Christmas ornaments. In Shirley's case she simply watched as a CNA made her a sparkly reindeer decoration. "Isn't that pretty?" the CNA asked.

Shirley, looking incredibly bored, shook her head in disagreement. "No, not really," she replied.

Christmas came and went and so did Shirley's birthday. I think she slept right through the whole day. She didn't seem to notice when bright red balloons were tied to the handles of her wheelchair. I knew things were getting bad when I brought her a peanut butter cup one day. I had unwrapped it for her like always and she started to eat but she was struggling. It was like she was forgetting how to chew. Chocolate was all over her face and hands and I quickly found a washcloth to clean her up with. She couldn't even manage to eat half of it.

Shirley was moved to the feeder table not long after but she didn't eat nearly as much as she once did. Food was no longer her source of enjoyment and I found it harder to pull her away from her confusion and unhappiness. She stayed in bed a lot and I visited her in her room as often as I could.

It was a late March morning when I went to visit her one day. She had been moved to her own room, no longer sharing her space with a roommate. I assumed it was because we had a bit of extra space. I didn't want to think anything more of it. Elvis Presley was playing softly from a radio next to her bed. The warm rays of early spring were seeping in from the blinds.

“Hello, Shirley, how are you today?” I asked, reaching out to hold her hand.

“I’m alright,” she mumbled, her eyes blinking sleepily at me.

For a while I just watched her rest, pulling the blankets up around her and hoping that she was comfortable. When I knew I had to get back to cleaning the halls I pressed a kiss to her cheek. “You rest, sleepy princess. I’ll see you later, I love you,” I said softly, no longer thinking that she was awake.

I was surprised when she opened her eyes and looked at me. “I love you, too,” Shirley said before rambling off to something completely different. Her words didn’t make sense after that but I was happy. She said she loved me and that was more than I had hoped for.

When I came in the next morning I stopped by Shirley’s room after clocking in to say hello. I felt a wave of fear wash over me when I saw her room empty. It wasn’t just the empty room that scared me but the lack of bedding. The room looked like she’d never been there.

I dragged myself to the nearest CNA and I asked quietly where she was. Abbie gave me a sad look. I already knew but I needed to hear her say it, I had to know for sure. “Shirley passed away early this morning, I’m sorry,” she said gently. I nodded silently before wandering off to the janitor’s closet. What was I meant to do?

Did they expect me to act like I wasn’t upset? No, I wasn’t her family, no she probably didn’t even know my name, but I loved her. And suddenly she was gone and I didn’t want to clean the halls. I didn’t want to empty the trash or clean the bathrooms. I just wanted to sit on a pile of mops behind a closed door and feel sad.

I don’t know how I managed that day, I just went through the motions. Life in the nursing home continued on. Call lights still lit up, breakfast and lunch were still served, the world didn’t stop like I thought it might. Like I wanted it to. If only for a minute, I wanted everyone to stop and realize that Shirley wasn’t here anymore. I wanted them to feel like I did.

I had finished cleaning everyone's room that day but hers. I had saved it for last just because I hadn't wanted to go back inside. I don't know why; it wasn't scary or horrid. It was just mainly empty, all of her personal things had been picked up by her family. I knew eventually my supervisor would ask me to deep clean this room for the next resident but I took my time glancing over it. That's when it caught my eye. The family had forgotten something. Or well, they hadn't wanted it or cared enough to take it with them. It was a sparkly reindeer decoration. We weren't ever meant to take anything from a resident but I thought just this one time it would be alright.

There was a lot I didn't understand when Shirley moved into Crescent Care Center. The biggest thing I learned is that Alzheimer's is one of the worst diseases in my opinion. It stole so much from Shirley. Then I learned that her family wasn't selfish, they were hurting. Just like it hurt me to watch Shirley's disease progress, it hurt them even more. Being a caretaker is hard, it was hard for a staffed nursing home with twenty-four-hour care. It was nearly impossible for a small family with jobs and children. Perhaps it was too painful to visit.

Then I realized that it wasn't just me who missed her, the whole staff did. But while my job gave me the luxury of dwelling most of the day, their jobs didn't. They had other residents to take care of, they had to get food cooked and laundry done. They couldn't slow down. People still needed their care.

I never knew Shirley before she lost most of her memories. I didn't know what it was like to have a competent conversation with her or hear her laugh. I didn't know her real favorite foods, her favorite colors, or her favorite sweetest memories. But I know I loved her for who she was. She taught me more than I thought possible. She taught me that loving someone for who they are is more important than loving them for who they were or what they could be. She taught me that sometimes love isn't verbal, sometimes love is smiles and hand holding and peanut butter cups.

---

To me, Shirley was perfect. She was perfect even when she was threatening to burn the building down and she was perfect when she was swearing at me. I think about her fairly often but I'm at peace with things. I know that she finally made it home.

---

## *Just Another Day*

by Elizabeth Rogers

It's just another day. Wake up. Get dressed. Cut fabric off the bolts. Run the cash register. Selling quilting fabric at Canton Trade Days is fun... but, really, it's just another day. It's not my Sweet Sixteenth. It's just the first of November.

That is what I tell myself as I stare up at the ceiling of the travel trailer, talking myself into getting out of bed. The trailer rocks a little, and I recognize Mamma's footsteps. She is already dressing and gathering what we need for the day in Canton. Daddy is probably sipping his coffee and skimming the headlines. And my little brother is still asleep in the bunk above me. Eventually I resign myself to the return of real life with the sun's rising and toss my cozy blankets to the side, cringing at the rush of chilly air.

I try to ignore all the things tumbling through my head so fast that I am no longer thinking in words, but in feelings and blurred images. *Three years here. No friends. Still no friends. One friend hours away might call me. But I never get to see her. And it's not the same. It will never be the same.* Sometimes, in the process of getting ready, I manage to stop thinking. Still, inside my head, it is like the trailer. If no one moves, the trailer is still. If none of my thoughts can move, my mind is still.

The drive to Canton takes half an hour, and in the backseat of the pickup there is nothing to distract me from thinking. *Other girls have a Sweet Sixteenth. They have friends. Maybe some boy who asks them on a date. But I've never been "other girls." Other girls don't bottle feed goats. They don't know how to fix an electric fence. Or butcher deer or wild hogs. They don't know what it's like to have a horse who's a more loyal and attentive friend to you than any person ever has been. Maybe I'm glad I'm not "other girls." Who needs a Sweet Sixteenth, anyway?*

The minute my dad parks the truck behind our booth space in the metal pavilion, everything feels different. There is no time to think anymore. This is show time. The first half hour is a quiet bustle of vendors pulling off dust covers, plugging in lights, scarfing down breakfast before the customers come. Then the real activity begins. Customers begin trickling into the pavilions. Concession stands begin frying everything imaginable. The air is dotted with music from vendors here and there, blending with the sounds of talk and laughter. As the sun reaches higher, the buildings begin to smell of concrete and heated metal, mixing with undefined scents that are simultaneously sweet and spicy and earthy. Occasionally a brisk wind from outside swirls its way from one open end of the building to the other, and all the booths seem to shiver along with the people.

On a Trade Days weekend, Canton seems to be sprinkled with magic. This day is no different. But really, it is still just another ordinary day. It is still just the first day of November.

Half of the day passes. I help customers coordinate fabrics for a quilt. I cut fabric off the bolts. I ring up sales on the cash register. At one point, or maybe two, I slip away from the booth to pet the chocolate brown poodle across the way. I convince myself that we are friends because he offers to hold my paw as we sit side by side, watching people go past.

Sometime in the afternoon, Mamma goes to the concession stand to get a drink to bring back to the booth. We are southern to a fault, so, though the weather is crisp, Mamma brings back two big Styrofoam cups of sweet iced tea. When Mamma sets the tea down on the cutting table, there are a few minutes of silent activity, and then Mamma asks me if I would go get us a drink.

“Mamma...” I say, wondering how she forgot so soon, “You *just* got back with the tea...”

“...Right!” she says, after an awkward pause. “But I’d like a Dr. Pepper.”

I stare at her blankly.

“Silly girl!” she says, waving a five-dollar bill for me to take. “Just go get the drink!” Her eyes sparkle, and I know there will be no further discussion. Mamma has decided, and that is the end of it.

With a laugh and a playful headshake at Mamma, I take the money and go to Horse Creek Concessions—halfway down our building, out the enormous roll-up door on the side, through the other building, and right out into the sunshine. I could swear the sunshine in Canton has a scent, somehow.

“Hi, Rachel!” says the lady taking orders at the window. Everyone at Horse Creek knows my whole family after a few Trade Days weekends. I think my family single-handedly makes iced tea their best-selling item.

I order the Dr. Pepper, laughing about how Mamma was *just there* not ten minutes ago.

The lady laughs. “Well, you know how moms are! Oh, hey...I have something I want to show you,” she says. “Follow me around to the side.”

Dr. Pepper in hand, I walk around to the side of the trailer where all the fryers and griddles are set up. This is where the real cooking happens. She waves for me to come into the edge of the cooking area and shouts, “Hey, guys!”

Everyone drops what they are doing. The sizzling goes almost completely quiet, leaving only the faintest sound of bubbling-hot oil. All the scraping, all the busyness, all the rush to cook orders...silent. And then they start singing.

My own throat tries to strangle me, and my cheeks burn red while everything goes blurry.

“Happy birthday, dear Rachel,” they sing, “happy birthday to you,” and all I can do as they finish clapping is choke over a simple “thank you.”



---

The work quickly resumes. The oil sizzles again as the battered foods submerge. The metallic scraping of the kitchen tools dances in the brisk air. For everyone else, real life continues.

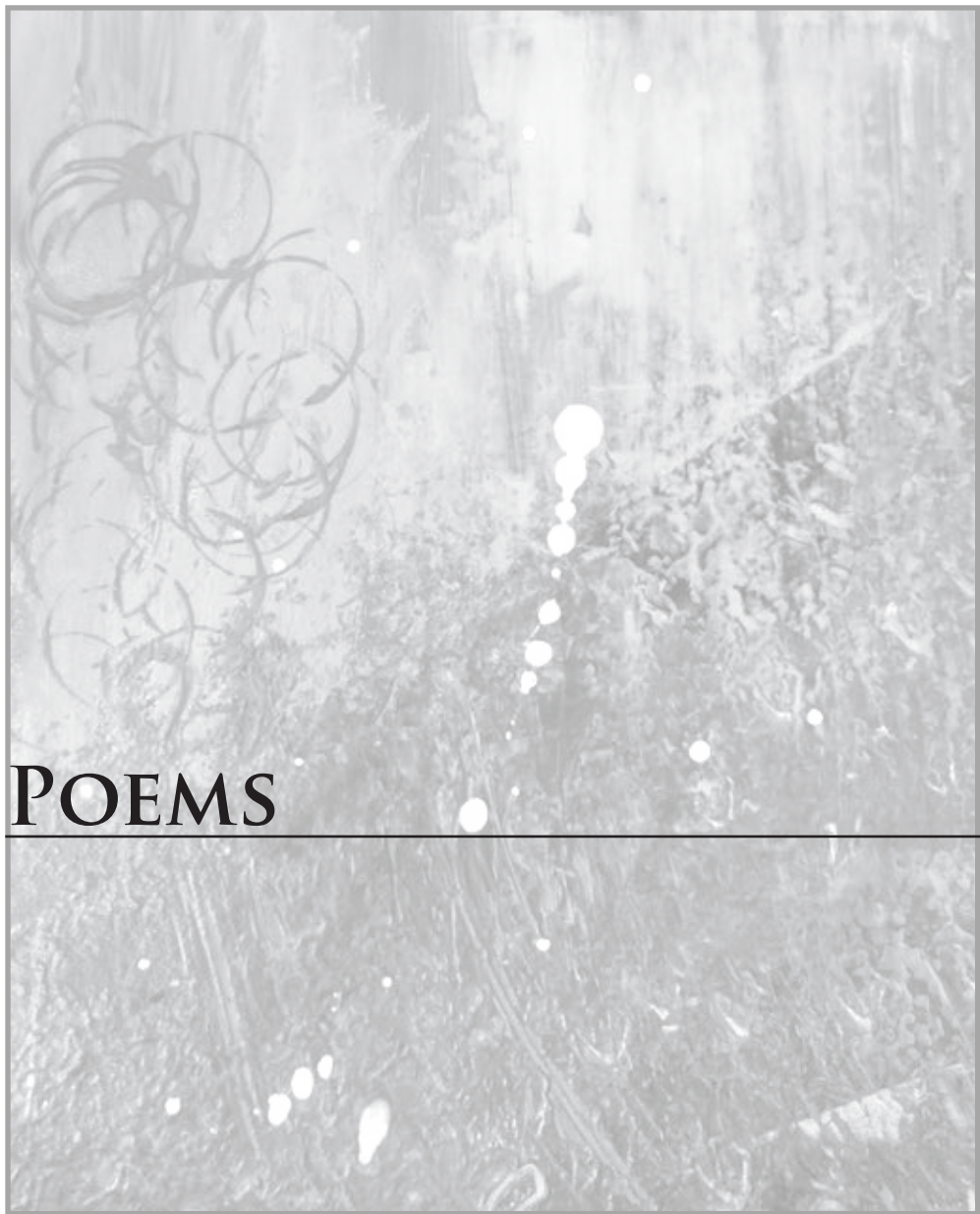
I am stunned, speechless, walking back to the booth without seeing or hearing any of the constant bustle of Trade Days. For me, real life is still frozen. Even my thoughts are completely paralyzed for the first time all day. The only motion I can feel is my pounding heart.

When I get back to our booth, Mamma is beaming at me. I hand her the Dr. Pepper with a distracted laugh at her silly ploy to get me to the concession stand.

“They sang happy birthday to me,” I say, trying to hide the wobble in my voice. “They all stopped working and sang to me.”

I am finally pulled back into reality when a customer brings a stack of fabric bolts to the cutting table. I start measuring, then pull the silver shears out of the drawer behind the table. Suddenly, with the numbers on the measuring stick in front of me, I can think again, and I feel a smile curving the corners of my lips.

*It's just another day. Just another twenty-four hours full of tiny reasons to wait for the extraordinary to appear in the ordinary. It's just the first day of November. Just my Sweet Sixteenth.*



---

## *Some Feelings Refuse Translation*

by Terri Lynn Cummings

How hard the pen scurries  
to explain his feelings  
while the mind tosses memories  
on a table like poker chips

He considers the eyes  
of his mother locked inside  
a camera. Joy hints the air  
but it is not there—

only the leaf of a promise  
fallen from a tree or a diamond  
flawed yet expected to mend  
itself, each one monumental

as seeds in winter. How easily  
a mirror swallows the years  
and prayer forms the root word—  
despair

---

## *Ode to Jefferson*

**By Camirye T. Brewin**

The gentle way our bodies fit,  
The graceful form with which you sit's  
    Deserving of an ode—  
    While weathering these roads.

Your arm wraps 'round my chest and back  
Your Alpha's shelter in this pack  
    But how far could I go  
    Without my Beta's flow?

Your melodies and ringing songs  
Can never sound out weak and wrong—  
    Your six-stringed garden grows  
    The sweetest playing shows.

If ever others groan and glare  
Against your honored title bared,  
    Remember flowers pink  
    By other names smell sweet.

So, yes, my beautiful guitar  
Don't let their raucous drown you out—  
Your bluesy swells will carry far  
    Above the crowds.

---

## *Understood*

**by Angeles Maestre**

You ask me why I am weird,  
Or why I am so quiet.  
I am often lost in thought,  
Or memory, or feeling,  
So I may appear dazed.  
I promise, I am okay.

It is that there are times  
When a dull light,  
The way metal looks,  
Or a painful silence  
Reminds me,  
On the way back,  
From my first family vacation  
My family of immigrants was detained  
At a border inspection station.

I awoke in the back of the van  
With a strange man in a uniform  
Standing next to my mother  
As she picked me up  
To carry me in this small,  
Bland building where we sat  
In an empty lobby for hours.  
I listened to this unfamiliar silence:  
My family was usually so lively,  
Even obnoxious at times,  
But here, we sat in fear.  
Now I understand  
Why I always need noise  
To feel comfortable.

---

I was too young to understand,  
But I knew this was wrong,  
Especially when they placed  
Five of us all in one steel room  
With one toilet, a sink, and one small bed.  
I had never seen anything like it,  
But now I understand  
Why being in a small, silver elevator  
Gives me such an unsafe feeling.  
Occasionally, they would give us  
Ham and cheese Hot Pockets  
So, now, every time I taste one  
I am reminded  
Of the discovery of what my life  
Was set up to be from then on,  
Of how good my family was  
With heavy weighted secrets,  
And the ultimate epiphany that  
I am not normal.

This is not something  
I say on the first date  
As it is my baggage  
As some would call it.  
With this stab in heart,  
Pitiful news,  
You may be thinking,  
“Now I understand.”

---

## *Peonies*

by Betsy Blair

Peonies are the flowers I have always loved  
though I've never owned the perennial myself, other  
than the one behind the rented colonial that bloomed in small explosions.  
Like carnations, but less common—no space between when held together  
then dying one by one—those blooms, like watching themselves  
bloom and die off until their time was up, or was it quite yet? *Semper Fidelis*

Like that white t-shirt someone took a magic marker to and wrote, *Semper Fidelis*  
on the man-like trumpets or kazoos, announcing the arrival of my beloved.  
How ironic, like the peony bush down the block I coveted, the neighbors  
themselves  
Walking from car to house without pausing to notice another  
summer announcing itself—peonies unaware of foreclosure, keeping it together.  
Perennial, and immune to the chill as well as small, political explosions.

Like those large-breed dogs who cover an acre in one or two jubilant explosions  
They bound about, boom and die, leaving much too soon. *Semper Fidelis*  
I guess they're ponying around up there now in heaven, together.  
Peonies, that litter the ground with children's clouds. I'd love  
to have a wedding bouquet, or in the event of another  
funeral be covered with them head to toe, so others may think to themselves

"She was a like a prize horse, a dependable performer," I tell myself,  
not like those mean ponies that balked and cut away, or bucked in shitty  
explosions.  
Not like that ex-girlfriend who made a quilt of his concert t-shirts, or the other  
ex-girlfriend who asked if she could keep her cell phone at his service. *Semper Fidelis*  
Peonies are the pom-poms of the cheerleaders of love,  
Not that I ever was one, of course, but I tell myself that lie now to hold it all  
together.

That man's ashes rest in a box under a bald cypress—we're no longer together.  
Sunflowers were placed upon his grave. *Sunflowers!* Those others, themselves  
so common as to place those hippie flowers on the grave of my beloved.  
Those others, who picked a cross necklace off a dying man, then fought—such  
explosions  
were far beneath me. Peonies bloomed once again and became me. *Semper  
Fidelis*  
though since his death I have not found another.

Most of the bars he frequented have been razed, other  
than The Blue Note, where family and friends gather annually together  
to cry and drink and drink and drink. *Semper Fidelis*  
How could I be jealous? White peonies like gibbous moons, themselves  
now shadowed with decaying petals, like the smoke that lingers from scattered  
explosions.  
Peonies so remote now and undeserving of this much love—

And yet, I still drive through old haunts hoping to see them,  
those blooms upon the one I coveted—cloaked now by a shrub, not one bud  
awaiting explosion  
like a razed cocktail bar, like his grave shaded by bald cypress, like the absence  
of love.



---

## *My Soul*

**by Ryan Schwimmer**

I don't know how you slice my heart into  
These little pieces, torn from end to end.  
I try to put them back together, send  
My love as whole as it should be, to you.  
But ev'ry time I write, I find my mind  
Just searching for the words to use to make  
These feelings transform into words, not break  
Apart within a page, stanza, or line.  
I start to stress when I can't fit the words  
In little packages for you to read.  
I can't just simply plant it like a seed,  
My love deserves a rose, a ring, the world.  
At last, the paper has been filled—my goal.  
My love will fin'ly have what's hers—my soul.

---

## *Blocked*

by Catherine Katey Johnson

I go outside  
to take my German Shepherd out  
for a midnight stroll,  
to drop a deuce  
and I find a pickup,  
blue light alarmed Silverado curbside,  
behind a four-door Buick-ish, ninety-nine, I'd say,  
behind a red extended-cab Ram pickup  
and that's all well and good,  
but the Buick is blocking,  
*completely* blocking my driveway.  
I can't get out if I want  
and my daughter can't get in.  
I mean the nerve of some—  
So I go next door  
knock on the house  
and yell, "Hey! Move the cars!"  
Should I have to go over there  
and tell them to move the cars?  
Of course not!  
I am late night in my robe pissed.  
"Hey!" I say louder.  
"Move. The. Car!"

Four guys come out.  
Their cards are in their hands.  
Nobody trusts anyone any more.  
It's not like Black Jack in the good ol' days  
and I don't give a rat's behind anyways.  
I just want to have a place  
for the ambulance to pull up

---

if my pacemaker goes south  
and a place for my daughter to park  
unless she gets lucky.  
The nerve of some guys.  
Blocking my drive!

Crap!  
I bet my Cream-o-Wheat is burnt, now.

---

## *Lessons from a Seed*

by Elizabeth Rogers

I sat alone in the wind  
trying to be okay when,  
for a moment,  
a seed I had never met  
alighted on my knee  
and whispered its story  
to me.

It used to have  
something to hold onto  
a home that felt like a friend  
and friends that felt like home.  
But one day it had to  
let go—

It had to grow  
and even though it was  
alone, and a little lost,  
and whipped by the wind,  
it never doubted  
never doubted  
that it would land.

The wind carried away the seed  
and I watched it dance  
unsteadily away,  
in that moment I knew.  
If that little seed would be okay,  
then I would be okay, too.

---

# *Thank You*

**by Christopher Tomlin**

You were born into a world that did not want you here  
Catching eyes on the street bringing thoughts full of fear  
Your life a struggle, yet you never complained  
About the hand you were dealt  
Your struggle ingrained

A man proud, a man strong  
A life lived so long  
Like a soldier in formation  
Your legacy marches on

Your smile and laugh bring joy to us all  
Your story of perseverance ensures we will not fall  
Your life a struggle, yet you never complained  
About the hand you were dealt  
Your struggle ingrained

You helped show me what was right and teach me of wrong  
From the life you lived, so proud and strong  
You have written books and told stories of your life to me  
In hopes I know and value what it means to be free

Now with heads high we both walk side by side  
Two generations of black men swelling with pride  
Yes your life was a struggle and no you never complained  
You made sure the hand I was dealt  
Was better for the struggle that remained.

---

## *Ode to Anxiety*

by **Kristen James**

So often you consume me,  
Suffocating my mind, heart, and body.

Crippling me with fear,  
And plaguing me with indecision,  
You break me down, piece by piece.

You have no right to control me,  
And still you persist.

Electricity, like a live wire,  
You flow through my veins,  
And I find it hard to breathe.

When you consume me,  
You dictate my every move.

I hate you and your arrogance,  
You have no right to control me,  
And still you persist.

---

## *Misfit*

by Chelsea Whittington

Forever a shadow,  
Lonely and unnoticed.  
An ancient tree,  
Old and lost.  
Recycling its life,  
Forever immortal.  
Hidden within the crowd,  
Nonbelonging.  
Loneliness is comforting,  
And detached.  
Like a deity,  
Stuck inside a human form.

---

## *A Mother's Christmas Lament*

by Victoria Jaczko

It's Christmas and there aren't any toys for the young  
we agreed to bring into this world together.  
The house is warm, the lights are on (for now at least).  
Your family won't loan us more money. No blame  
because I wouldn't loan money to us either. Worth  
less than the elements that make us, you and me.

Your element is hard work; I'm just stay-at-home-me.  
At the start of this, we were brave and free and young.  
You've worked so hard; but I wonder what a mother's worth.  
Sometimes I think you're happy at least we're together.  
But more money might be better; in that, I'm to blame.  
More money would mean Christmas food and gifts at least.

What gifts do I bring to us? Aren't I the least  
of our family? Something must've happened to me,  
becoming a mother. I have no one to blame,  
it's just the sense of self subsumed to needs of the young.  
How I long to be so much more to you, me, together!  
In today's market, what are abandoned dreams worth?

I always hoped these dreams of artistry would be worth  
something someday, repay your faith in me, at least.  
Then it all--babies, chores, bills--blended together.  
I saw the artist last in dishwater, watching me.  
Things aren't what I wanted, when I was young.  
But you're still here and my failures you never blame.

Next the plumbing's failed; landlord says we're to blame.  
Never mind gifts. Is it heat, light or food that's worth  
giving up for dry toilets that work, because young  
bodies aren't built to wait. Maybe They are right: the least  
shouldn't have children; the cash-poor, like you and me,  
'cause when we struggle for them, they struggle, too, together.



This Christmas, I'll struggle to keep it together  
'cause kids can't see Mom cry and not think they're to blame.  
The tree is little, no gifts, no feast, but in me  
I know I have to dredge up a kernel of worth  
taken by a culture where "mother" is the least  
thing a poor girl should aspire to be when young.

Darling, together, we've stumbled, but we're worth  
more than others' blame. We're not society's least,  
but its potential, me and you; Christmas is hope, newly young.

---

## *Smell Mail*

by Robert Herman Broyles

*Smell mail*—it sounds strange  
But so did *email* two decades ago  
And *voice mail*, formerly known as  
Messages on an answering machine  
And *snail mail*, which is a derogatory term  
For the lost art of letter writing

Smell mail may sound silly to you  
But don't underestimate the possibilities  
The power of the sense of smell  
For years after our first falling in love  
The smell of your perfume on someone in an elevator  
Would send me spinning back through the vortex of time

Imagine... what are the first smell mails that you will send?  
To my son Jim, the smell of a grilling onion burger at Abraham's  
To my son David, the smell of cherry blossoms in Bethesda  
And to you, my love, what would I send?  
Would it be the sea breeze through a window  
Or a pecan pie baking in the oven?

And what would I want you to send me, dear friends?  
The leathery smell of a well-worn baseball glove  
Or maybe the smell of the kiss of a woman who has smoked a cigarette  
There is something excitingly forbidden about that  
Something I have not experienced for a long, long time.  
No, I don't recommend smoking—we all know it does not end well—

No, no, my darling, I do not want you to smoke  
I want you to send me the smell of you  
Of you when we are making love  
And maybe, when they add *feel mail*—  
You know, like the *feelies* that replaced the movies in “*Brave New World*”  
Please...please send me the feel of your hand in mine.

---

# *With Tired Eyes, Tired Minds, Tired Souls, We Slept*

by Brooklyn Murdaugh

A black shadow cast upon a small, silent hill.  
Trembling and heavy, the weight of his feet carrying.  
Pounding, wounded heart, beating loud as a clap of thunder.  
Ice was the gun, superior to his frail hand.  
In slow motion, loaded by hatred, desperation, abuse  
It rose, resting on the worn red hoody that housed his chest,  
moving in and out rapidly.  
Time stood still in a deep, frozen slumber.  
He yearned for relief, for it to end as he drifted off from reality.  
“It gets better,” he felt the words rush over him like cool, relieving water.  
“But it hurts,” he pounded his heart, “it hurts.”  
In that stitch of time, the shadow rose, the master of his fate.  
Its shot barreled through the empty halls as he fell to the chilled floor.  
And with tired eyes, tired minds, tired souls, we slept.

---

## *Summertime*

by Eve Summerton

Inhalers and summertime don't mix well—  
Really, just like garlic and strawberries.  
But I'm drawn like a moth to open flame:  
The sun's flame, the summer's flame. And hot rays  
Become your brilliance as you torture me  
With your gentle hands and your sweet smile.

My hands on your ripped jeans make me smile.  
Sitting together on lips of old wells,  
Your own chapped, ice-cream-dried lips teasing me  
While ice cream topped with sticky strawberries,  
And searing heat from your star-brilliant rays,  
Make me welcome cooling damnation flames.

If LA waters ever quench your flame,  
Recall this eternal day and smile.  
When I was sun-kissed by your gentle rays  
That again made my diseased yearning well.  
While walking through lawns, shops, and strawberries,  
I selfishly thought your wants were of me.

Because I know soon, dear friend, you'll leave me  
All alone, and I'll drown within old flames,  
Longing for these days filled with strawberries.  
It's hard, though, to make pictures of smiles,  
Of *us*, because through all our careful, well-  
Meaning fights, peace is beaten down by rays.

Boy, I love how I'm blinded by your rays.  
(But I won't let you coax secrets from me  
Because, dear, that never goes over well.)  
So, my moth heart's burned again by your flame  
And I can't breathe beneath this feigned smile  
As you suffocate me with strawberries.

For now, let's hide with secret strawberries  
As we fight against evanescent rays.  
Fool me with your sweetly lying smile;  
Say you'll never leave, much less forget me.  
Drown graduation in trickery flames  
For we both know your ambitions too well.

Your smile tastes like sugared strawberries  
And I'm well again because of your rays  
Curing me, and illness, with the Chapel's flame.

---

## *Forgotten Beauty*

by **Angela Meade**

I sit waiting for the door to open after reading words that stole my heart  
Silently waiting on a carpet where two bodies once lay and shared their dreams  
Now only hold the soft breaths of fear and pages beyond measure that tell of  
    the hidden truth.  
She told me this morning  
“I dreamed of what your heart feels like.”  
She didn’t know it then  
But it grew twice as large that day  
Even if it was just through a text message.  
You may not know this  
But I’ve been through hell with this girl  
Heard of the tales of long nights and years spent with spoonfulls of poison  
    relinquishing the  
Long drops of what she calls freedom  
Down to her fragile veins.  
Veins that hold memories  
Veins that hide  
Between the two words ‘present’ and ‘past’  
And she finds herself lost in between.  
But I’ve memorized these veins  
The lines of her face  
The curves of her body  
That she hates so much  
The laughter shared between the two of us  
And even the disagreements that followed.  
If I could write a story with a love song  
I’d use her as my muse—  
Beautifully damaged  
But brought up from fate.  
No I wouldn’t tell of the heartache  
And I’d leave out all of the mistrusted issues

---

Of a lost girl  
Trying to become a woman  
But I'd sing of her battle  
I'd mimic the fight  
And somewhere along the lines of melody, pitch and tone  
You'd hear my story.

---

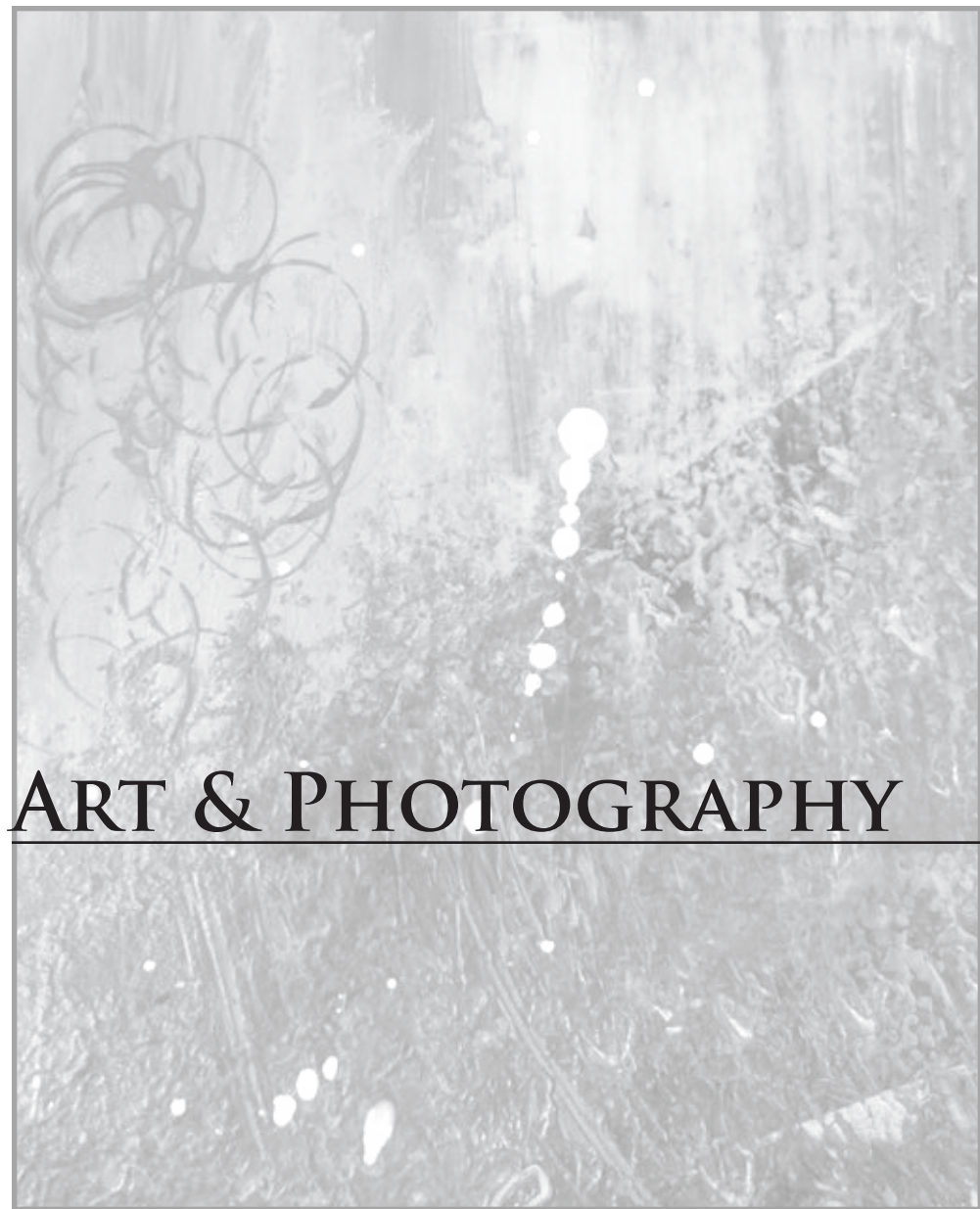
## *Questions to Answer*

by Rebekah Browne

After cheap rest, mind and metabolism renewed  
I see shapes of shadows slightly skewed  
From where they were just yesterday  
Or was that the day before?  
After worthless weather, countless clouds collide  
With reported clear sky. Unlike those storms last week  
We knew would happen so we didn't apply our pesticide  
What do we do about the puddles so deep still left behind?  
After regretful republics, truth tires the mind  
To see it you must dig at least six feet under  
Blanketing hatred, beneath thick layers of fear  
Why have they made it so hard to find?  
After peaceful protest, fighting only for freedom  
Embracing the beauty that is your silenced duty  
Revealing wrongful strife, you unknowingly risk your life  
Is it the same red they spill that paints the stripes in the sky?  
If you're not paying attention, you won't be asking crucial questions  
And if of the answers, too, you are unaware  
Your privilege has allowed you not to care







# ART & PHOTOGRAPHY



*Reminder of Terror*  
Michael Reeves



*America Proud*  
Michael Reeves

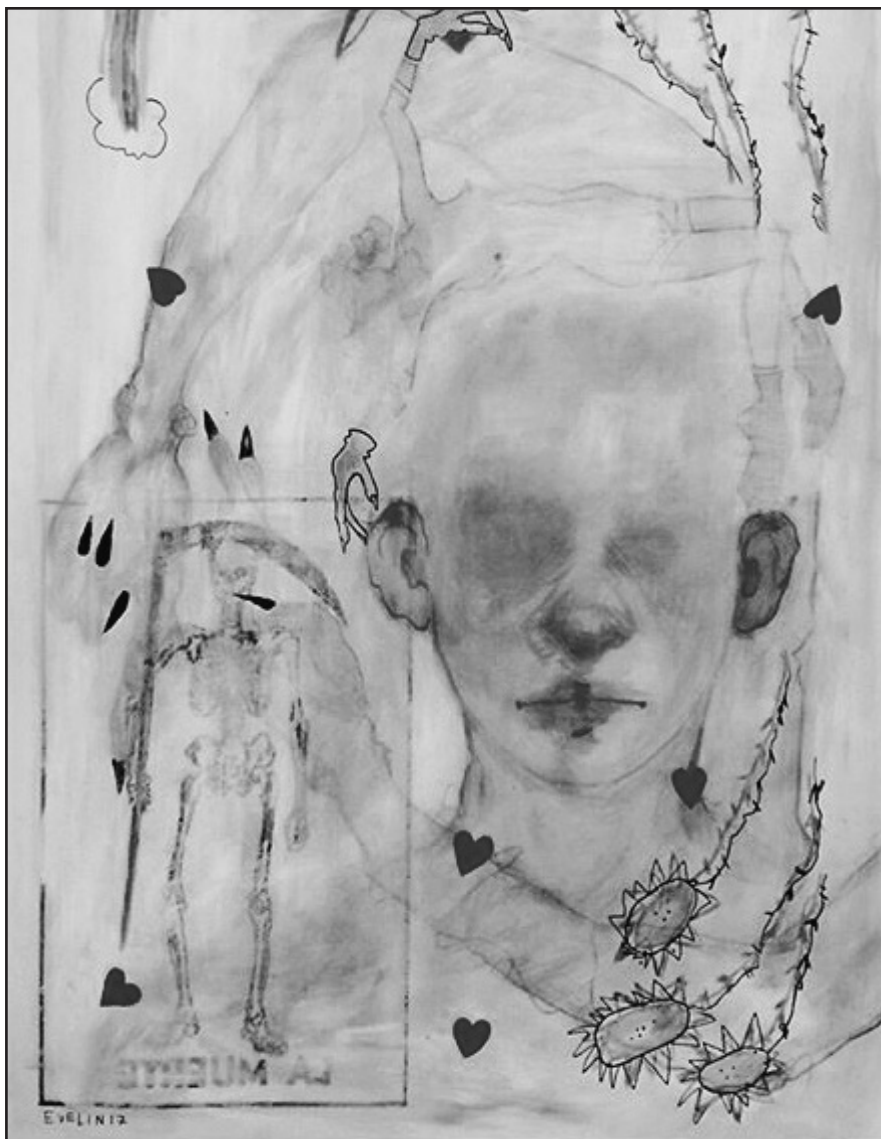


*Kitt*  
Bethany Hill





*Winter's Confection—Arizona*  
Robert Schultz



*Whatever the Case, Please Don't Forget Me*  
Evelin Alvarado

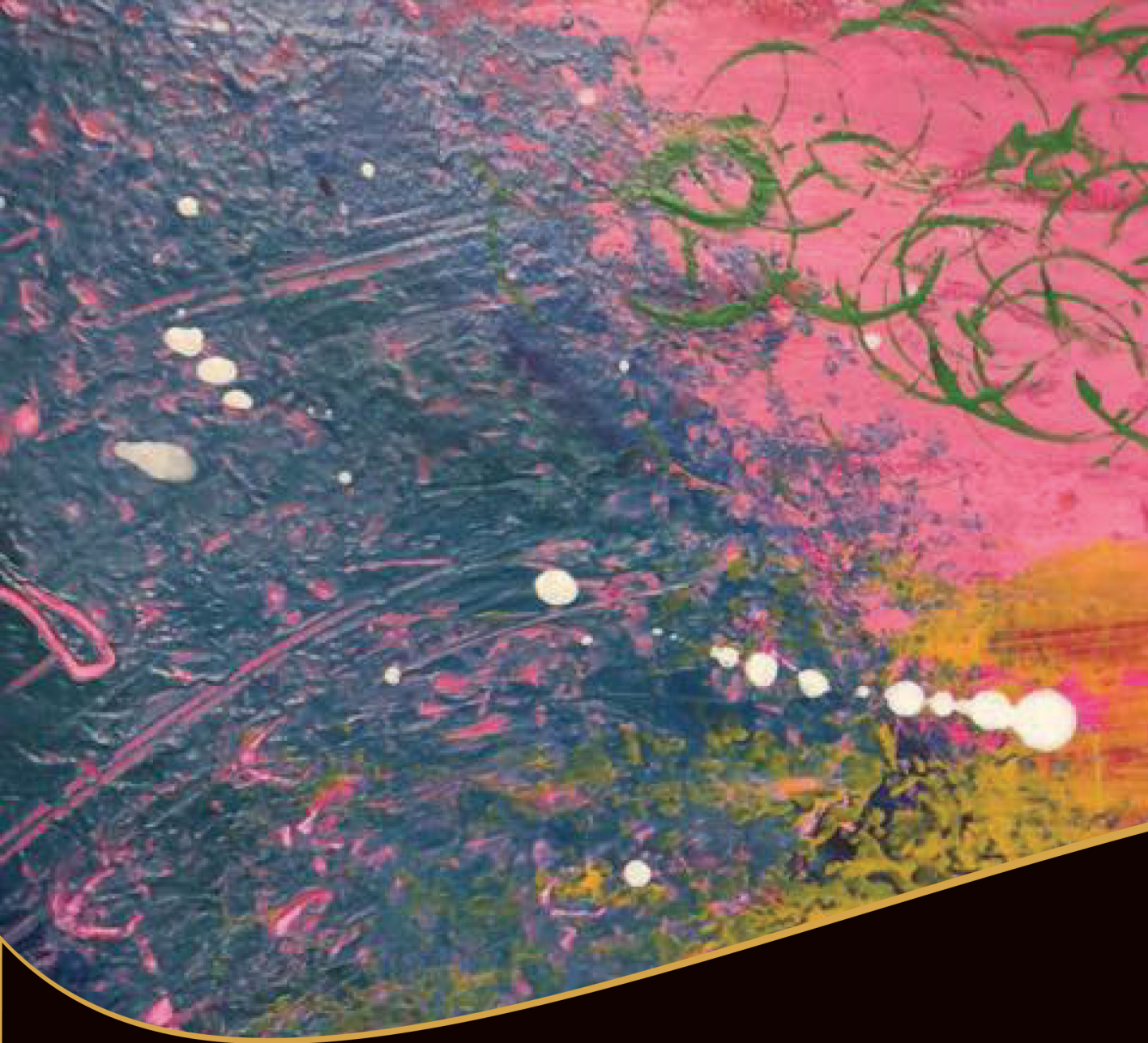


*Adult Shovel Nose Snake—Arizona*  
Robert Schultz





*Ceramic Face Jug*  
Hattie Kennedy



OKLAHOMA CITY COMMUNITY COLLEGE