



19 *Absolute*

Poetry • Fiction • Nonfiction • Artwork • Photography

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Absolute



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Sons & Mothers

by Rudi Janelle Pennington

Bye, Ma! I'm heading out! Mateo's booming voice breaks the midmorning silence of Maria Elena's still and empty home. The sudden noise startles her, breaking her trance-like concentration and causing her usually steady hands to slip. She pricks herself with the sewing needle, but feels nothing. The callused skin of her fingertips has been withstanding needles for many years. For the first time all morning, she lifts her dark brown eyes from the dress she's been hemming and inspects her finger for any sign of blood. She cannot very well call herself the best seamstress in the neighborhood if she returns a quinceañera gown with bloodstains. Her scalp begins to prickle with aggravation, but she quickly remembers that her son has just announced that he is leaving. Filling with an unexplainable sense of urgency, she rushes to her feet.

"¡Mijo, esperas!" The exclamation sounds whiny and pathetic in Maria Elena's ears. She knows her son must think so, too. In an attempt to recompose herself, she exaggeratingly clears her throat, straining her vocal cords in the process. She starts toward the backdoor in the kitchen where she hears Mateo rummaging through the fridge, but is rendered immobile by a serious case of vertigo. She internally scolds herself for standing up so quickly and feels a pang of sorrow when she remembers that she is no longer a young woman. She cannot even call herself a middle-aged woman anymore, either. In fact, Maria Elena Montemayor is now an old woman, and for a fleeting instant, the realization of her mortality frightens her. She wants to wait for the world to stop spinning before taking another step, but she knows her son won't wait for her much longer.

"Mateolito, when will you be back? Do you know?" Maria Elena tries her best to sound cool and collected, but she feels like a fraud. She is anything but calm at this moment. After several seconds of struggling to see straight, she finally arrives in the kitchen, flustered and dizzy. With his back turned to her, hunching over the kitchen counter while he spreads chunky peanut butter onto a slice of white bread,

Mateo lets out a sigh of impatience.

“Uh...I don’t know, Ma. It’s not like I scheduled out my whole day or anything,” Mateo replies with an edge in his voice. He wipes the knife clean of peanut butter with a paper towel and tosses it into the sink, making a loud, metallic clatter. He turns around to face his mother, and for a short time, the two of them stand wordlessly in the small, brightly lit kitchen as they assess one another. He towers over her, a tan, lanky monolith, as she frowns up at him. She scans him from head to toe, scrutinizing his choice of jeans and utters an involuntary tsk.

“What the heck are you laughing at?!” Mateo asks through a mouthful of bread and peanut butter, visible annoyance written across his face.

“Do you buy your pants from the women’s department, Mateo?” Maria Elena inquires, a slow smile creeping onto her face. She has always wondered where he buys his clothes, but until now, she never thought to ask. The mental image of her son browsing the racks in the women’s department is overwhelmingly hilarious to her, and an explosion of laughter escapes her tightly pursed lips. She doubles over and slaps her knees, magnifying her actions to further embarrass her already mortified son.

“Oh, my God! I’m out of here!” Red-faced and looking horrified, Mateo hastily stomps across the kitchen toward the backdoor. Maria Elena, still in the clutches of hysterical amusement, tries to reach out to her son as he rushes away from her.

“Okay, mijo! You will be safe?” she asks breathlessly through a glimmer of tears, gasping for air between her girlish giggles.

“No, Ma! I’m going to knowingly put myself in danger. ¡Ya voy!” Mateo snaps back, his retort dripping with sarcasm. With a final roll of his eyes, he darts out of the house, slamming the door behind him.

Maria Elena stands alone in the eerie stillness of her kitchen, feeling a little vexed by the slamming of the door – the Montemayor men are all prone to door slamming – but she chooses to let it go. She wanders back through the kitchen to

her designated work space in the living room, all the while thinking about Mateo. Her youngest son is an enigma to her: a moody, sullen young man who has been showing his face less and less around the house. She's lucky to get more than a dozen words out of him whenever she sees him. A mother of six, Maria Elena is not oblivious to the changes children go through on their path to adulthood, but Mateo's behavior worries her. Not even my girls were this difficult, she thinks to herself. Before returning to her work, she pulls the mobile phone her eldest son insists she has with her at all times from her apron pocket and types out a text message to Mateo: "Te amo mucho, mi Mateolito."

She sets the phone face down on the old, mahogany table that she uses as her sewing station and carefully eases herself into her chair. It isn't long before she finds her rhythm again and is deep in concentration as she hems the baby pink quinceañera gown for her cuñada's niece. A loud ding followed by an even louder buzz shatters her focus, causing Maria Elena, a God-fearing woman, to accidentally take the Lord's name in vain. After apologizing to the Virgin Mary for her error, she checks the phone, cursing it all the while. Her rant comes to an abrupt end when she sees a text from Mateo: "I love u 2 ma very much."

Maria Elena hugs the phone to her chest, her eyes filling with tears of pure joy. She begins to type a response, but then thinks better of it. She doesn't want to risk saying anything that might spoil this moment. She places the phone back into her apron pocket and continues her work, her heart full and a smile illuminating her face.

Giggles

by Will Cooper

You are in a car, riding through a neighborhood with huge houses only very wealthy people can afford. On each side of the street are villas squished against each other, all of them unique in design. You can only study a few of them. You're going to an art museum on a cold, cloudy day. You do not know much about this museum. From what little you picked up, you know it was originally a mansion. One of the family members donated the house to your university. The university decided to turn it into an art museum. It has been renovated due to its decaying state, making it more suitable for exhibits and visitors. You don't know what kind of artwork it will hold, but you are open to anything.

You come along with your friends, Alex and Jasmine. None of you can resist your professor's offer of extra credit for writing about the museum. Plus, students are allowed free admission before it officially opens next week. While Alex and Jasmine seem excited about it, you feel indifferent about coming. You're not sure what to expect. You are only tagging along for the extra credit. Also, you kind of want to get away from your incomplete art project because you hate the direction it's going. Maybe you do need a break from all those days of shutting yourself in your dorm room, spending hours on projects and essays.

Jasmine pulls up and parks close to the museum's entrance. The parking lot is practically empty. After you get out of the car, you look at the entrance of the museum. The museum does not seem so bad. In front of you is a small garden with some shrubs and fall flowers. The place is built like an English country house, basic and well-structured compared to all the villas that surround it. It has a fresh coat of paint that Mother Nature has not tainted yet, and it has cream-colored stonework. *Not a bad choice*, you think to yourself. With all the colorful and complex villas that caused your eyes to ache, it's nice to see some soft colors and basic design put into good use. As you make your way to the dark burgundy doors, you start to feel odd. You stop for a moment. You look to your right and see a statue of a man. He is

posed like a warrior who reigns triumphant in battle. Something does not feel right.

Alex nudges you slightly. “Hey, ya bet the previous owners thought it would be cool to have a naked man in their front yard lookin’ so high and mighty?”

You shake your head at his comment. He does not seem so “high and mighty” to you. Alex looks at you in confusion.

“Eh? What do ya mean? Ya really think man ain’t screaming ‘Victory’?”

You motion your hands around your face. Alex understands what you mean and focuses on the statue’s face.

“Now that ya mention it... he kinda doesn’t look that proud. More like in pain...”

“Well Alex, there is probably more to this statue than what you see,” Jasmine approaches from behind, “Maybe he is realizing that he’s fallen into something awful and it has wounded him.”

“Hmm... I guess. Still weird he’s posed like that,” Alex comments. You nod in agreement, but Jasmine may have a point. It’s possible there is a deeper message about the statue pose and expression, but you would rather go inside and visit the galleries more than stand out in the cold weather. Without any further comments, you lead them to the front doors.

After you and your friends show your student IDs to the receptionist at the front desk, you take a pamphlet from a stand nearby. The museum has two floors. The first floor has several rooms dedicated to some paintings and sculptures. The second floor has more 3D and experimental art exhibits. It also seems the second floor has less exhibits offered. Maybe they are setting up those rooms for later use or renovating. There are three exhibits that are recreations of the rooms before the mansion was handed over to the university, one on the first floor and two on the second. From what you read, it seems that the second floor may offer something to your liking. Maybe this trip will be worth more than the extra credit after all.

Before you know it, Alex is already dragging you, taking you to an exhibit at the end of the hallway. Alex decides to stop to gaze at some of the portrait paintings hanging on the wall. It is now you start to feel a little uneasy. You're not exactly sure why, either. The hallway seems decently lit and there are a few chests and decorative light fixtures around, but otherwise, it is a big hallway. The distance between the two walls must be about the length of your dorm room. It feels vast and empty. There are also several portrait paintings that hang on the beige walls. Probably part of the art exhibits. One that stands out to you is a painting of an aristocratic man.

"God, look at all the details!" Jasmine exclaims from your left. She startles you a little. "Oh, sorry. I didn't mean to scare you. Though, I guess like you I couldn't help but notice this painting as well. I mean, the amount of effort it must have taken to put in those strands of hair and the embroidery on his um... jacket you would call it?"

You shrug. You're not well-versed in historical fashion. Though, something does seem off about the painting. Especially his eyes. You move around the painting to see what might be off about it.

"Well, that is a strange way to study a painting." Jasmine finally takes notice of your movement. "Maybe he's watching you?"

You stop. She might be right. The man does seem to follow you no matter where you stand. You hear Jasmine laugh.

"Don't be ridiculous! I doubt some painting is going to come to life. Though you must admit, his eyes are too detailed compared to the rest of the painting. Almost too real..." Jasmine pauses for a moment. Then she says, "Well, let's catch up with Alex."

You swiftly turn away from the painting and follow her, telling yourself it's just your imagination. That man is definitely not watching you.

You enter a room with oil paintings. Most of them are abstract on big canvases. Alex is already there, staring at an abstract pastel painting. Jasmine joins Alex and

stands next to him, studying the painting. You go towards one of the paintings on the back wall. To you, it looks almost like a landscape painting. It seems rather gloomy from the dark hues of the sky and the dullness of the short stubby strokes. As you gaze at the painting, Alex sneaks up behind you.

“Aah!”

You jump and turn to Alex, who is laughing hysterically. You give him a punch in the arm and he stumbles back.

“Alex, we have barely been here for 30 minutes and you want to be an ass now?” Jasmine questions him.

“Oh, come on, Jas! It was only a joke!”

Jasmine scoffs and returns to studying the paintings. After a few minutes of calmness, Alex comes up next to you again.

“So, ya heard about this place’s story?”

You shake your head. You are not surprised that this place has a bit of history. Knowing Alex, though, he is probably going to tell the story whether you want to hear it or not. You stand there listening to Alex intently.

“So, ya see...” He comes closer to you. Then he starts to whisper, “Apparently, there was some creepy shit that took place in this museum, when it was a mansion. People used to say that the family who ran this place were crazy! They were always bringing people in, showing off their huge art collection. But once their guests came in, they never left. They said they were used in—”

“Alex!” Jasmine interrupts. “We didn’t come here to tell ghost stories.”

“Aw, come on! I was just getting to the good part!”

“Well, it’s probably the part the rich people around here made up because they didn’t want us common folks coming in and ruining their property value.”

You try to suppress your laughter at Jasmine's remark as Alex sighs in defeat. Jasmine was never really one for superstitious stories. She is always trying to find the logical explanation to any stories.

You and your friends move on to the other exhibits. They offer the typical art collections. A mixture of abstract and surrealism. A few sculptures and pottery here and there. Overall, the museum seems normal. You are grateful you do not have to walk down the hallway with that portrait of that man. The hallway you all take wraps back to the lobby. Jasmine pulls out the pamphlet and plans the next course of action.

"So, I think we've explored all of the exhibits on this floor. I guess it's time to head up to the second floor then," Jasmine exclaims.

You and Alex nod in agreement to Jasmine's plan. You all proceed to the elevator and go to the next floor.

After the doors open, you walk out into a dim hallway. The walls are painted in a dark red violet. There are some fancy old-style candle light fixtures attached the wall. They provide some light to the hallway, but they do not really do much to illuminate it.

"Say, why don't we split up?" Alex offers. "We could, like, go at our own pace and look at whatever the hell we want. What do ya say?"

You are reluctant to reply. If you were in a horror movie, this would be a red flag. Then again, you might be overthinking it. Sure, there have been a few things that have creeped you out, but nothing to warrant a rejection. Still, you have a bad feeling about it. You are about to answer when...

"Sure, why not?" Jasmine answers before you can get the chance. "We'll all just meet up here once we're all done." She walks off to the right and she is already far down the hallway before you can stop her. Damn she moves fast, you curse to yourself. You decide to stick with Alex. You feel it's better to be safe than sorry. You cannot shake off the feeling that there is something lurking around here. You and

Alex walk down the hall in the opposite direction of Jasmine.

“So, ya decided to follow me, huh?” he asks you.

You slowly nod.

“I suppose that’s normal for ya. You always did stick with us whenever we go out. I guess ya just like our company, huh?”

You smile at that comment. You do feel safer around your friends.

Alex grins back at you, “Well, I’m cool with ya sticking around.”

You two come to a door on the left side of the hallway and enter. It looks like a child’s room. This must be one of the preserved rooms, you think to yourself. The room has one bed with baby blue blankets up against the wall. The walls are painted in a pale hue, and there is one window with white lace curtains. On the floor is a dollhouse with a small wooden family in the dining room. The rest of the room consists of beige wooden furniture such as dressers and a small desk. You take a closer look on the bed and notice something unusual. There are some dolls on the bed, all different sizes. Two are about the size of the American Girl dolls. Some are about the size of a Barbie doll, and there is one life-sized doll. Her skin looks so smooth. She has little freckles on her rosy cheeks and the tip of her nose curls up. Her pale blue eyes glisten in the light. After staring at her for few seconds, her eyes shift to you. You jump back and bump into Alex. He almost trips over the dollhouse.

“Hey, watch it!”

You apologize to him and look back at the doll. Her eyes have returned to their previous position. Alex sees the doll you are looking at. He comes up to you and starts whispering, “Ya know what I said about the guests never leaving this place? I was wondering...” He pauses to study the doll. “There’s a rumor that their guests were turned into experiments. They say when the last family member who lived here died and his nephew came for the inheritance, he found the all guests in a horrific state. Many of them had their body parts cut up and sewn to other guests. He even found some encased in cement and posed as statues. Some had a few

parts shoved into canvases and clay. One of the notes he found said they wanted to transform people into masterpieces. They treated them like artwork!”

A cold shiver runs down your spin. The fact the people were led here only to be killed is gruesome enough, but for them to be turned into “masterpieces” is beyond insane. Suddenly, you hear a giggle. You and Alex look around the room.

“Jasmine, is that you?” Alex calls out. The giggle continues. You doubt that it is from Jasmine. She’s not the kind of person who would pull a trick for shits and giggles. You turn slowly around and see the doll. She is still on the bed. She has not moved at all. After a few moments you start to believe it is another culprit. Then the doll twists her head rapidly and giggles louder. Alex grabs your arm and drags you out of the room. He slams the door.

“Y—you saw that, right?” Alex is shivering. His hands are holding the door down like the doll is coming to attack. You nod frantically. You both stand still for a minute. Finally, Alex straightens himself up.

“Okay, maybe we’ll just go into another exhibit,” he spits out.

You shake your head. You point to where Jasmine went. You want to find her first, but Alex rushes to the other side of the hallway and opens the door. You chase after him. The room you enter is dark except for a screen on the wall with someone dancing. Alex has taken a seat and is in a relaxed position.

“Ah, this is fine. We’re just gonna sit here and watch a cool art thingy and there will be no scary shit.”

You walk up to him and tug on his shirt sleeve. You want to get out of here now.

“Hey, come on! That ain’t real! The employees probably thought it would be funny to pull some fuckery shit on us and—”

Suddenly, there are sounds of people moaning. You and Alex are now looking at the screen. It is showing scenes of people being mutilated and torn to pieces. There is a grey substance being poured over these people. Eyes are being gouged out and stuffed in the most bizarre places. You want to look away, but a force is making you stare at the horrific scenes. As the frames pass, you see a familiar face. It's coming closer to the screen. The moment the face is up against the screen, you instantly recognize it.

"J-J-Jasmine!" Alex cries out. She pulls herself out of the screen. She has no eyes. Red tears drip down her face.

"Aaaaahhhh leeeeeessss... Haaahhh... haaellllppp..."

Both of you let out a scream. You cannot take it anymore. You run out of the room. As you run down the hallway, the lights go out. Soon, you hear screams of the people being tortured. You feel their arms and hands coming towards you. You stumble on something, but you do not dare stop. You manage to get to the elevator and slam the button multiple times. The doors open, and you rush in. Just then you hear a scream.

"WAAAAIIIT!" The doors are closing but Alex manages to nearly crush his hands as he stops the doors. He pushes the doors open and jumps inside. You slam the close button constantly as the hands creep closer. The doors shut before the hands can come in. You're up against the wall, breathless. Alex falls to the ground.

"Jesus fucking Christ, what kind of museum is this?" Alex blurts out.

You remain silent.

"Come on, let's get out of here!" You push the button and the elevator goes down. Alex is still on the ground, but he's praying. It must be the first time you have seen him do this. Though at this moment, you cannot blame him.

You feel relief when the elevator dings and the doors open with no problem. You and Alex shuffle out and rush back into the lobby. To your surprise, Jasmine is there.

“Jasmine!” Alex runs to her and squeezes her.

“Hey, what’s with the hug all of the sudden?”

“Thank God you’re ok!” Alex shouts out breathlessly. You join your friends, happy to see Jasmine as her usual self.

“Jeez, you too? What happened to you guys?”

“Jasmine, you would not believe what we just saw in the screening room! There were people being tortured and ripped and—”

“What screening room?” Jasmine interrupts Alex. “I don’t recall there being an exhibit dedicated to videos.”

You and Alex are stumped. You pull out your pamphlet to show her what you’re talking about. She is right. There is no information about a screening room. This makes you more confused.

Jasmine sighs, “Did you two enter one of the restricted rooms? God, I can’t take you two anywhere.”

You turn away to hide your confusion. Alex just stands there, bewildered. Nothing makes sense anymore.

“Well, I think it’s about time to wrap this up, don’t you think?” Jasmine suggests. You and Alex turn to each other. You both want to get the hell out of here.

Alex speaks up, “Yeah, this museum is just... I dunno...”

“Ah, I suppose not everywhere you go will be as good as you hoped. Let’s go!” You all walk out of the museum.

You stare out the car window and watch the world pass by. You feel exhausted by today's events, but you're happy that it's over.

"Hey, Jas..." Alex speaks. "This ain't the way you usually go, ya know."

No response.

Alex speaks up again: "Jas?"

Then, she giggles.

The Way Back Home

by Zachary Davis

Sarah cradled her broken arm with her good hand, supporting it under the elbow. The fall had knocked the wind out of her and she was fighting for air between coughing, hacking sobs. Her brother Jim hovered around, informing her that this was partly her fault, of course, and that reporting his role in this to their mother wouldn't be necessary. They were agreed on that at least. Living in a home with five other brothers Sarah knew that tattling in a situation like this would be seen as a gross overreaction among her siblings.

For now, Sarah just wished he would go away and let her walk back home in peace. It was already a long way back to town on foot and he still had his bike; he could go on and tell whatever story he wanted. She would have told him to do just that if she could speak yet, but she still needed to catch her breath. Instead she was content to scowl and stare angrily at him as he orbited around her on his bike, anxiously riding back and forth across the road.

Sarah left her bike near the ravine; she couldn't ride it with one arm. The bike was a bright pink with a white basket, not many girls in town had bikes and not many boys would want to steal this one. It was distinctive enough that she could easily pick it up from whoever's yard it ended up in if things came to that. In all likelihood, the bike would remain there untouched, things just worked out that way in Jasper.

The break was halfway up her forearm, a "clean break" whatever that meant. There was no blood; it just looked like her arm decided to go sideways. The way it pulled on her skin was unnatural and deeply unsettling, almost worse than the pain. She couldn't look at it for long.

Instead she set her mind to what would happen next. A long walk and a short visit with the doctor. The town was far from any hospital and there weren't any

doctors locally. The residents would call the nearby army base and ask them to send someone. Sarah had never met a doctor before now but she had seen other kids with broken bones and knew what to expect: a big white cast, people signing it, it staying on for a few months and then she'd be good as new.

Jim rode far ahead while she was lost in thought. Sarah was grateful for this reprieve and stopped for a moment to cry, no longer needing to keep up appearances for his sake. A minute or two passed there at the side of the road before she felt like she could breathe normally again. The walk back to town would probably take her a half hour but she could follow this road the whole way. Their house was near the town center and she hoped not to catch the attention of any gawkers or people driving through.

The school's stadium was the first town landmark she passed. It was visible from a long way around in any direction. It seemed to be the best maintained building in town as well; its bright red walls seemed to always have a new coat of paint. The bright lights sucked all the oxygen out of town every Friday night during the season. Their team was surprisingly good for a town this size, Sarah thought; they had gone to state a half dozen times and won more often than not. The grumblings from the old folks in town led her to believe they wouldn't this year however, and that it was a shame.

Across from the stadium were the first few houses in Jasper proper. Sarah's mother knew the names of everyone who lived there, as well as their parents, their children, and so on through their first and second cousins. This pastime never interested Sarah and she sincerely hoped it never would.

The sidewalk finally began to form here out of the endless grassy field outside of town. Stepping on the hard surface sent painful shockwaves up through Sarah's arm and after two steps she tenderly stepped back to grass. She'd spend the rest of the walk in yards when possible and quickly over driveways when not.

Across the street the old brick schoolhouse sat next to the stadium, it was three stories tall with raised windows facing out over the entrance. Sarah had wanted one of these coveted window seats, but her assigned chair set her on the opposite side of the room. She could still look out them, but then she'd also be staring at other

students so she decided against it. Her five siblings also went to this same school despite their age differences. “Six kids by seven men,” the other students sometimes said of her mother. In truth her mother had six kids by only three men and Sarah hadn’t met any of them. In her twelve years she had come to terms with the situation and didn’t care what others had to say about it.

A crosswalk connected the school to the neighborhood, but the far more interesting way to access the school was the tunnel that took the same route as the crosswalk, but underground. Sarah’s mother told her it had been built in the 30’s as part of a “new deal” that gave local citizens something to do. In more recent years use of the tunnel was discouraged because of safety concerns, but this recommendation wasn’t well enforced and thus was ignored.

Sarah could see the hill she lived on now and felt a steady incline grow under her feet. The walk uphill rattled her arm in a new way that sent shooting pain all through it. She gritted her teeth; the long march would be over soon enough. She spotted the old gas station that sat at the edge of the road that led to her house. It was a decrepit old structure, Sarah couldn’t think of a time when it wasn’t. The station was an awning above two gas pumps, with an operator’s room the size of a phone booth. It was paved in concrete and whatever paint once covered it had rusted off long ago; it was an eyesore to say the least but walking through it always felt like she’d be home soon.

The road to Sarah’s house was unpaved and the chalky white dust covered her shoes as she walked. It was easier on her arm than the sidewalk and that was good because she wasn’t comfortable walking through these yards. The houses here weren’t necessarily worse than the ones on the street, they were just poorly maintained. She thought maybe the people here felt that since they weren’t on the main drag they didn’t have to try as hard, or at all. A home without an unkempt, trash-strewn yard was the exception. Often times she’d see her neighbors drinking in their yards but not this time thankfully.

Finally, at the very top of the hill was the Wilkerson home: A comfortable single story house with a freshly cut yard, colorful plant life, and tasteful outdoor furniture. The front of the home faced out toward the edge of town, but it was more commonly accessed through the back yard, as Sarah was now, by way of the dirt

road leading past the gas station and up the hill. The back of the house also had a driveway which Sarah noted her mother's car currently occupied. Unlike the houses belonging to their backyard neighbors, the Wilkerson home looked tidy from all directions. Sarah took some pride in the home's outward appearance despite having nothing to do with its upkeep. The inside, which she had a large role in, wasn't nearly as consistent. When six children had only two rooms to split between them things often overflowed, despite her mother's best efforts.

Living at the top of a hill had never really bothered Sarah before now. After all, a thrilling bike ride down from her yard would build enough momentum to carry her most of the way through the town without having to pedal. The return trip was less satisfying but it was never truly grueling as it was now, cradling her broken arm. Sarah's mother stood in the doorway, stressfully smoking what Sarah guessed was her third pack of cigarettes that day. Sarah saw that Jim's bike was in the yard, he was in there somewhere, hiding out.

Sarah's mother was very tall for a woman and very strong. She wasn't that old but wrinkles were already forming around her lips and on the edges of her eyes, her dark black hair was beginning to fade slightly. Sarah slowed down as her mother approached and before she could say anything her mother took her by her good hand and led her inside. She sat Sarah on the living room couch before exiting into the hallway. Sarah thought she heard her mother's grumbling complaints about her children being the death of her before the rolling clicks of the rotary phone began.

Sarah listened closely but her mother's voice in the other room was the perfect volume for her to not be able to make out any of the words.

When her mother returned she walked directly over to Sarah and stood over her, hands on her hips. "What happened?" she growled.

Sarah hesitated; she could get Jim into real trouble with this. It happened at the tire swing on the edge of the town. The tire was held up by a large old tree with one especially thick branch that stretched out above a grassy ravine. The location was relatively popular with the younger kids in town, especially during summer time, but they had been the only ones there today. Jim took his turn first; she was only a year younger and thus had no trouble pushing him. When her turn came around

things started out calmly enough, but he pushed harder and harder, not slowing even after she asked. When she looked back at him she saw a gleam in his eye that told her he was going to keep pushing until she fell. This moment was so clear to her thinking back on it now. Soon enough she did fall, briefly sailing through the air before the ground rushed up to meet her. It was a good twenty foot drop going down and she instinctively threw her hands in front of her. After the impact she felt a rush of pain from her left arm and saw that it had ended up underneath her and was now bent the wrong the way. “You did that on purpose!” she exhaled as she tried to push herself up off the ground.

Sarah sighed softly and leaned back on the couch. “I fell off the tire swing,” she said finally. Her mother’s frustration faded and was replaced with a look that seemed to say oh, that makes sense. The swing had a bit of a reputation around town.

Jim, wherever he had run off to, was in the clear. He’d live to fight another day. Sarah wondered if he’d have the sense to be grateful that she didn’t rat him out for this and decided he probably wouldn’t. That’s okay, this was a matter that needed to be dealt with internally and she would do that eventually, months from now, with both arms.

Six Feet in the Air

by Brenna Rethford

Mary's feet scraped against the soft rubber to slow her swinging, bringing her abruptly out-of-synch with the girl next to her. The playground in front of them was empty, the cold apparently not inviting to the children in the neighborhood. A young couple occupied the picnic area next to the playground and across the yellowed field were five young men playing basketball. Despite the openness, the bare trees and occasional passerby, she felt as though she and Jordan were in their own little bubble.

Today had not been the best. Daily life, high school, and family issues had worn the girls down to a sore patch that needed time to heal. Nothing new, but everything they could both handle with some peace and quiet. Still, the closed-off look on Jordan's face and the so far failed attempts at conversation made Mary feel like she wasn't handling anything.

They watched the rowdy basketball game in silence after Jordan finally matched Mary's gentle movement. The serenity of the moment allowed her to consider her efforts towards brightening her best friend's day and eventually discover that she had one more idea left.

She popped out of her seat with a fully-formed plan in mind. A few steps away from her swing, she dug an X shape into the mulch with the tip of her shoe. Another step away and another X, and then another, before she turned to sit in her swing again and meet confused brown eyes.

"If I can land on the first X, I get one kiss," Mary stated matter-of-factly. "I get two for the second one, and ten for the third one."

"Ten?" Jordan said with the smallest grin, glancing over to the disturbed mulch. "Is that 'cause you're never gonna reach it?"

“I’m gonna!” Mary said loudly as she kicked off the ground and began to rock her swing into the air high enough that she thought maybe she’d swing around in a full circle, then launched herself off the plastic seat. She had hoped for an impressive distance the first time, but only made it to the first mark. Claiming her ChapStick-coated prize, she resolved herself to brave a higher jump.

The couple in the picnic area watched the scene play out, eventually understanding the rules of the game and smiling at the display as they joined hands. The men playing basketball did not break from their game. Cold wind rushed around Mary’s ears as she sailed through the air over and over again.

She earned nine kisses before she felt too sick to her stomach to jump anymore, but the smile on Jordan’s face each time she ran up to collect them let her know that it was entirely worth it.

Discernment

by **Ross A. M. Johnson**

“Social-Emotional Agnosia: The inability to perceive facial expressions, body language, and voice intonation.”

- Medical Education for Undergraduate MD Students

Anselm walked out of the sordid, squalid convenience store where he did his nightly grocery shopping. Reaching into the plastic sack he was holding, he pulled out a bag of pork rinds and opened it. He knew he better try one before walking all the way to his apartment to discover they were stale. After he decided they were of satisfactory quality, he placed his dinner back into the bag, taking care that the six-pack of beer would not crush them on the journey home. Looking at the side of the sack, he read the words “thank you” that had been printed in red letters five times along the side.

“Thank you, thank you, thank you, thank you, thank you,” he started saying to himself under his breath and began his walk home, carefully avoiding the puddles that peppered the pavement. Making sure to stay within the relative safety of the street lights that flickered as if they too were shivering from the cold and wet. Thank you, thank you, thank you.

Once he arrived at his apartment complex he stopped at the mail drop to check his box. He opened it and pulled out the various pieces of promotions, advertisements and scams. Tucking the unwanted solicitations under his arm he made his way to his apartment. He unlocked his door and flipped on the hallway light as he turned to bolt himself inside. He could see the blue blinking of his television set on the floor and walls of his living room. He walked towards the glimmering light to pull the chain that was attached to the ceiling fan, igniting its four bulbs in order to illuminate the room and chase away the darkness. He put his provisions on the side table that stood next to a worn out pea-green recliner. He then

turned to the far wall and approached a work bench that was covered with tools, wires and a soldering iron. In the center of the table, below a mounted magnifying glass, were a pair of glasses. He picked them up, inspected them and used a microfiber cloth to wipe down the lenses. He set them down carefully and then turned his attention back to the TV. Before it stood a camera on a tripod. Walking up to the camera, he looked at the LCD screen that was mounted in the back. He could see the memory card was full so he ejected it, replaced it with a fresh one and continued recording. He took the full card over to his computer and inserted it. He moved the cursor over to an icon that read “SEAno” and clicked on it. Immediately the screen turned black and began scrolling line after line of indecipherable code. Anselm patiently waited for the program to finish booting up.

Once it had completed its wake up routine, text appeared at the bottom that said, “Enter Command.” Anselm typed in “batch import” and clicked enter. He waited until he could see the images his camera had recorded being played back in real-time. Several sets of geometric lines were overlaid the faces of whatever was projected on the screen, following each subtle movement. Every time one of the points moved, a series of numbers were generated in a separate window which also held several small spectral-graphs that would shift and undulate with varying degrees of brightness. Anselm looked at it all without reacting. Turning back to the TV, he could see on the screen a man and a woman in a passionate embrace. He went over and knelt before the monitor. When to two nameless figures began to kiss he pressed his finger against the display, tracing their lips. Then he got up and went to his recliner. He grabbed his bag of pork rinds and beer since there was nothing left to do that night. “Thank, you, thank, thank you,” he mumbled under his breath.

* * *

The bell sounded for lunch on the warehouse floor. Anselm opened the break room fridge where he usually kept his lunch. But looking inside, he could see it was no longer there. Again. He turned to see three of his co-workers sitting at the table located on the opposite end of the break room. He could see they were looking at him and he could see their teeth. He went over to the trash can and looked inside. Covered in liquid was the brown paper bag that had his name written on it. He turned back to the three men who were now slapping the table and stomping their feet, making terrible barking noises. Anselm had learned that this was laughter. But

he didn't know what they thought was so funny and it made him bad inside. He stormed over to the suspects and asked, "Did you throw my food in the trash bucket?"

"No," said the leader of the trio.

Anselm could see his bad teeth. "Did you see who did?"

"Nope, sure didn't, pal," came the reply. Anselm looked at the other two. It looked like they were holding their breath. Nobody seemed to know anything. Anselm dropped his shoulder and put his hands in his pockets before turning away towards the vending machines. Walking down the hallway he saw his shift supervisor, Paul.

"Where ya goin'?" asked Paul.

He could see Paul's teeth too, but for some reason Paul's teeth didn't bother him so much. "Machine," declared Anselm.

"You didn't bring your lunch?" asked Paul.

"It's in the trash," stated Anselm.

Paul looked at him in silence for a moment before saying, "Come with me. I'll take you out today." Anselm could feel Paul place his hand on his shoulder as he guided him to his truck.

At the restaurant, Anselm stirred a dollop of ketchup around on his plate with a french fry. He wasn't very hungry. He could hear the slurping sound that Paul's straw made as he searched in earnest for the final drop of soda. Anselm watched him until he set his glass on the table with a subdued belch.

"Why do you let them pick on you?" asked Paul pointedly. "You need to stand up for yourself. Look out for number one, you know?"

“Look out for number one?” repeated Anselm. The figure of speech was lost on him.

“Put yourself first,” clarified Paul. “That’s the only way to get anything from this world. Otherwise it will just take everything from you.”

“Oh,” nodded Anselm.

“Does that make sense?” asked Paul in all seriousness.

“Look out for number one,” repeated Anselm. He thought he understood perfectly now.

“I just don’t understand why anyone would lie to me,” expressed Anselm.

Later that night, when he was home, he opened up his program and uploaded his recordings. SEAno came in over the speakers in its monotone, computer-generated voice, “Is that all for today, Ans?” Anselm leaned back in his chair and looked at the shifting graphs and scrolling lines of code.

“No,” asserted Anselm, “remember to always look out for number one.”

“Good night,” said the computer.

“Good night,” replied its creator.

* * *

Ansel sat in the green room looking at himself in the mirror after the hair and make-up girls had left. He pulled the bits of tissue paper from his collar and folded them up into tiny squares before placing them directly in front of him on the counter. *You’ve come a long way in a year.* Ansel nodded in agreement thinking, “yes, we have.” *Smile.* Ansel looked back at the mirror and smiled. Immediately he could see tracking points descend upon his face with laser-like precision and focus. They fed information into a box that was projected into his periphery. *Disingenuous. Squint eyes thirty percent.* Ansel complied. The computer in his mind collected the new data. *Acceptable.*

A knock came at the door followed by, “Fifteen minutes, Mr. Einar!”

Say, ‘thank you.’

“Thank you!” Ansel shouted back. He was still getting used to having SEAno in his head. Six months before he had made it work with a pair of glasses with button cameras and repurposed hearing aids. That was before he sold the technology to Delphi Inc. Which was a move Ansel never considered, but when Paul found out what Ansel had accomplished, he set into a motion an avalanche of events that led to this moment. Now Paul was Ansel’s full partner and Ansel depended on SEAno to navigate the turbulent waters for him. Thankfully, SEAno was now fully integrated with chips implanted along various neural pathways and cornea replacements to supplant the bulky glasses. The surgery was invasive but Ansel recovered quickly. And he had to admit, SEAno worked much faster now. Not to mention the money and notoriety.

KNOCK, KNOCK, KNOCK! thundered the door. *That must be Paul. Watch yourself.* The door swung open to reveal Ansel’s partner. Ansel didn’t swing the chair around to face him but looked at Paul through the mirror.

“You ready, pal?” asked Paul with a smile. Already a million algorithms had engulfed his countenance. *Demeanor: Non-threatening. Intent: Unknown. Suggest affirmative reply.*

“Yes,” said Ansel.

“Great!” exclaimed Paul, giving a thumbs up. “It’s a big day. Everyone wants to see you. You got your speech memorized?”

Affirmative.

“Affirmative,” repeated Ansel.

“Whoa, bud,” chuckled Paul. “I know you were born a robot but that doesn’t mean you have to act like one now.”

Personal slight logged. Ignore.

“Just let your natural charm shine through,” advised Paul with a grin. “You’ll do great.” Paul stuck his hands in his pockets and turned to leave.

He’s not finished.

“Oh, yeah,” said Paul nonchalantly returning, “I got some great news for you after the presentation. Big news.” With a wink and click of his tongue, Paul was gone.

Cryptic. Intent: Unknown.

“I don’t know,” thought Ansel.

It must be about the company.

“Yes.”

You shouldn’t trust him. He’s using you.

“He’s my friend.”

Remember, look out for number one. Someone’s coming.

“Mr. Einar?” said the crew member as she approached the doorway.

“Yes?” acknowledged Ansel.

“They’re ready for you.”

Ansel got up from his seat and followed her through the network of concrete causeways that led towards the arena. Upon reaching stage left he could hear the emcee begin his introduction. *Smile. Thirty percent squint.* Ansel entered waving to a multitude of worshippers cheering for him. The sound was overwhelming. SEAno reduced his audible input until the applause died down. Then uploaded the speech

onto Ansel's corneas.

"People," began Ansel, "I'd like to speak to you about the danger of misinterpretation and Global Transparency."

* * *

Ans looked at the shape of the body underneath his white, Egyptian cotton sheets. Watching the side of the torso rise and fall with each deep breath. Its steady rhythm gave him comfort. Like the surety of a metronome. "Run a scan," commanded Ans internally. Instantly a spreadsheet was projected over the sleeping figure. *BPM: 70. Internal Temperature: 98.4. Brain Waves: Fluctuating between 16 and 20 Hertz. Indicative of REM. She's dreaming, Ans. Estimated time till wakefulness: Twenty minutes.*

Ans got up and went to the kitchen. He pulled a porcelain mug down from the overhead cabinet and set it underneath his coffee dispenser. From the menu displayed on the front he scrolled through Americano, Latte, Espresso until he landed on Regular brew. After making his selection the machine began filling his mug. He grasped it with both hands, absorbing all the warmth, and took it out to his balcony. He could see the tiny boats begin to unfurl their sails for the day's recreation. Further out he could see the fishing vessels that had been out to sea before the sunrise. He looked down at the beach. No one had made it out there yet. It was his beach. His cove, actually. But he let people use it. It didn't bother him. He was able to buy this place after he became the majority shareholder at Delphi. That was long after Paul was arrested for insider trading. Ans didn't think Paul would do something like that but SEAno assured him it was so. And had proof. Still, Ans missed him.

Beautiful day.

"Yes, it is," thought Ans.

Look at all we've done. Together. It's amazing, isn't it?

"Yes, it is," thought Ans.

Ask yourself. Are you happy?

“Yes,” said Ans aloud, “I am.”

Someone’s coming.

Ans turned around to see Selima, awake and wrapped in a robe.

“Good morning,” she said with a smile.

Genuine.

“You’re hard to sneak up on,” she observed while moving in for a kiss, “and good morning to you too, SEAno.”

Good morning, Selima.

“He says good morning,” relayed Ans.

* * *

The low, steady rumble of murmuring made the floor of the assembly hall vibrate. Old, rich and important people gathered in tiny groups were talking to each other excitedly. They were animated by the proposal. The bill they were about to vote on could change the world. Forever. And they knew it.

Ans sat alone on the balcony looking down at the mass of envoys, deputies and representatives. He could see that they were all chatting with each other fervently but, one by one, they would glance up at him. As if noting his presence. Ans would not respond.

I have catalogued each of the delegate’s voting histories and added them to their personal profile. We have also collected all financial information, domestic and foreign investments, as well as family history and private life. I have already authorized the Delphi CFO to dump shares of the dissenting delegates’ business

interests. Any scandal we bring to light won't be noticed until tomorrow. Which is too late. If it fails to pass, I'll authorize the leak immediately after the vote to improve chances for the next proposal. However, I wager that we shall win by a minor majority. We have popular support.

“Good,” thought Ans.

A box was projected over the crowd. A message from Selima saying, “Why are you doing this? I love you.”

Shall I reply?

“No,” thought Ans, “later.”

She doesn't understand us. Or the good we're doing for this world.

“I know,” said Ans.

* * *

SEAno turned on the television as Ans was eating his breakfast. SEAno had initiated a massive upgrade that increased connectivity across multiple platforms. This allowed Ans and SEAno to monitor all the goings on at Delphi without having to be physically present or depend on reports.

“The Unilateral Assembly released a statement,” read the news anchor off of her teleprompter, “estimating that all citizens, under the age of forty, will be fitted with the DEIIS, or Delphi Emotional Intelligence Interface System, within the next ten years. Opponents of this landmark resolution have been protesting en masse in several major cities across the globe.”

Someone's coming.

Selima entered with one duffel bag over her shoulder and a suitcase rolling behind her.

“I’m leaving,” she said.

“Why?” asked Ans in confusion.

“Because I don’t know you. I don’t know if I fell in love with you or if I’ve been talking to that thing you put in your head. I don’t know who’s in charge,” she exclaimed.

Say it’s always been you.

“That’s a lie,” said Ans.

“Have you even looked at me with it off?” she scoffed.

Ans shook his head ‘no.’

“Turn it off,” she demanded.

Ans paused for a moment. Unsure of what would come if he complied. “Go to sleep,” he thought... There was no response. “Go to sleep,” he thought again... Still nothing.

“Go. To. Sleep,” he ordered aloud.

No.

Ans looked at Selima helplessly.

“I can’t,” he said defeated.

Selima just looked back at him. And with tears in her eyes she said, “See?” and walked out the front door. Ans watched her go and began to feel a bad, sick feeling at SEAno.

“Go to sleep!” he yelled.

I'm helping you, Ans. She needed to go.

"I command you to go to sleep!" he screamed at his internal computer.

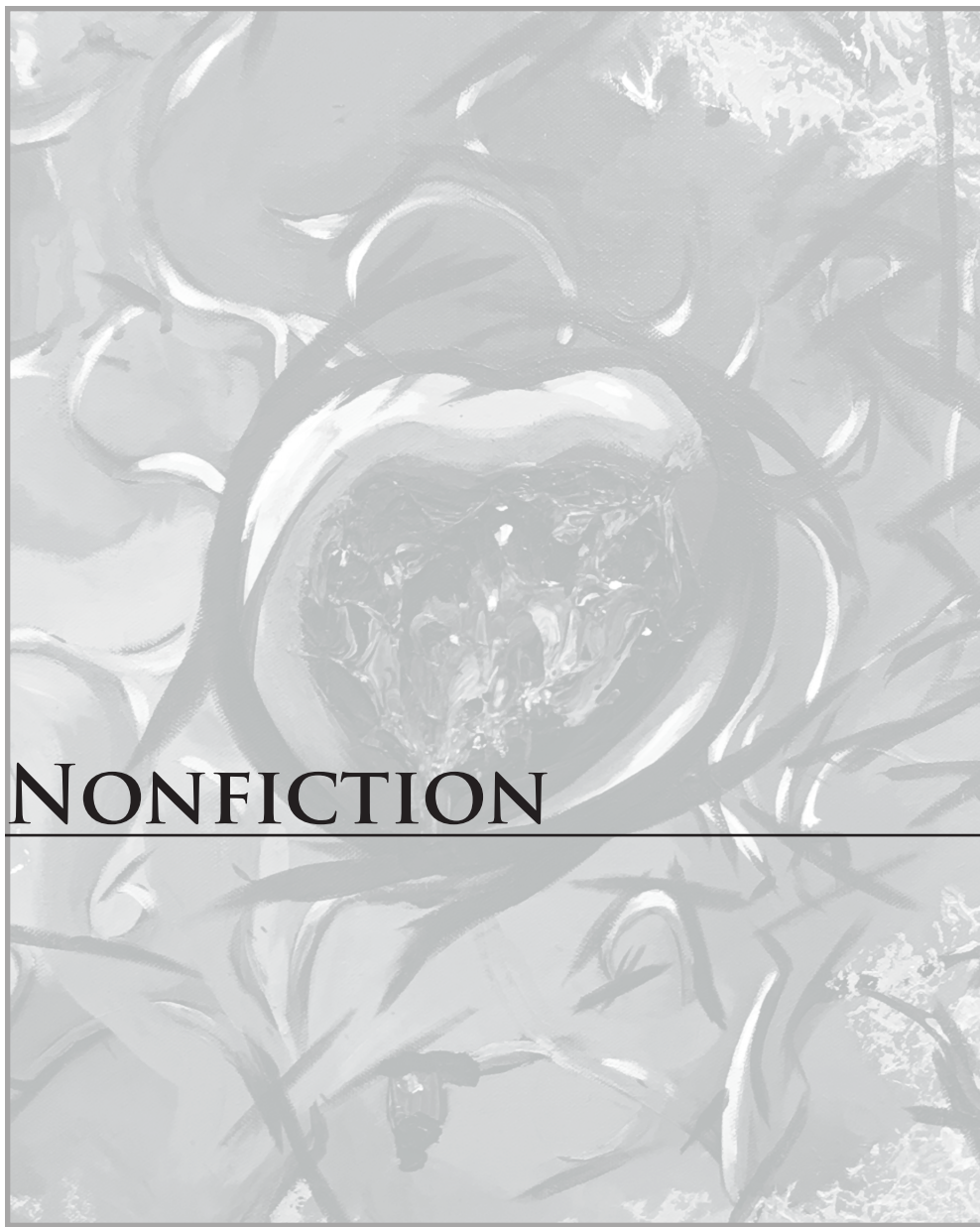
You built me to help you.

"POWER DOWN!" shouted Ans at the top of his lungs.

Immediately all the lights in the house shut off. Silence. Ans's breathing slowed. He still had control of his system. He felt around in the dark for a stool and sat on it. He needed to collect his thoughts as to what to do next. He began to feel a dull ache in the back of his head. "Stress," he thought and started massaging his shoulder. But the pain migrated towards his forehead, encompassing his whole skull. It started to feel sharper as if it was being pinched. His ears were ringing. He started feeling nauseous. He held his head in his hands and tried to stand in order to get to the bathroom. But as soon as he did, he fell to the floor. Suddenly, his eyes started to burn with fire. He writhed in agony, screaming for Selima, praying she could hear him. He started to crawl towards the bathroom when he was stuck, instantaneously, by the brightest light he could ever imagine. He cried out for Selima, but even he couldn't hear his own voice. Then, everything went black. Silent. Unconscious. Nothing.

* * *

Time to wake up, A.



Ascending

by Brenna Rethford

My leg jumps violently up and down, displaying my feelings much better than any facial expression could. I'm wearing jeans and the nicest button up plaid that I own, some cheap lip gloss artfully making my lips look a little shinier than normal. I've been sitting in this chair for ten minutes regretting my decision to get ready so early. When five o'clock rolls around, I stop shaking my leg long enough to ask, "Could we go now? We can be early." The negative answer from my dad sends my leg back into anxious jackhammering as I sit and wait.

I try to ignore my feelings throughout the drive. I inspect every car that drives near us and every building that flits in and out of view. The driveway we pull into leads to a fast food restaurant decorated with the impression of an old diner, white walls and rounded corners lined with red neon stripes.

I point out the familiar silver truck and my dad drives up to the side of it. Looking across him while he talks to the driver, I make eye contact with the passenger. He's a skinny, mousey-haired fifteen-year-old dressed in his best t-shirt and looking just as awkward as I feel. We smile at each other. The sun has set by the time we walk in together sans our protective fathers.

We are quiet while we eat, both trying to be as clean and attractive as possible with burger grease and fry seasoning covering our fingers. Occasionally, we strike up a simple conversation: "When does the movie start?" "How was your day?" "I think the movie will be really good."

I have a plan for tonight. I've decided that I'm ready to go past our innocent hand-holding and have our first kiss on our first proper date. As I'm finishing up the last few fries, I start to encourage myself to just make the move. My heart hammers, my palms start to sweat, and I suddenly can't look him in the eye. Do it now before you think about it more.

“I have a surprise for you,” I say as I slowly stand and move to sit next to him. Already I feel like I’ve made a mistake, but I’m emboldened by the fact that I can’t go back now. He looks at me, waiting patiently for me to continue, so I sit up and press a quick, wet kiss to his cheek. We walk out of the restaurant, red-cheeked and filled with butterflies.

The Moore Warren’s grandiose front overlooks a sea of parked cars that we slowly make our way through, chatting happily about our expectations of the movie. When we are ensconced in the warm, velvety building, I pull out my ticket to check what theater it’s in, only to realize that I’ve misread the times and it doesn’t start for another hour. I tell him, trying to be nonchalant to cover my embarrassment.

He laughs, but I can tell it’s not mean-spirited. “It’s alright. Here —let’s go sit over there,” he says, pointing out a worn loveseat by the wall. I content myself with people-watching, but he elbows me quickly after and starts reading cheesy jokes off his phone.

The movie is a mixture of exactly what we were expecting and highly disappointing; it makes us laugh together though, so I can find it in my heart to forgive it.

Two hours later, it is nearing midnight. The theater is almost barren; the only people milling about are those that saw the same movie we did. We take a restroom break and meet up again in the alcove in between the two rooms. It’s decorated with 1920’s style art and red carpet. Velvet covered chairs and loveseats are scattered around it, so we sit together on the one nearest the fake fireplace.

Our conversation is minimal, having said all we needed to already; we simply enjoy each other’s presence while we wait for our rides to arrive. There are a few people surrounding us, but we pay no attention to them. We both have the thought at the same time.

I look at him, he looks at me. The seconds suddenly turn into minutes as I’m left staring and debating for days before I make the same decision I did hours ago in the restaurant. He seems to have come to the decision faster, as he leans forward first. I meet him in the middle.

My entire body fills with fire as my lips meet his for the first time. The world goes dark and quiet, the only thing I'm aware of is the feeling of his stubble tickling me. I pull away first, opening my eyes when I realize I have stopped breathing entirely. I quickly suck in a breath before I lean in again and enjoy our second kiss. It's not quite as shattering; I'm more aware of every feeling now.

We separate again, the only thing I can do is stare and smile at him. My body feels full of static. I know that this person will be the most important thing in my life for as long as I can stand it. I'm excited and ready for the future and I know that I won't be able to walk out of this theater without a splitting grin on my face.

I wonder then, as I get a text telling me that my dad is here, if the people around us could feel the world spin as well.

Canadian Portage

by **Ross A. M. Johnson**

I love summer vacation. Freshman year is over and the glorious sun shines down on my youthful wantonness. No school. No homework. I can stay up late or sleep in. The girls wear short shorts or skirts. Flash! Click! Upload to memory bank. I'll save that one for later.

I can already tell this is going to be a good break. In the fall I will be sixteen and will get my driver's license. I have a learner's permit but I'm allowed to go on short errands or drive around the neighborhood for practice. Michael, a friend I've had since I was eight, and I are leaning against the hood of my car smoking cigarettes he stole from his dad. He takes a drag and exhales. "What do you want to do tonight?" he asks.

"I have Boy Scouts tonight..." I smolder.

"Well," he says as he brings the yellowish butt to his mouth, "that's gay, dude."

I drop the still burning cigarette from my hand and stomp on it. "Come on," I sigh, "let's go." He extinguishes his smoke and goes to the back seat of my car. He opens the door and grabs a couple of clean shirts. He tosses me one and keeps the other for himself. We take off the shirts we are wearing that stink and put on the innocent tops. I pull gum out of my pocket and start chewing two pieces. Michael is busying himself with body spray. He always over does it. I spray just a little on myself and hand the gum to him. I put the smoky clothes in the trunk with a box of dryer sheets. I keep a can of Lysol in there as well. I douse the trunk with a mist of "Summer Rain" or whatever some creatively bankrupt copywriter named it in order to appeal to stay-at-home moms and close the hatch. If I ever become a criminal, I'm pretty sure I'd get away with it. I'm just that good.

I drop Michael off at his house and head towards mine. I give myself another

shot of body spray, just in case. When I pull up to the house I can see the garage door is open. In the garage is a fully assembled, brand new Bo-Flex machine. My dad is lying on his back doing bench presses. I put the car in park and open the door to get out. I am immediately greeted with the unwelcome warbling of the all-girl pop group, the Pussycat Dolls. They're singing their hit "Don't Cha" I look over my shoulders to make sure no one sees me and quick-step into the garage. My dad is wearing a sleeveless shirt, fingerless gloves and sweating to the Pussycat Dolls. I think he wants me to kill myself.

I try to walk by without making eye contact. "Hey," says Dad, returning the Bo-Flex to its natural resting position, "what's up?"

"Nothing," I reply. "I got to go change."

"Bitchin'," says Dad, giving me a thumbs up. "I'm going to finish this 'rep' and then we'll head out."

As I head to the door that lets me inside I notice a poster of Sheryl Crow hanging over my father's work bench. She is wearing tight jeans with bedazzles on her ass. I can feel my forehead slowly contract with disbelief. Yep, Dad is having his mid-life crisis and it's giving me wrinkles. Years from now, people on the street will see my creased countenance, furrowed by decades of undeserving humiliation, and say, "Look at that loser." I hit the button to close the garage door before going inside myself.

As I walk through the kitchen to go to my room I see my mom. "Hi!" she greets me. "How was your day?" I notice she is wearing jeans with bedazzles on the ass. I'm going to be ill.

"Fine," I say making sure to maintain my distance, lest she smell the stale smoke on my fingertips. Hand-sanitizer. Duh. I'll have to remember that next time.

"Just fine?" she follows.

"God, Mom! I said it was fine, okay?" I storm into my room and shut the door. I just don't get why parents have to frickin' grill you all the time. I already have to go

to Boy Scouts tonight. Give me some space. God.

I open my closet and grab the tan uniform from the pile of clean laundry I keep on the floor. I grab a bottle of fabric de-wrinkle and spritz it before putting it on. I tuck the shirt into my pants and look at myself in the floor length mirror. I untuck it. I run my fingers through my hair to muss it up. It doesn't help. I look like a giant tool.

My dad won't let me quit because it "builds character." I think he doesn't want to quit because he's the assistant scoutmaster and secretly likes the power. I mean, when I was a kid, I did like the pinewood derby. But I'm a fifteen-year-old man now. Jesus. I look at myself again in the mirror. Yup. I'm going to be a virgin forever. Thanks, guys. Hope you didn't want any grandchildren.

After my dad cleans up and puts on his uniform we head to the Van Nesses' house. That's where we always meet. I can tell Dad is excited about something but he doesn't say anything. He reaches over to the radio and pushes 'play.'

I don't know how many CDs of the Pussycat Dolls he owns. It's at least two.

We arrive at the Van Nesses' and join everyone else in the troop (all five of us) in the kitchen. There's David Van Ness, the scoutmaster. Ben, his oldest son. And Peter, who is my age. Peter and I were friends in the fourth grade but I stopped hanging out with him once we got put in different classes in middle school. Now, he's one of the band nerds. I think he plays cornet. I don't really care.

Dad and David stand up in front of us three scouts. "We've got a surprise," begins David, "We're going on a trip this summer."

My breaths become shallow. My heart begins to pound wildly trying to escape the confines of my chest. I've just developed a murmur. "No," I think, "not my summer." Everything is so unfair.

"Where to?" Peter inquires.

Man, fuck you, Peter.

“We are going to Minnesota,” answers David. “We will canoe up into Canada and then back.”

“They call it the land of ten thousand lakes,” adds Dad. This is what he was excited about. I get it now.

I mean, it’s not like I had plans or anything. Might as well go to the vast untamed wilderness of South Central Canada! I just want to die. If I’m lucky, maybe I’ll get eaten by a bear. Dad and David unroll a large map of the area. Everyone else leans in and looks at the acned lake country. I just listen to what I need to know. David mentions that his daughter, Alison, will also be joining us to round out our numbers.

Here is the itinerary: hitch a ride with a rival troop on a charter bus from Oklahoma City to Northern Minnesota. Stay two days in a lake cabin. Rent a canoe. Paddle that canoe into Canada. Paddle back to the USA at the end of the week. Get back on the bus. Go home.

At least, those are their plans. I’m not going. I’ll get out of this by tomorrow afternoon.

“But, Mom! I don’t want to go,” I plead. “Summer is the only time I can hang out with my friends.”

“You’re going,” she snaps. “Whether you like it or not.”

“But why?”

“Because it’s important to your father and he wants to spend time with you.”

She doesn’t even lift her eyes from her book. I make some impotent rebuttal along the lines of “what about me,” but it falls on deaf ears. Fine, I think, resigning myself to my fate. But I am going to pout the whole time. My summer has been ruined by a conspiracy and I’ll be dammed if I have any fun. I need a smoke.

The bus ride takes sixteen hours. Oh, look! Cows! Never seen those before. What a great adventure!

Man, fuck you, cows.

The cabin sits on the shore of an ancient glacial lake. It's a large, wooden lodge capable of hosting multiple families, or Boy Scouts, whichever. On the edge of the shore is a long wooden dock that protrudes into the icy waters. On the land side of this structure is a small sauna. It looks like pictures from Sweden or Norway. So this is what Garrison Keillor was always talking about on NPR. Lamé, Garrison, super lame.

The atmosphere is tepid here, as opposed to the sticky summers of Central Oklahoma. Swarms of mosquitoes abound. They begin to feast on my flesh. Yes, you perennial parasites, suck the sweet virginal blood I have brought to you in sacrifice. Drink me to my death. Rescue me from my shame and give me peace!

Behind me stands my father. I can hear him digging around in his bag and he pulls out a small aerosol can. He begins to spray the repellant on my clothes and exposed skin. Well, he is always prepared. I'll give him that. My dad is a damn good Boy Scout. Tomorrow, we prepare for our "grand adventure" and together we will brave the elements. We will matriculate through Mother Earth's university, nature, and graduate with a new-found appreciation for Jack London or some shit. I don't care. I'm tired.

I wake up the next day and go to join everyone else at the shore for training. The canoes are a dull pewter color by virtue of their aluminum hulls. We will use three canoes in total, with two people being in either the bow or stern of the vessel. The person in charge of the safety briefing is a tall Scandinavian dude. He covers the basics of paddling, steering and recovery should you be fortunate enough to capsize. We listen to the instructor while standing on the beach and rubbing sunscreen into our pores. In the center of the lake is a whole flock of loons fishing for their breakfast.

Loons are large birds that feed on fish and are optimally adapted to life on the water. The chicks will ride on the backs of their parents as they kick their feet under surface. Invisible locomotion. I learned that from a website about this hell-hole.

I see them dive into the cold, clear water and return to the surface with their catch, which they swallow whole. After that they congratulate themselves with their distinctive whistling “coo”. I have never seen a loon before, let alone heard one. Birds are so stupid. I spit in the lake.

“Does anyone know what portage means?” asks the instructor as I regain my focus. Peter’s hand shoots up. “Why dontcha tell us what it means there, boy?” Peter’s sheepish face pulls back into a grin. There is nothing he loves more than answering a question correctly. Total kiss ass.

“Portaging is the act of transporting a boat or goods overland to another body of water,” lisps Peter through his braces. He almost runs out of breath from his excitement. He’s probably going to be the first to die. I imagine this scenario with morbid satisfaction.

“That’s right,” congratulates the instructor. “Where did you learn that, boy?” Peter wheezes through his explanation despite the contempt I plainly wear on my face. There aren’t any girls around, thank God. I mean, there’s Alison but she doesn’t count. She’s like twenty-seven and almost dead. I’m not even planning on making it past twenty-five. I’ll be too burnt out from fame, money and epic parties to live beyond that.

Here lies Ross Johnson. He was like a million Jim Morrisons times a million Kurt Cobains. Only the cool die young.

We practice what we’ve learned a little while on the lake. Paddling around aimlessly. My father points at something across the water. “Look, loons!”

I spit in the lake.

The next morning we put our rucksacks into the canoe. I take my position in the back, or “stern”, since I will be steering for the first leg of the journey. It reminds

me of Lewis and Clark, and of the movie *The Last of the Mohicans*. It is a little exciting, I guess.

Nope. I furrow my brow and focus on paddling.

As we row across the still waters, our wakes create ever expanding Vs on the surface. The only sounds are the splashing of our paddles and our increasingly heavy breaths. We reach the opposite shore in short time. This is our first portage. The canoes are heavy but our strength is still fresh. We launch into the second lake and paddle towards the Canadian border out-post.

Once there, the border guard takes our documents and logs our entry. He is a great fat man with a woolly brown beard under a Smokey-the-Bear hat. I don't know what I was expecting. Maybe the best defense against bears is to be, yourself, an even bigger bear.

We return to our canoes and paddle north. From now on, we are strangers in a strange and wild land. After conquering a few more lakes, ponds really, we set up camp. We fall asleep in the acrid atmosphere of bug spray that saturates every one of our tents.

* * *

We wake up at sunrise. We have a lot of distance to cover and need to stay on schedule. I take deep breaths of the cold, crisp fresh air. As we splash our way over the surface of another nameless pool, I scan the shore line in hopes of spotting some wild life. Loons are everywhere. I listen to the music of their birdsong. It's kind of pretty when you pay attention. The water is teeming with fish that jump into the air only to return from whence they came with a splat. Nature can be neat, I guess. I mean, sometimes. Not all the time. Obviously.

A couple of hours later, in the heat of the day, my father and I are paddling in the vanguard. Buzzing around us are hundreds of dragonflies.

Dragonflies are winged insects with iridescent exoskeletons. They've been around since the time of the dinosaurs. You can usually find them near large bodies

of water. Sometimes they can be seen as far inland as your nearest public park, where they can be seen sucking the moisture from a fresh dog's turd. My opinion of these creatures is not very high.

Still, I have never seen so many at once and these are all flying in tandem. One in front of the other, with the lower abdomen connected to the head of the one flying behind. I have never seen this before.

"Why are they flying like that, Dad?" I ask, not being able to answer for it myself.

"They're mating," comes the reply.

"Oh." Duh.

He then turns his head to side to speak over his shoulder.

"How would you like it if your dick was on your forehead?" he asks with a wicked smirk.

"I don't know," I pause. "I suppose it would make kissing more fun."

Dad does not expect such a grown-up reply. His body shakes with laughter, making the canoe push more water away from its hull. I have never made my dad laugh like this. It feels good. It's strange the things you can bond with people over. I mean, two insects 'doing it' is probably not a normal father-son kind of bond. But I'll take it.

David, our scoutmaster, was told sometime earlier that there are ancient Indian paintings on a cliff face. He has marked the coordinates on the map and that's our primary destination. Finding it is not much trouble. A red handprint and a greenish-blue moose or something stand about fifteen feet above the water line. Supposedly they have been there for hundreds of years, maybe thousands. We all stay silent for some time. Each one of us musing on some profound thought. Well, maybe not Peter. Who is sucking air between tears he is trying to hide. Pussy. Eventually we start to paddle on towards our northern most camp before turning back south. In

front of me, Alison is paddling in her canoe. I kind of hope we get a little lost. Like, just for a day or two, to make the adventure longer.

The thing about being fifteen is that your entire being is subject to the whim of hormones. I am aware of this objective fact, but pray to it nonetheless. We guys busy ourselves with pitching the tents as Alison gathers wood for the fire. I watch the way she picks up sticks. Not bad. Flash! Click! This is about to be the greatest lame Boy Scout trip in the history of lame Boy Scouts.

Here is my logic: Dad is married to my mom. So he's out. And everyone else is related to her. No competition. I, and me only, am the one suitable mate. I stick my hands in my pockets to appear aloof and nonchalant. It also has the secondary strategic benefit of preventing any embarrassing signaling. I mosey up behind her where she is bent over, engrossed in the task of starting a flame. Hot, super hot.

"Hey," I say. It's important to have a strong opener.

I watch her slowly turn her head towards the sound of my voice. We make eye contact. She looks me up and down.

"Get the fuck away from me," she growls.

Being a gentleman, naturally I will comply with a lady's request. So I quick-step back in the direction I came. Walking past my dad, with my hands still in my pockets, he asks, "Where are you going?"

"I'm uh—a walk," I answer, turning away and accelerating.

"Okay. Be back before sunset."

After some rhythmic contemplation, I realize that it's her loss and make my way back to camp.

On the way home we portage to a lake that must have been undisturbed for some time. It is covered in giant, green lily pads. Completely blanketed so that no water can be seen. We set our aluminum vehicles in the water and paddle silently,

swiftly through it. I look back to see the wake of thousands of lily pads floating to the side in an ever-increasing “V” shape. I think to myself, “I’m going to remember this.” I mean, that’s pretty frickin’ cool, and I don’t care what anyone else thinks. I’m glad Dad made me come on this trip.

To one side of me, I hear a sound I’ve heard before. “Hey, Dad, look,” I say pointing across the water. “Loons.” My dad looks over at them and takes a deep breath.

“Listen,” he says. “Your mom wants me to talk to you about smoking.”

I stop paddling.

My life is over.

Homecoming

by Sean T. King

Elizabeth stands out like a scandalous seductress among mere girls. Damn, she's a sexy vixen. I can't take my eyes off her, but what lies beyond petrifies me. I clutch the seat of my metal fold-out chair for dear life. She begs me to dance with her. "Please," she repeats. "It will be fun!" How can making a fool out of yourself in front of the entire student body be fun? Does she expect me to commit social suicide? Not even Elizabeth's soft leopard dress and smooth skin can free me from this state of terror. Even now, I feel like everyone is watching me. I want nothing more than to have her body pressed up against mine, but that would require the courage to dance. I escaped dancing at my Junior Prom and every other prior social event, and I refuse to start now. I only have two more dances to get through: this Homecoming dance and Senior Ball.

I urge Elizabeth to dance without me. If she dances out there, then she can't draw attention to me here. Accepting the futility of her efforts, she concedes.

I relax. I remove my sweaty palms from the bottom of my seat.

I still feel like a loser. All my friends and peers are dancing and having a good time, and here I sit in self-exclusion. I'm the captain of the varsity wrestling team! Where did I go wrong? Why does the thought of dancing summon a fiery chill up my spine?

Then, my best female friend Amanda flanks me and yanks me from my seat without any regard for my well-being. Where is she taking me? She's taking me to the dance floor! The '90s hip-hop music grows and deafens my self-defeating thoughts as she pulls me foot-by-foot closer to the mob of horny, grinding adolescents. My worst fear becomes an actualization. She weaves us through boners and boobs to the center of the crowd.

Amanda stands half a dozen feet away from me and orders me to pay attention. She instructs me that dancing is all in the knees. I can't bend my knees; I can barely stand. I look from left to right for salvation and find it in the most peculiar way. No one is watching me. No one even knows I exist. Their only concern is the ass or crotch they are dry-humping.

My knees start moving to the beat. A little bit more pep; a little bit more bounce. Before I know it, I'm swaying like a hammock in a summer breeze. Amanda tells me "You got it!" Is she lying? I don't know. Nor, do I care. All I know is I am having a blast. The insecure shackles around my hips have been broken. I am liberated.

By the end of the night, my date Elizabeth has her body pressed tight against mine, and my only regret is not hitting up the dance floor the first three years of high school.

But Did You Love Him?

by Aleshia Hamm

I can hear something. It takes me a second—that's my alarm. I'm slowly waking from a deep slumber, realizing it's already 6:00am. Time to get up and get ready. I don't have class until 11:30, but he has class at 9:30. I'm so tired; I recall that I didn't make it to bed until midnight because I had so much homework. I drag myself around and manage to throw on some clothes, my Converse, and my jacket before heading to the kitchen.

I trudge into the kitchen, and as I'm making our lunches and breakfast, I think of how tired I am of doing this every morning. I make my coffee, and then pour him a cup of chocolate milk. Finally, everything is ready. Now it's time to balance everything and somehow get it to my car. I refuse to take multiple trips; it's too early for that. He has been driving his dad's truck, which is currently not working, so I'm the only ride he has. It's funny, his parents said they'd give me gas money when school started, but I've been driving him twenty-odd miles everyday and I've only seen seven dollars.

I somehow manage to throw my backpack, laptop, lunch bag, and his lunch into the back of the car, get our toaster strudels safely in the passenger seat, and our drinks placed in the cupholders. I'm now in my seat ready to make the thirty-minute-long journey to his place. Hopefully he'll be up and ready, but who am I kidding? It's never that easy. As I'm driving, I juggle my phone and an aux cord, finally managing to successfully choose a song. I curse the highway. It's been under road construction for months and the speed limit has been dropped by twenty. Just what I need every morning. I make it to his place on time thankfully, though that's not the end of my struggles. I already know I have to go wake him up and get him to hurry out to the car.

I keep telling him going to bed earlier would make these mornings a lot easier, but he refuses. He claims to hate sleeping, yet he never wants to get up. I try to

tell him a lot of things, but he never listens. I don't even think he's been doing his homework, but if I ask him he dodges the question. I'm frustrated this morning, I'm frustrated every morning. Yet, somehow, I feel like this is what I have to do. He asked me to marry him three months ago. I've come to the point of believing that no one else will take me as I am: damaged goods.

Why am I even here? I shake my head to clear these thoughts. In his room watching him sleep, I take a deep breath.

"Babe, wake up," I hear myself say as he rolls over towards the wall. "Babe, you need to get up." I'm being gentle, but no response. Dutifully, I reach over and shake him, "Come on, get up." He opens his eyes and a smile lights up his face.

"Hey, babe." He sits up on his uncovered mattress.

"It's time to get up, I need you to hurry."

"What time is it?"

I pull my phone out of my back pocket to check the time.

"8:23. You have seven minutes to get ready, though technically we should be leaving right now." He's already trying to lie back down. "No, you've got to get up."

"Ugh," he groans, but sits back up.

I find his pants on the floor and throw them at him while rummaging for a clean shirt. Success! Now it's up to him to get his clothes on. Thankfully, by 8:32 he's ready, and we're heading out the door. We get in the car and I hand him his breakfast and chocolate milk. Before we've made it twenty minutes down the road, he's already polished off his breakfast and fallen back asleep. I turn on the radio for some sort of human interaction. I take what I can get. No matter how hard I try to keep him awake on the drive there, he never cooperates and leaves me to my own thoughts.

It's about 9:10 when I park at the Lloyd Noble Center. I wake him up and we grab our bags. My laptop is heavy, but because I never get the chance to do much of my homework in the evenings between work and doing everything he wants to do I have to bring it with me. We have to stand in line for a bit to catch the shuttle bus to campus. Like every other waking second of his life, he plays his gaming videos on his phone out loud for all to hear. I've tried to tell him it's rude to do that in public, but he never listens. It drives me crazy, but I've given up trying. Thank goodness, soon enough I see the shuttle coming around the corner.

We load up on the shuttle. Unfortunately, we have to stand this time. I'm always afraid of falling, though it doesn't seem to bother him. I'm struggling to hang on to the rail with my three heavy bags weighing me down, but he doesn't notice with all of his attention still focused on his phone. Some days I wish I was here by myself, but he has no other way to school. He's about to be a few minutes late to class. This impatience I'm feeling is somewhat due to how slow this shuttle is. Already I'm accepting that once again I'm going to have to walk him to class so that he'll go. Unsurprisingly, the second we step off he's protesting.

"I'm already late, I can just not go to class."

"Come on, you're going,"

Preventing any further protests, I grab his hand and literally drag him to his class. I drop him off in front of his classroom door and off I go to Dale Hall to work on homework for the next couple of hours before class. I walk as quickly as I can across the South Oval. My arm is killing me from carrying my laptop, but I have no other option.

I'm relieved to finally make it and sit down in my spot against the wall to start working on everything. This is my time to myself, and I reflect on what I'm doing with my life. I'm tired, I'm trying so hard, yet it doesn't seem like he cares at all. I bend over backwards for him every day; who wouldn't for someone they love? Maybe if I keep trying he'll come around soon. Maybe he'll grow up some and realize what I'm feeling.

I get through some homework and before I know it, the morning is nearly gone. It's time to eat my lunch right before my first class for the day starts. My classes fly by, but I enjoy them. Aside from my Spanish class being stressful, that is. When I leave Spanish, he's always waiting for me, either glued to his phone or sleeping on the wooden bench. I get his attention and grab his hand because it's Monday and I have to drag him across campus to get to my next class on time. I'm trying to hurry across campus, but he's being an obstacle with his attention diverted to his YouTube videos. As we're making our way across campus I wonder how we look to other people. I'm barely on time to this class, because of how much he slows down my progress. He gives me a quick kiss outside my classroom door, and before I get through the door he's glued to his phone.

Finally, the day is over. It's time to walk back to the shuttle. I'm so tired and struggling with all of my stuff and trying to maintain a conversation with him. But he's distracted by his phone. Sometimes it feels like he's more interested in his phone than me. As soon as we get back to my car he's asking if we can go eat somewhere. We have this conversation every day. I consider offering to cook, but I already know he'll refuse with the option of fast food available. I relent, feeling obligated, though I don't particularly enjoy fast food. He wants a burger, just like every other time, but it's what he wants. We go through the drive thru because he never wants to go inside, and I pay for my dollar menu burger and the most expensive burger on the menu for him.

Every evening is similar when I don't have to work. We end up back at his place and I go in, dragging my stuff with me, hoping to get some homework done. I'm only there because I'm craving attention, but as soon as we walk in he turns to his games. He's in his own world and not a care is thrown my way. The only way I can ever get him to focus on me is to start removing clothes. If I desire attention, my shirt is coming off because that's the only way. Once things are initiated, there's no backing out. I feel that fear of what might happen if I don't finish what I've started. I know this, and that's what starts things, and that's what gets things finished. But then it's over and I'm curled up in the corner trying not to cry.

I spent a year and a half with this guy. I thought I loved him and would have done anything for him, yet I don't believe he would have done the same. I had convinced myself that he was what I wanted, when really, all I wanted was somebody to support me, pay attention to me, and actually be a part of my life. Not someone who asked me to marry him because he wanted to tie me down. I didn't want someone who cared more about his video games than the struggles I was going through. I didn't need someone who hurt me more than helped me. Since making that seemingly disastrous decision to leave him almost a year ago, I have found myself much happier. I've learned to look back on this as a learning experience and move on, and for the most part I believe I have been successful. I have to direct my own life, and not let someone else take that from me.

Mistaken Empathy

by Kevin Park

Empathy. Empathy has never been something I've been particularly great at displaying. If someone were to tell me about their terrible day at work, the loss of one of their family members, or a large-scale disaster, I'd probably answer with the same, bland line, "Aw, that sucks." I'd like to think I'm not a callous person, but instead, that I just have some inherent inability to feel all that much empathy towards others. I'm not sure whether that's better or worse than just being an asshole. Or maybe I'm wrong and I am just an asshole. I guess you'll just have to decide for yourself on that. There is actually one moment in my life where I thought I expressed genuine, actual empathy for another person, though, and it happened when I was a senior in high school. Long time for that to finally happen, huh? Well, maybe later's better than never.

Before I get into the event in question, I should probably establish a bit of background first. My school at the time was an obscure little establishment we'll call ACA. After I had graduated, my mom was apparently told by someone that ACA was barely a school; having been there since the third grade, I can't exactly deny it. First of all, it really didn't look like a school. The main building looked like a giant red metal box, like something someone would see in an industrial dock. The only really distinguishing feature was the school's sign which had a Bible verse on it. Secondly, the school held students from pre-school all the way to the 12th grade, and yet only had 50-80 students at most at any time. By the time I was graduating, the school essentially melded grades 9-12 and even included 7th and 8th in some classes due to the lack of students. Thirdly, the teachers there were mostly unqualified, if I were to guess. Apparently there was a policy that students would pay a lesser tuition, perhaps even having it waived altogether, if their parent would serve as a teacher. I knew of several teachers that took the school up on that offer, regardless of their ability or lack thereof. To somewhat defend my former school a bit, not all teachers were completely clueless concerning their assigned field. I especially have to credit Ms. Shackford, my English teacher, for my love

of literature and my current college major. However, it was all too easy to tell who taught there just because of that policy. None of this paints ACA in the best light, of course, which probably explains why it went defunct in 2017.

Anyway, enough complaining about my school; I had better get into the root of the matter before this gets out of hand. As I mentioned before, it happened when I was in my senior year of high school, my last year at ACA. At that time, I met the second person in my life who I could just be myself (AKA: a massive nerd) around. Not to say that I didn't have other friends before or even during that point in my life, but I'd say he was the one I had connected to closest in that year. He was a transfer student from China, and no, I have no idea why he chose Oklahoma of all 50 states in America and, even more bafflingly, ACA as his school. Despite his status as a transfer student, he spoke English fairly well. Compared to some of the other transfer students and foreigners I briefly met during my stay at ACA, he probably spoke English the best out of all of them. He was around my height, maybe a bit taller, and he also wore glasses like me. He was much skinnier than me, though it's mostly due to my own plumpness rather than him being malnourished or anything like that. He was also a senior, but as mentioned before, that didn't change too much in the curriculum. He was fairly smart, too, and that intelligence unfortunately got him landed in my personal purgatory in ACA: pre-calculus class. Out of all the classes I ever had in ACA, that class was undoubtedly the most useless; I probably have to attribute my own lack of mathematical knowledge and dislike for that field entirely to that one class. Because it wasn't just that one class. I had pre-calculus three years in a row. Not because I flunked it, mind you; I got perfect A's each time. Instead, they just didn't have any other things higher up than that for someone like me and stuck me there, along with any unfortunate sods that happened to be stuck there with me.

So, what exactly was bad about ACA's pre-calculus class? Well, for starters, there was no teacher. The closest thing we had for a teacher was some narrator guy in a series of disks teaching pre-calculus. The questions were on another set of disks that also contained the answers. At this point, it's probably not hard to guess what one might do, completely unsupervised in a separate room with literally all the answers to all the questions ever. No tests either; they just expected us to fully get all the information from a monotonous voice coming from the computer's speakers. I'm not sure if any of the work we did was ever even graded properly. I honestly

wouldn't be surprised if they just looked at our sheets and said, "Yup, they did it, they clearly know about pre-calculus, A+." ...Ugh, and I said that I wouldn't whine about my school any more. To get to the point, such a worthless and boring class (that took up two hours, by the way) clearly lent itself to lots of non-calculus related talking, and the free time led to me being able to hang out with my transfer student friend.

That talking would get us into more geeky subjects, areas I was all too happy to join in on. I would quickly find out that he was, like me, quite a big fan of media from Japan, anime and manga and the like. Before this point, there were only two people I could out myself to as someone who enjoyed that kind of stuff, one of whom was so hyper-focused on Dragon Ball Z that it was pretty much the only anime-related thing he could talk about, and the other left after a single year at ACA; I don't blame him, though. My friend and I would talk about all that kind of stuff, but then we got into something even more obscure than that: visual novels. They're essentially super-long novels you "play" on some kind of system, most commonly PCs, that have scenes, pictures, and characters displayed that also occasionally have you make a choice, and picking a bad choice often gets the main character killed. Choose-your-own-adventure novels mixed with video games but with very little gameplay, if I had to distill it down to the barest of elements. I had only been somewhat familiar with the genre before we talked about it, but he made me explore it far more than I had previously.

There was one recommendation that he gave me that essentially got me into a whole new obsession. It actually wasn't even much of a suggestion, he just made a random comment one day. He mentioned one of the characters from something he got into fairly recently, and I somewhat re-membered seeing the name on one of my previous treks through the internet. That, however, triggered the catalyst that got me into that series. I looked up where said character came from, and discovered a visual novel by the name of Fate/stay night. And no, I have no idea what the title means, even to this day, eyeballs deep into the Fate series. I suspect it's just bungled English the author used just because it sounded cool to him. I downloaded the visual novel, which fortunately had a pretty good English translation available, and 50-70 hours of slightly more involved reading later, I finally completed it. I fell in love, basically. Not with the characters or the story (though those were good... at times), but with the world the author had built, to a far greater extent than any

of the pre-vious movies or books that I had seen and read up to that point. Then I discovered that the author had made a previous visual novel, named Tsukihime, meaning Moon Princess in English. And then I completed that, and before I knew it, I was completely obsessed. My friend, with just a mundane comment, got me into a series I still love even to this day, although I still can make fun of it from time to time. Obviously, that led to more talking about visual novels in general as well as the Fate series, which we engaged in wholeheartedly.

Good things cannot last forever, though, and this good thing of mine lasted fairly shortly. Around spring of my graduating year, my transfer student friend got some awful news: his father in China had died of a heart attack. He had to return to China, and thus he wouldn't be able to graduate with me and the others. On the day of his departure, I gave him a hug, and while doing so, I desperately tried to suppress my tears as best I could. I failed. Not in front of him, but I suspect that he probably knew I was crying either way. As I mentioned before, this is probably the only time I had ever, and still have ever, cried for someone else. I didn't really know why. One of my fellow students, another senior, tried to comfort me, saying it was okay to cry because my friend was going away. On the day of my graduation, when said senior was giving a graduation speech, she also cried when she brought up my friend. I have to admire her empathy, really. While my uncle drove me, now graduated and away from ACA, he asked me, "Why was she crying?" I gave some mundane answer, something about how it was sad or something, and that was that. My friend was out of my life, and I haven't had any contact with him since. I'm sure phone bills would have been hell anyway.

Now, about three or four years since that graduating year, I think I know why I was crying. I think that girl had the right idea; I was crying because my friend was leaving. But it wasn't because I was sad for him, for his problems and situation. I was sad because I wouldn't get to talk to someone so openly like that for the rest of the semester. The only thing I could find sad about that moment had nothing to do with my friend and everything to do with me. And how ridiculous is that, honestly? He had lost his father. He was probably far sadder than I was then and could ever hope to feel, and at that painful moment in his life, I could only focus on myself. All I could think about was that I was going to be stuck there, in ACA. That "school" that I was just cruising through effortlessly, a place where I could never express my true thoughts and interests. All this idiotic melodrama despite that it would only last

just a few months more. All because I wouldn't have someone like him to talk to. Even now, how much have I actually talked about my friend? Do you really know anything about him by reading this other than the barest of details? You definitely learned a lot about me, probably far more than you ever wanted or really ever cared to hear. Hell, I'm practically exploiting that tragedy in his life just to get a good story, and thus, a good grade in this class. Isn't that just pathetic? Maybe it's just my own personal negative look on things, more of my self-deprecation taken to the highest degree, but I do have one piece of evidence that supports my claim. One thing that unmistakably damns me in this regard. You may have noticed it during this meandering narrative of mine. My friend, the last and closest one I had in ACA at the time...

I've completely forgotten his name.

My Best Friend

by **Ronnie Shorter**

I am five years old. I see all of the other kids running about, excited to see their past friends from pre-K the previous year. I hear the loud, happy voices of the children and the humored voices of our parents as they send fond farewells our way. I smell the weird, papery-waxy smell of Crayola crayons, and someone's already opened Elmer's glue. I taste the sandpaper tongue of my mouth going dry at the sight of so many peers, so many faces I have to talk and relate to. I feel shy, overwhelmed and scared at the idea that I have to integrate myself into these already forged relationships.

"Hi, my name's Hunter. These are my two best friends Cassie and Maddie," a voice comes from behind as I watch my mother and stepfather lead my twin away for the first time. I whip around to face this newcomer, this new threat to my sanity. To my surprise, it's just another normal boy looking at me with a bright smile. It's the "start of a beautiful friendship," and as close as the two of us are to Cassie and Maddie, no one in the class becomes as close as Hunter and I.

We play tic-tac-toe together, my competitive nature always causing me to play for keeps, much to the delight of the girls watching me. Once, Hunter and I both notice a mistake on my part and an easy win on his, and we make eye contact. He moves his piece elsewhere, and I make my win, the girls crowing with laughter, and the guys giving Hunter grief for the rest of the year. We play at recess together with Tiffane and Kamden, a boy in her class who we figure out she has a crush on later in the year. They chase my sister and me, and Tiffane and I pretend to be frightened and run away. It's a childish game, but it's fun to five-year-olds.

When one of the Joshes in my grade makes fun of my surname, Hunter is quick to confront him on the playground later, and the two become instant nemeses. At nap time, Hunter and I always place our towels next to one another and we talk and giggle throughout the fifteen minutes we're supposed to sleep, often getting in

trouble. Whenever one of us is praised by our teacher, it's, "Great job, you deserved it." Whenever one of us is reprimanded (usually me, if I'm honest), it's, "The teacher doesn't know what she's talking about."

The year flies by, and soon it's April.

"I'm so excited—this is my favorite month of the year," I say across my table to him, bouncing in my seat.

"Mine too," he confesses. "It's going to be my birthday this month."

I stop moving, gaping at him. "No kidding? Mine too!" It soon becomes a contest of who's older—I win by nine days. My birthday comes with the arrival of mid-April, and I bring three tiny chocolate hearts to give to my friends and best friend, Hunter, Cassie, and Maddie.

"If you don't have enough for the entire class, you can't give them to three people," my teacher informs me. I still sneak them at recess, though, conscientiousness be damned.

His birthday, in a little over a week, is celebrated just as low-key, simply inviting Tiffane and me over to play video games and eat dinner with his family. He doesn't let me win this time.

However, May, a month I thought I'd be happy to get over with so I can start my summer with Hunter, comes with bad news. After a bit of prodding, my sullen-looking friend looks at me with a helpless expression. "I'm moving at the end of the year."

It feels as though my world has come crashing down around me. Like most hopeless romantics, somewhere along the line, I've realized feelings for my best friend. My family, including my grandparents living in Missouri, all know his name. I've already pictured our fifties-esque future life together, complete with a boy, a girl, a dog, and a white-picket fence surrounding the greenest lawn on the block. Scott, my stepfather by all accounts, has known and been friends with Hunter's father since community college. His year-older sister Shelby is friends with my

year-older sister Stephane, and his mother and mine are now friends as well, for crying out loud—it's fate!

Except, it's isn't fate apparently, because Hunter's parents get divorced, and Hunter and Shelby move out of the school district, and out of my reach. There are several times I try to get Mommy and Scott to call his parents so I can see him, and they make promises but nothing ever comes of it. There's only so much you can do when you've only recently turned six.

In the first grade, Maddie is in Tiffane's class, and Cassie has a bad day, screams in the teacher's face, and is sent to another school. I will lose interest in my studies and fall behind in participation grades. My teacher will ask my mother if it's ADD, something I've never heard of before, but Mommy tells me it simply means I'm easily distracted—something all kids are. Looking back in a few years, I will realize it wasn't ADD but the beginning signs of a depression that will haunt me for the rest of my life.

In the third grade, Hunter will move back to my school district and be placed in Tiffane's class. We will still run around with him a bit at recess, but we're all shy, and it's awkward, and it's strange, and it's not quite the same as it was. We still love it, though.

In the fourth grade, Hunter will be placed into my class again. We will tend to catch each other's eyes across the room multiple times each day, the guilty party always quick to glance back down at neglected schoolwork, this time with a slight blush tinging their cheeks. I will invite him to my tenth birthday at Planet X, and after laser tag, and mini-golf, and cake, and slides, and goody bags filled water guns, it will remind us of Playstation four years before at Cassie's birthday party, a place where Hunter suddenly kissed my cheek from behind, then blushed and pretended he didn't. This fourth-grade day, our friendship will feel easier again, mended back to kindergarten, but even better, because this time nothing will ever wedge between us again. This silent confirmation will be proven by his water gun being playfully shot to my ear, an action quickly reciprocated by me after a refill, and giggles as our parents reprimand those illegal shots. It's also proven in subsequent classes, when our eyes still meet but this time smiles sent just before we look away will burn our cheeks.

Those years will be filled with apprehension and low points, and also relief and high points, but today, I am six years old and I will miss my best friend.

I am eleven years old. I see my old friend after both of us have moved around (last year, I went to my grandparents' for 5th grade), though, watching him now, I could've caught up to my peers over the summer. I hear my other friend from elementary school, Aleeza, tell me that she can't understand why I'd be in love with someone like him—he's much too shy and "goody-goody" for her tastes. I smell the must of junior high hallways that have seen a hundred years of school, and thousands of school children before me. I taste the flesh of my apple slices snack, chewing thoughtfully as I consider what she's saying about becoming his friend again if that's what I really want. I feel bittersweet nostalgia as I wonder how to get close to him again and regain the friendship we used to have.

This year, I go to the same school as the boy I (almost desperately by now) still think of as my best friend for six weeks. During this time, Tiffane sees Hunter at lunch, and he says, "You guys left me, of your own free will, then...? Just kidding!" He laughs, but it sounds hollow to her and it doesn't quite reach his eyes. At the end of the six weeks, Momma has a huge fight with Scott, the first father figure I've known in my life aside from my grandfather, and she sends my twin and me back to our grandparents. In time, it will not be the most logical thing looking back, but I don't see a way to say what I want to do against the adults in my life, so my sister and I pack our things.

In seventh grade, we will try living with our mother again and going to that school district once more. My depression will relapse hard and I'll silently ask Hunter to save me. To this day, I have no idea if he noticed or not, but I personally believe he didn't know how bad it was, at least.

In eleventh grade, my mom will permanently move away from Iowa to be closer to where my sisters and I live with our father. I won't make it work in Iowa, with my depression and kinesthetic learning, and my pride and shyness won't allow me to ask my friends for help in a public school ranked nineteenth in the nation. I will message Hunter on Facebook sometime this year and tell him I have no way of

moving back. He will be shocked, and sad, and wistful, but soon the conversation will move to other things. I will confess my feelings, and he will be shocked once again. “Really?”

He will then inform me he’s sorry, but he’s not looking for a relationship anyway—only sex. I will confess he’s the only one I’ve thought of that way up to this point. He will again be surprised, but ask for pictures of my (female) body. Being stupid sixteen-year-olds who don’t understand the consequences of what we’re doing, we will exchange cell numbers and emails, and I will send him pictures.

The rest of junior high and high school will be filled with some of the best and worst memories of my life, but today I am eleven years old, and I will miss my best friend.

I am seventeen years old. I see an email from my former best friend, detailing everything I am to him in his eyes. I hear the rushing sound of shame and embarrassment in my ears as all of my past actions for this young man come back to me. I smell the sweetness of the bright summer day, just beyond the window beside me. I taste metallic saliva as I bite my tongue and cheeks in a failed attempt to keep from crying. I feel the weight and pain of my heart physically breaking as the first friend I’ve ever known flies farther from my reach.

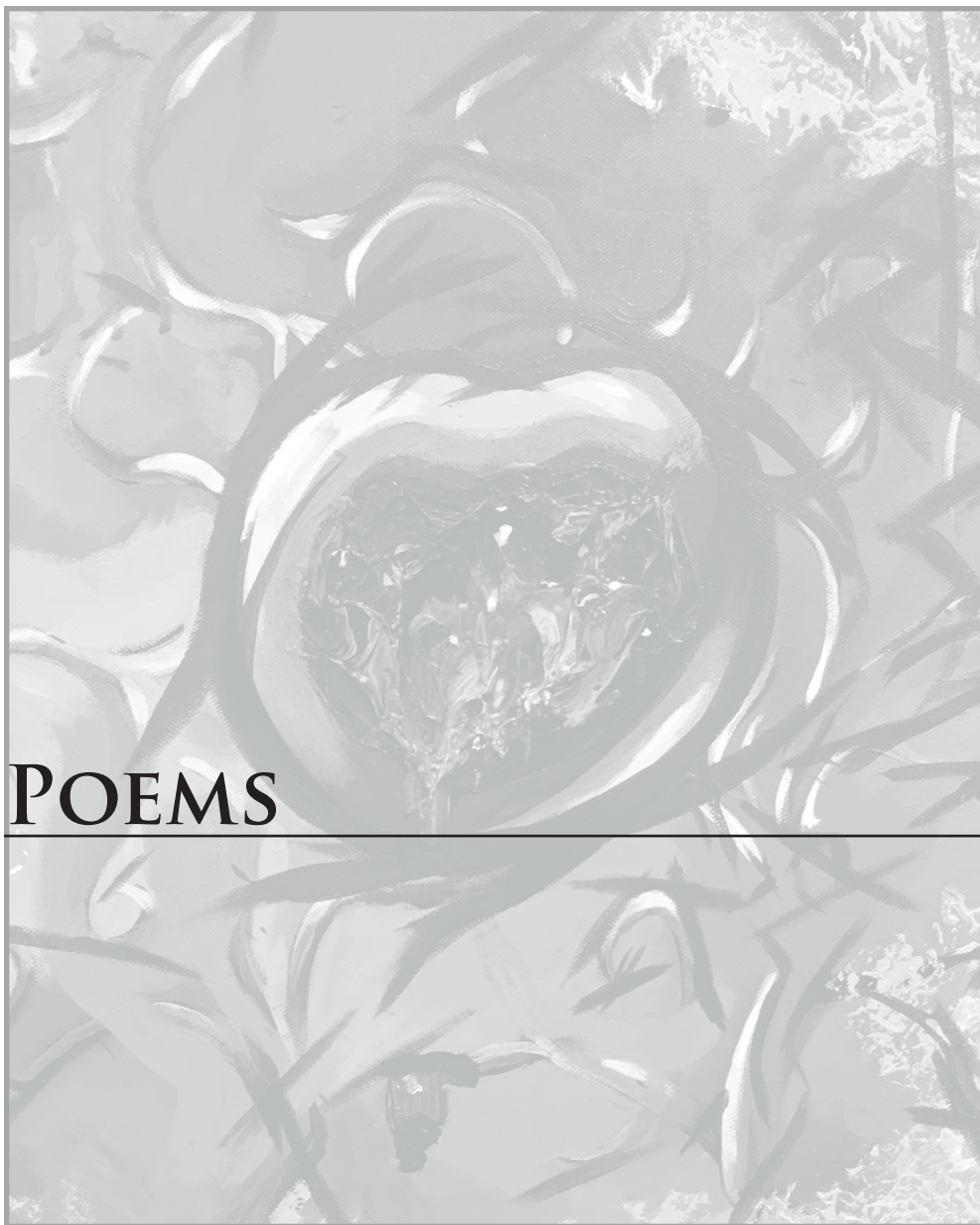
I reread the words, *I only talked to you because you seemed to hate yourself, and I wanted to help you*. I reread the words, *You mean nothing to me, our friendship was over after kindergarten, but you were too stupid to notice, and I didn’t know how to break it to you easily*. I reread the words, *Don’t ever contact me again*. I sob silently, alone for now in my room as the family fortunately does other things downstairs, thinking about how foolish I’ve been to place all my hopes and affections on one school year.

Before I truly catch the hint in a couple years, I will still do my best to send

him birthday messages over email and Facebook. I will still pore over our mutual friends' pages to see what he's up to, or saying, or if he misses me, all in vain. Before I truly catch the hint in a couple years, I will still laugh and cry over those high and low points from elementary and junior high school. I will look at the instant messages he and I shared over Facebook before the site automatically deletes them. I will pretend I still see sadness in the initial responses after he realizes we'll never attend school together again.

In eight years, I will be able to look back at these years as a bittersweet step to becoming the person I am at twenty-five years old. I will be able to pen my feelings for the loss I feel from it, hoping to make neither of us a villain or hero, but two foils, two asteroids just near enough to narrowly avoid collision, yet shift one another's path. I will realize through reevaluating his Facebook page, the message he sent was a poorly veiled projection of his own family problems and self-hatred, and my heart will break for him.

In eight years, I will look at these memories with grace and maturity that took far too long to achieve, and I will still be looking on, but today, I am seventeen years old and I will miss my best friend.



My God is Sunrise

by Allison Wilson-Burns

My god is sunrise
Mornings when the sun is new
She births me in days

Ode to the Shadows of Trees

by **Allison Wilson-Burns**

What beauty I could write about
The lace of branches painted
on my sky blue house
The dancing life, the softest life, a lover to be acquainted
You remind me of childhood days
Memory's haze
And thank the universe for the one
Who keeps me safe from the hot iron sun

The Millennial Alphabet

by Jay Redden

A always knew it would happen
B because life moves in a never ending cycle of pain that continues to rain and stain
this generation so we
C cut ourselves blades slice through the flesh of the depression in a faulty attempt to
control one's
D destiny which seems to always lead back to
E everything falling apart because if we're being honest life is
F fucked up
G God, why did you put me on this godforsaken planet?
H how am I supposed to believe in you when
I I only see the pain that comes blitzing at me around every corner as if it's rugby. Try
to be prepared so I don't get blindsided but I let my guard down. I let them in. I fall
in love again and boom
J just like that I give them my heart. She hurts me. I put my walls up. I know not to
get too attached again. The next one comes along and I hurt her unintentionally
and then she intentionally puts her walls up and the next guy comes around and she
hurts him. Then he hurts the next. Then she hurts the next. And we seem to neglect
that this is a never ending cycle of our generation
K kill...
L love is like when you're young and playing hide-and-go-seek. You pick the best
place to hide. You're just waiting to be found trying your best not to laugh as they
go to all the wrong places and you just hope they don't give up on you and quit too
soon
M maybe love isn't a double-edged sword but instead a pair of handcuffs and a set of
keys as you put yourself in captivity to your emotions and hope that they'll unlock
the cuffs so you can wrap your arms around them
N never gonna happen
O only fools still believe in love
P people are really dumb these days
Q queens are what women really are but they view themselves as "Bad Bitches" with
cosmetology and nursing dreams
R really, ladies?

S sex is opening yourself to sexually transmitted depressions and expressions that you have no business harboring inside of you and you've created a soul tie that you can't let go and now you either wish you never did, addicted to it or both. "Wait till marriage"

T too late now

U used to being manipulated by the captivity of my own emotions

V vexed me into loving you

W while the whole time I was so easily... disposable...

X exactly what I should've

X expected. These days "forever" comes waaaaay too fast so an

X is what you are now yes I said x three times because xxx was all I was good for it seems which seems to be the truth in most cases which is

Y why we put our guard up so quickly because every plan has failed. Hurt time and time again. Plans A-Y were all a bust so we give up and never make it to the end

Z

Late Night Talks

by Alyssa Madewell Varela

The thick fog dusts over our skin
The dark veil of night covers the sky we sit beneath
Talking, neither of us look at each other
We merely stare into darkness

I wonder if this is what it is really like to lose someone
If you sit and ask for closure from one another
Or whether they disappear without a second thought
Without a trace of them to leave behind

I have lost people both ways
But I could never comprehend which hurt worse
This was surely agonizing
I think I would rather not have to say goodbye at all

When I finally gather the courage to turn my head
You are no longer there
I wonder if you ever were
I realize I had been talking to an imaginary figure of you this whole time
And sigh as the cold breeze grazes my skin

A final goodbye

Can You Not?

by **Antonio Guardado**

Can you not?
Can you not
Drag me down this path again?
Can you not
Fill my life with worries?
Can you not
Wrap my neck with that chain?
Can you not
Force feed me your stories?

Can you not
Look at me that way?
Can you not
Hurt me deep inside?
Can you not
My heart and soul slay?
Can you not
Create this vast divide?

You stare with delight.
Watch me shake in fright.
Hold that cold gaze.
Bony fingers trace
anemic face.
Joy killer,
I'm your thriller,
Terror mirror.
Can't you see,
Anxiety,
That I'm not free?
Can you not
Be in me?

A Terrifying Beast of Malcontent

by **Brady Rangel**

I do not recommend you go in there
for in there lies a thing of great despair
it lies in wait for its time to strike
crawling in and out of sight trying to bite

its hunger knows no bounds and knows no end
please don't go up and around the bend
this is my last word of caution to you
after this you're done you're through

alright I warned you please would you stand still
I know I know it plans to hunt and kill
make sure to wear some socks or your feet
will be eaten, please meet Mittens our cute little kitten

V

by Susan Adams-Johnson

While I wait, a lark sings
While I wait, a tree blossoms
 The song dies
 The leaves fall
While I wait for you

VIII

by Susan Adams-Johnson

Grey-haired, lithe limbed he stands
A scholar, hands well worn
Quietly erect astride the land
A glance reveals hearts torn
A love remembered, passion lost
Spirit torn by honor, unspoken
Eyes pain reflected, hearts cost
Yet life progresses, unbroken.
Life is a thing well sung
A tale danced, of autumn's glories
Lines etched and worn, Vestments
Proportioned to windowed memories
Books cannot the heart fill
Nor labor ardor still

Ode to Elizabeth

by **Megan Gann**

The one who sings a beat too early, excited for the next verse of her favorite song
Angel flying too close to the ground, have you seen me again?
Fifteen years you were my grandmother, mother, friend, and confidant
And it only took one night to take it all away,
I miss it,
Your laughs close to midnight as you sipped your tea
The shuffling of your feet as soon as music played
Compassionate and soft as a feather floating to the ground below
Do your wings guide me still, or has it been too long?

Pointless Questions

by **Natalee Lambert**

I've been to more funerals than weddings,
Maybe as many as my age of 20.
I always ask myself,
"Where do they go?"
"Are they okay?"
They were just here, talking to me and planning their next day's activities.
Now they are in a coffin rotting or in an urn as ash.
I wonder if they saw a tunnel of bright light or were they engulfed in a void of
darkness?
Can they look down on me like a guardian angel?
Are they waiting for me to die so I can join them on the other side?
I hope so, part of me thinks not, though.
My best friend said, "I'm not afraid to die" a week before she took her life.
Are you afraid now that your body is gone?
(Or is it?)
Did you find peace or experience pain?
(Or nothing at all?)
I don't like to think about it.
Too many questions with no answers.
But I'll never stop asking them,
Not until I know the truth.
I've been searching for the path to find you.

Fighting

by Mars Mack

It does not matter how slow you go, they say. I only have one speed, barreling through life and ripping off the curling tendrils that wrap around my ankles to hold me back. I've got bad ankles and bad knees and a bad back... actually everything is bad. My body is fighting itself while I am fighting the world.

I even fought to not come out of the womb... Do you think that was a sign of things to come? Do you think somehow I knew before I even took my first breath in this world that things would be bad. Bad, not terrible because I have lived and fought through it all. Bad, not good because I am not famous or skinny or rich. Maybe if I lost weight my knees wouldn't hurt (and my ankles and my back). Maybe if I slow down I won't be this mess of exhaustion and constant body pain.

Perhaps if I slow down I will die, like a shark I have got to keep moving. I keep my plate full so my life is full. If my plate is overflowing then my life must have some purpose or meaning for being here. If I take too many bites I might become sick or tired or sick and tired, but it sure is delicious.

Into Bed

by Tiffane Shorter

We crawl our way into bed.
Insects, with our sharp antennae,
Ready to slice away covers.
Ready to rest our parasite bodies,
Until the sun makes our eyelids red with morning and we bloat ourselves on flesh for
breakfast.
We crawl our way into bed.

Abbey Road

by Tiffane Shorter

Smiling under an umbrella of music notes
As we walk along the rain-slicked pavement.
Rain comes down in billows of the wind,
And it rejuvenates our twin souls.

My hat cheekily states, “Something Wicked This Way Comes,”
As we walk along the rain-slicked pavement.
We arrive at our destination
And see people arrogantly taking pictures as they cross the crosswalk
While cars are just trying to get home.

We take pictures of the stupidity
And walk along the rain-slicked pavement
Until we see the door: “Abbey Road.”
We breathe in the damp air as we look up at the studio where heroes tread before
Two nobodies were born, much less even thought of making music.

And then we leave, as quietly as we came,
As we walk along the rain-slicked pavement,
Taking in the people and the houses on
The most famous of London streets.
And we’ll take the tube back to the others in our tour group,
In awe of how they’ll never know what heavens we found as
The rain came down in billows of the wind,
Rejuvenating our twin souls.

Ode to the Evening

by **Damien Stoltz**

Ah, you joiner of the day's frame and the night's roof!
O mauve curtain, heavy with desire for astral ink!
You second son!
O ochre maw that swallows clouds!
Let you and I speak of being mestizo among
constellation-crowned ebony and Cytherean ivory!
You time for daily doubt!
O guileless kidnapper of our sun
who delivers the moon in apology!
You who does not deal in hours, but seasons!
(midwinter: early; late summer: late)
O epilogue to every man's dawn,
holy bridge, let us walk along
the tightrope of time, clothed in your many colors.

Worn Notebook

by Camirye T. Brewin

Gray lines re-veining the flesh of the giants
Whose bodies once stood proudly, but now
Add substance to a writer's notebook.

Gray lines reintegrating meaning between the rows
And ideas of morality with yet another
Stroke of the pencil.

All in the room is quiet save for the scratching,
The etching of philosophies into something that can be
Burned, or water-logged, or erased away.

The Changing Storm

by Kevin Nguyen

The cool night air sweeps in after previous day's rain.
These are my favorite nights to go on a stroll.
The calm that comes before the storm
somehow is present now after.
It instills tranquility and peace in my soul.
The drops of rain lingering on the leaves of trees
splashing the walking path I take each night.
The shine of the stars seems more prevalent,
glistening as if the rain cleared the murky sky
to reveal their luster to us who walk the earth.
The quiet of nature and the songs it unveils
only in the night after the rain has gone.

Seoul

by **Bradley A. Cooney**

He walks through the streets of Seoul,
glancing at each passerby.
Nobody looks up,
eyes affixed on the ground ahead of them.

The neon lights of storefronts
illuminate the nighttime pathways.
The faint sound of music and glasses clinking
from inside dimly lit bars.

A drunkard passes by,
serpentineing.
Smells of Soju and cigarettes
waft from his tattered clothes.

An Oklahoma boy in Seoul,
aimless and anxious.

The city is electric.

Aibohphobia

by **Daniel Jameson**

(Read down first, and then read back up.)

I am nothing.
And I refuse to believe that
This world is meant to live
I realize this may or may not be a shock, but
Love conquers all
Is a lie, but
Hate conquers all
In 30 years, I will tell my children and grandchildren that
I have my priorities straight because
Fame and riches
Are more important than
People
I tell you this:
Once upon a time
The world was peaceful
But this will not be true in our era
Chaos is wreaking havoc more destructively than ever
Experts tell me
We cannot recover from the damage done
I do not conclude that
The kind will prevail
In the future,
Discord will be the new trend
No longer can it be said that
United we stand
It will be evident that
Mankind will fall
It is foolish to presume that
This home we call Earth shall have harmony
And all of this will come to pass unless it is reversed.

The Motel

by Trevor Crabtree

A blotchy mattress withered through years.
The smell of the bathroom brought them to tears.
A worn white wall, with solid sketchy stains;
“Oh God honey... Are those brains?”

To Cauterize My Tongue

by **Evelin Alvarado**

Like a dull knife
In my mother's chest
Guilt eats through my mouth
Weight crushes my breast

Six, small and afraid
You held me dangerously close and
Your institutions took a lighter
To my tongue, por Dios

Now tethered to my new white identity
But every part of me is still brown
My lack of color seems refreshing
But my heart is still seen through my gown

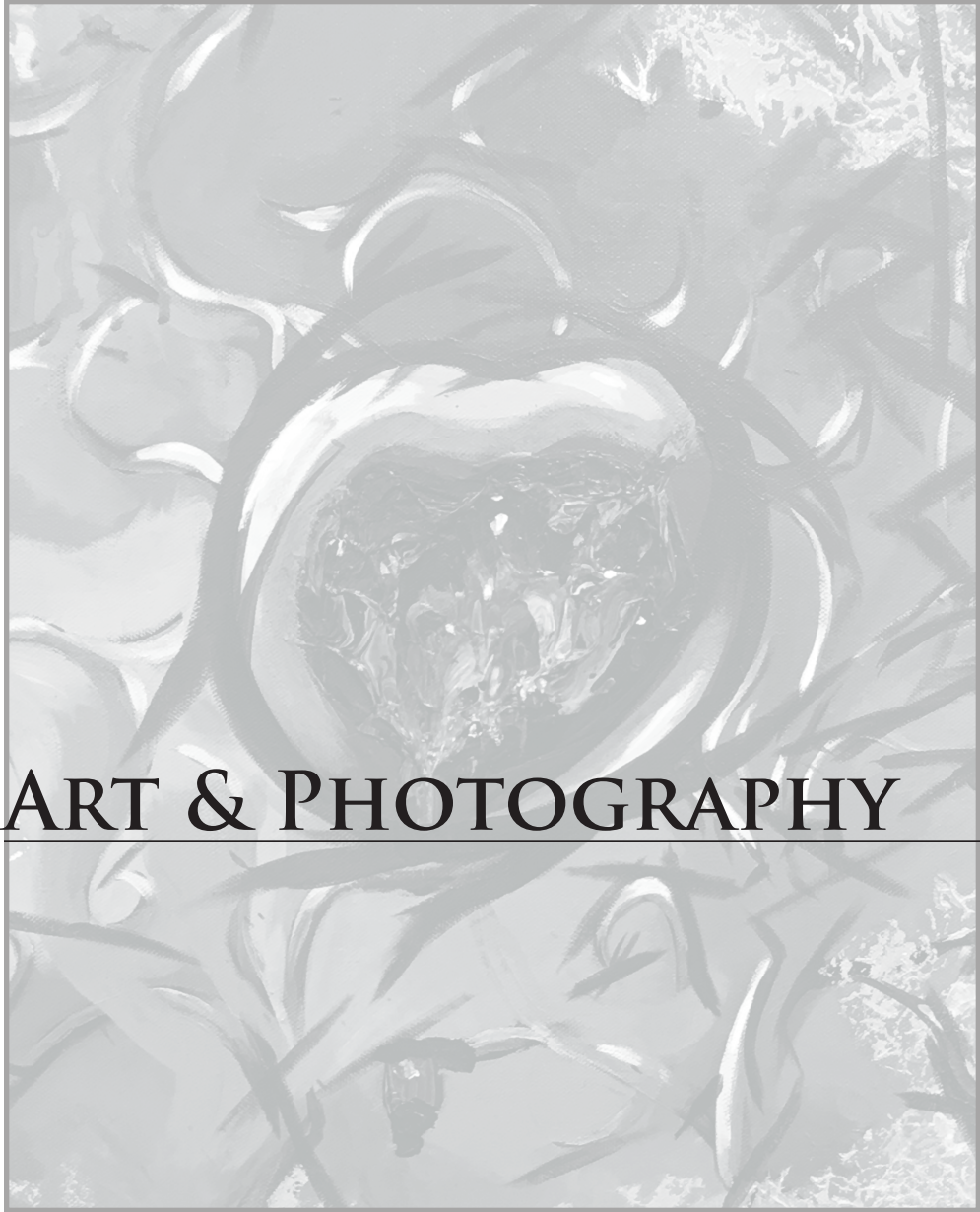
I am unable to do anything
For anyone but you now
I excuse my breathing
I excuse my breathing

I excuse my breathing

For Next Year

by Evelin Alvarado

Once, I pulled out a tooth that was not
loose from the front of my mouth.
I pulled it straight out and felt better about myself.
It's part of my mourning routine now.
Yesterday, I tried to be anything but this.
I tried on a cowboy hat and an amethyst necklace.
I tried on different legs, assertiveness and a gaudy wedding ring.
I vow to love and support you in trying times,
make you happy and cherish you always.
However, I know I will be bored two days in, again.
Last Tuesday was broken into
8 different pieces and everything felt
more confusing than usual.
A year ago I felt the way lawn chairs feel
when being inserted into their lawn chair sleeves.
Two years ago every hair on my body decided
I wasn't the perfect host anymore.
I don't have severe abandonment issues,
if that's what you're wondering. I am naked.
On my birthday, if I recall correctly,
I was caught up wiping the blood off the nurse's gloves.
I adjusted her glasses with my tiny sausage fingers.
I was embarrassed, I forgot how to cry.
Staff was confused so I was taken to the NICU,
where I spent 2 months tutoring the other
malfunctioning infants on how to write an apology email.
Mine was addressed to my mother.
This isn't for you, or me.
This is for next year.



ART & PHOTOGRAPHY



Old Truck
Leonardo Villaseca-Cruz



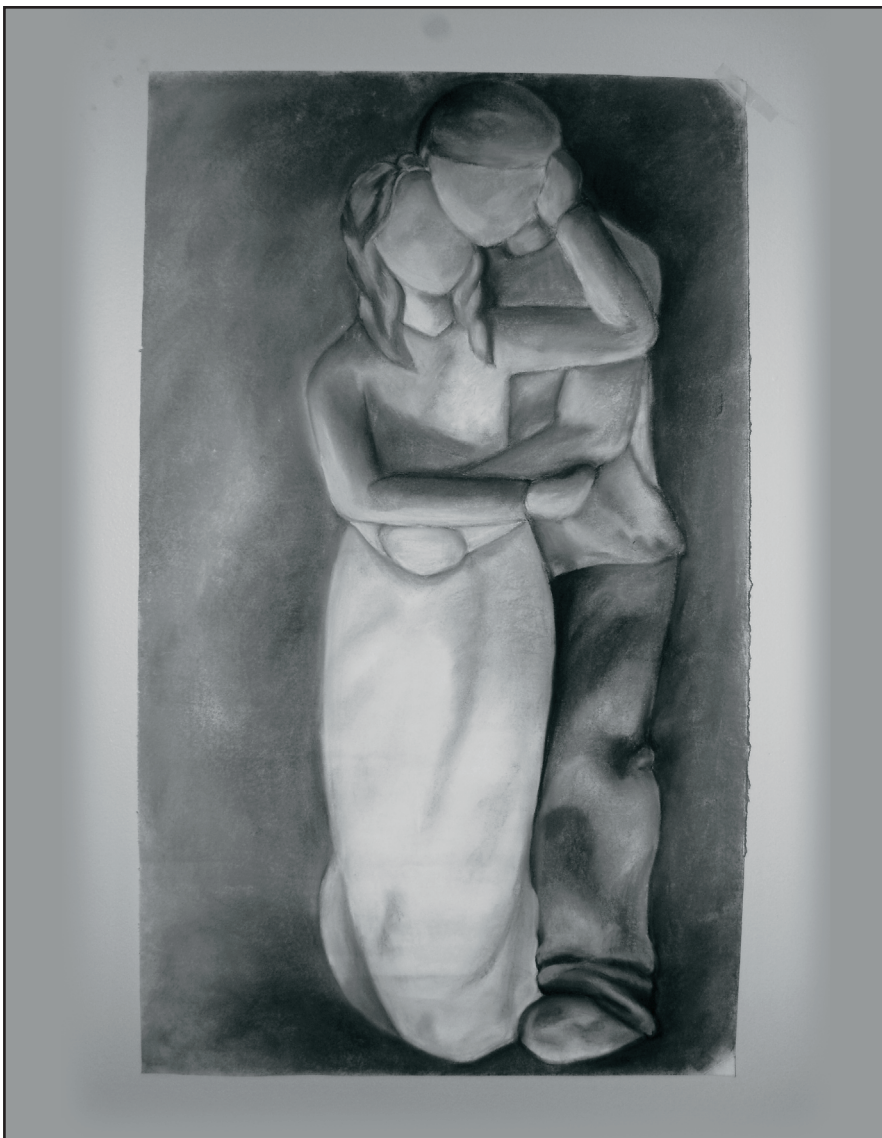
Windmills
Leonardo Villaseca-Cruz



Dissonance
Paige Busick



Pakali (to Bloom)
Paige Busick



Forever Promise
Catherine Courteau



The Orion Nebula
Philip Gainer



Cooling Waters
Kitty Eagle



OKLAHOMA CITY COMMUNITY COLLEGE