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Absolute

Absolute 2008

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FICTION



Death of a Neighbor

By Cynthia Praefke

Janet was jarred awake by an unfamiliar sound. It was a cross between an ear-piercing scream and the cry of an anguished child. She shot straight up in bed and shook her head to get the cobwebs loose. The popping of glass made her worry that one of the children had gotten up, tripped, and broken something. *Dammit, what would make them screech like that at 5 a.m.? Not like it's Christmas or anything.*

She slid into her slippers, in case there was broken glass, and rushed across the hall to the kids' room. She thought she smelled smoke. *No noise from the smoke detectors. Imagination?*

Janet screamed for Joe while she pulled on her jeans. "Joe, wake up. Joe, get your ass up, something's wrong." Her husband grunted and rolled over, but made no effort to get up. *Typical.*

She glanced down the stairs to see if there was any sign of smoke or fire. Nothing.

Just then she heard the sounds again, the shattering of glass and voices outside their bedroom window. Janet pulled back the thick curtains that she had hung to keep the bright security lights out of her eyes at night. Joe could sleep through anything, but she needed all the help she could get. She wished she was a sound sleeper.

At first her mind didn't absorb the scene she was facing. Down below, on the other side of the fence, three neighbors were working frantically to unhook the propane tanks from Jack's trailer. Flames were leaping from the broken windows in her neighbor's trailer house. She wondered if that was Jack's cry that she had heard.

Janet went back and tried to jar Joe awake. He cursed her but began to rouse when he heard the commotion outside. She checked on the children once more and ran down the steep staircase to the front door.

It was so sad. Jack had taken five months working nights and weekends remodeling his home. He was so proud of the job he did. His job kept him busy so he had asked Janet if she would be interested in doing his housework and laundry to make a little extra cash. That's how they became friends. Good friends. She prayed he would be safe, maybe drinking a shot of whisky in Betty's trailer.

As she got to the rear of the house, the neighbors yelled for her to grab the hose from her yard. They had several hoses, not enough to fight the inferno. It had become much

worse, and Hank was moving his truck out of the shared parking area. She couldn't see Jack anywhere.

Hank backed his truck up to the trailer and ran a chain to the door handle of the trailer. He revved up the truck and pulled the door loose.

Janet jerked on the hose. It had snagged on the fence. *Dammit*. Joe appeared from the side door. He had taken the time to comb his hair. *Jackass*. He grabbed the hose from Janet's hands and told her to get out of the way before she got hurt. She gave him a hard look but stepped back to give him a clear path.

Maybe Jack was only hurt and just resting in his car until the ambulance arrived. Janet peeked in to the driver's side window. She saw the blue jacket he wore. She had ironed it only last Monday. It always smelled of Jack's pipe tobacco. *Nice smell*.

The men were yelling now, telling Janet to get back. "Get away from the trailer door, Jan!" It seemed as if they were all shouting at once. She could hear the sound of sirens in the distance.

The men dropped the garden hoses and, with a look of complete defeat, turned away from what was left of their neighbor's home... The guys were talking to each other quietly. Janet wondered why they looked so sad. *It's only stuff. It can be replaced. It's sad but...*

The men turned and moved toward the sound of the fire engines. Now Janet could see into the smoldering living room. Then she saw the foot. Her eyes were not in sync with her brain. She wondered why the men had not helped Jack. She ran to the door.

At the same time, her husband dashed toward her, but Janet reached in through the broken entry. Her fingers closed around Jack's foot as Joe reached for his wife's hand and pulled it back. Janet stared at the blackened object that once was part of her friend's body. Her mind told her to drop it, but she tilted her head to the side as if fascinated.

She knew her body was shaking, but she could not feel anything. She stared in disbelief at the charred flesh and bone. *Like a drumstick on an overcooked chicken*.

Somewhere in her mind she heard a scream, but she did not know its source. A million hands reached for her. Someone said, "Settle down, ma'am. You need to go inside."

She heard her voice saying, "Leave me alone. Don't touch me." She only wanted to go inside and hold her children.

Melinda

By Lyndsie Stremlow

The van sinks and rises like a massive ship on the salt sea. The older women chatter like birds in the front seats. There are six of us: five married, one not. Naturally, the women begin to talk warmly about their husbands and children, relaying doting anecdotes with droning ease. Melinda does not say anything.

I do not say when they ask, “I am married, but working on *not* being that way,” which is my usual answer, routinely followed with a feigned laugh and lingering silence. Melinda says suddenly as we pass a stretch of sunflowers on the side of the road, “I’ve seen a lot of pretty things this morning. I just love early mornings.”

That does it. After that we do not say another word for some time. Even though she is nearly deaf, I imagine she is silent with the drunkenness of this Oklahoma, so lonely and lovely, nothing like the paved, alien paradise that is the swelling, pregnant suburb of southside Oklahoma City.

The same feral, yellow flowers grew in our neighbor’s yard after we were married. I often woke to see guineas and a lone peacock warbling around the flowers on the way to his child’s bus stop. More often than not, I would be required to stop so Hunter, my seven-year-old stepson, could chase them away, arms flailing and shrill voice even colder than the winter air. A garland of sunflowers sat, out of place, on the desk of the minister who married us at the courthouse in December. When I decided to leave and had packed the last boxes of my belongings and crowded them into the back seat of my car, I passed a group of men thrashing the overgrown flowers with machetes until they fell in brown piles alongside the fence.

“Look, you can see the mountains from here,” Melinda says as she turns to me; we briefly make eye contact. She is flawlessly framed by the window. The juxtaposition of wildflowers and mountains behind her make her appear strangely pretty. As we advance into southern Oklahoma, a strange and dangerously beautiful terrain, a blackbird as portly as a Chihuahua flies over the car, bobbing like a vessel hefting its own weight over every wave. I suddenly crave escape. Escape from Melinda and the old hags in the front seat. Soon enough Melinda is asleep, snoring softly, posed immobile against the immense red rock hills that appear to be flying by us faster and faster.

It was shivering newness over a year ago. We passed these same red rocks, stacked in jagged formation, and then came upon our intended destination, the river. I took pictures of him holding a beer bottle, of the tattooed arms that made my inner thighs tremble at just the thought of them, and of the hands smaller than mine. We parked and slid down steep trails to the river. The water rushing all around us was surrounded by towering red rocks and remote caves. Inside one of the caves I found a cherry rock shaped like the human heart. It was crawling with ants. The horseflies were attacking us from every angle until we obscured ourselves neck deep in the frigid water. I could see the outline of an immense, aboriginal face on his back through his thin shirt when he stood up. A fly attached to the tattooed third eye, and he comically tried to slap it off his back. When we were both exhausted from the sunlight and the hike, we climbed into his truck and sat in silence as the sun was spilling a torrent of burning colors across the sky. We bathed in the waning, salmon-colored light until completely buried in night.

There was a moment of ungainly silence. He reached clumsily for my mouth. That night he made love to me on a pile of leaves by the water. I could feel the cool earth damp and unyielding under me. He radiated heat and moved fluidly over me. I could feel the damp earth come alive under my arched spine. Five months later we were married.

Melinda begins to stir when we reach our destination, a human resources workshop designed to make customer service personnel feel better about their jobs. We can see a flood of dull suits, nylon hosiery, and middle-aged women storm the entry way. One of the older women frantically gropes for her cell phone while driving. Everyone in the car becomes tense, clutching door handles and seat belts as the van veers to the left, nearly hitting a parked sedan. "Hi, honey!" She shrieks her greeting. "Did you pick Elsie up from soccer practice already? Good! Okay, have to go. Love you too, baby, buh-bye!"

I stood on the platform at the bridal shop, watching my mother admire the antique lace train of the dress in the mirror. I tried to visualize the ivory dress against mahogany pews at the chapel, the claret gowns of three bridesmaids, the filmy veil lifted from my face, his striking smile...darkness filled my stomach, heart, head, and every offered organ. I thought of the river and the obscurity of the caves. I wanted to exist instantly and namelessly there, never to reflect on his smile, the small hands, the smile dropping and decaying over years, the tattoos that still make me hot, the child growing older and waking up to the injustice of life, our bodies deteriorating together, watching one another die, craving death as an end to our regrets. I longed to bolt from the bridal shop and dart through traffic like a madwoman foaming, spilling over, and going nowhere.

Melinda and I sit like mirrors looking at one another over the round table decorated with stuffed cats and dogs, neon donuts with multicolored sprinkles, complimentary college pens and notebooks, and nametags with bubbly writing. She probably can't hear the bird-like

chatter amplified tenfold. The room swarms with middle-aged women with bad haircuts, a group of suits waiting to give their “Comedy in the Workplace” presentation to the sea of color-treated, prattling heads. We both sit with our arms crossed, pretending to read the program. Melinda is holding hers upside-down. A stout woman in a floral summer dress approaches the podium, giving a little wave to the audience. She speaks in a tinny voice, “How many of you take your jobs seriously? I know I don’t.” Pause, hesitation, then the room comes apart at the seams, a flood of false laughter like the buzzing of flies filling the room to its brim. Melinda gawks blankly at me and then randomly breaks into a strange fit of laughter, looking around to the room for reassurance. I laugh at her. Everyone in the room is laughing hysterically.

He wept on his knees the first time I tried to leave, three weeks into it, beseeching me to bleed dry whatever poison had seeped into my mind. I stayed because I couldn’t bear the fact that the ruins of this man I stopped loving would be left behind like another sullen specter. Months later, I grimly packed paintings, dishes, clothes, love letters, and countless other objects in bags and boxes. Cradling the last few bags in my arms, I passed my husband sitting on the couch, staring vacantly out the window. Hunter was sitting on the floor, watching his father watch the window. I sought the little boy’s support with my eyes, but he just gazed at me helplessly. It was over. I passed the hydrangea we planted months earlier and wrenched one of the blooms from the plant. The obscurity of ten thousand shadows had been lifted from over my head. As I drove back to my mother’s house to live once more, I saw the men with machetes slashing the shrunken sunflowers, leaving them in brown piles along the roadside.

Fish on the Verge of Change

By Nelson Bundrick

So I thought I'd piss in my fish bowl, no ulterior motive at first. It wasn't done for reasons of cruelty or spite either. I was simply sitting in my living room one day when I wondered what it would do. I had three fish at the time, none of which had names, so I wasn't very attached to them. The tank was amply accommodating for the fish and was likely more fitted for four times what I had. After I had done the deed the water didn't look any different, and the fish didn't seem as though they cared. Having that done and the desire to do so out of my system early in the afternoon, the rest of my day was spent pondering. My mind was allowed to passively wonder as I watched the calm peaceful movements of the fish.

I knew that these fish had not existed since the beginning of time. And I knew that not even their specific species had existed for long in the whole scheme of things. So I then wondered on how these things come to be. They had to have evolved, and by that I concluded that their ancestors must have had to adapt to new environments. Many a fish had probably had to follow food from salt water to fresh or vice versa to continue to live. So in order to stay alive over time these fish would have had to adapt or evolve.

These fish were amazing creatures. So I would help to make a new evolution into a kind of piss water fish. I was creating a stronger more amazing fish right here in my living room. It was just on the verge of birth as I sat and pondered. To help my fish get more of a taste of their new environment, I took another piss that night before I went to bed. The next morning I was out of bed quickly to see what changes had occurred. To my surprise and disappointment one of the fish hovered in the bubbles next to the air pump. *Oh well*, I thought, *the weak ones must die off so that the strong can live*. I considered taking it out, but decided against it so that he might give the other fish some incentive to want to live. Situations like the birth of a new species in my living room made me glad I had no job so that I could invest all of my time and effort into the fish.

I took another piss in the tank before I headed out that morning. I was going to the pet store to get four more fish. What if the others I had were weak like the one that died? At midnight another fish hovered at the top. I wasn't too sure why. I had only pissed in the tank two more times since the morning. The water was pretty yellow by that point so I figured I'd let the fish get used to it. At two that morning I could see that they were struggling to

live. *Their old ways must be dying so that their new selves can be born*, I thought. Yet in the morning all of “their selves” were just dead. Feeling stupid about buying so many fish from the same place, I decided to spread the wealth a little. I returned in the afternoon with six new fish and put them in the tank.

Pet store fish must be far inferior to the real fish that live in the wild. In fact, I’m pretty sure that I had read somewhere that much like dogs and such, fish had also lost many of their wild instincts. I thought this because by the morning all the fish were dead. For today, I would go to the river and get a fish there. But I definitely couldn’t stop, this was far too important to me to give up.

Billy Ray

By Paul A. Phillips

The East hallway where the terminal patients stay is not a happy place. The first thing you notice when you walk on to the floor is the smell. It smells of old people, mold and death. The waiting room is a place always full of families with long faces and eyes that told you of deep thought. Their children are either playing in the floor or bouncing off the walls and being a pain in the butt. At times I wish I could just get rid of them all. Of course, Billy Ray could have emptied the waiting room in no time at all.

Billy Ray was a slim, middle-aged man who was bald on top but kept long hair on the sides of his head. Two front teeth were missing, and he had tattoos all over his body. His only joy in life was to make everyone else's life miserable. Billy Ray's favorite pastime was cursing the kids and making fun of the other patients' suffering. When Nurse Racket Ass said something about this, all he would say was, "I don't give a shit!"

Nurse Racket Ass looked like a black Pillsbury Dough Boy, with black horn-rimmed glasses and a tent for a dress. The woman had a Napoleonic complex. If she couldn't control everything and everyone, she made everyone miserable. We took an instant disliking to each other the first time we met.

We met early in June when I started working for the hospital full time. Being the new guy on the staff and being on Nurse Racket Ass' list, I got Billy Ray because nobody else would take him. No one would take him because he liked to grab the nurses' boobs or butts, with an occasional hand up the skirt. The first time I walked into Billy Ray's room he reached up and grabbed my chest without even looking up to see who came in.

"Does that do anything for you, sweetheart?" Billy Ray said.

Now I've played head games with the best psychological patients around. This action was nothing new to me, so I replied, "No, but if you go down below my waist it might."

Billy Ray's hand recoiled faster than a striking snake and his whole body shook like it had been shocked with 10,000 volts.

"Get away from me, you fuckin' faggot," he stammered out.

This is how our relationship started out. Believe it or not, he became one of my favorite patients.

One day a nurse's aide came running out of Billy Ray's room screaming. I went into his room to find out what happened and Billy Ray had a hand full of shit ready to throw.

“Don’t throw that!”

“And just what are you going to do if I do, you fuckin’ faggot?”

“If you do, I won’t be your friend.”

Billy Ray broke into a deep laugh that ended in a coughing fit.

“Look,” I said. “You can still walk. You can walk out of here. No one will stop you. No one will run after you and beg you to come back. You can go back to the wide open world and die anywhere you want. You can even die in a ditch, lay in your own shit and piss. Why, with the way you are with people, someone might even call the police before the flies and maggots get to you.”

Billy Ray threw the shit on the floor and said, “Faggot!” I noticed it was not “fuckin’ faggot.” I had gotten a promotion.

About mid-July we had worked out something of an agreement. He just about stopped having any more shit-slinging episodes. Urine would go into the toilet and not on the floor or wall and the soup bowl was returned to the kitchen. He would take a bath daily, not monthly. He had stopped making fun of the other patients’ suffering and stopped cursing the kids, sometimes. Of course, Nurse Racket Ass took credit for this. That is, until Billy Ray got into the nurses’ break room and peed in her coffee cup. When I asked him why he did it, all he said was, “It was afternoon. If it had been morning, I’d pissed in her Cheerios.”

In July, Billy Ray started having periods of depression. He was having trouble walking and needed a wheelchair. Of course, Nurse Racket Ass made sure he got the worst chair we had. It had been used as a shower chair at one time. The cloth parts were torn and worn, the removable legs were mismatched and the hollow outer rings on the wheels had rusted. When the chair rolled, it sounded like sand moving in the rims.

That’s about the time he started to tell me stories from the more colorful parts of his life. “One time when I was down in Mexico in a hole-in-the-wall bar, I got into a gun-and-knife fight with the Bitch. I fired off about a dozen rounds at the Bitch. I don’t know how many shots she got off at me. Then she pulled a straight razor, and I used a broken beer bottle. I took one hundred and three stitches and she took a hundred and five. Lord, I miss that woman.”

“What? You miss that woman?” I asked.

Looking down on a tattoo of a naked lady on his right arm, he said, “My ex, now!”

In the middle of one of his other stories he stopped and asked me, “Faggot, do you think God would let me into heaven?” But before I could answer him, he went on with his story. Later I asked the chaplain to see Billy Ray and he tried. On the third time, Billy Ray shit-bombed him.

In late August when the grass had turned brown and the ground cracked from lack of water, Billy Ray’s liver failure had advanced to the end stage. Housekeeping had started

putting out solid sticks of room freshener. The smell of rotting flesh is not pleasant. His skin had a pumpkin color to it. His eyes were yellow. His abdomen was swollen due to fluid build-up and he had lost about half his body weight. Billy Ray became incontinent and had unmanageable pain. One day after I cleaned him up, changed the bed and gave him medication just below a lethal dose, he said, "You know, I've lost my dignity and I'm sick and tired of being sick and tired. Hey, faggot, would you ask the chaplain to drop by and see me?"

"I don't know if he will come back the way you treated him last time."

"I promise I'll treat him right."

"Do I have your word on that?"

Shaking his head, Billy Ray said, "My word."

The chaplain showed up at shift change and they had a long talk.

The next morning when I came to work all the night shift was in a happy mood. Even nurse Racket Ass smiled at me. I found out why when I looked at the assignment board. Billy Ray's name had been taken off the board. He had passed in the night.

One of the night nurses told me that Nurse Racket Ass had wanted Billy Ray out of the hospital so bad that she'd called the funeral home to come and get him half an hour before he died. In memory of Billy Ray I pissed in her Cheerios that very morning.

Spurious Depuration

By Chris Jones

His legs were burning and his eyes were stinging with sweat, but this he abided no longer. He relaxed his grasp and an arm fell to the cold earth, the new snow rising softly around it in the air, pristine. He wiped his face. His beard, gray and slightly less unkempt than the one at his feet, was beginning to soften from the moisture in the air. He searched the surrounding forest with concern. Realizing that its density would prevent anyone from a distance from becoming a witness, he briefly relaxed. He looked behind to see paths within paths, ravines from heels within the broader trail the body had carved. This sole trail only they had treaded, now sprinkled with sporadic bursts of crimson, still masked itself as liberation. He looked down. It was trickling out around his feet. The spots from the overpass to the shack before him would be lost in the perpetual snow being laid upon them. The spot at his feet was growing more substantial. *Who bleeds for 45 minutes?*

The moonlight draped them in. He opened the door to the shed, its rusty hinges protesting, briefly ruining the tranquility. His eyes had adjusted to the night. Through the slightest of cracks in the cabin he saw the others, piled and approaching decay. This would be the last one. A thought danced within, that perhaps he had managed the slightest catharsis this time, but he quickly laid the deception to rest. An unwelcome burden crossed his mind. The word *metamorphosis* fluttered about and he could not rid himself of it. The roof dripped, protesting his intentions. He reached down and grabbed handfuls of torn sweater and tugged, backing into the darkness of the small wooden structure. He added the old man to the pile and arched his back, which suffered on each of these occasions. He peered out from the open doorway. The forest was so thick it prevented him from seeing more than a few feet past the clearing that encircled the cabin. The closest birch was less than 40 feet from him. Beyond that was darkness. As he raised the first gas can over them he wondered if that distance would be sufficient, or if the term *conflagration* would finally make the morning news. *It's snowing. The trees will be fine.*

He emptied all four cans, left specifically for this occasion. He stepped out into the night air, attempting to rid his lungs of the fumes. He removed his gloves, as they were sprinkled with a variety of evidence, and tossed them into the doorway. He did a quick checklist in his head. *Gloves, bat, gas cans.* Oh. He reached inside and removed a stainless steel snow shovel and stepped back from the cabin once more. He searched his pockets for the book of

matches and removed it. He waited, soaking in sweat and breathing slowly. Then he lit one. He watched it dance in anticipation, then finally sparked the box and flung it inside. Within seconds the shed was ablaze, the moisture proving no adversary for the gasoline.

He stood within feet of the fire, allowing its heat to relieve his frostbite slightly. Smoke billowed steadily and blended nicely with the clouds above. Occasionally the wind would whip through the trees, stinging his face and glazing his eyes; the smoke would dissipate and then reform. The sky consistently cast its duvet upon the earth, and he stood statuesque, somewhere between hypnotized and bewildered. The beauty of it overwhelmed him. It was almost soporific. He felt dazed. The ash kicked up by the intermittent gusts began blending with the snowflakes and continued serenely coating him, leaving a leopard print of gray on his black derby and thick black coat. The thought of punishment sat in the corner of his mind like an obedient child he did not feel obliged to acknowledge. The surrounding trees glowed with disapproval as the fire burned on. The smell was pervasive and his fingers were beginning to burn from the cold. He turned to see that the trail was completely veiled. How long had he been standing there? He realized the shovel would be unnecessary. His boot prints would be covered soon enough. He tucked it under his arm and thrust his hands deep inside his pockets, searching for warmth. But he did not feel warm. His feet carried him away, back into the darkness.

The Towel

By Ugur Sener

The towel was still swinging. Not such a surprising fact given that he had thrown it over the bar about ten seconds ago. It could be explained by the application of force and the direction of momentum. Yet he watched it with intimate curiosity. Left and right... It reached just a bit lower with each swing. Gravity would make sure that it would settle. Nine point eight meters per second squared. That was the acceleration of gravity. How did the pull of a planet accelerate? The square of a second... Now there was an interesting concept. How could you square a second? What did that mean?

He stepped out of the bathroom. The water hadn't been able to really get rid of that red stuff. But wasn't it supposed to be the universal solvent? And wasn't blood mostly made of water? So water couldn't get rid of itself... Delightfully confusing. He bowed before the solubility laws, humbled by their deliciously irritating simplified complexity.

He prodded one of the corpses with his foot. Good... It was still lifeless. The pool of blood was growing larger. He had cut a hexagon on her chest. Carefully measured angles. Geometric perfection at odds with the curves of her body. The arteries no longer carried blood through her veins. Her heart didn't beat. Her chest didn't rise.

No more angry sounds. Decibels piercing his ears. No more telling him what to do. He prodded her one more time. Very good... Definitely dead.

He momentarily considered burying the corpse. Return her nitrates back to the environment. To be decomposed, recycled. Maybe to a more pleasing form. A more pleasant demeanor. But he didn't want to get all that messy stuff on his hands again. Nah... The corpse would decay here perfectly well.

He walked out of the apartment. The sun was rising to the east. The earth's equator measured about twenty-five thousand miles. The planet fully rotated every twenty-four hours. So it had to be going pretty fast. He contemplated why he couldn't feel it move. He would certainly feel a car going that fast... Delightfully confusing.

He walked down the road with a wide grin on his face. No needle for him this morning. He'd contemplate the formation of clouds and the speed of wind instead. He wondered... Did everybody look the same when they were dead? A lonely pedestrian walking on the other side of the road.

Time to find out.

Purple Thoughts on the Moon

By Ann Hovda

“It is just so sad,” the teachers all declared in hushed tones. “She came here directly from the funeral.” They discussed everything, as if talking about it until they were hoarse was going to make it go away. They were divided on the subject of whether or not Mandy had returned to the elementary school prematurely. Half of them were shocked she had returned only a few hours after the funeral. They said it was far too soon, and she was putting the other students at risk of having to deal with her emotional turmoil. The other group of teachers concluded that rushing back into school would help poor, little Mandy cope with loss by providing the distraction of schoolwork.

Four days before, Mandy had gone shopping with her mom and found the perfect outfit. Picture day was coming up, and Mandy was looking forward to wearing her new dress. It was beautiful, purple and lacey. She had begged and begged for it. And finally, after accepting Mandy’s promise to do the dishes for an entire month, her mother gave in and bought it. Mandy’s mother thought she was the perfect child and loved spoiling her. She wanted Mandy to look extra pretty for picture day. The night before the big event, she braided Mandy’s thick, dark hair and tied off the end with a silky purple ribbon. Feeling like the most beautiful little girl in the world, Mandy kissed her mother goodnight and skipped off to bed.

It was two o’clock in the morning when Mandy’s father shook her awake. “Get dressed quick,” he said, as he threw a pair of overalls at her. He told her just to put them on over her nightgown. She followed him into the living room where she saw lots of strange men. Two of them were carrying her mother outside on a stretcher. She ran outside to follow her mom and was struck by bright flashing lights. She tugged on one of the strange men’s shirts attempting to get his attention. He looked down at her and said, “Your mommy isn’t feelin’ too good right now. We’re just taking her to the hospital to try and make her feel better. She’ll be back home real soon. Don’t worry, kid.”

He lied. By the next morning, Mandy’s mother was dead. She had not survived the heart attack. Mandy cried all the way home. As her world flooded with tears, more strange people showed up at her house and their refrigerator filled up with food. They tried to console her. This time, though, she knew they were all lying. They were lying when they all said they understood how she felt. How could they understand her feelings when at the moment she

wasn't at all sure she even understood them herself? She was tired of all the visitors and was happy when her dad recommended she go back to school.

It had been three days since her mother's death, and she wanted to get away from it all. She returned to school wearing the same nightgown and overall outfit that she had worn to the funeral, the same one that her father had thrown at her the night her mother died. She did not know what she was supposed to wear to the funeral; for her entire life, her mom had always helped her pick out her clothes. Besides, most of her shirts were hung-up too high in the closet for her to reach, and she didn't want to bother her dad with that now; he had enough on his mind. "It doesn't matter what I wear," she told herself. "Mommy loved me for who I was not what I wore."

At recess she sat by herself on the chalk-filled sidewalk daydreaming. She thought about her mother. Mandy tried to imagine a world where her mother did not exist. A world where she was no longer there everyday picking her up from school, making her sandwiches for lunch, or kissing her goodnight. She occasionally looked up from her thoughts and glanced at the teachers who were gossiping about her. She hated them, all of them. In her eyes, they looked just like a bunch of clucky hens. Suddenly, she felt a tug on her now greasy and dirty braid and was pulled back into the real world. Brittney Gooren yanked again on the braid that had once represented the love of Mandy's mother. Brittney's friends laughed hysterically. They all joined in the fun of pulling on her dirty braid and followed her around the playground. It was all a game to them. The teasing was fun, and seeing Mandy cry was an added bonus. The teachers were so distracted by their conversation about Mandy that they failed to notice the attack on one of their students. After recess, Mandy called her dad, and he picked her up from school.

When she got home, she ran to her parents' bathroom and locked the door. After a few minutes of sitting on the tile, Mandy picked up her father's shaving razor with a shaking hand. She held it for a minute in the palm of her hand and stared. It looked like freedom from the pain of being picked on; it looked like an escape from all the dirtiness of the last few days; it looked like relief from the grief she was feeling for her mother's death. She turned on the faucet and wet the blade with water; then she began. With each smooth stroke, she felt a little less pain. With each piece of hair that fell to the ground, she felt more freedom. The braid had once been a thing of beauty and love, but now it just felt heavy.

Although Mandy had never used a razor before, she did well. Mandy had watched her father shave in the mornings, and she knew how. She nicked her head once or twice but never too deeply to cause her much concern. She stared at herself in the mirror. Her head was shiny and white; to her, it looked like the moon. She placed some Scooby-Doo Band-aids over the cuts on her head and began to pick the hair off the floor. She needed to keep it; she needed to remember everything about her mother. She grabbed an old shoe box from the

closet and threw the long thick braid into it. She intended to keep it under her bed. It would be safe there, away from prying eyes.

As she walked down the hallway to her room, she stopped to look at her father. He had been sitting on the sofa staring at the wall. He said nothing about the hair; all he did was nod. He understood the pain. She sat down by him and leaned in to hug him; he held her so tightly, she wished he would never let go. She felt his warm tears fall on her bald head.

The next day at school was makeup picture day. She put on the pretty purple dress and thought of her mother. She walked to her classroom that morning and thought of her mother. When they took her yearbook picture, she thought of her mother, and smiled.

The Paris Apartment

By Rebecca Barbee

Elizabeth fumbled through her purse looking for some gum or a piece of candy. Finally in frustration she emptied her purse in the passenger seat of her car. Lipstick tubes, ink pens, wadded receipts, and coins tumbled out. Empty gum wrappers, business cards, and a few crumpled dollar bills added to the mess, but nothing she could use to get the sour taste out of her mouth. Bile rose in the back of her throat, gagging her, and her tongue felt swollen and dry. She looked out her car windshield and saw the sign of the store she was about to go into.

Her hands shook a little as she fumbled through the mess on the seat next to her again. She opened the ashtray of her car and peered inside. A book of matches was the only thing there. She stared at it for a second and then snapped the ashtray shut and began rummaging through the pile again. Finally she came across a honey lemon cough drop. She hadn't realized that she still had any.

She unwrapped the paper and popped it into her mouth hastily, then closed her eyes and leaned back in her car seat, trying to calm down before she went into the store. There was no reason to be this unsettled. She was just going to go in and look around. As she was working up her courage to get out of the car, she saw a woman leaving the store and heading into the parking lot. The woman was tall, with dark brown hair and a slender build. She was talking on the phone and seemed oblivious that anyone was watching her as she gracefully sat down in her black Honda. She started the car and then pulled out of the parking lot in a hurry, heading north.

Elizabeth started her car and pulled out behind her. There was no need to go in when the woman she wanted to know about was leaving the store. The cough drop started to taste too sweet, almost cloying in her mouth, and she fumbled through the mess on the seat beside her coming up with a receipt from the gas she had purchased that morning to wrap the remainder in. The woman she was following drove quickly, but it was easy to follow her as there was little traffic this time of day.

Elizabeth found it hard to believe that a week ago she had been sitting in her kitchen thumbing through a magazine with no clue how to find this woman. She had been absently looking through the articles trying to figure out if she really liked the smell of the orange flowers she had bought at the market that morning. Her husband used to bring her flowers

before everything went wrong between them, and Aaron had brought her flowers when he was younger. There was no one left to bring them to her anymore, so she had to buy them herself. The scent seemed so strong and overbearing, but when she saw the photo of the owner of The Paris Apartment, she had forgotten all about them. The article said that the woman who owned the apartment was named Monica Lewis, but it was the woman's face that Elizabeth couldn't look away from.

There was no doubt that this woman was the one Aaron, her lost son, had painted. She had gone to the gallery herself to look at the painting. She had almost haunted the place for weeks, trying to catch a glimpse of this woman. The woman in the painting was identical to the one in the picture. Her son had spoken of a woman. He had told her so much about her, but never her name, never anything that would identify her. He had told her that he would tell her when the time was right, when he knew where it was going. He had teased her when she pressed him, and she had laughingly agreed to give him his space, but her heart had sunk. It must be serious for him to be so secretive. He had never kept anything from her before.

His father had died when he was very young in the fire that started in the garage and had spread throughout the house while he slept. Elizabeth and Aaron were visiting her mother or they would have been trapped in the blaze as well. Since then mother and son had shared everything about their lives. When he was small, she had encouraged it. When he was older, she had demanded it.

Elizabeth followed the car as it turned into a daycare parking lot. She watched as the woman disappeared inside. While she waited for her to come out, she thought about Aaron. He had lived in an apartment complex not so far from the antique shop the woman she was following owned. The apartment complex had burned to the ground during the night, a year ago next month, destroying everything in it and taking the life of her son. The only two men in her life had been taken by fire.

She had to talk to this woman, had to hear the details of her relationship with Aaron. She wanted to know everything her son hadn't told her about the last few months of his life. She was curious about Monica and wanted to figure out what had been so special about her. Why had he dedicated the time to her portrait when he had never painted people before? What had made their relationship so special that he had refused to discuss it with her when they had shared everything else?

The fire had been intense, and firefighters had never determined the cause. It had destroyed everything and Elizabeth had been left with only ashes to bury. The memorial service had been a small one, and she had known almost everyone there. She had searched the audience but the woman had not been there. Afterwards she had paced her small home restlessly, wondering how Aaron could have been so consumed with someone who didn't

even bother to come to his funeral. The funeral of her son was much different for her than the funeral of her husband. By the time her husband had died, she had hated and feared him equally. Hated him because of the way he spoke to her, feared him because he often threatened to leave her and take their son with him. From the moment he was born, Aaron had been the most important thing in her life, the only thing that really mattered to her. After his funeral Elizabeth felt lost, almost hollow. The last words she had exchanged with him had been so bitter and angry. Even though he was gone she could still feel the hurt lingering from his pushing her out of his life.

Now she had seen the woman that her son had painted and seemed to love but still didn't know why she hadn't attended his funeral. Had they quarreled prior to her son's death? Was the woman out of town? If that was the case, why didn't she call Elizabeth to offer her condolences, to share her heartbreak? What sort of woman could cause a man to love her as deeply as her son had loved this woman and show no signs of sorrow or grief when he passed on? How could a woman who felt so little have possibly come between her and Aaron? How could Monica not realize how much she would be longing to meet her?

Sitting in her car waiting for the woman to come back outside, Elizabeth feared she would never have the courage to approach the woman, much less voice the questions that burned inside her. She glanced at the clock on her dash. Five-thirty. Keeping her eyes focused on the door, she fidgeted restlessly, toying with the keys that dangled from the ignition, moving the car out of park and into drive and then back. The door opened and the woman came hurrying out, an infant carrier placed over her arm and a blue and white diaper bag slung over her shoulder carelessly. Even with the heavy carrier to throw her off balance, she still moved with grace, using her free arm to smooth down the light blue blanket covering the carrier. To Elizabeth it looked like she was smiling and talking to the baby inside.

Elizabeth watched the woman place the carrier in the back seat before she settled in the driver's seat and started the car. She continued to stare after the woman as she pulled onto the road and drove away. There was a child, Aaron's child. A boy.

Dazed, she drove back the way that she had come, noting that the woman hadn't gone back to her shop. She parked the car, got out, and walked inside the small store where she pretended to browse. The girl working the store moved towards her with a bright smile. "Anything in particular you are looking for?" Elizabeth turned to the girl and smiled with a helpless lift of her arms. "I am looking for a present for my son and his wife. They love antiques, but I have to admit I am hopeless. I was just driving by and thought I would come inside and see if something stood out to me."

The salesgirl's smile widened as she nodded thoughtfully. "I can definitely help you there. What occasion is the present for? Did you have a price range in mind?" She continued to ask

questions with thoughtful pauses as she floated through the store, Elizabeth trailing behind and adding details to her spontaneous story. At the counter she saw a framed picture of a newborn infant and she reached out to pick it up, exclaiming, "What a beautiful baby boy! Is he your son?"

Shaking her head the salesgirl smiled. "No, not mine! But he is the most precious baby I know. Just look at those dimples! He is Monica's son, the owner," she said, waving her arm to encompass their surroundings. "It is really a tragic story, but so romantic." The girl sighed wistfully. Elizabeth nodded encouragingly, doing her best to portray a casual interest as the girl leaned one elbow on the countertop and told Elizabeth the story of the passionate love affair of her boss and the gorgeous young artist.

"She didn't know at the time of his death, and he never knew, that she was carrying their child. So it is sort of like a parting gift, a little bit of him she gets to keep forever. In some ways he lives on through their child. Isn't it beautiful?" The girl stopped suddenly, seeming to catch herself. "I'm so sorry; I have gone on too long."

Elizabeth glanced at her watch and pretended surprise and dismay upon reading the time. "I'm sorry...I must go. I had no idea how late it was getting. Will you be here on Saturday? I can come back then!"

Throwing out apologies and farewells, she hurried out of the store to her car. She would return tomorrow and follow Monica once more to discover where she lived. The salesgirl was right; her son did live on through this tiny baby. She had to be a part of his life, had to have a chance to start over with her son and make things right. She knew the mother might put up a fight, but she knew how to deal with that. She opened the ashtray and glanced at the matches that lay inside.

The background of the page is a dark, monochromatic abstract texture. It consists of numerous overlapping, expressive brushstrokes in shades of dark gray and black, creating a sense of depth and movement. A thin, solid black horizontal line runs across the middle of the page, positioned just below the word 'NONFICTION'.

NONFICTION

The Perfect View of a Blonde's Fate

By Fredy Valencia

It is 1995. Another sunny afternoon in rural Guadalajara, in the western part of Mexico. Spring is at its best, and it seems like the perfect day to visit my godmother, Louisa, at her restaurant, only two blocks away from my home.

I am only 10 years old.

It does not take me more than a few minutes to get ready to leave, and today I am taking my older brother's keyboard because I want to show Louisa the new song I have been practicing. I wave bye to my mother, and she tells me to be careful walking down the sandy street. In less than three minutes I am there, standing in front of the restaurant, staring at the bright-orange bricks that make up its rustic walls. The open black gates welcome every hungry customer, and the sound of popular music sets a friendly mood. I savor the aroma of the always tasty food that she cooks there, and as soon as I put my first little foot inside, I am received not only by my smiling godmother, but by her beautiful blond sister Angelica.

Though they seem busy, they offer me a cold drink, which I take between my hands, and begin to look for a table to sit down. Almost as if it had been waiting for me to sit there, I get the best table in the whole restaurant, the one by the huge arched windows where one gets the best view. I can see perfectly across the street.

I sit on one of the four metallic chairs. I read "Corona" from the center of the cold table before putting my drink and the keyboard over the logo, preventing the letters from being read again. After my drink is half empty, I find myself playing the little instrument. I notice one of the customers raising his hand, as he is ready to pay. Angelica receives the money, but realizes that they have no change for such a big bill. She apologizes to the customer and asks him to wait while she gets change from the store across the street. Seconds later, she is walking toward the main door. "I will play the song to her whenever she gets back," I say while one of my careless hands spills the salt, spreading the white crystals all over the table.

She walks through the dirty street while she covers her face with her left hand, preventing the sand from getting in her gorgeous blue eyes. As she nears the road, there are many cars, and there are no traffic lights, not even a single stop sign. She must do just as everyone else and simply wait for a chance to cross. What I see through the window is almost like a painting—a contrast between her almost mystical beauty and the ugliness of the road. The sun's ever-warming waves are reflected by her beautiful natural blond hair, and she is

wearing blue jeans, a white shirt, and black shoes. Her white skin looks fresh and perfect, and her lips are scarlet red. The big bill rests in her right hand.

I am still watching while a black car tries to pass the one in front of it, but the driver fails to see a big 16-wheeler and panics, quickly turning right to avoid a fatal collision. Suddenly, a gray cloud rises up as the sound of the braking car announces tragedy. I can not even blink as the car drifts. It happens so quickly that Angelica does not have a chance to even look. While turning, the car crushes its left-side mirror in her face, sending her flying thirty feet away from where she had been standing.

I hear screams and cries, chairs moving and feet running. I am breathless. Everyone rushes to her side. Soon afterwards, I find myself walking out the door, heading home, but the way home is now colored dark red. Angelica is in my way and I am afraid to see her, but I have to walk by her.

As I approach, my eyes become fixed on her, but my feet won't stop. There she is in an impossible pose, her body crushed against the dirty road. Her lovely hair is no longer shiny but gray from the sand of the street. Her once flawless skin is now stained with purple spots, dark red blood, and some exposed flesh, as her face is biting the dust and is drowning in an expanding pool of muddy blood. Both of her shoes are gone, as is the black car, and the only thing that remains is the bill in her crooked hand. When I finally get home, I sit down, but I can not yet react, talk, or even cry, but most of all, I can not forget.

I am only 10 years old.

Pariah

By Jeffrey Miller

Matters of faith are best kept private. Most people have invested their self-identity into their religion to the extent that they can neither understand nor tolerate those whose ideologies differ radically from their own. Raised under the auspices of Christianity, I abandoned my religion at an early age. The conservative nature of small town Oklahoma meant that I spent large portions of my life as a social outcast. Even today I see constant mistrust and ignorance of my beliefs. Experiences have forced me to conclude that religious discussion should generally be avoided. Despite passing this advice on to my children, my daughter has inadvertently gone public with her own atheism, and the whole process is already starting for her.

I grew up in a loving and supportive household, raised by parents who felt that religion was a private matter. My parents both believe in God but do not bother with church. For them it is enough to live a good life. The small town where I was raised was full of churches. Every version of Christianity was represented. My sister and I occasionally went to the Nazarene church with some neighbors. I was a frequent winner of verse memorization contests in bible school. During these classes, everyone really seemed into it all. Outside the classes, though, not so much. Since my parents were so mum about their beliefs, it did not even occur to me that the things I was learning were supposed to be true. I considered it just another form of mythology. When I realized that it was all “real,” I started paying more attention to the people around me. The extremely religious mothers of two of my friends would have a profound impact on my feelings towards religion in general, and Christianity in particular.

At the age of six I made friends with two boys in my first grade class. James was the picture perfect representative of an Aryan poster boy—tall, athletic, with blond hair and blue eyes. The only thing spoiling the Nazi image was his genuine niceness and good behavior. He had no hate for anyone. The other end of the spectrum was Tom. He was more of a trouble maker. Brown hair, brown eyes, and a mischievous smile generally meant that someone would be yelling at him soon. They weren’t friends with each other, but they were both friends with me.

James’s mother was, and is, a complete waste. She spent his life telling him that he was stupid and useless, and anything he tried would be doomed to failure. As can be expected,

she was mostly right. Anyone with that kind of motherly support would be hard pressed to find success at anything. She has never actually read the bible, but she is pretty sure she knows what is in it. She burns books and protests Harry Potter. I have never had any use for her. Today, her son is thirty-four and paunchy, with two young daughters and an ex-wife. He lives in his grandmother's garage and has never held a job for longer than nine months. After twenty-eight years, he is still genuinely nice, with no hatred for anyone. He suffers from chronic depression and can occasionally get a little selfish, but he is my best friend and I do what I can to help him.

Tom's mom made James's mother seem like a godless hippy. The house was covered with crucifixes, and she spent all of her available time talking to Jesus, presumably because no one else wanted to talk to her. When I thought about the truly devoted, I thought of her. Before the end of the school year she personally spoke to the Holy Trinity, and he/it/they told her that Tom was possessed by Satan. The only way she could save her son was to find the demon inside him and cut it out. She stabbed him with a kitchen knife while he was in bed. According to a conversation I had years later with then Police Chief Gilson, Tom had gotten away from his mother and run screaming into the night. She caught him on the front lawn and stabbed him in the head and chest over fifty times. Neighbors dismissed the screaming child as a dog yipping in the darkness. She dragged his body back into the house, lit candles around it, and began praying for his salvation. Tom brought the ugly specter of a bloody lawn, which was finally enough for the police to be called. Chief Gilson told me that she was smiling and happy when he arrested her, and that she bragged about how she had saved her boy from hell. She is still alive today, being cared for in Central State Hospital.

When I think of the truly devoted, I think of her.

Waking up one morning and finding out that one of your best friends has been brutally murdered in the name of a just and loving god can sour your feelings towards church. One morning before bible school I asked if I could just stay home. It was the day of an awards ceremony, so my parents were actually going. It was the first time I can remember being allowed to stay home alone, as they took my older sister with them. In absentia, I was awarded a prize for knowing the bible better than any of the other children in any of the other age groups. At home, I decided that, even if this god existed, which I did not believe, he was not worthy of worship.

Still, I did not share my absence of faith with my family. It was not something we ever spoke about. They were happy thinking I believed, and I was happy letting them think it. I saw no reason to disappoint them as I turned an ever more critical eye on society around me.

The most glaring and irritating thing I saw with the general behavior of the church-going elite was a smug sense of arrogance and superiority, flavored with false humility. The attitude projected was one of "I'm not a great man. I'm only a little better than you." Next

was the love affair Christians have with being persecuted. The times they were happiest were the times they could claim they were a poor, repressed minority. Despite having almost complete control of western civilization since 313 AD, they still managed to be a persecuted minority. Everywhere I saw a complete contradiction between the supposed teachings of Christ and the actual behavior of his flock. I grew bitter and sullen.

Time passed and I grew into a physically imposing individual. Even in eighth grade, I was larger than most of the seniors in high school. I never developed the competitive streak of most boys. Combined with a skeletal malformation of my legs, that lack meant that I never got into athletics. A boy who was not into football? In Oklahoma? That just was not right. That boy must be strange. In fact, that boy was strange enough to challenge district policy and risk getting a failing grade in physical education, resulting in a complete overhaul of the requirements for P.E.. The other children wondered why I made such a fuss about it. Running a mile as the final exam seemed so much easier to them than any other class they had. Why would this big weirdo not just go ahead and run? Were they curious? Certainly. Were they curious enough to actually ask me? Of course not. That would be reasonable. Instead, they tried to come up with reasons of their own.

My own reasons were many. Foremost was that I was physically incapable of running a mile. Walking was no problem. I could walk farther than most of them. Running further than a very short distance, though, was not actually an option. Another reason was my refusal to be a sheep, bleating for acceptance from those placed above me. That was probably the biggest reason—I refused to do it because they told me that I had no choice. I proved to them that there is always a choice. You just have to decide what you want more.

I grew still older, and people began to notice more things about me that did not fit in. Most importantly, they noticed that I did not go to any of the churches in town. Socially speaking, Sunday and Wednesday church had grown just as important as school. Does he go to that church? How about that one? Eventually, they finally grew curious enough to actually ask me. In my naiveté, I gave an honest answer about being an atheist. After all, almost none of them had anything to do with me, so what could it hurt? It turns out that the answer to “What’s the worst that could happen?” is generally a little bit more than you expect.

Soon, almost no one would associate with me at all. Aside from James, the only people who would deal with me were those who had to and those who were also social outcasts and misfits. I never had more than two close friends at the same time. Everyone else was generally an unwilling acquaintance. I would occasionally hear rumors about myself. Once I heard that I kept a chalice of blood on a table in my bedroom. I never heard what kind of blood it was supposed to be. Another rumor was that I worshipped trees in the woods. James was into athletics and played on the football team. While I was living my life without even considering their existence, they were fretting quite often about mine. According to

James, one of the school jocks swore up and down that he had personally seen me wearing a flowing robe while conducting some sort of ceremony in one of the town graveyards. On numerous occasions several of them would get themselves worked up into a frenzy, and decide that they would find me and beat me until I admitted that God was real. Just as they would approach the point where James felt he needed to call and warn me, they would remember that I was bigger and that I might kill a few of them while they tried to take me down. That was the only part they ever got right.

It all pointed to one of the main problems Christians have with unbelievers. They seem to think that atheists spend all of their time sitting around not believing. The truth is that most atheists spend as much time actively not believing in God as they do not believing in leprechauns or fairies. I have had co-workers ask if atheists get together for ice cream to talk about how they had not gone to church. Another asked if my belief in science meant that I was a Scientologist. One dear woman told me flat out that I could not possibly be an atheist, because I was so obviously a good person. Until I heard that, I had gone for years thinking that I could no longer be offended. I have had to explain time and again that secular ethics not only exist, but are superior to spiritually-mandated morals. Who is more ethical, the person who does no wrong because he will be punished for it later, or the person who does no wrong because other people have a right to live their lives unmolested?

I have mellowed a great deal with age. It has been over a decade since I tried to deprogram a church member. These days I am content to let those who believe live their own lives, as long as they do not try to force those beliefs upon me. I still get invited to church services by those who are looking to “save” me. I no longer accept those invitations. I have spent too many church services with my head held high while the congregation was bowed, listening to the pastor lie to the faithful. I have no stomach for it anymore. My feelings are more along the lines of George Carlin’s when he said, “Religion is like a lift in your shoe. If you need to be taller, that is up to you. Put the lift in your shoe, or not. But let’s not run around nailing lifts to the natives’ feet.”

My luck changed for the better about thirteen years ago. I met an incredibly beautiful woman who seemed interested in me. It turned out that she was an atheist, too. Our sixth wedding anniversary was a few months ago. Most of our close friends are religious, but not the inquisitorial kind. James, of course, is Baptist. My wife’s friend Sue is a devout Catholic, and her friend Kesha married a preacher. He seems quite uncomfortable in our presence, but the others are okay with us. We refrain from talking sense into them. They neither save us nor burn us as heretics. It works. Sadly, our daughter’s friends are not quite as understanding.

We have two children. Our son recently turned five, and our daughter will soon be eleven.

He is too young to have much thought on spiritual matters, but she has turned into quite the little skeptic. In fact, she doubts things so much that she almost never believes the two of us when we give her advice. We told her to not talk about her religious unbelief—that people would not understand and would treat her differently. As with so many other things she decided that we were only saying it to be saying something. She told one person, and one person only, that she is an atheist. Even now she insists that the conversation must have been overheard by someone else, because she just knows that her friend would never have spread it all over school.

So one person soon became a multitude. Most of the children had no real knowledge of what was going on, so many of them dismissed it. Some of those children will remember hints of it when they get older, and the insults, rumors and innuendo will metastasize from bigotry and fear, shredding any chance she had for a normal social life. It has already started. A few of her schoolmates went home with questions, and came back to school with parental orders not to associate with the hellbound, godless thing disguised as a ten-year-old girl. As she tearfully told us while we comforted her that afternoon, “It isn’t fair!” She is right—it is not fair. Life is not fair, but that is just the way it is.

Deep

By Shanna Kathleen Wallace

The dog days of summer in Oklahoma are like swimming in a swamp, then cramming yourself into an oven that's been preheated to 350. Every breath is hot and moist, and nobody ever says, "At least it's a dry heat," but they do say, "I hear Arizona is nice this time of year." If I close my eyes and try real hard, I am taken back to the summer of '96, with the midwest caught in the grip of a killer heat wave, temperatures soaring to 118. Immediately, my senses are filled with the cloying, sickly sweet smell of honeysuckle on the vine, and the drone of hot, angry bees gathering nectar for their queen. I can open my eyes and see the house I grew up in, white paint flaking off the weathered brick, standing sentinel against the faded denim of the sizzling sky. Wild vines crawl up the sides like hungry green worms searching for the meat inside. Down the hill, through a crazy, overgrown maze of skeletal sycamores and pecans, was the lake. It was officially named Lake Albert, but the kids called it Grave Lake, for the spooky way it looked at sunset, or sometimes Cold Ass Lake, for the way it could freeze you to death in a matter of minutes, even in the most deadly summer heat. This thought inevitably leads me to Andrew.

I was 17, Andrew a respectable 23. Daddy had gone fishing for the day with Uncle Frank, but they never fished in Lake Albert, said it was too cold. Instead, they drove 20 miles to the east to Lake Taunton. That left me and my five-year-old sister Sara alone with nothing good to do but get in trouble. I wanted to go for a quick swim, just enough to cool down a little, so the two of us rode down the hill on my ten-speed. Sara brought her red plastic beach bucket and shovel, and I laid out a blue blanket for her on the sand, a few feet from the water's edge. I looked at my watch. It was still early, but the temperature was already hovering somewhere in the 90's, and I knew it was only a matter of time before the sun came out from behind the house and roasted us both. I slipped off my sandals and stuck a toe in the water. Immediately my body temperature dropped what felt like twenty degrees, and a chill raced up my spine, snapping my jaws together with a clack. Sara smiled up at me as I peeled off my tee shirt and jeans.

"If you get too hot, just splash a little water on yourself, okay?" She nodded, and I waded in. I took four steps, until the water was at my waist, and dove in. It was amazing what a different world it was, like walking through a doorway in the desert and finding yourself suddenly on top of Mt. Everest. I swam out a few feet before resurfacing, gasping from the

cold. Wiping water from my eyes, I turned toward Sara. I had only been under for a few seconds, but apparently that was long enough. She was gone.

“Sara?” I looked around frantically, feeling my muscles tighten. In a moment, I wouldn’t be able to move at all.

“Sara!” I struggled to swim back, swallowing water, faltering. Now we would both die. We would spend eternity in this icy grave. My arms wouldn’t move. Water rushed in my ears, my mouth, as I struggled to stay afloat. *I’m sorry, Sara*, I thought. *I’m sorry, Daddy*.

Suddenly there was a flash of white and a splash in the water before me as my head went under. There was a frenzy of movement that kicked up sediment, and then I couldn’t see anything. *This is it, Captain; we’re going down. It’s been a pleasure serving on your ship...* Time stopped as the world held its breath in agony, waiting to see if I would ever come back. I thought not.

Out of nowhere, I was yanked to the surface, just long enough to see Sara sitting wide-eyed on her blue blanket. Then down I went again. There was a hand in my hair, dragging me through the water, then the sand. Suddenly I could breathe. I was thrown to the ground and as I lay there, coughing up water and tearing in great ragged gusts of air, I turned my head and saw Sara. Other than the tears rolling down her face, she was completely dry. I looked up into the face of my rescuer. He had terrified, wide brown eyes and long blond hair streaming. As he knelt beside me in the sand, his lips were an interesting shade of raspberry popsicle blue, and I realized that I must look the same. My angel of mercy helped me sit up and Sara crawled over, throwing her tiny arms around my waist.

“Where were you?” I choked out, teeth chattering, feeling the heat of the sun slowly penetrating my frozen body.

“I had to pee.” Sara sniffed and wiped her eyes. I looked down at her in shock, and my rescuer laughed, despite the terror still etched into his face. He had a very nice laugh. He held out his hand.

“Andrew.” His fingers were cold, but strong.

I introduced myself. “Angela, and that’s Sara.” He kissed the back of her hand, making her giggle. “Thank you so much, Andrew. I thought she was in the water.” He helped me to my feet carefully, and I took a good, long look at him. He was handsome and muscular in blue jeans and a white tee shirt, eyes sparkling with intelligence and good humor. Andrew shook dirt off the blanket and wrapped it around my shoulders, guiding me to his car, a white ‘72 Camaro.

“Where do you live? I’ll give you a ride.” He opened the back door and Sara jumped in. I smiled.

“You see that big white house up there?” The sun had crested the hill, and Andrew had to shade his eyes to look up to where I was pointing. He smiled, wide and bright, and it fell into

place so easily that I knew it had to be his normal expression.

"I have to get my bike anyway."

He laughed and popped the trunk. "Throw it in. Never mind, I'll do it." Andrew walked over and grabbed my bike before I could stop him. He placed it in the trunk and held open the door for me. As I got in, he whispered, almost confidentially, "Seventy percent of a car is air," and winked. I knew in that moment that I loved him.

Sara had fallen asleep, and she didn't stir as we drove up to the house. Andrew parked under a big, shady pecan tree, and we began to talk. We talked about little things, like where we were born, and about Big Things. Andrew wanted to be a rock star, and had the angel's sweetest voice to back him up. I told him I wanted to be a writer, and he asked if he could read my stuff sometime. I had never let anyone read my things before, but I knew I would let him. We ended up talking all day and into the evening. When I saw the lights of Daddy's old Ford plodding up the hill, I rushed inside with Sara, and Andrew drove off in the other direction, promising to come back tomorrow. So it went, all summer long, spending just about every waking moment with each other. Sara simply adored Andrew, calling him Uncle Andy. I adored him too, but it wasn't a sexual love, though it was passionate. What I felt for him was too beautiful to say that I loved him like a brother. I loved him like the piece of soul that completed me, the piece of God that is in all living things.

It wasn't until autumn, when the wilted leaves turned blood red and fell from their lofty perches, that I noticed a change in Andrew, and a terrible sadness began to grow within me. It wasn't a great change, at first. I would catch him staring off into space, and he would sometimes push Sara away absently when she tried to crawl into his lap. He came over later and later until one day he didn't come at all. I waited until five, feeling sick to my stomach, until I couldn't wait any longer. I had a feeling that something terrible had happened, so I told Daddy where I was going and left. Andrew lived less than a mile away, further back from the lake and down a long dirt road. There was an ancient, bullet-riddled sign on the corner that read "Eagle Drive." Those bullet holes always made me feel uneasy. The tan single-wide trailer had been his father's, but Steven Jones had since passed on. I pulled into the gravel driveway on my bike, full of fear. Andrew's car was there, but the front door was locked, which only added to my terror. Andrew never locked the door. I knocked loudly, but there was no answer.

"Andrew!" I yelled. "I know you're in there! Open the door!"

"Go away." His voice came softly from the other side of the door, and I could picture him leaned against it, one eye to the cloudy peephole. I recoiled from the sound of his voice. It sounded scared, lost, and desperate. The voice of an accident victim.

"Andrew," I whispered, staring at the door, seeing him on the other side in my mind. "Let me in." There was no answer, not even the sound of cloth against wood as he moved

away from the door. Nothing. “I love you.” I turned to walk away, but I guess those three little words really are magic, because the deadbolt gave a loud crack as it was drawn out of the frame and into the door. The brass knob slowly turned, and the hinges creaked like something out of a horror movie. I shuddered and took a step into the cool darkness of his living room. Andrew stood there in old, torn sweatpants and nothing else. His beautiful golden hair was tangled and dark, hanging dejectedly to his shoulders. He hung his head. I couldn’t see his face, so I put my hand beneath his chin and forced him to look into my eyes. His were dull and cloudy, filled with shame, and I couldn’t say that I blamed him. In one hand, he clutched a lighter and a spoon. In the other was a hypodermic needle, the kind that diabetics use, but this boy was no diabetic.

I led him to the brown suede couch and lay him down, his head in my lap. I took the things from his hands and stroked his dirty, sticky head. There were so many things I wanted to say, like “No Andy, bad Andy, no cookie for you,” but nothing came from my dry throat. I couldn’t believe that my friend, my soulmate, my angel, had fallen. I continued to stroke his head and say nothing.

Andrew was asleep.

Now what was I to do? He’d told me more than once about how his mother had died in a hospital, due to complications from surgery, and how much he hated doctors and hospitals above all other things, but I was afraid that if I didn’t help him now, he’d never help himself. I thought about calling Daddy but was scared that he might insist I never see Andrew again, so, in the end, I did the only thing I really could. I called 911.

Andrew woke up in the hospital, and I was by his side when he first opened his swollen eyes. He looked around, confused, then saw me and smiled. I smiled back, though it felt like my face would crack and fall to the floor.

“Where am I?” he croaked. The smile disappeared.

“The hospital.” His eyes widened, but then he seemed to remember something and turned away. “Do you remember what happened?” I asked quietly. He nodded and covered his face with both hands. *How thin his arm looks*, I thought. Andrew was crying. He whispered something and I leaned forward.

“What?”

“I said you must really love me.” He took his hands from his face and held them out to me. I hugged him as he cried. It was true. I loved him more than Sara, or Daddy, or anyone. I loved him more than life.

The weeks ahead were tough, but I saw him every day. When he was detoxing, he asked me not to come, but I laughed it off and came anyway, and when he was rocking back and forth in the corner, swinging his bedpan at anyone who came near, I was the one who bravely took it from his hands and held his hair back while he vomited on the nurse’s white

shoes. That was the worst day, but it got better. Andrew was gaining weight, and even the purple smudges beneath his eyes began to fade. His brilliant, charming smile slowly made a comeback, and he started to look like the guy I knew. The doctors all said he was doing great, and he would be released with a clean bill of health soon. I prayed they knew what they were talking about, and I smiled and nodded in all the right places, but I was cold inside, haunted by the memory of that darkened room, and I think Andrew knew it. I could tell by the hangdog way he looked at me when he thought I didn't see. I'd catch him looking at me with those wounded doe eyes and I would smile, though it felt like plastic. He always smiled back.

Monday, November 17, 1996, he came home. It was just like old times, except for that dark thing between us. *I have to get over this. I have to move on*, I thought. *He's only human, just like me*. After a few weeks of saying these things under my breath like a mantra, it began to work. I guess it was like anything you want to be really good at; you just had to practice, practice, practice, and really hammer that baby home.

Months went by, seasons changed, and suddenly it was spring, a lovely wet time in Oklahoma. We are known to the rest of the world for spring, because it's the start of tornado season, but it's also a time of heartbreakingly beautiful sunsets, gorgeous cloud formations, and fresh green smells everywhere. Andrew and I would climb up on the roof of my house every morning and look down at the fog crawling thick across the lake. The wild vines were reclaiming the steps of their forefathers, and the trees were a beautiful sight with their new leaves of green and red and gold. The heady perfume of new flowers was everywhere, so thick it was almost a solid thing that would slap you in the face when you opened the door. Across the lake, the larger hills stood proudly against the azure air, mist clinging to their heads like fairy crowns. The world was a lovely place again. With Andrew sitting beside me, looking healthy and happy, I thought that would never change.

There came a day in late March when I had to call Daddy to come get me from school. The nurse said I had the flu, but I had my doubts. I couldn't see straight, and my body felt so heavy I could barely walk. There was a constant high-pitched ringing in my ears, and my mouth was full of cotton. I couldn't even swallow. As soon as I stumbled through my bedroom door, I flopped down on my bed and passed out. When I awoke, hours later, Sara was screaming bloody murder in my face.

"Daddy! Daddy, come quick! Sissy's dead!" My father came flying into the room, a horrible expression on his face, grim and terrified. "Is she dead, Daddy, is she dead?" I tried to open my eyes as he knelt over me, but then I realized they were already open and blinked. Daddy jumped back and clutched his chest.

"I'm not dead," I rasped. My throat was so dry. "I feel better." I tried unsuccessfully to

stand. My arms felt heavy and useless, weighing me down, and my right bicep burned like someone was shooting acid into my arm. Suddenly, a horrible thought occurred to me, and it was the only one I had time for before I passed out again.

Shooting acid into my arm...

I woke up later, crying and numb, and I knew. Andrew was dead. Still weeping, I dragged myself from the relative safety and comfort of my room and went downstairs. Daddy and Sara watched silently, passing unspoken words between their wide, wet eyes. I picked up the phone with hands that trembled and held it to my ear, listening to the mindless, stupid dialtone. My hands shook so badly that I had to try three times to hit the numbers 911. I told the disembodied voice on the other end to send an ambulance to 613 Eagle Drive, then dropped the handset on the floor and ran out the back door. I didn't bother with my bike, just ran as fast as I could to him. The wind raked tears from my face, and I tried to run even faster, hoping to break free from my own body and join Andrew, and then everything would be okay. I ran straight to his front door, never slowing, and slammed into it with all my weight. It flew open, banging against the wall, and I stood in the darkness of the doorway, gasping for air.

The first time we'd met Andrew had saved me from drowning, but I felt that I was drowning still. This time there would be no white knight, for either of us. In the distance, I could hear a wailing siren, and it made me think about the Irish tales of banshees, the screaming demons who came for the souls of the dead. My eyes adjusted to the blackness and I could just make out a dark, hunched shape on the couch. There he was, my angel, my devil, lying dead and alone on his back. His arm hung over the edge, fingers brushing the floor, and beneath his hand was a syringe, glittering balefully in the pale light of the half moon. I screamed an inarticulate cry of rage and crushed the needle beneath my heel, kicking away the shards. Andrew's chest was covered in white, frothy vomit; it clung to his hair like lumpy, misshapen spiders, but I didn't care. I sat beside him, holding his head in my lap and rocking, tears and snot streaming down my face. The banshee was closer, the pulsing red and blue of its eyes filling the room with a terrible light. Then there were people, paramedics, I suppose, who pushed me out of the house, and placed Andrew on a stretcher. Daddy was outside, and Sara waited in the truck, face pressed to the window, eyes sad and bleak, watching as they loaded Uncle Andy into the back of the ambulance. Daddy tried to hold me, to comfort me, but I pulled away sharply and swiped a hand across my face. There were no more tears now, just a deep, empty chasm that used to be my soul. I turned and walked away from my father's strong and comforting arms and into a night, the first of many, that held no hope.

The day of Andrew's funeral was a beautiful, typical spring day. Clouds were building

on the southern horizon, and I knew that by dusk they would have become a formidable crouching hulk of black and red and green. There might even be a tornado or two, but for the moment it was just like it always was when we were together. I stood at his graveside, hating him and loving him and wondering how I was going to go on. I watched as they lowered the casket into the ground, preparing to cover a beautiful human being with the finality of earth. He had saved my life once, and I had saved his, or at least tried to. I didn't feel calm, or peaceful, or happy that he'd gone on to a better place. I felt confused, and lonely, and terrified of the future. I only knew him for a short time, but what a time it was. I knew it was cliché, but I felt like Andrew was watching me. Not from above, or beside, or from the box at my feet, but somewhere inside. He was watching, and waiting to see if he needed to rescue me again. I thought he might. I knelt and tossed a handful of fresh earth on his casket, watching it slide off the glossy black top.

"I will fear no evil, Andrew." I stood, wanting to smile, but remembering all those times I'd smiled before, plastic and false and hurting my face. Suddenly, I had a vision of the first time we'd met, when he'd pulled me from the water and saved my life. He threw my bike in the trunk of his car and whispered "Seventy percent of a car is air" like it was the secret to life itself. Hell, maybe it was. I laughed out loud, startling a pair of doves into flight, and turned to walk away. I wasn't smiling yet, but maybe with time. Maybe with time. My father and Sara waited at the truck, and this time I hugged them both.

Some Dead Body Action

By Johnathon Seratt

On this bright July day my family is camping in Sulphur Springs, Oklahoma. The air is humming with the simple sounds of summer. Children are playing and their joyful screams echo across the crowded camping area. I am fourteen and camping with me are my mom, cousin, my two sisters, Denea and Daneille, and two of our friends Bobby and Lisa. To me this day seems like any other perfect summer day, free from obligation and responsibility.

Today is about recreation. Today I am only concerned with my own enjoyment and well being. Today is unbearably hot and the only relief is the cold, lazy stream running through our campsite. As we eat our lunch, it is a hundred degrees, and not even the shade of the forest can keep us from sweating. We finish eating and decide to walk up to a large pool called Little Niagara to cool down from the heat.

The pool is so crowded when we arrive I have to wait in line to jump into the water from the waterfall. I wait until the person in front of me jumps, and, when the coast is clear, I follow after him. My friend Bobby and I both jump off the falls and swim to the other end of the pool. As we swim we play a game called sea monster, taking turns dunking each other under the cool green water.

From the far end of the pool my sister Denea and her friend Lisa swim up to us with concerned looks on their faces that don't match the day. They tell us they have found a dead body in the water, and we should come check it out. Thinking that this is just a ploy for our attention, we splash them.

Lisa pleads with me to stop and says that she and Denea have found something in the water and need our help. I doubt her, but Lisa confidently sticks to her guns, and my sister has a look of sincerity in her eyes that I know she can not fake. After the girls show us where they found the body, they get out. The water is almost over my head, so I must tread water to bob along the surface. Bobby and I float over the area, bouncing off the bottom, feeling with our feet for anything that might be a body. I swim around for the next five minutes with Bobby floating next to me. I am ready to give up when Bobby leaps from the water and quickly swims to shore.

Bobby tells me he felt the body, and the girls are off and running to the waterfall to get my mom. I tell Bobby he must have felt a submerged log. Bobby tells me to swim back a

few more feet. I point out to him that it would be hard to feel anything for sure.

“A few more feet,” he says as I backpedal in the water, smirking. Bobby is saying something to me, but I do not hear him, because at the moment I am no longer treading water. In the cold, dark water, my left foot comes to rest on a hard and rubbery torso. I can feel the slope of the chest, and the cold skin is unmistakable on my bare feet. The fifteen feet to shore now seems a very long way.

I cover the distance in short order and gravely inform Bobby that there is indeed a dead body in the water. He rolls his eyes at me as my mom and cousin swim up from the falls. The girls refuse to get back in the water, so Bobby and I get in to show my mom. My mother does not handle blood and guts very well, and one touch of the cold corpse sends her to the shore in a panic. She tells everyone who will listen that there is a body in the water.

On this hot summer day in the middle of the afternoon, a once-crowded pool is now empty except for Bobby, me, and the body in the water. On the bank a hundred sets of eyes watch us, and the whisper of “Dead body in the water” spreads around the pool. Bobby and I hover in the pool above the body like water beetles. With the spotlight on me, I am a natural showman and decide this body must be pulled up.

I tell Bobby he has to pull the body out of the water, and he gives me a look that says he disagrees. Bobby says if I want to do it so bad I can do it myself. I tell Bobby we have an obligation as CPR-qualified Boy Scouts to do what we can to help. He tells me to go to hell. We argue as everyone sits around the pool watching us.

I know that breathing into a dummy and pulling a decaying corpse from the water are two very different things, but this job has fallen to us, and we must act. There is only one way for the two of us to decide who is fated to retrieve this corpse: Rock, Paper, and Scissors. The loser will bring up the body.

Bobby agrees and then quickly loses the match and begins to swim away. I am now emotionally invested in this body and remind Bobby of the deal we have made. He is still unwilling to comply, so I tell him if he pulls up just the leg I will help him with the rest.

With this new deal struck, the reluctant Bobby agrees. As he takes a big breath of air and dives down, I wonder if my face has the same intense look his does. He dives down as the crowd on the bank inches closer to the water. It is so quiet I can hear the birds singing deep in the forest. Before I can exhale the breath I took when Bobby went down, he starts to come up from the cold dark water.

First a foot appears held up by the ankle with a white hand. Then a forearm and shin bolt from the dark water, followed by a knee, elbow, and finally Bobby’s curly head. The tangled mess of limbs rises out of the water. It is now clear that Bobby is holding the dead body’s leg up in the air like it had just won a boxing match. The image of the dark brown hairy leg

and the sky blue swim shorts are ingrained in my mind.

Bobby takes one terrified look at what he is holding, drops it, and swims quickly to shore. He repeats the mantra “holy shit” over and over, as he rocks on the bank. The crowd on the bank breaks out in murmurs as I follow Bobby to the shore. We sit on a rock until a young kid on a bike rides up.

The boy has heard the crowd and comes up to ask if the body is wearing blue swim trunks. I tell him “yes,” and then he tells me his brother came up here to go swimming before lunch and has not returned. He was wearing blue swim trunks, and no one can find him. My stomach drops. It has not occurred to me that this might be someone’s brother, not just a body in the water.

The boy takes off riding to get his friends. I look at Bobby, and without a word we both slip back into the water. We begin to drag the water, again looking for the dead boy. His friends show up to help us search, and before long we find him. His body has floated a little bit down stream, and the five of us dive down under the water to pull him up.

Under the green water, I grab a forearm and shoulder and begin to pull. As the body comes to the surface, it floats. The crowd of people gasps and someone finally goes to get the park ranger. As we pull him to shore, I see the dead boy’s face for the first time. He has black hair, wide-open brown eyes, and a rough teenage mustache.

His head dangles loose in the water, and that’s when I see the hole. Halfway down his neck, a small piece of white bone sticks through his skin with a large blue vein ripped in half. It is slowly streaming a small amount of blood into the water. The blood disappears almost as fast as it spills out.

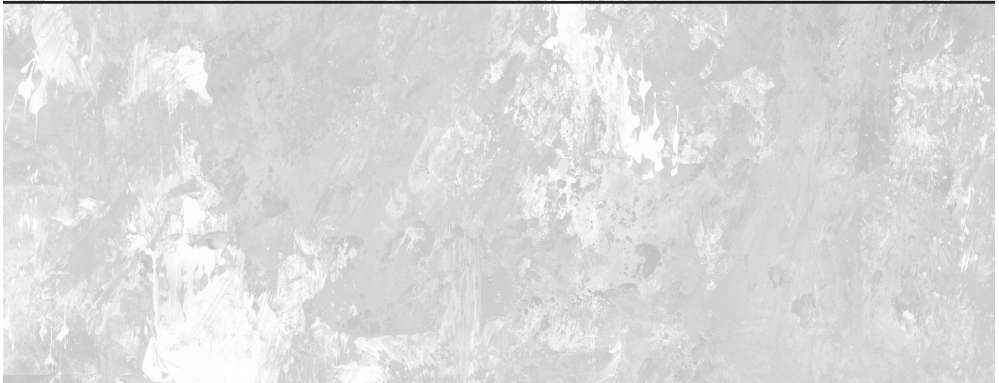
As we reach the bank, the useless staring crowd on the shore springs into action. They pull the dead boy up on some rocks and even try CPR on his corpse. As I get out of the water, I sit next to the dead boy’s body. I watch as the would-be heroes push on his chest, making water come out of his mouth and the hole in his neck. When they try to blow into his mouth, the hole swells and shrinks. He is like a balloon with a hole in it. No matter how much they blow, he will just not hold air. When I tell them he is dead, they just they look at me and continue to try to save him.

That night as I lie awake in my tent, my mind goes back to the boy’s face again and again. It is still boiling hot outside and everyone is restless. I get up and walk down to the stream running by our camp. The running water has lowered the temperature by at least twenty degrees. As I sit there, my mom and Bobby walk up to me, and we all put our feet in the water. We talk about bullshit, nonsense, and tell ourselves our own version of the story until my legs are numb to the cold water. I finally slip in and swim upstream underwater, thinking about life and death. How sad it is that chest deep in a crisis, the people you look

to for help and guidance will not always be there. The cold and scary obligations under the surface of every difficult situation in life are ultimately yours to pull up. Fear has a way of crippling people. When you dive into the unknown, a world of possibilities can come into play. It is a partnership between fear and freedom that keeps the timid on the shore and the brave in the water. With the current rolling around me, I have run out of air on my dive. I hold on longer and turn over in the water so I can see the moon through the blurred curtain of another boy's death. What was the last thing he saw? Could he feel us walking on him, prodding him with our feet while the sun burning overhead faded to black? In the unknown anything is possible. Just don't stay down too long.



POEMS



Concrete

The room was dimly lit
Casting shades of blue and gray
Musk hung thick in the air
Concrete walls stretched upwards
Playing with concrete beams above
Laughing at her
Oh, the secrets these walls kept
Secrets they were built to keep
They must have been two feet thick
Pock marks, where re-bar and gravel lay,
Clinging to these barren walls
Gruesome pictures stood
Mutilation seemed persistant throughout
Blood echoed off the concrete floor
A noise scuffed across the room
Rubber soles of shoes
Gently sliding over dirt
In the concrete floor
She turned her head to see
Tried to raise an arm
Strapped to an icy table
No clothes, a headache, dull pain everywhere
Her vision slowly worsened
“Who are you? What do you want?”
The usual questions asked
Laughter danced about the room
Compounded by the concrete
Everything she laid her eyes on
Was covered in a blue haze
A figure moved in closer
Curly, thick, dark hair
Plumped atop a narrow, pale face
Dark, menacing eyes stared back
Excited
Her heart began to race
Thumping deep within her chest
Those eyes could smell her fear

Wider they grew, gleaming
Her arm began to burn
Like a large, serated paper cut
Pain hastened across her skin
Something warm and wet
Pooling around her hand
Sticky
She screamed out in fear and pain
More burning sensations inflicted
Various places on her body
The concrete walls began to swell
Desperate to contain her noise
Outside, the sun closed his eyes
And pulled the blanket of trees in close
Night owls of the woods awoke
Staring at the cabin
Until the faint screams finally faded

– **Cheyenne West**

The Beginning

The beginning, when I held him for the first time,
His little fingers and toes, all bundled
In what we would nickname the “burrito”

He was a bright-eyed boy,
With innocence I’d never seen.
As we rocked him back and forth
His eyes fading and becoming dim.

The beginning, in what would be the end,
As I held him, in a moment’s time
Creating an induction ceremony,
As we passed him around, one last time

His body, gently resting in my arms,
Unforgiving of letting him go,
Giving him back to his mother
One of the mistakes in life I would always regret.

I gave him to the lions,
Letting him fall through the cracks
The abuse going unnoted in thousands of letters,
Documenting his short, unfair journey.

This little boy, no longer bright-eyed,
Was rescued from the America that killed him
The America that let him fall through.

As he was given the life he always dreamed,
Dancing with the angels, that bright-eyed boy
Will forever have touched my heart.
As I hold his lifeless body, ready to let him go one last time.

– Kelsey Lowrance

Goodbye

She can't breathe,
standing in that cold dark room,
with her face covered
by a tiny pink blanket
she bought over a year ago.
Hysterical with gasping breaths.
And flowing are her tears running down,
like water from a faucet.
One by one,
each picture taken off the wall,
wrapped in newspaper,
carefully placed in a box marked "Natalie's stuff."

"It's not going to be easy,"
the words her father once told her mother.
"We knew she'd get attached."

Remembering back now
to the first time she called her "Momma,"
she folded the blanket
and placed it in the box.
She put the box in the closet,
next to the perfectly wrapped Christmas presents
that had been there since the day she put up the tree.
Slowly,
closing the door,
and hoping...

...hoping in the same way she does
every morning
when she opens her eyes.
...that she'd get the usual tug on her pant leg,
by an eager little girl wanting to be picked up.

But she was gone,
and she wasn't coming back.
She was not her mom.
And she knew that.

Madeleine Albright at McDonald's

Madeleine Albright was sitting in McDonald's
or somebody who looked just like her,
dining with her husband in the back booth
when in comes a young man with a T-shirt that says,
"SHOW ME YOUR TITS."

Madeleine Albright looked appalled,
her husband too,
while the idiot teenage boy sat with his hulking friends
who all looked equally Neanderthal in their teen years,
ready to reproduce,
and they seemed dangerous or just
stupid the whole lot of them.

What happens to boys?
What turns them so damned dumb?

I had to wonder as I sat with my
beautiful ten-year-old boy,
he with his back to the idiot,
he happily still playing with the Happy Meal
thing of the week,
he not yet concerned about women's breasts
or the grunting call of reproduction,
just how Shrek and company fit together in the
puzzle.

– David Charlson

Leaving

If Silence is what precedes Truth,
then, I think, the quiet winter,
with its stillness and absence
fathered me, and

If what precedes Silence
is the Unpronounceable Word,
then, perhaps, the season
of winds, and birds
and leaves, and birds
and leaving, and birds
was my mother, who

before departing, left me
a lullaby, a solemn goodbye:
Sleep my Silent Son,
my Magnificent Sapling, and

when I awoke, what remained
was a tree, dripping nectar
and leaves
that withered before or
around my bed.

From that day on, *Father*;
I became your child.
Son, you called me.
Your voice the cleaving wind.

My only friends, the birds,
left for North, and I, alone,
carved prayers in soft snow:
I will wait for you, and
I will wait for you.

But I knew then that
I would never become like the bird,
never to escape, to leave.
That to the words *Father*; *Mother*;
I would every evening cleave.

– Paul Taylor

Beautiful

if beauty were a thick pair of glasses
on a babyfat face
long legs and scars from bike accidents
jeans that don't fit and shirts that fall lazily from pale shoulders
I would be beautiful
and beauty would be the girl on the front porch who looks sixteen but
instead is twenty
that girl (woman) who stares at trees and wiggles her toes
in the dirt
awash in sunshine, distracted
distracting, a birthmark on the face of this little street with its
little houses
she's a transplant, you can tell, a northerner,
I live in the the right place
with the right faces and wrong thoughts—I want to turn back sometimes
but here is too perfect
there is too much to hold on to here and too little to miss back there
in the cold and snow and bad drivers and hopeless retail jobs of my youth
here, sometimes
sometimes I think that maybe here, here alone, I am beautiful
and if beauty were a bad haircut, and laughing smiles
and occasional tears and broken thumbnails
if beauty were careful attention to detail
and no attention to the self
self-loathing and self-longing
and faithfulness to anyone who smiles
that would be beautiful: I would be beautiful

– Nicole Utz

A Woman's Reflection

Gently tracing the slight curve
Of the breast,
The subtle sensations awaken
Amazement at the womanly shape
The mirror reflects and I stare
Quietly at the person staring back.
When did I become *her*?

When did I forget to care?

How could I have missed the separation
And soft, smooth, shadows of my own breasts?
Or the unseen path that runs between—
And down—to my navel—and further down
Creating yet another visible mystery

For a moment, my mind resists its normal impulses
To deny what I see
The light plays delicately on olive skin
And I am beautiful
Content—even in my imperfections.

— **Rebecca Weber**

The Pool Room

The room was moving
with bodies
with money
with clandestine courage.
Light sat softly
in small pools
on the action,
and he was on his game.
His stroke was smooth
and easy,
he glided
around the table,
so cool.
I sat perched
on a stool,
surrounded by local flies,
Watching him.
Between turns
He would make
his way
to my side.
And on one of those turns,
He gave me his love.
With all the room buzzing
His eyes caught mine,
I fell in,
And he stole into mine.

– **Nancy Morgan**

Mornings

I wake up to warmth and beauty
On a Saturday morning bed
The lack of sounds
Except for her breath
The covers over us
Hiding us from the day

How could I be so lucky
To be here with such a woman
She rolls over
Lays her head on my arm
And falls back to sleep
So deep that I don't even try to wake her

How long will this last
I hope it never ends
The day never comes
And the morning stays forever
Even though my arm is numb
Even though we have so much to do

– **Jess Slack**

Car Salesman

You see the slicked back hair,
The smile, coffee breath,
You see a cheap suit and tie,
You hear the eager laughter,
Behind false eyes
And false compliments
You despise
You resent
You walk away
Shaking your head
Tell a joke when you get home
Feel better about yourself
What you don't see

Fourteen hour days
Sitting outside
People looking down
Laughing at you
But you grin and take it
Because you have sad little girls
Sitting at home
Missing their daddy
And you love them too much
To watch them wait for food and toys
So you go and buy your cheap suit
That you can't afford
And let them laugh

I'll let them laugh too
And when I look at him
I won't see a car salesman
I'll see a man
That loved me too much.

– Crystal Woodard

Crab Salad Avocado Grapefruit Delight

Mama made it for us
When she came to help
after tiny Jeremiah Joseph
showed his bright blue eyes
to the world for the very first time.

She always prepared
this sumptuous treat
on the most
auspicious occasions—
Christmas, weddings, birthdays.
But this time
was the last time.
My baby boy's arrival
and our farewell to Mama.

A greeting,
a farewell,
a treasured moment out of time
still hovering in my mind's eye
delicately glistening with teardrops
as each remembered moment
gives its gift of itself
into this heart and mind.

She was beautiful still,
fragile as a butterfly.
She rubbed my back for me
even though her own back
was hunched over in pain.
She carried my baby
in her arms so tenderly.
Her own arms were bleeding
because she could not
carry herself tenderly.

She worked so hard
for this amazing and
overwhelming family.
Washed our clothes,
made a turkey,
and the most delicious
orange-glazed pork roast
we ever had.

She laughed with us,
she sang with us,
she even looked almost well
for a moment or two
when a flash of hope and brightness
returned to her eyes.

Oh, Mama, thank you for this time.
You gave your all for us this time.
This last time
our ignorance was bliss.
We knew not
it was our farewell,
but our hearts told us
to pay attention.
Our hearts whispered messages
of love, and trust, and courage.

She left for the unknown,
never to return again,
leaving behind a legacy.
A lifetime of adventures
dark and bright.
Lessons of love
and compassion
and gourmet specialties galore.
My favorite
was always
her crab salad
avocado
grapefruit
delight.

– Kamea Moonmaiden

Mr. President

The sneer spreads wide over
his face of shame
Red, white and blue cover
a thin cloak of protection
Like a sword or a gun
he uses it
time and time again
Justifies wars that bleed souls into sand
Children crumble to the cracked earth
in countries
Far away
From pent houses and armed protection
He laughs at the concerns of a world
full of hurt
The sneer spreads wide across his
vacant rattling eyes
Here's to you, Mr. President
You must be so proud
The path you have worn
is soiled and sad
They believed in you, but not enough
To win

It wasn't your victory when
the polls closed that day
We threw eggs at your chariot
that carried your golden wife and
sparkling watch to a house
stolen in the night
You hid in your boots far down
in sweet Texas
That day they needed you
You escorted the killers on a plane
Up, up and away
Smoke 'em out, W!
With your snicker and your fear
You've aged with this time

that passes so slowly
It is the countdown to freedom
and a time to begin
To heal and to change
We cannot wait for your wagon
to pull away
And sink slowly into the sand
A citizen of pride and sadness, I am
Red, white, and blue from beginning to end.

– Candice Hillenbrand

A Paper Past

I turn the pages,
With paper-cut edges,
Revealing my life's
History past.
Times of blood,
Times of strife.
Turn the page,
As the blood trickles,
I see my fathers'
Rebellion against
Those Presidents
Who were once fickle.
Turn the page,
Another drop drips,
I see my grandfathers
Struggling against the market
And the rich,
With their pretentious coffee sips.
Turn the page,
As the blood flows,
I see my forefathers
Fighting against indecision,
For life and equality,
Yet, fields filled with crows.
Turn the pages,
As the blood spills,
I see those
Sacrificing their blood,
So their children,
Look back with only paper-cut thrills.

– **Matt Bryant**

Riders

We was pushin' up from Texas, had a thousand head bedded down
Out there by that big clear creek 'bout a mile and half from town
I was ridin' in to grab some grub and maybe some good shut-eye
When some strangeness started happenin' and still I wonder why
I seen this little black dogie, strayin' from the herd
And I didn't want to chase him, but your handshake is your word
I came up out of the arroyo and what do you think I seen
A remuda, chuck wagon, four old waddies, they was dirty, hard, and lean
I glanced toward their saddles, they was totin' Winchester '73's
But I allowed that even with them old guns they'd be a match for me
So I rode on in and politely asked if I could sit a spell
One old puncher said "Climb down, Son, if you've got a taste for hell"
Then the cookey brought me a metal plate full of bacon, beans, and bread
And ten years out I still recall every word them fellers said
We sat there by the fire and told each other lies
We cracked some jokes and drank some Joe then I said the time does fly
But if I'm gonna catch that little stray, I better catch him soon
Cause it's getting on toward sundown, and there ain't even a quarter moon
So I swung up on my pony, and headed up the hill
I glanced back over my shoulder and got an awful chill
I seen no wagon, no punchers, no woodsmoke hanging in the air
I thought that was rightly strange, 'cause I was just sittin' there
Just about then that little black brute broke from the Mesquite patch
And me and my little ropin' pony both knew he'd met his match
I pulled my old magee from off my saddle horn
And my little ropin' pony 'membered why that he was born
We reeled that dogie in boys and headed down the draw
And I got a chance to study 'bout the things that I'd just saw
I got that stray back to the creek where the herd was bedded down
I got him gentled up and then I headed into town
I bought me a glass of whiskey and I raised that glass up high
Cause I knew that I'd just taken chuck with them riders in the sky

– Ron Scribner

The background of the page is a dark, textured surface with visible brushstrokes and splatters of paint in shades of grey and black. A thin, solid black horizontal line runs across the middle of the page, separating the word 'PHOTOGRAPHY' from the rest of the background.

PHOTOGRAPHY



How the West was Won

LaWanda LaVarnway



Grand Canyon Fire Site

John W. Perry



Girl

LaWanda LaVarnway

*Reflections***Melania St. Onge**



At Work

LaWanda LaVarnway



ART





Tree in a Basket

Tina Marsh



Paper Sacks

Edward Safley