



11 *Absolute*

Poetry • Fiction • Nonfiction • Artwork • Photography

11
Absolute

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CONTENTS

FICTION.....2

<i>Pearl Sleeps beneath a Sundial Now</i>	Stacey Rios
<i>Skinned</i>	Victoria Jones
<i>Engineering the Opera Infiltration</i>	Darci Moore
<i>Stones</i>	Lyndsie StremLOW
<i>Dinner</i>	Jeff Provine

NONFICTION31

<i>I Didn't Kill Your Ferret (But I Considered It)</i>	Benjamin Siess
<i>Brace Yourself.</i>	Michelle BorrOR
<i>Preschool or: The Inevitable Path Toward the</i> <i>Systematic Destruction of the Human Mind</i>	David Mercer
<i>A Life of Purpose</i>	Andrea J. Kern
<i>The Weight of Everything</i>	Jack LePlante
<i>What Children Hear When Adults Talk</i> <i>or What I Learned in Sunday School</i>	Abigail Wiseman
<i>The Bright Side of Christmas</i>	Stephanie Woodard

POETRY69

<i>For Captain Miller, That Day at the Station, 2004.</i>	Rachael Z. Ikins
<i>Doing the Hula</i>	Amy Wilson
<i>Eesti Vabariik (The Republic of Estonia)</i>	Megan Dinan
<i>Pocketknife</i>	Brandon Isaak
<i>Fiberglass Carnival</i>	Kyle Stults
<i>Songs That Harrison Sang</i>	Kortni Torralba
<i>Astroturf: Dreamtime</i>	Michael Snyder
<i>Vacancy.</i>	L.T. Budrich
<i>Ode to My Morning Coffee</i>	SueAnne Lewis
<i>The Night Is Wild</i>	Stephanie Menotti
<i>A Midnight Stroll Through Suburban Eden</i>	Michael Fadum

PHOTOGRAPHY & ART.....85

Ferris Wheel *Abril Estrada*

Holy Water *Brenda Breeding*

Daisies. *Donna J. Ward*

Pickens Family *Raymond Isaac*

Clock Tower *Joie White*

Maurice on Spoon. *Richard Auer*



Pearl Sleeps beneath a Sundial Now

By Stacey Rios

Her name was Pearl. She had gold hair and a gap between her front teeth. She smiled with all her teeth and shook my hand politely as her family introduced themselves to us. She looked me in the eye and asked me about myself. *What's your favorite made-up creature?* I decided it would be unicorns. *What is your favorite animal to read about?* Bengal tigers were interesting and going extinct. I was concerned. *If you could turn into anything in the world, what would it be?* I wanted to be a weeping willow because their tiny leaves fall like confetti in the autumn. *What do you want to be when you grow up?*

We decided to become architects together. Pearl's sculptures would become monuments. She would align them all in her own patch of land and be buried with them when she died. Her sculptures would all have sharp edges. She would base them off of crystals and they'd sparkle over her decomposing body as the sun rose every morning. I would make odd green houses each with a little red fence as my signature. My houses would have secret doors. The walls inside the hidden spots would be engulfed with paintings of sea creatures. Blue whales would greet you silently in the front. Seahorses and starfish would be above you, watching you step deeper into the passageway. Great white sharks would nearly make you piss your pants as you got further in and it ended with the core of the earth. The core would glow. You would walk into the light and go blind.

Pearl and I climbed trees together. Her dad nailed three small steps on the stubbiest trees in the backyard. Pearl and I climbed the unassisted trees. We watched birds build their nests. Orange beetles landed on our arms and we would name them. I climbed so fast one day, I didn't get a chance

to catch myself from falling. A thick twig nestled itself into my tricep and I pulsed onto the earth.

I could feel my forehead leaking saltiness. I stood on my side of the fence and gawked at Pearl. The sun illuminated the gold strands on her head. I could see pools of moisture collecting under her arms. I pursed my lips and I watched the speckles of sweat unite on my upper lip. Her pink shirt had a unicorn on it. It looked longingly into the sky. It would be frustrating to be stuck on a piece of cloth. Pearl made eye contact and showed me her middle finger. I showed her mine and I brought my other appendage into the battle. We stood with our middle fingers out and we screamed. We were miniature sirens declaring our anger and misunderstandings. Our voices dissipated and we shared a glass of orange juice as a truce.

One summer, Pearl and I went to the beach together. It was gray the entire time we were there. We watched lightning overtake the sky and reflect off the waves of the black water. She looked me in the eye and interrogated me. *Is there a place you want to go to but know you can't?* I told her I could never float in space without my capillaries freezing and my organs exploding inside of me. *Do you think people who run away from their current thoughts resolve anything?* I couldn't really give her an exact speculation. I told her, maybe people who run aren't afraid. Maybe they just want complete independence from anything that attaches them to negativity. *Would you nap in the white fluffy clouds with me while there was a war waging below us?* Of course.

On Pearl's front porch, we went through phases. Frida Kahlo was one. We would wear huge flowers in our hair. We danced in the dark so nothing could see us except for satellites in space. Marisol Escobar was another phase. Her wooden sculptures are shaped like geometric people. They congregate, they get married, and they struggle. Pearl and I began adding faces to inanimate objects in Marisol's honor. Yayoi Kusama was the last artist we indulged in. Her phallic structures and eloquently vivid rooms had us in awe. We painted each other one day. Our entire bodies

were immersed with spots. I was mostly red dots. Pearl was purple dots. We crawled into one of the trees in her backyard and napped.

Pearl had me dye her hair neon blue. The chemicals were caked on her scalp. She looked up and smiled at me. *Do you think people are inherently good or evil?* I told her, socialization has a lot to do with it. It's an ugly cycle of bewilderment. Where have your dead skin cells floated onto? I hope some of them had dispersed onto the sun. I hope some of them have landed on the other side of the world. I like the idea of strangers breathing me in. *If you could hide somewhere forever, where would you go?* I would hide in a cave. I would eat bats, contract rabies, get stuck in a brilliant blue cave pool and wither away. I kissed her on the forehead and inhaled the chemical potency perched within her hair.

I watched her look down. Flushed, she looked up and told me I was insensitive. She grabbed my arm tightly. Her blue hair tickled my neck. Her grip led me into the backyard. She whispered at me. *There's no substance.* Her radiant green eyes went wide. The sky was clear. Her face was stoic. She wanted to go to Russia. Her dream last night made her limbs cold. Four statues stood in the snow. If you stood in their shadows, your limbs would go numb. Pearl wanted to find these four women.

I pushed my glasses further up my face as I browsed through the architecture and design section of the bookstore. My eyelids were parched from little rest. I wanted to find a book with simple text and photography. There was an awkward book bugged between two miniature books about architecture in small spaces. The big book featured the Jantar Mantar. These ancient astronomical observatories are maintained in India. Giant sundials sit in a courtyard. Marble envelopes each structure. I remembered Pearl's staircase dream. Massive glass staircases rested on a green pasture. Red lilies bloomed in front of each staircase. Drizzle blurred the atmosphere. The moisture landed on Pearl's hair, droplet by droplet. The steps led to nothing. The Jantar Mantar looked like the closest thing Pearl would ever get to finding these subconscious inventions. I imagine her living there. She cracks

the universe open and measures the planetary alignments. She tracks the stars and whispers the constellations to children in the streets. Once night falls, she pulls her blue hair back and sleeps beneath a sundial. I imagine her being comfortable. I imagine her being completely rested before she wakes up and gets back to her contract with the cosmos. It has helped me come to terms with the loneliness.

Skinned

By Victoria Jones

The sand never goes away. It blows into your mouth and eyes, into every crease of your skin. It covers every inch of uncovered skin and finds its way into your clothes. You can scrub all you want but when you step out from under the water, it is still there, behind your knees, between your toes, in your ears. The sand combines with your sweat to create a gritty, dirty second skin. Eventually, it becomes comforting to slip into this second skin, this different, dirty you. You begin to forget how it ever felt to live without the grit and grime, how it felt to live without the guilt.

The sky is on fire, burning, vibrant orange, as the sun falls behind the earth. Soon the darkness, cold and stillborn, will begin to creep across the skyline, across this Godless Holy land, slowly invading until it overtakes us. My heart pounds in my chest, my pulse floods my ears, deafeningly loud. It drowns out the familiar sound of the MRAP, a steel-plated womb, protecting the fragile life within it from fiery explosions. IEDs litter this barren landscape, waiting patiently, invisible, beneath the sand. There is nothing but the desert, with its never ending waves of sand. It rises and falls, rises and falls, again and again, as far as I can see. Sand, sand, sand. It all looks the same.

Soon we will reach a village, an island in the barren sea of sand, and there we will slip into our second skins. We have Intel that one of the houses there may be harboring insurgents and a possible cache of weapons. This is my first raid. I clench my fists so no one will notice the trembling of my hands. No one knows what we will find there. There could be two men, six men, or twelve inside, there could be no one. We are all silent. I focus on

the sounds within the MRAP, listening, taking comfort in the sweet, steady thrum of the engine.

As we near the small village we receive our final briefing and orders. The smell of sweat is thick in the air as Harper gives us our assignments. Marshall and I are to take the back of the building. Cooper, Harper and Austen will take the front. Keaton, the medic, is to stay back. The vehicle stops and we are suddenly plunged into silence. Harper gives us one succinct nod and sends us out into the waiting darkness. Quietly, we crawl out of the MRAP, expelled from the womb and into the harsh, unfriendly desert. We must protect ourselves from now on. Cooper's eyes are wide and the stark whiteness around his irises shines in the darkness. Beside me, Marshall's breath comes out in short bursts. My own heart races, the pulse sounding almost like one continuous note.

Harper, in his second tour of duty, with his strong chin and heavy brow, leads Coop and Austen towards the front of the house. Harper's face is a mask of composure; he never shows fear or apprehension. Usually our comic relief, Austen's face is focused and serious, a look we so rarely see from him. His face glistens, sweat capturing the scarce light and his mouth cracks a brief shadow of his usual crooked grin. He takes a deep breath and falls in behind Harper. Cooper is last; his wide eyes glance back at me as he makes his way into position. Cooper is just a pimple-faced kid, a boy teetering on the brink of manhood. Eighteen and straight out of some small town high school, he shouldn't be here. He should be back in Heartland, America with his pregnant high school sweetheart. With one quick nod to Cooper I fall in behind Marshall.

At the back door Marshall hesitates, waiting for the order to act. Marshall's breathing has become slower, more controlled. His tall frame is completely still as he waits, taut with apprehension. I take a deep breath. My heart no longer pounds against my rib cage. The fear is falling away. We are slipping into the sand, into our other selves.

Marshall's boot collides with the door in front of us, busting through the frame. The sharp crack of the wood pierces the night. It tears through the veil of silence and sound floods into the dark. I can hear shouts and crashes from the front as that door caves in too. Pop. Pop. Gunfire. Adrenaline propels me forward at unimaginable speeds as colors and shapes blur in front of me, there is so much motion before me. Something hot splashes across my face. Like a marionette cut from its strings, Marshall's body crumples to the ground in front of me. The split second it takes seems to freeze and consume hours. His upper body is twisting through the air, suspended in front of me. I can see his open hand, his shiny wedding band, and then he is plummeting to the ground. He lies face down on his stomach, sickeningly limp. Noise roars into my ears, the crack of gunfire screams and cries. I catch a flash of movement behind me and I spin around, spraying bullets into the space behind me.

The bullets tear through the room. Feathers rain down, sticking to me. I have eliminated the only other occupant of the room, a chicken. I can see the vibrations of the tip of my rifle, my hands are trembling. White feathers slowly drift by my shaking weapon, softly landing onto the pots and pans of a small kitchen. I whirl back around, scanning the room for enemies, but there are none. The room has fallen still and the only people standing are mine. The house is small and Austen and Coop stand in the middle of a living area; the tan walls are splattered red. Harper stands in the opening of the house's single bedroom, looking tired against the blood-stained walls. I look to the ground. Blood crawls across the floor, reaching red tentacles towards our boots. Three women lie before Cooper and Austen. There are three young women, lifeless, on the floor.

"Keaton," Harper barks into the radio.

Cooper shakes so violently he looks as though he'll come apart. He mutters to himself but I can't make out the words. Austen just stares at nothing. I walk to Marshall and slowly turn his body over.

“What in the Holy Hell happened?” Keaton yells, stepping onto the bloodied and feathered floor. No one speaks. I don’t know what to say, I don’t know what has happened. Keaton sets his medic’s kit down next to Marshall. Anger and confusion whirl together inside of me. I push the kit away.

“He’s dead. His fucking face is missing.” The words come out in a harsh voice I don’t recognize, even though I speak them.

Keaton looks at me and then slowly turns his attention to the others, one at a time he looks at us. His face transforms slowly from remorse to horror. His eyes finally fall on Harper.

“There—there are no weapons, there are no guns. Who--?” Keaton stops midsentence.

“She had a knife,” Cooper wails, “she had a knife, a knife, all I saw was the knife. And then I just shot, I just shot—”

“Don’t say anything else,” Harper’s voice cuts off Cooper’s words. I look at Harper and his mask is shattering, pain and sorrow pushing through.

The sand is suffocating me; it pours into my mouth and rushes into my lungs. I cough and spit, gasping and sputtering for air but I can’t breathe. The sand is killing me. The sharp little pieces get into my eyes, cutting them. Blood runs down my face, mixing with the sticky spattering of Marshall’s blood, turning fine white feathers red. I am dying in the sand.

I am stuck in the desert, drowning in the sea of sand. The great waves rise and fall, crash together, send my body twirling and tumbling through the sand. I will die in this dry land where nothing can survive, where nothing grows. This land should be fertile and green. It has been flooded with moisture. A river of blood has drenched the grounds of this land. So much blood has soaked into this God forsaken land and still nothing lives. This land supports nothing but death, death and more blood. I will never escape it.

A fierce wind blows; the sand whips around me, cutting me and then is gone. Brightness blinds my eyes. Bright yellows, cheery oranges surround me. A cup of coffee lies spilled on the warm hued wood table I sit at. Fear fills my veins. The kitchen I sit in so foreign and frightening. Happiness emanates from its bright hues and careful decorating. I sit in a stranger's kitchen, in a strange land, shaking.

I touch the sticky blood on my face but the blood is gone, the feathers are gone. I am home, in my kitchen, my bright cheery kitchen. I should feel safe, thankful, but I am terrified. I no longer know the woman who once lived here. I have become a stranger, a stranger to my friends and family, a stranger to this home. I cannot resume my life from before.

The sand never leaves. I have slipped into that second skin and I can no longer shed it. I am dirty and gritty and covered in sand, in so much sand.

Engineering the Opera Infiltration

By Darci Moore

When I was small, my favorite task was to get the mail from the mailbox. Who knew what fabulous treasures may await? My grandmother used to give me those thick sweepstakes envelopes to open that seemed to arrive daily along with such treasures as S&H Green Stamps and Carol Wright catalogs. I just had to be sure to throw them away after I was done dissecting them. The sweepstakes entries made me feel terribly grown up at the age of eight—to be putting all the stickers in the designated dotted lines and carefully selecting the magazines I wouldn't actually order. I must admit my grandmother's subscriptions to *Good Housekeeping* and *Woman's Day* didn't actually run out until the mid 90's so some got by. According to the introductory letters these sweepstakes were important and official documents. I must be a very trusted and responsible person to be granted such a great responsibility. Oh yes, yes I was! You could count on me!

One particularly thick envelope that arrived from *Reader's Digest* was a contest that included many fabulous prizes including a state of the art quadraphonic stereo system complete with eight-track, turntable and even a cassette deck! I was utterly enthralled, my heart was aflutter even though my musical expertise consisted of a very small collection of sixty-nine cent singles from the local five and ten store.

I envisioned the praise I would receive for winning such a valuable treasure so my grandparents could listen to their music, which seemed to consist mostly of Jim Neighbors and Anita Bryant albums, on new shiny state of the art stereo instead of the current clunky record player built into the top of the Magnavox Console TV.

Why I was so desperate for them to have this I honestly can't recall. The syrupy tunes my grandparents favored both at home and during outings in my grandmother's Estee Lauder-scented Impala gave me a blinding headache. They were especially bad Sundays on the ride to church. My headaches, caused by the hour of obligatory religious guilt while perched upon a hard wooden chair, could only be remedied by the Sunday lunch visit to the local cafeteria across the street and the certain knowledge that my grandfather would take a nap as soon as we got home.

My grandfather was a mechanical engineer with twenty-two patents to his name. Living in an engineering household teaches one to tiptoe almost from birth. Only when the engineer is asleep or simply gone is the coast truly clear, and even then it was of utmost importance to avoid their claimed areas. The average person has a personal space bubble of about four to six feet, the average engineer has a bubble of about twenty feet. My grandfather, being who he was, had a bubble closer to thirty feet. This is what led me to quiet time activities like filling out sweepstakes in the closet under the stairs where my personal space kept residence.

There seemed to be an endless amount of stickers to stick and paper pieces to put together for this particular contest. It took me the better part of a rainy October afternoon, and at the end I was weary and had a paper cut on my tongue. I had to sign my name, which completed the contest. I thought that a bit odd as I had never had to before, but then the prize had never been so glorious. Certainly the additional effort was justified. Of course, I was eight years old. What did I know? I carefully stowed the letter in the mailbox, raising the flag ceremoniously, and went off to find a new project.

About a month later the UPS delivery man showed up with a large box from *Reader's Digest*. It was a stereo amplifier, or so my grandfather said as he pulled from the cardboard box that I was already eyeing up as a new horse stable for my herd of plastic horses. "Where did this come from?" he asked mostly to himself. My grandfather asked my grandmother what she had done this time. My grandmother immediately became defensive. Why

on earth would she order such a thing? My grandfather, being an engineer, appraised the situation and the equipment. He proclaimed it extremely bulky and too heavy to be efficient, but the control panel seemed well designed. He also commented about the fact it sported the *Reader's Digest* winged horse logo which he found a bit perplexing.

Reader's Digest, stereo, the wheels in my head were spinning, the contest! I had won, really won. Why else would this be here! I had not been told I had won the contest, but here was a part of the stereo. No telegram had arrived, no well dressed spokesperson with a bunch of balloons and a photographer at the front door, just a UPS delivery.

I opted to use the silent approach. Something wasn't adding up. The intense fear of a very precarious child clenched at my insides. I was quite the fool. I wholeheartedly believed the horrific tales of the more wizened eleven year olds: the secret beatings in the schools principal's office with the giant wooden paddle, the lunch lady spitting in your food if you didn't eat all of your brussel sprouts the day before. Then there was the horror of horrors that your parents had seen each other naked. I was certain there was something really bad in store for me, something new and unimagined--maybe even a nun with a ruler. I had never seen a nun with a ruler, but I had heard stories.

Two days later two huge larger boxes arrived, which turned out to be a pair of speakers literally three feet tall. My anxiety began to swirl in my stomach and my legs felt like rubber. If I was found out what would happen? My grandparents would be livid. I was relatively certain that if my grandfather got mad enough he would actually burst into flame. There was no mention of a telegram or letter. The tiny bit of hope I had that things would work out seemed to be nonexistent.

The very next day the cassette deck showed up, encased tightly in styrofoam, also bearing the winged horse of *Reader's Digest*. I was questioned. Had I ordered this? No one else knew anything. My brother was only six and my mother was bedridden. I was by far the most likely culprit of

this unsolved mystery. My grandmother phoned the *Reader's Digest* number that was listed in the thick instruction book. This was of course before the computer revolution and it took weeks to investigate. There were no instant database searches and digital signatures, just a lot of offices with a lot of clerks sending a lot of memos back and forth. I continued to proclaim my innocence out of sheer terror.

During the next two weeks we continued to get box after box of stereo components, an AM/FM tuner, an equalizer which was almost the size of a modern day microwave oven with more switches and toggles than the cockpit of a commercial aircraft. Other items, miles of cable, an antenna for the radio, a cleaning kit, more speakers, even sets of records with names like *The 200 Most Loved Melodies in The World* and *The Greatest Love Songs of All Times* all in their separate boxes with the now evil winged horse that I was certain would appear some night very soon to steal my soul. I was convinced this would all end in my being disowned and sent to an orphanage similar to the one in *Oliver Twist*, or possibly a prison chain gang.

Fortunately, the living room had a long bank of windows with a shelf just deep enough to hold all of these pieces of electronic wonder. Ironically, it was almost as if the stereo had been designed for that very space, which had always been empty except for a flesh-colored plastic radio and what else, but several dozen read copies of *Reader's Digest* Magazine. Oh how I hated *Reader's Digest*. By the time the last piece arrived, the sixteenth and final box holding the eight track cassette deck, I knew my inevitable demise was a certainty.

Everyone who stopped by the house got to hear the story of the mystery stereo. My grandfather had erected hangers for some of the smaller speakers and it was fully operational with the help of the local Radio Shack repairman he had hired to make sure all of these items were connected for optimal sound experience.

It was now early December and time to put up the Christmas tree. My grandfather insisted it not be put in front of the window to impede his access to the stereo—what seemed to be, much to my amazement, a source of pride and pleasure.

A Saturday trip to Tulsa found the car trunk not laden with the usual bootleg wine and liquor but also several dozen albums of opera and Italian singers such as Luciano Pavarotti and Placido Domingo. My grandmother insisted we purchase a few Christmas albums. Her request list was my responsibility to keep track of, and it was also my responsibility to make sure my grandfather actually left the store with them. My grandfather seemed to actually be enjoying himself—something I had never seen him do before. It was much to my surprise a very fun day and I had not had been castigated even once.

I had all but forgotten the inquiry to *Reader's Digest*, but when we got back from our long trek to Tulsa my grandmother announced rather cheerily that she had gotten two letters from *Reader's Digest* in the mail that day. One was a Xerox copy that clearly displayed my signature to purchase a Quadraphonic Sound system in easy payments, and in a separate envelope, a bill for the first installment towards the twelve-hundred dollar purchase price. My heart was in my stomach and the end was here; I had been found out. My grandmother and grandfather sat me down and asked if I had any idea of what I had done. Did I have any idea I bought an entire stereo? I broke into tears and tried my best to explain that I had no idea I had ordered it; I only wanted to win it for them. The hot tears burned my cheeks as I told them I did not want any Christmas presents this year or anything else for the rest of my life because I had done such a stupid, stupid thing and thrown us all into abject poverty.

My grandparents turned to each other and chuckled, something else I had never seen before. To be honest there was not a great deal of happiness in our home due to my mother's illness. I had ordered what in today's prices would have been a seventy-five-hundred dollar stereo system, and had it

billed to my grandparents, yet they seemed deeply amused. They told me they did not hold me responsible for the purchase, nor was I even in trouble. I was utterly speechless.

They did tell me in the future never ever sign anything unless you have read it and if you can't read it that was when you were supposed to call a lawyer like cousin Kurt, but I would learn about that when I got much older. Then, they simply went back to their daily routine, leaving me staring at the drying tear spots on the kitchen table. I was deeply confused on what had just occurred, but I knew somehow to just let this go, and eventually I went about my day too.

Several months passed, my grandfather's record collection grew and I got accustomed to opera after school and on car trips. Opera had slowly but surely infiltrated itself into our daily lives. One day, when no one was around I examined the stereo. I was still rather scared of it in some foreboding way. It had symbolized my demise, but now it was just a stereo, and somehow I had been given credit for getting it here. My grandfather eventually came in the living room to read the evening paper and showed me how the equalizer worked and the special turntable arm. Then he said, "This is the best gift anyone has ever given me."

I was perplexed yet again, "But...you had to pay for it. You didn't even order it," I said cautiously.

He guffawed and said, "I don't care about that," and I realized he didn't care, at all. I had somehow done a good thing maybe, judging by the expression on his face.

My grandfather died twenty-two years later, right after his 84th birthday. In the new house my grandparents had built the year I turned twelve and my grandfather retired, the family room, his room, was designed for better acoustic effect. This room was referred to as "The Hall of Giants" due to the many enormous speakers all set just so. My grandfather had been legally blind for the last five years of his life, but he still had his music and

an oversized remote he could see the buttons on to play it. No more *Reader's Digest* equipment; names like Bose, Yamaha and Sony were in abundance now. After he passed we found over 440 vinyl albums, 350 VHS tapes as he had taken to recording every episode of Lawrence Welk, and several dozen cassette tapes and CDs. It's funny how something as small and insubstantial as filling out a sweepstakes can affect a life. My mistake gave him twenty-two years of music. It's the best mistake I've ever made.

Stones

By Lyndsie Stremlow

Monday morning dressed as a drone. I'm driving. I watch with wonder the flaming tip of first sun I've seen in seven days burning its unscripted fire along the edge of the city's smog horizon. I've negotiated with your absence for months, years, weeks, days, repeat sequence.

The first stone sinks inside me: *I haven't slept for a fucking week.*

Years ago I didn't dare allow myself the luxury of frankly being in love with you. Not because I wasn't, but because I didn't know how to fight for something that shatters people daily. And now everything beautiful I have to say wants to be said to you. For a week now I've wept bitterly for love I bled out in a letter to you likely hidden (near archived by now), love you returned hastily on your lunch hour, then swiftly made secret. I cried and drank so hard on Saturday after you left I vomited and punched walls, broke plates on the sidewalk with a hammer to the shock and awe of my neighbors, the constant shining couple. You know the kind: consistent, stable, standard issue. At one point the happy couple comes outside. They look worried and ask if I need anything. "It's for an art project," I say and stop hammering for a minute. Then, laughing, "You guys look happy." Out of the quiet despair that follows certain defeat I go to bed in the chest cave I made for comfort with shallow drunken breaths. I think at this point I am going mad.

The second stone sinks inside me: *now I get to move in the same austere spaces with you, not in warm bedrooms and breakfast room, or any rooms I choose. And nothing but my heart has changed.*

I tally them one, two, three breaths; count blow by blow each of your scripted visits where you might admit to my foolish, unfounded joy you just

wanted to see me. And inevitably I resign to the dark part of me that wants to be rid of the sweet woman you go home to, her blushing blamelessness that hung my house heavy with shadows. Hours before you arrived I'd pace and put on my makeup, shaking, trying to decide if I could bear even one more of those talks. You know the ones. Me: *pretending to be cool, collected, compliant*. You: *Christ only knows what's going on inside your head*. We might sit on the same couch not touching for years. I'll probably dissolve into venomous tears and trembling, calm acceptance of your inevitable verdict. And finally, when you motion as if to go, I will ask you as lightheartedly, playfully as possible to stay. You might sit with your gloves in your hands, fidget for a minute, and then go for the door. And all this for love not fearless enough for a careless kiss or embrace. When did you grow up and leave me behind with a bandit's spitting bravery?

The third stone sinks into the morning inside me: *nothing is beautiful about fighting for someone who won't fight for me*.

That one thought burns and boils and frees itself on the brain's bone-dry periphery. Monday morning driving. I'm dressed as a drone, this mind uncovered that was just buried in the stone sleeping apathy of what you and I refer to as our "SITUATION." More stones fall and follow silently as light through water. And I decide in that definite way that only happens when doing what is entirely mindless that I would, without pause, cross the ruthless cruel wilderness of my bewildered, murderous heart twenty times to reach your arms. Hell, I'd drag all the bodies in behind me.

But then I pull up late to my parking spot, spill a little lukewarm coffee in my lap and curse at it. Other drones begin to trickle in and park around me. When I go inside all of the plants on my desk are wilted, lifeless without water for a week. When I sit down, the phone begins to ring with all the usual questions about due dates and deadlines. All the questions that are a souvenir from a fate we won't escape and still pay the bills on time.

Dinner

By Jeff Provine

Famine and Death sat down at Meggido's at a quarter after nine. Death wore a black suit fit for a funeral. They weren't his usual secretive cowl and robes, but still shadowy in its ubiquity. His white hair was cut short, fitting close to his pale skin. Dark eyes stood starkly like sockets in a skull.

Famine was gaunt and pale, and her eyes were ravishing. She wore a pale flowing gown. It hung like extra skin over her slight frame.

"It's been a long time," Death said to her.

"It has," she agreed. "Probably since East Africa." She sighed.

Death sighed after her. "How are you?"

She pursed her lips. They were thin, almost translucent. "Times have been tough lately."

"I'm sorry," he told her.

Famine nodded and looked down at her empty plate. She liked the sight.

Death took her hand from across the table. "Talk. You'll feel better for it."

"Thank you," she said.

She straightened up in her chair. Her bony shoulders shifted under her chiffon. "It's all this technology. I'm telling you, times are changing more than we think."

"There is nothing new under the sun," Death told her. "Cars are just carriages with the horses made of metal and the fuel oil instead of hay. Before carriages, they were chariots. Before chariots, sledges."

“Don’t give me that!”

“I’m sorry, but it’s true.”

“They have those winged things now,” Famine said. “Aeroplanes, they call them.”

Death nodded. “Yes, I’m quite familiar with them.”

“Even a century ago they were scarcely more than kites. Now they leap from one side of the world to another in a single bound.”

“It’s still travel,” Death said. “Travel among the fluids. Not much different than sailing, you know. Faster, yes. Still, nothing completely new.”

“They’ve gone beyond fluids.”

Death took in a deep breath and sat back in his chair. “Yes, the space travel. Even I was impressed by that. I took a few in explosions here and there, but they were terribly careful, weren’t they?”

“I wouldn’t know. It’s out of my jurisdiction.”

“True, though I’m sure you’ve heard what they eat. Barely enough paste to keep them alive.”

“It’s better now than it was.”

“So I’ve heard,” Death said. He scratched a few shadowy whiskers on his chin that looked like cracks. “Still, it’s all just travel, isn’t it? A few rafts above the atmosphere is fairly the same as the first ship to sail out to sea past the horizon. I remember them being much more afraid then.”

Famine’s eyes stared at the dying rose in its vase on the table. “They’re growing up.”

“In some ways,” Death said. He stroked the flower, and it wilted to a black cinder. “But enough of them. What have you been doing with yourself?”

Famine looked back at him. “I’ve had some success in fringe lands: Korea, Africa again. But, overall, they’re becoming better at averting me.”

“You’ll always be there,” Death soothed.

“I know,” she said wearily. “Still, it’s not like it once was. I’ve had to be more creative than relying on simple shortages. There’s just so much food these days!”

“It’s true.”

“Remember when they first invented agriculture?” she asked. It wasn’t a question; of course he remembered. She wanted to remind him. “I was thrilled! All these little cities, big for their time, but still only villages, setting up their corn fields. They’d had strong diets hunting meat and gathering produce of every kind, and now they starved themselves of nutrients with bellies full of grain. Remember how weak they got? They were so short and brittle!”

Death made a snorting laugh. “Those were exciting days. Pestilence was ecstatic for millennia.”

Famine laughed with him, a shallow, breathy laugh. She ended it with a sigh. “Oh, if only I knew how far it would go. Irrigation, rotated fields, terracing...McCormick, Deere, and the rest...World hunger’s all but a fluke now.”

“Don’t say that.”

“It’s true,” Famine said. She sniffed in thought. “But, you know, all it would take is one big break in their system.”

Death cocked a pale eyebrow.

“So many of them live in cities now,” she explained. “They send in food by truckload and boat. If their oil ran dry or the seas swallowed their ships or earthquakes cracked roads...any of that, anything big enough. It

would only take a few days, and they'd be at the others' throats, fighting over a can of rotten fruit."

"Civilization is only five meals away from anarchy," Death said. "Or four or three, given the civilization. I wouldn't be surprised to see it if this missed just one."

Famine smiled, her thin lips over limpid teeth. "They're addicted. I've done my best with them, but I've never seen a people so plump."

"They're sent to me, one way or another," Death chimed.

"Still, they're getting wise to me. I've had them gorging on nutritionless sweets for years, but a few are gradually minding their meals. Imagine if they actually didn't overeat!"

"I'd shudder at the thought."

They laughed again: his echoing chuckle, her sighing chortle.

Famine slung her head wearily to the side and watched the other patrons of the restaurant. So many were starving, waiting on food. When it came, it would be nothing more than a few sticks of celery and a sauce made from a mushroom few had ever even heard of. It was as fashionable as useless.

"I like this place," Famine told him.

"I thought so when you picked it."

"There are lots of places like it, but so many of them give me the sneaking suspicion that everyone already ate a sandwich at home." She paused and wrinkled the taught skin on her nose. "Oh, how I hate the sandwich. Curses upon that earl."

Death chuckled again. "You said earlier you were being creative. Is this your work?"

"Some," she said. "They need a little nudging time and again. Once skinny became beautiful, I knew there was something beyond simple lack of

food. Now they starve themselves. Or, after they've eaten it, they vomit it up. Surrounded by food on all sides, and they look like a people lost in the desert. It's strange what their minds do to them."

"Very," Death agreed. He seemed lost in thought for a moment. Finally, he said, "I'm meeting with War later this year."

"Oh?" Famine leaned forward. "I've seen him a few times these past decades, usually following after him looking for ruined crops or selfish warlords."

"He's kept himself busy."

"War..." she said slowly, letting the word slide through her empty mouth. "He's probably done the best of us these past centuries." She paused. "Other than you, of course."

Death gave an appreciative nod.

"Really, it's been his best century ever," she mused. "He's taken advantage of their technology as much as I've lost ground to it. The machine gun? Ingenious!"

"It's kept me busy."

"And then getting them to use it!" she said. "He had a World War, they called it. Fighting across an entire continent. And then a Second, adding half of Africa and Asia, plus all those islands! Millions upon millions! Of course, I helped out as much as I could, but it was definitely his work. Poison gasses, explosives dropped from the sky, artillery, whole cities devastated..."

She paused and shook her head. "And then the Atom Bomb. Speaking of new things."

Death cleared his throat. "Pestilence was impressed by radiation. She'd never worked with it before on such a scale."

“I remember. She had such plans, but they shied away from it. Not that she’s had room to complain, but I pity her that. She’s done well enough this century.”

“She’d had her scares,” Death reminded. “First penicillin, then those vaccines: polio, smallpox, the rest...”

Famine scoffed. “Oh, she’s constantly a step ahead of them. A new strain of flu every few years to keep them on their toes. And that plague out of Africa? Terrible. Not to mention she’s got the mainstay of old age. Their bodies just give out.”

“Although by much of that time, it’s come to my attention,” Death said. “I’m more than just accidents, you know.”

Famine hummed. “Yes, but you’re the old consistent one, aren’t you? You and Taxes.”

Death grinned. Famine could not help but smile back.

She sighed. “But you were saying, about War? Are we finally getting the World War Three we’ve been promised these sixty-odd years?”

“Oh, it’s nothing like that,” Death said, shaking his pale head. “A long-term war, but small and rolling until a big civil war breaks out. He’s hoping the resulting world destabilization might lead to more international feuds.”

Famine cocked her head to the side. “All this poking around with bush wars... What’s wrong with War? What happened to his toppling of grand empires and invasions of millions?”

Death cleared his throat. Famine blinked hungrily at him.

“Honestly,” Death said softly. He narrowed his dark eyes. “Honestly, I believe he’s afraid of himself.”

“Afraid?”

Death made a slow nod. "When these nuclear weapons came out, he was so thrilled. To think, an entirely new weapon with which to fight! I hadn't seen him like that since gunpowder. And then... then he realized what it meant."

Famine leaned toward him. "What?"

"He finally had the capability of wiping out everyone in a single war. Certainly, the thought had been there, such as if everyone slit everyone else's throat, but now... Now he could conceivably do it. The thought of an Absolute War terrified him."

"War? Terrified?" Famine flinched backward in her chair. "But why?"

"Because it would be a war to end all wars," Death said gravely. "Permanently, not proverbially. Everyone dead, meaning no new wars. Ever."

Famine cocked her head to the side again. "I never thought of them all being gone. Even at my worst, I could never wipe them all out."

"War finally can," Death told her. "And he's done his best to work within the bounds of nuclear warfare. It took a lot out of him to keep the Cold War from going hot."

Famine nodded, slowly at first, and then more quickly as she understood. "It must be hard on him."

"You and I would never understand fully." Death shrugged. "Perhaps Pestilence might."

"Her? With her bubonic plagues? And smallpox wiping out ninety percent of the Americas?"

"Ninety percent," Death repeated. "Never all of them. She could have, perhaps on a number of occasions, but she always made sure there were more to repopulate. No plague was ever to be absolute."

"When we were working together in Ireland," Famine said, as if recalling a dream, "she said something like that."

Death hummed. "We do our best work together."

"That was almost two centuries ago now, but I remember her toying with the blight, and I asked her why we didn't poison all of their crops. Imagine the hunger then. But she said to me, 'Because they're ours.' I didn't really understand it."

"Do you now?"

Famine pursed her lips. "Not entirely, but I may be getting there. I've always imagined we were here to make them suffer, but that's not true, is it?"

Death only looked at her with warm, black eyes.

"It isn't," she said, shaking her head. "It's not us against them. We're with them." She glanced at Death again. "Are we guides or something?"

Death's head was turned, following a redheaded baby girl sitting in a stroller costing more than many countries' cars. She looked back at him and cooed, not yet afraid of what he meant. He smiled.

Famine could see the girl's whole life reflected in his eyes: private schools, tearful twenties with misdiagnosed mental breakdowns, community success in middle-age, ending not quite a century from now as a grandmother of twelve. The two shared gazes until she was pushed out the door by her terse parents.

Famine watched Death. He was the oldest of them, but she often forgot that. Maybe it was his eternal presence that made him so wise, not crafty like Pestilence or hotheaded like War or even subversive like herself. He'd experienced more than all of them would.

He didn't fear the humans or hate them. If anything, Famine would have guessed he loved them. He was what made their short lives worth living, a thrill of a race against time instead of the ennui the immortals could never shake.

Famine wondered what a feast would mean if she had never given anyone a hungry winter.

“I’m sorry,” Death said suddenly.

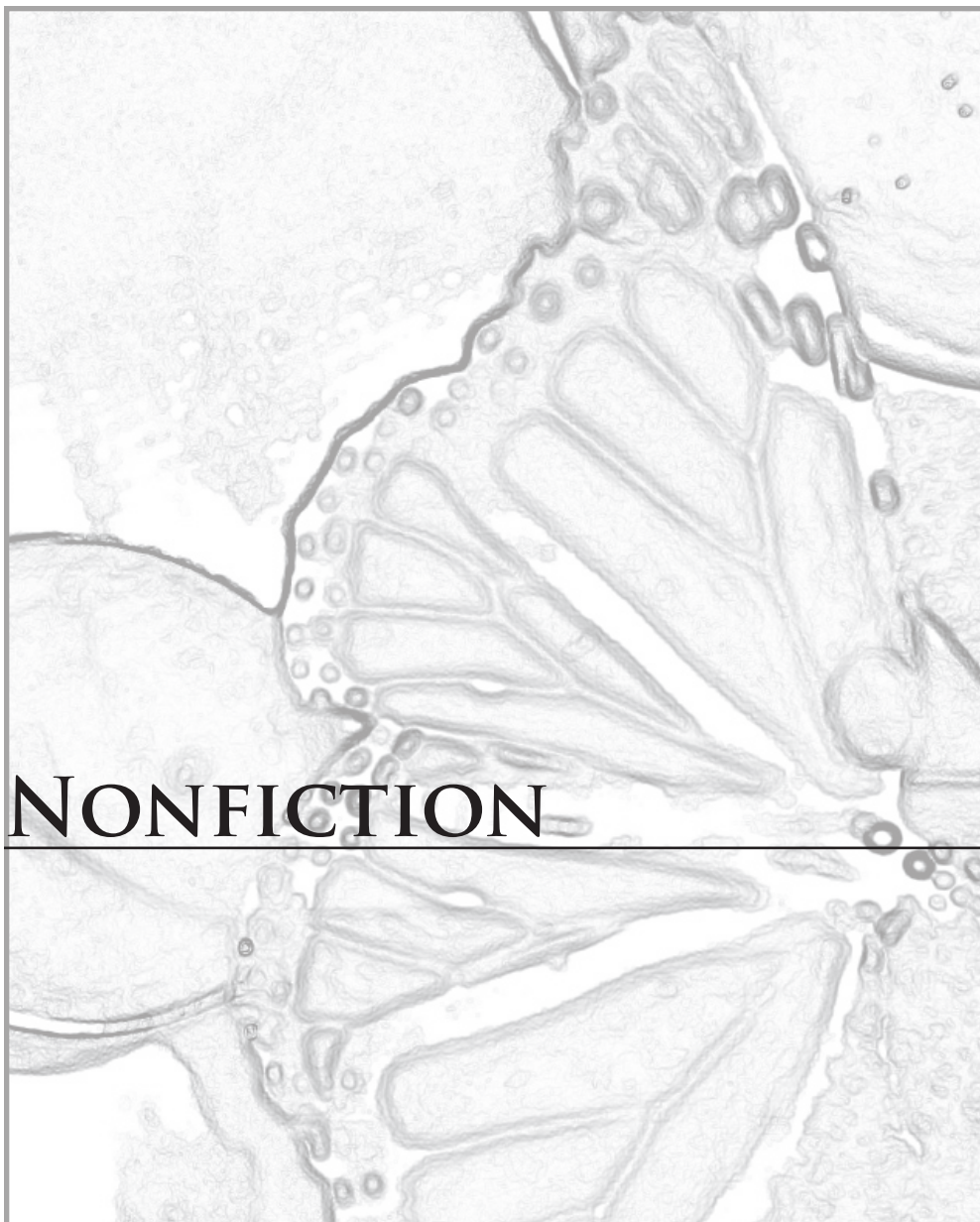
Famine looked up. He had turned around again. His pale cheeks still held gray lines of fading dimples.

“You were saying?” he asked.

“Oh, nothing,” Famine told him. “I think we should order now.”

“Hungry?”

“Always.”



I Didn't Kill Your Ferret (But I Considered It)

By Benjamin Siess

If you want to find a bookcase, Craigslist is the place to go. You make plans to meet during the middle of the day and if it looks like they could possibly have a basement filled with corpses, you keep your foot on the gas. If you want to find a roommate, I suggest a different tactic.

Sometimes you don't have a choice, though. Sometimes your girlfriend cheats on you after you live together for four years in a one room apartment with two cats and a smelly, fucking litter box about two months before she graduates from pharmacy school and buys a beautiful, three room home with her new \$100,000 starting salary. Yeah, sometimes that happens. And when this happens, you have to pray that you have a friend or acquaintance that just happens to need a roommate at that exact moment. And when that doesn't work out, you do everything you possibly can to avoid asking a family member for help so you don't have to deal with those pesky feelings of failure. This desperation is what leads me to Craig's List, which, if you'd only heard about it via the local news, you'd think was an exclusive club for murderers, prostitutes, and pedophiles.

I meet Meg and Bryan at a Subway on 12th and Alameda to talk about their three room duplex. Before I'm even 15 feet away from them, I know that these people are not made for society. They just have that look about them that says the only place they feel at home is in a darkened room with the comforting glow of a computer light bathing their faces in the technology that replaces things that horrify them, like human contact and sunshine. It's their posture. They're both slumped, but they somehow look jumpy at

the same time, like they're always expecting someone to throw a bucket of pig's blood on them, Carrie-style. They know humiliation and when they are exposed to surface dwellers, they're always kind of expecting it. I know that I should be hearing warning bells, but when I see them, I'm hoping that they're the kind of nerds that keep a clean house and leave their third roommate alone.

As I reach the table, Bryan looks up to stare at me, stopping in mid-chew but saying nothing. Meg cautiously offers, "Benjamin?"

"Yes, and you'd be Meg and Bryan?"

Bryan is north of 325 lbs. with glasses and black, thinning hair. Meg somehow manages to look like an adult and a gawky, 4th grade tomboy at the same time. She wears a hat with a severely curved bill over short brown hair, a baggy, black shirt, jeans, and glasses. She's skinny and her eyes are unsettlingly bulbous. I wonder how she could ever fail to see anything, glasses or not.

The introductions are basic; Meg is the mouthpiece of the duo, handling even the dispersion of Bryan's info. Bryan is a 24 year-old police dispatcher and Meg a 23 year-old student. I'm me, a 25 year-old sometimes-student, fantastic in almost every way, other than at completing life goals or having enough money not to live with weirdo strangers.

Bryan abruptly enters the conversation for the first time, albeit awkwardly, "We have a no dating roommates rule."

Meg looks uncomfortable and carefully says, "Well, it's not a rule so much as something that seems smart..." tailing off in a way that, to me, and maybe I'm reading too much into this, but to me, it seems like she's trying to keep her options open for possible future roommate romance without reneging on an earlier understanding she'd reached with Bryan.

Bryan looks at her, then at me and then back at her. He is getting the same vibe, I think. Suddenly the sandwich making process is fascinating to

me. I stare in the general direction of the 16 year-old sandwich artist.

Meg breaks the silence, “So do you have any questions for us?”

“All I really want to know is if you guys are filthy,” I say with an easy smile. “I’m by no means an overly tidy guy. I don’t own a feather duster or anything. But I’ve lived with a couple of different roommates who are disgusting. One of them had literally twelve different cups of tobacco spit spread throughout our apartment.”

Meg, as per usual, answers, “We keep the common areas clean because that’s just respectful. We do have two cats, and we change the litter box regularly. Our rooms can get a little out of control, but we’re pretty clean people.”

“I love cats,” I say, “so that won’t be a problem. Two cats in a three bedroom shouldn’t be too terrible smelling.”

“Nah, it’s not bad at all,” she says. We sit and stare at each other in silence for a second. “So, what do you think?” she asks, but it feels more like she’s saying, “I’ve made the decision for Bryan and myself that I want you to live with us. Now it’s your turn to judge us.”

I smile and think about how much I don’t want to have to ask anyone in my family for help. It’s something I’ve managed to avoid having done since high school. This place is about as much as I can afford at the moment, which isn’t a lot.

“Let’s take a look at the place and go from there.”

“Deal,” she says.

A week later, I’ve signed a yearlong lease.

The first sign that I might have made a mistake comes in the form of a question. “Do you mind if I call you Jamin (Jeh-min)?” Meg asks me. Perhaps this is her way of rebelling against being called “Meg” when she

secretly wants to be a “Gan”. I’ve been called an assortment of things that I’m not entirely comfortable with, ranging from “Benji” to “Been Jammin’”. There are a number of natural ways to shorten or spice up my name, but no one has ever hit on this new, hideously bad incarnation. Honestly, I have no idea what to say to this question.

“Um... I suppose. Whatever floats your boat.” It’s my fault I guess, but I don’t realize how much she wants to utilize this little creation of hers. Each time I pass by her, she says, “Hi, Jamin!”--even if I’m just going to the bathroom. After flushing, I have a “Bye, Jamin!” waiting for me on my way to my room.

Every. Single. Time.

She never lets an opportunity slip by. It’s like a psychological conditioning experiment wherein she’s picked the dumbest possible nickname to see how many times it takes her saying it before I break and start signing my checks “Jamin Siess”.

It’s been five weeks since I moved in. They have yet to wash a single dish. The fruit flies are loving life in our new home. The litter box is cleaned a maximum of every two weeks. Three more mammalian tenants have moved in, a ferret, a hamster and another cat, bringing the total to five and compounding the animal stench that already permeates the duplex. The ferret does not shit in the litter box. Apparently it is this ferret’s natural tendency to shit in corners. Like its owner’s refusal to miss a single opportunity to molest my name, this ferret leaves nary a corner free of turds.

“Hey Meg, I don’t know if you saw, but the ferret has pooped in the corner. Well, all of them, actually. Including the one in front of my door.”

“Oh okay, I’ll get to that.”

“Awesome,” I say, my eyes raised in manufactured excitement so as to try and convey to her how excited I am for there to be less ferret shit in my

life. I turn to leave and she says, “Bye, Jamin!” My back turned, I stop and grimace while biting my lip. I raise two fingers in reply and continue walking away.

Meg does not get to it. Ever. Meg and Bryan are seemingly okay with living in a house filled with feces. Filled to the brim. This is the feces house. I clean the corners nearest to my room, but I refuse to set the precedent of being the house-wide pooper scooper.

In the weeks that pass, my attempts to keep a somewhat placid demeanor dissolve. I repeatedly ask both of them to clean up the shit. I ask them to take care of the sink stink. I ask them to empty the litter box daily. They are nice when I ask them and always agree, but it never happens. I hang up fly traps, not just because I want the flies gone, but because I want a visual representation of how disgusting this is. After three days the four different traps have eighty bugs stuck to them, but this is just treating the symptoms. Their continued filth is an outright refusal to be decent humans to me, which turns my attitude to blatant surliness.

I pretty much never see this ferret. The only times are when it darts out from behind something to bite my lower extremities, because not only is its asshole out of control, it's an out-of-control asshole, biting anything that moves. One night Bryan watches the ferret try to attach itself to my calf while he sits on the couch snacking on his twenty piece chicken McNugget, the new, healthier, white meat recipe having reaped no visible benefits. I have zero desire to be a good roommate anymore. This is war now. I see the rodent coming, incisors bared, and misdirect the ferret's path from my ankle to the nearest wall, by um, nudging him in that direction with my foot. Okay fine, I kick the ferret. I say, “I swear to Christ, bite me again and I'll barbecue you just so I can have the pleasure of watching someone chew on you.” Bryan looks from me to his barbecue dipping sauce and correctly discerns who I'd choose for the chewing.

I hate this furry bastard.

A few months later, I'm getting some cereal downstairs when I feel two pairs of eyes intently watching me pour my milk. Because of my inward fury, I've stopped acknowledging my roommates except for a slight nod of the head at Meg's incessant, "Hi, Jamin!" But these stares are just uncomfortable enough to get a response out of me.

"Yes?"

"Loki died," says Meg.

"Who's Loki?"

"Our ferret."

I'm overcome with glee before realizing that a huge smile is not the correct response. I try to replace it with a grimace, and fail miserably.

"Oh, I'm sorry." I drop my head in faux sadness at the death of the creature who has been contributing to my having to live the white trash lifestyle. I wait as long as I can, which happens to be about two beats, before adding, "You won't be getting another, correct?"

"I can't even talk about this right now!" Meg yells at me, for the first time failing to address me as "Jamin".

"We don't have to talk about it. Just know I'm going to throw a hissy fit if you do get another," I calmly reply. I know I'm being insensitive, but I can't summon the good character to give a shit at the moment.

"You killed him, didn't you?" she says angrily. I see Bryan watching the situation intently, and I know he squealed on me for soccer balling Loki across the kitchen. He looks happy, like perhaps this is one less suitor that can take Meg away from him. He needn't worry.

I'm genuinely shocked. For a moment I have the ridiculous thought that maybe they found that rodent douchebag slathered in barbecue sauce, in which case I'd really have no defense.

I respond with, "..."

Meg glares at me, "..."

Bryan looks on smugly from the corner, "..."

"You're serious," I say.

"Yes, I'm fucking serious," she shouts back.

"Well then, no, Meg. As a matter of fact, I did not murder your pet."

The conversation lulls at this point, there seemingly not being a natural follow up after a homicidal accusation and subsequent denial between strangers who happen to live together. I sit down and finish my cereal before washing my bowl in what I can only hope is an instructional manner.

The house remains free of "Jamins", but another odorous ferret quickly replaces Loki. I just want to say here, in case anyone is in the dark regarding the biology of this particular sort of rodent, that ferrets are born with musk-producing anal sacs. I feel it should be generally accepted that animals with musk-filled sacs on their anus are not pets, but rather vermin. I'm not willing to budge on this point.

Meg and Bryan generally kept their doors open at all times in the past, but now they shut whenever mine opens and I hear the barely audible clicking of the lock as if they're well-to-do, upper-class white folks and I'm a black guy walking past them at a stoplight. When I walk into a room, they hold their pets to their chest. Neither Bryan nor Meg speaks to me again for the remaining six months of our lease. When the utilities check is due each month, a note is taped to my door. Much to my surprise, it is my roommates who think they have been paired up with a psycho killer via Craigslist.

When my lease runs out, I pack up all of my things and leave without a word to either of them, although I will admit to childishly placing one of Meg's library books underneath her couch. The potential of a maximum \$2.50 library fine brings me entirely too much joy.

I live alone now. I'm poor. Roommates make living inexpensive, but having to dodge shit every time I round a corner is no longer a tax I have to pay. It's completely worth it. I live in the cheapest apartment complex in Norman. I found it on Craigslist.

Brace Yourself

By Michelle Borrer

As he tilts the chair backwards, the orthodontist asks me if I am nervous. “No,” I reply. I am excited.

He reminds me that the procedure will take a few hours: “Go to your happy place.”

It is only too easy to follow his suggestion. While I am leaning back in a chair, with plastic keeping my mouth open and metal being glued to my teeth, I am far away, on a date with Damien Lynn.

I hear a knock at the door and my heart beats faster. I look across the table at my sister, and her smile is almost too big for her face. I imagine mine is the same: The boy I have been pining over is outside my door. All the time I have spent thinking about him, while only being seen as a friend, has not been wasted and has culminated into my first romantic entanglement. Even though this is only our first date, my head and heart are full of clichés: It is the beginning of the rest of our lives; we are meant to be.

I open the door, and he follows me into the kitchen so I can make my lunch. We are going to ride our bikes to my favorite park and eat. Damien waits patiently while I pack, talking to my sister and nephew. Then, my father walks into the living room and Damien’s entire body tenses. His face fills with terror—he is about to meet my father for the first time.

I laugh to myself because my father is consumed by a television program and hasn’t even realized Damien is there. But Damien is on alert, no doubt overthinking the situation—could my father be trying to intimidate him by ignoring him? He stays across the room from my father, unsure, so I

yell for my father to come meet my new boyfriend.

My father looks up quickly from his recliner and laughs, before becoming apologetic.

“I’m sorry, I didn’t even see you!”

Damien’s body relaxes at the sincerity in my father’s voice and walks over to shake his hand. I smile at his unnecessary apprehension, all the while trying to suppress my own. My father brings up the subject of college, and Damien confirms he is leaving in one week. My stomach drops, and I try to stifle my reaction. With the reminder that we only have so much time, we say our goodbyes.

Once outside, I abandon my worries about the future and soak in the August sun. We ride our bikes, talking and laughing as we lazily pedal. We race down one street, and on another see who can pedal farther without using their hands. We stop at a park and eat lunch—peanut butter sandwiches and carrots. Afterwards, we walk hand in hand down the park trails.

I try to memorize the feel of his hand, for when I can’t hold it every day. I wish that we would have realized our feelings sooner, but Damien feels otherwise.

“Everyone should be friends before they start a relationship. This is the way it’s meant to be.”

My mind is once more filled with euphoria, satisfied with the here and now, and we take shade underneath a tree. We spend hours lying beside one another, talking and not talking, staring in each other’s eyes. I am sweaty and devoid of make-up, and he tells me that I am beautiful. No one has ever called me beautiful before. No one has ever looked at me the way he is looking at me, or leaned close to me and kissed me like he is doing. I feel as if I am dreaming. My brain is floating somewhere where thoughts are not necessary, where only hearts and lips and hands feel. Cool grass, and cool shade; hot breath, and hot sun.

The orthodontic assistant laughs at the expression on my face. “That was a good happy place,” she jokes.

They are finished; my mouth feels like it is on fire. If I put my hand to my face, I can feel August heat rising from it. The assistant hands me a mirror, and I look at my braces for the first time. Aside from the discomfort, I like them. The blue bands around them match my eyes, and it’s almost like I have a new accessory.

I call Damien as soon as I get home. My mouth is sore, so there isn’t a lot I want to eat. He informs me he wants to be the first person to take me for ice cream. After we set a date, I call my other friends. They give advice ranging from “Always carry a toothbrush” to “Don’t get your braces stuck on the carpet.” I laugh off the latter advice, though the friend assures me it is practical.

I wear make-up to go get ice cream. It feels more critical, like a serious date. This is the last time I will see Damien before he goes to school. I need him to remember me at my best.

As always, Damien does not obey the speed limit, though it seems nature does want us to slow the pace when we make it to Braum’s: the parking lot is full of senior citizens. We walk inside and realize we are the only customers under the age of 60. We laugh to ourselves as we order. The coldness of the ice cream momentarily soothes the ache of my new braces, but I should have foregone the extra M&Ms. I can only chew so many before I give up. The ice cream does even less for the cloud hanging over us, but we try to fight it off, choosing which old person we want to be when we are that age. Damien wants to be the man with giant glasses and a pipe; I will be the lady with a knitted purse and plastic woven hat.

After finishing, we want to spend more time together. We drive to our old elementary school playground and park. Damien reaches into the backseat and reveals a zebra-striped gift bag for me. Tomorrow I turn sixteen, and he leaves for college. I rifle through the green tissue paper and

am elated to find a Mr. Potato Head in the costume of Darth Vader. I lean over to give Damien a thank you hug when he tells me there is more.

Curious, I look deeper into the bag. Stacked neatly at the bottom are several labeled envelopes—Day 1, Day 2, Day 3, all the way to Day Whatever. I look at him to elaborate.

“They’re letters. I’ve been writing them to you all summer.”

My heart beats faster as I read the words on the envelopes again. He has been writing these letters since the beginning of the summer. I want to punch myself for the time wasted, but I am so overwhelmed. For the first time, I am truly happy; I feel adored. I have never had a boy declare his feelings for me, and now I have one that will do so in writing. These are love letters I am holding--my mind can hardly wrap around it!--Love letters to me. And he has been writing them for months.

He tells me to read them when I get home, so I tuck my gifts safely back into the bag. We spend the afternoon roaming around the elementary school yard, reminiscing and realizing how long we went to school together and never knew. He shows me a pole he ran into while playing soccer—the mark is still there. I tell him how I wasn’t tall enough to reach the glider, and someone always had to hoist me. We bide our time until the inevitable; we say goodbye. I don’t cry because I know everything will work out. I know because I have his letters to remind me.

In my room, I will pour over them, full of wonder, and then hide them from all other eyes. My sisters will inform me of their desire to sniff them out, but they are for my eyes alone. I will only allow myself to indulge in reading them a few times a week. When Damien begins calling less often, I will cry over them. When he breaks up with me, Labor Day weekend, I will read them one last time, making sure to keep them free of tears, before burying them in my bottom drawer. They will burn in the back of my mind, taunting me, until I finally throw them away. Years later, I will wish I had kept them.

But this sad future seems not of the merest possibility to my teenage sensibilities; the distance between us is not impractical, but instead is a romantic struggle that will make life worthwhile. I now shed the life of a boring, boyfriendless girl and emerge from summer exciting and interesting—I have a college boyfriend. And though we will be tested by physical separation, phone calls and e-mails will carry us through. I have yearned silently for so long and have finally gotten my heart's desire. Everything will work out. We are perfect for each other; we are meant to be.

I tuck the letters into a pillow, hide my face in my bed and smile. When I try to sit back up, I realize my braces are stuck to my futon.

Preschool or: The Inevitable Path Toward the Systematic Destruction of the Human Mind

By David Mercer

I approached the building with a sense of dread. To my young mind it seemed like a tower, a massive structure of absurd proportion. My mother carelessly waved and shouted that she would see me later. She sped off before I had time to ask exactly when “later” was. Did she mean later today? Tomorrow? Next week? After I’d grown up? When? Maybe this was just a trick and she would be back in a few moments. I waited for several minutes, but she didn’t return. I gave up and anxiously stepped closer to the fortress. With growing fear I opened the door and entered.

Once inside, I was immediately overwhelmed by the lack of direction I was receiving. I didn’t know where I was or why I was there. I’d never wanted to be there, so why was I there? I’d asked my parents many times why this “school” was so important, but they never gave me a reason. They only said, “Everybody has to go to school. You don’t have a choice.” When I asked who did have a choice, they claimed, “Nobody. It’s just the way things are.” I didn’t understand what they meant, someone had to have decided on this. If it was so important, shouldn’t it have a reason for being so? The realization that some nameless entity was to rule my life was off-putting, and I wondered why anyone would let such a thing happen. I soon realized, however, that I couldn’t do anything to change it. I was only a child, and one of countless others with no voice. What could I have done?

After my mind finished wandering, I looked around to find someone

who might be able to guide me to my destination. I walked into a nearby room in which I saw some adults discussing whatever it is they were talking about. Apparently, my walking into the room was an intrusion. One of them asked who I was. I told them that my name was David. They asked what I was looking for. While I was trying to formulate a response, since I didn't know what I was looking for, one of them groaned and asked, "Are you here to start school?" I replied, "Yeah." She told me to follow her. I reluctantly complied, and was led to my first classroom.

The room was filled with children, no doubt also against their will. The hideous old woman at the head of the room pointed to a vacant seat toward the back of the room and growled, "Are you David?"

I answered, "Yes."

"You can sit over there." The scorn in her voice choked me a little. I walked through the room to the empty seat, taking in the searing stares of the children along the way. I considered what they might have been thinking. Did they welcome my arrival? Were they repulsed by my late entrance? It was difficult to tell because their faces seemed so lifeless, as if their souls had been stolen.

After I sat, there were a few seconds of silence which felt disproportionately long, as I waited for someone to do or say something. The old woman broke the silence with an announcement that it was time for the Pledge of Allegiance. The children rose, like slaves, to the misplaced authority of their self-proclaimed master, and placed their hands on their chests. I remained seated, for a couple of reasons. First, I didn't know what everyone was doing; I'd never heard of this strange phenomenon. Second, I'd been given no reason to comply with this unusual command. The woman leered at me with a hatred I'd never seen before. "Stand up, David." She spoke with contempt only attainable by lunatics and psychopaths. When I asked why, I was told to go to "The Office."

I exited the classroom, not having asked where the office was for fear of

eternal damnation. I wandered for a moment, exploring the dungeon. It was the largest building I had ever seen in my still short life. I soon decided that I would just sit in a hallway and enjoy the surroundings for a moment. I watched as a few adults passed, some of them looking at me with the confused expressions of idiots. Eventually, one of them came up to me, and I recognized her as one of the people from the first room I entered after setting foot in that place. She asked why I was there and I replied, "I was supposed to go to the office, but I couldn't find it." With an exasperated sigh, she said, "Okay, come on."

She led me through the corridors of the place, not saying a word. When we finally got to the office, all she said was, "Well, go ahead." I went in and walked up to the desk. The person behind it inattentively asked what I wanted. I told her that I was sent for not standing when everyone else did. It must have been a terrible inconvenience for her to do anything, because all she said was, "Go back to class." So I made my way back to class, unenthusiastically anticipating what might happen next. Would I be scowled at? Would the class be as it was when I first entered? I had no idea.

When I walked back into the room, the children were cutting pieces of colored paper and gluing them to paper of various other colors. I went back to the empty seat and watched them for a few seconds before being interrupted by the old woman. "Get some paper from over there, some glue from over there, and some scissors from over here." I fetched the materials and returned to my seat. Since she hadn't told me what to do with these things, I just did what the other children were doing. The process seemed arbitrary and pointless, but I had nothing else to do anyway.

Soon I ended up wondering how this busy work could possibly be important. I never saw anyone important cutting paper and gluing it to form meaningless shapes. Even more elusive was the reason why I couldn't just do this at home, or anywhere else. Another thing that bothered me was that the other children seemed perfectly content with all of this. I continued with it, though, if for no other reason than to help alleviate my boredom.

After what seemed like an inappropriately long amount of time, the old woman instructed everyone to stop. It was “Nap Time” apparently. The thought of sleeping in a room full of strangers was unpleasant, and I had no intention of doing it. To save myself the trouble of being sent away a second time, I pretended to sleep. As I got on the floor, I was sickened by the idea even more, as the situation became all too real. I felt my mind writhing with abhorrence at this travesty. Why were they doing this? Why were they treating us as subhuman beasts that didn’t deserve life? Were we deformities that didn’t belong in the outside world? Why?

After forty-five minutes of mind-racking terror, we were called upon to rise. We gathered ourselves and found our seats. Our next task was to color black and white pictures in books, which, being another menial task, disappointed me. I feared that if I continued these mind-numbing rituals for much longer, I might not make it out alive. I was trapped, and time just kept getting slower. Every scathing minute was inordinately longer than the last. The assignment continued for an unspecified amount of time. I desperately wished that it would end soon.

After being shaken almost to my last nerve, that decrepit old woman, that disgusting bag of hatred that the most morbid of people would detest, finally declared that it was time to clean up. As the children carefully put away their materials and gave their projects to the old woman, I saw some of their parents walk in and greet them. They ran up to their mothers and fathers and hugged them in gratitude for rescuing them from the prison. Once I was through putting away my work, I anxiously awaited my mother. One by one I watched them leave, until I was the only remaining child. Having waited for what seemed to be a lifetime, I feared she would never show up.

She did show up, finally, but not before plenty of staring from the old woman. Once my mother arrived, I asked what took so long, and to my horror, she told me that she almost forgot to pick me up in the first place. I asked why, but then she said she was only joking. I was offended by the joke, but I let it pass, because all that mattered was that I was out of that place.

I remarked in a relieved tone, “I hope I never have to go there again.” To which my mother replied, “You do. You have to go every day from now on.” My mind was instantaneously permeated by unadulterated fear. My free life had ended.

A Life of Purpose

By Andrea J. Kern

It is a typical cold evening in North Carolina. The sky is overcast with intermittent showers. The wind is not blowing; it is just plain dreary. All I want to do is get home from work and crawl into my nice warm bed, but it is not going to happen today. I made a promise, and I am going to keep it.

My brother, Jeff, is twenty-four years old and is two years older than me. He has Down's Syndrome. He always has a smile on his face, has never met a stranger, and has no enemies. He is always happy and eager to go on whatever adventure someone will take him on. It takes a lot of patience to have Jeff in our family, but he gives even more than he takes. Taking care of Jeff is never thought of as a chore, and everyone always takes care of Jeff.

As I pull into the driveway, I see him waiting patiently for me at the front. He is dressed in his best blue jeans and button down white shirt. His dark hair is brushed and parted to the side, the way he fixes his hair for church. I can see his wallet in his hand and his face brightens with a large smile as he sees my car pull into the driveway. As I jump out of my car, it starts pouring rain again. I run across the driveway strategically, trying to miss the puddles of rain in our dirt driveway. I am wearing high heels and stockings. Running through the mud, I feel the cold slush creep in around my toes. "Damn!" I curse and immediately feel bad as I see his face right in front of me as he holds the door. To him, I can do no wrong. He loves me regardless of any faults that I may have. "Mud in shoes, Purly? I fix." He says as he reaches for my shoes. I tell him that is ok; it can wait. He is always trying to take care of his "baby sister".

Today, I am taking Jeff Christmas shopping for Mommy, and he is excited. He's been saving money here and there for a while to buy Mommy a present. I change clothes, and off we go on our adventure called "Christmas Shopping at the mall two weeks before Christmas". We walk through store after store, looking for that ever elusive perfect Christmas gift. After walking through a mall for two hours, I realize that I have not eaten since lunchtime. It is around 8:00, and I am as hungry as a horse. As we are walking to the car, I ask Jeff if he is hungry. He says, "Now, yeah. Purly, me have Taco Bell, now?" Jeff is asking for his favorite, Taco Bell. He asks me what he can get, and I tell him anything he wants. He looks at me and says, "Any?" I say, "Yes, Buddy, anything." He starts shaking his hands, which is how he shows that he is excited.

We order our food, find a seat and begin our meal. Halfway through eating our food, I notice four boys about thirteen years old walk in with skate boards. I ask Jeff to get up and get me a napkin. As I reach down for my taco, I hear a giggle to my left and look up. I notice that one of the boys is making faces. At first, I am not sure what he is doing; however, as I watch him, I notice that he and the other three boys are watching Jeff. As the scene unfolds, my heart breaks for my brother, and my first reaction is to cry. I look at Jeff and see that he is oblivious to what is going on around him, and I decide that it is best to just leave before anything else happens. I start to clean up my tray and ask Jeff if he is done. Jeff says, "Yeah, now, Purly." He picks up the tray for me and starts to walk to the trash can. Thinking that the boys will stop if they see an adult walking with Jeff, I walk with him. However, I am wrong. Their taunts only get louder. As I am walking, I look around the restaurant and see that it is crowded. I try to control my rage, but as the taunts continue, I lose my temper. The thought that keeps running through my head is, "You always take care of Jeff."

Jeff, still oblivious to what is going on, proceeds to the trash can while I walk over to the line where the boys are standing and confront them, "Who do you think you are picking on someone like him?" Everything in

the crowded restaurant comes to a grinding halt as the patrons watch me tear into these boys. One of the boys shakes his head and protests that he was not picking on anyone. "Don't tell me you weren't picking on him. I watched you from the moment you walked in the door. That person that you are picking on is my big brother. If you think that I am going to stand quietly by while you pick on him, you are sadly mistaken. You may see someone who is different than you or someone that is weaker than you, but he is a hell of a lot stronger and a better person than you will ever be in your entire life. Do you think it's cool to pick on someone that you think is less of a person than you? Do you feel big and bad? Do feel like more of a person? How about picking on someone your own size? Try picking on me. Or are you too scared? How about I follow you home and tell your parents how you spent the evening?" At this point, everyone in the restaurant is either standing or sitting with their mouths gaping open. As I walk towards the door, I grab my brother's hand, and I can hear applause start across the restaurant. I walk out the door with my brother.

After we get outside, my brother stops me and says, "Purly, boys pick on Jeff?" I answer, "Yes, Buddy, they were picking on you." He asks, "Why boys pick on Buddy?" At that moment, I realize that Jeff does not realize that he is different than everyone else. I say, "Jeff, you are different and some people pick on people that are different." He looks astonished, "Buddy, different? How?" To which I reply, "You are special, Jeff. Some people get jealous of people that are special." He simply says, "Aww, you take up for Buddy when mean people pick on him? Thank you, Purly." When he says that, I start tearing up and decide that those boys are going to apologize. I grab Jeff's hand and march back into Taco Bell. The boys are standing closer to the door by this time, and I demand an apology. One of the boys says, "Hey, I'm sorry." I say, "Not to me. You tell him. His name is Jeff. You also need to tell him what you are sorry for." He says, "Jeff, I'm sorry for picking on you." Jeff replies, "OK, you my best friend, now, ok?"

Fifteen years pass, and I have a daughter of my own. I could go on and on about the many lessons that my family has learned from living with Jeff; but this would turn into a book. I can say this; Jeff's life has always been a blessing to us and never a chore. Living with him has left a legacy within our family--unconditional love, unconditional forgiveness and unconditional understanding. I try and teach these lessons to my daughter Anna every day. I teach her that it is not acceptable to pick on people for any reason. Anna is raised around my brother and taught to treat him and people like him with respect. I also teach her how to help people like Jeff and help others understand people like Jeff.

Anna's exposure to individuals with Down's Syndrome allowed her to help a fellow student with Down's Syndrome who was mainstreamed in her second grade class. The little girl's name was Ana. The teacher tried for about twenty minutes to get her to do some class work. Ana was getting frustrated and threw her pencil in the floor. My Anna kept raising her hand. The teacher told her to put her hand down. She would come and help her next. Anna told the teacher, "But you are doing it wrong. I can help her." Anna got up from her desk and sat down next to the girl. Within five minutes, Ana calmed down and was doing the work that the teacher tried unsuccessfully to get her to do. After class, the teacher asked Anna how she knew how to calm Ana down and help her do her work. Anna informed the teacher that her uncle was "the same as" Ana. Because I've taught Anna how to work with Jeff, she was able to assist the girl in her class.

When my husband and I ask Anna what she wants to be when she grows up, she says that she wants to be a teacher so that she can help people like her Uncle Jeff. Through the eyes of an adult and the heart of a child, Jeff's legacy to our family is to forgive wholly, forget completely, love and respect unconditionally. We should all be so blessed to have a soul as pure as his. Jeff's life has created a purpose for a little girl and left a legacy for an entire family.

The Weight of Everything

By Jack LePlante

The ghost speaks as I enter the kitchen. “Your dog tried bringing in a dead squirrel today; Suzie had to chase him out with it. Then I caught him with a dove, didn’t kill it just broke its wing. It’s out there if you want to see it. I made it a cage.” I am a master at listening to what he says without acknowledging his presence. I grip my robe tighter, and drag my house shoes across the red brick floor out the back door. Spring is sprung, and the grass is green. Darby, the resident dachshund, wags his tail as he stares up at the gray animal kennel sitting on our patio table. Darby turns and stares up at me as I make my way over to the table. His eyes lower and his head begins to cower, showing remorse for his actions.

“Get away from there, you little shit,” I say. His tail wags as he rolls over on his back, hoping for absolution from me. I rub his little black belly as he wiggles side to side, mouth open; his remorse is rubbed off in the grass. “You know better,” I say without much conviction. A parent’s guilt trip, I say it half hoping next time he will know better, that something in his instinctual animal mind will remember my words and he will think twice when he decides to try and kill another animal. I don’t believe the words as they leave my mouth; instinct is ingrained in him. He is a hunter, and the older he gets the more he grows into himself.

As much as I miss the defenseless puppy he used to be, I know that there are some things you shouldn’t try and change in animals, some lessons that can’t be taught or pieces that shouldn’t be broken. I love him for who he is, a killer weenie dog, whose favorite pastimes are belly rubs and cuddling up with me for a nap after I get off work. As he gets back up on all four paws he stares up, shifting focus between the pet carrier and me. “Get out of here.”

He hesitates. I snap my fingers and point to the open door and he bolts, off to find another adventure.

The cage is dark. I lean over to take a look at the ghost's patient. The dove isn't what I expect it to be. Instead of a pristine white symbol of peace, its feathers are a mix of grey, white, and a light black. It stares at me from the back left corner of the cage. Its eyes are focused on me, in spite, probably at being roughed up and locked up for the festively fertile holiday. I try and link symbolism or superstitions with finding a dove in this kind of shape on Easter. Nothing comes to mind. It's just another unwilling guest in this household. I think to let this bird go free, open the cage and send it on its way before Darby comes back. The dove's chances of survival are slim, but higher if free. Cages are known to kill wild things, and the criss-cross wire metal mesh on the door of the kennel reminds me of the small windows on the doors in the county jail.

I sense the ghost's presence in the doorway. My muscles and teeth clench, more out of habit than anything. Like always, he will speak and I will have no choice but to listen. "I pulled up some grass to make him a bed that will keep him warm. I'm toasting some bread so he'll have something to eat. He's lucky I found him when I did; a broken arm could have been the least of his problems." Darby stands at the ghost's feet, his jaws anxious to taste the bird once more. "I figure I'll nurse him back to health again, just until his wing is better and he can fly again. I've seen two doves flying around, they must be mates, and this one must be the girl." I continue to stare into the bird's eyes, finding all the truth of its life that I need. "I'm going to jump in the shower," I reply, and flee from the scene.

I slip the small worn disc into the CD player in the bathroom and wait for it to be read. My eyes automatically avert from my naked reflection in the mirror. Today I don't feel like criticizing how I look. Instead I begin to program tracks and make a playlist for the shower. Programming five tracks off of the Evelyn Evelyn CD, I turn on the hot water and get my shower ready. When the water hits my skin, I feel my flesh instantly relax.

My aching muscles waver under the stream of rushing hot water, my skin changes color, my pale white shoulders become the color of a lobster as I simply stand there taking the water's rhythmic beating against my body.

I feel a break somewhere inside of me. Whether it's from my job, or it's the holiday I can't tell just yet. I can only mentally trace my attention along the crack in myself and take guesses as to where the rush of emotion is coming from. I think of all the people I've lost along the way to get here, to this very moment. My parents' deaths, all the random boys, while some comrades, some were also lovers, and I'd stopped denying that. I feel the weight of everything on my shoulders, and as the music plays I feel the tears slip out here, the only place I feel safe to cry.

I am not a crier. My bouts of weakness have been coming more and more in private, which could be a sign of something I'm not sure I'm ready for. I'd asked for this for years, to be in touch with my emotions, to control and accept how I feel in the great scheme of things. After my parents died, I managed to escape by burying these feelings deep inside my soul. Yet here I am, bawling like a baby, wondering at twenty-one when everything in my life went horribly wrong. Something inside of me wants answers, wants resolution to the questions I've been asking ever since the family trip we took in '97, when we left sunny California in venture of this flat Oklahoma reclusion. There is no true way to ask the dead of their motives during their lives, no way of tracing back the thought processes and inspirations for the ideas responsible in altering the very destiny of your life. I trace the straight-edged lines that razors left on my outer thighs so long ago, and continue to explore this pain I feel.

It's because my parents left me here. It's because holidays don't feel the same without them. It's because he doesn't love me back, and the only thing I can imagine him doing right now is introducing his new girlfriend to his family, smiles on everyone's faces. I'm losing it because I don't know where I want to go, what I want to do, who I want to be. Am I normal? Crazy? Sane? My two-week stint in the mental institution was a nightmare; I

was a captive of fluorescent lighting and the lies I was telling. I wanted out. Not to be better, just out, in the world, to breathe. She has done this to me, Oklahoma. She is vicious when she wants to be, not to mention her children. The ass backwards mentality of conditional love is everywhere and I feel like if I want to be myself, it won't be okay. Who I am is not okay, and the only people who didn't believe that were the ones I put in the ground.

I take my washrag and begin to wash these thoughts from my skin. I start from my neck and work my way down, making sure every square inch is lathered up, before rinsing it all off and down the drain. My tears have subsided, and the playlist is coming to a close. As my mental crack begins to close I feel a little part of me slip out before the break completely vanishes again and I watch it as it's washed down the drain. My family, my tears, that little piece, my answers, all slip away, unresolved. The hardest thing in life is accepting it; accepting that not everything has an answer and that some things in this world just are. I'm back to feeling empty, apathetic. Another Easter practically gone.

Slipping my robe back around me, I stare into my own reflection. The dark circles under my eyes, my own hard stare, home is taking a toll on me I can feel it. Another year is going to pass, and I can't shake the feeling that I won't make it through alive. I'm afraid to die. I'm afraid to live. So I just am. I brush my teeth and wonder if this feeling will last forever. I wonder if this role and these grandiose ideas in my head are a product of hope, insanity, or intuition. I want to be somebody, loved by somebody, found by somebody. I want so much from life. As I spit out the toothpaste, the music stops. Ten seconds of silence pass, almost too much for me to bear. I gather my clothes and the CD and run across the hall to my room.

In my room, I begin to send texts to my friends like fishing lures with hopes that someone will bite. I doubt anyone will because it's a holiday and usually everyone's spending time with families. I check my face in the mirror to see if anything's out of place due to my shower session, but everything's in order and I do something I usually regret seconds after the statement is

made. I open my door and step over to the living room couch where the ghost and my grandmother sit, the television glow reflecting off of their glasses. “Hey, you guys want to go to dinner?”

What Children Hear When Adults Talk or What I Learned in Sunday School

By Abigail Wiseman

I love my church, and I want to show it. I go to the Intercession Room where the adults pray over the sermon-to-come before the service. They need me there because I know how to pray, and I am the only child there. At my church, children are held up as examples because we are innocent, we trust better, and we can hear God better than adults. I sometimes wonder what happens to adults that makes them less innocent than before, but I'm only twelve, so I don't know yet. We pray for our church service, but we also pray for the world. Sometimes we pray for a specific part of our city, and sometimes for a whole continent. I never hear anyone pray for a specific person by name. It's because praying for specific people is selfish. I know that if I were to only pray for people that I know, I would never get to know anyone else, and neither would God. So we pray over large groups of people instead of individual people that we know.

I spend a lot of time in the Intercession Room before the service, but I have nowhere to go after the service. My mom is always talking to someone-or-other, and she brushes me off. What can I do? I see some people I recognize from the Intercession Room. I skip over, but they act like stone – they are crowded around someone who is sobbing. A murmuring voice rises in volume, and I realize that they are praying. I want to do it, too. I hesitantly raise my hands in prayer. I feel stupid just standing there with my hands raised, but I've been told that my presence is a comfort in and of itself. I decide to stay there until my arms start hurting.

A few weeks later, I'm in the Intercession Room, looking around for a group I can join in prayer. After checking twice, I see no one. Well, being lonely is no excuse for not praying for someone in need. I shuffle over to a woman bowing over the floor. She looks needy. But what can I do alone? Children are supposed to be better at hearing God than adults are, but now that I think about it, I can't really tell one way or the other. I'm only twelve, after all, and the wisdom and knowledge that I need right now are supposed to come with age. I nervously slip my hand into the hand of a crying woman, trying to console her through my touch. Maybe the childlike action will be comforting simply because it is childlike. She looks up at me and I try to smile encouragingly, but I don't think it's really working. She chokes on a sob, but she is smiling back at me. Maybe I'm better at loving on people than I thought I was.

I decide to comfort people regularly. After the sermon, I comfort some of the weeping, prostrate people in the front. I pray for the people I comfort, too, but I'm a little afraid of saying something wrong. I think that maybe I am afraid for nothing. It's easier to speak up in the Intercession Room, I think. And then there's a woman at the microphone, speaking about something. I haven't been listening. She finishes, and my mom is all excited. "Did you hear that, Abi?" my mom says. "She said she was inspired by a kid in Intercession. It must be you!" I decide that I should try speaking to people more. Maybe praying over people is something that I can do to express my love for them.

I have been praying for people for a few months now. I am almost used to the thrill. I'm still a little afraid that I'll say something wrong, but I make my prayers ambiguous enough so that it won't matter. I am almost bored. There must be something new and scary that I can do to show my church how much I love them, I think. If I'm scared, that makes me courageous, right?

I know what I want to try next. Last week, I saw a woman give several messages over the microphone, before the ending worship. I want

to know what it takes to do that. I pick a person, a guy, and decide what I'm going to say. I am ready to try. I find an adult that I recognize as a leader and ask if I can.

"Why don't you tell me first?" the adult in charge says.

He's not going to let me, I realize. He's going to think it's a stupid message. "It's only for him," I reply, pointing. That man won't think it's stupid because the message is for him. Belatedly, I realize that if I say it over the microphone, everyone will hear the message. Oh well, I'm new to this whole thing, anyway. I can get better.

"But it might not be right," the adult says.

I am taken aback. Of course it's right. I'm a child, so I can hear God better because I'm innocent.

"What if it hurts him?" the adult presses.

I pause. What if it hurts him? I didn't ever think of that before. How could that even be possible? I go over my bases. God is omniscient, and I'm better at hearing God, because I'm only twelve. I won't hurt him, because I love him, and God loves him, too. I say so.

"There's no way to know if it will hurt him or not," says the adult, turning me away. "Perhaps the message was just for you." I walk away, a little angry. I still won't get to tell the guy his message? I don't understand. If God loves him, and I can hear God, and I love him, then what doesn't check out? Could it be possible to hurt the people that you love without knowing it? I decide that must be it, because God can't take any blame (since He's perfect), and I certainly didn't mean any harm.

But, that can't be it, I reason. Because if you could hurt people without knowing it, then surely someone would tell you that they were hurt by you, right? I realize that I don't want it to be possible. Suddenly, figuring out the logic behind unknowingly hurting people becomes a matter of pride.

I de-personalize it, so as to be impartial to my own feelings. Both God and I love the recipient of the message. God is perfect, and so He can do no wrong. I can hear God, because I am a child. Where's the gap? Could it be that God sometimes gives messages about someone, but for someone else? Have I ever thought, Who is this message for? No, I just assume that the messages I get are for the person they concern. So... yes, it's possible to hurt someone that you love, if you're not paying attention. It's possible for me to hurt someone that I love.

As I reexamine my logic, I realize that I've wanted to help many more people than just that man. I am horrified. I think back and remember every person I've helped, every person I've prayed for. It is difficult to remember their faces. I hadn't hurt them, had I? But I don't know or even remember them, and so it's impossible to know if I hurt them. How many people have I been hurting? Self-doubt sneaks back in. How much do I actually help at all? It's possible that I actually hurt all of them, I think, staring at the floor.

"I... hurt people," I murmur to myself, feeling tears well up around my eyes. "I hurt people that I love."

The Bright Side of Christmas

By Stephanie Woodard

It is a heavy task to be your child's hero. Heck, it's hard to simply make yourself likeable a lot of the time. I was not ready for a child, and I always assumed that I'd be adequate at best as a parent. Nonetheless, Mary came along, and I loved her very much. I didn't know what I was doing, even more so than normal first-time parents. I was clumsy and often unacceptably unconventional (to "normal" parents, at least). Somehow, though, I slogged along, remembering that Mary was my Number One priority and hoping that actions borne of love would triumph over my clumsy childrearing.

There were many lean years. We tried to make that a natural, shame-free part of our family. I taught her comparison shopping at the grocery store and bargain shopping at Goodwill. Still, holidays were hard. We learned to improvise a lot, letting go of common conventions dictating the proper manner or day for celebration. That worked well until we got to Christmas. If there is one place you desperately want to preserve the magic for your child, it's Christmas. The Christmas of 2001 would be different, though.

Our general financial woes were worsened by my unemployment and my husband Zack's new, poorly-paying call center job. As Christmas neared, we had the painful realization that there would be very little money for the holiday. Now, don't get me wrong. We know all about and cherish the spirit of the season and value good company over anything material. We are not religious, though, so the more traditional aspects of the holiday tend to offer a quaint structure to the festivities rather than a holy celebration. Plus, if we are heathens and terrible people for enjoying a few gifts and the traditional holiday trimmings, then so be it. That's what we do, and somehow we had to be creative in our poorest year ever.

We scraped together a small amount for the whole shindig. Zack and I chose to forego our presents to make sure there was a good Christmas Day dinner and, of course, something special under the tree for the only person who really mattered. We chose to go for the single amazing gift rather than a couple of smaller ones. It felt like we had just taken a mortgage out on a house when we bought the video game she wanted so badly. That left very little for the dinner and an especially creative trip to the dollar store for stocking stuffers (because if there is one absolute tradition that was handed down from my mother, it's the grab-bag excitement of a full stocking). We were satisfied with our modest offering. Wrapping paper was another luxury, so I fished out some old tissue paper. It made our treasure look much less dazzling, but maybe that would be for the best. Mary was still in the "peeking at the presents" phase, and I hoped it was ugly enough to be ignored until the right time. I felt triumphant as I picked up the sad-looking thing and went to place it under our lovely Christmas tree.

The Christmas tree! Oh, dear God. There was no tree! Right behind the love of each other and the excitement of the stocking is the Christmas tree. It had to be there. It might be one of those sad Charlie Brown things, but there needs to be a tree. Every year, we get together and make our gaudy, loving ornaments and proudly hang them on our awkwardly-placed Christmas tree. We revel in the large piece of nature we get for a small time, despite the ridiculous ascension up the three flights of stairs, feet full of crispy needles, and cats racing to see who can pull the tree down first. Many years, I don't even recall many specifics of Christmas. However, I always remember the Christmas tree.

I felt like a failure having to explain to Mary that there would be no tree. It seemed I was denying her one of the basic joys of life. She is such a kind child, almost unspoiled to a fault. Her favorite thing to say is "Look on the bright side!" no matter how disappointing the situation may be. So, I tried to smile when giving her the news.

“Mary, this year is going to be a little different. We wanted to make sure you had a good present, so we got you something really cool. We’re going to decorate another way, though. Can you help me hang up some garland and make some decorations?”

“We always do that, Momma.”

Yeah, we do. So, now I needed to sell it. “Well, I was thinking it would be neat to hang our ornaments from the garland.”

Her eyes sank. “But what will we put on the tree?”

That was when I had to break the news. There was sadness and even some fear in her eyes, like she knew this was too different. Much of our life had been transitory and makeshift up to that point, and moving this piece of bedrock clearly frightened her.

She wanted to cry. You could see it in her eyes. Then, after a painful moment, she looked up. “Well, look on the bright side!” She then proceeded to tell me all of the neat things we were going to do, almost as if she was comforting me instead of the other way around. That was backward, but I was just happy there was some comforting going on in any form. Both of us were disappointed, but we put on our faces and gamely marched forward.

Christmas Eve arrived. In all the fuss, we somehow forgot about the gift from Santa. Although we suspected Mary already knew the truth, this was not the year to go breaking any more fantasies. Zack scraped a small portion off of the paycheck he just received. I trekked out to the vulgar insanity that is Target at 5pm on Christmas Eve. I just wanted a simple box of LEGOs. That seemed like something Santa would have the taste to deliver.

When I finally made it home two hours later, Mary was running through the apartment, singing carols and sticking more decorations on the wall. Christmas is so exciting for the young. Before I could make it three paces in, she was begging to open her gift now. She darted to the dining

room table, where a ring of tinsel encircled our simple offering and a few other presents donated by family to be given in our name. Mary wanted to open our gift first, which made us proud. Since she wasn't expecting our gift, I anticipated it to be a major, delicious surprise. She shook the box and proclaimed, "I know what this is! City of Heroes!" She then proceeded to show us how she had pressed the tissue paper to the box and read the label. Sigh. No surprise there. Nonetheless, she gleefully dragged Dad to the computer, where he installed the game. They played it almost non-stop for weeks. She was happy. That was all that mattered.

It wasn't, though. I knew I had let my kiddo down. There was a nice afterglow for a while, as the stress of the holiday ended and life returned to normal. Then Mary went back to school. Few things bring out the braggart in a kid more than post-Christmas gift comparisons. Mary was the token scholarship child at a ritzy private school. She came home after that first day back with fantastic stories of her classmates' booty. Then, more crushingly, she said they didn't understand why she didn't get more. She tried to explain and defend her inadequate haul. She told them about our time spent making ornaments and decorating the walls. But where was the tree, they asked. She was able to handle the sting of fewer and more modest presents, but not having a tree still made her sad. She told them we couldn't afford one. They couldn't comprehend that. Despite our efforts, she was bitterly reminded that there are haves and have-nots in this world, with her firmly in the second group. My heart broke.

Life went on, though. The next few weeks put the holidays mostly in the rearview mirror. Day by day, ripped-up wrapping paper and holly that had outlived its usefulness were thrown away. The trash dumpster began to look like a final, bulging Christmas present. Passing it every day became a source of amusement to us. Mary and I would sometimes notice a glittery decoration or pretty bow waving out its side and consider retrieving it. We aren't above dumpster diving. Shame over such things is for the foolishly vain. We are pragmatic and know that if we are patient and alert enough, sometimes treasures will reveal themselves in the most unlikely of places.

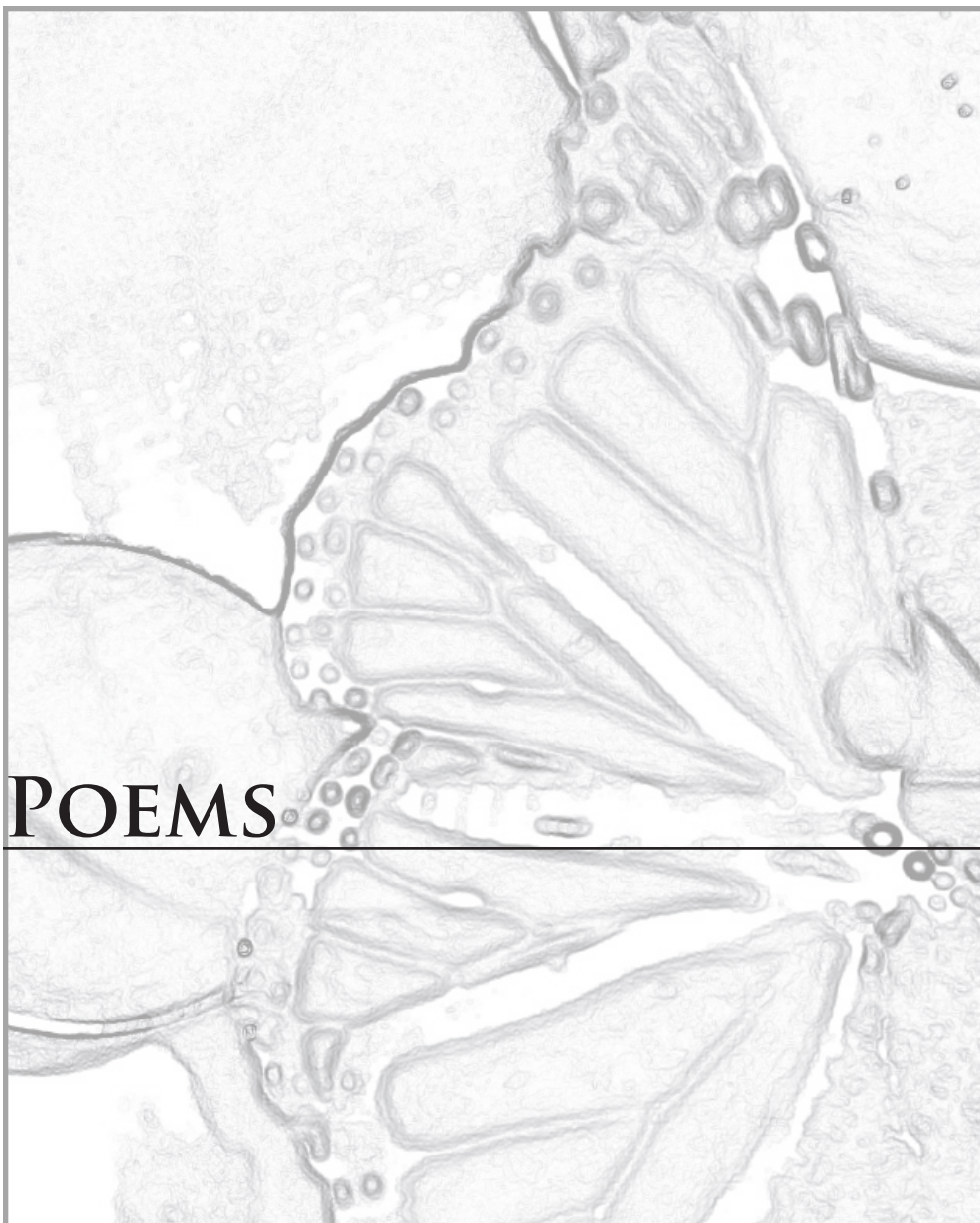
Almost a month after Christmas Day, we pulled into the apartment complex and drove past the dumpster. Mary gasped. “Look at that tree!” There, sticking upside down was the most beautiful tree I’d ever seen. It didn’t register immediately, and I made one of those autopilot responses about how yes, it was quite lovely. We passed by.

Then it registered. And then I got a brilliant, wonderful idea. I backed up the car and got out. Mary asked what I was doing. I smiled at her. “Baby, I’m going to get us a Christmas tree.” As I crawled into the dumpster, I looked over my shoulder at Mary. She was glowing in a way that will illuminate my soul for the rest of my days.

Oh, my. What a gorgeous find! It was a pristine eight-foot pine, denser and finer than anything we had ever had. I stumbled to drag it back to the car, as people drove by and looked at me, confused and rather appalled. Never mind. We struggled up the stairs and almost needed a battering ram to squeeze it in the door. It bent down against our low ceiling, smiling down at us as our oversized yet elegant guardian. We were waiting at the front door when Zack came home a few hours later. Beaming, we showed him our find. He was stunned and excited. “So, are we going to decorate this thing?”

We proceeded to yank the ornaments off the wall and dig our lights out of the closet. The cats had never seen such a majestic sight and fiercely took it on, but this tree was entirely too strong to be brought down. It was our protector. The protector of the Christmas spirit. We had never been as happy for something in our lives.

Mary couldn’t contain her excitement when relating the story at school the next day. Of course, no one understood and even found it “icky.” She didn’t care, though. It was our moment of magic. She was proud of her tree, and she thought her mom was the neatest person in the world. So, regardless of our means, I had what mattered. I had taught my daughter to accept what she had but never abandon her dreams. And, I also reassured her that Mom would do anything to make those dreams happen. I was, indeed, her hero.



POEMS

For Captain Miller, That Day at the Station, 2004

I wanted to write a haiku for the Syracuse poster project about my bus trip to Boston. I waited at the station between the Regional Market and Alliance Bank Stadium. In the women's lavatory I met Captain Miller. She held the door for me. Laughing. 24 years old. I shook her hand. Thanked her for protecting my freedom. I meant it. By coincidence we found ourselves seated back to back in the lobby. Kids with Dunkin Donuts sneaker-slapping past, janitor behind his shaggy gray mop. "Want to see something?" "Sure." I said. She rotated her army-issue-laptop on her knees so I could see, open to "My Pictures." Clicked on a photograph, Saddam Hussein, his glare in handcuffs. She explained she'd snapped his shot the moment of capture. She was there. She jounced with her best friend in a Hummer a few days later. An explosion. She lay beneath the 2nd lieutenant's body 8 hours, until someone pulled her free. She journeyed this day to deliver personal messages for family, the death of their daughter, etc. Her bus arrived before mine. I helped carry her duffel. I waved through the smeary window. She saluted back. How does a poet compress into haiku such a thing? Later I boarded the bus to Boston.

--Rachael Z. Ikins

Doing the Hula

Don Ho, Hawaiian Breeze,
Whisks her from this living room of green shag,
Sensible sofa covers

To sandy white beaches with
Girls swiveling hips, jiggling away
Just like Laki-Laki at Don Ho's side.

Pall Mall clutched tight as a rosary,
Ice tea pressed into the other.
With each gulp and crank of vinyl

Eunice becomes Lead Hula Gal
Her gray permed poodle hair
Glossy-black; waist length.

All the men want her.
Don Ho blows a kiss
Into her ear

As she hulas into the coffee table
Laughs into the lamp
Cry-giggles to the floor.

I will not forget the time
She brought out her ukulele
And Colt 45

Held it to her left temple
Then crown.

Grandma Eunice, if you were to drive
By 3901 Windsor Way,
Peek into the window at yourself

You'd see a woman
Downing Coke & rum
That only you call ice tea.

You'd see a woman
Stumble through the fluorescent night,
Your Maui Island faraway

As you dance into the dust
Of volcanic ash.

-- Amy Wilson

Eesti Vabariik (The Republic of Estonia)

My eyes vacation on idyllic images of Tallin
Pressing on my retinas--
St Olav's Spire piercing an empty Baltic sky,
St Catherine's Passage full of those verified talents
And cobble stones unevenly pave the way to
Churches for St Mary, St Michael, St John,
St Simeon and the Prophetess Hanna, and two for St Nicholas.
The Holy Spirit Church's clock indicates the time
I board the train to Keila.

My eyes sift through the rummage
Of over-occupation,
The remains of 90,000 german-murdered,
Innocent citizens unable to speak but managing
To visit through the blur of the train passing by.
Concrete ghosts stand gaping like dead men,
Remnants of crumbling communism--
Ravaged by time in effigy of Stalin.
I step off the train onto rickety platforms,
Driven in an old car to the pretty, quiet camp.
I read a verse from my Estonian bible and
The empty hearts of Estonian youth drink
This spirituality from a cold river of relationship
Where western tourists believe that they have brought
The beginning of religion to a freshly democratic fairy tale.

--Megan Dinan

Pocketknife

I lost my pocketknife about five years ago
Thinking it would eventually just turn up
After the move, and it wasn't until
The other night when I was going through
Some old pictures and sure enough
In the background of a photo
There was my old knife sitting on
The night stand next to me.

My body was sprawled out
Over an old nasty orange recliner
I'd got from my brother after he moved,
And I had this dazed look in my eyes like
I couldn't quite put something together.
But there was that damn pocketknife.
It was right there. But where was it now?
I had moved close to five times that year
And since then, a handful more.
There was no telling what happened to it.

The next day I made sure to stop by
The local hardware store
On my way to the supermarket.
An old toothless lady with a smoker's voice
Rummaged through a glass display case
Until she produced the Swiss Army Red
I was looking for. I paid \$12.99
For it outright, which took most of the cash
I had for groceries, and after leaving the store,

I sat in my car and unwrapped the knife.
I held it for a second and stared at it.
Then I hooked it to my keychain
Like a lucky rabbit's foot
And put the key in the ignition.

Back in my driveway, I'd skipped the supermarket,
I took a picture of myself with a Polaroid
I found at a thrift store earlier in the week.
I positioned the pocketknife in the corner
Of the shot, sitting on the dashboard,
But when the photo finally developed,
I looked like some goofy fucker
Posing way too hard.
So I tossed the photo in the backseat,
Pulled a cigarette from my pack,
Leaning my car seat back as far
As it could go, and stared out
Through my front windshield
At the dead gray sky passing above.

--Brandon Isaak

Fiberglass Carnival

I remember the heat,
Sick and nauseating,
All parts of my body
stuck together but slick
at the same time

The harsh pipe blows in the distance,
Screeching the sound of gypsies
disguised as some sane
Cheap and hollow as plastic jousting
Bards stuffing their faces with hot dogs

She was next to me
I could feel her caring
Hearing the torture in her laugh
As though the blades beneath
were stabbing her, one by one

The song crawled still down my throat,
Not forced, with no soul of its own
Just like the costumes that socialized all around
Tents full of armor and knives
Ready to be displayed in your home

--Kyle Stults

Songs That Harrison Sang

Anna was the kind of girl
who stared into the sun for too long
and burned out her vision

stumbling around the yard
unable to keep her orientation
she cautiously wandered
along a never-ending circle

In the empty spot
where moving pictures used to play
there was a constant swirling
of colored liquid pooling
and pulling at the edges
of her vision
her iris had become a kaleidoscope

Anna was the kind of girl
who made a lot of mistakes

that couldn't be taken back

--Kortni Torralba

Astroturf: Dreamtime

The Silver Surfer with a shiny smile
Meets the Sun King in Hawaiian style
A swollen moon offers us her child
Brian, Carl and Dennis, meet Mr. Wilde

The hairy potter and philosophers stoned
Are pottering about on lawn freshly mown
The muggles are so green, and burn so pure
Straddling a surfboard beneath a rich azure

One more once, just looking out my back door
The Astronauts are Venturing into space once more
Why do hieroglyphics suddenly appear
As the orange Hawaiian dawn grows quite near?

--Michael Snyder

Vacancy

The house of our love
is vacant and
beckoning visitors to come
and lay in its sorry beds.
Much too much for our brittle cups,
and me too ignorant to notice the mess.

Now, we both are without
brothers
and shivering in the shade of
the burial trees.
Not even the crows
want our twisted remains.

I don't think you
meant to hollow your heart out
and float away
in its dark red flesh,
but that's exactly what you've done.

-- L.T. Budrich

Ode to My Morning Coffee

Your persuasive aroma lures me from deep slumber.
With stumbling fingers guided by timid eyes and heavy lids
I reach for my beloved mug to capture your flowing brew.
Clenched stick in hand, I orchestrate your swirling fusion
To the creamy sweet enhancements I adorn you with.
Longing for the energy you bear, I offer up my prudent lips.
Your steaming roast encourages caution as I draw you in.
Like smooth velvety silk, you caress my buds as you pass by.
I savor every tickle your essence bestows upon my core.
Eyes widening now as you gently usher me into the morn.
Your warmth soothes me as I settle into a necessary calm.
You are my Columbian companion I guiltlessly share with no one.
As I tip my cup, you beckon me for another dance before I go.
Yielding to our mutual desire, I accept your extended invitation.
I anticipate that our second encounter will be even sweeter still.
Invigorated by our time together, I can face the day ahead.
To you I bequeath by sincere gratitude for your stimulating nature.
I look forward to our next rendezvous my friend, but for now, adieu.

--SueAnne Lewis

The Night is Wild

Below you lay, in dirt,
Your eyes wild
With delight at the vision above,
At dark night's song,
At trembling leaves,
At hot breath rising.

Rolling winds breathe,
Dancing through the smell of sweat and dirt.
Can we embarrass the leaves?
Shock the wild as it hears
Our love song below.

Or will they blush from above?
Contributing our breath to the wind, as we
Compose the notes to nature songs.
Could we embarrass the dirt?
No, for it's seen this before in flowers wild and honeybees!
Nothing new to dirt and leaves.

Laughing trees they shake their leaves
As happiness flows up and above,
They smile, pleased is this wild!
So how can we hide our breath when
Even the dirt rejoices in our song?

Sweet love song,
From lush lips you twirl, leaving
Us behind in the dirt to

Dance skyward on rolling winds.
Just another wild note,
Among the thousands in the world.

--Stephanie Menotti

A Midnight Stroll Through Suburban Eden

I set out on my pseudo-epic quest
With my fabled mutt beast and think
Should I lock the door?
If someone should actually break in
They need whatever it is more than I

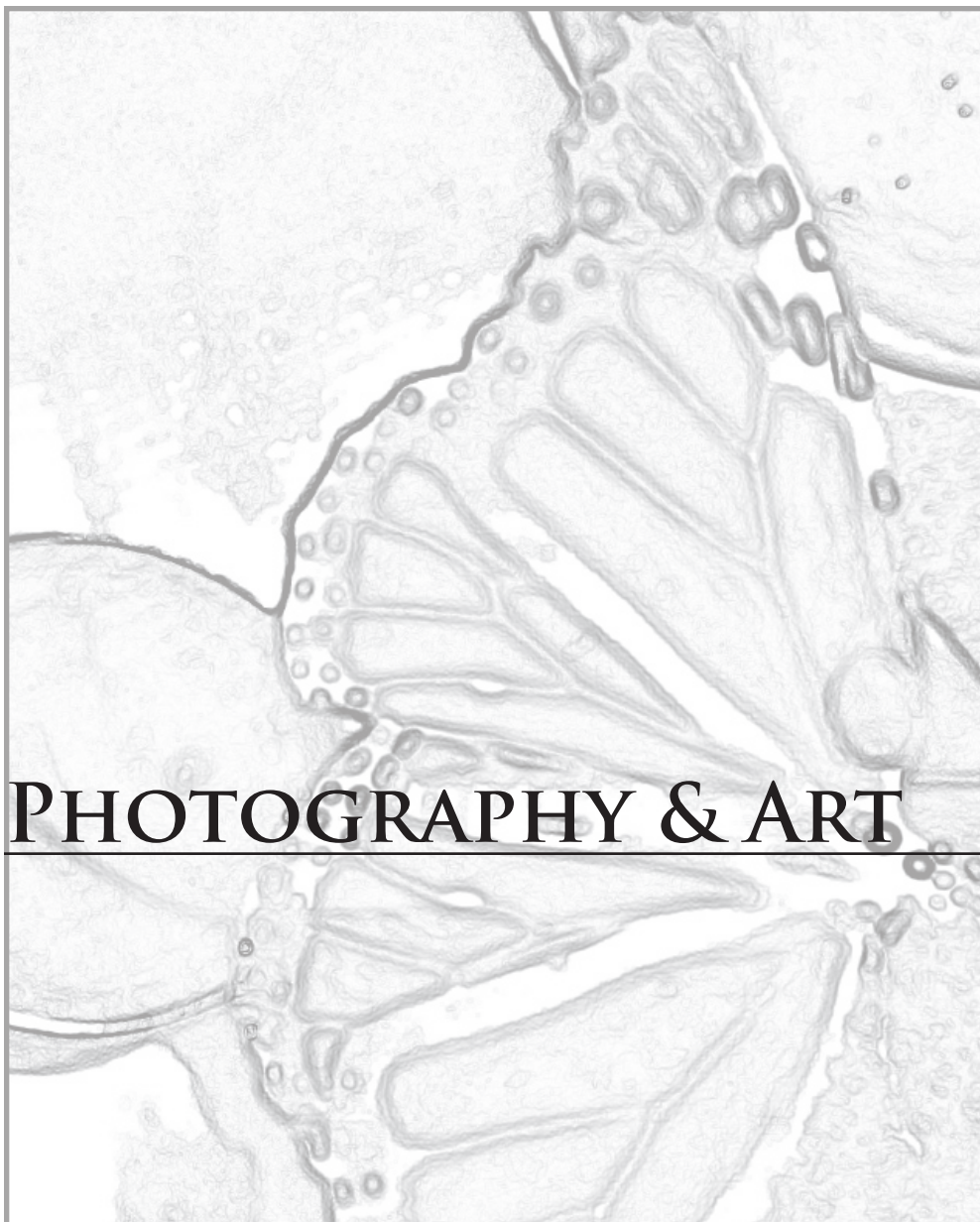
My neighbors' pet monsters begin to bark
In cadence with one another,
A gaggle of security guards
Who aren't really needed

I'm so far removed from fair Odysseus
My beast is blacker than the suburban night
In any shadow may lurk a stray cat or skunk
And still I'll jump every once in a while

Nothing but familiar concrete curves
And hedgerows with high and tight haircuts
They salute the street in homage to order
Just little clean lots with Bermuda grass borders

My three-mile trek ends with
The painstaking march up composite stone steps,
Grunting, I reach the top of a small staircase
And I thank the bright bulging nightlight
That guided me home.

--Michael Fadum





Ferris Wheel
Abril Estrada



Holy Water
Brenda Breeding



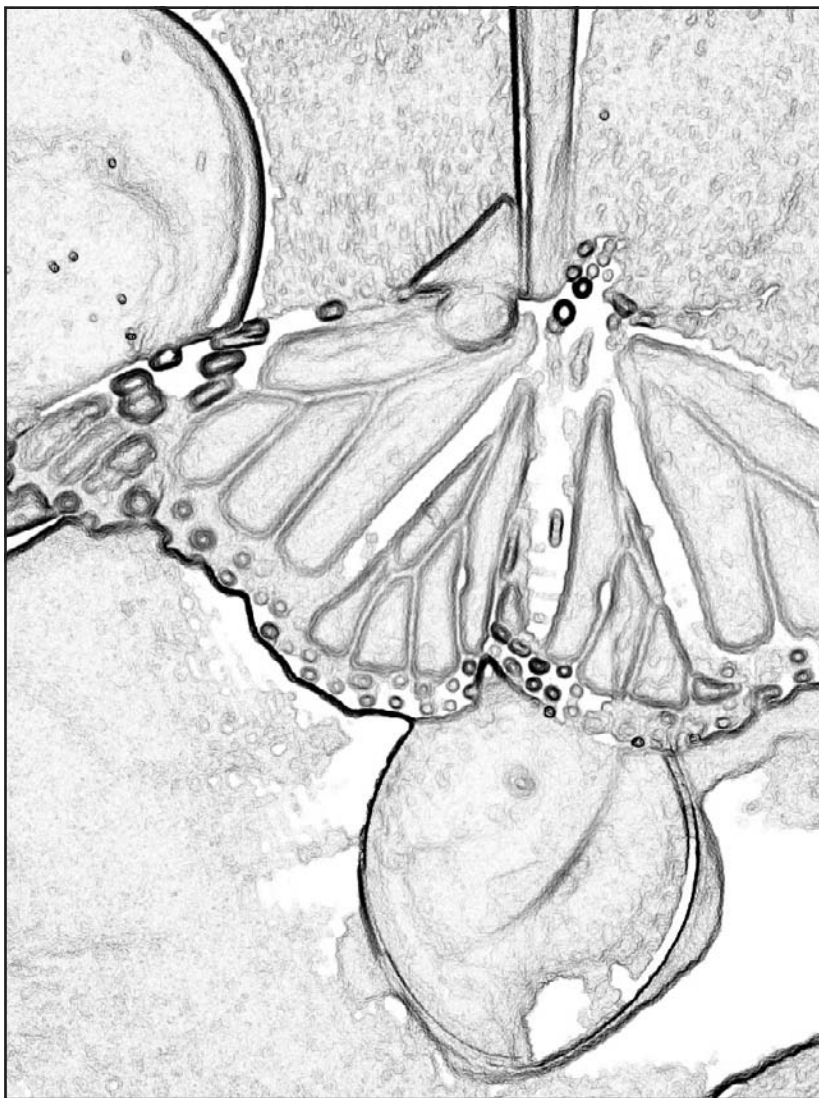
Daisies
Donna J. Ward



Pickens Family
Raymond Isaac
oil on canvas



Clock Tower
Joie White



Maurice on Spoon
Richard Auer



OKLAHOMA CITY COMMUNITY COLLEGE