



12 *Absolute*

Poetry • Fiction • Nonfiction • Artwork • Photography

12
Absolute



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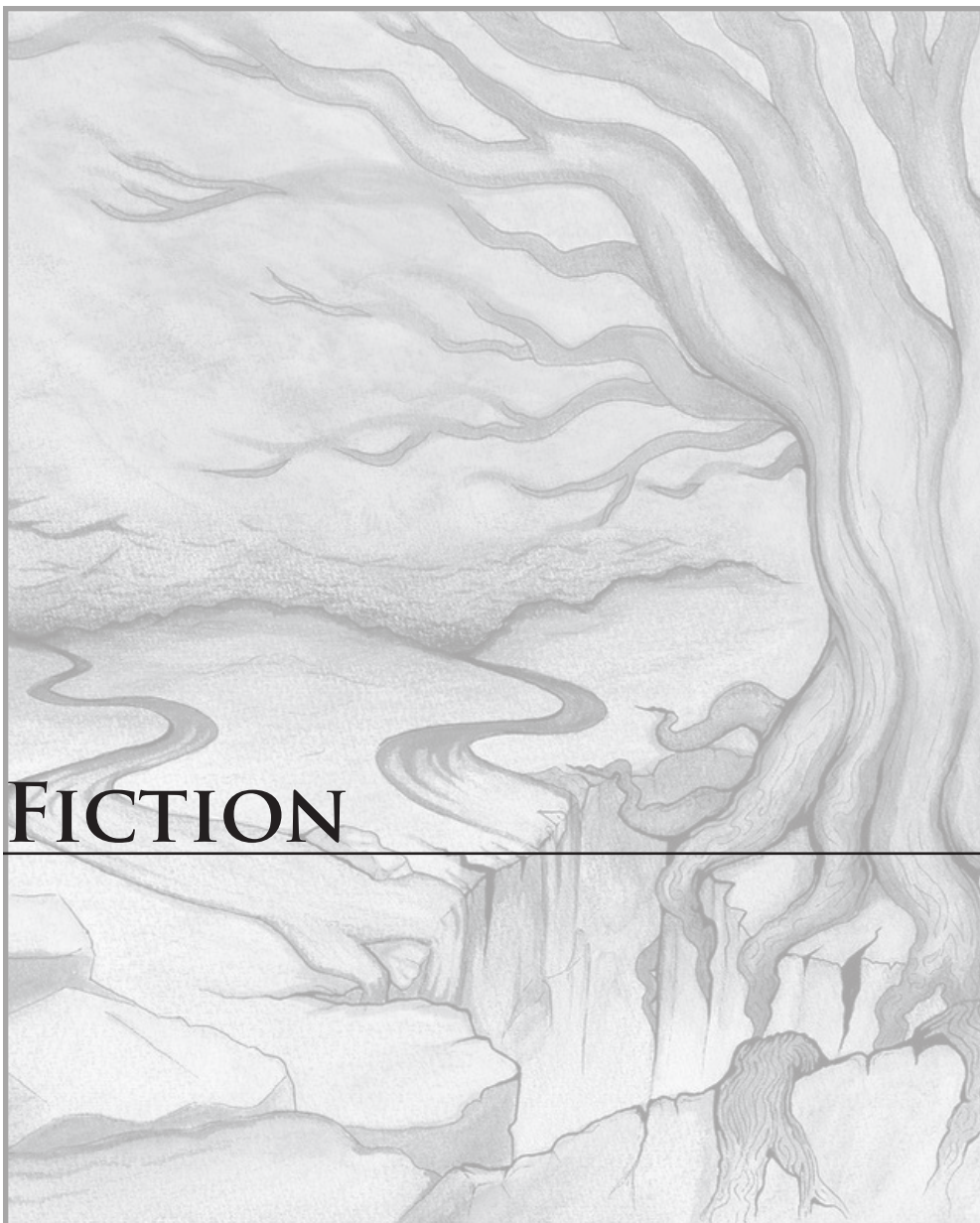
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Do Coffee Makers Dream of Killing Sheep?

by Jeremy Cloud

I'm having a really bad day. Actually, that's an understatement. I'm having the kind of day that would make a serial killer curl up in a ball and whimper for his mommy. It started out pretty normal, as days like these often do. I got up, and went through my normal morning routine. Lots of cigarettes, with the occasional oxygen break to shower and get dressed. Then it's off to the kitchenette to do battle with the coffee maker.

My coffee maker is the oldest one I could salvage, because the newer ones have really snobbish attitudes, and a tendency to go into catatonia when they realize that they live in a dump, literally. Mine is almost 50 years old, made of a plasti-steel composite, prefers to be called Damian, and will probably outlive me. Unfortunately, having survived in the Dumps for so long Damian has developed an adversarial attitude. Which is to say that the nasty little machine tends to shoot first and laugh at the bodies later, no questions needed.

Sadly, Damian the Coffee Maker is probably my closest friend.

Grabbing the riot armor off the table beside my bedroom door, I strap on the vest and crouch down behind the shield, before edging slowly around the corner to face the kitchen. Damian's latest thing is passwords. I've been writing them down, because the one time I forgot, I spent three days barricaded in my bedroom before I remembered.

"Intruder! Password!" Damian barks. Its voice is deep, guttural, and has a burr of synthesizer around the edges. I've often wondered if Damian's CPU was designed for a tank and got put in a coffee maker by mistake.

I check the Post-It stuck to my doorframe. “Alpha, tango, two, four, niner, niner, lambda, zero, crouton.”

“Correct. You may enter, Melinda.”

I creep into the kitchen, keeping the shield up. Damian has been known to take a stun shot at me just to keep in practice. I still have a scar on my butt where I made the mistake of turning my back on it.

“Morning, Damian,” I say cautiously, as I come into its line of sight. “I don’t suppose we could just make with the coffee and skip the crap?”

The face on the little screen gives me a thoughtful look. “You are willing to concede?”

I groan. Ever since I brought it back online, Damian has been trying to convince me that it owns me, instead of the other way around. “No, Damian, I just want my freakin’ coffee.”

A stun round blatts into my shield, nearly knocking me over. “Then we shall proceed. Normal rules?”

I let out a frustrated sigh. “Sure. Why the heck not?”

Instantly, stun rounds fill the air around me, blazing purple beams of energy that can blast me unconscious for hours, and leave me with the mother of all hangovers. The normal rules are if I can get close enough to hit the “Percolate” button, I rule the house for another day. So far, I haven’t lost yet. There’s a good reason I make sure I’m completely awake before I leave my room.

Crouching behind the shield, I assess my options. Usually, diving under the table, then rolling forward to hit the button works pretty well. But Damian has apparently figured that out, because today it’s saturating the area under the table with stun fire. So, it’s on to plan B.

I crabwalk over to the broom closet, my skin crawling with goose bumps from the energy crackling all around me. Getting the door open while

keeping the shield up is one of the less fun things I've had to try, but after a frantic second the door pops open and I jump backward into the closet. I pause a minute to catch my breath, thinking, as I have so often before, that if I ever find the idiot that gave a paranoid coffee maker weapons I'm going to throw him into a closet with Damian and leave him there for a few days.

The storm of stun bolts slackens a bit as my coffee maker tries to figure out what I'm up to. I wait until it's down to minimal cover fire, take a deep breath, and dive out of the closet, grabbing the broom as I do so. I roll across the kitchen, a purple bolt slamming into the floor by my head as Damian figures out my plan. But by the time it starts pummeling my shield with stun fire, I'm only two feet away. Leaning the broom on the shield and bracing myself against the constant pounding, I carefully slide the gun port on my shield open. A bolt comes through a split second after I jerk my hand away. I grab the broom, focus on my goal, and jab the handle towards the softly glowing little button.

Beep. Boop.

The stun bolts cut off abruptly. I creep closer, making sure the "Percolate" button has turned green before lowering my shield.

"Well, it looks like I win again, Damian." I try not to sound too smug. On the one hand, I've never lost in the year and a half that I've had Damian. On the other, I still remember the time I tried to have a microwave. The morning after I brought it in, I found it blasted to pieces, with a note on it that read, "Coffee makers rule!"

I still have no idea how Damian wrote the note, and that worries me.

The face on the screen glares at me. "Will you want Arabica, Columbian, or espresso today, Melinda?"

"Columbian. And could you at least try to make it look like coffee this time?"

Damian grins evilly. "I make no guarantees."

I find it best to retreat at that point. Leaving Damian to brew the sludge of revenge it passes off as coffee, I step outside to see if the newsvendor across the alley is open yet. My neighbors and I are pretty sure he steals the papers from various upscale businesses, but frankly we're so happy to get the news for cheap that we've been known to shoot anyone that tries to take advantage of him.

Seeing that the little closed sign is still up, I start to turn back inside, bracing myself to drink coffee from hell. Suddenly, the world goes white. When it comes back to normal, I find myself lying on the pavement, fighting to catch my breath.

My first thought is that Damian has shot me out of spite. But it's never been able to shoot and brew at the same time, or I'd never have gotten any peace. That's when I see the S.F.R.B officers heading down the alley toward me.

The Security Forces of the Belgium Republic are one part Gestapo, one part police, mixed liberally with several parts mercenary, cockroach, and Mafioso. Malicious, apathetic, and thoroughly bribable, the SefRebs make Damian look like a cuddly little puppy.

I force myself to lie still, thinking furiously. My vest must have taken the worst of the shot, or I'd be out like a drunken soldier right now. But I'm five feet from my door, and all my weapons are still in their holsters, hanging just inside the front door, mocking me silently.

The SefRebs sidle up to me, laughing softly. The one on the left is short and ugly, and the other is tall and ugly. Tall and Ugly kicks me, hard, in the ribs and growls out, "I know you're awake, little girl. So sit up and play nice, and I promise not to break too many bones."

Scowling, I sit up, fighting the urge to rub my side. I can't afford to show weakness, but it hurts like hell. "What can I do for you, boys?"

They laugh darkly, eerily in time. I think they teach them that in bully school.

“You can answer a few questions for us, little girl.” One of them produces a photo of our newsvendor. “This man is unregistered, and he’s wanted for petty theft. Have you seen him?”

I immediately start to shake my head, earning me a slap across the face. Several repeats of this later, my face is on fire, and I’m starting to panic. I’d rather die than betray a friend to the SefRebs, but if I don’t give them something soon, the creeps will probably haul me down to lockup on general principles. And being unregistered, I’ll probably never leave.

As if on cue, the short one turns to his friend, a leer on his face. “Look, we’re getting nowhere with this. Let’s just take her down to HQ and let the inquisitors sort it out.”

Tall thinks for a moment, then nods. “Go grab the cruiser. I’ll wait here and keep an eye on her.”

As his friend walks off, Tall begins to regale me with stories of all the awful things that await me in the company of the inquisitors. But I tune him out as I hear the most glorious sound, one I never thought I’d be happy to hear.

Boop. Beeeeep.

Damian’s brew cycle has just ended.

Squirming slightly ‘til I can see the coffee maker, I motion, trying to get it to shoot the SefReb. It smiles and pops up the words on its screen, “What’s in it for me?”

I fight the urge to start screaming obscenities, and mouth, “I’ll make you half owner of the house. I’ll never bring in another appliance as long as I live.”

The little creep actually takes a moment to think about it. Then it pops up, “I want to be your business partner, too. No more spending my days on this counter, waiting for you to come home.”

I can feel myself turning red as I struggle to breathe around all the curses I'm choking back. I manage a nod.

Damian smiles viciously...and does nothing. I stare at it, waiting for the shot. The cruiser glides silently around the corner, pulls up to a halt next to Tall and me, and still Damian is just sitting there.

They're actually cuffing me and getting ready to put me in the cruiser when two precise shots ring out. And frighteningly, these aren't the coruscating purple of stun bolts. These are lurid red, signaling kill shots.

As I stand there, staring at the two dead SefRebs, all I can think is, *Whoa. Damien has an active kill setting?*

I slowly walk inside, as the neighbors come out of hiding. I don't have to worry about cleaning up the mess. The people that live in this area will be more than happy to destroy a cruiser and burn a couple of SefReb bodies. Heck, they'll probably throw a party and use the officers' bodies to fuel the bonfire.

I stare at Damian for a moment. It smiles enigmatically. "So," it says, an undertone of glee dancing through every word, "let's discuss how big my cut of the profits will be."

Could this day possibly get any worse?

Daisy

by Kylee Jones

Daisy. A pure name. An innocent name. Simple. Patient. Daisy. She had never been anything else. Her name suited her fine, like a cheese grater grates cheese or a doghouse houses a dog. Every morning Daisy, in her yellow housedress, sits on her porch in a rickety wooden rocking chair. Silent. Waiting. Daisy is a silent name.

Silent things are. There is nothing but half dead grass surrounding the old house and only a dusty dirt road to stare at. An ancient tree towers incongruously over the yard. A sycamore tree. Daisy used to warn her children of the itch a sycamore rubbed against skin might cause.

Her children. She and her late husband, Cornelius, had three children together. James, Rebecca, and Nicholas. James died in a car crash 14 years ago, dead at the scene. Decapitated. His funeral had been closed casket. Daisy never got to say goodbye. Rebecca married an executive from a big city, disappearing into a world Daisy had never known but Cory had always dreamed of. Little Nicky's alcohol problem hit a record high the day he heard of James' passing.

Her living children hadn't visited her in years. Daisy had always counted on James to stay in touch.

He had. He'd still lived in the small town Cory had built their house just a few miles outside of. James came up every Sunday for supper. Daisy loved Sunday evenings, especially in that little stretch of time between summer and fall, when the breeze hit your neck just right and the flies didn't come around. Cory and James would sit outside on the porch, drinking iced tea and swapping stories. James never missed a Sunday. This is all Daisy needed. Her Cory and

her children. She never complained that Becca and Nick never came around; she could see Nick in Cory's strong arms and tall stature, Becca in her own hazel eyes and small nose every morning in the mirror. Daisy still writes each of her children weekly, hoping for a response of any sort.

Daisy waits for them. She waits for them silently, patiently in that old rocking chair. She waits like a daisy. The mail truck always comes around at 1 PM sharp. Old Jordy, their mailman, is never late. Unlike the other citizens he delivers to, he walks straight up to Daisy's porch, knowing simultaneously that he is about to crush her hopes but that she will need his company after the fact.

"I sure am sorry, Miss Daisy. Nothin' but bills an' coupon ads today."

Old Jordy always admires Daisy's patient and hopeful nature. Daisy always holds her optimistic head high, though she is given no reason to. Her wrinkled hands, the jade stone sitting with dedication on her left ring finger, reach out for the mail.

"Let me at least pour you a glass of tea for your troubles, Mister Jordan."

She always uses his full name when addressing him, though no one else in the town ever has. Jordy graciously thanks her for her own troubles before making his way on to the next stop. He climbs into the little white mail truck, but never drives off until he sees that Daisy makes it safely inside.

Daisy carries the mail and tea to the kitchen table, taking a last sip before studying the mail. She takes in the wrinkles left over from Jordan's mail bag, a bag that could easily hold her hopes and dreams but always proves fruitless. She presses her bony old finger along the inside of the envelopes' flaps, testing where they haven't been sealed properly. She stacks the mail and memorizes the order. Gas bill, coupons for the local grocer, electric bill, an ad for assisted living facilities. Gas, grocery coupons, electric, assisted living facilities. Gas, coupons, electric, assisted living. Over and over and over again. Following that, Daisy gently opens the envelopes, one at a time. She reads each word printed neatly on every page very carefully, she reads

the fine print. Searching. Patiently searching. Trying to read between the lines of bills and grocer coupons, looking for some kind of sign or hidden message snuck into her junk mail.

She knows she won't find anything in her bills and coupons and ads that will lead her any closer to her remaining family. Her Cory is gone. Her James is gone. They are gone permanently. But aren't her Becca and her little baby Nicky gone as well? They might as well be. Daisy's mornings are spent waiting for mail that will never come. Every morning she rises at six, eats a hot bowl of oatmeal with sugar and honey, brews her daily iced tea, and makes her way to her rocking chair to wait. Every day she rocks back and forth for six hours, patiently. She sometimes hums old tunes to herself. She drinks her iced tea with the mailman. She memorizes the mail she receives, though it is never what she wants. Daisy continues her routine, never being stopped by frivolous details, like Sunday (when the mail declines to run) or rainy days. If it is too cold, she sits inside by the window, after slowly dragging her old rocker in the house, scraping the hardwood floor as she does so.

She has done this since Cornelius died of a heart attack just a year after James was taken from her. Cory's funeral was even harder to handle – Becca showed up wearing an expensive ensemble she'd bought with her divorce money, Nicholas told his mother he would be making arrangements to move back home; he never had.

Following the daily mail disappointment, Daisy settles in at Cory's old writing desk. She begins drawing up maps of her family, trying desperately to figure out where things had gone wrong. Perhaps she should have bought Nick that toy six-shooter at the toy shop when he was six? What if she'd never allowed James to operate a motor vehicle? Could she have stood up at Rebecca's wedding, giving reason that she couldn't possibly marry this man Daisy barely knew?

Daisy never comes up with a satisfying theory as to why things ended up the way they did. Her hands shake as she pens lists and draws charts of her family's break. Daisy keeps each and every one of her lists, charts,

and diagrams. Long rows of filing cabinets line the study's walls. They are organized by date and she frequently reviews them at night when she can't sleep, that reoccurring dream of James' demise playing out in her nightmares, even though she hadn't seen it happen.

Of course, poor old Daisy never reaches any kind of closure or acceptance of her loneliness, her abandonment. She will still get out of bed tomorrow morning at 6 AM, she will still eat her oatmeal with sugar and honey, she will still brew her pitcher of iced tea, she will still sit patiently in that rocking chair waiting for an answer to a question she never wanted to ask. She will do this diligently and gladly until she dies.

Pure. Innocent. Simple. Patient. Silent. Waiting. Daisy.

Happy Burger

by Heather A. Skiba

James watched the lights of the building across from the street attentively from one of his booth windows. Business in his little diner had gone down significantly since the arrival of Happy Burger across the street. He hadn't understood how something like a fast food chain could outdo his home cooking diner so easily and so quickly. It had been two and a half weeks since their grand opening, and he thought that the new and shiny effect would have worn off by now. Surely people favored his home style over that processed and branded crap. It just didn't make sense. Even his regulars had been MIA, and that included the late night painter Sam, who always stopped by at least for a coffee.

James hated the fast food industry. Well, sure his diner was a quick eat place, but he didn't keep stuff under a heating lamp throughout the day. No, he made food to order, damn it! He put his heart and soul onto every plate!

James couldn't afford to let his business continue lingering in this stagnancy. Every day was adding to his losses, and if it continued on much longer, he was going to be threatened with the possibility of shutting down. After having worked his whole life to get this restaurant running, he'd be damned if he let a common food industry like Happy Burger ruin his dream.

He wasn't going to go down easy. No, not at all. In fact, James had a plan and as the lights of Happy Burger went out across the street, he moved to initiate it.

It only took him a few minutes to check his supplies and gather them together: a flashlight, the cigar box with the dead mouse inside, tape, and a lock pick. He looked like the stereotypical burglar in his get up of black

slacks, sweater, ski mask and... well, the green knitted mittens had been a gift from his mother, and he hadn't remembered to buy some different gloves. It didn't matter. He just needed something to keep his hands warm against the bitter cold of winter, and also keep his fingerprints from being left behind. The mittens served that purpose, at least.

Within the darkness of his own closed restaurant, James watched the outside of Happy Burger for a few minutes longer. When the manager had gotten into his car and driven off, James moved quickly to step outside and creep across the dimly lit street with a backpack thrown over his shoulder and his flashlight in the other hand. When he approached the entrance of the fast food restaurant, he paused with a grimace to stare at the plastic white faced Jester grinning broadly from its mount on the front of the store. Although it was cheery and had blushing cheeks, James could not shake the chill it sent down his spine. Mimes, clowns, and jesters were all on his "too unsettling to approve of" list. He was sure that the people who came up with such monsters had either a terribly dark humor, or were simply insane.

James continued around the building to the back side, where the alley was dark and narrow and provided much better cover than any of the front or side doors and windows. He approached the men's bathroom window with the hopes that no one had noticed it was slightly ajar. Luckily, no one had. Sticking his flashlight under his arm, he dug his mittened fingers into the thin crevice beneath the window pane, and growled as he worked to gradually pry it upward. It was much tougher than it had been yesterday, and as he struggled to get it open, he felt the flashlight slip from under his arm. The clatter of it bouncing along the concrete beneath him made him cringe, and as he let go of the window and looked down with the intention of picking it back up, something shifted behind the window from the corner of his view. Quickly looking back, he wondered if what he had seen had been a shadow, or reflection... or was there someone still inside the building? No, couldn't be. He had waited for the manager to lock up and leave. If there was anyone left inside, they would have been locked in along with everything

else. For a moment longer, however, James hesitated to bend down and pick the flashlight back up. When he had it in hand he directed the beam through the window and into the white and red tiled bathroom behind the glass, and saw nothing. With a grunt he tucked the light back under his arm and went back to prying the window open. It took a couple more minutes for him to finally slide it entirely up, at which point he tucked the flashlight in his pack, and threw it in before him. He had to make a small jump to get up onto the ledge, where the frame bit into his stomach as he wriggled his body through the narrow window opening slowly. He was lucky, he thought, that he was a rather thin man and he doubted he could have gotten in this way had he been a bit bigger.

James fell to the cold tile floor with a thump and a groan of pain, before snatching his supplies and composing himself to a stand. Out of paranoia, he took a moment to check each bathroom stall carefully in order to soothe his persistent concern that he had surely seen movement in here only moments ago. Even as he proved the bathroom was empty save for himself, he had trouble shaking off the cold prickly feeling brushing along his shoulders and neck.

Huffing out a heavy breath to calm his racing heart, he soon moved cautiously out of the men's bathroom and into the hall. He crouched low as he crept, keeping the beam of his light low along with his movements as he navigated the dark towards the kitchen door.

"Not much further," he told himself quietly as he pushed on the door and crept into the kitchen. It was here that he found himself stopping to look around in curiosity. Their kitchen was much bigger and far better equipped than he had initially imagined. There were giant mixers, a large grill, conveyor oven, more than enough prep tables, and several other pieces of equipment that he did not recognize. Perhaps he had underestimated the quality of their food? So perhaps they deserved to be beating him in the food industry?

“Bull hockey,” he growled, “I don’t care how much pretty and expensive equipment you foolishly broad-grinning bastards have, I will not go down easily.”

James threw down his pack and dropped to a knee to open it and pick out the cigar box. Opening the box he hissed and cringed at the strong scent of rot coming from the tiny mouse corpse. How such a little body made such a big, horrible smell like that, he didn’t know. What he did know, however, was that a fat rotting mouse corpse could kill your restaurant if someone found it in your food. Carefully plucking the dead mouse out of the box by its tail, James put the cigar box aside and then looked around for a good place to plant it. There were a lot of options, considering all the equipment, but he needed a place that they wouldn’t easily notice the contaminant.

Leaving his flashlight on the floor, James walked around the kitchen and towards the front counter. When he spotted the large clear milkshake dispenser, he knew he had found the best option. Smirking like the clever fox he was, he popped open the top lid of the container, which under normal circumstances would have easily kept something like a mouse from getting inside of it. Oh, well. These weren’t normal circumstances. This was war between his locally established restaurant and a giant food chain that usually crippled the businesses surrounding their locations.

There was a fulfilling “plop” sound as he dropped the mouse corpse into the slowly churning milky white liquid within the mixer. As he replaced the lid, he was pleased to notice the little gray-furred body glancing from behind the glass. It was perfect.

A comforted exhale escaped James as he stepped back from his fine work, but that same breath caught when something plump and large bumped him from behind. As he slowly turned to see what it was, his blood turned cold within his veins. The darkness afforded James only an outline of the man who now stood before him; a tall and thick built figure that, while James listened, seemed to wheeze faintly with each slow draw of breath.

Pale moon light coming in from a skylight only helped enough to expose the man's stomach, which was so large and plump it made Santa look like a spokesperson for Slimfast. Taking a step back, James instinctively raised both of his hands in submission before him.

"Oh, God. O-okay, you caught me. Just..." James stammered, looking through the shadows into the dark, jewel-like glints of what he imagined were the man's eyes. Stone cold where he stood, he watched in horror as the giant of a man leaned forward and brought his pale face into the dim light. For a moment he thought that the man was wearing a jester mask similar to the iconic jester which represented Happy Burger. To his great dismay he quickly realized that the broad, monstrous grin which stretched far too wide with teeth far too long and jagged were in fact a part of the man's face. No, not a man at all, but some horrible beast taken out of his nightmares.

James' mouth gawked as he struggled to scream. Then, without warning, a loud crunch echoed throughout the restaurant and resounded in his ears. In an instant too quick for him to catch, the top four fingers of his left hand had simply... disappeared. They were so cleanly snapped off his knuckles that he hadn't even felt it. Only when a gush of blood erupted from the neatly sliced stubs did he feel a cold wave of absolute fear and nausea wash over him. Stunned, he stammered to speak and trembled as he looked back up to the large beastly man, whose previously white grin had now been painted freshly in red. It chuckled in a deep, rumbling tone before its serrated teeth slowly pried apart for a thick, and terribly long, black tongue to wash them clean.

"Now you know the secret ingredient," it grumbled, "and it's a secret that we're going to keep."

Garlog's Revenge

by Neal Hassler

“We’ll see how powerful your spirit magic is when I cast my Desecration Ray, you fool boy!” bellowed Garlog, King of Darkness. Perwin the Good, chosen of the Free Eldarr Peoples and arch-nemesis of the dreaded Garlog, stood on the far side of the lava-filled chasm, wand at the ready. Though he stood bravely, and looked magnificent enough from afar, Perwin’s eyes seemed devoid of thought, and his mouth hung open slightly as if dazed by something.

“Come, then!” Garlog roared. “We will settle this here and now! The forces of darkness shall feast upon your soul!”

Perwin did nothing but lick his lips nervously and glance side to side. He didn’t speak. *Christ. Not again*, thought Garlog. This was the fifth time today. *I know you’re fucking Megan Fox, kid, and you think you’re hot shit, but you’re not going to last a month in this business if you can’t even memorize a few lines.*

Garlog had thought he was hot shit once, too. That was quite a long time ago, though. Garlog should have an Oscar and a mansion on Nantucket Island by this point. Despite being a truly gifted actor, however, (unlike the talentless pretty boy garbage he was forced to work with nowadays—Garlog had studied at *Juliard*, for Christ’s sake) his name didn’t carry the same power it once did. Not by a long shot. Once a semi-regular contender for the Oscar race, and even placing in the top ten of People magazine’s *Sexiest Man Alive List* a few times, Garlog’s career had stalled out in his early thirties with a string of crap pictures lackadaisically dumped into his lap by a cokehead agent who he should’ve fired long before then. He’d been slowly fading into irrelevance ever since.

To make matters even worse, Garlog had to piss like a racehorse, and the ten pounds of latex he was wearing meant he'd have to wait until they'd finished shooting the scene. Judging from the way Perwin kept forgetting his lines, though, that could be years from then. *Fuck you, kid. Fuck your three picture deal with Paramount, fuck your cover feature story in Esquire, and fuck Megan Fox for fucking you.*

"Line," Perwin said finally. At least there was a little bit of shame in his voice this time.

"The forces of darkness will never rule the Eldarr," chimed a pimply-faced production assistant standing just out of the camera's line of fire. Perwin repeated the line without gesturing or changing his facial expression; his voice had about as much emotion as Windows 98's original text-to-speech program.

"Come then, and let us do battle for the fate of the Eldarr!" snarled the King of Darkness. Perwin just continued to stare. *Christ. Jesus disco-dancing Christ on a velvet cross. Where did they find this guy?* Garlog had worked with his fair share of chiseled-jawed, shitbrained Orange County kids, but this guy had to take the cake. Pete Klein was his name. He'd been called up to the big leagues from table-waiting purgatory several months ago, originally starring in a Disney picture about a young man who discovers that he has the ability to talk to dogs, and ends up stopping an evil corporation from gassing canines for profit or something ridiculous like that. The movie was called *Dog Daze*, and Garlog had an intimate knowledge of its subtleties and nuances—mainly from being forced to watch it what felt like around 300 times with his kids. Garlog pictured Klein railing a fat line of coke in his trailer, then getting in front of a camera and pretending to be someone who actually cared about people and things other than himself rather than a self-centered, spoiled piece of *nouveau riche* West Coast trash whose greatest accomplishment in life would be being able to someday brag to his nursing home friends about how he was able to bang Megan Fox at one point in his life. Garlog remembered a scene where Klein's character got the

cookie-cutter love interest to fall for him by rescuing a dog named Scruffles from the clutches of corporate goons and nursing him back to health. He wanted to vomit just thinking about it.

More nauseating was the fact that he could probably recite *Dog Daze* line-for-line if he had to, and gladly would have done so if his reward were being able to take a Goddamned leak. The need to urinate felt like a venomous dagger in his crotch that got more painfully uncomfortable every second.

“Let’s take five, people,” called a merciful, beautiful voice from the heavens above. Director David Goldman had evidently decided that he as well had had enough of Klein’s childlike incompetence for the moment.

“Dave,” called Garlog, “Dave, can I talk to you over here for a second?” For a few seconds Goldman seemed not to hear, his face a blank thousand yard stare into oblivion. The moment passed, consciousness returned to the director’s eyes, and he turned to meet the King of Darkness.

“What is it?”

Garlog decided to get straight to the point. He lowered his voice. “I have to piss like a Russian racehorse, Dave.”

The director sighed. “Can it wait? We need about ten more takes of this scene, then we can get you out of the suit for today.”

Ten more takes. That was likely to be an eternity—or at least two hours or so—when the great Pete Klein was the star of the show.

Suddenly, a thought entered Garlog’s mind. It was a beautiful thought, and if it were a woman, the King of Darkness would take it out to an expensive Japanese steakhouse for dinner, buy it an eighty dollar glass of wine, take it home, and make sweet love to it on the shag carpet by the fireplace.

“Alright. Yeah, alright, that’s fine,” he said to Goldman, his tone suddenly brighter. “Just give me a minute to go outside and smoke a

cigarette.” Garlog turned abruptly and strode, awkward and ridiculous in his ten pounds of latex, for the coat rack where his pre-King of Darkness fleece jacket was hanging. The need to piss was reaching feverish and terrible heights. He’d need to act quickly on his Beautiful Thought.

“I thought you didn’t smoke,” called Goldman.

“I, uh, picked up the habit recently,” muttered Garlog as he fumbled awkwardly through his jacket pocket for his car keys. Clutching them, he stepped outside into the bright California sunshine for what felt like the first time in several days. Paying no mind to the various low-ranking studio lot workers scuttling around, he immediately started for Klein’s trailer. *Please don’t let there be any groupie sluts in here, please don’t let there be any groupie sluts in here, please don’t let there be any groupie sluts in here.* Garlog rapped softly on the door. Silence. A good sign. He tried the knob. It gave softly. *Klein wouldn’t expect anyone to deign to enter his trailer, the prick.* Holding his breath, the King of Darkness slipped quietly into the Star’s trailer. Empty. There were no groupie sluts in there after all, thank God. There was, however, a sizeable amount of cocaine on the cheap IKEA coffee table, confirming Garlog’s suspicions about Klein’s leisure habits. He scooped a pinch of the fine powder up and nestled it between his inner lower lip and gums. Extra energy would serve him well here.

Garlog acted quickly, checking for cutlery other than the plasticware the catering company provided for free. There was none. Thankfully, he’d brought his car keys. He took off his black wizard robe, letting it pool on the floor around him, and began to saw furtively at the crotch of his latex suit with the key to his Lincoln Navigator, the longest on the keychain.

It probably took about five minutes to saw through the thick latex. They’d probably be looking for him in the studio by now, but Garlog didn’t care: his member was finally free to wreak havoc and provide the immense relief that its owner had been craving for the last hour and a half. Garlog, hands shaking, fumbled and fished around in the dark, murky slit he’d created with his key, finally withdrawing his member. It was like a chemical reaction: as soon

as Garlog's Johnson touched the sweet oxygen of Klein's trailer, it let fly a brilliant golden beam of liquid glory as powerful as a fire hose. Desecration Ray, indeed.

It was the longest, most delicious, and certainly most glorious piss the King of Darkness had ever taken. The urinal rapture probably lasted somewhere from a minute and a half to two minutes; either way, Garlog certainly wasn't counting. He peed on everything. He soaked the walls, the rug, the already shitty carpet. He soaked the drapes, both the sofa and the loveseat, the front door. He peed on what appeared to be a picture of someone who appeared to be Klein's mother—she looked like a bitch—and Klein's carefully arrayed shoe collection next to the front door. When he was done, the inside of Pete Klein's trailer looked like a bunch of little kids had had a urine-filled super soaker fight inside of it. Glorious. The fact that Garlog had been shunned for the Oscar all those years ago no longer mattered, nor did the fact that Pete Klein was going to make about three times as much as he would off of this crappy fantasy movie they were starring in. For a few beautiful moments, Garlog was on top again, with a bright career ahead of him, smiling out of the pages of People magazine, making its middle-aged housewife readers swoon.

He put on his ridiculous wizard robe again. It and the latex suit were both suddenly quite tolerable. He hoped nobody asked him to take his robe off later, then he'd be forced to tell them to go fuck themselves. Whistling, he strode from the trailer with a spring in his step. Perwin the Good was waiting to do battle for the fate of the Eldarr, and Dave and the like would be looking for him on the set.

The Burning Santa Story

by Davina Caddell

The air was crisp and cold against Xander's face as he walked down Main Street and the cars crept by at their small-town blazing speed of twenty-five miles per hour. The light poles were decorated with blinking lights and twisted wreaths and somewhere off in the distance Xander could hear the persistent ringing of a Salvation Army bell.

No one noticed Xander as he pulled the collar of his black hand-me-down Pea coat up closer against his neck and jammed his hand into his pocket, walking down the sidewalk. He came to a railroad crossing for the train tracks that cut right through the middle of the small town and on straight through the other neighboring small towns in the area. To his right stood an old brick building that was once a bustling train depot with benches full of travelers and their luggage waiting for the bullet-shaped passenger train to track them away. It now stood pathetically converted into an historical museum with haunting black and white photographs on the walls inside and cheesy holiday lights spiraling around its decaying roof. Next to the forgotten building stood a giant wire Santa Claus frame with red and white garland wrapped around it, which towered over Xander and waved at the passing cars. *Jingle bells, jingle bells, jingle all the way.* Xander winced as he heard a car stereo blasting Jingle Bells while stopped at a red light up ahead. *Jingle bells, jingle bells*

"Alexander... Alexander will you please try and focus!" the boney psychiatrist sat behind her desk, looking down at Xander. Xander sat staring at the bookshelf of medical and psychology textbooks. On one of the shelves there was a diploma that read "Francesca Jane Lauren M.D. and Psy.D." The psychiatrist pursed her lips and tapped her pencil on the desk impatiently.

“These sessions are for your own good, Alexander. The sooner you realize that and stay focused during them, the sooner you can get better and go home! Alexander, look at me!”

“Can you turn that crap off?” Xander said, turning his head so it was facing the woman, but did not meet her eyes. She glanced down at the radio on her desk that was playing a jazzy version of Jingles Bells softly but didn’t turn it off.

“Why do you hate Christmas so much, Alexander?”

“Huh?”

“Why do you hate Christmas so much?”

Xander leaned back in his padded seat and picked at the cuticles of his short nails. You weren’t allowed to have nails longer than your finger pads in places like this.

“Because...” he shrugged.

“Because why?” Dr. Lauren persisted.

“Turn off that goddamn music and I might tell you,” Xander snapped.

Dr. Lauren shook her head calmly. “Answer my question and I’ll turn it off.”

The synthetic fabric of his patient clothing squeaked against the dark green leather of Xander’s seat as he slouched down. The radio still played the same song softly, *Jingle bells, jingle bells, jingle all the way...*

Xander set the gas can that nobody noticed him carrying down on the cold concrete and fished in his coat pocket for a pack of cigarettes and a lighter. The lighter flashed and he sucked down the bittersweet nicotine deep into his frozen lungs, holding it there a few minutes before releasing it into the frigid air. Across the street was a tiny little theatre where they put on low budget plays and recitals throughout the year. A mock old school sign with flashing light bulbs around the edge read “the Nutcracker” in big black

letters. A couple walked across the street hand in hand towards the building, where another couple stood huddled under the wanna-be old school sign waiting for them. Xander could hear their laughter as they greeted each other and hurried inside the play house out of the cold. The light at the end of the road finally turned green and the car whose radio was playing Jingle Bells pattered away, leaving a faint trail of jingle bell music as it went. *Laughing all the way HA Ha ha...*

“I hate the happiness!” Xander grumbled into his chest.

“You hate other people’s happiness?” Dr. Lauren confirmed.

“They all pretend to be so damn happy and cheerful. For one month out of the whole year every one pretends to be best friends with everybody all for the sake of the Christmas spirit, then three, two, one, Happy New Year and they’re back to being their regular asshole selves. It’s bullshit! That’s why I hate Christmas. It’s fake! Now will you turn that crap off?”

Dr. Lauren extended her long boney arm and switched off the radio and the office was filled with an awkward silence. Xander could hear the soft humming of a floor buffer that one of the dirty old janitors was pushing around hypnotically in the hallway.

“Is that why you did it?” Dr. Lauren finally asked.

Xander shrugged. “You want a better reason?”

Dr. Lauren pursed her lips and began tapping her pencil on the desk again. Xander smiled to himself as he watched the woman flip though his file in frustration. She stood up and walked over to a small kitchenette in the corner of the office. She poured herself a cup full of the brown liquid from the coffee pot and brought the cup to her lips. The coffee was old; she frowned and turned it upside down over the sink.

The gasoline splashed up against the giant Santa Claus and quickly soaked into the garland ropes, leaving a thick smell in the air. Xander took a deep breath of the fumes and smiled to himself. His cigarette hung loosely in his lips

as he worked to saturate every layer. He sat the empty gas can on the concrete and stepped back. Tires thumped against the rails as ignorant drivers cruised by across the train tracks. Xander took one last drag of his smoldering cigarette then flicked it into the giant Santa's belly. The saturated garland erupted into flame, snapping and popping, and in a matter of seconds the entire Santa Claus was engulfed in hot orange flame that licked at the night sky above happily. Xander picked up the empty gas can and walked away down the unlit side of the tracks as someone screamed from across the street.

"Let's talk about that Christmas Eve, Alexander," Dr. Lauren said, returning to her seat.

"Which night?"

"You know which one, Alexander, the night you burned down that Santa Claus, you remember?"

Xander shrugged, "Vaguely."

"Why did you set it on fire, Alexander? Was it for attention?"

Xander shrugged again, "I don't know. I just did. I just thought one day, what if someone lit that stupid Santa Claus on fire? So I did"

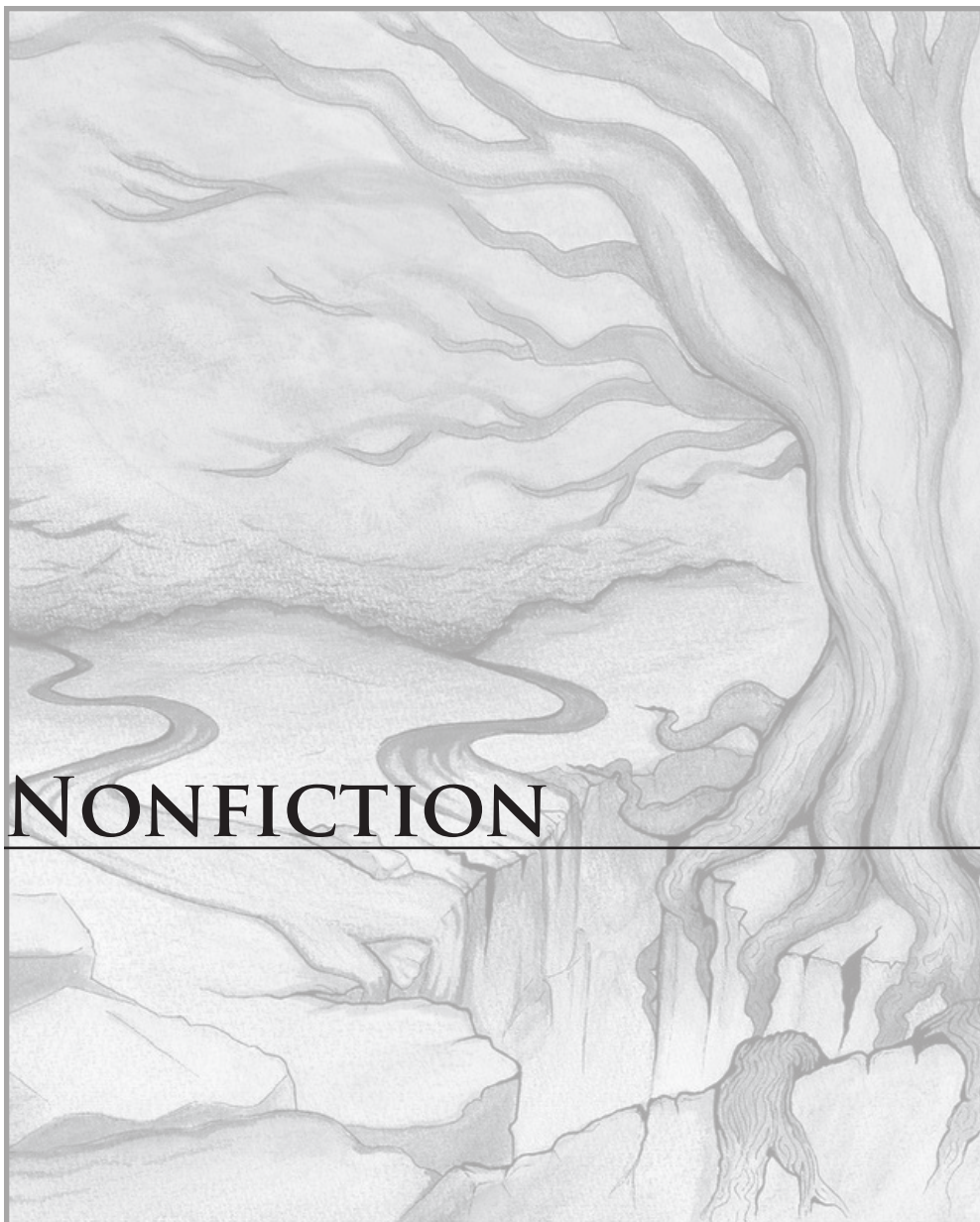
Dr. Lauren looked up at the big red clock on the wall and sighed. "Time's up for today, Alexander. We'll talk more next time. You can go back to your room now."

Xander silently got up and walked out of the office, down the bleached hallway to his door-less room. There were no doors in this place, no privacy. Crazy people aren't allowed to have privacy.

He wanted to confess everything to this frail little woman with three first names, but he didn't. He just kept picking at his cuticles and staring at the floor. He wasn't going to waste his time talking to a woman who didn't believe he wasn't crazy. He knew that she thought he was crazy, why else would she have sentenced him to live in this locked padded palace to *get*

better? Why else would she want to meet with him, three times a week, and prescribe him the same sleeping pills and anti-depressants that all the other crazy people here are forced to take? He wanted to talk to her but he knew she couldn't help him. He didn't really burn down the Santa Claus on Main Street next to the ancient train depot. He just said he did. It only happened in his head, just like most of the things in that file she was always flipping through during their sessions. He had always been good at telling stories. It wasn't 'til he became good enough to make people believe that they were true that they put him in this place. He had talent, a talent the doctors here call pathological lying. He was so good at it that even she believed him. So instead of telling her everything, and getting *better*, he spent his session in Dr. Lauren's office robotically answering her probing questions with whatever came to his mind.

Eventually she would get tired of asking him questions and sentence him to a sedation coma or he'd run out of things to tell her and tell her the truth, then they'd stamp his file with *cured* and send him back out into the world *rehabilitated*. He didn't really care what happened to him. Either way he was stuck here with Dr. Lauren until she decided otherwise. There was nothing worth going back to out there anyways. He lay down on his plastic-coated mattress and pondered what he could say in his next session with Dr. Lauren. The burning Santa story was getting old. It was time for something new to add to his file, something that would keep Dr. Lauren's pencil tapping on her desk for weeks.



My Mountainous Molehills

by William Collin Campbell

The first day at Eugene Field Elementary School— well, my first day, anyway. It is mid-November, and I stand outside the front door of my new house, barefoot, marveling at the mild weather. I scrunch my face against the warm wind, frowning at the brown grass and lack of snow. We moved here from Minnesota because my mom wanted to be closer to her parents after the divorce, but I am starting to realize that even the coolest grandparents can only keep me entertained for so long. I am going to be stuck in this place (an hour from the nearest theater or mall!) for the rest of my young life. “Get your shoes on, we’re late!” comes a scream from inside the house.

“I don’t *have* shoes, Mom!”

“We’ve been over this, now hurry up and get in the van!”

My mom is running about the house, rounding up my two older brothers, and trying to feed my younger brother, in her typical last-minute flurry, and I step back inside the foyer. After slipping my socks on, I slide the slatted closet doors open and look down at my impending doom. To clarify, my shoes are in Kansas right now. They have been there before, but this time they stayed behind, presumably because they knew what awaited them in small-town Southwest Oklahoma. I look down at my only other means of foot protection now: brown, fur-lined snow boots, which are several sizes too large, like everything else that was handed down for me. I guess this is what happens when you move to a town that doesn’t sell shoes after six p.m., a concept which baffles me.

She drives us across town, past houses that look like they may have been nice once, past a downtown filled with businesses without customers, and past countless churches which may still have congregations, but it is impossible to tell. After dropping my oldest brother off at what I am sure is an abandoned prison, sans security walls, Mom takes my year-old brother and me to Eugene Field Elementary School, and into the principal's office for orientation. I do my best to avoid staring at the principal's wig-line and bad makeup while my mom fills out our paperwork. My brother makes faces at me, pointing and laughing silently at my snow boots.

I can see it now. They're going to have me stand on a desk in the center of class, chairs ringed around, all eyes on the new kid's feet, waves of laughter until tears run and their sides hurt, the crooked old teacher cackling like a witch in the corner. "Collin. Collin. *Collin!*"

I look up, recognizing the tone my mother uses to snap me out of "La La Land" as she calls it. "Your room is at the end of the hall, 4B, Mrs. Holt. Good luck, Peach Cobbler!"

I grimace involuntarily as she leans in to kiss my forehead, my brother does the same before bouncing off to his classroom, and then I am alone in the hallway. Trudging down the hall, I take a quick glance at a side exit. I've skipped school before. God will understand if I do it just this last time. Mom won't, though, and she will know, just like the last time, when she found me hiding under the bed after a decadent Tuesday afternoon of video games and junk food.

A wrinkled head with greying, curly hair appears from the door at the end of the hall. 4B. Mrs. Holt. "Well come on in, Collin!" the teacher warbles excitedly. Her accent is thicker than a cartoon woodsman's, I think to myself, but more importantly, she doesn't even seem to notice my boots. There may be hope yet.

I slink into the alien classroom, beside my teacher, futilely trying to mask the clunking of my footsteps. The blood rushing into my face leaves my hands tingling and cold, an industrial grinder doing its work on my insides.

With head held low, I look at my surroundings to the best of my ability, avoiding eye contact with the unknown children at all costs. The walls are cluttered with faded posters, the row of short windows barely functioning through layers of dust and haphazardly drawn shades.

The teacher is saying something to the class, probably introducing me. The guide to the one-boy zoo exhibit, everybody come and see! The class breaks into excited whispers, and I'm sure she's mentioned now that I'm from Minnesota, which might as well be a foreign country to these small-townners. I scratch nervously at my rusty, lopsided bowl cut (made with a real bowl!) praying that the teacher will free me from my invisible display case and let me be seated. The teacher's aged hand grasps my shoulder and I look up at her squinted eyes, made visible only through the lenses of her oversized glasses. Her mouth is still moving, and her finger, clumsily coated in chipped red nail polish, points at an empty seat.

The room is silent, everyone eager to see how a foreigner walks and behaves. I take the first step. *Clomp*. Clutching steadfastly now to my olive green sweatpants, I take a deep breath and focus intently on my overweight feet, cursing my mother. *Clomp*. I think of the rest stop outside Kansas City where I left my tennis shoes, paired neatly beside the water pump so they wouldn't get wet. *Clomp*. Maybe they are still there! I'll call Mom to pick me up, she'll drive me to get them, and I can return to school as a normal kid, not the weirdo who wears snow boots in t-shirt weather. *Clomp*. I blink away my delusion, realizing I am standing in front of my designated seat. My sweating hands grip the off-blue chair, and it screeches across the colorless tile floor. I manage to climb into my seat without a major catastrophe and the teacher ends the silence with a loud clap, and begins twanging on about math, science, and everything else a fourth-grader loathes. Eventually, through careful peeks, I discover that not only do the kids in the class not seem to be entranced by my boots, but they seem to be very uninterested in me in general.

At the end of the day, as we prepare to leave class, the chubby kid I have been sitting next to all day without a peep leans over to me, honest admiration in his voice as he says, "Cool boots."

After All, Guys Only Like Girls Who...

by Brooklyn Gulbransen

The air smells of summer, coconut and chlorine. I can hear the children splashing in the shallow end of the pool and Backstreet Boys coming out of the speakers full of static overhead. I have spent every day of my summer at the pool and today is not going to be an exception. The sun is beating down on my face and the heat is making me feel a little nauseous. I am starting to wonder why I lay out here day after day feeling this way. Oh yes, I remember now, guys only like girls who have a tan.

My legs swing over the side of the lounge chair. At sixteen my body should just be growing into its own but I have looked this way for years. My legs are short but tan from the summer spent by the pool and my chest spills over my bikini top. My boobs have been the bane of my existence since I developed at the age of fourteen and became the butt of all the jokes in my jr. high. Now that I am in high school it is starting to become okay that my 34 Ds are bigger than the rest of the girls that I know— only because guys are starting to talk about it like it's a good thing and not drawing pictures of me to pass around the class.

I step up to the pool and look over my shoulder; I hope there is a hot guy looking at me. Instead I find my mother, long limbed and tan, about to lie on the lounge chair that I just vacated. My mother, the woman that all my friends talk about, the beauty who knows just how pretty she is and tells me all the time. I wish that someday I could look like her but I know that I never will. She has always been skinny, beautiful and she can talk to anyone, while I have always been a little chunky and have a hard time making friends. Why does she have to be out here today? Today was supposed to be the day when I got to feel good about myself and not a day when I have to be self conscious because everyone is looking at my mother. I always feel self conscious when I am around my mother.

I dive into the pool, hoping to get away from her and all the eyes staring her way. The water on my hot skin feels good. I might just stay in here and hide all day from the humiliation of being Cheryl Bishop's only fat kid. At least that is what she told me yesterday. "Brooke, someone asked me today if I had any fat kids. I told them just the one." Mom sure knows how to make me feel good about myself.

I am not a very good swimmer, just one more thing that I do that embarrasses Mom, so maybe I should just get out and face the music of my mother. I try never to let my feelings about the way that she talks to me show. Everyone always thinks I am crazy when I tell them what she says anyway. She would never talk to me like that in front of people; it would ruin her reputation as the perfect mother and she can't have that.

So I just try to grin and bear it and hide my food while I eat because fat girls should never eat. After all, guys only like skinny girls.

After getting out and drying myself off, I brace myself for the infamous chubby bunny cheeks that Mom gives me every time she sees my flabby little belly. The last time we were at the pool she told me that from behind I almost look like I could be pretty but as soon as I turn around you can see how fat I am and it just all goes away. I suck my stomach in until it hurts, hoping that maybe today she will lay off and I can just enjoy the sun.

She doesn't say anything to me as I sit on another lounge chair and try to settle in. I better put the baby oil on my skin before she tells me that I need to get more sun. After all, guys only like girls who have tans. I pull my wet hair up in to an elastic to get it off my face and lie back and start to read a book, and that's when she starts. She takes the book from me and hands me a magazine because we wouldn't want me to look like a nerd while in front of people, would we? I read all the time, but it embarrasses her when I am in public. Everything I do seems to embarrass her nowadays. While I am distracted by my magazine she has come to a decision.

"You know, Brooke, you haven't been working this summer. Your dad and I had talked about it at the beginning of summer and we thought it would

be good for you to have time hanging out with your friends but I am starting to think otherwise.”

“Why, Mom? I haven’t been much trouble this summer. I have spent most of my days here.”

“Oh, I know it’s not that you are doing something wrong. I just think that you need to start making some money. I don’t expect you to pay for anything right now but I think you need to start saving up your money.” Oh, well that’s not so bad. I guess she is just looking out for me. “You know some day you are going to need a boob job or a nose job and you need to start saving for that right away. They are expensive.” Wow, that was unexpected. Or really not so much, I should have known she didn’t want me to save money for college or a place of my own some day. After all, guys only like girls who...

I don’t think I am ever going to be the kind of girl a guy likes. That’s what Mom says anyway, and, after all, isn’t the whole point to life to be the kind of girl that a guy likes?

Just How Much Does a Nickel Coke Cost?

by Thomas Hanna

We called her Nan-Naw. That was my older brother's first attempt at the word "Grand-ma". She wore the same uniform year round. Her image is as alive in my head as if it were only yesterday. Let's take it from the top. Crowning her fluff of silver hair was a black pillbox hat with the widow's veil turned upward to keep it out of her make-up plastered face. Inside her black wool jacket she wore a white blouse with pleats on each side of the buttons which were always fastened all the way to the top. The blouse was tightly tucked inside a black dress made of some heavy material: most likely wool, which stretched from her waist down to her mid-shin. From her black hybrid shoe/boots her black hose reached all the way to just under her knee cap. At the time I just thought that it was standard grandmother attire. Witches have costumes. Santa Claus has a costume. Postmen have costumes. So too, I reasoned, should grandmothers.

Years later I discovered that the "widow in mourning" outfit might have been a sham. Family lore has it that one day my grandfather went out to buy some cigarettes and never returned. I've been told that the men on the paternal side of my family suffer from that failing. It is not as though we have a tawdry history of leaving our wives in the lurch, but we males on my father's side are cursed with absolutely no sense of direction. These days I've reconciled myself to the notion that since he left for a pack of cigarettes and never returned, he must have lost his way and died of lung cancer before he could make it back home: ergo, the widow in black.

It is a short walk from 11th and Hudson (what was then the "old apartment house") to McNellies (what was then Veasey's drug store) at Plaza

Court. Good thing too, because Nan-Naw refused to own a driver's license and so walked just about everywhere. Driving was most likely a violation of the spirit, if not the letter, of the protocol and etiquette for a proper grieving widow. In that brutally hot summer of 1960, we *both* became familiar with that walk to the Veasey's drugstore soda fountain that we so often took. The instant that I heard the beckoning call, "Tommy, are you ready for a treat?" I was out the door and eagerly waiting on the sidewalk. She would, of course, have to put on her pill box hat and heavy dark jacket while I idled on the hot concrete. No matter: I was accustomed to waiting. My birthday was approaching and I was about to turn five. That's right, *The Big Nickel*. I'd already waited almost a whole year for that. What was a little more of a delay? We were, after all, going to the Veasey's drugstore soda fountain.

The first thing that struck you when you entered Veasey's drugstore was the cashier's kiosk, which always reminded me of just another one of those thousands of newsstands that were on every other street corner in downtown Oklahoma City. Along the east wall was the soda fountain with at least a hundred stools to sit on. That is, unless they were busy, in which case they only had a handful of stools all occupied by big fat slow adults. Being four (almost five) and a tall four at that, a little help was necessary to mount the soda stool. I'm still amazed to this day when I think how that short plump woman could seize me by the wrist, exhale a small grunt, lift and plop: I was instantly on the stool, square and secure. It took a little growth on my part before I could finally rest my elbows on the counter. Incessantly being reminded that I was practicing "bad table manners" made achieving this rite of passage all the more worthwhile.

A few pleasantries were always exchanged between Nan-Naw and the kind generous woman behind the soda fountain counter. No matter that it was probably a different woman each time, I always thought of that charitable woman behind the counter as Mrs. Santa Claus. She was not quite as ancient as Nan-Naw but they shared the same taste regarding their black and white motif in clothing. To the reasonable four year old, it is not too much of a

stretch to believe that Mrs. Claus might take on a part-time job during the Christmas off-season. They all varied slightly in appearance from one Mrs. Claus to the next, but they were all so kind and generous and every single one of them knew me by my first name. That was comforting but it was also the cause for some alarm. Did Santa share his naughty-nice list with his wife, or wives? Surely not, I thought. That has to fall under the protected confidential communications that shield Doctor-Patient, Lawyer-Client, Priest-Parishioner and Santa-Kid among others. The thought that Santa might have more than one wife was a little disconcerting. Although I didn't think much about those types of things at the time, who's to say that Santa isn't an orthodox Mormon? He certainly sported the proper beard for it. That also would go a long way in explaining that small army of little helpers he keeps around. Just where did they all come from?

But I digress, forgive me.

At long last the moment would finally come and from Mrs. Claus' fingertips would slide before me a sweaty ice cold "nickel coke" in one of those funny chopped off light bulb glasses. I always made quick work of mine while Nan-Naw and Mrs. Claus chit-chatted. I could only stand to listen for a little while but once I discerned that their conversation had nothing to do with Christmas presents, my interest would wane until it was time to go. Mrs. Claus and Nan-Naw would invariably bid each other a friendly farewell, at which time we would slowly walk to the cashier stand where it was the cashier's turn to visit with Nan-Naw. All the while I conspicuously studied the candy selection under glass, occasionally giving her a starving puppy look. Those looks rarely worked on an old seasoned Grandma type like my Nan-Naw. She was, after all, trained by my older brother.

That one famous late summer afternoon it was especially steamy. At least two weeks had passed since my five-year milestone and I was well on my way to number six. The invitations to go enjoy a "treat" at the Veasey's drugstore soda fountain had dried up dramatically since my "half a decade" landmark birthday. My day in the sun had apparently expired. That particular

afternoon was not unlike the others that summer in that Nan-Naw honored her ritual of taking an afternoon nap. I sure had a strong desire, nay, a hankering, for a nickel coke from the Veasey's drugstore soda fountain. The thought of waking her and suggesting as much entered my mind for only a second before it was quickly dismissed. We were told to be super extra quiet when she was napping, so pestering her to ask a favor didn't exactly follow that logic. Need I disturb her at all? In my reckless youth I might have tried something that foolish and selfish but I was five years old now. Somebody younger and less mature may even have had second thoughts about undertaking this journey unescorted, but again, I was, as the big calendar over the stove in the kitchen would attest, a five full years old. The path to and from the Veasey's drugstore soda fountain was very well known to me. I knew I could do this myself. Might this be my first test of manhood?

When I entered through the heavy doors I noticed that everything was just as it had been when I last visited the Veasey's drugstore soda fountain, *with* Nan-Naw. Recently, I had taken to giving the black-padded chrome-sided stools a hearty spin before boarding. Never in my life have I been able to get a full revolution whirl from one of them. I am convinced they are diabolically engineered like that by the toy/ board game/soda fountain stool cartel (read: Hasbro, Milton-Bradley, Fisher-Price) to deliberately frustrate those ages five and up. With a little less help and a lot more effort than I last needed, I did manage to climb atop the slick surfaced stool; never once concerning myself with my dismount as I had learned that gravity has a way of taking care of such matters, bruises and all.

"Well, hello, Tommy," beamed Mrs. Claus, "What will it be, the usual?"

"Please." I said *please* without any prompting from Nan-Naw. Wait until she hears about this, she will be so proud.

"Where is your grandmother? Shopping?"

"Yeah, I think so." Well, maybe not so proud, I just out and out lied. If I lied, I must have had a whisper of an inkling of a hint that what I was doing

wasn't on the up and up.—Drat! That left me culpable if only to myself. It left me culpable.—Drat! Drat!

“Wow, Tommy, you must have been some kind of thirsty. Would you like another?”

“Well you see

“Don't worry about it, sport. It's on the house.” I had heard that phrase before, “on the house” which in essence meant they were free. But aren't they always free? They're always on the house aren't they? I never had to pay for a nickel coke at the Veasey's drugstore soda fountain.

After the third or fourth nickel coke, Mrs. Claus became very curious about my grandmother's where-a-bouts. I began to say something, probably laying the ground work for yet another whopper of a lie, when in walked my father. Great, maybe he'll sit next to me and we'll knock back a few more and Mrs. Claus won't be so concerned about the comings and goings of my grandmother. The determined look on my father's face immediately told me that is not what he had in mind. With his left hand he grabbed my wrist. The same wrist Nan-Naw would caress when hoisting me onto the stool. Dad's grip, however, lacked her tenderness. Then, in a motion I can only liken to that of the fury and velocity of an atomic-powered turbo-charged paddle wheel on a river boat slapping the waters of the Mississippi, he “reddened my back side”. We didn't, at the time, have the technology to measure it but the BPMs (Blows per Minute) must've been off the charts. While Dad dragged what was left of me to the cashier's kiosk counter, I managed to take a panoramic view of the entire Veasey's drugstore. In every department; cosmetics, pharmacy and even toiletries, every eye, employee and customer alike, was fixed upon me and nary a smile from the whole lot of them. Quickly I glanced behind the soda fountain searching for one shred of salvation, a twinkle of hope but there, too, Mrs. Claus was flat lipped. *Oh jeez, what in the world have I done?* I could just imagine the conversation when she returned home.

“Did you have an interesting day at the Veasey’s drugstore soda fountain?”

“Well, Santa, do you know that Tommy Hanna kid that lives at 501 NW 11th ...” She would have to give out my address, now wouldn’t she? Now there was not even a small chance of confusing Santa with any other Tommy Hanna who might frequent the Veasey’s drugstore soda fountain. I bet I know of one chimney plunge where Santa won’t have any trouble squeezing in his bag of gifts this year. It was curtains for me.

With my future in ruins, Dad led this spiritually lobotomized shadow of a boy towards the cashier kiosk, grumbled some inaudible sounds to the cashier and slapped some coins on the counter. He growled some choice words downward at me, tightened his already vice-like squeeze on my wrist, and we made our ignominious exit.

And you know, Doc, I don’t think he even left a tip.

Too Stubborn to Die

by Aaron Whitestar

The waiting room was dark and quiet, like a church on Good Friday and just as grim. Everybody was speaking in hushed voices. Most were crying. Others were sobbing. Except for me: I was laughing. My dad was dying in the next room and I was laughing. What's wrong with me?

He had been in the hospital for a week; surgery for an infection and treatment for sleep apnea. The phone rang at one that morning, making my stomach churn. When has good news ever come that early in the morning? Like that guy with the prize patrol sweepstakes is gonna call at one in the morning: "You've won a million dollars!" Or some radio DJ decides to call and tell us that we won a free trip to Hawaii. I don't think so. It was Uncle Henry. The hospital had been trying to reach us, he said. The nurses had found Dad unresponsive and not breathing. We threw on our clothes from the day before and raced to the hospital. My brother and I yelled at Mom the whole way to slow down. She would take the turns too sharp or go over the dips in the road too fast, sending the undercarriage into the pavement, the screeching metal on pavement would churn out red and orange sparks. She ran a red light even. Strange to be the voice of reason to a parent in a crisis. She did get us there in record time, though.

We got to his room only to see him hooked up to all kinds of equipment that did who knows what to him or for him. He was slack jawed and pale (I still ask myself how a full-blooded Indian could be so pale). The respirator he was hooked up to had to be taped onto his face and leads were fastened to his temples and hooked to a machine that showed us the loop-de-loops of his brain activity. We could barely hold onto his hands for all the needles and tape that criss-crossed along his hands and arms. The whites of his eyes showed under his eyelids and he would give a choke once in a while, as he strained against the rhythmic hiss of the respirator. They told us that when he was found he wasn't

breathing and that there wasn't a pulse. They told us he was clinically dead for the six minutes that he was worked on and oh, by the way, six minutes was about the maximum a brain could go without oxygen before brain damage. The nurses told us that there was nothing we or they could do except wait. Wait, they told us, and see what happens and maybe, just maybe he'll pull out of it.

We stood there and stared at him, each silently willing him to remove himself from the death shroud that his hospital blankets threatened to impose upon him. I hoped my eyes were lying to me. Having to see him lie there, limp and near lifeless, was a reality that I had thought too impossible to exist. I didn't want to believe it. Nope. Not my dad. Not the man who taught me how to play football as a kid. The man who taught me that family is everything. The man who showed me what being a man meant. Not the man who was always there for me. Not the man that I looked up to. Not to him, not to my dad. I refused to believe it. We stood there with him until the nurses got tired of us.

They shooed us out into the hall and into the waiting room, with its dog-eared magazines and uncomfortable, straight-backed chairs smelling of stale fast-food and ass. Then the crying started. Nobody cried in the hospital room, I suppose more from shock than from anything else. More family members showed up and the crying intensified. Everybody was crying and sniffing and hugging one another.

But not me. I couldn't do it. I couldn't cry. Instead, I sat staring at the wall, angry at everybody and everything. The harder they cried, the angrier I became. The more they kept trying to hug me, the more I resented them being there. I didn't want these people near me, even if they were my family. I hated them and I hated their crying. They acted as if he wouldn't pull out of it, as if he wouldn't rise like Lazarus from the grave, and pull those damned cords and wires off his body. He'd pull out of it. I knew it. I only had two reasons for believing it: a gut-feeling that he'd pull through and the certainty that Dad was just too stubborn to die like that. And that was enough for me.

Dad was my hero. While other people might look up to sports stars or movie stars, I looked up to my dad. He would tell me about the mischief he and his

siblings and cousins would get into as they were growing up. We would talk about religious, political, and social issues; sometimes we would argue about them too. He didn't do too well in school and only went to a junior college, but he had street smarts and was amazingly perceptive about things. He stressed how important education was and how I needed to learn as much as I could. Whenever I would do something he thought was great, he would say something like, "You did good, Bubba." Or, "That's good, Bubba," whenever I made him laugh. It felt so natural, that I never thought that I wouldn't be able to hear him say it again.

Just by watching him, I learned what it meant to take care of one's family, how to be a man, and how to be a father. Before this incident, he got sick and couldn't work until he got a doctor's clearance. So he went and found another job so that the bills would get paid. Sometimes he would work odd jobs so that we would be taken care of. He once worked as a bell ringer for the Salvation Army on Christmas Eve so that we could have a nice Christmas. He even saved me from having the dreadfully weird name of Erling that my mom's mother wanted to name me as an infant. That was my dad. That was the man that I refused to believe would die. I refused to cry because I knew he wouldn't just leave us. There was so much that I still needed to learn from him.

I sat there, brooding. Then, for some reason or another, my uncles decided to sit next to me. My dad's youngest brothers. They were drinkers and partiers that never really grew up out of their party years. So, they partied every weekend and some weekdays, at the expense of their jobs oftentimes. A few years after this, one would eventually become a junkie and almost die from a drug deal gone bad and the other would die from cirrhosis of the liver. Two of the most world-class-fuckups anybody could ever meet. And they saved me from myself, from my mind. They sat next to me, joking with me and telling me funny stories about my dad from when they were younger. Stories about how stubborn he was then and how he would be too stubborn to just give up now. Ted turned to Chris and said, "Remember that time when he got Grandma so mad she went after him with that wire hanger?"

Chris started laughing and said, “Oh yeah, yeah, he grabbed that thing out of her hand and ran out of the house and hid for the rest of the day.”

“And he only came back when it was supper time, acting like nothing had happened,” said Ted.

The laughter had just subsided, when Chris said, “Or remember that time in North Dakota (or was it Montana?), when there was a power outage during that blizzard, do you remember what he did?”

Ted, laughing, said, “He fired up that grill and grilled us all some hamburgers and hot dogs. He was bundled up in his biggest, heaviest coat, shivering and getting snowed on. But he pulled it off.”

They even reminded me of one time when we all visited a relative’s home at Thanksgiving and I had managed to knock my dad’s shoe off and leave it behind as we left. It was out of town, so we all carpooled in the same van. I had the bench in the back and my dad had the bench in the middle. As we were leaving, Dad told me to shut the door. I did. We made it back home and just as we were getting out, Dad realized he was missing a shoe (this should have been a warning sign for bad circulation in his legs). Not realizing it, I had closed the sliding door on his foot which sent his shoe flying off. We went all the way back, to find the shoe lying in the middle of the street. Everybody thought it funny and never let me forget it. Not even on this occasion. But it didn’t matter because I was already laughing and forgetting, for that moment at least, that my dad may die.

They told those stories and had me laughing. Just a little tired snicker and giggle at first and then full blown belly laughter. You know that kind of laugh: that big booming laughter that comes from your gut and if gone on long enough can make your stomach and sides hurt? But it’s a good kind of hurt, one that lets you know despite what kind of situation you are in and no matter the outcome, everything will be just fine.

And it was fine. Sort of. Though he needed a permanent tracheotomy for the sleep apnea, he pulled through. But there were soon other trials. Within a

year, he would lose one leg (actually it was the same leg that I closed the van door on) and then a few months later, the other leg. After his legs healed he would tease my mom that even without his legs he was still taller than her. And he was. We measured.

He would eventually require oxygen all day, every day because his lungs were failing him. He had developed walking pneumonia (he sometimes called it “rolling pneumonia” because of his wheel chair), and that along with the trache scarred his lungs to the point that he needed the oxygen all the time.

Each time he went into the hospital seemed like his last. But no matter how bad he got, he would pull through. The doctors would sometimes say that he was lucky that he had come to the hospital when he did, because if he had waited any longer he would surely have died. Time and time again this happened. He seemed too stubborn to die. He seemed to possess an inner strength that would get him through things that would have killed anyone else.

After five years of this, his weary body finally gave out. It just couldn't take it anymore. Whatever strength his spirit had was just too much for the body to take any more. I had expected him to come back from that last trip to the hospital, as he had so many times before. It's what I had gotten used to. He would get in a bad way, go to the hospital a while, and then come back home slightly worse for wear. But he always came back. Always. Leaving the hospital that last time, knowing I wouldn't be back to visit him, to go back home without him there or ever being there again gave me an empty feeling. Again I didn't cry. I refused to. I don't really know why I didn't. One aunt said to me that I was just like my dad when he was younger, that he would keep it all in and refused to let people near him, physically and emotionally.

One night after the funeral, I was trying to sleep. “Trying” being the key word. I've always had a hard time sleeping, but this time was bad. I kept thinking about Dad. It wasn't really memories I was thinking of, more like

flashes of images throughout the years: images of him hard at work doing some task with his tongue hanging out in effort and of him laughing with an amused gleam in his eyes. I had rolled over on my side and was finally drifting off when I felt a pressure on my shoulder. Alarmed at first, I looked in the direction of the pressure only to see nothing. After turning back around I felt the pressure again. Only this time I wasn't so alarmed. I flashed to a memory I had forgotten. I was about ten and I fell asleep next to Dad while watching t.v. He put a blanket over me and patted my shoulder just like what I was feeling at that moment. After that I slept better than I had in a long time.

After finally moving out of my mom's place and into my own apartment I had a dream about him. In the dream I was moving into my apartment and he was helping me. He was helping with some furniture even though he was in a wheelchair. I looked up to my apartment because it was on the second floor and when I looked back he was standing up. I asked him, "Where'd you get your legs?" He said, smiling, "I grew'em back. C'mon, let's get this up there." Next thing I knew, we were in the apartment, with everything moved in and put up (even cleaner than my apartment in reality). He took a look inside my new apartment and said to me, "This place is nice. You did good, Bubba."

I woke up crying and missing him like I hadn't before. It was the first time I cried since the whole mess started all those years ago. It was a good dream but I couldn't figure out why I was crying so much. I realized that it had been months since I heard him say my name or call me "Bubba" which he would do often. The realization pushed all that stifled emotion to the forefront. I was hurting and I missed him so much but I was also so glad. I was finally able to deal with, not only his death, but also with the feelings of watching a loved one slowly fall apart until there is only a shell of his former self. I am confident that Dad helped me come to this realization and helped me be able to deal with it. He assured me that though his body may be gone, he is still around and still as stubborn as ever.

Digging to China

by Robin Olson

In 1989, when I was the ambitious age of six, my sister suggested again that we dig to China in our sandbox. It wasn't the first time that we had embarked on such a mission. Several times before, we had made other bold attempts. They usually ended with the sandbox flooding, as we got tired of digging and broke out the garden hose, or when Mom called us in for dinner and then the work would come to a sudden halt. Today, for sure, we had decided, we were making it to China. We gathered our small beach buckets, the big yellow bucket with the red handle, and our trusty blue plastic shovels. The grass in our backyard was verdant and the air was warm, humid. My sister and I set to work with absolute earnest in our sandbox. It was wooden and about four feet by four feet, perhaps five. The dry sand turned over as we started digging a hole. We had resolved that this time, our hole was going to be so deep that you could fall into it and land on the other side of the planet. All of the grown-ups talked about digging to China. "If you think I'm going to pay this much for a car repair, then you might as well just dig to China!" they would say. Since grown-ups talked about it, surely it had to be true. Of course we could do it! The sky was deep blue overhead, and I could imagine breaking through the bottom of our yard and seeing blue skies on the other side, too. The buildings I pictured were red with curved roofs of clay tiles. The people who lived there were just on the other side of our yard, for sure. All we had to do was keep digging with our blue plastic shovels and we would see them soon.

We excavated in the most serious manner for rather a long time. Stray grass and tree roots kept bogging us down. The roots were hacked at with our plastic shovels until they gave way. When that didn't work, we grabbed

hold together and yanked, yanked, *yanked* until they came out of the ground with a satisfying *riiip!* Our hole was starting to go down pretty far, perhaps about three feet in depth. The sand turned to rich, brown dirt, moist from past rains. It was full of earthworms and other creepy-crawly, dirt dwelling creatures. Earthworms were slimy and gross and I hated touching them, let alone looking at them. The wriggly worms in the dirt reminded me of the time the boys next door ate earthworms and mud because I dared them. Those two would do anything on a dare. Especially a double-dog dare. No one could ever say no to a double-dog dare.

My mind wandered and I was filled with conjectures about our project. I wondered to myself if my sister and I would encounter underground monsters during our dig. If there were monsters under my bed at night, surely they were present under the ground as well. When we reached China, would we be hanging upside down? It was all the way on the other side of the planet, after all. I thought of all the times I had hung upside down on our swing set's trapeze bar. I liked to sway forward and backward, hanging by my knees, the earth swinging below me in crazy streaks of color. The blood would rush to my head, and my pigtails would swing, behind me, never quite catching up to my motion. Would it be like that in China? When I went through the hole we had carved through the earth, would I fall out and keep falling until I ended up in outer space? These thoughts were unsettling, but we had to press on. Fear would never get us to China. I could just see the people peeking over the edge of our tunnel. They would wonder who these clever, brave girls were, who would risk encountering monsters and falling into space just to see a foreign land.

We hit another root and our work abruptly slowed. This was a big root. It was thick, black, and looked like a tough one to get through. My sister started hacking at it with her shovel, as per our usual method in such an instance.

"Come on, Robin, help me with this," she said.

We both cut and jabbed at it, but to no avail. Our shovels were no match for this thing. Time for us to tug. We both grabbed on. The root was smooth and covered in gritty, moist dirt. We pulled and pulled as hard as we could. Combining our strength, my sister and I managed to yank it up into a decent-sized loop, the apex rising slightly out of our hole. That was as far as we could get it. Panting hard, my sister said, "We need a grownup to help us with this one. Go inside and ask Mom to come out here." I ran up the stairs of our backyard deck and into the kitchen. Mom was busy chatting on the phone.

"Mom, we need help pulling up a big root."

She held her index finger up in the "wait-a-second" sign and continued talking. I waited for what seemed an eternity (probably about ten seconds), but she clearly wasn't going to get off the phone to help us with some dirty, old root. I ran back outside and told my sister that Mom was busy.

"Go ask her again!" my sister growled. She was more determined than I was about going to China. I could see my sister was serious, which might have meant bad things for me if I didn't listen. Our disagreements usually ended up in a hair-pulling fight I would usually lose, so I ran back inside.

"Mom! Mom! Mom! Please come help us pull up this root! Pleeeaaase?" Mom gave me an irritated look and told her friend that she had to go, but would call her back. She followed me outside and I explained to her that we had been trying to cut this root with our shovels and pulling at it as hard as we were able, but it just wouldn't budge. We arrived at the sandbox and Mom looked down into our worksite. Her eyes grew large and she looked ready to do grievous bodily harm to someone within arm's length.

"Oh my God, you two cover that up right now!" she yelled. My sister and I were both dumbfounded by her reaction. What in the world was wrong with digging up such a big root? We were probably doing her a favor with our efforts.

"What's wrong, Mom?" my sister asked, bewildered.

“That’s not a root!” Mom shrieked.

“Well, it sure looks like one,” I said.

“It’s the telephone line!” she yelled. “Now cover that back up right now and you’re both grounded from using the sandbox! No more digging to China, to Peru, to anywhere!”

We set to work filling in our beautiful hole, dreams of China and its red buildings with curved clay tile roofs fading. I felt sincerely disappointed. Maybe it wasn’t a good idea to dream of doing impossible things, if tree roots were really telephone lines, I thought. I’d heard China was really far away, besides. And I didn’t want to find out if I would fall into space after jumping through the hole. It was the summer of 1989. My plastic shovel covered our ambitious efforts to dig to China. The sky was deep blue over our backyard and my world had grown a little bit smaller.

The Glories of Combat

by Brenden Stovall

“What was it like in Iraq?” If I had a nickel for every time I’ve been asked that question I would have a shit load of nickels. I get the fascination and the curiosity with the war and the men (and women) fighting in it. I just don’t get why a stranger or acquaintance feels entitled to an answer to a question that shouldn’t be asked. It’s usually asked differently between men and women, too. Guys usually want to know whether I killed someone, what it felt like. War movies are killing this country, man. I swear to myself all the time that the next time I get asked that question, I’m going to snap. “Ever seen anyone get killed?” they ask. *Fuck you*, I think, although I’m pretty sure the look in my eyes shares that same message. “I kill ‘em every night in my dreams,” I might respond, my eyes wide open and twitching. That usually works in ending the conversation.

Women are more sensitive. They usually act as if there is an obligation to ask a question, but are scared of the answer. The broken man and all that shit. I blame it on popular culture, Dr. Phil, and this idea that everyone is messed up and has issues they just have to talk about. Chicks are nicer about it than guys, sure, but usually in a way that makes you feel like a pussy. “Aw, you poor thing. Was it tough over there?” Honestly, if a soldier talks about combat to a chick, he thinks he has a chance at getting laid.

I don’t know what to tell anyone when they ask about Iraq. Sure, people die. It’s war for crying out loud. Don’t go branding me broken with some new age version of a Scarlett letter, though. No, I’m not going to dive behind some object if someone slams a door. No, I’m not going to start beating up my loved ones and blame it on PTSD. And no, I’m not going to describe the vivid images of combat to some stranger or acquaintance. Want to know

what those things are like? Be all you can be, go Army, and find out for yourself.

I must warn, however, that they don't tell you about the many "glories" of combat that you will actually experience. A trip to Iraq will help you learn to perfect the art of burning you and your fellow comrades's shit. That's right, I said it, and yes it actually does happen. Shit burning. Not as easy as you might think either. It takes a few weeks to discover the perfect combination of MoGas and diesel fuel it takes to burn crap properly. Then it takes a few more weeks to learn how to make the best of the "shitty situation". Like making shit smoke tornados that spiral fifty feet in the air from the metal bucket filled with crap and fuel, or like the time Private Jones roasted a honey bun over the burning poo. He threw up after biting into it. Good times.

Iraq was hot. Really hot. So hot, in fact, that by eight in the morning you are already soaking through your ACU's. By mid afternoon, if you haven't been in some AC to cool off, chances are your boots may have enough sweat to fill a water bottle. Sometimes we'd place bets on who had the most sweat in their boots, or who could wring the most sweat from their shirts. You would also consider yourself lucky to wind up riding outside the wire in a vehicle that actually had working AC. If not, a two minute drive would seem like eternity, and you would find yourself praying for someone to shoot at you just to have a reason to get out of that fucking vehicle. I mean, you are wearing about sixty pounds of body armor, gloves, long sleeves, pants, and a ACH (Kevlar helmet), while carrying two hundred and ten rounds of ammunition, medical pouches, grenades, and whatever else the mission on that particular day might require; all the while you are riding in a stuffy vehicle with no windows down and the temp outside is a ripe one hundred and thirty degrees, and Shartzer, your gunner, hasn't showered in three weeks.

Of course, the hotel accommodations aren't always bad. On one deployment I actually had the luxury of living in an eight-man tent! On

another trip downrange, however, I lived in a metal shipping container with no AC or heat. Sometimes during the summer my comrades and I would just sleep outside in the dirt where there was at least a breeze. Sometimes you have power, though, and can charge up a computer or even watch a movie on a TV in your tent. The quality of tent life is never really measured on how much space you have; no matter what conditions you are in you will never have much tent space. No, the quality of tent life is usually measured on how sanitary your roommates are. Sometimes you get stuck with the soldier that pees his bed. No, seriously, Baker pissed his bed so much we installed plastic lining underneath his cot. There's nothing like waking up in the morning to the smell of another man's ammonia-smelling piss. Other times you get lucky and are bunking it up with your best buds. Usually it's a mix between a few you like and several you hate. You have no choice but to take what you get. Just pray you don't end up with the losers that huff paint in the middle of the night, which, coincidentally, causes a person to pass out and piss himself.

Occasionally in Iraq, you'll get to have some entertainment. Washed up musicians like Montel Jordan love to visit soldiers. They stand up there on stage talking to you and acting like they are some kind of superior philanthropist coming to visit the poor combat peasants. We usually go to these events because it beats watching Shartzer scratch his balls and complain about his cheating girlfriend.

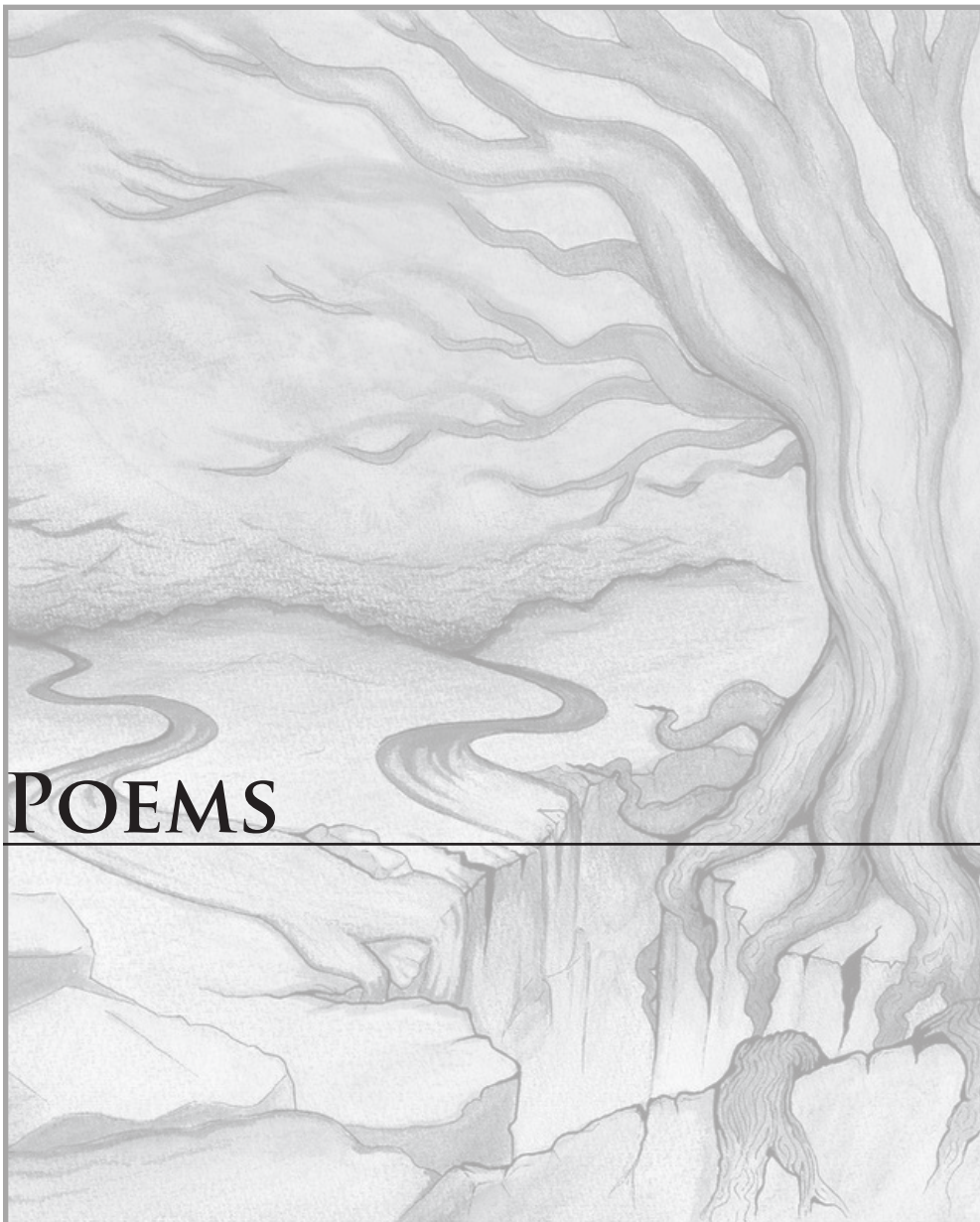
Before joining the Army, though, you should know that soldiers are crazy. I mean, you kind of have to be if you are volunteering to go to a dangerous, stupid-hot environment where all the indigenous population wants to kill you. If you want to be in the Infantry, you have to be willing to go on twelve-mile road marches wearing full battle rattle. You have to forget about your wife and kids if you have them; if the Army wanted you to worry about such things they would have issued them. Don't worry, though, while in Iraq you'll get to call home every once in a while. No complaining. At least now we have the ability to email. And tell your wife that if she expects the unit back home to help her move into a new house while you are gone,

she better understand that everyone on post will assume that she had sex with all the soldiers who helped her. You should also probably understand that there is a chance that she may have sex with each of the soldiers that help her. Hey, don't shoot the messenger. It's just a known truth in the Army that some wives hand out sex like it is Halloween candy. I remember the time Carmine came back to Iraq from R&R and was pissed off because his wife was pregnant and had given him Chlamydia.

Do you still want to know about Iraq? What it was like? I suppose you could ask the politicians, they'll proudly declare their expert opinion based off of a two-minute encounter with a soldier who was handpicked by the leadership. "I visited the troops and they are committed to finishing this war," one might say. Sorry, a soldier has no voice of his own. A soldier regurgitates to the visiting politician what the chain of command orders him to say. You want freedom of speech? Don't join the military.

When you go to Iraq you can't just decide it's not for you and come home. You can't say, "I didn't join to burn shit and get divorced." No, it doesn't work that way. Once you're there, you're stuck. When you do come home, though, some highly supportive old people and church-goers will meet you at the airport and clap and cheer for you. You will love them. You will hate the liberal protestors, though, and fucking hate those assholes who protest soldiers' funerals. Let me tell you, there's nothing like knowing that some dickwad protested your fallen comrade's funeral.

I'm terribly sorry if I didn't have enough time to explain how heroic and wonderful combat is, depicting the epic battles in which good conquers evil and every soldier is ultimately a great and wonderful person. In all seriousness, though, it isn't all that bad. In Iraq you make friends for life, friends that would literally take a bullet for you, friends you could trust forever; friends that you could trust with your life. Just don't trust them with your wife.



POEMS

And Darkness Coming

by Clay Randolph

Waiting for the presence of women—
gray house, pavement, light,
November evening.

The boulevard fills, headlights curve,
day's end, sad strangers pass,
dogs hurry beneath street lamps.

The boy waits...

Fearful of heavy doors,
shadowed porcelain,
creaking boards
where no one walks.

He waits.

They will come,
his dark-haired sisters
from beyond the blurred trees,
his gray-eyed mother,
her tired smile.

And he will stay
forever on this stoop
waiting for
the presence of women
to fill the house,
meet the evening
and darkness coming.

*ode to the little things**by Sarah Dooley*

the highlight of my day
was eating a perfect peach
succulently ripe
shaded by nature's paintbrush
sweet flesh
so juicy
that I stood over the
sink
while I ate it
watching drops of juice
be absorbed
by the quilted paper towel
crumpled in my hand.
I enjoyed this moment
this small, juicy minute of my day
so much
that when I finished
marveling at the source
the seed, now revealed
I smiled
pleased with life
and I ate another.

RIP (to the Collateral Damage of My Life)

by Chris Conklin

Dear Mother, Dear Father,
I don't want to bother,
Heavenly delight spoils like meat
When neglected.
I don't need you,
Anymore.
I have wandered far for influences,
After you dearly departed.
I spent five years, a vagabond observer
Down night slick streets of Sunnydale.
Lived in Agrestic, I mean majestic, and watched
Her little boxes turn to ash.
I rocked with Patti, fell for Amanda,
(The killers whispered the secret of life
To me that Christmas eve on acid, but I forgot)
Now, I spit gospel with the beats.
Spent two weeks in an institution, couple nights in jail
Some time in Italy, Rome was magnificent.
I've stolen hearts, and sought justice and fairness
In every step.
I did not know you, all of you, at least.
Every day I find myself becoming more like the
Ghostly image you left behind, because I know why
You were the way you were, confronted with the same choices.
My chest is where my heart is, but you
Were my home.
We can't go back, but I don't want to anymore
And I just thought you should know.

Valley of the Dolls

by Michael Snyder

Started when I was just six years old
To make my jittering end
And ever since then, the refills
Cause my mind to bend
If you want a free sample trial,
Just ask your friend
Or visit your psychiatrist, better yet,
Then it all begins
In the valley of the dolls—
Well, are they rockers or frauds?
Or are they pill-popping Mods?

Just took a red one so,
Let me know if it shows
If I start to fade just let me know
Why not take a Polaroid,
Watch the image grow
Just don't let my vanity show
(I think the pharmaceutical companies know)
In the valley of the dolls—
Are they pinheads and frauds?
Or are they pill-popping Mods?

Poverty

by John W. Alexander III

Looking back in time,
I can see three young boys riding their bikes to town.
Down a dirt road they went,
and off across a cotton field,
that was in full bloom.
The flowers were white with red streaks,
running down to the bottom of the petals.
The smell of the flowers and the salt air,
which the slight east breeze brought to bear,
was hard to explain.
That smell reminds a young boy of his mother.
Riding by the share croppers,
and their little shacks,
the roofs all rusted.
The paint peeling away like falling leaves,
with little front porches where the old men sit.
Upon metal chairs painted hundreds of times, hundreds of colors,
it all seemed to be quietly part of the earth, one silent moment.

A Good Cup of Coffee

by Lyndsie StremLOW

After brain surgery
you start to appreciate
a good cup of coffee.

The swill they bring you in the hospital
is in a brown plastic cup with a lid—
No one should drink coffee
from underneath a lid.
It should be brewed in a dirty pot
or a French press stained bean-brown

Starbucks was made for people
too busy to want life
Men and women in store-bought suits with security
in their boring relationships, internet porn,
paychecks, pensions...
People making plans for fun
fifty years from now.

The safety of those dumb
fucking sippy cups parents give their kids—
Those kids having their own
planners and piano or tennis
lessons lined up for years

Let the little shits
spill some juice now and then
It builds character to make messes
They'll learn that later in life.

A Conversation between Romantics

by James Rowch

I'm like a fire;
you will never put me out.
Catch me rolling like a stone across your plains,
with the wind at my back so not even your hurricane can stop me.

*And I am like a gypsy, covering lands you're all too scared to venture to.
To pick the dirt up with my hands and watch it filter through my fingers,
as the wind carries it westward whilst the sun sets and darkness lingers.*

I'm hiding something.

Be it a secret or a death wish, a scar upon my heart or a stain on my already dirty feet.
Just tell me when I cleanse myself you'll be right there in the fountain with me.
Cast me to crows if you want it like that.
But I can already tell you it won't stop the constant aching,
or the earth quaking inside your chest,
because the tremors in your heart
can't be stopped.

Lie to me.

*I've built a world inside a pine box,
to bury the idea that I was faking it.
And every word I ever said, dear, I meant it to the fullest
Even though the tempest in my heart was all but pushing me through this*

I've got a carbon heart now,
Made of the organic waste

Of the chemistry set from 4th grade
That sparked my interest of things
The inner workings of the being
Surely these are our components
I won't fight with love any longer
It's time we stopped being opponents

And held hands.

Brains Matter

by Benjamin Siess

At some point in March something went wrong.
Sam's brain misfired. It'd had enough.
He got depressed and started hearing things.

He did all that he could think to do.
But no one had answers. It was all too much.

Twenty-first century suicide notes in texts:
To his father-in-law, "You motherfucker."
To his friend, "Goodbye, I love You."

To Stacia his wife,
"I'm sorry. I'm not good enough."

He took a gun into their bedroom.
The mattress, just bought:
Ruined.

That is where Sam's story ends.
But in its place another:

Flowers, cards, warm meals, apologies,
Offers claim that they'll do whatever.
But as these things tend to go:

Everyone forgets
Before the widow.

She looks at their son,
And wonders how he'll deal.
Will not having his father wreck him?

Will he lie in bed
And wonder who he is?

Will the same chemicals that got Sam
Misfire in her boy?
Will his brain turn against him?

Oh Say Can You See

by Thomas L. Hedglen

When a picture is substituted for a thousand words,
How many mega-pixels will it take to compile a lexicon?
When dictionaries have been filled with images,
Will there be an illustration for “word atrophy”?
When all knowledge becomes visual,
What will a word be worth?
Who will build vocabulary?
How will one make a sentence?
Where will you curl up with a book?
Why would anyone speak, write or read,
If pictures say it all?
Hush. Close your eyes.
Conjure up a world without words.
Debate the issues of the future, using
Video logic from screen to screen.
Show your work without any explanatory context.
Express your feelings without emoticons.
Talk about your children without names.
Think about an eventuality in the making
Which abandons a legacy of words.
Can you see what I am saying?

Scissor Tale

by Kara Smith

Tired birds perched upon billboard ad
Tweet, tweet, how sweet
Silent ring tones smothered in dismay
Twenty seconds 'til they fly away

Wireless signals below their feet
Cows, chickens, delete, repeat
Wishing sun would come out to play
Wishing its blank-canvas life away

Four oh four not found, the sound
From modems and faxing, cars in passing
Unfastening, plastering decorated demeanor
Free men climb higher; no richer, no keener

Same Daydream

by Brandon Isaak

I clock in at this prison voluntarily
Day in and out I don't have to
Be here they tell me
There's smoke inside my head
I'm just a negative person
Look on the bright side
Of your stable income
Your brick and mortar house
All this beautiful stuff you own
All this beautiful fucking stuff
Piled up in heaps like trash stacks
The best hours of my day
Whored out to The four letter word
Just enough energy left by the end
Of the day to cook clean watch TV
Shop to shop and sleep
The forecast for tomorrow
Is always the same as today
I make up exodus plans
That pacify me enough
To keep going in this
Same daydream
We dream and redream
And pasteurize and homogenize
And regurgitate what used to be life
But now is a binary script
Programmed to be worked
And consumed and entertained

And we dream of virtual fantasies
Of stardom and fairytale love
Magical electronic devices
Legendary politicians
Perfect democracy spreading out
And infesting the lands
With red blooded 100%
Pure Angus Americanism
“You are free to do as we tell you
You are free to do as we tell you”
You are free to leave any time you wish
To leave all you have
Ever known.
These are
Your options.

For Allen Ginsburg

by LT Budrich

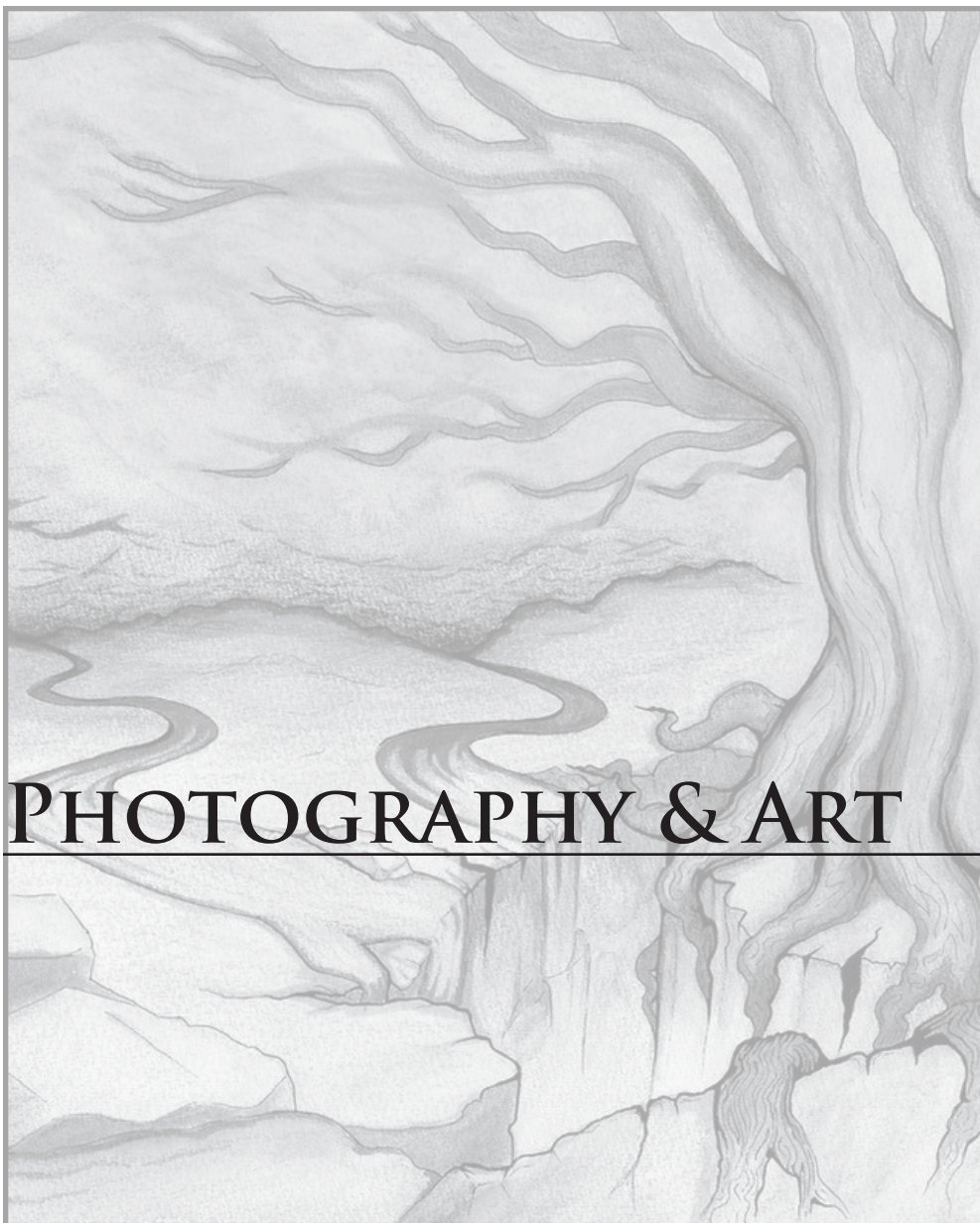
Give me
Ginsberg's voice,
the boom of god.

Shining, fleshy crown, yet
black-maned.
Russian lion.
King of May, who died in April.

I imagine silk worms gleaming
against your bones
in an unassuming mausoleum,
but you were put into the earth
to return to your
dark haired Naomi.

Were you ever what you wanted to be,
with miles of railroad track under your feet?

Did you find the love you penned
between
New Jersey and Chicago?
What was his name?





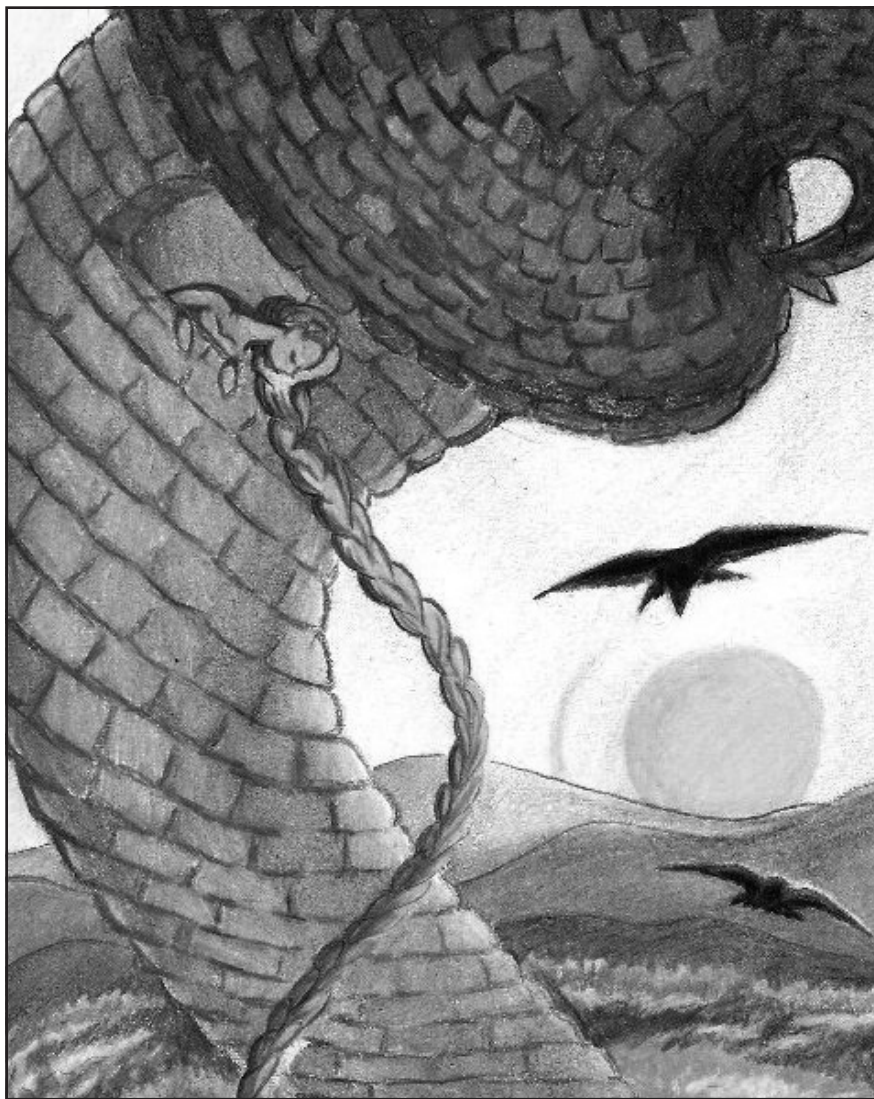
Going Up
Brenda Breeding



Tree of Life
Heather A. Skiba



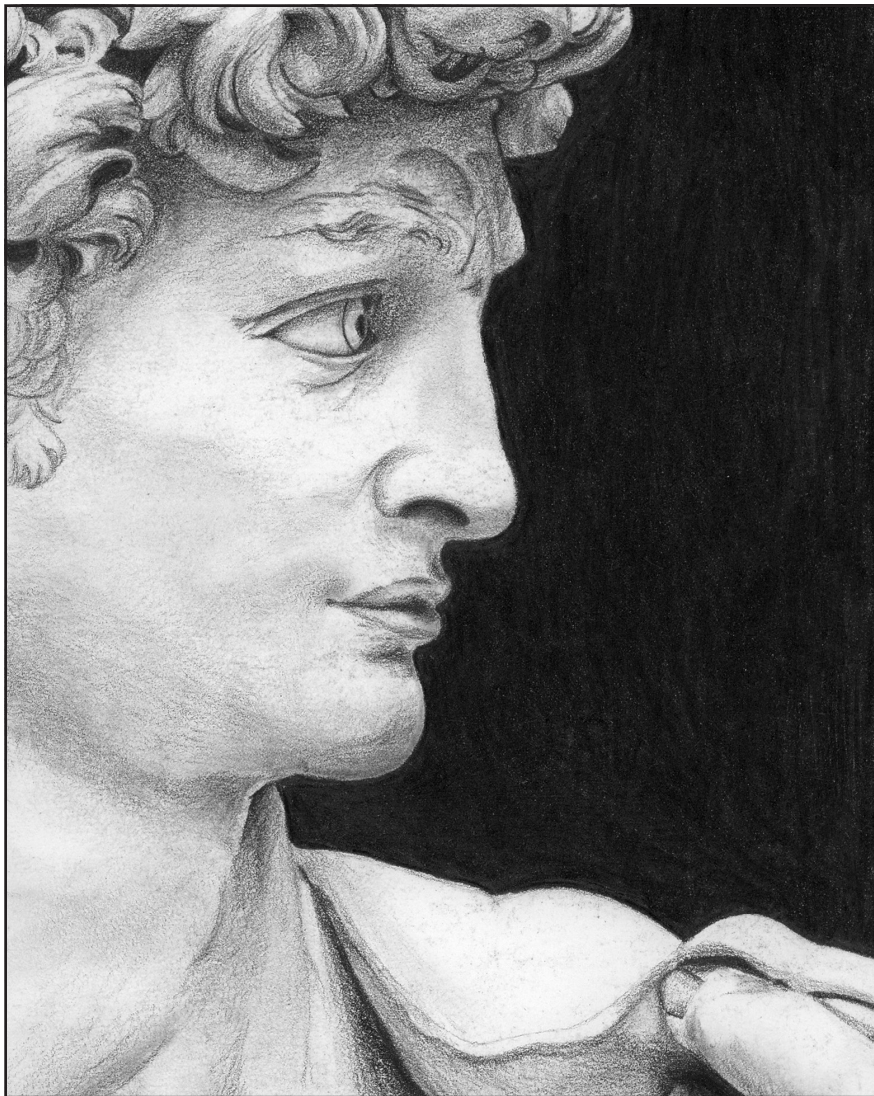
Four
Kara Smith



Let Down Your Hair
Heather A. Skiba



Go Ask Alice
Kara Smith



David
Shawna Roggow

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