

*The
Sigma Tau Delta
Rectangle*

**Journal of Creative Writing
Sigma Tau Delta
International English Honor Society
Volume 89, 2014**

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The Sigma Tau Delta Rectangle is published annually in April with the continuing generous assistance of Northern Illinois University (DeKalb, IL) and St. Norbert College (De Pere, WI). Publication is limited to members of Sigma Tau Delta. Members are entitled to a one-year subscription upon payment of the initial fee. The subsequent annual subscription rate is ten dollars (U.S.).

Sigma Tau Delta is a member of the Association of College Honor Societies.

2013–2014 Writing Awards
for *The Sigma Tau Delta Review* and
The Sigma Tau Delta Rectangle

Judson Q. Owen Award for Best Piece Overall
Megan Tilley
“Flowering”

Frederic Fadner Critical Essay Award
Alex Muller
“‘Aggressive Disintegration in the Individual’: A Lacanian Study of
Signification and the Destruction of Self in Shakespeare’s *King Lear*”

Eleanor B. North Poetry Award
Virginia Pfaehler
“The Heaviest Postcard”

E. Nelson James Poetry Award
Joshua Jones
“Repairs”

Herbert Hughes Short Story Award
Megan Tilley
“Flowering”

Elizabeth Holtze Creative Nonfiction Award
Elisabeth Schmitt
“Saving Abe”

Judge for Writing Awards

CHRISTINA SHEA received her B.A. from Kenyon College and her M.F.A. from the University of Michigan. She is the author of two novels, *Moirai’s Crossing* (Grove P, 2001) and *Smuggled* (Gallery Books, 2011). Some of her awards include the Barnes & Noble Discover New Writers Selection, a Mary Ingraham Bunting Institute Fellowship, and a Soros Foundation Grant. She is on the faculty of Lesley University’s M.F.A. Program in Creative Writing. Shea lives with her husband and children in Boston.

Contents

The Sigma Tau Delta Rectangle, Volume 89, 2014

Poetry

<i>The Heaviest Postcard</i> Virginia Pfaehler <i>Eleanor B. North Poetry Award</i>	9
<i>Repairs</i> Joshua Jones <i>E. Nelson James Poetry Award</i>	10
<i>Seeing Spots</i> Andrew Chenevert	11
<i>A Ghost with Four Names</i> Chelsea Ortego	12
<i>Working Titles</i> Linnea Nelson	14
<i>Elegy</i> Linnea Nelson	16
<i>Girdolls</i> Catherine Kyle	18
<i>Post-partum</i> Julia Petrich	20
<i>grandpa, the cowboy</i> Julia Petrich	22
<i>My Being Here on the Benefit of Drugs</i> Quinn Gilman-Forlini	24

<i>Cultural and Personal</i> Crystal Stone	26
<i>Anonymity</i> Jamie Berilla-Macdonald	28
<i>Culicidae</i> Martha Paterson	29
<i>My Dearest Mountain, Living Memory & Master, My Text</i> Chelsea Kachman	30
<i>Summoning</i> C. Michael Downes	34
<i>Half-caste</i> Jessica Perez-Jackson	36

Creative Non-Fiction

<i>Saving Abe</i> Elisabeth Schmitt <i>Elizabeth Holtze Creative Nonfiction Award</i>	39
<i>The Visit</i> Jiordan Castle	44
<i>The Stars</i> Connie Chan	49
<i>On Time</i> Jordan Kelly	52
<i>Just the Two of Us</i> Bunny Arlotti	57

<i>Reflections of a Kuwaiti Ex Libris</i> Ayat Al-Bloushi	62
<i>Unspoken Parentheses</i> Kathryn Baumgartner	67
<i>Two-Wheeled Freedom</i> Tyler Auffhammer	74
<i>The Abstract Human</i> Sarah Towle	78
<i>An Exposition of Death</i> Sara Tickanen	85

Short Fiction

<i>Flowering</i> Megan Tilley <i>Herbert Hughes Short Story Award</i> <i>Judson Q. Owen Award for Best Piece Overall</i>	92
<i>The Ins and Outs of a Death-Defying Trick</i> Sean Pessin	99
<i>The Cure</i> Juliana Goodman	103
<i>The Sentimentalists</i> Aidan Ryan	110
<i>The Family</i> Kirkland Back	118
<i>A Progression</i> Margaret Yapp	121

The Adventure of Kid Bill Williams
Jamal Michel

127

Soundless
Jiweon Seo

131

Poetry

The Heaviest Postcard

Repairs

Seeing Spots

A Ghost with Four Names

Working Titles

Elegy

Girdolls

Post-partum

grandpa, the cowboy

My Being Here on the Benefit of Drugs

Cultural and Personal

Anonymity

Culicidae

My Dearest Mountain, Living Memory & Master, My Text

Summoning

Half-caste

The Heaviest Postcard

| Virginia Pfaehler

Alanna, you remember
walking through the market nibbling sandies.
We stooped to pet dogs made
lazy by summer's
palm closing over
the peninsula.

She cupped us gently, like you used to hold water.

The lady making sweetgrass baskets
had my name, or I had hers, and she
told us they were remarkable
because the more submerged
the basket was in water,
the tighter the weave became.

You've been in the desert so long, Alanna,
where the air holds only dust. Do you
still remember
how in the flood
the basket's brim and the wave's crest
were the same?

Virginia Lee Pfaehler is a senior at Columbia College, Columbia, SC, where she majors in Literary Studies and minors in Religion. She is the current Co-President of her Sigma Tau Delta Chapter, a classroom partner for the First Year Writing Program, and an editor of the college's literary magazine, The Criterion. After she graduates in May 2014, Virginia plans to pursue her M.F.A. in Creative Writing.

Repairs

| Joshua Jones

The river diverted, and among
the bones and bricks, they found an arm
thrust up from the black silt floor.

A bit of shovel-work discovered
a god attached.
Tiber himself dredged out of himself.
No long locks, but clearly a beard
scraped off,
only a trail left
too rough to make out
where it fell on his chest.

Michelangelo,
come to see the workmen
about a model for Adam,
was asked to make repairs.
He caked the loam
in wavy veins
from neck to waist
and knotted it at the bottom.

“Is that how it looked?”
“No, but that’s the way I saw him.”

Joshua Jones is a recent graduate of Houston Baptist University’s Honors College program, getting his B.A. in English. He is currently pursuing his M.F.A. in Poetry at the University of Massachusetts, Boston, where he helps out with Write on the Dot, a community reading series. He is excited to have this second publication in The Rectangle and thankful for all the help Sigma Tau Delta has given him.

Seeing Spots

| Andrew Chenevert

Doc I'm seein' spots is a common way in old vaudeville programs to indicate illness, stress, general wear; a cause for alarm. Any doctor today will tell you that the condition comes from the eye's vitreous gel snapping off naturally with aging. Totally harmless, they say.

We've now reached the narrative's unspooling. At the word *harmless*, the crowd can release enough breath to fill a balloon. Death's flexed muscles deflate, or pop.

Harmless drops fall off the actor's face, like sweat flicked by the back of a hand. A dance number always follows with limbs levitating over tables, and a song to toss off heavy burdens.

No one thinks a more accurate word is *inevitable*. The first sign of rotting you can see: your vision growing cobwebs, preparing for the mind to become an empty room.

Our theater unpacks into the street. Ushers inside sweep at the debris.

Andrew Chenevert recently received his B.A. in Creative Writing from Lesley University, Cambridge, MA. He currently lives in Boston where he does volunteer work for the Boston Poetry Union and its small press imprint Pen & Anvil. He plans on pursuing his M.F.A. in Creative Writing.

A Ghost with Four Names

| Chelsea Ortego

My name is Isabel, a haunt.

I am a magnificent

holding-the-door-man,

Isabel.

I fought the Spanish War and knew the world

red;

and I am a gypsy

And my name is Isabel

and Francesco,

and I knew you when you were soft

like a peach.

My name is eroded mountains,

kicked up by the horses' hooves,

and I am there—

Isabel, Francesco, Maria, riding the air,

haunting my own.

I am a Jew,

and a TV repairman—Maria,

a haunt (who has lost the shapes taped off in the stars).

I am walking this house,

and you can watch if you cannot sleep—but then you are the specter.

I am Isabel, leaving maps for you

(in the walls).

I threw the body.

I haunt my own, as you pretend I am not watching

you come

and go.

I ate bread with the Lord, fought for La Patria—

I am an infant's mellow dream—fisherman of Greece—

Guillermo.

I met the Kennedy's in Grand Isle and burned down the house

because of all the straw.

And the secret is this: that the leaves will lay themselves open
like pages—

No, like warm, flowering whores if you whisper
to them, “I am Isabel, Francesco, Maria, Guillermo
and I haunt my own,”

and their undersides have maps for days.

Chelsea Ortego is a senior at Rhodes College, Memphis, TN, majoring in English literature and Creative Writing with a poetry concentration. She is a Film Studies minor and is completing an internship with the Memphis and Shelby County Film Commission. She plans to embrace the gap year(s), looking ahead to a postgraduate degree in either film or Creative Writing.

Working Titles

| Linnea Nelson

We hadn't planned on it coming down like that,
like how it snows in dreams—
a frigid sandstorm taking the city out.

It lasted for hours, all afternoon,
while we sat on our separate plains,

latitudes and longitudes getting in our way.

Borrowed dimensions
were our silent gifts to each other.

The dinner and the weather were
the same, I think—

the month a little different, and
the year. Still Sunday.

I had trouble remembering much of anything
and lost track of how many times we watched the
weighted snow slide in sheets from your
big black car, though
it seemed very important to us both,
for a while.

We gave our lives *working titles*.

We cried in the style of
crying that makes a person doubt
anything will ever be quite that good again,

and still half the reason I was crying was for you—

was for the way this had not been our plan.

We spoke in *What did you says* and *I don't knows*,
your stuffy brick apartment imparting
a language of its own, and I forgave
you, if that was necessary;

and fate, or whatever,
that my hair couldn't keep its curl that day.

So we needed to believe in leftovers—
that some borders are worth demolishing,
that such things as temporary sadnesses
still exist.
And we made their geography collapse that Sunday—
made it utterly desist.

Elegy

| Linnea Nelson

When your beginning was over,
no one sought out a small, solemn boat and pair
of eager oars to sail
away and find you.

No one locked themselves up in a burning
lighthouse to watch for you.

I unlaced my boots and listened
for weeks to creaking furniture, soap
spreading itself over vital
skin, and flakes of winter slipping into
rooms where you and I had made
staggering accusations to
the human race for who knows
how long.

Our beautiful neighbor
continues to choke at his breakfast;
books and cupboards persist in
closing.

The foolish lights we considered walking
under, for the sake of breaking
the veritable world somewhat open,

still do not suggest
what exactly it is that
holds even the tallest of
mysteries together, and
still refuse
to go out.

Wherever you ended up,
I wonder if you, too, are noticing these things;

if it's any easier there to get the last word—

if you are still giving yourself away
in indiscernible quantities—

if, there, it is also true that some people never get
old enough to do what you did.

Linnea Nelson will graduate this spring with a B.A. in English from North Dakota State University, after having completed her coursework while studying abroad at Leeds Metropolitan University in Leeds, England, the previous semester. She served as the editor of NDSU's literary journal, Northern Eclecta, and Vice President of its Sigma Tau Delta Chapter. She intends to pursue an M.F.A. in Creative Writing.

Girdolls

| Catherine Kyle

Once we were dolls,
cloth and floppy, hands eloping,
but they told us, *hey! girdolls*
don't hold hands that way.

Can you remember? Our hairs
were strands of chaos, chattering,
conversing in the language of cracked
bells. Our scars were paused on open,
rosebud mouths that bit on secrets,
and our glass bead eyes cavorted
and our blouses were all—

but then we changed our minds;
remember? They told us to
look elsewhere; they told us to
drop hands.

The sky was so bright that day, blindingly
bright. There was, you said, no place to go—
there should have been a corner or at least
a slender shadow into which we could
have wriggled like a pair of living vines—
but the sky was so bright that day, blindingly
bright, that even the dark alleys in our
neurons waved their flags.

We cooked there on the pavement,
stranded seastars for the white gulls.
The starkness of the playground was enough
to startle God.

Catherine Kyle is a Ph.D. student in English at Western Michigan University. During the 2012-13 year, she was the President of her university's Sigma Tau Delta Chapter. She was also the recipient of the William C. Johnson Distinguished Scholarship in 2013.

Post-partum

| Julia Petrich

She misses its release—doesn't see
 the disposable organ detach
 from Mother

& *plop*

as it lands
 in the sterile
 metal pan.

What a waste
 so much effort to end up tossed in
 with other biohazards

in a tower
 of frying tumors & charred
 black lungs.

Bury it—maybe hide it in an arid hole, wrapped
 in inky newspaper & shrouded in stove ashes,
return it to the earth

Or do as the Kwakiutl & give it a funeral in the sand
 at high-tide then the child will know where & how
 to dig for clams

Leave it out for ravens to peck at & devour
 then the child will grow a third blind eye,
 another vision with it

Treat it with reverence as baby's fallen
comrade, dead twin, comatose sibling
lifeless, insensible thing

She sticks
one gloved hand in & gropes
the still-warm bloody bag—one side slick
the other raw & meaty

She reads it
like the lines on a palm & imagines
she knows its language

grandpa, the cowboy

| Julia Petrich

almost midnight & i'm smashing
saltines on your kitchen countertop

you sit hunched
over the table—belt high & loose
hovering above your waist—buckle
glowing

vexed you straighten
your bolo tie—the one
with the owl on it

almost midnight & you can't sleep
because your love lies on a hospital bed
not with you in yours

i pour crumbled
cracker into two tall glasses & top
them off with fresh velvety
milk—just the way
we like it

you smooth
your shirt & take hold of the glass
long garden snake fingers spooning
out the soggy salty
scraps

minutes later
glass half-empty & ready for bed
you struggle to stand

i follow as you
on two feet & two wheels
shuffle down the corridor & my guiding
hand meets your jutting spine

edge of the bed & i untie your shoes
take off your bolo & gleaming
belt buckle

you know you
don't have to be tough
for me

Julia Petrich is a senior at Carnegie Mellon University in Pittsburgh, PA, where she studies writing. She works as a Spanish writing assistant and a literary agency intern, as well as with her university's press. Upon graduating in May 2014, she hopes to pursue a career in publishing.

My Being Here on the Benefit of Drugs

| Quinn Gilman-Forlini

You would not see me without
my concoction of pharmaceuticals
mixed in blue dessert bowls,
swallowed in fistfuls, capsules and

round yellow pills with tiny numbers
imprinted along the crease—how
are those etched? I imagine a tiny
man with a silver scalpel in his studio

chipping away, drug scrapings strewn
all over the floor for his dog to lap
up and we dream the same fiery colors,
this dog and me, we each lay beside

something cool to control our sensitivity
to lights, our loose heads lolling along
in nods, yes, yes, there's nothing else we
can do, clucks mister doctor in his white coat

I can pinch him between two fingers if I
squint small enough, crush him like a single
piece of brittle rosemary over a pot of apothecary
soup, slip him into its flame-warmed bath.

In 1968 my father was watching lunar
landing hype on television, my mother
drawing dress patterns on paper bags, my
grandparents planning vacations and divorces

I think I was there, in a speck of dust falling
from their bedside lamps as they read

biographies of presidents' wives or scrawled
letters to people tied by blood, and I am tied

twisted in their worlds and lineage, floating
around times before I was an idea, through
the invention of cordless telephones and
plastic orange prescription bottles

maybe they held a pre-pregnancy powwow
and asked questions like: if it's only here
because of drugs, should we keep it?
and they must've shrugged, decided sure,

why not? We could move across the street
from the pharmacy, forego the kitchen
renovation, keep that tiny man in business
at least, enough so he can feed his dog.

Besides, what are the chances of that?

Quinn Gilman-Forlini is a junior at Ursinus College, Collegeville, PA, studying English, French, and Creative Writing. She is currently Vice President of her Sigma Tau Delta Chapter and runs the Literary Society at Ursinus. She envisions a future of writing and travel abroad as soon as she runs into some money.

Cultural and Personal

| Crystal Stone

The Teacup

Do you still remember who you were?
 The tea bowl—blooming honeysuckle,
 watered with hot dewdrops each morning.
 Now, like a boat docked on the shore
 of a sun-bleached, Caucasian island—
 the lines on your surface stretch like stems,
 roads on maps headed West.
 At the rim, the silver-lined border is broken
 by a chip in the ceramic—a lost war.
 You reek of Earl Grey, subduing
 the oolong-stale scent you once exhaled.
 Dearest tea bowl, who have you become?
 To what depths have you gone?
 Beneath what ocean, under what *tianchi*,
 in the cupboard of what country?
 The china was England's betrothed,
 handled with ringed privilege.

The Mother Land

Bouguereau, 1883, Oil Painting

The children are innocent, hugging
 a mother too young for nine.
 None of the children have clothes
 but the shy brunette on the left;
 the tan boys feel right at home.
 But where is the father, the source of their color,
 the rice hats, the *Áo bà ba*, the sandals?

The purple mountains threaten invasion,
 but the mother is stern, and one day,
 the children will forget their homeland,
 the faint black clouds of smoke behind them.
 Even now, they just of trivial things:
 how long will it be before they can wear their
 mother's laurels, her daisies and roses.

Memory: Age Six

That day, I drew mom's cheeks pink
 like flamingo wings, the way they were when
 I ruffled her feathers. I did not show
 how her face wrinkled like her parachute pants
 when she sipped the vodka orange juice
 she hid in her drawers. Or how her eyebrows
 furrowed, Spanish accents on vowels, once visibly drunk.

I wanted to make her look beautiful, but
 she just wanted me to get into the car.
I don't want to go, I protested. *I don't*—
 the car door shut, off we went.

In the car, on the way to Jersey's Storybook Land,
 my crayons had melted in the door—
 the only papers I had left to redraw my mother's face
 on were the maps I had to learn to read
 if I were to guide us back home.

Crystal Stone is a junior at Allegheny College, Meadville, PA, where she majors in English and minors in Psychology. This summer, she worked as an editorial assistant for Film Criticism and studied poetry at the Black Forest Writing Seminars in Freiburg, Germany. She is currently working as a writing consultant at her college and hopes to teach English in the future.

Anonymity

| Jamie Berilla-Macdonald

China—
 silence ruled in customs, enforced by threatening glances
 and foreboding bilingual signs. Then sound exploded
 through the gates, signs held for those incoming
 as our tour guide shepherded us to the safety of the bus.
 We didn't know the language and the toilets confused us.
 Some people wanted photos: I was blonde, my roommate had
 cornrows,
 and another student was confused for Obama. They let him hold
 their baby.

We moved away from urban centers, reveled in the rocky crags
 of the stone and seaweed scattered beaches. The Pacific filled our
 lungs
 with light salt, and we reeled in surprise at the sun-baked smell of
 fish
 laid, flayed in the open air market. There were rundown boats,
 rusted in harbor. A young man with long bangs,
 white and red jacket fluttering in the wind, stared out
 beyond the boats and clenched his fists. Something
 in the way he stood, bereft, made me want to comfort him.
 I would not have known the words to say. How would one find him
 with only a furtive photograph as a memory?

Jamie Berilla-Macdonald graduated summa cum laude from Muskingum University, New Concord, OH, in 2013, where she was active with her Sigma Tau Delta Chapter as President and received an Academy of American Poets prize. She earned her B.A. in English and now attends Cleveland State University, where she pursues an M.A. in Literature.

Culicidae

| Martha Paterson

summer is lonely and lovely.
 I tie the dog out back and dappled sunlight
 illuminates his spots. later, the rain
 moves in and dots my legs
 as I watch from the front porch,
 stomach stuffed with watermelon
 and the scent of wet sidewalks.

summer is lonely and lovely
 until the bugs come out
 and the cicadas sing along
 to the books I read in bed
 and the june bugs crawl
 through the crack in the screen door
 and gnats stick themselves everywhere,
 from my bar soap to the ice cubes
 in the pitcher of sangria.

summer was lonely and lovely
 until the mosquitoes arrived
 and nipped my exposed skin
 like starved men, their hum
 like slurs in my ears as I slapped
 them away, staining my palms
 with my own sweet blood.
 I let one escape and I heard it
 spinning drunkenly above my head
 for weeks.

M.J. Paterson is a junior at Carnegie Mellon University in Pittsburgh, PA, where she double majors in Creative and Professional Writing and minors in History. She is the current Vice President of the Omega Tau Chapter of Sigma Tau Delta. She works as an editing intern at the Carnegie Mellon University Press and plans to pursue publishing after graduation.

My Dearest Mountain, Living Memory & Master, My Text

| Chelsea Kachman

Jonathan Culler tells me, “Performative utterances do not describe but perform the action they designate. It is in pronouncing these words that I promise, order, or marry . . . If I say I do, I may not succeed in marrying—if, for example, I am married already or if the person performing the ceremony is not authorized to perform weddings in this community. The utterance will ‘misfire,’ says Austin. The utterance will be unhappy—infelicitous—and so, no doubt, will the bride or groom, or perhaps both.”

So I am trying it: “The Aporia of the Performative Cure for Lyme”

Act (A) or Locution:

I read it in a book.

The book said:

You are healed.

You will be healed.

You will see results

You feel better already.

“I therefore . . . do
solemnly publish
and declare that I am

and of right ought
to be better and healed.”

could get

better.

Act (Ca) or Perlocutionary:

So, I AM
persuaded.

Act (B) or Illocutionary:

My Doctor-Authority
urged me to believe I

better so I would get

Act (Cb)

He got me to believe so I will.

It is circumstantially appropriate.

I do as he says:

*I hereby banish
all ye spirochetes.*

“Stop!

*(We dance around
a ring and suppose,*

*but the Cure sits
in the middle and knows.)*

“I will get better
tomorrow.”

“I hereby affirm
that I am
healed.

I promise.”

*I declare myself
healing, healed, better.*

I do as he says.

“I do” as he says.

“I do as” he says.

*I do.
I tell*

my

husband:

“I do I do I do I do I do I do I do. I do as he says. I will get better. I
am getting better.”

Act (A) or Locution:
“I’m sorry, Rebekah,
it was a misfire. Sometimes that happens.
But! But *you will get better.*”

Chelsea R. G. Kachman is pursuing an M.F.A. in poetry and an M.A. in English at Portland State University in Portland, OR, where she is the Secretary for her Sigma Tau Delta Chapter. She received her B.A. in English from Oakland University in Rochester, MI. Before moving to Portland, she ran inner-city writing workshops in Detroit, MI, and her work has appeared in Diverse Voices Quarterly, The Portland Review, Drunken Boat, and others.

Summoning

| C. Michael Downes

I.

You came calling through the heat
of two
hands struck together,
opened and revealed:
from the bath
wearing only water
droplets and the weight of dampened hair,

set a trickling fire to frame
this dream of mine
in Flamenco and soft flora,
swirling tones of lustful coals
of our same sky.

II.

I stand at the crackling hearth
close my eyes in your absence
and perpetual fratricide—
of love and logic—
seconds of a flesh offering to the fire,
my atonement for the absence.

You appear at my arm,
opening and closing your outstretched hand,
fingers in the firelight.

Lee University alumnus C. Michael Downes has been honored with Allegheny College's 2013 Poetry Prize, and as an Outstanding Author by Nota Bene (2011). Downes presented "El Dolor de Amor, Santiago" at the 2013 Sigma Tau Delta Convention, and continues to share his work through various publications.

Half-caste

| Jessica Perez-Jackson

And I'm not even half.

A quarter, but in high school I was called 75 cents.

A term of endearment maybe, not meant to be offensive

You haole.

I almost got beat up a few times just for being the new girl from the States.

But I'm not from the States, I was just there because my mom was going to school.

And now I'm here. Fighting furiously to show—to prove that I'm just as Chamorro as you.

So I may have a haole accent when I pronounce the words *salmon* and *almond* with a silent *l*.

But I *am* just as Chamorro as you.

And now I'm in my thirties. Not a timid, insecure 14 year old trying to fit in.

Still trying to prove my Chamorro-ness.

Taotao Inalahan.

I na'an hu si Jessica.

Ñalang yu—

Hungry to learn more than just some memorized sentences in my language.

Can I even call it mine if I can't speak it?

And then there was the elevator ride in San Francisco when I was sandwiched between three suits.

White suits.

Staring down at me from their towering heights, like a piece of brown meat,

Succulent, tender, exotic, small,

And weak.

HA! They'd like to think so.

Little did they know I knew what they were looking at

What they were thinking.

You'd like to conquer me

Like they conquered my island, wouldn't you?

Pay me less than the Chinese girl because you think I'm Mexican.

Tell me that my boots are distracting you because you can't stop
gazing at my

nice,

round

dagan.

As I squeezed past their lascivious grins I remember thinking

I don't like to feel small and insignificant,

something to be used and trampled on and controlled.

The little island girl.

Are all girls from Guam pretty like you?

Are all you Guam people so nice and do you all like to eat so much?

Where is Guam by the way? Do you wear hula skirts and run around
topless?

Do they have MTV?

When I'm home I feel like I have to earn my membership

And when I'm away I have to fight off ridiculous questions and
stereotypes because no one knows what I am. Who I am.

I'd like to think I'm just as Chamorro as you are

Because I am not 75 cents.

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Creative Non-Fiction

Saving Abe

The Visit

The Stars

On Time

Just the Two of Us

Reflections of a Kuwaiti Ex Libris

Unspoken Parentheses

Two-Wheeled Freedom

The Abstract Human

An Exposition of Death

Saving Abe

| Elisabeth Schmitt

Waves distort the atmosphere above the shiny black street behind the Laundromat. The view is at once mesmerizing and horrifying. I'd only ever seen this sort of thing in an oven, or rippling above the orange-tipped blue flames of a lit stovetop. Sitting on the curb under the punishing noon sun, one thought perspires into the heavy air: *this place is nothing like my beautiful Argentina*. Oh no. My eyes span over cedar scrub, heat, rocks, and more heat. Welcome to Texas.

A metallic twinkle from across the road brings me to my feet. *Another one*, I think, scurrying in pursuit before it melts back into the firmament of bottle caps and broken glass. Fishing between parched weeds that have already managed to break through the asphalt, my fingers wrap around a bit of tarnished bronze. The coin scalds my palms as I examine a now-familiar prominent profile: a straight, big nose; a short, kempt beard; gaunt cheekbones and a receding hairline so like my *Papá's*.

"Who are you, little man?" I whisper into my cupped palms, but he doesn't answer. He never does. I don't recognize the bronze man, but he must be important to have his face on a coin. Back home coins have worth: 10 cents, or 20, or 50—big and bold on their face. On the other side, they show the symbols of our country: *los laureles, el Sol de Mayo, el Escudo, el Cabildo, la Casa de Tucumán*. Though the bronze man doesn't have a number, his building of tall Greek pillars above a flight of steps reminds me of *la Casa*. But not.

"*Esa es tu casa*, little man?" I smother a sweat droplet tickling a path down my thigh. *Is that your house?* But there is no luring an answer out of him. We are alike in that way; we have both forgotten how to speak. I'd like to know who tossed the poor little man aside. How irresponsible these Americans were! Even though I'm eleven, I understand by now that these round shiny coins are friends to be guarded by zippers, jars, and strong leather—throwing them away is

a spoiled thing to do, *Mamá* always says. Hiding them is allowed; spending them, sometimes; stealing them, even, is preferable (though by no means allowed). But to throw them to the wind like limp candy wrappers—how spoiled! I shake my head, lamenting the decadence of this foreign society, and slide the bronze man gently into my pocket. My mysterious friend chimes a greeting to all seven of his identical brothers; they clink and jingle a ditty at my every step, celebrating a reunion in my faded jean pocket. A smile tugs at my lips, though I suppress it out of respect for my little friends. I don't want them to think I'm stuck-up—after all, I've already lived in Texas for three months and there's still nobody else to play with.

Puzzling out the mystery of the coppery coins, I ramble onwards, eyes scanning the ground, hoping to catch a glimpse of telltale yellow-orange shine. My mind goes back to the box beneath my cot at Aunt Neila's house—a little hostel for mistreated coins; my little castaway fortune. At least a hundred coins rest there now, a hundred bronze men, all the same, all nameless and unappreciated until I found them.

“Lorraine, *hija*, it's time to go!” *Mamá* calls from the entrance of the tumbledown Laundromat. Behind her, *Papá* lifts two baskets of faded clothes, his scant hair sheathed in static and floating to the rhythmic whirring of the clothes-dryers. “Get your *hermanos!*”

Nodding, I jog briskly down the alley. Though Rodo is almost nine and Juli is eight, little Mica is only three and still *un bebé*, so while *Mamá* y *Papá* are inside the Laundromat, it is my responsibility to watch over my *hermanos*. Even while hunting secret riches, I've kept a close eye on their game of *las escondidas*—hide-and-seek. The laundry process usually takes hours, but they always find a way to pass the time. Undaunted by this arid desert of grocery-store refuse and superheated dumpster stench, my baby sisters giggle as they hide from Rodo. We Argentineans are survivors.

“¡*Vamos, chicos!*” I have to raise my voice to get their attention. A chorus of protests rises up from behind swollen jet bags. Forgetting that I'm busy being sullen, I suddenly smile.

“¡Apuesto que no me agarran!” Nobody wastes a breath—it’s a race to the Laundromat! Four pairs of sandals slap on the sticky, granulated asphalt, spraying rocks and glass as we bolt to the faded turquoise-and-white sign of the finish line. Sporting at least three inches more leg than my brother, it surprises me to hear thudding close at my heels. But a sharper sound accompanies the race as seven bronze men *clink-clang* in my pocket, protesting their rough transportation. I am in the middle of a silent apology when I hear it:

Plink.

My body battles momentum as I dig my heels in. Rodo breezes victoriously past me, whooping with glee, but I fall, skidding on a silver Doritos bag. I vaguely register my knee grinding on loose gravel, but it doesn’t matter, none of it matters because I’m on the road searching, searching, searching, looking desperately for the poor shiny coin, my dear friend, my missing straight-nosed man. The day’s heat pins me to the ground, crisps my pallid freckled skin, coalesces each breath into syrup and soon I’m sobbing for a breath, gasping to escape the sweat that flows down my face, salty and hot with frustration as I realize that I’ve lost yet something else, and that I will never find it again. The ever-present turbulence of traffic emanating from the highway beyond the Super S crescendos into white noise, crashes silently on my ears, unheard as I close my mind to everything but the most important thing in the world right now: holding on to something, anything at all.

It is nearly *media hora* before Mamá finds me sobbing on the back road, coin long forgotten. I can’t stand a second more of this hot, humid country where everyone speaks senseless English and drives fancy cars, this crazy country where school starts in August—not March—this lonely, lonely country where children spend summers playing by themselves.

Like my bronze friends, I’m lost, alone, and don’t speak the language.

“Oh, *Chiquita*,” Mamá sighs sadly. Then, with that infinite compassion so characteristic of mothers, she sinks down beside me,

wrapping her arms around my shoulders. We sway together for a moment, her voice rising in a sweet lullaby—

Ay, ay, ay, ay,
Canta y no llores,
Porque cantando se alegran,
Cielito lindo, los corazones . . .

Now we are both crying—for our country, our friends, and most of all, our home.

“*Consuelo!*” *Papá’s* voice drifts over, tunneling through our nostalgia. *Mamá* promptly pats her face with a shirt hem and tries to coax me to my feet. “Come, come, we have to go. It’ll be okay, you’ll see,” she murmurs against my matted hair.

“*Mamá*, I can’t leave him,” I hiccup incoherently. “I can’t!” Slipping away from her helping fingers, I fall to my knees on the street, hands grasping for metal with a hysterical drive.

“What is it, Lo?” She looks over her shoulder to check if *Papá* is coming. Survival has made him an impatient man. *Papá* wants this to work. He needs it to. “It’s time to go. *Se va a enjoar tu padre.*”

“But *Mamá*—”

“Lorraine, I understand that you’re going through a hard time, but we *have* to go!” she interrupts firmly, a thread of impatience finally weaving into her voice.

“But—”

“Lorraine . . .” She strikes the *Mamá* Stance—arms akimbo, eyebrows furrowed, lips pursed—and I know that the last tendrils of tenderness have dissipated; real life moves on. Real life leaves things behind. When she walks away, I follow, wanting to be numb, rubbing away a teardrop kiss, so engrossed in my misery that I don’t see her stop, I don’t see her bend down until we crash together.

“What—” My indignant protest dies as I spot a glint of corroded copper. Though distorted by the wax lens of my tears, that crooked nose is unmistakable.

“Look,” *Mamá* says, dusting her hands on faded jeans.

“Find a penny, pick it up, and all day long, you’ll have good luck!”

She smiles fondly as she chants this quaint American saying. My heart relishes in the new knowledge; my mind archives the saying immediately; it is filed alongside “Cielito lindo,” between “Arroz con Leche” and “Que llueva, que llueva,” as if there were no distinction—as if they could coexist inside me, the old world and the new. *Mamá* drops the small coin into my palm and my fingers curl around it, a profound realization unfolding deep inside me.

Satisfied that my sudden nostalgic bout disappeared as mysteriously as it arrived, *Mamá*—no, *Mom* turns away towards the car, anxious to return to her husband and resume the hard, confusing new life they had chosen for us by leaving Argentina to start anew in the United States of America, the golden land of opportunity. Every day we persevere, surviving this strange culture and slowly, automatically, adopting its peculiar ways.

“Penny,” I breathe as I walk after Mom’s hurried footsteps. “What a weird name for a little man.”

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The Visit

| Jiordan Castle

There are never any white families. It's a medium security prison with a few minimum-security inmates like my father. They put prisoners wherever they can fit them, stacking people in cells like chickens in a coop. We wait our turn to be called—the Castle family, minus my sisters: both older, with the same last name, different than mine. They're both away at school. Like us, they come when they can.

We put keys, rings, and bags on a conveyor belt, just like at the airport. They pat us down; they give us back some of our things. We're allowed to bring one clear bag full of change for the vending machine. On the first visit, my mom didn't know the rule, so my father couldn't get a snack during our hour. This time, she brings a Ziploc bag full of quarters and dollar bills, just in case.

There are a lot of little kids, some of them babies, in the elevator with us. No one says anything. Even the kids don't cry or yell. Security guards take small groups up to the second floor, where we wait to be let into the big, run-down visiting room.

Once inside, I pick a few seats by the window, against the farthest wall.

When the guards let them out, it's a sea of orange and khaki jumpsuits. My father walks over to us, each footstep an effort. He's roughly 5'8" and stocky, almost muscular, tanner than I've ever seen him. His face is sallow and more freckled. We hug for the allowed time—somewhere between five and ten seconds, approximately—and he sits down across from us. There are no signs posted, but the arbitrary time limit is enforced. It's a social construct, like so much of prison life—even this, the time it takes to greet a person. We can sit together, but we aren't supposed to touch. There are few exceptions.

This is the second time in a year that I've seen my dad, and it may be the last. My parents were divorced less than a year ago—my mother still in love, my father in the first half of his four-year

sentence. They were divorced to save us from his debt, a result of the ruling, but also because of his ongoing feud with mental illness. At his final sentencing, I heard it argued that his illness prevented him from conducting business properly. Nearly two years later, in this box that has little in common with a room aside from its four walls, his illness is more or less the same. But here it comes to life; it's the only thing that separates him from any of the other inmates. He needs it to survive.

He talks about their library and playing guitar, and how he's been helping inmates work toward their GED. My dad went to Stonybrook and Hofstra. He was a banker before he came here, and now he teaches grown men to read. He doesn't get in too much trouble with the more hardened criminals here because he can help them write letters to their children.

He describes an inmate known for his temper—a man who says very little, beats the shit out of most guys for no reason at all—who asked for help writing a card to a daughter he'd never met.

"He asked me how to spell 'birthday,'" he says, his eyes glossy. "Birthday."

My mother holds his hand, eyes glued to his face. She listens to him. She tells him that he looks good. I look around the room. The walls are a murky shade of white, a dusty eggshell, the tiles worn and cracked beneath my feet. Long, fat fluorescent tubes of light hang above us, threatening to break. I can count on one hand the number of teenagers here; female teenagers, even fewer.

I get up to get my dad a drink—Crystal Light pink lemonade, a recent favorite of his. The prison has a canteen, like at summer camp, where the men can buy small goods like candy and cigarettes with the change they save from working. They don't have drinks though. My dad makes less than a dollar an hour from working in the library and doing labor outside. It's more than most. At the end of his four years in prison, he'll have made less than a thousand dollars, about half of which will be his to take home. So my mom pays for his pink lemonade.

I fumble with the plastic bag at the vending machine. A guard to my left watches me. He watches as I insert four quarters and drop the fifth. I turn to watch as it rolls on its side, a gray speck spinning away from me. It stops against a pair of worn, off-white sneakers, the same pair my dad has. But these have no shoelaces.

He is a six-foot tall traffic cone, with dark skin and eyes, his heavy palm holding my quarter just out of reach. As the hand reaches mine, I see the security guard, now to my right, tense. He slowly moves his hand to his gun, but just rests it there. He never looks at me; he only eyes the man before me. His is not a look of hate, but of haste. And for a moment, I feel like something bad is going to happen to one of us. But the hand covers mine, the quarter dropping into my small palm, his fingertips rough and calloused.

“This yours?” he asks. I nod.

I put the quarter into the machine, my pulse thumping in my ears, all the blood in my body swimming around, confused. If it was fear, I didn’t know it. I just put the money in and carry an artificially pink plastic bottle back to my dad, silent.

Behind my dad, maybe twenty feet away, there’s a row of twelve men in orange, with women in low-cut tops and screaming babies bouncing on their knees. A boy ignores a fight between an inmate and the woman visiting him. He’s on a Game Boy. I don’t know how he got it in here. He must have gotten special permission.

My dad has shoelaces because he’s never murdered or raped anyone. And he’s not on suicide watch. He has shoelaces because he likes to exercise when he can—walk the track outside, find the biggest spaces he can in here. He has a khaki jumpsuit. He owned a bank and wore striped silk ties before coming here.

But he didn’t have shoelaces when he first got here—the idea being that he might use them as a weapon against other inmates, or against himself. Prison suicides are most popular among middle-aged white males. Studies show that they’d rather hang themselves than risk getting murdered in jail. But my father is funny, darkly so, and a lot of inmates like that. They respond to it. He plays guitar

with some of them, and they call him “Maestro.”

His guitar has only three strings. It’s harder to play for people that way, he says, but if you’re good, you’re good. This is because sometimes other prisoners use the strings for tattooing, draining ink from pens and practicing on themselves: the backs of thighs, shoulders, whatever’s handy. My dad doesn’t want one, although a lot of guys offer to pay him for guitar lessons in ink.

I wish he could’ve gone to a psychiatric prison in New York. He doesn’t get medication in here and I can tell. But being crazy, and acting like it, in a medium-security place might be a good thing. That’s what he tells me on the phone, three months later, after his nose has been broken in a fight and he’s put in solitary confinement for a week.

The man from the vending machine is somewhere in the row of twelve, with a kid on his lap and a woman seated across from him. His son looks to be about three or four. I wonder what he’s done. My dad probably knows, but I don’t ask.

And when visiting hours end, after my mother has nodded her head off and worn her smile thin, we both stand up to say goodbye. I hug my dad. It’s just his arms adhered to mine, my body especially small in his grip, and then I pull away. When he hugs my mom for longer than the allotted ten seconds, a guard behind my dad tells him to get off of her.

My mother says, “Fuck you” to the guard at my father’s back and hugs him again. The words roll around in her mouth, lost for a place to be. No one hears but the three of us—my father, the guard, and me. And still, my mom winces, though the words themselves seem freeing. She doesn’t usually curse.

Before he’s taken away, he asks if I want the rest of his drink. It’s nearly empty in his hand, a nauseating pink color not found in nature, cap turned up at me. I say no, I want him to have it. But he can’t take it back in. Still watching, the same guard tells him he’s got to leave it behind.

Once outside, I throw away the bottle, past the hedges that someone gets paid 12 cents an hour to trim.

Jordan Castle is a pizza-loving word lady transplanted to San Francisco from the wilds of New York. A graduate of the University of San Francisco, she is now a content writer at Esurance. In her spare time, there are cupcakes baked, cartoons drawn, and books dog-eared.

The Stars

| Connie Chan

Jake's car tires roll over the crumbling rock road, leaving behind a powder-white dust cloud. The harsh headlights cut through black and illuminate a rusty gate at the end of our path. Jake kills the engine and restores the gentle darkness of the prairie, lit only by the soft glow of the moon. We sit in the destination spot of local high schoolers in stupid love, whose naïve parents enforce an open door policy at home. But Jake and I, being platonic friends and jaded college students, are here for another reason. We are here to stargaze.

We crack our car doors and step out like hermit crabs emerging from their shells. The night engulfs us into a protective shadow and we are powerless under its black canopy. We are not scared because imbedded in the expansive sky are thousands of tiny crystals that sparkle and sit still. Luminous swirls of white wrap around them and fall in ribbons to every horizon.

"I've missed this," I tell Jake. I spin around to look for an empty patch, but the stars are scattered evenly across the heavens. In Pittsburgh, I can rarely see stars at nighttime—only a select few jewels, the large enough ones that hang electrified in the purple and orange saturated sky. But here, the sky looks crowded with a star population almost too generous to be real, on a background of black leather. It is the most expensive thing I have ever seen.

Jake flattens his messy bronze hair with his hand and gives it a shake.

"That's one thing about the country you city slickers don't have," he brags. Though Jake and I grew up together, he insists I'm now a foreigner for attending an out-of-state college.

"I'm still country at heart," I claim, but the only thing country about me is my inexperience with public transportation.

The shuffle of our feet makes the road dust rise into an earthy fog that floods even the knee tear in Jake's jeans. We lower ourselves into the clouds and sit behind the car. When the dust settles, the

moonlit rock road before us looks like extraterrestrial terrain straight out of *National Geographic*. The only thing that makes these little white rocks less special is their proximity and accessibility. I increase the value of a lucky one by tossing it far into the prairie.

Jake offers me his sweater to lie on, which I smooth out beneath me before sprawling out. It is scratchy on the back of my arms, but it beats the sharp rocks I can still feel through the tribal-print fabric. Something about the naked scenery and humble appreciation of nature makes me wonder if Native Americans once stargazed from this exact spot, at the same balls of hydrogen and helium that have been burning for millions, even billions of years.

I know this only because I've looked it up. "What are stars made of?" At the time, I was embarrassed for not knowing what I believed was common knowledge, a piece of astronomical trivia people carried around as conversational fodder. Since that inquiry, I try not to analyze celestial bodies past their basic functions. It takes away from the intrigue that a nightly sighting can be as intangible and mysterious as it is common.

On our backs, Jake and I can better appreciate the view at our disposal. It is disorienting though, like vertigo, which is why I think people must lie down to properly stargaze. Occasionally, I even lose my sense of balance lying down. But tonight, I am stable, and as a veteran gazer, I take pride in the development of my sea legs.

Observing the stars from a prairie actually feels like submerging myself underwater. I dunk my head into another dimension and it floods my entire vision. The water and the sky both extend to reaches beyond my periphery and make me feel smaller and lighter—I take up less space on Earth than I previously imagined. My eyes dive into the sky and search for stars like shiny coins at the bottom of a pool.

"I only see the Big and Little Dipper," I say.

"I think I see Sirius," Jake says. He points up toward a mass of sparkles, indistinguishable from the others. "That really bright one . . ." His square, trimmed finger traces a V in the sky. "Maybe not."

I stare at the ghost V that lingers above us even after Jake lowers his hand. Now that Jake has connected a few stars, my mind tricks itself into seeing something. The once arbitrary cluster is now a craft in the sky, the individual stars holding tighter to one another because man has deemed it worthy of being a constellation.

“Oh, I see,” I say, pretending to find Sirius. I like feeling like I know this universe.

I sit up and turn to Jake. “You know they have an app for finding constellations now? You can look at the stars through your phone and it tells you where they are.” The idea both disgusts and fascinates me.

“I know!” Jake says. “I have it.” Jake pulls out his iPhone from his pocket and unlocks it by connecting a series of white dots, much like how he mapped Sirius.

Jake holds his phone above us and the screen captures the view. Moments later, a scratchy white line appears, connecting the stars into a constellation. The star skeleton is accompanied by a Latin name I’ve never heard of in a sans serif font. The map readjusts and refocuses with each small sway of Jake’s hand. He pans across the sky and the lines and labels process and reprocess at lightening speed. The lines spike up and plummet like the pulse on a heart monitor. After a while, Jake shuts off his phone and it’s like the stars have stopped breathing.

It’s the first time I’ve seen the depth of the night sky flattened out and contained in a 4.53 inch by 2.31 inch screen, making the wonder of the stars inarguably more digestible—and possible as of now, clickable. The experience leaves a bad taste in my mouth.

“It’s amazing, isn’t it?” Jake says and I agree without knowing what he’s referring to anymore.

Connie Chan is an English major at Carnegie Mellon University, Pittsburgh, PA. She is not as impressive as everyone else in this journal, but she can fake it pretty well. How else would you be reading her biography right now?

On Time

| Jordan Kelly

In Tennessee, there are a few weeks out of every year in which the seasons do battle. Lately, I have been enjoying the spectacle these wars present from the third floor of the student center at a small, private college. Wherever the eye turns, the campus is surrounded by hills that are almost mountains. These tree-clad little mountains have been gently, almost imperceptibly touched with gold and orange over the past few weeks. They grow a little brighter and more autumn-like each day, yet summer refuses to relent. She continually strikes back with the ferocity of her heat. Autumn is a stealthy warrior, though. She sneaks quickly and quietly past summer's defenses, noticed only by a few, and I feel privileged to be in her secret.

I love the subtleties of this exchange. I love the details, the little signs. Most of them go unnoticed, even by me, until the changes are complete. I do not see the first soft, Midas kisses of autumn on every leaf. If I watch very closely, I might observe it on a few. Soon, I know, I shall be living in a shining, golden world of the perfect climate and I shall not remember clearly how I got there. An invigorating chill shall touch me in the morning, turning by midday into that temperature on which we do not comment because it is too right, too much in harmony with our impressions of how the world should be, to catch our attention. But the battle is over so quickly, and autumn always triumphs, though I do not know how. Every time I blink, I miss something.

These days are always my idea of paradise. I need no waving palms. Give me golden and crimson leaves dancing now riotously, now tenderly with the wind. Give me an unscathed, crystal clear blue sky. Give me mists in the morning. Give me stars.

And oh, what stars! They are seldom seen so brilliantly in Tennessee as at this time of year. All summer, humidity, that great oppressor, casts its shroud over them, and we look down, not up, at the ends of the sluggish, never-ending days. We Southerners

can usually see the constellations only dimly, as through a hazed glass. But when cooler temperatures come and the air can hold less moisture, they come out. They shine thus all winter, but the night grows cold. We cease to watch them once the activity demands that we stand shivering. We give up our time with them—those silent, haunting, freezing nights—for the comfort of lesser fires.

It is raining today, and I expect it will continue for several days. Afterward, we will have that golden time. The skies will unveil the sun, but the air will be cooler. We will have two weeks or maybe three to drink it in. Groups of students from the college will invade Pocket—a nearby wilderness area with a river and a valley and a bluff—and hike as much as they can. Many will not think of how little time they have to do so. They will go because these days are perfect, but they will not go as much as they would if they only remembered that these days are numbered.

But I will remember. I will take my friends by the hands and bid them come with me. We will go together to enjoy these precious, living days. I will not just walk in the golden wilderness. I will climb the waterfalls and swim in the river and touch the warm bark of the trees and soak up the warmth of the rocks and the ground through bare feet while warmth can still be found. It will not be long.

I was there yesterday. We climbed all the way to the bluff called Buzzard's Peak and looked out over the world, three friends and I. The namesake of those cliffs circled above us in great numbers. There were so many of them—dull-winged scavengers, the harbingers of death—and one red-tailed hawk. It was strange to watch that beautiful hawk sailing along among so many of its hideous kin. While the buzzards croaked, "*Memento mori!*" the hawk seemed to shriek, "*Memento vivere!*"

I looked out and threw my hands wide and felt the wind touch every invisible hair on my arms. I felt the warmth of the sun even through the clouds. The beauty of the place and the season was untarnished. The buzzards were an afterthought and easy enough to ignore. It was the rest of the place I had come for and the rest

remained. I knew it would pass. It would all pass at the last day. The mountains would be cast into the sea. But they lived now, and they sang, and the song would echo on forever. Would mine?

When I was eleven, my Aunt Lisa contracted leukemia. When I was twelve, she died.

Whenever we went to visit her in Kentucky, she always scooped me up in the warmest, plumpiest hugs imaginable. Sometimes it used to irritate me because I couldn't catch my breath. But not after she got sick.

We went to visit her more often in that year than in the rest of my years combined, and when she hugged me, I hugged back with all the strength my little arms could muster. At first she seemed alright. Her hair was a little thinner. That was all. The next time she wore a scarf around her head. Her face was thinner. She had lost a lot of weight all over, and she was a bit jaundiced. Midas had kissed her like the leaves. But she was so beautiful. She got tired easily, but she still smiled. She still laughed, musically and often.

The next time we visited, she was gone. She was there, the doctors told us. But Lisa was not there. Her spirit was struggling toward heaven, and only one little corner of her mind remained. Yet they had told me she was still alive—that this was probably the last time I would get to see her alive. I was twelve, so I imagined miracles. I prayed hard. And I believed. I imagined the hug. It never came.

My mum and I stood at the threshold of the hospital room. She had already been in. She placed a hand on my shoulder as she turned the knob and whispered, "You don't have to do this if you don't want to." I didn't understand. I was appalled. How could I not want to? I was there either to say goodbye to my aunt or to watch God miraculously heal her. She was only forty. There was still time.

We stepped into the room. Aunt Sue was faithfully watching by Lisa's bedside. She thought Lisa was there with her, and maybe she was in a way. But she was not in her body. Not fully. I walked up

to the bed and stood frozen. I was too late, and I knew it. I would never hear her laugh again. She would never hug me as only she could do again. It was too late. There was no time.

Why had I wasted the summer of her life not loving her enough? Why did I only hug back once I read rumors of autumn in her face? Why do we forget to live until it is time for someone to die?

I didn't cry in the room because part of me and all of Aunt Sue was still fighting to believe she could come back. I knew she *could*. Christ had raised Lazarus. He could raise my aunt. But I knew just as surely that He wouldn't. Not this time.

As soon as we stepped outside, I broke down. Mum just held my hand for a few moments before saying, "Are you alright?" I nodded and wiped my eyes. I was fine. But my aunt was leaving, and I knew nothing of the place where she was going. The reality passed unspoken between us. We had just seen death living in my aunt's body.

Aunt Lisa had set aside some things to give me. There was an amethyst ring, a turquoise necklace with two hearts on the pendant, and a rust-colored leaf brooch made of some kind of resin. The rest of her was somewhere else—somewhere I could not reach.

Again and again, every year, the leaves turn to rust like that brooch. The leaves are all the fading years leave us. A few rusty leaves floated down from the trees on the hike to Buzzard's Peak, though many were still green.

We rushed on our way up, and we stopped and sunned ourselves when we got there. I remember the bare peak more clearly than the journey there. We didn't pay as much attention getting there. But the journey begged to be our destination, and my heart felt the tug of the river's song and the smell of the hemlock stands as much as it felt the sun on the rocks at the bluff.

We speak of heaven as the place where God reigns. But does He not reign here too? Does He not bring our years round and round and make everything speak to remind us? Does He remind us only

that we are dying? Is all this life only a journey to heaven? And if it is, is it less important for that? Should we not still remember that our every brief motion is burdened with the weight of eternity? This is the battlefield. It is where things are determined. It is where we live, and there are beauties and glories and fragments of heaven here too.

The buzzards still circle the peak. I can see it, bare and golden in the sun, through the windows of the student center's café on any clear day. I can hear their taunting cries: "*Memento mori! Memento mori!* You're dying, you're dying, you're dying! You are nothing more than food for us. Your time is passing. It will soon be gone. To dust you will return." But the hawk is somewhere up there too, singing his harsh, brave, joyous song. "*Memento vivere!* You're living! You're living! You're living! You are young. Number your days. Count each one and ask if it was full enough of life. Be breathless. Be passionate. Love much. Live well. Redeem the time."

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Just the Two of Us

| Bunny Arlotti

During the early morning hours of a wintry Atlantic freeze, the Aero Lingus airbus touched down in Dublin. Although my red-eye flight from San Francisco left me drained, I suddenly felt that I could breathe again. The Irish air, pregnant with moisture, smelled like home to me. I was heading for an old friend's cottage nestled in the Wicklow Mountains south of Dublin. I caught St. Kevin's bus to Glendalough, an ancient glacier valley of lakes, and home to St. Kevin's sixth-century monastic ruins. On the bus, I did my best to not think about what I was doing in Ireland. I did my best to not think about my brother and the last time I had seen his shrunken frame in that Hemet hospital. Running from life requires being in the present and never looking back. I was good at running—very good.

My brother Allen had lain in his hospital bed; a thin cotton gown revealed each protruding rib and did little to conceal death's lurking embrace. Contracting HIV during the mid-80s guaranteed a short life, but Allen had out-run the disease for thirteen years. Although the medical world had finally concocted the so-called "cocktail" of HIV inhibitors, their work was too late for Allen. When I approached his bed, I feared I'd break one of his ribs if I touched him; but sensing I was near, he reached up for me out of his slumber. I hugged him loosely; his hair was matted with sweat, and bright red scabs covered his arms and legs. I think I was afraid to touch him. I was afraid of catching AIDS, although I knew it wasn't transmitted through hugs. Allen cried tears of fear, told me he loved me, and then sent me away. He didn't want me, his little sister, to see him like this. I walked uncertainly out of the hospital, but ran fearfully out of the country.

The St. Kevin's bus dropped me off in front of Lynham's Pub in a small village near Glendalough. The pub's rowdy drinkers turned to stare at me, but I didn't care. I ordered a ginger ale for my stomach and warmed my hands before a peat fire. In Ireland, bogs

and moors supply fuel instead of trees. Peat gatherers cut dense, decayed vegetation from the earth and burn it in their hearths for heat during the winter months. The fire warmed my hands, but despite my best efforts to not think about what I was doing in Ireland, memories of my brother kept flashing like camera bulbs bursting through the past, time traveling with me to my safe place.

Allen was eight years older than me. He was tall, with shoulder length blonde hair, and he had the most beautiful steel-blue eyes. He was also the black sheep in our family. Allen was always getting into trouble. Like the time when I was eleven and a swarm of unmarked police officers surrounded our Sun Valley, California home. When I went to the door, the officers demanded that I open the door and hand over my brother. Sensing the manhunt, or maybe feeling the guilt of having committed the crime, Allen crawled up into our home's attic to hide. From the front window, I could see the officers' hands gripping their steel firearms, and one of them had a long billy-club, ready for anything.

As an eleven-year-old home alone with my big brother, I was scared. At the time, I didn't know what Allen had done, or why the entire Sun Valley police force was banging on our door—but I knew I wasn't letting them take him. After I told the cops to leave because they were not coming in, an armed officer discovered an unlocked window in my bedroom, slit open the window screen, and climbed through. Just as he was entering, the rest of the police brigade burst through our front door and began searching every crevice of our home. They caught their fugitive hiding in the attic, bound him tightly with shiny silver handcuffs, and placed him in the backseat of their unmarked police car.

As it turned out, my stepmother had called the police and reported Allen for forging one of her checks. She was conveniently out shopping on the day of the arrest, but she left me at home to watch as my older brother was hauled away in handcuffs.

Maybe it was seeing someone I love being hauled away in handcuffs, or living with the reality that my biological parents didn't want me—but whatever it was, our connection overrode bloodlines.

All three of us siblings were adopted from different families, and this truth seemed to bring us closer together. Years later, Allen and I would laugh about that day—the day my stepmother tried to tear us apart.

Even though Allen had forged one of my stepmother's checks (he was the black sheep, after all), I loved him more because none of this was his fault. Allen lived his life by reacting to the mayhem that surrounded him. When he was four years old, Allen's birthmother preferred pills and booze to mothering. As an eleven-year-old latchkey kid, he stole fireworks from a neighbor's shed and blasted them off in the backyard near our milking cow. When our parents returned home and discovered the cow cowering in the far end of its pen, they tied Allen to a walnut tree with leather horse reins and brutally beat him with a dirty garden hose. Scared and bruised, Allen ran away from home, but he was caught the next day hiding in a neighbor's barn. Just when Allen was entering adolescence, our parents sent him away to a boy's home as punishment. The abandoned and beaten eleven-year-old, turned into a gay, HIV infected, intravenous drug user.

Years later, when my brother was living on San Francisco's Polk Street, an area notorious for its gay nightlife, he phoned to ask if I could take him to the hospital because he couldn't see out of his left eye. When I arrived to pick him up, Allen's closet-sized studio stunk of cigarette butts and dirty clothes piles littered the floor. Allen's Maltese sat hungrily staring at me; her hair was matted and stained yellow. Allen loved San Francisco, but San Francisco didn't love anyone.

I expected to see Allen's beautiful steel-blue eyes peering back at me, but his left eye was completely shut. His long black eye lashes were matted together with yellow puss, which oozed from his left eye. Later, when we were waiting in the cold San Francisco County Hospital, Allen brought up our parents' divorce:

"Remember when Dad kidnapped us?" Allen asked.

"Kind of," I said. "How old was I?"

"I think you were four, and I was twelve." Rubbing his good eye,

Allen shivered.

I did remember. I remembered how Allen had held me in the backseat of that station wagon, while I cried to go home to my mom. I didn't want to tell him how scared I was sitting in that cold hospital. It was easier talking to him about the past—it was easier talking to him about anything other than his eye. I had to be strong; I was his rock. Our mother was 350 miles away in southern California, and our father and brother had disowned him. It was just the two of us in the back of the station wagon the day our father had kidnapped us; it was just the two of us in that hospital.

The hospital's team of eye specialists and nurses kept Allen in the hospital for ten days. They kept his left eye too. His eye had been too badly infected to save. The day they released my brother, our mother drove the 350 miles to bring him home from San Francisco. A few years later, Allen lost his other eye too.

Back at Lynham's, after a pint of black Guinness and a bowl of steaming Irish stew, I sat reading my emails from home when these simple four words floored me: "Your brother passed away." That was all my mother had written—nothing more. I think my mother blamed me for running away from my brother's death. But I couldn't watch anymore. I couldn't watch him, and I couldn't help him. The life-sucking disease had beaten me too. The prolonged agony had worn away my defenses. I couldn't stop his pain, or the flow of life from his body. I hated that disease—AIDS.

I was thousands of miles from home, but my life had caught up with me. I needed a place to pray. Just outside of town, a country lane nestled along a roaring rusty river. At the end of the lane, the villages' church, St. Kevin's, and its deserted cemetery, patiently awaited me. I left the pub and headed up the lane on foot. I wasn't expecting to find a traffic jam, but a sea of orange lights greeted me. Motorists extended their necks out of their car windows as a large herd carelessly meandered across the road. The culprits—a crew of muddy Irish sheep—huddled and blocked traffic in either direction.

I wrangled and squeezed my way through the warm, furry bodies and their peering black eyes.

Just past the sea of sheep, I could see the antiquated cemetery—gray head stones peeped up out of billowy green stalks. Next to the cemetery, the small church was hidden underneath a canopy of ancient trees. Once I was inside St. Kevin’s Church, the outside world faded. Hanging on the wall above the white-clothed alter, a small red candle flickered; it was just the two of us now—God and I.

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Reflections of a Kuwaiti Ex Libris

| Ayat Al-Bloushi

After reading Anne Fadiman's book of essays, *Ex Libris: Confessions of a Common Reader*, a number of questions occurred to me. But one question haunted me the most. I wondered: "Is the author really a *common* reader?" Considering her family background, her career as Yale professor and author, and that she reads Homer's *The Odyssey*—for fun—Fadiman strikes me as an extraordinary reader. As a matter of fact, relegating her to the ranks of a common reader is a farfetched idea.

I discussed these reflections with my American professor and she suggested that Fadiman is more or less a common reader for an American with her parents' occupation and socio-economic group. This idea was an awakening call to my Kuwaiti ego. I realized then that the conclusion that I made about Fadiman's attitude towards reading was based on my interpretations of reading habits in Kuwait. It was a new idea to me that both cultural and familial contexts play an important role in building the character of a reader. I started thinking about my own situation.

When I was a child I did not see anyone in my family hold a book, except for my dad. My father had a corner in his room full of religious books. He used to read at night and during the next day would tell my brothers and I about the ideas that he learned from his night-reading. He encouraged us to ask questions about any issues that seemed ambiguous. Sometimes while we had dinner, my brothers and I used to discuss a specific matter and then argue about it. We even fought each other since that is what children usually do whenever they find someone opposing their views. But dad was always the tiebreaker. He brought the relevant book to the dinner table and recited a passage or more about the topic that we debated.

Dad was a great teacher. This was why I enjoyed car rides with him. He used to tell us religious stories so that we could learn life lessons from them. The rides were really fun because my father's

voice kept us awake and attentive instead of us falling asleep. “Ride-storytelling” became so expected that if my father forgot to start speaking to us as he drove from the house, we nagged for a story! I can venture to say that oral texts shaped a great part of my life, and I believe that our habit of listening to our father made me disregard reading myself and think of it as something that another person did. That person would then tell me about the books and encourage my thoughts.

This idea started to change in high school. I had to read the books that were assigned to me by my teachers; however, I never read anything that was not required. This was the case until I met my tenth grade English teacher whose passion was reading. Her love for books made her dedicate much of our class time to teaching us students lessons that she found appealing from the book that she was reading at the time. She used to advise my classmates and I that we should read books to gain knowledge. I followed her advice and chose to read a book for my own knowledge. The topic of the book would not surprise anyone; it was religious and about God’s prophets in Islam. One could argue at this point that my father’s experience with books affected my choice. That would mostly be true since the only books in our home were about religion or the schoolbooks that we kids were required to buy. While the subject may have been my father’s, the habit of reading started to become my own in tenth grade. I was transformed.

My English teacher also advised us to read books for the sake of improving our personalities since she believed that books changed her life for the better. Again, I took her advice and went to the bookstore and bought my first book to read solely for pleasure. It was a book about body language. As I started reading it at my leisure, I actually found it amazing. I started paying attention to the people around me so that I could use my newfound knowledge from that book to analyze their gestures and know their moods. My reading seemed even more valuable to me when my observations about people turned out to be true. I remember once, my cousin

was smoking and blowing his cigarette smoke in a low direction. This made me ask him whether he was thinking of something that stressed him. He was shocked and replied, "How did you know! I'm trying to hide it. Was it obvious?!" One can imagine the big smile on my face as soon as I heard his answer. I felt that I was really knowledgeable. Even though some might consider this knowledge insignificant, I believed that I had done something useful. This body-language book and the book about the prophets of Islam began my journey as a reader, thanks to my inspiring English teacher.

Since then, I have enjoyed going to the bookstore to explore the world around me through texts so that I could be an open-minded person who reads just about everything for pleasure, except religious books! I have noticed that my reading habits have not affected my father as his habits once affected me. He has not expanded his field of reading; consequently he engages in his nightly reading of books about Islam and the Qur'an. Now do not misunderstand me. While my father does read books about Islam exclusively, he is neither a fanatic nor a conservative. He interacts freely with people from all cultures but thinks that he should read exclusively about his own religion.

My father and mother are proud of my extensive reading, especially my mother. She encourages me to develop my love for the written word even more. Oftentimes she asks her brother to lend her books to me, since my uncle was an English professor at Kuwait University and has an extensive library. She also informs me of any of the scarce book sales that might be happening in Kuwait and takes me there to buy books. I once asked her, why is she so interested in my decision to be an avid reader? Mom replied that she was proud that I have better educational opportunities than she had in her twenties. She and her sisters had to take care of my grandparents and uncles because they did not have maids to help them with the housework. Only the boys were free to pursue higher education. Mom would have liked to earn a degree in English, but that was not to be. Times have changed in Kuwait and my mother

is happy that I am empowered. Furthermore, reading has given me a “voice” in discussions with my family. Previously, I used to be a follower who complied with whatever a person older than me said. Now I’m able to articulate my views and share my knowledge with others because I can trust my critical thinking gained through the reading I have done.

I read everything: fiction, non-fiction, poetry, plays, essays, magazines. You name it. Sometimes I chose my fiction to read after being inspired by a movie adaptation. That happened with *Oliver Twist*. Other times a friend or a mentor would hand me something to read. That is how my fondness for *Gulliver’s Travels* and Shakespeare began. In high school, I read simplified versions of the Bard, but I soon moved on to his full-length plays. *The Comedy of Errors* is my favorite. I also love *The Tragical History of the Life and Death of Doctor Faustus* and *Paradise Lost*. Even our common reader sent me scurrying to the bookstore. Because of Fadiman, I now have *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey* on my bookshelf. Just as soon as I get a break from school, I’m going to read them.

But now, I just feel lucky to be surrounded by people who encourage me to read. My family, my professors, and my friends at university all make me the reader that I am. I realize that I am fortunate and I worry about the people who do not have someone to encourage them as readers. Perhaps, they will never understand the importance of cultivating one’s mind with texts and become cynics who regard readers as “pathetic” bookworms. Some of my Kuwaiti friends are like that. They find books boring not because they “know” that reading is boring, but because it “seems” that way to them since they have never been transformed by a text.

Once I was showing one of my book-bashing friends the photos from my trip to Spain, and she came across a picture of me reading a book on the train. She laughed and said: “Seriously? Who reads books these days? Watch the movie!” Even though she made fun of me, I felt sorry that she would not know the pleasures of a book. The same is true of my cousin. Once when we were shopping

together, I insisted that we stop at a bookstore. She told me that I was wasting time and that visiting the bookstore was not important. Such moments with my friends and family make me feel sorry for them because they don't appear to know the pleasure that a person can experience while reading.

I think that the social and economic situations in Kuwait are factors that lead some Kuwaitis to disregard the idea of reading a book. For instance, our schools and governments do not host activities that promote reading. We have no real public libraries even though each district has a government store with a *maktaba aamma* attached. If one was to go inside one of those buildings, and we don't, one would find useless old books that even an avid reader would reject. We neither celebrate a National Library Week in April, *Shawal*, or any other month nor teach our primary students that Reading is Fundamental.

Added to the problem of deteriorating readership, worsened by a lack of school and government programs, is the surprising problem of our wealth. I strongly believe that our luxurious lifestyle has made us lazy. Why read the book when we can just buy the movie and play it on that new Panasonic 152-inch 3D Plasma TV that we picked up for a mere KD 141,205 or in other words a paltry \$500,000? I am exaggerating a bit but this consumerism is widespread in my country, and it starts at an early stage of a Kuwaiti's life. Most families buy their preschoolers iPads to watch videos on *YouTube*, instead of buying them books to read. All I am saying is that a notion of a "common reader" has all but disappeared in my country. Consequently, Fadiman's idea of a common reader shocked me, an avid reader in Kuwait.

Ayat Al-Bloushi graduated from the American University of Kuwait (AUK) after successfully defending her senior thesis on Ford Madox Ford's The Good Soldier in 2013. She now works at the Kuwait National Council for Culture, Arts, and Literature, where she translates books written in English into Arabic. Al-Bloushi has also been hired at AUK to help teach basic writing and critical thinking skills. She will pursue a Ph.D. in English literature after gaining some career experience in the field.

Unspoken Parentheses

| Kathryn Baumgartner

Last night's test of my sobriety—paired with the two 24-ounce cans of Coors Light my friend left in the fridge—leave me craving a buzz. The feeling of looseness and laughter that accompanies the high is calling my name and I am eager to respond. I grasp one chilled can in my hand, the mountains on the side as blue as your eyes, and hop onto my bed, ready for the release of air and satisfying POP that comes when I crack open that taste of the Rockies.

My feet meet the floor again in a sudden moment of clarity. Only my non-drinking roommate and her boyfriend are around, so I realize I may come off as a bit of an alcoholic if I crack open a can of beer and guzzle it down alone in my corner of the room. Desperate for more of a party (and to fulfill one of my guilty pleasures, which is simply hanging out with you), I send a text asking if you and the guys want to hang out. You say you'll get back to me. In other words—or at least in my mind—that means a polite “no.”

I sulk for a moment before Matt comes to the rescue, saying he also has beer he would like to drink. I grin and once again take a can from the fridge, ready to open my form of paradise. (I really hate the taste of beer.)

Nearly one can and several trips to the bathroom later, I am enjoying spending time with my friends, but I cannot silence the part of my mind that is focused on your absence. Soon, though, we hear voices coming up the stairs and the harsh slam of the front door. It looks like you decided to show up after all, and I say as much when you enter the room. (The whole time, thinking, ‘Act casual.’) It is only you and he, the rest of the gang unusually absent, but I am more than okay with this. There's so much history hanging in the air between the five of us, some of it my own thoughts unknown to any of the others though pertaining to them, and it both bonds us together and tears us silently apart. It buzzes between us, invisible threads of energy as fragile as an unpopped bubble

floating gently through the air. But all I can think of in the moment is the hours you and I spent together and how easily they had flown by. (You thought differently.)

I was playing a card game with Matt and Amanda when the two of you came, one that had been initiated by my intense need to do *something* other than sit. It is yet another night filled with the pull to be somewhere, doing something, that will make me feel as though I'm really living my life and not merely existing in it. I never have been able to figure out what exactly I can do to feel that way, though I know playing a card game and drinking a couple of beers is not it. Still, it's better than nothing.

As soon as you start talking to me, the game disappears. Maybe that's because of the alcohol I had, which has already allowed the hands of the clock to reach midnight far sooner than I thought was possible. Maybe it is because I don't really know how to play the game and am losing terribly. Or maybe it has something to do with you. (It has everything to do with you.)

You wander down the hall to the stash of candy hearts kept for what many of my friends and I celebrate as Single's Awareness Day. After you come back, I do the same. We are all having fun trying to determine what the messages say and what they actually mean. How is "boogie" a romantic sentiment, especially coming from a heart-shaped lump of sugar?

"True love," I read, not tipsy enough for my words to start slurring or my footsteps to start wobbling, even in the wedges I still have on from a formal dinner earlier in the evening. I sit on my roommate's desk and continue, "It's like karma. I'm never going to find any since I'm eating it."

The words really don't make much sense, but the meaning behind them is clear and true in my mind. You may have reacted to them, but for once I am more focused on his face than yours. He and I used to be so close, like family I thought. I don't go around telling just anyone they are closer to me than my flesh and blood.

But there was never enough balance to our friendship; it was all deep, darkly emotional heart-to-hearts at odd hours of the morning and not enough laughter. Not wanting to go back to that place of darkness, and seeing the sad, shocked look on his face (how many times have I caused that look to appear?), I cover the moment with laughter. I giggle and pretend it is all a joke. (It isn't.)

“I really want food,” you say.

You've been saying this about every five minutes for the last hour and even I am getting sick of hearing it. Even though it is now past one o'clock in the morning, I also want to go on a food run, but mostly just because of that overwhelming desire to leave this cramped room and enter the world outside. I want to feel like I'm actually doing something. (I know it's pointless in the long run.)

He drives and I ride shotgun, afraid of throwing up if I ride in the back. It's only the three of us, you and me and him, and I'm secretly thankful the others decided not to go. (Otherwise, my presence so easily fades into the background.)

The beauty of the 36 ounces of alcohol I consumed is the total lack of caring that comes with it. Nothing matters but this moment. I have my entire life spread before me at 19. I have years and years of responsibility and hard work to look forward to, so why start now? There's no point to youth if it cannot be spent creating memories and learning lessons, pushing off adulthood for just another year or two. (It doesn't cross my mind that I may not make it past 19 if I keep this up.)

The fact that he had a beer an hour ago and is only 20 means nothing to me, though if he gets pulled over we're all screwed. He drives with no hands on the wheel for a while, riding casually over the dotted white line; the only sign I give of caring is offering to help plug in the phone he is attempting to charge. I don't even care when he doesn't accept the help.

In that moment, my brain slightly fuzzy from the beer, the steering wheel appears to me as a wheel of fortune. For one of the

few times in my life, I am allowing the wheel to land where it may and not trying to force the outcome. It lands where it lands and if it happens to land us into a tree, then that's just what the fates handed us and we have to deal with it when it comes. Being in constant control over life's events is nothing more than an illusion anyway, because anything else can come along and override the control a person has over the steering wheel of their life. Sometimes it's best to just steer in the same direction life is pushing for instead of fighting against it. That's what I decide to do tonight.

"Just get us home in one piece, that's all," is my only response.

He takes the curves in the road way too quickly, and all that runs through my mind is how like a roller coaster it is. (I hate roller coasters.) Even after you tell us about the kids who died on this road because of the curves and excessive speed, I don't care. I'm not them and, even if I was, at least my family can tell everyone I died with two of my close friends, having fun on a Saturday night, instead of any boring alternative. (Though I know they won't see it that way.)

He drives on the wrong side of the road for a brief period of time, all for the sake of more easily entering the driveway to 7-11. It's worth it when you and I find the Entenmann's pies we are so desperate for.

"Are you sure you're going to be able to pay?" You always seem to think I'm drunker than I am.

"Hey, if I can walk in these shoes, I'm golden," I say, indicating my two-inch wedges. "And you know how I know these shoes are hot? Two straight guys told me so."

(Never mind that one of them was you.)

Back in the car, he opens the moon roof and tells you to stick your head out. We're cruising down the highway and the wind is whipping through the opening, its volume competing with that of the music pumping through the speakers. You chicken out.

"Come on, someone's gotta do it!"

I volunteer. (Another perk of the alcohol running through my

veins.)

For the brief second my head and hands are out the window, I forget. I forget who I'm in the car with; I forget who I am and where I want to go in life. I feel I N F I N I T E. (Something I've always wanted to feel, thanks to Chbosky.)

“Dude, you only stuck like your forehead out.”

Your snarky comment brings me back to where I am. I remember that I wouldn't be here if the ones you two were lusting after could be. I remember that I'll always be the second option. I'm an easy replacement because, no matter how much I know you're using me, I am always willing to fill the role. It makes me feel like I'm part of something, if only for a night.

The truth is, though, you're pining after her in the same way I'm pining after you. You wish she were here in my place, I'm sure of it. Instead, she's spending the night with him and will never feel about you the way you want her to. (At least you know how I feel.)

It's scary how similar we are. We overthink the simplest things, we both chase after the one person we apparently aren't meant to have, we have a lot of the same views and neither one of us ever act on them, but as funny as we are together and as easily as I feel conversation flows between us, it would never be good for me to date you. There are too many reasons not to—comments like the one you made in the car, you mooch off anyone you can, you dominate the conversation only to talk in circles, and you could never love me the way you love her.

That's the deal-breaker. I can deal with any of the other things (maybe), but I can't settle for a love that's anything less than passionate. And even though I know feelings can fade and change over time, or fall to the back of the heart when someone new comes along, I also know how difficult it is to forget the one person you can never stop thinking about. (Thanks to you.)

Yet somehow you make me a better person. Well, you make me want to *be* a better person, all without actually being as righteous as you'd like to think you are.

I think of all of this after you tell me to shush for what feels like the hundredth time tonight, and honestly probably is.

Eventually, we come back to where we began, and I move straight to the fridge for the last 12 ounces of beer. My buzz is beginning to wear off and I'll do anything to keep things the way they are, the aggressive banter between us flowing more easily when I have liquid courage coursing through my veins. Only the thought of how much more open and outwardly funny I am when I drink makes me keep forcing down sips of the Coors.

"Are you going to finish that?" you ask, nodding towards the can I placed on the floor a moment ago.

I shrug. I've been contemplating emptying the last half of the final 24-ounce can in the sink the whole time you two were talking.

"You should. It makes you funnier."

(Ouch.)

We had been arguing and throwing insults at each other all night, mostly instigated by you. I knew you were joking those other times, so I went along with it, desperate to hold onto the feeling that we were as close as the bickering made me feel. (We always joke about not being friends, but I really don't know where I stand with you.)

This time, though, you really strike a nerve. I don't need you of all people, whose opinion matters more to me than most, to point out how much more free I am when I drink, how much wittier and more open I become. I want you to be able to see that I am like that all the time. I want you to care enough to see past the walls I build around the real me when I'm sober.

Instead of responding, as I did to all your other jibes, I immerse myself in the boring, mentally numb world of my phone and give you vague half-answers when you try talking to me.

That doesn't last long. The pull to talk to people, especially you, is too strong to resist. So, our bantering resumes and once again it is all light-hearted fun. I jokingly sucker-punch you in the face,

accidentally cause you to spasm when I elbow your side, and I say a lot of rude things that I really don't mean.

"You two are bickering like an old married couple," he remarks casually.

That stopped me in the middle of my response to you. He knows I like(d) you. He knows you didn't feel the same. That was almost a year ago, but I'm sure he knows I'm not over you, even though I haven't told him.

In a masochistic way, it was as pleasing to hear as it was shocking and upsetting. Perhaps if he could see the chemistry between us, you may also be able to see it one day.

The moment passes and we go back to the way we were, you throwing one last jibe at me before leaving almost an hour later.

"You should change your clothes, you know. The party's over."

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Two-Wheeled Freedom

| Tyler Auffhammer

Ever since I can remember, I have always wanted a Harley-Davidson. I like to think it was something nostalgic that drew me to the steel steeds that have become synonymous with rebellion and freedom: the iconic bar and shield logo, the distinctive *potato-potato-potato* patented sound of the engine, the distressed black cowhide jackets worn by old school riders. The iconic images of motorcycles have always had an allure, but it's likely that my love for motorcycles began with my search to find something in common with my father.

He had always been a two wheels kind of guy, my father. When, on the drug-laced and sun-soaked beaches of 1960s Cocoa Beach, Florida, he got his first metal flake blue mini-bike as a preteen, my father found his freedom—freedom from his nagging mother and her abusive boyfriends, his slew of younger siblings always aching for his attention, and hollow promises of the local schoolhouses.

Most of all, I think, that mini-bike was freedom from who *he* was. My father, being the pimple-faced, red-haired stepchild he was, ended up the brunt of many schoolyard jokes and, subsequently, schoolyard fights. I'm not sure if he was ever comfortable with himself growing up. It's hard to be comfortable with yourself when no one else is comfortable with you. To combat his anxiety, my father turned to cheap thrills. From pouring a bottle of deer urine in the school radiator to riding his dirt bike through the halls of his high school, he grew up hard and tough, but his motorcycles became a much-needed outlet.

Unfortunately, cheap thrills and the open road sometimes lose their luster in the passage into adulthood. The love of a raven-haired woman and fatherhood for someone who never had known his father was enough for him to surrender his freedom. Birthdays came and went like hunting seasons in a country town and my father found himself middle-aged and itching for his freedom again.

Having matured since his days as a beach bum, my father no longer sought freedom from his mother or schoolyard bullies, but from the daily grind, two decades of raising a family, and a failing marriage.

So my father bought a Harley-Davidson 1200 Sportster. I still have a few pictures of that black beauty. One picture is of my niece and nephew as toddlers draped over the thick leather saddle; another is of my father in full leather regalia before hitting the road on a trip to Biloxi. But my favorite is of me at twelve with a shaved head, unopened beer-in-hand, and an unlit cigar-in-mouth. Unfortunately, black beauty only made it to pasture a few times before the expenses of divorce forced my father to sell the bike.

After my parents' divorce, seeing my father became limited to dinner and a movie every Thursday. I couldn't get the "proper" upbringing that a young boy like myself needed: grease under my fingernails, guns in my hands, and support and advice from my father. So, at sixteen and old enough to make my own decisions (I thought), I moved from the nurturing arms of my mother to the stern hands of my father.

My father then owned a Harley-Davidson Heritage Softail Classic in a rich red color, complete with whitewall tires and studded leather bags. He had purchased it new after the divorce—maybe to replace what he had lost, maybe to stick it to the old lady and buy something he had always wanted. Maybe he was just looking for his freedom again.

When I lived with my father, we would take car trips over-the-hill to eastern Tennessee from our rural home in Robbinsville, North Carolina. After stopping at our favorite restaurants (usually something wholesome like Hooter's), we would always stop at the local Harley-Davidson dealership. Just sitting on the bikes shot adrenaline through my veins, like I was Bellerophon stepping onto Pegasus for the first time. From that moment on, I knew that I wanted to live my life on two wheels like my father.

At eighteen I bought a Harley-Davidson Deuce, six hundred pounds of steel and chrome tightly packed into the softail frame.

Raked out and solidly built, the bike's sleek black tank and double-stitched leather saddle were more than perfect for me. After I made the down payment, the sales associate had me start it up and just sitting in the deep leather seat made my fingertips yearn to engage the throttle. My father had to ride it home for me because I didn't have a riding permit or license yet. Having drained my bank account, I *needed* that permit.

Once I earned the right to ride on the road, my father and I went for rides almost daily. Dad would lean deep into the tight curves of the mountain roads and I followed suit, hoping to become as skilled as him through repetition. We often journeyed on the "Tail of the Dragon," an 11-mile stretch of mountain road named for the 318 curves that test the skill and determination of its riders. With his leather-bound feet positioned casually on the highway pegs, knuckles to the wind and eyes placed alertly on the road ahead, my father would find his freedom again on two wheels. For me, it was always about the excitement of the ride, about the image it evoked, and about the girls I naïvely thought I would attract while riding a bike.

Soon I left for college and now I find myself caught up in the daily grind that plagued my dad for many years. From the constant demands of schoolwork, scholarship requirements, and my futile attempt at a personal life, I am not yet the biker that I always envisioned I would become.

Still, on those rare days when I find myself back home in the mountains with my dad, we fire up our bikes and travel back to the rural mountain roads where we used to ride. Back to the roads where the distant cobalt sky is visible through the phalanx of pine limbs—where my father, who now follows his son's lead, nods his head in approval as I shift up through the gears, forcing oil into the pistons. We bolt past the green-leafed maples and the loose-nailed tobacco barns, our machines rumbling beneath us. Rubber hooves rapidly revolve over cooling asphalt as our steel horses carry us through the cove. The chrome of the bike and my black leather flashes in the last burnt orange rays of light as I speed down the

last stretch of the valley and disappear into a tunnel of bowing sycamores.

As I vanish into the sycamore grove, I imagine my father looking up ahead at his son—cowhide boots placed calmly on the forward foot controls, knuckles at the wind and eyes placed attentively on the path ahead—knowing that I too have found my freedom on two wheels.

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The Abstract Human

| Sarah Towle

His face is distorted. The nose is too long, and placed in a spot that doesn't make sense, aesthetically or anatomically. Only a couple of paintbrush strokes were required to alter the genetic make-up of the man in the art gallery. Abstract and cubism art aren't the most appealing paintings necessarily, but they ask their viewers to ponder why the artist chose to paint a man with no arms, or a woman whose eyes are far too close for any passerby to find pleasing. I suppose Picasso had the skills to create a woman of charm and elegance on his canvas, but he chose displeasing and out-of-place. He chose to alter the human body, and for what purpose? Perhaps it was to make it better or to validate some point. Regardless of intent, the painted human was modified, and it was cherished.

As I stood in a university art gallery, I couldn't help but correlate the similarity of a quick and easy altercation with human flesh and blood, as well. Just as quickly, a living being can suffer a sword mightier than the paintbrush and have a change of course thrust upon him. Sure, human beings are strong and capable of the most fascinating and courageous feats. Four-thousand people have hiked in efforts to conquer Mt. Everest; one man completed 1,868 one-arm push-ups in sixty minutes; and some women push whole humans through their birth canals! However, out of the 4,000 that attempted Mt. Everest, only 660 to date have actually done it and survived; according to the CDC, one-third of America is considered obese, and therefore, not accomplishing many one-arm push-ups, and even with modern-day medicine and miracles, 287,000 women died world-wide in 2010 from childbirth. We, as the human race, are strong—but we're equally fragile.

Paul Klee, a Swiss and German artist, created an abstract piece titled *Senecio*. The painting is comprised of lively colors: oranges, yellows, and pinks, but the painting—which is translated as “old man” in Latin—is a disfigured face with only a faint hint of a nose,

one eyebrow, crooked eyes, and color cubes for a complexion. A perfect circle remains for the head, as if the *senecio* kept a remnant of what once was even though the rest of his face no longer resembles a typical man's. This old man is different now; he appears to have suffered from the frailty of the human frame.

I thought about how quickly our own flesh could be altered without our agreement, or even how drastically our perception of the world around us changes, whether we embrace the enlightenment or not.

I'll never forget my first essay of my junior year in high school. We came back on a humid summer day, and our teacher asked us to write about what we learned over the summer. I quickly began explaining, "This summer, I learned we are not invincible. I learned there are limitations to the human body, and though we are young and feel mighty, we are easily brought down in our feeble strength." It was a lesson I felt too young to learn. That summer distorted my own view and created an unappreciated abstract painting of the past months. The day after the Fourth of July, my high school sweetheart crashed into a coma.

The diaries of Paul Klee lack depth of emotion, or even thought, towards personal issues. He offers little to no mention of love, death, or friendship in more than a factual form. However, he joyfully gabs on about the beauty of the bodily form, his enthusiasm and wonder for colors, and his overall buoyant appreciation of art. Klee certainly did not reveal himself as an unemotional man, but he perhaps delegated emotion as more appropriate for intellectual thoughts and theories than personal issues. Another painting of Klee's titled *Miraculous Landing* is comprised of straight lines and sharp geometrical shapes. Though the objects are more overt in this painting than other abstract pieces, the abstract style mimics the oddity of its depiction of a ship sailing into a house with a young girl as the captain. *Miraculous Landing* might represent a fairy tale or some sort of fantasy—maybe a dream of someone bound by an

unfortunate reality or a paralyzing truth.

It is often debated whether or not comatose patients dream, and though a recent study claims to have found evidence that dreams are flooding comatose patients, it's almost next to impossible to confirm such claims. I know little to nothing of science, but I remember after my boyfriend, Jay, went into his coma, anyone could hold his hand and his thumb would rub yours. The doctors said it was something like muscle memory, but we all hoped there was something else within his stressed and swollen brain that knew the hands he held. We all wanted something to connect his unconscious state to our reality.

Jay played the scarecrow in our high school's production of *Wizard of Oz* earlier that spring. Person after person said to me, "Isn't it ironic that he played the scarecrow, and now this has happened to him?" It was as if each insensitive commenter needed to allude to some universal foreshadowing of "if I only had a [working and healthy] brain." I never knew how to respond to those remarks.

July 5, Jay travelled to a town close by for a day at the arcade with a couple of his friends. "I wasn't going to let him go because his room was so messy. I keep thinking that I should have made him stay home. I should have made him clean his room." His dad, a professor at the local university, kept ruminating over that thought. On the way back from the arcade, Jay drove his friends down a familiar country road. He paused at what he thought was a four-way stop, but he was unaware that only his road had the stop signs and the other vehicle could drive through. The other car crashed into Jay's and hit his seat. (I never saw Jay's vehicle or the pictures of it. No one would let me view the van in its distorted shape.)

Jay and I had plans that night, and he meant to call me when he got home from the arcade. He never called. It was uncharacteristic of him not to inform me of changed plans or simply to ring to say hello, and it was especially odd for him to miss out on an

opportunity for a sweet, North Carolina summer date. I'll never be able to describe the exact feeling or discernment I had in those moments, but in the pit of my stomach I knew something was wrong. Something was out of place. I drove over to his house. No one was home.

One of Klee's last pieces of artwork was a painting called *Angel Applicant*. This work drastically differs from the colors of his *Senecio* piece, because *Angel Applicant* encompasses a gloomy and dark atmosphere with its blues and grays. The figure in the painting resembles more of a disfigured farm animal than an angel, and the only familiar object in the painting is a gray, crescent moon. In Klee's final days, he suffered from scleroderma, an autoimmune disease that causes a painful death with the hardening of one's organs, including the skin. This shift in his life created an overt shift in his art, and Klee's obsession with mutated angels began. The heavenly creature reveals an uncomfortable relationship with death, as the darkness of the piece reminds its viewer of the grave's nearness for both the artist and the painting's onlooker.

Jay's doctor said the car accident was similar to the repercussions of shaken baby syndrome. When the car hit him, Jay's body must have tensed up in anticipation of the wreck, and his brain literally rattled within his head. The trauma caused swelling to his brain, and he was close to death numerous times during the months he was in the coma. The hospital became like a second home for his family and friends during those months. We watched and prayed, and simply hoped he would wake up one day.

I had a lot of unwanted attention on me during that time. I secretly read one of my dad's emails one day because I sensed everyone was always talking about me. He told his sister he was scared to let me drive to the hospital each day, because if Jay died while I was there he didn't want me driving home alone in the emotional state I'd be in. I was furious at the thought, but also understanding of his concern for my wellbeing. I envied Jay's

freedom from the chaos we all dealt with. I wanted to sleep or dream—or whatever it was he was doing—and not wake up until it all had passed.

I saw a movie about a guy waking up from a coma after this experience, and I couldn't believe how inaccurately Hollywood portrayed the process. Jay wasn't able to talk or move. He developed a blinking system, which later evolved into face scrunches, head nods, and typing with a single finger to communicate. It's a long and gruesome process with physical training, and that's nothing compared to the mental side of the recovery process. I can't imagine what all went through Jay's mind. He woke up, and barely remembered anything from the past year or so. He remembered me and his care for me, but couldn't recall specifics of hang-outs or conversations. And Jay was brilliant before his coma (he received just under a perfect score on his SAT the year before), and then he seemed almost smarter afterwards. But he couldn't form full sentences that his listener could understand on the first try, and he couldn't walk or feed himself. He was frustrated, and understandably so. He woke to a silent and unmovable truth—unable to properly convey thoughts or move. We were just grateful for his life. There were numerous days that a tomorrow with Jay seemed like a penny in a wishing well. However, of all of the tomorrow-scenarios we anticipated, one of the trials of Jay's awakening blindsided me.

Personality changes after a traumatic brain injury are both normal and common. One of the earliest and most famous cases of personality change was in 1848, when a twenty-five year old man suffered a severe brain injury after a metal rod went through his skull in a railroad accident. The man was known to be quiet, well mannered, and gentle; after the accident, he was disruptive, rude, and obscene. Jay's personality changes were not quite as drastic, but they were evident and painful for those around him, or at least they were for me. I expected the physical struggles for Jay, but I assumed

everything apart from the physical would fit back into its rightful place—as if the painting of Jay’s life became a puzzle that would piece-by-piece be placed into the proper spot. The painting instead became abstract. The puzzle pieces didn’t, and wouldn’t ever fit again.

Our relationship eventually crumbled with the clash of the altercations. I had loved a boy who no longer existed in spirit, even though his body was there with me and still intact—it was almost a torturous picture of what was and what was not. He became a new man, a revised version of what he was before. And while he was not what I knew, he was still a paraphrastic masterpiece to the world.

Jay suffered the greatest consequences, and of course he couldn’t help what his brain changed within his mind and personality. He became that abstract painting, the *Senecio* of Klee’s. The colors are vibrant and full of life, the outline of the human form is still intact, but something is altered. The former person of Jay is not quite the same. Of course, his body suffered the brunt of the trauma. Jay, now ten years later, is still in a wheelchair and suffers daily inconveniences from his accident, but he is sharp as a tack; he has his Masters and a respectable career. His life is beautiful, though not the picture of perfection—it’s far more interesting than that. It is life’s disfigurement at its finest.

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An Exposition of Death

| Sara Tickanen

He smells of death. Not the “rotting in the ground” type of death, but rather the “impending cloak of doom” type of death. What happened wasn’t his fault. You can tell he doesn’t understand as he stares off into the yard through his sealed doggy door with a slap-happy smile on his face, a single stream of drool leaking from the corner of his mouth. The eyes that stare at you only project love: love for people, and love for you specifically.

His tail swishes back and forth almost silently behind him. He desires to be a part of the real world again.

You know that won’t happen, because this is it for him.

Death row—there is no going back.

“People think that pit bulls are bad. And they’re really not. It’s all in how they’re raised. A lot of people just make awful assumptions.”

Jenny fingers the silver wire of one of the animal shelter’s many dog cages, her hands traversing up and down the triangles but not really seeming to feel anything. I watch while looking down, unsure of where my eyes should actually be. On him? On her? On nothing at all?

“You don’t hear about all of the good dogs, the good pits, that are out there. You only hear about the bad ones, the ones that fight, the ones that get into trouble. Pits are such devoted dogs. And they’re so smart. They’ll do anything for you, if you just ask. But they need to be trained right. I wish the shelter could find people to do that.”

I nod quietly, unsure of what to say.

“So, you know the Great Lakes Pet Expo? We brought some dogs there last weekend.”

I’m not sure that I do. But I quickly realize that she’s going to take me there.

You look around the room. The Great Lakes Pet Expo is busy;

lots of people, lots of pets. You realize this shouldn't surprise you. It's a pet expo, so it's expected that pets will be there.

Graham is ready. Sitting. His tail swishes back and forth almost silently behind him, sweeping the ground and showing that he is ready to spring to action at a moment's notice. The first person who comes to him will be greeted and licked into happy oblivion.

The dog next to him is ready too, but in a different way. You remember Nosey, from previous outings. He strains against his leash, stretching his handler's arm out like that character from *The Fantastic Four* movies. While Graham is waiting for people to come to him, Nosey is out and about in everybody's business.

Graham hates this, you can tell. He wants attention, and he's trying to be patient. But people won't come close to him because they don't want to come by Nosey. He's too pushy. They will never find a forever home this way.

Nosey is ruining everything.

"We send a lot of these dogs to foster homes for whatever reason. Like, if we want them to get more social with people or dogs, or just get some love or whatever." Jenny sticks her fingers through the holes of the cage, despite the big red sign that says she shouldn't. I watch as the tail action increases, swishing back and forth behind him. I can almost hear the words coming out of his mouth: *Love, love, love, LOVE!*

"We do a lot of handling on the Pit Crew. I've worked a lot with this dog. Sweetest dog ever." She points into the cage. "This one handler named Tim took a dog, Nosey, home with him. They had this dog for a while, but nobody checked on exactly what they were doing with the dog. He had a lot of problems."

You watch as the man on the other end of the leash chokes Nosey back. Graham's handler takes him a few steps away and makes him sit again. Graham follows every command like a champ, and his tail swishes back and forth in anticipation of what's to come.

Nosey growls at a passing dog. Someone yells at the man to

take him home, he doesn't belong there. Not when he's aggressing towards other dogs. You imagine that Graham is laughing. If Nosey goes away, Graham will be adopted. Of this, you are sure. The man says no, he can handle it, he can handle it. You watch. You aren't sure that he can handle it.

It looks bad on the shelter, someone tells him once no one is watching. Nosey obviously doesn't want to be here. You agree. But your two cents don't belong in this situation, so you remain silent. The handler insists on staying, insists the dog is fine.

Graham eyes Nosey as he strains again against the handler. You can see the wheels turning in Graham's head. Why can't Nosey just sit down already? Why can't he be nice? Didn't his mother ever tell him that you get more flies with honey than you do with vinegar? Doesn't he want to be petted? 'Cause Graham wants to be petted. Very much.

His tail swishes back and forth, back and forth.

He waits.

You wait.

"Nosey had a lot of problems. Like, he would act aggressively towards other dogs. Not biting aggressively. But aggressive. Growling. Personal space. Very reactive." Jenny looks at Graham. He waits for her to open the cage door, to come inside, but she can't. It's apparent that he doesn't understand this as he pushes his snout up against the wire again and again. His tail swishes back and forth behind him and her fingers graze his nose.

"Nosey jumps up, and gets over-aggressive and just . . . not good with people or dogs. But he was getting better . . ."

She loves Graham, and Graham loves her. I can tell.

Nosey's bark is booming, and echoes over the sounds and excitement of the Expo Center. You watch and you see the moment when Graham can't take it anymore. He's still sitting, his tail is still going back and forth, but he lets out one single bark.

As you watch, Nosey turns and hauls his handler right back over to Graham. Nosey is barking. Graham barks again. He's mad; he doesn't understand. This is as plain to you as day. You wonder why the handler doesn't see it.

Nosey barks. Repeatedly.

Graham barks.

And suddenly Nosey latches on to Graham and they are rolling back and forth on the floor of the Expo Center. They are latched on each other, growling and snapping and biting. The sound of jaws snapping and spittle flying fills the air. You can see that Nosey has Graham by the neck and that he has absolutely no intention of letting him go. You are frozen, but other people are scrambling. What to do, what to do? Iron pitbull jaws. The handler sticks his hand right in between the dogs. Everything seems to freeze. You want to smack your forehead with your hand. It's all completely asinine

"Tim, in his infinite wisdom, decided to stick his hand in between the dogs to try and break them up. What kind of moron sticks their hand between two fighting dogs?"

I would really like to know the answer to that question.

Graham's tail swishes back and forth as I reach out and pet his nose, even though I'm not supposed to either. It seems that *he* would like to know the answer to this question too.

Unfreeze. The handler is missing his thumb. From the tip to the first knuckle. It's just . . . gone. You watch in horror as the blood seems to go everywhere. The dogs are separated. Nosey is in a cage, Graham is in a cage. How did they get there?

Panic.

The handler is bleeding.

God. That's a lot of blood.

Graham's tail swishes back and forth, back and forth, but it's different now. His head is down; his eyes aren't looking out. He didn't do anything wrong, but he's afraid. You can see he wants

reassurance. He wants someone to pet him. To love him.

Nobody but you is paying him any attention.

The handler screams, over and over. He's sitting on the floor, holding his hand. People are swarming everywhere like bees on a hive. Someone wraps his hand in a towel.

God. That's a lot of blood.

Jenny is an excellent storyteller. I shake my head, trying to clear the images out of my mind.

"When a dog bites someone, it gets placed in this sort of quarantine." Jenny trails her hand along the big red sign that hangs from the cage, the sign that states the bite quarantine restrictions. She still doesn't seem to really *see* it. "It gets a permanent black mark on its doggy record. Now it's an animal that bites. Nosey had bit before, but Graham had never bit anyone. He was so sweet."

I am struck by her use of the past tense as I watch her, at a loss again as to what to say. "What happens to them?"

"Well, they could get put down. It depends on whether they have bitten before, how reactive they are in the quarantine area, if there's any available no-dog homes for them to go to. 'Cause once they've bitten, they can't really be adopted to a home with other dogs in good conscience. You know what I mean?"

Graham's tail swishes back and forth as he sits otherwise perfectly still in the middle of the cage. His nose grazes the bars and his head tilts to the side as he studies us, still not understanding why we don't open the door. I wish that I could explain it to him.

"Graham bit back. So now he has the black mark. They both might end up being put to sleep. And it's hard to see. It makes me really sad. I hate to think about a good dog being put down just because it got in a bad situation."

After a moment of silence, she turns to go. Graham stands up, his tail cutting the air as it swishes side to side. I can almost hear his voice: "*You're leaving? You didn't come in! You didn't play! Come onnnnnn, I wanna play!*"

“Thanks for letting me vent.”

As she walks away, I stay for a moment and watch. Graham sinks to the floor of the cage and lies with his head between his two front paws. He desires to be a part of the real world again, but maybe he is beginning to realize that this probably won't happen for him.

He thinks she doesn't love him anymore. There's no way to explain it to him. He didn't do anything wrong, but he's probably going to die. And he has no idea why.

I wish it wouldn't happen, but I accept that it probably will. I wish that I could just let him out, just let him run away. But I can't.

This is it for him.

Death row.

There is no going back.

His tail stops wagging back and forth.

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Short Fiction

Flowering

The Ins and Outs of a Death-Defying Trick

The Cure

The Sentimentalists

The Family

A Progression

The Adventure of Kid Bill Williams

Soundless

Flowering

| Megan Tilley

We knew where to grab the barbed wire just right to slip under or over it, never catching our jeans on the edges because Momma'd take the cost of darning thread out of our hides. Behind the fence the land sloped sharply down, our legs tangled in the saw grass, boots hooked in the Arkansas soil. My brothers let out high-pitched whoops in their boy-voices, clamoring down towards the cornfields with their pellet guns slung over their shoulders. I'd play with them, or try to, until they confidently informed me that war games were no place for a girl unless I wanted to play nurse, which I most decidedly did *not*, thank you.

The cornfields were bordered by rows and rows of sunflowers, their broad black centers rimmed by gold, the bright petals suns in their own right. I ran among them, bare feet black with dirt, shoulders already pinking with sunburn. I wove back and forth, tracing an invisible maze, toes digging into the soil. Green stalks turned into jade, large blossoms, glittering chandeliers. My too-big shorts and secondhand T-shirt became a silk skirt and brocade sash, covering my awkward-girl frame. I was royal, a long cry from my knob-kneed prepubescent self.

The sunflowers were my mother's—she planted them every year at the beginning of spring, her tired face inches from the soil as she pushed them in with tenderness rarely shown to my brothers or me. We'd learned early on to keep out of Momma's way. She'd box my brothers' ears until they cried when they'd damage the stems, fat black heads slumped on the ground crying golden tears, proud stalks snapped. So the boys kept to the cornfields, shooting their guns at each other, while I scampered through the flowers' jeweled halls. I loved them—they were the most beautiful things I'd ever seen.

We didn't have much besides the land and the house—a four-bedroom mess of add-ons and mismatched floorboards. My father used to be a woodcarver, making custom cabinets for the wealthy people in stuccoes suburbs a half mile out, but he lost his thumb

and forefinger in a drilling accident, so we lost everything except the house and our couple acres. As the years went on, Momma got harsher, lines around the corners of her mouth and eyes growing deeper. I'd learned by the time I entered grade school that no matter what I said, it'd earn me a slap or no supper, so I just stopped speaking to her altogether by the third grade.

My father kept a still in the stables tucked into the back acre of land and he brewed grain alcohol to sell to those who knew he made it, and in a dry county, it made a pretty penny. Most times was enough to get food, pay the mortgage, or sometimes buy new clothes when ours wore out. Birthdays passed without mention, and Christmas was just a reason for my father to get drunker than usual.

The sunflower fields gave me my presents, little skulls and bones left by scavenging birds, brilliant cobalt feathers, and once, on my tenth birthday, a rare geode I tried to crack open on the edge of my porch, steadily beating it against the wood until my father came out. He took it from my hands, rolling it over in his rough palms. He smelled like whiskey and stale cigarettes—the perfume of my childhood. I was afraid he would take it but instead he grunted and motioned me over to his toolbox. He knelt before it; knees planted solidly on the crooked porch and pulled out his chisel and hammer, holding the chisel awkwardly in his bad hand.

“All it takes is the right angle,” he said, positioning the chisel carefully. “One hit, and it'll split right open.”

With one gentle *thump* it split in two and he held it with me, our fingers chasing the brilliant rings excitedly.

“Don't tell your mother,” he said, and I looked up at him. He was still watching the geode catch the last of the light from the setting sun. He caught my curious glance and looked down.

He ran one hand over his unshaven cheek, opening his mouth to speak, but before he could, the door swung open on barely bolted hinges. Momma stood in the doorway, cleaning a plate with one hand.

“Audrey, you were supposed to be helping me,” she said, that

dangerous edge riding low in her voice. She kept her eyes on my father as I scurried inside the house, tucking half the geode into the wide pockets I'd painstakingly sewn into my dress.

"What were you doing?" she asked, and I shrugged, grabbing the nearest cup and stepping onto the stool my father had made for my brothers and me. Momma pursed her lips and plunged her hands into the soapy water.

"If he gave you any money best tell me now, girl," she said, scrubbing a plate furiously. "He already spent money we didn't have getting that piece of shit truck fixed."

I could see her knuckles turning whiter. I kept my mouth shut and dried the cup off carefully, stashing it in the cupboard. When I turned back around, she was a breath from my face, all narrowed eyes, burst blood vessels and flushed cheeks.

"Did he give you money?"

I tried to move past her, to grab the next plate that needed drying, and she grabbed my wrist, squeezing until I could feel the cartilage creak.

I squeaked.

"I asked you a question, girl," she said and I shook my head as fast as I could. She grabbed hold of my ponytail with the other hand, staring me in the eyes with barely-veiled hatred.

"Let the girl be," my father said from the doorway and Momma let me go, rounding on him.

"What did you want with her?" she asked, that edge back in her voice. I stood at the sink, wrist and scalp throbbing, watching my father sink down into his seat.

"It's her birthday, Sarah. I just wanted to spend some time with her," he said wearily.

"Time? Time that you could spend looking for a job so that we can pay for your children? Pay for that truck you bought? Pay for those crops, that still? This isn't prohibition, there's no money in it." Her voice was rising steadily with each question, and I tried to inch my way out of the kitchen. I was almost out when she grabbed me by

the back of the neck.

“Do you see your daughter? Do you? She’s wasting away because of your mistakes,” she screeched, shoving me forward. I stumbled, catching my knee on the table before tearing out of the house.

“She’s a good girl,” I heard my father say before I dove into the sunflowers, collapsing into the dirt, sobbing, until dawn crept into the sky. I snuck my way back into the house, scrubbing the dirt off the best I could before crawling into bed, the fighting still loud from my parents’ bedroom.

I set one half in my window where the bundle of crystals could catch the light, and, in the morning, left the other at the edge of the sunflower field in some kind of tribute to my father’s rarely bestowed attention, to the words *she’s a good girl*. I checked that afternoon, after getting back from school, and it was gone. I was convinced from then on that the field was magic.

By the time I was 14 my mother was big with child, and had decided her oldest child was a mute.

“Your daughter’s touched,” she said crossly to my father, who didn’t even spare me a glance. The farmer down the road had been by, bought all of my father’s grain alcohol stock. The money couldn’t get him drunk though, not with my mother hiding the car keys, not with the still dry until the end of the week and his stash already gone. He stared dully into the bottom of his cup, filled with water.

“All she does is sit and stare at those damn flowers,” she pressed again. “There’s something wrong with her, Charles.”

“There’s nothing wrong with her, dammit,” he said, slamming his glass down on the table. I jumped, my brothers sinking down into their seats. “She’s just quiet. Let her be.”

“Is that your solution to everything? Just let it be? Are we just supposed to let the debt be, the broken truck be, your drinking be?” Her voice was getting louder, shriller, and I tried to summon the tablecloths, the china, the fine conversation of my sunflower palace, but all I could see was the dust floating in the air and my mother’s

reddening face. She struggled to her feet, and my brothers took off, scrambling out of their chairs towards their bedroom. I stayed glued to my seat, too scared to move.

“We’re not having this conversation now,” my father said quietly, that low dangerous pitch that meant big, *big* trouble. Last time I’d heard him use the tone, my brother had ridden the tractor into a ditch on accident, trying to impress the girl from down the street. My mother stood huffing, both hands planted on the table, belly almost touching the edge.

“I am so sick of this,” she nearly growled. “I’m done with this, with this dust, with this *nothing*. We have *nothing*. Look around, there’s not enough food, no money, nothing but dust. You promised things would get better, but you’re too useless to do anything but tend your still and drink half the stock.”

“Then go,” my father said, glaring straight at her. “No one is trying to stop you.”

She giggled, slow at first, then great whooping howls of laughter. She eased back onto her heels, fingers scraping at her wedding band before she yanked it off, slapping it down on the table. She crossed to the open door, onto the porch, heavy footsteps creaking. My father shot me a glance before looking over his shoulder.

“Get back in here,” he yelled to nothing but the cold cackle of my mother. I scuttled to the window, trying to see her, hoping she wasn’t actually leaving. Who would watch the sunflowers, *my* sunflowers? I didn’t know how to care for them like she did.

I managed to make out the silhouette of my mother marching through the field, tugging a matchbook out of her apron pocket as she went, and then the golden arch of a flame.

“The stables,” I whispered and my father was out of his seat like it was lit out from under him, hauling himself towards the door.

The explosion was deafening.

Fire belched into the sky, the silhouette of my parents tearing at each other against the burning horizon. My brothers crowded around me as we watched the destruction of our parents’ marriage.

The sunflowers burst into flames, and I cried for the first time in years, childhood engulfed in my mother's rage.

I sprinted out of the house and down the stairs, trying somehow to save the sunflowers, but the fire was too hot, spread too fast. I turned to my struggling parents.

"Stop it!" I screamed, arms clutched around my stomach. "Just stop, please, please."

My father paused, holding my mother's arms away from him, his weak arm visibly straining.

"Please, you're ruining everything," I cried, and my father dropped my mother's arms, both of them staring. Their faces were shiny with sweat and soot, scratches on my father's arm, bruise blooming on my mother's cheek.

"Go back inside, Audrey," my father said, heat from the fire burnishing my cheeks.

I hiccupped, trying to brush the tears and sweat off my face, but didn't move. My mother crossed her arms over her stomach, refusing to look me in the eyes.

"Go back inside," my father repeated, his voice breaking. This time I turned, walking slowly back up the steps. Once I reached the porch, I looked back, watching the sunflowers snap and spark, their magic disappearing like the smoke into the night.

She was gone the next day, taking my unborn brother and all the dishes. My father drove her to the bus station. The house was quiet, so quiet. We walked around my father like he might break if we made any noise. I cooked and cleaned and did the best I could, my younger brothers helping out with the fields—most of the corn, and the ground foods had survived. Our neighbors came by with food at first, almost like my mother had died, but they stopped after a week or two, too busy with their own. My father purchased a new still, set it up in a ramshackle shed, and never touched his own stock again.

When spring came back, I kneeled in the soil. The broken remains of the sunflowers had decomposed, leaving the ground rich and dark. I pushed seed after seed into the ground, hands black

after the first row. They zigzagged slightly, not as neat as my mother's rows, but there they were, little promises packaged in the ground. In a few months they would rise, tender and green, and then supernova into blossoms. My father said we could sell the seeds for extra money, something my mother had always refused.

I sat up, wiping my forehead. It was almost dusk, and I gathered myself up, brushing off my filthy knees with filthier hands. I saw my father at the edge of the field, something dark in his good hand.

"You did good, Audrey," he said, looking over my work. I smiled.

"Thanks," I said, setting my hands on my hips.

"Good to hear you talk, girl," he said. We stood in the rising dusk for a few moments, looking at the fresh soil, the barely-there stalks of corn pushing through the ground a few paces over.

"I found this," he said finally. "A couple years back. Thought you might want it. You left it out here, wasn't sure why. Didn't want it to get lost."

He passed me the geode I'd found what felt like a lifetime ago. I smiled, rolling it back and forth in between my hands. The inside was smooth, just catching the last strong bits of light.

I kneeled, settling it into the soil, marking the edge of the field.

That summer the sunflowers bloomed again, bright shining suns of new beginnings, new growth out of the charred remains of the old.

The Ins and Outs of a Death-Defying Trick

| Sean Pessin

Outside of the man is a box. Rather, the man is inside the box. Inside of the box is a man, and inside the man is a key. The man is outside the key, but inside the box. Outside the man and outside the box is a lock that keeps the man in. Outside the key, outside the man, outside the box, and outside the lock is the stage. Outside the stage is the audience and outside the audience is the theater. The theater is composed of bars and wood. The audience is composed of humans made up of organic compounds. The stage is composed of bars and wood. The box is made up of bars and wood. The man is made up of organic compounds. The key is made of brass, which is an alloy of copper and zinc and lead; the key is made of copper and zinc and lead. The man is a magician.

To complete the trick and release the confetti inside the cannons that are on either side of the stage (the stage is in between the cannons), the magician must evacuate the key so that he can evacuate the box. Then the confetti can be outside the cannons and the people and the cannons can be inside the confetti inside the theater. The audience must remain outside the cannons; fire hazard—it is in the rulebook. The key works its way inside of him. The key is inside of him. The key is only partially inside of him, and partially outside of him. The key exits his mouth. The box remains totally outside the key and the magician. The cannons remain outside the confetti and the confetti remains inside the cannons. The stage remains in between the two cannons. The audience remains outside the cannons and the confetti. The magician is a tax-evader.

Inside the stage is the second stagehand. Outside the second stagehand is the stage. He is working on the switch for the finale of the current trick. Outside the title “second stagehand” are quotations. Inside the quotations is the word stage. Outside the word stage and inside the quotations is the word second-hand; his tools are borrowed from the theater union. The secondhand on his

watch strikes 12, and inside the watch, cogs turn; an alarm is tripped to trigger a memory inside him that the stage must be ready. The sound is in the air and outside the second stagehand until he hears it. The second stagehand is outside the alarm. The stage is almost ready.

The key is now no longer inside the tax-evader, but it is still in the box. The key is in the tax-evader's palm. The audience inside the theater must not see that the key was inside the tax-evader inside the box. The box, the tax-evader, and the key are placed inside a sheet; the sheet is placed on top of the box. The key inside the palm of the tax-evader inside the box inside the sheet moves toward the lock. The tax-evader is still a magician.

Inside the audience is a transvestite. The transvestite is a man in drag. Inside the woman's clothes is a man, and inside that man are tucked genitals. Inside the word transvestite is "-vest." Outside "-vest-" is "trans-" and "-ite." "-Vest-" is clothing, while "trans-" is beyond, and "-ite" means to make or do. Beyond the clothing to make or do. Beyond the clothing, she makes do. Outside the penis and testicles is a drag queen. She reaches inside her purse to find her cell phone, and her hand brushes against a condom. She desires to be outside a penis besides her own, and in her mind, she knows she must be ready. Outside the hand is a condom and a badge and a purse is outside the two of these things. Outside the purse is the rest of her, and outside the rest of her is her date, who is in her gaze. Her and her date are inside the audience.

The confetti is still inside the cannons. The audience is still outside the confetti. The audience remains outside the cannons. The magician remains inside the box. The transvestite remains in the audience. The key and the palm are outside the box. The key is outside the lock. The key is inside the lock and outside the lock and outside the box. The palm is outside the lock, but the key and lock are still inside the sheet with the palm. The tumblers in the lock click while the key is in the lock, and the key evacuates the lock and retreats back into the palm. The palm is now in the cage and the key

returns back inside the magician. The lock evacuates the box and the box evacuates the sheet and the magician evacuates the box. The key evacuates the box. The magician is in the spotlight.

The switch is tripped by the stagehand. The confetti evacuates the cannons. The audience is inside the confetti. The stage is inside the confetti. The magician is inside the confetti. The confetti is inside the theater. The magician is still a man.

The admiration is a celebration. The celebration is composed of the audience. The celebration is a riot. The audience is a riot. The confetti is outside the riot. The man is in a panic. The audience is outside the cannons. The audience is inside the cannons. The cannons are still outside the audience. The cannons are tripped by the second stagehand, he is in the stage and the sounds of the riot are not in him. The audience is in flames. The theater is engulfed in flames. The woman outside her penis is in the fire department. The woman puts the audience in evacuation formation. The audience is inside the theater. The audience is inside the theater and the theater is outside the audience. The audience is outside the theater.

Outside the theater is the audience. Outside the second stagehand and the man is still the theater. The man is trapped; outside the man is a pile of rubble. Inside the audience is the theater. Within the gaze of the audience is the fiery spectacle. Outside the man are flames encroaching. Inside a ring of flames is the man.

The man and the flames are one.

The next day in a coffee shop, the second stagehand, now out of work, reads the newspaper. In the headlines, the unemployed man notices in the paper outside of him the story of the magic act. Outside the paper, the unemployed man waits for coffee. Outside his hands is coffee in a cup in the hands of a barista. The coffee is outside the hands of the barista and the unemployed man. Outside the coffee is the unemployed man and inside his hands is the cup. Partially outside the cup is the man and partially inside the coffee

is the man. The coffee is outside and inside the man. The coffee is inside the man; the cup is outside the man's mouth but inside his hands; the cup is outside his hands. The unemployed man's hands are outside the paper. As the coffee goes deeper, it makes way for him to take in the cover story of the newspaper. The eyes in the unemployed man receive the light. His eyes are reading; the unemployed man becomes a reader. Outside the eyes of the reader is the story. Between the paper and the reader is the reflected light. Outside of a picture is the story. Inside the picture is the lady (the man in drag) leading the audience out of the riot and out of the theater. In the story, she is the heroic fireman in that sequence of events.

In the story is also the man (the magician sex-offender). Outside the article are his tax-evader parts. Not in the article at all, aside from the picture in the article of them being herded, is the audience. The reader wonders about the thoughts of the people in the audience. The man is in the memories of the audience. The memories of the audience are outside the magician.

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The Cure

| Juliana Goodman

You don't need a man. You can survive on your own, and if you can't, something's wrong with you. Momma swore by this, and even though she had never been serious about a man since Daddy left, I knew she was lyin'. How could someone live their life alone? Without romance? Without someone to roll over to on a warm Sunday morning, to go out and sip expensive champagne with or just to tell you that you're beautiful? I imagined I'd be the first to figure it out, seeing as I was as big as a double wide with a face like a horseshoe. Nobody thought I would care when they teased me, so they never stopped. I was tough just because of my size. Too bad fat don't protect the heart.

Sometimes, when I was hurtin' bad and I couldn't help but cry, I liked to look at myself in the mirror. I don't know why, but watching myself cry felt good. My mouth all stretched into an ugly arch, forehead wrinkled like a paper bag, and my big fat lips, all wet and salty with tears. I disgusted me. And I said it to that bitch in the mirror. *You ugly! You ain't shit! You ain't neva gon' git no man!* I tortured that girl more than any of the kids at school ever did. I didn't know why. But Momma claimed she did.

"You know why you keep chasin' these lil boys that don't want you, Aleejah? Because deep down inside, you're like me. And I'm like your grandmother. We strong women, Leelee, don't you forget that, but we have our weakness. We constantly crave somebody to comfort us, cuz truth is, we scared to be alone more than anything," she said. Mama never told me the cure.

My life wasn't much different until the summer I turned fifteen. Believe me when I tell you, it was the hottest summer in the history of summers. In the history of hotness! I had just gotten out of a cold shower one Tuesday afternoon when Momma came home with three big bags of cleaning supplies.

"We got to clean this house top to bottom tonight. Your cousin Kelsey is comin' to visit tomorrow," she said, grabbing the broom

from behind the fridge.

“Kelsey? Who’s she?” I asked. We had a fairly large family of cousins, aunts, and uncles, so it didn’t really surprise me when Momma mentioned one I didn’t know.

“He. Kelsey is your Aunt Lois’ grandson.”

“Ooohh, I think I remember him. Wasn’t he at that family reunion?” I asked.

“Yeah, I think he was there. You was about seven then, so he musta been . . . about nine or ten. Cutest lil baby I eva saw, wit that good brown hair. But his momma’s checkin’ into rehab on Thursday. Aunt Lois begged me to take him in until his daddy get back from California. I felt so bad for the boy . . .”

“Why he gotta stay wit us? If his momma on crack, how we know he ain’t on it, too? We could come home one day and all our stuff be gone! Sittin’ in some drug lord’s apartm—OW!”

Momma popped me on the ear for that one. I had forgotten my Daddy was a crack head too. He’d left right after I was born. Didn’t leave a letter, number, or nothin’. But momma still loved him.

“He’s coming tomorrow morning,” she said, glaring at me for my outburst, “and I’d appreciate it if you didn’t mention crack or his momma while he here. He’s probably had it hard enough without you throwing it in his face. Now put them Cheetos down and get in that bathroom. We need to have this place spotless before he gets here.”

So I spent that night scrubbing the tub so hard, the paint chipped off. *Leave it to Momma to care what a crack baby thinks*, I thought to myself. I was sure any house without shit and piss on the walls would be a step up for him.

God help me, I thought to myself the next morning. Have you ever seen those romance movies where a beautiful woman walks in and all of a sudden everybody else in the room jus’ stops movin’? That’s how it was when Kelsey Kane walked into our house that morning. I had neva seen a boy so fly. He was a high yellow, so high, he was almost white. His light brown permed hair lay straight down his

back and over his shoulders like a curtain. And his eyes shined like wet blacktop under orange streetlights. Kelsey Kane was a GOD.

Kelsey didn't speak when Momma brought him home from the bus station. I don't know if it was because he didn't want to be there, or because Momma was talkin' too fast to give him a chance.

"I'm doing' yo grandmama a favor by lettin' you stay here. Now we gotta few rules in this house and I expect you to follow all of 'em. No calls past 10:00 p.m., put yo dirty clothes in the hamper . . . "

She rattled off the next 600 rules as Kelsey started to unpack his duffel in the living room. We only had a two-bedroom, so he was assigned to the sofa pull-out. Momma tried to wave me over during her never-ending speech, but I was too embarrassed. I had expected my cousin to look like me and the rest of my family: big, black, and ugly. So I hadn't seen a reason to press my hair the night before. Little nappy curly cues dotted my forehead, and my thin ends stuck straight out like pins. I ran to my room and locked the door before I could be introduced as "Aleejah, your fat hot mess of a cousin." No, I'd just stay out of his way. Maybe I would even have Yonette stop over with three days worth of baloney and cheese, so I wouldn't have to come out of my room. Saturday would be here soon enough.

I heard Momma leave for work early the next morning. She always left my bacon and eggs in the microwave for when I woke up. I could smell it from my bed, and I wanted it. I could run to the kitchen, grab the plate, and run back to my room. Kelsey probably wasn't even up yet. People in the projects are like roaches, when the light comes on, you don't see 'em.

I opened my door extra slow so I wouldn't make the hinge creak. I peeked around the corner. The coast was clear. I tiptoed across the hall to the kitchen, opened the microwave and crammed a slice of greasy bacon in my mouth. I was about to finish the plate right then and there when I heard him.

"Hungry huh?"

I turned around, egg on my face, and there was Kelsey, not only awake, but lookin' fresh as he did the day before in his baggy blue

jeans and crisp Lakers jersey.

“Ain’t nobody eva tell you it’s rude to walk up on people like that? What if I had a gun?” I said, trying to hide how mortified I was at being caught in my dingy-ass nightgown.

“Then yo ass woulda been surprised, cuz I’m always strapped” he said, taking a piece of bacon from my plate and slipping it between his pink heart-shaped lips.

“I ain’t scared o’ you. What’s a nigga named Kelsey to me?” I teased.

He smiled.

“Don’t let the name fool you. I ain’t no punk like the otha niggas out here,” he said, swaggering over to the table and sitting down in my usual seat.

“So where da A/C at in this muthafucka? It’s hot as hell in this kitchen,”

“Well, my Momma got the only air in her room. We can sit in there if you want to.”

He followed me into Momma’s room, and I felt his eyes on me, burning spots all over my thighs and back.

I sat down on the edge of the bed. Momma’s queen size took up damn near the entire room, so we couldn’t sit on the floor. Kelsey sat so close to me, I could smell his peppermint gum as he exhaled. Inhale . . . exhale . . . inhale . . . exhale. Even his breaths were perfect.

“Yo momma got Spice?” he asked, flipping through the TV channels.

“Uh, yeah, we got some salt, pepper, and paprika up in the kitchen if you need it . . .” I said, confused. Maybe he *was* on crack.

He laughed and pressed the power button on the remote.

“I don’t feel like watchin’ TV anyway,” he said, placing his hand on my thigh.

I was still confused when he leaned over, his hand on my back, and kissed me. I knew I was horrible at it. I had neva done it! My tongue moved where his tongue moved, but mine was always a

second late. But it felt good, whatever we were doin'. He gently pushed me back on Momma's pillows and laid between my legs. I thought I was gonna die right then and there, and we hadn't even done anythin' yet. Just his body laying on mine was enough to keep me happy.

I shifted my hips up so he could slide my panties off. He didn't seem to notice, or care, that they were big ol' granny bloomers. I thanked God for his kindness, for his sexiness, for this moment.

I'd always imagined my first time being with a man like me. He'd have a fat-ass name like Bernard, or Frank, or Willie. We'd meet at the McDonald's up on 145th street and he'd sweet talk me over a greasy Big Mac and hot fries. When he laid me down on his old stained mattress, I could just imagine us both suffocating. All that fat just squeezin' and slappin' together, sweat stickin' all ova the sheets. I hadn't been lookin' forward to it.

"Get ready," he whispered.

I wasn't ready. I saw him push forward and felt my insides tear apart in the same moment. I cried out in pain, but he didn't respond, just kept ripping, and slicing and stabbing. I couldn't breathe. It was like a plunger had been stuffed in my body, preventing things that needed to get out from escaping. He was pushing them back in me. This wasn't right, my body said it wasn't right. I was shoved inside myself and he was poking me like a five year old with a twig.

"Feels good, don't it?" he said, drops of sweat glistening on his forehead. Now I understood why the women in the movies cried out. Not because it felt good. That shit hurt like a bitch! If a person could take your soul, this is how it would be done, from the inside out.

"Awwwww yeah," I heard him moan. I don't know what came over him, but he started moving faster and faster, and I thought I was dying. I was crying to God, *please take me with you, I'm done here. Just take me.* And I think he heard me, because Kelsey sighed and stopped. He finally *stopped*. Without speaking, he got up and walked

to the bathroom, closing the door shut behind him. I didn't blink, I didn't breathe, I didn't exist. After awhile, I heard the screen door close, and I knew Kelsey had left. I didn't care.

Momma eventually came and found me. She yelled and slapped and shook me, because I wouldn't talk to her. *Why are you shakin' me, can't you see I'm DEAD?! She stopped hittin' me after awhile and started rocking me in her arms. She was cryin', but I didn't understand why. Acting like I was a newborn, she helped me into the tub and scrubbed the dirt off me. As the warm soapy water splashed over my back, I felt Kelsey slide from me. His hazel eyes, his straight hair, his ivory skin, all gone down the drain in a colorful black and white swirl. I was laying up under Momma, wrapped in a thick white towel as she scratched my scalp, when I heard the screen door slam again. Momma grabbed her bat, and she flew out into the living room like a vulture, her arms open, ready. I wanted to stop her and explain to her, Momma, I wanted it. I let him do it. I let him kill me. I let him.* But I didn't move as I heard them yelling.

"I try to help yo ass and you in here rapin' my baby girl?! Nigga, you done lost your mind. Not in here. Not today, mothafucka!"

Momma said Daddy was the best man she'd ever had. In the picture on her nightstand, he was tall and towered over my mother, shielding her like an umbrella as she held a tiny black me in her arms. We looked like a real family and they looked happy, like they belonged together. Nothing forced, no struggles or complaints. Momma said he loved her like a real man, even through the drugs.

"You think you gon' whoop me in my own house? You a big man. A big rapin' man! Do it!"

"Get yo hands off me, bitch! I swear I'm finna—"

How could he love her so well and not love me at all? I musta did somethin' wrong. The little pink bundle in my mother's arm cried too much, needed her diaper changed too often or maybe she was just too ugly. Too big and too black. I'da left me, too.

"Nigga, you finna what? You ain't gon do shit but get yo triflin' ass the fuck outta my house!"

Was this the cure I'd been lookin' for? Is this what Momma did to make Daddy stay all those years? Did he pierce her insides every night as she cried and bit down on her lip? Did she kiss him as she died? Was I the aftermath of a murder gone wrong?

"Don't nobody wanna be in this dirty ass shack of a house!"

"Then get the fuck out! I shoulda known betta than to let a crack baby in my house! Think you hood? You ain't shit but a little ass baby boy!"

I wanted him out. Out of me, out of my head, out of this world I existed in. He was a beast, and I'd been clawed. A chunk of flesh had been torn from me, a gaping black hole left in its place. I was floatin' around somewhere in the universe, lost, but still warm from the beating of my heart.

"Baby boy?! Aight. Lemme show you what kinda nigga I am!"

The hard crack of a fist crushing a delicate chin awakened me from my death.

You don't need a man. You can survive on your own, and if you can't, something's wrong with you.

Juliana Goodman is a senior at Western Illinois University, Macomb, IL, where she majors in English literature and minors in Creative Writing. She is an editor for the literary magazine, Elements. She will graduate in May 2014 and plans to pursue an M.F.A. in Fiction Writing.

The Sentimentalists

| Aidan Ryan

Rain was falling in sheets across the autobahn. Cars like spaceships sent up great clouds of silver stardust as they sped down the road, an inky swath cut through the forest. Two young Americans looked out the windows of their rental and saw the trees, which seemed to them strangely thick and full of moist life, still drinking in the rain as it fell, and fell, and continued to fall. Köln, a mirage, rose easy as a hill in the distance.

The car shifted gears around a curve; “I guess this is it,” said the blonde one. The road straightened out and suddenly they were in the city, which opened slow and sudden as a flower, wet and purple in the rain.

They had come to see the cathedral because it was a Wednesday and they hadn’t yet tried Kölsch beer. It was still raining though, and hard, so the Dom, as the locals called it, looked less like a Gothic cathedral, the way people think of Gothic cathedrals, and more like a rock, a huge rock, rising out of the mist and toil of some godforsaken sea.

Stone saints and damned men reached out of the rock, so many that they *were* the rock, the building, the whole thing, more frozen faces and outstretched, falling hands than you could count. But on a day like this they caught the rain and tossed it back up, forming a fog around the thing so that you couldn’t see the faces or the hands, just a rock.

They stood under the portico of an old building, looking out across the rain-slicked stones, a mirror pointed at the skies, reflecting nothing.

They could have gone inside the Dom, of course, but the rain had driven the gypsies and panhandlers under the archways, so that you’d have to step over their legs to get to the doors.

“Well, we saw it,” said the tall one. He was thin, and blonde, and wore small black glasses. He also wore a trench coat, sharp and trim

and well-made, in part because of the rain and in part because it caught the eyes of café waitresses and college girls. “Are you hungry?”

“I could go for a beer,” said the one with the dark hair. He was tall too, but not as tall, so that when they stood together, though people didn’t think of him as the short one, they did think of his friend as the tall one; and this he resented in spite of himself. He wore a black sweater and his dark hair was wet, dripping drops down his nose, because he didn’t care about the rain or the college girls.

The café was packed but it was packed with attractive people—and besides it was raining out—so they stayed. The tables were small to begin with, little postage stamp squares with wicker-seat chairs clustered around, and most of these tables were full. They stood awkwardly and the blonde one pretended to squint at the German words on the chalkboard menu behind the glass counter in the back.

“Do you see the redhead,” the dark one asked, audibly. No one took notice.

“Yeah, at the table by the window?” The girl in question was unusually tall, and serious-looking, with heavy-lidded eyes and freckles illumed in the pale rain-light. “Ok.”

“She’s wearing a red dress,” the dark one smiled, for the first time that morning; “And she’s alone.”

The tall one shrugged and adjusted his glasses. His trench coat was buttoned all the way up, with the collar high around his neck, and he felt a little foolish just standing there. His friend was already moving, weaving through the tables and brushing past jackets on chair-backs, dripping puddles on the floor.

Up close the girl was even prettier, in a very real way. She had thick reddish-brown hair and a smattering of freckles. The dark one insisted that girls with thick hair and freckles were always more *real*; the two had discussed it once and the blonde one agreed. This one was reading a book.

The dark one put his hand on the back of the chair facing her. “Do you mind if we sit down? It’s crowded.”

The girl blinked up and slowly scanned the room, as if to make sure it was, in fact, crowded.

“Alright,” she said—and from her voice they could tell she was an American, like them—“Don’t expect much conversation.” She made a slight nod toward the book in explanation, if not in apology.

The dark one had already pulled out the chair across from her and the one with the glasses followed suit. He blinked and nodded at the girl as if to beg pardon for their interruption. She blinked and proceeded to ignore them both.

“Studying for school,” the dark one asked.

She waited before answering, her eyes rolling over another sentence or perhaps two. The dark one noticed that they were green. Then she looked up.

“No.” Then, despite herself: “What makes you think that?”

“You read with a pen.”

For a moment she stared dumbly at the incriminating thing in her hand. Her green eyes grew heavy and her facile lips pulled into a smile so sinister it fogged up the glass windows; and the rain steamed away outside. “Habit.” she said.

There was a waitress standing above them, notepad in hand. She was wearing a short black dress. Her hair was brown and curly, her nose was pierced and unmistakably Jewish, and her lips were full and the color of grape tomatoes. Her nametag said “Maria.”

“Can I get you anything?” she asked. Her accent was French, with a hint of the general European, that unmistakable dialect of those who moved often as children.

The blonde one looked at her and smiled. “*Ich möchte zwie Kölsch Bier,*” he said. He thought his accent was passable.

“Alright,” she said, in English.

“*Drie,*” said the dark one, tapping out three fingers on the table and looking smugly at the green-eyed girl. She blinked up, stared, returned to her book. “It’s eleven o’clock,” she said without looking up.

“So it is,” he said.

She looked at him again and did not answer, although her look was not cold.

The blonde one leaned his elbows on the table and stared obviously at her book. "So, what are you reading?" he asked.

"Portrait."

"Of the artist?"

She cocked an eyebrow. "As a young man."

In a moment Maria returned and set three tall glasses on the table.

"She's a trip," the dark one said, after she had walked away.

"What?" his friend asked.

"Never mind."

The dark one saw that the girl had returned to her book—or maybe he realized then that she had never left it—so he looked around the café for the first time. The floor was made of fake marble tiles; the tables and chairs were all plain-looking curves of plain-looking wood. He thought for a moment that he could snap any one of the table legs—the color of a coffee with one cream—if he really wanted to; but there was no reason. At the back of the room was a glass case with white and brown treats, and the walls were hung with the sort of pictures one finds in cafés, anywhere in the world: sunny harbors and quaint little alleys. It was still raining, and the place was still full.

The dark one looked at the girl, her mind far-gone in Joyce's prose, and he could think of nothing else to say. Outside the Dom sat like something out of the depths of the earth, something uncovered in the process of city building that stood as a reminder of—what? He thought for a moment of standing with her at the top, looking out over the rain-soaked city—sitting snug on the Rhine, staring like all those sad, significant faces in the stone. It would be perfect, what with her red dress and the way her hair would blow in the breeze. The only trouble was getting her there.

"Would you mind some company?"

The voice was male, British, and attractive. A hideous man

pulled out the chair next to the girl, and sat down. He was a hunchback, a gangly gimp with long arms and no neck of which to speak, just a head plopped on top of a wet misshapen coat. His jaw jutted out like a brick in an impudent smile. The blonde one saw the man's trench coat, and was upset.

None answered, for the man was already sitting and smiling sickly at them all, prickly hairs standing out on the tip of his brick of a chin. The dark one reached for his glass and took a sip. It was good, but over the lip of the small round glass he saw the hunchback leering at him, waiting to speak, so he took another sip and ended up draining the whole thing. The blonde one followed suit.

"What are you drinking?" the hunchback asked, still smiling like a subway busker. The whole thing was ridiculous; he sounded like Pierce Brosnan.

"Kölsch beer," the blonde one said, smacking his lips with distaste. The hunchback began windmilling his crooked arm, like one of the arms of a Swastika, trying to hail Maria, the waitress. The dark one looked over to the girl, trying to catch a glance, to see that she too was baffled or upset by the scene and the hideous man, to meet with raised eyebrows and a soft laughing breath and to nod toward the windows, toward the street and the cobblestone square, and be gone with her. But she was buried in her book. The rain was letting up and the first rays of the noontime sun shone like faint spotlights through the clouds over the city. One fell through the window and across her pale white face and onto the pale white page; her fingernails were green like her eyes.

"Maria, darling," the man said, "Four more of whatever they had before. That's right—" and she was off with a twirl of her short black dress. "Americans, you are?" he asked them, rolling his eyebrows in a way that on someone else might have been charming, even alluring. The dark one felt vaguely sick; the girl reached for her drink and took a delicate sip. Her mouth parted and closed and parted again around the cool glass: lip meeting lips.

"We are Americans," the blonde one admitted. Maria returned

with the drinks.

“To Uncle Sam then?” the hunchback asked, raising his glass above his head—that is to say, about a foot above the table. And then: “What are you doing here?” He drained half his glass and set it down, thirsty for their answer.

The blonde one looked at the dark one and the dark one looked back.

“We’re just blowing around, I guess,” said the blonde one. His friend was already looking at the girl, hanging on her answer.

“You’re not together then?” the hunchback asked, black pellet eyes darting between the three. “What are you here for then, love?” The dark one felt the clench of muscles of which he had never been aware.

The girl looked up and seemed vaguely annoyed but unflustered by the six eyes fixed on her freckled face. “I wanted to have a coffee and get a little reading done.”

The hunchback reeled in his seat and let out a ridiculous, lordly laugh, smooth as puffs on a fine cigar. Across from him the Americans looked utterly lost.

“It seems to be clearing up now, though,” she said, “so I’ll go. Thanks for the drinks.”

Before any of them knew what was happening she had risen with her book and brushed past them toward the door.

“You haven’t even finished them!” the hunchback laughed; and he looked at his two partners as if they, too, should have found this amusing. The blonde one looked at his friend and saw that his eyes were fixed on the departing girl; there was something new in them. He broke his gaze and rose from his seat.

“Where—”

“I’m going after her,” he said, and let a few euros rattle across the tabletop.

“You’re not going to finish either?” asked the hunchback.

In response he raised the glass and drained it; then he was out the door. The blonde one stood to follow, mumbling apologies to

the chuckling hunchback in the trench coat. Maria was coming their way and he was terribly alone. He felt suddenly reckless and raised his own glass, and drained it; and then did the same to one of the girl's. He felt flushed and his eyes glistened. "I suppose you can have her last one," he said. "You bought it, anyway." And then he was out the door and into the sun, chasing after a disappearing figure in a dark sweater.

"Queer Americans," the hunchback said, and laughed.

The man in the sweater was jogging, up steps and over puddles and across the slick and shiny stones, the hard leather soles of his shoes going clip-flap-clop as he went. The girl in the red dress was ahead, walking briskly on her long, sturdy legs but not running: past the church and toward the river, thick and surging with fresh life. Her steps carried her onto the Hohenzollern Bridge, out over the Rhine, the color of verdigris. He followed, but his steps slackened; she was already more than halfway across. The day was bright now, and a strong breeze blew clouds thick and puffy and white. He squinted against the sun—reflected off the thousand padlocks left by lovers, hooked forever to the bridge in a metal patchwork quilt of a thousand daydreams, convening on this spot above the waters. The sight was impressive, maybe to a sentimentalist even more impressive than the church rising up from behind. But the dark one didn't think he was a sentimentalist. His hand caught the railing and he stopped, breathing hard.

"Hey!"

It was his friend's voice, blown by the breeze from the foot of the bridge. On the other side now, almost to the end, the wind tossed the girl's thick hair over her shoulder and whipped the fringe of her dress about her knees. People and bicycles and carriages were between them, and cars glittered on the bridge and a thousand keys to a thousand locks glittered too, somewhere beneath the thick, tumescent waters.

The running and the sun had made it too hot to wear a sweater,

so he pulled it over his head and turned, and looked out over the river. To his right the Dom rose up black and imposing, a Gothic cathedral the way people think of Gothic cathedrals, only bigger and more impressive. Stone hands reached up, although he couldn't make them out. He watched the people passing by, and listened. The wet air was roaring.

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The Family

| Kirkland Back

The brother, John. Nice guy. Great guy, even. He's older, but he's not all there. Sweet guy, though. Great guy. The mom, Jean. A real handful, Jean. She's pissed off that she got knocked up. She's pissed off that she's still teaching kindergarten. The dad, Al. Nice guy. Great guy, even. He was class president his senior year of high school. Still talks about it. Likes a drink. Head deacon. The dog, Blue. Blue was the runt. Blue is half-crazy. Blue bit straight through John's hand three days ago, to which John only said, "I mean, it's fine." The sister, Sarah. Younger, pretty. Delusional. Thinks she's a great singer.

204 Carlisle Way, the house. It's covered in white embossed siding, which Jean sees in her rearview as she backs out of the driveway each day, making her morning coffee taste sour. Al loves siding, because it is cheap and can be cleaned with a garden hose. Sarah couldn't give a shit. John doesn't notice.

On Tuesdays, the whole family goes to basketball practice. John is the worst one on the team. He goes to the public (Al says, "FREE") all-black high school, so he can't be blamed. He's also a little slow, which doesn't help. So he's white and dumb and trying to play basketball. Sarah thinks this is hilarious. She knows she's going to win American Idol, so she really doesn't care if John sucks at sports. During practice, she sings into a plastic microphone in the bleachers. Jean is generally pissed off. John took her by surprise, so it bothers her that he isn't good at sports. It's the least he could do. Jean loves to hear Sarah sing, though, so basketball practice is fun. Al paces during basketball practice, because he can't sit down. He was a collegiate athlete at the best state school. So how he came to have a sissy son, he just absolutely cannot understand. Blue stays home on Tuesdays.

Wednesday is church night. The whole family goes to the church house. Al loves Wednesday. He is the head deacon. This is the single

most authoritative position he has ever held. It is the best it will ever get for Al. He knows this and it makes his eyes roll to the back of his head when he thinks about it. Jean loves to hate Wednesdays. She eats dinner at the church with other moms. They gossip about which kid got arrested for drinking at the football game Friday and which girl is screwing a teacher. Jean secretly wishes gossip would start about John. Maybe then he wouldn't be queer. She's terrified that he's queer. Sarah loves Wednesday. She is on the front row of the youth choir this year. She has a solo next Sunday, again. Everyone in the church is dreading it. John hates Wednesday. As far as he's concerned, it's just another opportunity to be rejected by the cool kids. Because even at church, there are cool kids.

Friday is the best of days for Sarah, because it is football day. Sarah loves to walk the track around the football field and smile at older boys. They can't wait until she's out of middle school so they can at least take her shirt off without feeling creepy. Jean equally enjoys Friday, because she gets to wear her "fun girl" tops. Jean goes to the karaoke bar on Friday with her girlfriends from work. They are all teachers over the age of forty-five, wearing thin lycra tops at a karaoke bar, singing Bon Jovi, drinking Smirnoff Ice. Al loves Friday, because he can take Blue to the football game and relive his glory days. Every week he hopes maybe some chick from high school will come around and offer to sleep with him. He was the kicker. They should treat him with respect. Blue should be cute enough to do the trick, anyway. John doesn't hate Friday. He sits with the basketball players in the stands. And by "sits with the basketball players," I mean he gets up every time someone has to pee and offers to get snacks every ten minutes. He wants to make friends.

On Saturdays, The Family watches TV. They do this all day long. They eat microwave meals. Al tries to ask John how school is going, but John becomes so awkward that he simply walks away. "Why can't we ever do anything fun? Everybody else goes to the mall and stuff on Saturdays so why can't we go to the mall? Mom

like everyone is there I'm serious can we go Mom I just want to see my friends and actually have FUN for once GOD!" Sarah gives this same oration almost every Saturday. When she begins, Jean sneaks into the kitchen where she drinks vodka and orange juice. John has no idea any of this is happening.

Sunday means church, again. Sarah is generally nervous, because the passive aggressive choir director let her have a solo again. Jean is generally pissed off because she has to act like Sarah sounded good, and she hates acting. John is happy. He likes Sundays.

Monday is the worst day. Al hates this day because Blue always wants extra attention on Monday. Al hates dogs. Jean hates this day because she has to go back to a classroom full of snot-nosed kindergarteners, who cry every time they piss their pants or get hungry. John hates this day because he has quizzes in geometry on Mondays and he has never passed a quiz. He can handle rejection from humans, but rejection from a piece of fucking paper just sucks. Sarah hates Monday because she feels left out in homeroom. All the other girls are allowed to go to the movies on Saturday. Somebody always held hands with somebody else and she never knows what's going on. Maybe if her mom wasn't such a . . . bitch, she'd let her go to the movies and have a cell phone like everybody else. Sarah hates Mondays. In reality, Monday is a great day for Blue. Al always plays with him a little longer.

1994 green Chrysler van, the car. The Family rides around in this van most days. Al drives. Jean gets shotgun. John sits behind Al. Sarah sits behind Jean. Blue goes in the trunk. Sarah listens to her iPod and pops gum. She is learning her audition song for American Idol. John spins a basketball in his hands and hopes that if they get in a wreck, it's on his side. Jean doesn't give a shit. Al looks for the cheapest gas station. Blue watches out the back window and has to wonder if this is as good as it's ever going to get.

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A Progression

| Margaret Yapp

The spring of 2007:

“I need to ask you something quick,” my mother said as I moved out of the kitchen. My movements made the floorboards creak as I laced up my shoes in the mudroom. “I’ve been finding beer bottles in weird places. In cabinets, behind potted plants. Your father said it isn’t him leaving them there.”

She began to chop a green pepper.

“Are you and your friends drinking beer?”

Chunks of pepper began to accumulate in a round pile on the edge of the overworked cutting board. I finished lacing my shoes.

“Are you serious? No.” I answered. I moved back into the kitchen and picked up a piece of pepper, sucked on it and eventually chewed. My mother looked at me and picked up a piece of her own. We liked snacks like this: fresh, raw, foods that are hard to stop eating.

“Okay, don’t worry about it, it’s probably just your father not remembering.”

We stood side by side, nibbling on green pepper.

*Last night I had
a dream*

The summer of 2009:

My father ran over my cat. He was pulling out of the driveway to go to work and she, our beautiful, caramel, bitchy cat, was napping underneath the belly of our car, the car he had taught me to drive in.

Our family had Jenny for as long as I could remember. When I was three or four years old my mother had known a woman who had an addiction to cats, dogs, furry things in general. Eventually, her animals became so numerous that they took over her home.

She was too busy to take care of them all, and would set out a few cartons of pre-sliced lunch meat on a counter every morning before she went to work, and that's how the cats would eat. After a while, this woman finally realized that she was in over her head and began to give away her pets. That is how we got Jenny; she had been with us for as long as I could remember.

I returned home that day, the day my father ran her over, to find Jenny sleeping on a makeshift bed of woolen blankets my mother had put in the corner of the kitchen. My mother was making dinner—pasta—and Jenny looked flat, like all the bones and muscles in her previously lithe body had been melted into gray paste that was now exiting her eyes in globs of pus. My brother, crying, quickly whispered the explanation as we watched Jenny breathe: it had been an accident, the vet had given mom some painkillers to put in her food. We just had to wait. Her breaths were slow and crooked, they shook her entire body with such force I felt sure she would burst and gray paste would flow out in rough, bitter waves.

“Do you think she will be okay?” my brother asked. He was stirring a white wine sauce with a worn wooden spoon, helping my mother with the food.

In the next room my father's eyes were red, his body hunched. He sat, reading the newspaper. His hands shook and he smelled like sweat and beer. He gave me a soft hello as I set down my coat near his chair. I moved back into the kitchen.

“He feels so bad,” my mother told me, quietly. “He's been trying to distract himself all night. Go say something nice.”

I walked upstairs to my room, unable to watch my Jenny's rough breaths any longer.

*Last night I had
a dream where
I watched my father find
big glass bottles of booze*

The fall in 2010:

I had watched my father make hash browns so many times. Several times a week, it seemed, he would wake up before the rest of us were out of bed to shred a few large potatoes that he kept in an old woven basket in our pantry. I often woke to these soft sounds of an adult morning, slipped into the kitchen, and curled up in the back corner to watch him work.

These childhood mornings drifted in my mind as I watched him attempt the process drunk. He had returned home from work this way and was now trying to make dinner. From the back corner I watched him lump together the shreds in his hands and toss them in a dull silver strainer, press out the excess water with his fingers. He began to move towards the stove, but before he could reach it I interrupted.

“I got it,” I said, and turned the burner on low.

He said nothing in response, but dripped one-third cup of oil onto a blackened frying pan and dropped it on the flame. I gathered the shredded potatoes in my own hands and set them in the pan as my father moved out of the room. I could hear him rummaging around the living room as I stirred the increasingly golden hash browns, a quick stir every few seconds so they would not stick together. I had learned that much from watching him make them so many times. After a few minutes I flipped them over to brown the other side. I listened to my mother question my father as he continued to poke around the living room, having completely forgotten the dinner he was trying to make.

The hash browns were done. I slipped them onto a plate and added some pepper, just enough to taste. I took the plate in both hands and walked into the living room.

“Who’s hungry?” I asked. I didn’t look at either of them.

*Last night I had
a dream where
I watched my father find
big glass bottles of booze*

*in my backpack.
In front of me he sipped
from each bottle.*

The winter of 2010:

On the morning after the third or fourth snow of the season, my father had woken up with a loose mouth and a bitter smell; he was unable to button his shirt correctly or put on his tie. Later, I drove with my brother to a Japanese restaurant a few miles from our house, a place we had eaten at a few times with our parents. My mother had told us to go out to eat, that she thought we should get out of the house for a few hours. We obliged, the house had been filled with the absence of communication all day as my father slept, he hadn't gone to work. In silence, my brother and I ate seaweed salad from small blue bowls and drank Diet Coke with ice from plastic glasses.

"I thought he was having a fucking stroke," I said to my brother. My blue bowl was empty; a small image of a goldfish had become visible on the bottom. I poked at it with my chopsticks. "All of those signs were there, you know? the slack face. Shit, he couldn't talk right, it was all mumbling and weirdness and—"

My brother didn't look at me. Instead he kept his eyes on the table next to ours, where a plump family was sharing rolls of sushi, bowls of miso soup. I watched him look at them.

"Do you know them?" I asked him. He finished his glass of Diet Coke, crunched a cube of ice between his teeth. That was a bad habit of his, the ice crunching. It was constant, and he would devour

the entire glass, chewing and chewing until it was gone.

“No,” he replied. “No, I don’t.”

*Last night I had
a dream where
I watched my father find
big glass bottles of booze*

*in my backpack.
In front of me he sipped
from each bottle.*

*Grimace in his face:
“I have to, you made me.”*

Our spring of 2012:

My mother poured a half-cup of brandy out of its glass jar into a large yellow bowl already containing an egg, butter, and sugar paste. My father walked over to her, holding a jar of orange juice, and added some to the mixture. Together they whisked, taking turns mixing and adding new ingredients—completing the steps.

My brother and I watched them from the living room; my mother poured the completed batter into a round pan that had belonged to my great grandmother. My father sprinkled the top with halved almonds. The cake, orange and brandy, was my mother’s favorite, and she hadn’t made it in several years.

“It’s golden,” my mother said. My father opened the oven and pulled out the pan. The smell of the dessert, potently citrus, slowly enveloped my head in waves of warmth. My father tested the cake with a toothpick slowly, to not warp the smooth surface.

“It’s done,” he said. “It’s done.”

*Last night I had
a dream where
I watched my father*

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The Adventure of Kid Bill Williams

| Jamal Michel

I remember my grandpa would always tell me, “Never turn your back on the bad guy.” I stayed with him a lot while momma worked and he liked having me around. Maybe I was a little rambunctious like he says. Maybe I shouldn’t have done what I did, but I wasn’t a fool. My momma, he said she was a fool. One time in the grocery store she worked in, a customer spat in her face for accidentally ringing up a can of tomato soup twice. I remember standing behind a shelf of Cracker Jack’s, and I hid while the man shouted at her. I was afraid to move; he was a big white man with heavy arms and a deep voice. The man shouted something I can’t really remember; something about you people not being good enough with money, or not trusting you people with his money, or something like that. She just looked up and wiped her face, apologizing. He raised his hand and slapped her, and it cut her cheek. No one did a thing to help and momma just looked at me and I could see the hurt in her brown eyes. Not because of the cut that began to swell, or the tons of eyes that looked at her, stopping what they were doing to turn and stare, but because I was watching.

I started the sixth grade at Galding Heights after momma got something called ‘evicted.’ I don’t know why but we couldn’t live in our home and I ended up switching schools. I missed my old school. And I missed my friends. That’s when momma said we’d be staying with grandpa for a while. He told me it often happened to fools, getting ‘thrown out,’ and I felt bad for momma and all the things we had left behind. When I started school, the kids there looked at me funny. Some of them shouted names like ‘spook’ or ‘coon.’ I didn’t know what those words meant and I would come home with questions for grandpa, questions he never knew how to answer himself, he’d just scratch his head and look out the apartment window. “Bigots,” he’d mumble. Whatever that means. He said our ancestors took enough of it back then for us to take it now. He said bullies used it to pick on people that were different. He pulled

me close and said, “William, don’t ever turn your back on the bad guy,” and I could smell the cigarette smoke on his breath and feel the fire that always showed in his dark eyes. There were a lot of lines on grandpa’s face, and he let go of my shoulder and turned back to his rocking chair facing the open window, humming an old song I heard a group of people sing in the neighborhood a week earlier.

About a month after I started school I met a boy named Brice who I’d hear getting called to the principal’s office almost every other day. I always saw him beating on a kid smaller than he was. One time he grabbed a crippled boy by the name of Charlie by his ankle braces and nearly drowned him in the bathroom. I remember hearing him scream while Brice dragged him down the hall. He was a big kid, the kind you made sure to avoid in school and the kind that made you keep your lunch money bunched up in your sock. A week after, a new girl started coming to my class. The teacher asked her to introduce herself to the other kids. She said her name was Mary and her parents moved to Mississippi on account of her daddy’s job. She had a pretty smile and when she walked by my desk she smelled like apple pie. My grandma used to make apple pie before she got really sick. When she and grandpa came to our old house she would slap his hand if he didn’t say grace before eating. Grandpa says we all have to face death, whether we like it or not so life isn’t gonna’ wait around for no man. The teacher assigned Mary’s seat behind Brice’s and the moment she walked past his desk, he tripped her. The class laughed loudly and cheered and clapped as her books slid down the row of other kids. One of the books stopped by my foot and the title said “The Adventures of Kit Carson.” I picked it up, dusted it off, and handed it back when she got up. “Thanks” she said and I couldn’t stop staring at how green her eyes were as she smiled. When she sat her hair shined like the sun outside.

I got home and started asking my grandpa all about Kit Carson and he said all I had to do was wait until that night and we would watch the show together. For nights I sat with grandpa and we saw

Kit travel from town to town on his trusty steed, Apache, and he had showdowns with the town's biggest and meanest criminals. In one episode, a woman was thrown out onto the street, right out of a saloon by a man who went by the name of Butch Becall. Kit saw it from far away but approached the man and said he'd better leave her alone or else. The man, who was taller than Kit by almost two feet, grabbed him by the neck, tossed his gun from his waist belt, and slammed him hard onto the ground. The woman got up and hid behind a stack of hay and cried out for Kit to stay down. He held his sides and slowly stood on his feet. The man grabbed Kit again, this time strangling him from behind and then threw his head to the ground. I watched, trembling. My grandpa saw and said I had nothing to be afraid of, it's all just Hollywood. "But why does he keep getting up? That man wants to kill him!" I shouted. My grandpa sat quietly a moment. "Maybe Kit's just a damn fool, too."

The next week at school I came to class thinking of all the things I could tell Mary I saw on "The Adventures of Kit Carson." When recess started I saw her sitting alone and I walked over and said hello. She looked up and her green eyes were really bright and I messed up what I was going to ask a bit and she laughed. That made me feel good. I sat down and we talked so much about Kit, Apache, and his close call with Butch and all the other scary criminals. I liked Mary. She didn't treat me like the other kids there and she was really pretty. We talked so much my mouth got really dry and I told her to hang on for one second I had to run over to the water fountain. I skipped and smiled and I looked back and saw her smiling, too. I turned the knob of the fountain and let the water spring up a little bit before swallowing a mouthful. I stood up and wiped my mouth and heard someone scream from across the playground. Brice was standing next to Mary, a handful of her hair balled up in one hand as he tried picking her up. He threw her out of her seat and laughed. I saw him reach for her leg and she kicked and shouted for someone, anyone to help. The other kids just watched. Some of them cheered Brice on. I didn't think, my heart

was racing really fast and my head was lined with sweat. I just started running over to where they were. I stopped in front of him and said to take his hands off her. He turned, his huge stomach reaching my chin, and grabbed my shirt. “What’d you say, coon?” he growled. I looked up and swallowed hard. “I—I said leave her alone.” He picked me up and I saw everything go upside down for a moment. The kids stopped smiling and Mary hid behind the bench we sat on. “Stop it, Brice!” Her shouting scared me and with that he slammed me to the ground. I heard him laugh loudly and I felt a really sharp pain in my side. My fingers scraped the concrete too and it felt like fire. With my cheek on the ground I saw a blurry Brice walk over to where Mary was. I put both my hands down to help me up and stood, wobbling without anything to hold onto. “Hey!” I screamed, my cheek feeling sore. “Leave her alone.” Brice charged at me, holding me by the waist like a big brown bear and he threw my body against the ground, harder than before. The fall made me bounce and I flinched, but without thinking I tried getting up again. I don’t remember getting to my feet but Brice was madder than before and he stood over my back and I felt the sun on my arm and neck and wondered what was going on. My eyelids grew heavy, but I saw Mary still holding onto the bench, crying. The playground and all the kids went black. The sun had been setting a bit and I closed my eyes. I heard grandpa in the distance.

“Maybe he was just a damn fool.”

Jamal Michel is presently finishing his senior year at Florida International University as an English major, with a minor in Sociology. He will pursue an M.F.A. in Creative Writing and upon completion he will enter into education reform. Michel is a writing fellow at his university’s academic center.

Soundless

| Jiweon Seo

You wake up to the sound of your alarm clock ringing and the sunlight streaming in through the blinds. You force yourself out of bed to turn off the alarm and shuffle into the bathroom before your body instinctively crawls under the covers again. After you have washed up and convinced your brain to stay awake, you check your phone to see if the weather outside is warm enough to forego a jacket. You don't notice the seventeen missed calls until you close the weather app.

Your father has been calling you since eight in the morning. After six consecutive calls one after another, he has resorted to calling you every ten minutes. Your tendency to sleep like the dead combined with your accursed habit of keeping your phone on vibrate at all times results in this: calling your father at eleven-thirty in the late morning while you wonder where your roommate left your nail clippers after using them last night. This distracts you to the point where you initially fail to notice that your father is saying your name over the phone.

You are utterly, painfully oblivious until this point. You ask if anything is wrong. As if seventeen missed calls isn't obvious enough.

Your father tells you to not go to class. He tells you that you should come home—wait, never mind, he'll come pick you up—no, no, no. He sounds lost and his voice shakes and cracks into sounds you've never heard from him before. The pit of your stomach drops and the possibilities pile up in your head. Your grandfather has finally passed away after months of hospitalization; no, your father has cancer again, and this time it's not going to be a quick fix with surgery; perhaps your younger cousin, the one you've been suspecting of anorexia, starved herself too much; oh god, what if there was a car accident?

You are wrong. You wish you were right.

Your father says that he bought plane tickets for you. You take a flight from the Chicago O'Hare International Airport straight to the

Seattle-Tacoma International Airport in eight hours. Your mother has committed suicide.

Your parents have been divorced for nearly nine years. You've spent the majority of the last decade living with your father and visiting your mother on the weekends. The past three years, you've hardly seen either of them. You've been busy with college life. You love Chicago; you want to spend the rest of your life there.

You hardly get along with your father, though you grudgingly love him in a way only family can. Seeing him as little as possible helps smooth out the rough patches in your father-daughter relationship. Absence makes the heart fonder, they say. It does wonders for cooling down your matching tempers.

Your mother is a different story. She is sweet and kind, with bottomless patience. She divorced your father because his mood swings and volatile nature finally wore her down, but she loves you unconditionally, even if you've inherited all of your father's nasty mood dispositions and cutting tongue. You love her just as much, but you've been limiting Skype sessions with her recently because she keeps bringing up uncomfortable conversation topics, like your GPA and post-graduation plans. She worries about you a little excessively.

You need to stop thinking about her in the present tense.

By the time you stagger into the arrivals lounge, it's past sunset. Your father greets you with a stiff embrace and red-rimmed eyes. He takes your luggage bag from you and leads the way to the parking lot. You follow him without saying a word, unsure whether you should talk about your mother. You don't want to have this kind of discussion in the car. There's too much proximity in a closed space.

In the end, you and your father travel home in tense silence. You try to grasp the fact that you've just flown over half the country mid-semester because your mother committed suicide. It doesn't seem real at first, but your father's bloodshot eyes and greying hairs at his temple make your chest tighten, like you're out of breath, and reality starts to sink in. You wonder what your mother would think,

you leaving behind your studies like this. You are glad that midterms were two weeks ago. But it doesn't really matter, does it, because the one person who always kept track of your academic progress is dead.

You don't cry. Not in the car. Your heart seizes in your chest and the seatbelt feels too tight and you feel cold all over, but you don't cry. You shudder and clench your fists until your knuckles go white, but your vision doesn't blur. The world is soundless in your grief.

The sky is still dark when you arrive at the drab grey apartment building you call home. You and your father take the elevator to the sixth floor, mutually agreeing to not discuss the matter until you both get some sleep. So you trudge into your room, the same as you left it, and you neglect brushing your teeth in favor of keeling over your bed and trying to will yourself into unconsciousness before you can cry.

You spend the five days planning your mother's funeral by alternating between a numbness that leaves you spending hours at a time staring at space, unaware of the time slipping through your fingers like water, and an impressive range of emotions mixed into a cacophony. From overwhelming sadness to bitter resentment to dull fury.

It starts with the realization hitting you like a train wreck. Your father says your mother overdosed on sleeping pills. Your mother's tiny apartment thirty miles away will be emptied and all of her possessions will be shipped over. You inherit everything, not that there is much. Your mother's earnings as a librarian were modest at best. There won't be any inheritance issues, since you're an only child and there are no relatives from your mother's side of the family.

You listen. You nod. You give monosyllabic answers. Your father asks whether you want to go back to school after the funeral. You don't know why, but the question slices through your core and makes you feel like you're spilling blood everywhere.

You start an argument with him. It is petty and destructive and full of misdirected anger, and by the end of the fight you both just

try to silently apologize to each other by talking about what flowers you should order for the funeral. You aren't able to agree on which flowers you like, and that sparks another argument. The anger keeps coming in floods and bouts, spurring you on and draining you out until you feel wrung out, bruised all over.

You want to scream at him, *it should have been you*. You keep those words barred behind your gritted teeth and swallow them down like arsenic.

The funeral is small and private. Several of your mother's friends whom you do not recognize are there, sad-faced and discretely weeping. Your mother's best friend delivers a eulogy, and a good portion of it is about how much your mother loved you. You disagree. You think that if your mother really loved you, she'd still be alive.

You don't say a word for the entire funeral. Everybody else doesn't mind, because apparently you are excused from social niceties when your mother just killed herself. You stay silent until the moment your mother's coffin is lowered into the ground.

You watch the wooden coffin sink slowly into the grave with the kind of morbid fascination one has when watching a ship sink in the middle of the ocean. You try to say, *please, don't, that's my mother, don't do that to her*. Instead, you choke out a wordless sound of pain and swallow the rest down.

After the funeral, you sort through your mother's possessions, neatly packed and delivered to your doorstep. Amidst the books and shoes, there is a box. It is a slender, black thing with an elegant pattern embossed onto its lid. You open it with care, just like how you'll spend the rest of your life gingerly prodding at the memories of your mother, testing them to see where it went wrong, when you could have noticed, if you could have stopped it.

There are photos, easily a hundred or more. There are pictures of you from every stage in your life, images of your mother with longer hair and less wrinkles, your father with a wider grin and smaller crow's feet at the corners of his eyes. Your entire twenty years

of life, memento after memento, stacked and stored like a compact museum of your footsteps.

There are plenty of photos of you with your friends, of you having fun, of you waving at whoever took the pictures. There is only one picture of you and your mother. In this picture, you doze on a couch with your head on your mother's shoulder, your body slumped into hers in no way that could have been comfortable for her. She smiles, her whole face lit up and alive, as she looks down at you nestled into the crook of her neck.

This is when your breath clogs up your throat, the numbness and anger and sadness disintegrating. Your blood runs hot and then cold and then you don't feel anything at all, except for the weight of the sunlight and the perceived air pressure skyrocketing as the oxygen momentarily leaves your lungs. The crippling sensation of missing your mother slams into you.

This is when you cry.

Once you start crying, you have trouble stopping.

Anything becomes a trigger. You open the refrigerator and see grapes, which your mother was allergic to, and then your vision goes blurry. You slam the refrigerator door shut and compose yourself, only to open it again and find cream cheese, your mother's favorite bread spread. You end up bawling in the kitchen, your back to the fridge with your face in your hands.

You open your email to find a message sent a month ago from your mother, and you spend the afternoon huddled under the covers of your bed, sniffing into your pillow. You squeeze shampoo into your hair and the scent punches you in the gut, and you crouch under the spray of water, stifling sobs under the relentless pangs of nostalgia. You turn on the television and every time you see a teenager and a mother onscreen, you fight the urge to scream and throw the remote control; you opt for curling yourself into a ball in one of the corners of the living room.

The grief comes in waves, almost like a circadian rhythm. Some moments it seems bearable, and other times you feel like drowning.

You are tempted to take the semester off, to wallow in this tidal wave of grief swallowing you whole, but you know that your mother would hardly approve. Your father starts to worry as well, and you are a few days away from reaching your limit for peaceful cohabitation with your father.

After sixteen days, you go back to Chicago.

Classes force you to battle against the tide of the grief. You don't have time to let the pull-and-push of grief control your life when you have papers to catch up on and projects due that force you to stay up all night. You blink back tears when you see cream cheese and your breath hitches when you look up at the picture of you and your mother, newly framed and set on your desk, but you force yourself to wake up, eat, work, and sleep.

It isn't easy at first. You catch yourself wondering if this is okay, if you should really move on with your life. The worry that you will eventually forget about your mother, about how much you love her and mourn her, keeps you up at night.

Sometimes, the grief catches you off-guard, making your muscles seize up and the pit of your stomach turn over. Like a song abruptly cut off-track. Months after the funeral, you lose an earring. It was a gift from your mother several years ago and it goes missing, a half of a pair gone. You search your room from corner to corner, upending drawers and reorganizing shelves, but you don't find it. You panic, you pray, you wish for it to come back somehow, but in the end you never find it. You sit on your bed and cry, the tender edges of where your mother has been ripped out of your life still raw and pain-riddled. You hate yourself with a vicious ferocity for days. It takes you almost a month to finally accept the loss and forgive yourself about it, but the twinge in your chest whenever you think about it never really goes away.

You never learn what exactly drove your mother to do what she did. You ask questions. So do your father and your mother's friends and the police. There are suggestions, hints, implications spread over the map of your mother's life. She had financial issues; she was

lonely; she was sick of her life. You guess but you never know. You never find out why she did it and it takes you years to make peace with that.

You graduate college and get a job that helps you pay just enough for the rent. You date and break up and marry. You climb your way up the corporate ladder and earn yourself a stable job and a stable home. You are haunted by more things as life goes on. Most of them fade away, like the faintest imprints of scars that you can see only in the right light at the right angle.

Some days you wake up with tears running down your face and your mother's voice in your ears, but those days lessen over time. Some days you miss her with a fierce longing. Once in a while, the world goes soundless, muted by bone-deep regret.

You wonder, from time to time, if you could have stopped it. The thought never leaves you, not entirely. But you learn to live with it, the "what if" that'll follow you for the rest of your days.

There will come a time when you wake up in the early mornings, slip out of bed before your husband wakes. You'll make yourself some coffee and trace your fingers over the picture frames on the wall. One day, you will smile at the picture of your mother, you cuddled against her, and there will be no grief there.

But that day will not come for a very long time.

Jiweon Seo is a senior at the State University of New York College at Plattsburgh, where she majors in Psychology and English and minors in Theatre. She plans to pursue a Ph.D. in Psychology and continue writing in her spare time. She loves her parents very much and dedicates her work to both of them.

Jurors

Kevin Brown received a Ph.D. in English from the University of Mississippi. He also has an M.A. in Library Science from the University of Alabama, and an M.F.A. in Creative Writing from Murray State University. He is a professor at Lee University with two books of poetry—*A Lexicon of Lost Words* (winner of the Violet Reed Haas Prize for Poetry, Snake Nation Press, 2014) and *Exit Lines* (Plain View Press, 2009)—and two poetry chapbooks—*Abecedarium* (Finishing Line Press, 2010) and *Holy Days: Poems* (winner of the Split Oak Press Poetry Prize, 2011). He also has a book of scholarship titled *They Love to Tell the Stories: Five Contemporary Novelists Take on the Gospels* (Kennesaw State University, 2012).

Katie Fallon is the author of the nonfiction book *Cerulean Blues: A Personal Search for a Vanishing Songbird* (Ruka Press, November 2011), which was recently named as a finalist for the Southern Environmental Law Center's Reed Award for Outstanding Writing on the Southern Environment. Her essays have appeared or are forthcoming in a variety of literary journals and magazines, including *The Bark*, *Fourth Genre*, *River Teeth*, *Ecotone*, *Appalachian Heritage*, *Now & Then*, *Isotope*, *Fourth River*, *the minnesota review*, *The Tusculum Review*, and elsewhere. Her essay "Hill of the Sacred Eagles" was a finalist in Terrain's 2011 essay contest, and she has been nominated several times for a Pushcart Prize. She has taught creative writing at Virginia Tech and West Virginia University.

Ty Hawkins is an assistant professor of English and coordinator of the Freshman Composition Program at Walsh University in North Canton, Ohio. He is a faculty sponsor of the Alpha Omicron Alpha chapter of Sigma Tau Delta. His publications include *Reading Vietnam Amid the War on Terror* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), as well as a number of journal articles. He teaches courses on American literature, general-education literature, and writing. He holds a Ph.D. from Saint Louis University.

Anne Mallory is an assistant professor of English at East Carolina University, where she teaches eighteenth- and nineteenth-century literature with an emphasis on British Romanticism. Her essay “Burke, Boredom, and the Theater of Counterrevolution” (*PMLA*, 2003) was awarded the William Riley Parker Prize in 2003. Her reviews have appeared in *Gothic Studies*, *Women: A Cultural Review*, and *Partial Answers*. Two essays are forthcoming in *Approaches to Teaching Jane Austen’s Mansfield Park*, Eds. Marcia Folsom and John Wiltshire (MLA Press) and *The Hardy Society Journal*.

Donika Ross received her M.F.A. in Poetry from the Michener Center for Writers at the University of Texas, Austin. She is a Cave Canem fellow and a 2004 June fellow of the Bucknell Seminar for Younger Poets. Her poems have appeared or are forthcoming in *Crazyhorse*, *Hayden’s Ferry Review*, *Indiana Review*, and *Best New Poets 2007*. She is currently a Ph.D. candidate in English at Vanderbilt University.

Scott Sanders is the author of two novels, *Gray Baby* and *The Hanging Woods*, both published by Houghton Mifflin. His awards and honors include a writer-in-residency fellowship from the Camargo Foundation in Cassis, France, a fiction award from *The Atlantic Monthly*, and a fellowship from the Virginia Center for the Creative Arts. He lives in Virginia, where he teaches fiction writing at Virginia Tech.

Shannin Schroeder is an associate professor of English at Southern Arkansas University, where she teaches composition, literature, and creative writing. She also directs the writing center. Her publications include *Rediscovering Magical Realism in the Americas*, and her research interests include magical realism, the contemporary novel, the American frontier, and popular culture.

Kevin Stemmler's fiction, poetry, and essays have appeared in *Writing: The Translation of Memory*, *Paper Street*, *Heart: Human Equity Through Art*, *Gay & Lesbian Review Worldwide*, and *Pittsburgh Quarterly*. He was a recipient of the 2008 Pennsylvania Council on the Arts Grant. He is a professor of English at Clarion University.



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