







# **The Nemadji Review**

**2014, Volume 3**

## *Editor-in-Chief*

Samantha Lokken

## *Editor*

Nyssa Search

## *Editorial Staff*

Sydnee Chipman

Kelci Greenwood

Seth Love

Mara Martinson

Kourtney Sande

Katie Wolden

## *Faculty Advisors*

Jayson Iwen

Hilary Fezzey

John McCormick

All correspondence should be addressed to [thenemadjireview@gmail.com](mailto:thenemadjireview@gmail.com)

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## Editor's Note

Dear Reader,

The third edition of *The Nemadji Review* is much smaller than the previous year. However, the journal still had a great response for poetry, short fiction, creative non-fiction, and artwork/photography from the many great writers and artists here on campus. We appreciate everyone that submitted their work to *The Nemadji Review* for they are the ones that made this journal possible.

When we took over *The Nemadji Review*, we knew that we wanted to have a better quality book to give to our readers. We wanted to expand the submission list, so everyone could submit any type of work. We believed that this would allow *The Nemadji Review* to expand with future years to come, and still continue giving readers a great book.

We would like to give our thanks to the advisors who gave us guidance throughout the academic year. To all those who submitted their work, and to *The Nemadji Review* staff for all their hard work. This journal wouldn't have been made possible without the help from them. Lastly, thank you reader for taking the time to read the wonderful stories that this edition has to offer. We hope that you take great pleasure in reading them, and knowing that this journal is for you.

We hope that the journal will continue to showcase the work of current, and future students of the University of Wisconsin-Superior. We know that the journal will be in capable hands as the staff will continue all of their hard work next year.

It has been absolutely fantastic to be a part of *The Nemadji Review*. Nyssa and I appreciate being able to run the *Review*, and to give guidance to those who will take over next year. We look forward to the expansion and new growth that will take place in *The Nemadji Review*.

Sincerely,

Samantha Lokken and Nyssa Search

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# Jasmine Ayers

## *The Mistake*

He and her  
Together Forever  
She made a mistake  
They couldn't endeavor

Like a thorn in his side  
She made him weak  
She made him cry

Blurry had been his vision of late  
Trust was fleeting beyond the gate  
The gate that held their love so tight  
The love he held every night

For one another, they fought on and on  
Trust me, it was like an ongoing song  
A song that's been played over again  
A song being played by a tired violin

For he has felt this pain before  
A pain so deep it hits the core

Towards her he has an undying love  
For she was so perfect, his angel, his dove  
And while his mind was running a maze  
He decided to choose, and she he forgave

# Thomas Erickson

## *The Crow's Following*

The first time I heard its cry,  
I jumped and turned to see that horrible bird.  
Ignore it was what I thought I could try,  
Since no one else could hear what I had heard.  
It was a soft sound that became soothing,  
And whenever I saw it, the crow beckoned to come.  
That's when my feet began unconsciously moving,  
Away to a place I'm no longer from.  
The more I pursued, the crow had sped on,  
It wasn't till later I'd noticed its feathers began to fall.  
The journey to catch it felt long and drawn,  
Till finally it perched on a tree strong and tall.  
That's where the other followers begged below the tree,  
Pleading for the crow's chants to cease.  
The crow's song became painful, us yelling to be free.  
The other followers longing for release.  
I crawled away from the crying mound,  
Sprinting down the path no matter where it took.  
Till their voices drowned out to a far off sound,  
I never raised a single daring look.  
I kept running, until I thought it wrong,  
Wrong to ignore the now sweet crow's song.

# Anastasia Kirchoff

## *Impaired*

Beauty was like a beatnik drunkard  
hazy grey blanket warm and inviting  
a mist of protective evergreen cover  
safe but inviting trouble  
Minds coalesce iridescent  
colored threads languish and unravel fibers  
fraying turning into lights pinpricked in the sky  
glimmering in and out of sight  
in and out of reach, visible  
only through the haze playing out sepia  
burlesque scenes; jazzy club grins, laughter  
like Champagne bubbles bursting on your tongue,  
the moonlight seems a warm bath  
filtering down, wisps of possibilities splaying over your  
skin softly, deftly, time is  
like slow European waltz and  
it seems there's an endless amount of steps before  
The ball is over and we're released into  
Forever Night



# Tamara Kolesar

## *Inside a Lie*

If something is said in a rush or hurry,  
not meant to hurt  
or heal  
Are those words a lie in their insincerity?

If a gift is given in an unconsidered manner,  
not given with goodwill  
thought, concern  
Is that gift a lie in its wrappings?

If I know of something and do not speak of it,  
not meaning to awaken or shelter  
your feelings  
Is that a lie by omission?

If I accept your kisses and caresses,  
knowing you have what I need not what  
I value  
Is it a lie to lie beneath you and accept is as more?

If I hear what I choose,  
not listening to the words said  
and unsaid  
Is that a lie to the beauty of your words?

If I accept what you offer,  
with no attempt or intent to give back  
the same  
Is that a lie in my taking?

If I say the words you long to hear,  
with fingers crossed behind  
my back  
Is that a lie to your heart?

If I stay entwined unto you 'til death do us part,  
While my head and heart is  
at odds  
Is that a lie to my own soul?

# Mara Martinson

## *Goodbye, Friend*

Tears but fall from her silky rosen face,  
Saturating the cyan sheets beneath her without a trace.

A violent wave of guilt ensues, like a tempestuous tide  
Pulling her to a darker place inside.

It consumes her only shred of earthly happiness,  
And leaves her with tears of ultimate sadness.

This perpetual storm furies on,  
And as she lays here—she only mourns.

# Kourtney Sande

## *Midnight Rising*

Sunset shadows mourn the day.  
The pitter patter splashes on my carriage window.  
Countryside beautiful, but ever so deathly I know that now  
once now, the lightning strikes the hazy and crying clouds.  
The driver races faster toward home.  
The horse working up a cold and hot fever.  
My worries make me crazy, and shout to stop.  
My lover on my right, seething with pain.  
His arm bleeding greatly from the driver's literally drunk speed.  
Faster and faster we race down the mud splattered lanes  
of Devon. My face stained with fear and tears.  
My lover dying of pain and me dying to keep him alive.  
I cry for him not to be lost and don't let go.  
He screams for me to keep quiet; the driver is shouting profanity at his horse.  
The midnight hour rises to meet us. The rain still shouting and screaming.  
I am holding my lover, keeping the blood from seeping anymore.  
The lightning rears its ugly head; the poor, exhausted horse kicks and rears,  
meeting the midnight horizon. My lover and I feel the ground upon our  
faces, his arm bleeding still. His trench coat covers his face. I feel his heart.  
His body gone into the next world.  
His mangled face, and cuts too gruesome to word.  
The driver is alive; the poor creature shrilled its last.  
The driver goes on in a gimp, not even caring about our thorough bruises  
and scars; the pain we all went through. The dead animal that leaves for  
the better.  
My lover; gone, his shattered remains still staring at me.  
I cry and curse the midnight rain.  
I carry the corpse to its resting place.  
His love still eternal.  
His soul still stands at the foot of my bed.  
My heart is now a mess.  
Never to be repaired.  
Never to love another.  
I never will meet a carriage and it's so great driver.  
Someday soon, I shall meet him up into the stars above.  
Lost in lover's fantasy.  
Now, I sleep alive and restlessly.  
A night of sheeting rain keeps me up.

The evilness that lay within the rain.  
Six feet under; lies my love.  
Rain, the root of all evil.  
I will sleep tonight with solitude, knowing he is waiting for me.  
So soon to come.



# Nyssa Search

## *Trattoria Dinner*

Luscious mangos sat in a silver bowl  
beside a cask of red wine.  
Not my favorite vintage,  
but it would do.

There I was, wearing four-inch patent leather heels,  
my feet hidden below the table.  
Had he noticed them?  
Had he seen?

My eyes drifted to the fruit, transfixed.  
Much like myself, it had come into season.  
Its flesh was ripe—  
juices running rich beneath the skin,  
ready for consumption.

I poured another glass of cabernet  
to settle my swirling mind,  
then smiled coyly.  
Dessert had almost arrived  
and I wouldn't miss it for the world.

# Lavern Still

## *Childhood's End*

Shiver

In the stagnant cold of this tomb, you must shiver  
Wet with the refuse of childhood's end,  
Clinging to your ravaged body as you restlessly stir

Eyes stare aghast upon your emaciated form;  
Wan and wasted from spells of narcotic slumber,  
The imprints of passion's infernal debt yet remain  
How it pains me to watch you writhe and suffer

Whisper

In the darkened corners of your tomb, I hear whispers  
As the skeletons of notions subdued arise in sympathetic defiance  
Rattling their wretched bones to wake your swollen heart from slumber

What a weary effort it must be!

To posture in such contortions of character  
As you lay in this stark mire of inhibition  
And ignore the child-cry that weeps in your tomb of sedation  
Beware if they begin to seep through its walls of flesh  
Lest your thin pride begin to tremble or falter

Tears flow between the linoleum as opiates through a ruptured vein,  
—Tiny streams that may yet wash the refuse and imprints away—  
Yet the potential for cleansing is tragically squandered as they sink down the drain

And thus, does my heart break...

# Sarah Wargin

## *Stars Shining Out*

After sunset,  
I'm pulled under by sweet darkness.  
Oh, the way it envelops my skin under a waxy moon  
Crushing me under like lavender velvet.  
I love the way the night hides me,  
Can you hear it whispering in the darkness?  
I light a thick, pale candle;  
White is for magic.  
A few scattered words of spell are chanted under the sky;  
Only Mother Moon could understand them.  
I could sit for hours under the frosted stars,  
Strewn across the universe.  
Maybe,  
You are somewhere out there,  
Looking out to the moon with me.  
I am full of hope for the oncoming day.

# Sharon Williams

## *You Been Exploiting*

You been exploiting' me for the longest time  
Now it's my time to subdue you  
Until you concur not to be  
Antipathy toward me, let the light shine on you.  
You are the one  
The only equilibrium that can bring  
Our world to a new millennium  
You must revert to your training  
In order to save us.  
Come one, come all  
Let's enjoy our saves to the zenith of life  
That people will listen to coherent.  
We will segregate that disruptable man  
From our communal.  
Just let me make the transformation  
'cause I have seen the light,  
And it's the equilibrium that will win.  
So my trouble, one you have  
Circumvent me for the last time.  
Now, I will eject you from here for life  
Be gone, off on your way.  
We shall collaborate in destroying the world  
As it was once written,  
We shall fall into nadir of the earth.  
Here I come to save the day!  
I am your hero from here out  
And out we must be united.  
As in one for we must have the power.  
We must depart ourselves from one another.



*Short Fiction*



# Dale Anderson

## *Wounds*

Katie sat on the dingy floor of a cheap hotel room that reeked of a disgusting blend of mold, marijuana and stale sex. She didn't remember how she had gotten there. Only slight flashes of memory that were there and briefly gone. The more she tried to focus on them, the faster they flitted away like fireflies darting back into the night. The carpet was a drab olive color that looked like it was probably installed in the early seventies and didn't appear to have been cleaned since it was first installed. The walls were yellowed with years of cigarette smoke and most likely the smoke of other more illicit drugs. Katie felt that she should be repulsed by her surroundings, but this was not the first time she had come to in a disgusting hotel room. It wasn't even close to the worst place that she had come to after a serious heroin bender. She tried to clear her mind. Usually if she focused on her memories of the past, it helped to ground her; to make her feel more real. Heroin had the effect of making everything seem as if it was just a construct Katie had built up in her mind. It made her feel that her entire life were something ethereal that she constructed out of sugar glass that would melt away as the rain of pleasure brought on by the rush of a fix entered her veins. She closed her eyes and remembered her mother. If anything would bring her back to reality, her mother was it. Memories of her were by far the most sobering in her mind, but also the reason she sought the comfort that the drugs would bring.

Katie had always been a wayward soul. She did not grow up under the best of circumstances, but she was a bright, wide-eyed little girl with golden hair that everyone was envious of with bright blue eyes. She was a curious little girl and despite generally being of a good disposition, she occasionally would lie for no reason at all. She did not know why she did it. It could have been for the reactions that she would receive. It could have been a cry for attention of some sort, or it could have just been out of boredom. She was raised strictly Roman Catholic with an extremely high value placed on religious values and dogma.

She was confirmed when she was seven years old. It was a memory that stuck out in her mind for some reason. She remembers with vivid detail how bright and white her cotton dress was and how it contrasted to the dark somber interior of the church. The only thing that was as white as her dress, as she recalls, was the pale skin of Christ up on the crucifix at the front of the cathedral. It seemed to shine with a supernatural glow. She was always comforted by the statue, but at the same time horrified by the dark red blood that flowed in long ribbons from the wounds in Jesus' hands, feet and side. The statue also felt like her only tangible link to God. When she was very small, the priest once rebuked her for constantly referring to the statue itself as God. He had said that worshipping an image rather than God himself was one of the sins that must never be committed. She thought it was horrifying that people would treat God in such a gruesome manner. As much as the priest kept telling her that he had died for her sins, she couldn't help but

escape the feeling that the crucifixion never needed to happen.

“People just should have been nicer,” she once told her mother.

This thought brought her crashing back to her current reality. She opened her eyes. It was all still there. The carpet, the walls, and the horrible smell. She now noticed in her increasing sobriety a bright white sheet laying in the center of the floor. In contrast to the room surrounding it, Katie thought it was absurd that the sheet would be so clean. She stood up and moved closer to the sheet. It was with dawning horror that she realized that there was something under the sheet. Something vaguely human shaped, but more skeleton than human. She knelt down in front of the sheet, becoming fixated on a dark red spot on the sheet. The spot seemed to be growing like the bloom of some gruesome flower. It was almost beautiful in its own way. Katie resisted the urge to lift the sheet. This was all too horrible for her to process. How did she get here, and who was under the sheet? The harder she tried to remember, the more her head ached. She leaned back into the ache and searched her memories again.

Katie recalled how troubled she became as she grew into adulthood. Her taste in movies and music started to move to anything that would annoy her mother. She would listen to anything loud and thumping that would require her mother to scream to be heard as she told Katie to turn it down. She became fascinated with macabre and horrible movies which depicted graphic sex and violence.

This is not to say that Katie was really a bad person. Amidst all this chaos and lashing out, she still maintained good grades and was generally liked by those around her. Despite her fascination with the macabre in her movie choices, she still dressed in the nicest fashions that her mother could afford. Even with her occasional lies, people in the school seemed to adore her. They simply chalked up her lies to her being “quirky.” She was still a fiercely loyal friend to those around her. It probably helped that she had grown into a beautiful young woman with long blonde hair that always appeared silky and well groomed. She wore little makeup as her natural features defied the use of it. She had high cheekbones that gave her face an angular appearance with soft full lips. Her eyes seemed to sparkle, perhaps conveying the mischief that she sometimes concealed behind them.

Without any warning, the doorknob of the room rattled, causing Katie to instinctively jump to her feet. Years of running from her past and occasionally the law had honed her fight or flight instincts firmly to the flight side. The sheet and its ghastly contents now completely forgotten, she looked all around the room for a way to escape. There were no doors or windows other than the main door and a large picture window that was currently covered by blinds, shutting out any light. The rattling of the doorknob became more insistent. She finally decided to bolt into the bathroom. If she could not run, at least she could hide. She huddled down inside the grime covered bathtub, listening intently as the turning of the doorknob stopped. She looked around the bathroom, hoping that there would be a window through which she could slip, but found none. All she could see was the filthy bathroom. The smell of the rest of the hotel room was not as strong in the bathroom.

It was instead replaced by the strong acrid smell of bleach. All the bleach in the world could not have washed away the filth that seemed to cover everything in the room. It was as if the room itself defied cleaning. She again drifted back through the haze of her memories.

When she graduated, her mother simply kicked her out of the house. There was no warning. She simply came home from graduation, and her bags were packed. Instead of the perpetual look of anger and exasperation she usually wore, she instead looked tired. It was obvious that she had been crying and Katie noticed that she held a rosary tightly in her hands as she calmly said in a slow, deliberate voice.

"You don't belong here anymore." Her voice seemed devoid of any emotion other than exhaustion. "I have tried and tried with you, but no matter what I did, the devil managed to take you away from me. I can't have your evil in my house, so you need to go."

This devastated Katie. She didn't know what to do. She screamed at her mother, but found her unmoved. She tried being kind and coercive, but her mother simply ignored her. This was real. Her mother serious and no amount of cajoling or argument would get her to change her mind. Katie lived off the kindness of her friends for a while, but eventually, they all moved away to pursue school or careers. She simply drifted for years, jumping from one sordid relationship to the next. She eventually turned to drugs, finding the comfort of the short high of heroin to be preferable to this cold cruel world she had been thrust into. All the while, she wondered why the bright man on the cross had forsaken her.

She was just starting to wonder if whoever it was had gone away when she heard the sound of a key being slipped into the lock. They must have gone to the management and come back with a key.

Katie held her breath as the door to the hotel room slowly creaked open. She didn't know what to do. She needed to get away, to get her head together and find out what happened here. Through the closed bathroom door, she started to hear muffled voices. She couldn't make out what they were saying, but it appeared to be two men who were having a serious conversation. She may have not been able to make out the words, but she could make out the tone. One of the voices moved closer to the closed bathroom door. Katie held her breath and pulled some soiled towels over her as she tried to sink into the linoleum of the bathtub. She left enough of a space on the towels for her to be able to see the doorway. As the doorway slowly swung open, Katie gasps as she saw the barrel of a gun peek through the opening, slowly followed by a tall man. He had a very serious look on his olive colored face. He grimly surveyed the scene. Katie started to tremble in fear as his keen looking brown eyes surveyed the bathroom. He was dressed in a cheap suit and clipped to his belt shone a policeman's badge.

"Bathroom's clear," he said over his shoulder and slowly made his way back to the main room.

Katie didn't know how the police officer didn't see her, but she let out a small quiet sigh of relief.

"I'm gonna go call this in, the coroner should be here soon," said a light masculine voice. She imagined that it belonged to the man who had just been in the bathroom.

"I'll go ask around, see if any of the other scumbags in this place heard or saw anything," growled a deeper gravelly voice.

She heard both of their voices trail off as they left, closing the hotel room door behind them. If she had any chance of escape, it would have to be that moment. She quickly threw the towels off of herself and crawled out of the bathtub, rushing towards the hotel door. As soon as she cleared the bathroom her heart skipped a beat as she came face to face with a small framed woman who was crouched down next to the body. Why hadn't she heard another person? The woman looked back up at Katie with wide brown eyes that were now the size of saucers. The woman appeared to be just as surprised as Katie. Katie stared at this small unassuming black woman kneeling before her. The woman was wearing a professional outfit. Maybe she was the coroner and the other's just missed her. Why hadn't Katie heard her come in?

"Okay, honey," said the woman as she slowly stood up. "I don't want any trouble, and I don't think you do either," she said in a slow, deliberate voice. Her voice sounded sweetly comforting and strangely familiar to Katie, but she couldn't place where she knew it from.

"I don't even know what the fuck is going on here," Katie blurted out suddenly. Everything seemed to come crashing down around her. The terror, fear and confusion of the last few minutes simply collapsed in on her and she started crying hysterically.

"It's all right, sweetie," the woman said. "Why don't you just sit down and we'll get this all sorted out. I'm Sarah. What's your name?"

Without hesitation, Katie simply sat down on the bed. "Katie," she replied weakly.

"Is that what I think it is?" Katie said, shakily pointing at the sheet on the floor.

"I'm sure you already know the answer to that," Sarah said soothingly.

"Who is it?"

"I think you know the answer to that, too," Sarah said, looking down gently at Katie.

"I... I can't remember," said Katie. "I keep trying, but I just can't remember."

"Why don't you tell me about yourself, Katie?" said Sarah. "Maybe it will start coming back to you."

For some reason, Katie inherently trusted Sarah. She had no idea why, but she felt such a comforting presence in her. Katie didn't know where to begin, so she started at the beginning. She told Sarah everything. She told her about her confirmation, her lying, and her mother's betrayal. She told Sarah everything.

Through the entire story, Sarah simply sat next to her and listened. When she had finished, Sarah simply reached over and gave Katie a hug. It was the warmest, most fulfilling hug that she had ever had in her life. Katie had spent so long being closed off from everything and everyone that this one single gesture of kindness was like an atom bomb of emotion destroying all the walls that years of desperation and fear had built up. Katie began crying again, unable to hold back the tears.

After Katie began to regain her composure, Sarah looked at her gravely and said, "What about the gun, Katie?"

Gun? What gun? Katie rolled the word around in her head as if it was the first time she ever heard it. It was as if Sarah had mentioned a concept that was completely foreign to her. She didn't know anything about a gun, but at the same time, the mention of the word gave her a sick feeling in the pit of her stomach. Dim memories began to swim to the surface. Cold steel. The smell of gun oil. A bang. A flash. It was all there. Suddenly Katie knew what lie under the sheet. She knew, but didn't want to know.

"Katie, honey," said Sarah. "It's time."

Katie kneeled down next to the sheet, a sheet that she now knew wasn't really there at all. A sheet that only she could remove. She reached out a trembling hand towards the sheet. As she did this, she felt Sarah put a comforting hand on her shoulder.

"Go ahead, Katie."

Katie grabbed the sheet and pulled it back. It seemed to melt away like fog as she pulled it back. Under the sheet, she saw her own beautiful blue eyes staring back at her. She hardly recognized the ghoul that lay before her. Her long yellow hair was now stringy and brittle like straw. Her once beautiful face was now emaciated and worn. On her forehead, was a small hole where the bullet had entered, ending her life. She suddenly felt a wave of pity for this lost creature, this failed being of the flesh. Katie realized how fragile she really was. She suddenly wanted to hold that little girl in the cathedral tight and give her words of comfort, but it was too late for that now.

"Katie, let's go home."

As Katie turned around, the small black woman was no longer there. Instead she was replaced by the pale glowing man that she remembered from her childhood. He too was transformed. He no longer carried the ugly gashes of blood pouring out of rough wounds that had so revolted Katie as a child. She fell into his arms, more exhausted than she had ever been. She didn't care if this was a drug induced hallucination. She didn't ask for salvation but it came to her anyway in the form of his all-encompassing embrace. She knew that it was over, this sad failure of a life and in that, she felt comfort. She knew that she was no longer forsaken.

# Samuel Center

## *Malak*

The biggest lie God ever told is that He would never give us more than we can handle. This dawns on me as I rinse my brillo pad under a cold faucet. Dead, stringy skin collects into thick webs that stick to the creases. My fingers struggle to pick them off and push them down the drain with my fingers.

"Anka! Get your ass back over here!" Dante, my Platoon Sergeant, barks. He's holding the screaming child down on the gurney. He has the same look on his face that Jeffrey Dahmer had the day they dragged him off to prison.

My hands are shaking; my head is a helium balloon. I click my heels three times and whisper "there's no place like home", but I'm still in Afghanistan; still in the filthy, tent-shaped piss-hole that we're calling an emergency room. I wring out my sponge and skulk back to the table.

The child is struggling with all his might. He arches his neck and bucks like a wild bronco with his tiny legs. Our eyes meet; he is a dark, empty void staring into me. His eyebrows shoot up when he sees what I'm holding. He starts squealing in his native Arabic tongue, which I don't need to speak to understand that he's begging me to stay away.

"Hold him still!" My voice sounds cold, emotionless.

Dante bears his weight down, tightening his grip. He has two kids of his own waiting for him back home. It must make this harder.

I center myself and dip the sponge into the soapy basin at my right. I splash it up and down a few times before forcing myself to look at the child's back. It's a sloppy mess of bubbling flesh. Any muscle or fat that had been there is melted into a bright hew of yellow and white. Ashen blisters frame the mess, creating a stark contrast to the rest of his brown, sun-kissed skin.

"Just do it already!" Dante grunts.

I bring my pad to the wound and press down. There is high-pitched wailing, but I have to ignore it and put my mind someplace else. My wrist moves cautiously back and forth, gently grazing the scorched lump.

"You have to do it harder. Don't be afraid to really get in there," Bob, the Special Forces Doc, instructs from behind me. "You have to clean all of that dead skin from the burn, or we won't be able to fix him. Just pretend you're getting the rust off a steel pipe." Bob has the best poker face. His voice is calm and casual; he may as well be teaching me how to make a paper airplane.

I put my hands on top of each other and press down until my triceps ache, scraping the damn thing violently and popping blisters. Puss bursts out in all directions, mixing with the suds into a milky pale mush. It all swells up, as though something is hatching from his innards.



"Okay, this one's done." Bob pats my back. "We're gonna get him wrapped up and hooked to an IV. He's going to be okay. You're doing good work."

Dante helps Johnson lift the body onto a cart. As he's wheeled away, his eyes find mine one more time. His wails have been hushed into mournful sobs. "Shaitan..." he spits, "Shaitan." His fangs flare as he hisses it again and again until he's out of sight. "Shaitan, shaitan. Shaitan! Shaitan ..."

"What's he saying?"

Bob hesitates, "It means... Devil." His jaw drops for a second, but he quickly snaps out of it. "Go ahead and get a new brush. The next one's coming in."

I gulp the bile growing in my throat. "H-how many more are there?"

"Too many."

\* \* \*

First Sergeant Weever's eyelids are drains with pale rings circling them. His oversized body is hunched over like he should be guarding a cathedral in Notre Dame. He stands at the front of our worn Headquarters tent. The tan, plastic flaps that make up our roof drape around his giant forehead. He briefs us in a confident boom. "Intelligence says that we've found the bastards responsible for setting the fire in Charikar. They're held up in the eastern sector of the district, right here." He points to a small rock on the make-shift sand table we threw together with dirt and sticks. "So here's the plan: First Platoon is forming a cordon around the area. They're gonna pull security so Second Platoon can clear the buildings."

He stops for a moment and looks each and every one of us up and down. "It's been a fucked couple of days, gentlemen. None of us signed up for it, but the fact is we didn't have enough medical staff to handle the overflow. It was a shit sandwich and we've all had to take a big, old bite. Now we get to return the favor, so I say we fist their asses with a whole metric fuck-ton of red, white, and blue!"

"Hooah!" The entire company replies in unison.

"The Commander wants this done right, so meet in your platoon areas and start running drills. Mission is set for 2300. Nut up and pay attention. Any questions?"

\* \* \*

Rodriguez asks me if I'm ready with a tilted glance. His eyes are moons peeking through from behind the grease paint he used to camouflage his face. I nod my head. My gloves clench around my rifle and my stance shifts forward. My leg wobbles, but it's not fear; I am a bull at the gates.



He leaves the wall and turns to face the door. He knocks it in with one kick. Splinters pelt my face from the shattered hinges. I dive into darkness. The flashlight on my rifle creates a spotlight. I scan the room and dart to the far end. Straight, down-left, down-right, up-right, and up-left; I trace the corners of the stone interior in the order of an old cheat code for Super Nintendo. I cross a sandy throw rug, cornering myself between two adjoining walls and a mattress that's lying crooked on the floor. My search repeats on the opposite side. The whole thing is held up by four thick pillars. A musty, dank smell squishes against my face like a moldy washcloth. A stymied cough escapes my lips. Giant sacks are piled up all over the place, potatoes spill out of one. There is a worktable with a cell phone that's been split in half cradled amidst a mess of brass wires and hand tools. Something muffles a groan from beside it. I tilt my spotlight; it reveals a contorted body that's been dumped into a pile of hay.

"All clear!" My shout summons Dante, Jessup and Rodriguez. They pour in and size up the area.

The body I found is a soggy knot of crusty bandages and rotting meat. He's a drowning rat, wheezing heavily and gasping for air. One giant, yellow eye looks wildly at us from the sullied, torn cloths he's been wrapped in. He reeks of rotten eggs. As my eyes adjust, I realize that there are two oozing lumps where his arms should be. His legs are blackened and jagged. Pink muscle spills from various open sores. His clothes are fused into pieces of exposed skin. It all melds together, creating a swollen tapestry of brown and green.

Rodriguez finds an empty gas can next to the table. "These are definitely the guys that started the fire."

"Looks like this one got caught up in it. The others must have gotten word that we were coming so they left him here." Dante cringes.

"Serves the fucker right! I say we let him die from exposure." Jessup spits at the ground.

We all stand quietly for a moment and look down at our boots, trying to avoid catching one another's glances. Dante lifts his rifle and aims it at the Arab's melted head. He holds it steady for what seems like hours, but finally lowers it back down. "I guess we should call for a Medic..." He grumbles quietly.

"No, don't. He deserves this." I bring my rifle to my cheek, and stare down the site, right to a spot between the mutant's eyes. A drop of sweat drips down my helmet and traces my face.

The Arab closes his eye tightly. "...Shukran... Malak... al... Rahma..." He gurgles between heaves.

"He's thanking you," Rodriguez whispers. "He says you're an angel of mercy."

My finger trembles across the length of the trigger. I follow it up and down, counting heavy heartbeats in between.

I relish in the moment and savor every detail: the damp air, the heavy heat, the buzzing pot flies, and all the other wonders of glorious Afghanistan. There is nowhere else I would rather be.

My elbows rock back with the force of the bullet. There is a flash and then the smell of smoke. Blood and brains spurt out and paint the wall. The dripping crimson reminds me of a Rorschach test. I see a rabbit to the right, a duck to the left, and there, in the middle, is a giant figure standing tall with sharpened wings poised with the eminence of something from Heaven, or maybe straight out of Hell. I can't decide. Maybe there's not really a difference between the two, maybe that's the biggest lie God ever told.

# Sydney Chipman

## *Lumps*

Calloused hands worked wildly, flinging open cabinets and rummaging through drawers. The slamming of cabinet doors and clanging of metal of pans and bowls was music to Thane's ears, somehow better than the thrashing metal music that usually came through his headphones. This was more authentic and to him, the familiar sounds meant that something was going to come of it.

He stood in the small kitchenette of the run-down Brooklyn apartment, arms folded across his chest as he eyed the ingredients he'd hauled out of the cabinets.

*Butter, flour, baking soda, eggs, vanilla extract, cocoa.*

Thane probably liked baking and cooking for different reasons than most people. He liked it because all became a blur. It was like the hardest drug, but better because sugar was involved and the police weren't. There was nothing illegal about tearing apart your kitchen to create the perfect cake. Nobody could yell at him for shutting a cabinet too hard or beating the eggs into oblivion. Everything went into the bowl and the whisk moved in fast circles, mixing all of the ingredients into a swirling mass in which you could never separate again. It was violence without the damage and repercussions. It was brilliant. It was a release.

He went to crack the eggs, tapping them against the side of the bowl.

"What the hell are you doing in there?"

The sudden booming voice made his hand slip and egg yolk fell onto the counter. He stared at it as it oozed towards the edge and was overwhelmed with rage in that moment. His fingers curled around the counter, gripping it so tightly his knuckles were turning white.

Now he could hear the rushing traffic through the open window and the blaring of the television through the thin wall that divided the kitchen and the living room. He could smell the stale stench of beer that lingered in the apartment. It came flooding back full force, all he'd tried to ignore, all blending together.

He didn't need to peek his head around the corner to envision that his father was sprawled across the sofa in the same t-shirt he'd been wearing for days and a pair of slacks that he actually used to go to work in. His eyes would be glazed over and glued to the television, but more so looking through the screen than at it and there was no doubt that he was downing a bottle of beer. He could hear the pang of the beer bottle being set down on the glass coffee table, a sure sign that he was opening another one and he was one more bottle gone. Sometimes the bottles didn't stay so stationary.

"I'm making a cake," he stated.

No reply.

He turned to grab another egg from the carton. With precision and twice as much force as before, he cracked the egg open, a hint of a smile on his lips only noticeable through the twitch of his lip ring.

He began to toss ingredients into the bowl, disregarding the measuring cups he'd taken out in the beginning. Sure, there was a recipe, but that seemed a lot like rules and Thane didn't play by rules.

Stirring the mix of ingredients, Thane watched as they all molded together. He specifically worked at the lumps in the batter, desperately trying to get them to disappear, beating at them with the whisk. Droplets of batter slid down the sides of the bowl and onto the floor.

He stopped. The shrill ringing of the phone bounced off of the walls of the tiny apartment. He didn't pick it up. Nobody did. A few more short rings and it cut to an automated voicemail greeting before a feminine voice filled the air.

*"Thane, I know you're ignoring my calls. I'm just wondering if you're okay --" Beeeeeeep.*

Thane had rushed to the answer machine only to press his flour covered thumb down hard on a button that made the apartment seem to go still with the loss of the voice. Why shouldn't he ignore her calls? She'd selfishly saved herself, desperate to flee the situation she'd finally realized was poisonous much too late—when they'd both acquired bruises.

He moved back to the counter, retrieving the mixing bowl only to stare down at its contents. There were still lumps of flour that he couldn't get to disappear into the batter. They protruded as if they wanted to be noticed, antagonizing him.

It seemed that life liked to do that to him—antagonize him. Life particularly enjoyed kicking him when he was already down, going for the tender area where it hurt the most. It was like his life could never be completely smooth—there were always complications, bruises and scars. There was always something you wanted to run from, because it wouldn't leave you alone.

The whisk went idle in his hand.

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*He took careful steps down the staircase as if not to strain himself. His side and back ached enough to make him walk crookedly, but he bit the inside of his cheek and tried not to let it show, even if the bite was enough to draw blood.*

*A new day, a new set of bruises, and another lie to cover it all up.*

*He padded into the kitchen, backpack over his shoulder and eyes set on the door. That was his destination. He just had to reach it without his mother approaching him. She had her back turned to him at the stove.*

*"Thane!" He'd been reaching for the doorknob and cringed at his name, craning his head slightly to look at her. He had a feeling if he tried to move much more than that, his body would retaliate against him. "Why was your father passed out in the hallway when I returned home last night?"*

*"He went drinking," he offered, a half-truth.*

*"I know that, but why was he laying in the hallway?" She'd turned to face him, holding a mixing bowl in her hand, still moving the whisk in a circular motion as she spoke. She was making a cake, one with several layers for Dick's birthday.*

*"I don't know," he said with a shrug. As if it was the truth. As if the whole truth didn't even matter.*

*"You didn't think to go check on him?"*

*"I fell asleep early."*

*"Oh, alright." It was odd how quickly she dismissed it, concentrating on the cake batter instead of the situation at hand, which wasn't as simple as she thought or was choosing to believe.*

*"What's the cake for?"*

*"Your father."*

*"Dick?" It wasn't that he was being a smart-ass, but that it was his actual name. Richard Graves. So what if he wanted to call him by his actual name? He didn't really earn the title of 'Dad.' That, and Dick was more accurate.*

*"Don't call him that," she said simply, but it came out more exasperated than scolding. "It's his birthday and I thought I'd make him a cake, as long as this batter will cooperate with me. If there are too many lumps in the batter, the cake won't turn out as well."*

*He twisted the doorknob and with a roll of his eyes and a throbbing pain in his back, he headed out the door.*

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It was all so insignificant. That memory. So, why had it come to the forefront of his mind before anything else? His mother still hadn't noticed the obvious and she'd been making a birthday cake. So what? His mother never stopped to really take notice of what was wrong with Thane. Why there was sometimes a limp in his step or why his face contorted in pain when he walked. But blissful ignorance had only worked for so long...

He realized that the whisk was dripping cake batter onto his shirt and held it over the bowl once again. His batter was too lumpy and the fact that he made cakes the same way as his mother sort of bothered him. Okay, it really bothered him, especially since she'd just left him with Dick in this shitty apartment to rot. At least that was how he saw it. Sure, she dealt with Dick as well. Some nights they stood in the living room, screaming at each other for over an hour. She wanted him to stop drinking, she'd tried to help him.

*"You're going to ruin this family," she'd tell him. "You need to pull yourself together."*

But she'd given up. It didn't take long. Sometimes Thane thought she'd just fled without him because she was afraid what would happen to Dick if he was left totally alone. She was so tired of taking responsibility for him that she was going to

pass it on to somebody else, even if it was her fourteen year old son.

He continued to stir the batter until his arm ached, not stopping until every lump was out of the batter and then he put it in the oven proudly and waited for the finished product.

It was nearly impossible to sit still. He found himself pacing back and forth on the wooden floor, running his hands repeatedly through his hair—a bad habit. The action caused the flour on his hands to spread to his forehead. But it didn't matter because he looked like somebody had clapped several erasers on him with all of the flour he'd managed to spill anyway.

He found himself staring at the blinking light on the answering machine for several minutes, unable to bring himself to listen to the full message. Dick would check the messages, right? He could call her back.

"Dick!" he shouted, with the booming voice he was sure he'd gotten from him. He was nearly positive that he wouldn't hear it over the television. Sometimes he thought Dick had the volume up so loud to tune him out. "Dick!" he yelled again.

This time he slunk around the corner to the living room. "Leah called!" He didn't call her 'mom' either. Not anymore. She lost that title when she moved out to Maine without him.

He received no reply.

Dick wasn't on the couch. The television was on and it was loud, but nobody was watching it. A collection of beer bottles littered the coffee table, leaving rings that his mother would have flipped shit over. That part was normal. Dick's absence was not.

He turned on his heel and walked down the hallway towards the bathroom. The door was left ajar. Then he bounded up the stairs, taking two at a time. "Dick!"

Thane's bedroom was the first on the right and the door was always closed, displaying a Lamb of God poster.

The next bedroom was his father's. It used to be both his father's and mother's. Thane never usually dared to look inside because of that fact. He hadn't seen inside of it since she left. He slowly inched towards the closed door and twisted the doorknob, throwing the door open in one quick motion. He'd done it with such force that it had swung open and hit the wall.

Empty.

Dick wasn't on the couch, nor was he in the bathroom or in his bedroom. But how was this possible? He'd just yelled at Thane a half-hour ago from the living room and he knew he'd heard the slamming of another beer bottle down on the coffee table.

He moved back into the hallway, shutting the door behind him and turned to stare down the hallway. *God dammit! Where the fuck is he?*

He was halfway down the stairs when the timer beeped to let him know that his cake was done. He'd pulled the cake out of the oven, marveling at the smooth

texture. No lumps. It somehow felt like a big accomplishment.

He set it on a cooling rack and stood there for a moment, leaning up against the cool counter. He found that his gaze once again landed on the answering machine.

Before he could change his mind, he moved off of the counter and pressed the button before returning to the cake. He reached for the frosting jar and spread a thick, sloppy layer of it across the top of the cake. He then took a fork from the strainer in the sink—which he assumed was clean. He didn't remember the last time he'd done dishes. Dick wouldn't do them.

The message started.

*"Thane, I know you're ignoring my calls. I'm just wondering if you're okay. I didn't know it was that bad there..."*

Digging his fork into the center of the cake, he cut out a square and lifted it to his mouth.

*"I didn't know..." Her voice was coated with something between regret and sadness and Thane swore he heard a sob in-between her words.*

He chewed the cake and swallowed before taking another forkful. It wasn't lumpy at all.

*"I just found out about your father...I'll be there for the funeral, okay? I'm coming to New York tomorrow. Please call me. Please."*

There he stood with his flour covered clothes in the midst of a messy kitchen eating the cake he'd made right out of the pan.

He didn't shut off the television. He didn't pick up the beer bottles. Instead he left it all where it was and where it had always been.

The cake didn't taste the same. Somehow he didn't expect it to. He'd beat out all the lumps and somehow he was still left with one in his throat.

# Kelci Greenwood

## *The Pikes*

Waiting. That's what I am doing. That's all I can do: wait for the inevitable. The prince has no mercy in his heart. I face the pikes at dawn.

I did nothing wrong, but I know why I'm here. The Impaler is a suspicious man. He has every right to be – rulers being overthrown and assassinated everywhere you turn by their supposed "allies," their fellow countrymen. Unfortunately, when our good leader's paranoia came to a head, I happened to be standing in his path. I meant him no harm, but it was no use trying to get that through to him once his mind was made up. I've had no better luck with the guards. They are completely loyal to Prince Vlad, and even if they were not, they fear him far more than they pity me.

So now all I can do is sit in my cell and wait for death. Alone. Waves of hopelessness washing in with every cold draft.

It's funny – in some twisted, macabre way. I used to walk by this prison every day. It was just a building then. I knew what it was, of course, but it didn't matter then. It didn't affect me personally. It was just another normal aspect of daily life. I wonder if everyone thinks like that. If not, then I was a fool. If so, then perhaps I was still a fool but amongst other fools.

When you're on the outside, it looks so big. Those vast stone walls seem to go upwards forever. Almost like a palace, but without the spires. The only indication of its true purpose is the too-small windows placed far too high to be considered practical. From the inside, it's like a completely different building. Once you enter, it becomes suddenly tiny. Each cell isolated from the others. You really are alone. No contact, not even from the guards, except when they bring food. Just you and your thoughts, which will undoubtedly turn morbid before the first night is out, and can only twist darker, never turning back towards the light. Those windows, like a beacon of hope, only to have it all come crashing down a moment later, when you realize you'd never get out. Even if you could, you wouldn't survive the fall. If you were lucky, you'd die immediately, but more likely, you'd lie in agony until you froze to death. You never get past that first let-down. Every cold breeze through that window serves as a reminder of your fate... Or maybe that's just me.

The only consolation is that I don't have to see those shadows on the outer wall. Every sunrise cast images of those long, wooden poles, sharpened to a fine point, which will represent the end of me. The shadows can't reach the window. I know what's going to happen to me, but at least I don't have to see it until the very end. I think I'd go insane if I did. That wouldn't be so bad if I didn't have to die anyway, but I do, and I'd like to go out with a little dignity.

I hope they don't leave my body out to rot for very long. They do that sometimes – keep them out there for weeks at a time. On bad days, it's like a forest



of bodies. Of blood-soaked wood and decaying flesh. The smell of death never bothered me.

Maybe that's because we all smell like it. Everyone dies. It's just a matter of where and when.

I was going to sleep. I can't. I don't mind. I'll have all eternity to sleep soon enough. I can feel the dawn approaching. It will be a beautiful sunrise, I just know it. Maybe it's my imagination, but I fancy I can hear the sounds of footsteps. The guards coming to escort me to death's door, perhaps? I should be afraid. I'm not. The wind is strong this morning, gusting through that little opening. I don't feel it anymore. I am numb – in body and mind. I will die. I accept my fate. I have an appointment with Dracula... then, Death.

# Crysta James

## *Shadow*

I get in my car, just a used up old beater that barely runs, but it works. From A to B in my typical life. Home. School. Work. Home. A rhythm that barely changes, monotones. Tonight it's cold. It's so cold even I wait five minutes before pulling out of my parking space. I parked in a different space today. Further down than usual, facing west instead of east. Weird.

The drive home is the same. It's always the same. Left out of the lot, mile and half. Right. Another mile and a half. Home. Plug in the car. It's cold out. I have school tomorrow. It needs to start. I'm already focused on home, on what I'm going to do when I get there. But first I make that left. Drive ten feet. Stop behind a very boring, very normal looking van. It's dirty. Filthy from the salt sand and slop of winter. My car is dirty too. I should wash it the next time it stays above thirty degrees.

I look up and see headlights. They're bright. They shine in my eyes, so I reach up and flip the mirror. Even then it's bright, perhaps that's because my car is twenty two years old. Whatever. The light, the light is taking forever. Red. Red. Red. It doesn't want to change, impatient the van in front creeps forward, hoping that the forward movement might make a difference. Traffic to the left slows. The last left turn is made. Green. Go. The van takes off through the intersection. Left at the next. I slow down, allow them to turn, and continue forward. It's a mile and a half. Than I go right. And another mile and a half before home.

Those headlights follow. Four way stop. I look up. Maybe they will turn. Those lights are bright. They hurt my eyes. Stop. Go. Look behind. No luck. He follows. Second stop. Still no luck. I go forward, watching in my mirror, he gets further away, and then he catches up. This game of cat and mouse continues. For the third stop, he continues to follow. The lights bright in my mirror. They don't let me see who he is; maybe it's a she I don't know. But the lights, the lights are bright. They are not yielding. Following me, never leaving me. A shadow in the night.

Is he following me? Why would he follow me? Where is he going? Is it a neighbor that I've never seen before? Someone new? Did he follow me all the way from the parking lot? I look back, I think. I can't remember. It's all disconnected. I don't understand.

Another stop. Blink right. Creep around the snow bank. No cars. Just the shadow. Right. Look back. He turns right. It must be a man. It's a truck. I think. A cop? No. Taillight is busted; he would have stopped me already. Forward we go. He catches up. I watch in my mirror. He follows. Forward. Block after block. He remains. Stoplight is green this time. We go. Still no traffic. It's weird. There is always at least someone else. Forward. Four blocks. Stop sign. Bars to the left,

and to the right. No people. Nothing. They are all inside. Drinking. Playing. Fun.

Me? I'm in my car. Home. Bed. School. Work. Routine, something that never changes, always the same. I stop at a stop sign, I look, left. Right. No one is here, just headlights following behind. The shadow. He's still there. He's still following. Is it safe? Should I break routine? Should I go left and not straight. What if I go left. Take the highway. Will someone see me? The gas station is down the street. I can stop there. Will he stop too? Does he want something? Does he tell something.

Crap. It is a stop sign. A four way stop. I should go. Forward. I look back. He follows. A shadow. I'm scared. Do I go home? Should I call for help? Forward. Half a mile. Train tracks. Thump. Thump. It's rough from winter. Usually I slow down. Anxiously I go forward. I want him to turn. I picture it in my head. Looking up, I'd see a blinker and then blackness as he goes away. And then I'm alone again. Like I should be. But no he follows. Half a block. I'm here. An entrance to the small pocket community I live in, the road curves, but I go forward. I enter the park. I look back. He takes the road. He goes left.

Slow down. Bump. Bump. Speed is reduced. Creep. Left. Park. Home. Safe and sound. Like always. Don't forget. Plug that car in. I have class in the morning. Work that night. My car. My car that is older than me, it needs to start.

The shadow is gone. Life restarts, the track picks up, and I'm back to normal, no more disconnect. Crap. I have homework.

# Kaylie Knase

## *Tending*

Heaven on Earth sits patiently in wait for morning. Its wooden floors nearly sparkle, so dedicated is the overnight lady. Three steel sinks yawn in unison, empty and gleaming. A polished cashbox sits slightly ajar, and the digital readout says: READY. Row upon row of glass bottles in assorted shapes and colors stand at attention along the length of a marble countertop, directly opposite the future objects of their affections: glasses of all kinds, ready to receive whatever beverage Stanley deems appropriate. There are bottom-heavy rocks glasses, solid and reassuring. Delicate glasses for red wine, with tiny stems soaring up and ballooning out. Smaller cousins whose weight balances evenly between base and rim like a fine sword. Unapologetic goblets. Unassuming cylinders, the worker bees, the average Joes.

Stanley likes to sit here in the eager quiet and muse about the evening to come. Different, always a surprise: here he coaches a young girl (blue liqueur and yellow fruit juice make swirling love in a hurricane glass), here he bustles to and fro in order to keep a steady supply of amber bottles rolling toward the scuffed patch of floor that folks like to shake on. Once he talked an old-timer from the city out of suicide (clear liquor on ice). The old man had walked straight out of Heaven on Earth to hail a cab, and his old, Russian pal had helped him stumble into the street in front of a pick-up truck. Died on impact, but Stan takes no credit for the man's good fortune. What happens in a place like this, he says to himself, is nothing less than providence, and I'm only the messenger. He leans back in a booth, hands clasped behind his head, and dreams of the night to come.

# Amy Leffel

## *Us Against Her*

Special, that's how they all describe this sister of mine. I never got it. She's no different from me. Just a little older, taller, smarter, thinner, bolder, alright fine perhaps she is special but not for any of these reasons. The reason is, she has a way about her, this sister of mine.

The day it happened started out like any other. She had not awakened me and I was once again running late. Her condescending smile lit up her face as I hopped into the kitchen. One arm in the sleeve of my coat, one shoe on while pulling the other onto my opposite foot, my hair was undone and a mess. She shook her head and gave a chuckle. My mother glanced up from her cup of half coffee and something that wasn't creamer, a biting sentence ready to jump from her lips.

"Fifteen minutes, Jane," my sister said, cutting off whatever my mother was about to enlighten me of. Montgomery smiled and took a bite of her toast, looking defiantly at my mother. She had five more pieces sitting on her plate. There was little doubt that in fifteen minutes they would all vanish into her tiny stomach. I would slip out with barely enough time to grab an apple. While walking to school I would take two bites and then throw it in the trash. She would say nothing about this and continue to walk along side me. We never spoke on the five block trek to school. That day was no different.

That day would have stayed that way if it hadn't been for our schedules. Montgomery and I, being only six months apart, thanks to good old Dad, were always in the same grade and often in the same classes. This made school conferences nice for Dad. He could ask about her at mine and thus avoid the implosion that is Montgomery's mother. The only time I got a break from this sister of mine was at lunch. I had first lunch while she was stuck in history. Not that she had a problem with history. She had a 4.0 and wasn't even trying. I could barely claw my way to a 3.0.

My habit had formed about six months earlier. Mother had made some comment about how little Montgomery's waist was compared to mine. It was the last straw. So, after lunch every day I would sneak off from my group of friends and into the bathroom. It was so easy. That day was special though.

"I'm just going to jump in here before class," I said to my friend Mellissa, nodding to the bathroom door. I gave her a smile and wave then pushed open the door. There she was, standing at the sink, water dripping from her fingertips. The reflection of her gray eyes caught mine. That smile crossed her face before I looked away.

"Have a nice salad for lunch? Must have been big, you didn't eat breakfast. Not that you ever do," she said. I should have known then but I didn't.

I didn't answer. Ducking into one of the stalls I waited to hear the clomp of her leather boots, the click of her metal rings against the handle of the door, and finally the thud of the bathroom door as it closed. That's when I turned to look into the eye of my best friend. The white porcelain of the toilet bowl glared up at me. I squatted down next to it and pulled from my bag a pink tooth brush. I pushed the end without the bristles deep into my mouth. After two gags my nice big salad came back up. Tears streamed from my face, I wiped them off with a piece of toilet paper. I pulled some tooth paste from my bag and put it onto my pink toothbrush. I turned and opened the door moving the brush around my mouth. I froze. Crouching upon the sink, her hands between her shoes, shoulders shrugged up to her chin, was Montgomery.

"Gotcha," she said. We stared at each other. What could I have said? What could I have done? I did the only thing I could think to do. I waited. She stared at me with a look I had seen many times before. It wasn't pity; Montgomery Clarence did not know what pity was. It was determination. That sister of mine had made up her mind right then on what she was going to do and there was nothing I could do but hold on. I shifted from foot to foot not sure what to do. Finally, I resumed brushing my teeth. At my spot in front of the sink she was so close to me. She hopped down and leaned against my back. Her breath whispered against my neck.

"Why do you let her do this to you? It won't make her love you, to be thin. There's nothing wrong with you Jane. Not one thing," she said and then she was gone. Montgomery left me standing there looking at myself in the mirror. My neck warm from her words. I spit the residue into the sink and left that dreadful room.

For the rest of the day I sat in a daze. What would she do? Who would she tell? I should have known what she would do but I didn't. That special way she had of doing things just didn't leave room for predictability.

We all sat down to dinner that night: my mother, our father, my brothers/her half-brothers, and us two. I stared at her from across the table. I silently begged her not to tell. Father began talking about his day. The boys dropped their peas under the table. Mother took a drink of wine. Montgomery took a large spoonful of mashed potatoes onto her plate and then placed those eyes on me.

"Potatoes Jane?" she asked holding the bowl towards me. I stared at it and began to shake my head. She looked at our father. "So, at school today I discovered something I think you'll find interesting, Dad."

I grabbed the spoon and plopped some of the pasty mush onto my plate. Her smile lit her gray eyes. She pushed the gravy at me and started talking about the football team. Later she would discuss: the school newspaper, a book club, volleyball practice, and her science test; while I added chicken, peas, gravy, and fruit salad to my plate. My mother's hawkish eyes watched every spoonful that went into my mouth.

"Rosetta made a good dinner tonight," she said. I looked at her and nodded. That would not be the end of it, I knew, but so did Montgomery.

“That is one thing you and my mom have in common Joy, neither of you cook,” that sister of mine said. The dinner table grew silent. The normal antics to those two little boys went cold. We all looked from Montgomery to my mother. Mother’s cold blue eyes turned from my pale blue ones and onto those gray ones. Montgomery picked up a forkful of chicken and stuffed it into her red mouth. She looked at my mother and dared her to say something. She never would. That was when I realized this. My mother would never step up to Montgomery. She could barely hold eye contact with her.

My mother looked away and a collective breath was taken. The rest of the night went as I expected. We kids cleared the table and put the dishes in the dish washer. Montgomery then put the boys in the tub and asked if I needed any help with homework. I told her no; my loyalties were still for the moment with my mother. As I struggled through my homework I listened to the boys’ laughter. She was telling them a story as she put them into bed. Their childish laughter shook throughout the house until Mother came up the stairs, wine glass firmly in hand. Her muffled voice ended the fun, but a retort from that sister of mine sent her from the room. She stopped at my door.

“So smart she is. What good is a daughter with a smart mouth? About as good as a fat one,” she said. My mother slid down the hallway to refill her glass with alcohol as I headed towards the bathroom.

Perhaps I wanted her to know or to hear. Either way she did. The chicken, the peas, the mashed potatoes, the fruit salad, it all came back with the help of my trusty toothbrush. My watery eyes looked up into the gray ones that leaned against the doorway. I had not closed Montgomery’s joining bedroom door. She walked over to me. I leaned back my thighs sitting them on my calves. That sister of mine wiped the tears from my face and took my pale yellow hair in her hands. She pulled me through the bathroom door into my room. She sat me down in front of my mirror and took up a brush. She pulled it through my hair.

“Fat is just a state of mind. There is no such thing. The only person who is fat is the person who believes they are fat. That woman has an ugly mind and that has nothing to do with you,” she said. She brushed my hair into glowing strands of gold. She braided it down my back. It thumped when she dropped it. I opened my eyes that I hadn’t realized had closed.

“There is nothing wrong with you,” she said. She turned to leave but I followed. I sat on her bed while she finished her homework. Her elegant script filling out worksheets, her small fingers turning pages, her gray eyes taking it all in; I watched it all.

“Nothing,” I whispered.

“Nothing,” she said.

She stood and put her books away. Then turning she grabbed her suitcase and began filling it with the things she brought from her house to our house. Her favorite clothes, the book she was reading, and other needed items. She stuffed it all in that bag. The doorbell rang.

"I'll be back," she said. She turned and headed towards the door. I had never done it before. Never had it even crossed my mind to follow her but that day I did. Montgomery turned and looked at me, surprise lighting those gray eyes. I felt the tears then; real ones now, not the ones that came from my own hand, but hot tears of agony. They rushed down my cheeks and soon onto her shoulder. She pulled me close and held on tight. I didn't want her to ever let me go. I wanted her to stuff me into that bag and take me with her.

"I'll be down in a second," she said when they called for her. She pulled me back down the hall and into her room. Montgomery pulled down the sheets to her bed and pushed me down into them. I laid back on the pillows that smelled so much like her and continued to weep. She pulled the covers up to my chin and tucked the corners in around my shaking frame.

"I'll be back in a week and you'll see me at school," she said. Then with a kiss to my forehead she was gone. The front door slammed behind her. Rolly, her older brother, revved his engine and took her away. She went to her life where I did not exist. She left me. She left us all in this house where the ice queen ruled but that day I knew. The ice could be broken. In one week the sun would shine once more upon us and the ice would begin to crack.

Special that's how they all described this sister of mine. Finally I get it. She's no different from me. Truly she is not. She is my sister and the only one I've got. For this reason she is special. Not for her looks, or her grades. She has this way about her. A way of getting me and everyone else to see things the way she sees them. She is an icebreaker that will not be broken.



# Thomas Mickelson

## *The Presence of the Guard*

Every night, I have the same dream. We are in the orchard, my wife and I. The sun gently shines through the trees. My daughter runs up to me and I hoist her onto my shoulder. She plucks an apple from a low branch and I can hear her bite into it. My wife smiles at me and I can feel myself smiling back. She's wearing her beautiful dress. The wind picks up and it blows the white fabric against her body. Her golden hair blows across her face. She grabs my hand. It's warm, and I love her. My daughter climbs down from my shoulder into my wife's arms. Everything is absolutely perfect. I am happy. They are both smiling at me. Then, I blink and suddenly they are yards away. I am confused. I walk towards them, they are still smiling; still happy. I am still happy. I blink again and they are even further away, still smiling. I become nervous. I begin to run, I blink again, they are even further away, still smiling. I am now panicked. I begin to sprint as fast as I can carry myself, everything around them gradually turns black, they are still smiling. I blink. I blink and they are gone, and I am dead.

Now the war is over. We defeated these wild creatures of the south. Though an uneasy peace may be in place, there is still much to be done; debts to be collected. The animals took my only child and my wife. They snuffed out the only true innocence I knew in this life. The last island of peace I could have returned to is now gone. It has sunk beneath a black ocean of pained existence. My life is a cursed burden to me now, but I must keep going, for them. If I give in now, I will have failed them in the next life. Shame would overcome me when I saw them again.

I am a guard. My presence is the Emperor's rattling sabre against the necks of these monsters. I am more a lesson to these things than anything else. They are wild and irrational, I here to enforce the Emperor's new law and will.

I was conscripted into the Emperor's guard shortly after the war. There was no time to bury my past. I took the oath of silence, as every other guard did. We speak to no man, including each other. We only listen to our captains. They are the Emperor's own mouth. We enforce the law of the Emperor as we see it broken. Once these beasts adapt to the new order, the guard's duty is finished. I pray that day will never come, because there is still much for me to do. I must hunt.

Hunting and killing these animals is forbidden by the Emperor, unless they provoke us or break the law. I do not abide by this law. It is my one act of self-interest; my personal treason. They are brutes and will only ever be brutes, no matter what the captains say.

I am marching to my post now. The sun is rising, casting rays of light between the amber mountains. The beams paint brilliant orange lines on the muddy ground ahead of me. My mail rattles with each step. My sword swings in tandem with my thigh. It is hard to breathe in this helmet, but anonymity must be maintained.

We are forbidden to show our faces to any man. This doesn't bother me. I only ever showed my face to my wife and daughter. This march is tiring and dirty, but each step brings me closer to the lands in which I will gain retribution.

I am now at my post. It's a filthy hive of these creatures. Their mud dwellings look as though they are trying to imitate our own. Few of them venture outside, many of them stay in their dens. I begin my patrol through the mud streets. A gust of wind blows my green cloak against my breastplate. For a moment, it feels like a soft hand brushing across my chest. I think of my wife. I continue down the path. I pass a few mongrels as I march down past a few more clay dens. They snarl at me. The smell is terrible. Filthy earth and horse excrement.

As I hear myself breathing inside my helmet, I begin to recall past successful hunts. There was one where I had a beast cornered, away from the pack. It cowered up against a tree and whimpered like an infant. The weeping stopped when I cleaved its head off with my sword. I wiped my sword off on its thick fur coat and slid my blade back into its scabbard. Its body leaned against the tree as if it were napping. The head lay on the soil underneath its arm, eyes open, and mouth agape. I left the remains for the ravens and returned to my patrol. It was a good kill.

My boots are sticking to the thick mud in the walking path. I pass more burrows, no animals to be seen. I begin to think that today may hold no bounty for me. It wouldn't be the first time. Another gust rattles my helmet.

As my patrol wears on, I pass a group of the beasts. They look at me, and I at them. I hear them growl and hiss. Their heads turn back towards each other and they continue about their business. I could have easily slain them, but there would be too much noise. Too many listening ears. They may be nothing but dumb animals, but they are vicious in numbers. I continue.

I am about to reach the end of my route. The edge of the hive leads to a lightly wooded area, with a crisp mountain stream. I can hear it now. My mind is temporarily lost in the mesmerizing trickle of the water. I quickly shake myself into alertness. My opportunity could come at any moment.

My patrol area does not continue past the hive's limits. Today, I will continue past regardless. I want to visit the stream. I march through the lightly wooded area. Pine needles and leaves crunch beneath my feet. The only sounds I hear are the gentle stream, the wind in the trees, and my armor.

I reach the end of the small forest, where the stream flows. The water is as clear as air and the light it catches is reflect back as small strings of silver. It flows over the smooth river stones gently, but constantly, like a long exhale. A flash of my wife and daughter bathing in the river crosses mind. This stream can never be as pure as that river in that moment.

I hear something moving next to me. I turn my head sharply and draw my sword. A little creature screeches. An adult beast comes up from behind it.

"What's wrong?" asks the big one before seeing me with my sword pulled. It stops and swallows hard. "What is this?" it asks. "What's going on?"

My opportunity has finally arrived. I raise my sword above my head. The two creatures scream. I can see the fear in their eyes. The adult grabs her daughter and holds her tight. The muscles in my arms tense as I prepare to swing my blade.

Suddenly, a sharp pain from my back to my chest erupts. My sword falls from my failing hands. When I look down, the helmet falls from my head. There is a blade protruding from my heart. A crimson stream flows into my green cloak. The blade is pulled out swiftly from my back and I fall to my knees. A third beast enters my field of view. Another adult. A man. The man, his wife, and his daughter stand next to the stream, wide eyed. Looking at my face. A gust blows the woman's dress against her body. The girl cowers in her arms. The man has his sword pointed at my face.

I fall on my side. "Lora" I say, through the blood in my throat. I always wanted my last word to be her name. Things begin to go black. They are still motionless, looking at me, still shocked. The man embraces his wife and child. He tells them that it's okay; that he's there and that he would never let anything bad happen to them. I no longer saw animals. I saw my wife and daughter. I am happy. I blink.

## Dan Pearson

### *The Eyes of Cold, Looking for Home*



A sound in the night. Car lights so bright. Looking at my bed, my home. A spot in nowhere, but everywhere to me. No food, no fire. Just the bitter taste of another cold winter night. Cars drifts by. So cold, Where's my mom, my dad. Is that you. Please slow down, and see me. So hungry. Will you stop. Please help, for my feet are so cold, my fingers are so numb. My tears freeze with the stillness of the night. So thirsty. Cant sleep. Cant dream, for what is there to dream tonight. So many cars, the smell of the warmth brings chilly fevers. Body shakes, one more night. One more day. So cold... A sound in the night. Car lights so bright. Looking at my bed, my home. A spot in nowhere, but everywhere to me. No food, no fire. Just the bitter taste of another cold winter night. Cars drifts by. So cold, Where's my mom, my dad. Is that you. Please slow down, and see me. So hungry. Will you stop. Please help, for my feet are so cold, my fingers are so numb. My tears freeze with the stillness of the night. So thirsty. Cant sleep. Cant dream, for what is there to dream tonight. So many cars, the smell of the warmth brings chilly fevers. Body shakes, one more night. One more day. So cold... (A PAGE FROM THE BOOK OF DAN AND JOSIE)

# Nyssa Search

## *Long Nights, Impossible Odds*

It was a late Wednesday night at Gilroy's Pub. Veronica sat at the end of the smoky bar clad in her favorite red, suede wrap mini-dress accompanied by a sensational pair of black stiletto pumps. She liked this particular outfit because of the way it clung to her body in all the right places, and of course the extra inches she gained from heels never hurt. She'd been there for the past several hours watching the usual suspects shuffle in and out. She always hoped to see a new face, but no dice so far. I've got to find another hangout, she thought as she finished her third Jack on the Rocks.

Disappointed by how ungodly dull the proceedings were, Veronica sauntered up to the jukebox and began paging through its catalog. She was three pages in when she knew she'd found the perfect song, or at least the most fitting. Placing her change into the machine, she made the selection and walked back to her seat, waiting for the familiar notes to come through.

Veronica ordered a Long Island Iced Tea for variety's sake and leaned back against the bar as the sweet sounds of "Hotel California" came blazing across the room. She closed her eyes for a moment, imagining being anywhere but her current location. To be someplace else besides brisk Chicago in late winter was a compelling notion, indeed. She'd long dreamed of taking a vacation but simply couldn't afford to. As much as she loved temp work, the one downside was never really being able to save up for much because no job assignment was ever going to last. The thing she liked best about what she did was also the thing she liked least, in a way.

Veronica reopened her bright, beaming brown eyes as the bartender served up her Long Island. She slipped him a ten spot and told him to keep the change. Sometimes, she wondered if this was perhaps the real reason why she couldn't collect enough cash to go on a trip. But the thought was quickly pushed out of her head with every sip she took from the glass. Bruno, the stocky, middle-aged fellow behind the bar, poured drinks strong, and damned if she didn't love him for it.

Midway through the bridge of her favorite Eagles song, Veronica spotted what she'd been waiting for all night long— somebody new to the joint. Blame it on a combination of the booze and genuine surprise, but she almost fell off her stool when he entered the room. Like a god garbed in leather, this man, all 6'5" of him, strode in with a poise she was wholly unused to witnessing amongst Gilroy's patrons. It was as though he'd gotten lost and somehow ended up in this stain of an establishment. Surely he was there by mistake.

Not only was this man new, but he dropped Veronica's jaw. He sported gorgeous black hair tied back in a ponytail and wore the most form-fitting pants this side of a classic Mötley Crüe video. She wondered if he was a biker. He must be, Veronica thought. That was okay by her. She was open to all kinds. She particularly liked the tattoo he brandished on his right arm. It was a cross with thorns wrapped

around it. Did it mean something? Was it a gang symbol? She didn't care. She admired the artistry of it, no strings attached.

Veronica didn't miss the way he'd glanced at her when he walked in. Sure, it could've been because her dress was cut down to "there," but she wanted to believe it was more than that. She wanted to believe it every time. She reasoned that someone would see something beyond her flesh, eventually. It had to happen at some point, right? Maybe this would be the one— she never knew. But she had to at least try to make a go at him. As the adage states, "Nothing ventured, nothing gained." She couldn't quite remember who'd said that, at least not after three Jacks and a Long Island, but she knew they were important words because someone wise had told them to her. Pity she couldn't recall who that was at the moment either. But never mind. She had more pressing matters to attend to.

"Hello," she said, walking up to the ruggedly handsome stranger, positive he'd be her lover tonight.

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Veronica sat at the edge of the bed as she began to put her clothes back on. She sighed when she noticed the clock on the nightstand. It was already nearly 4 A.M., which meant her ass would undoubtedly be dragging at work. "Not like that's anything new," she muttered to herself. Hesitating for a moment, she turned to glance at the man slumbering beside her, covered only by the thin cloak of dingy, once-white motel sheets. His name was Jake, as it turned out. She first learned it after they got back to his room and she asked him what she should scream while they were intimately engaged.

Returning to the task of redressing, Veronica was stunned when a hand tapped her shoulder as she attempted to hook her red satin bra. Quickly spinning around, she realized that the man lying next to her had not actually been asleep at all. In fact, he was sitting up watching her curiously.

"Going somewhere?" he asked.

She shrugged. "Figured you'd want me gone before you woke up." Her tone was oddly nonchalant.

"Why would you think that?" Jake questioned.

"Because the liquor's worn off and I'm not kidding myself now," she said without heed, continuing to dress as if his words meant nothing.

Jake paused, taking in the situation. He then swiftly grabbed Veronica by the wrist as she was in the midst of searching for her shoes. "Stop," he said, locking eyes with her while keeping a fairly firm grasp.

She appeared genuinely confused by his gesture; taken aback, even. Veronica longed for love more than anything else in the world, but she was also no fool. She knew how these things went and truly wondered why Jake would want her around after an encounter that many would regard as just another notch on a bedpost. A good number of guys would simply shut up and let her go her own way. Apparently not him, though. Perhaps he's finally the one, she mused. But how could she be

sure?

"Why do you want me to stay?" Veronica partly inquired as he relinquished his hold and she moved to sit beside him.

Flashing a wicked grin, he spoke. "Maybe I think you're hot. Maybe I wanna go a few more rounds for another couple of hours. That'd be pretty tricky to pull off if you're not in the room."

She laughed, surprised, yet also strangely impressed by his forthrightness. "Hate to break it to you, but I have a job to get to in 'another couple of hours.'"

"So blow it off," he suggested rather cavalierly.

Veronica shook her head. "I need the money."

"Ah, come on. I'll give you a ride and you can hang out here until then. My wheels aren't much but they'll get you where you gotta be."

"And show up wearing the same clothes as yesterday? I hear what people say around the office. I know half the women there refer to me as 'that slut temp.' I'd rather not prove those smug bitches right," she said in a huff.

"Fuck 'em," Jake plainly replied.

Veronica couldn't help but snort at the remark. The guy was glib as hell and she kinda loved it. "Fuck 'em, huh?" she reiterated his words, a slight smile cracking through her veneer.

He nodded. "Damn straight. Whatever their problem is, it's just that—theirs. You're doing your own thing and they hate you for it... probably jealous."

Veronica considered his sentiment for a moment. Could he be right? She'd never thought about it that way before. It was difficult for her to imagine anyone being even remotely jealous of her. The notion seemed preposterous. "Jealous? Of me? I know it's only 4 a.m., but I'm sure that'll be the best joke I hear all day."

"Listen babe, I'm serious. You got somethin' in you that a lot of people don't. You got a spark. I knew it as soon as you walked up to me tonight, point blank."

*He's trying so hard, she thought. It's actually kinda sweet.* Still, Veronica wondered if he really meant what he said. In his favor was the fact that in her experience, strangers had no reason to lie. Hell, they tended to be more honest than the folks she supposedly knew well. She always figured that was due to the total lack of pretense involved in talking to somebody you didn't know. The results could run the gamut from positive to painful, but at least it wasn't mere pacification.

"Tell me," Veronica began. "Are you being upfront or is this just a way to get me back under the sheets?"

The debaucherous grin that threatened to make her melt had returned.

"Can't it be both?" Jake asked playfully.

*Oh yes. Oh yes, it could.* Though she didn't speak a word, she offered a more visceral reply in the form of a sudden, forceful kiss that seemed to surprise

even him. *If I have a spark, she thought, then maybe I can light up this room through the dawn.*

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Morning had crept up in the blink of an eye and Veronica now stood before the mirror of the tiny motel bathroom, liberally applying makeup. She groaned, snapping her compact shut. *I could spackle it on and it still wouldn't be enough to cover these circles.* Sleep had been the last thing on her mind for the past few hours and it showed, or at least she thought it did.

"Hello, gorgeous," Jake said as he peered into the room.

*Gorgeous? Ha.* He was the one who looked amazing. *How is it that a man can look so good with such little rest?*

"Careful, flattery will get you everywhere," she quipped.

Jake smirked. "Don't I know it," he remarked while moving in close behind her. He placed a hand on her hip and gently kissed the nape of her neck. Veronica shut her eyes for a moment, letting the rest of the world fall away. Though she'd been with many men throughout the course of her twenty-five years, there was something about his particular touch that set her ablaze. She adored the way he felt against her, so warm and firm, sort of like a living shield.

Veronica knew she was going to be late for work as Jake's now roaming hand charted a path up her dress. She didn't care. If they docked her pay, so be it. *This, she mused, is more important.*

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Driving his black, battered Chevy Impala, Jake pulled up to a sky-high building that almost seemed to shimmer as sunlight beat down upon its numerous windows. "So this is where you work, huh? Nice."

Veronica laughed slightly. "It's not as impressive as you'd think, trust me."

Turning to let herself out of the car, she stopped when Jake spoke. "When do you get off?" he asked.

"Five," she replied.

"Want me to pick you up? We could get a pizza or something."

"Absolutely," she said, beaming. For her, it wasn't even a question. Maybe it was crazy to feel so connected to a guy she'd only just met, but the heart wants what the heart wants and hers commanded him.

Veronica's jubilant expression soon soured as she spied a group of female coworkers out on a smoke break. "Looks like the harpies are in full force today," she lamented with a sigh.

"They the ones you were talkin' about?" She nodded affirmatively, prompting Jake to step out of the car.

Veronica was baffled by the response. *What is he doing?* She scarcely had time to ponder it, as he'd rapidly walked around to open the passenger side.



She exited the vehicle and he quickly slammed the door shut behind her.

Pinning her to the side of the car, Jake whispered in her ear, "If they're so eager to judge you, we might as well make it worth their while." He leaned in and kissed her in full view of the smokers crowd, making a point of letting it linger a little too long. As it turned out, that was okay, for neither of them really wanted to tear themselves apart from the other. Veronica loved the way those sanctimonious women were staring right at them. It spurred on a flash of crystal clarity— Jake had been right; they were jealous. The envy rolled off them in waves, fueling their dirty looks and rotten dispositions. *Must be pretty damn sad*, she thought, *to be them, trapped in their dispassionate, sexless marriages*. She knew that would never be her.

# Lavern Still

## *Adora Vivos*

She was leaning against the wall outside the pub, smoking a cigarette. In the cold December night, the ground lay covered with a thin sheet of winter snow. The sky was clear and particularly bright, nary a star in the sky. Dim lamplight softly glowed against the falling snow. The street was relatively quiet; no vehicle in sight, and the occasional chatter from sparse passersby and soft murmur from the pub were little more than pleasant ambience. Through the snowfall and periodical puff of smoke her eyes lingered in the sky's vast horizon; neither looking at or through it. She was a rather petite woman; most people of her size would likely dread the cold, but her body surrendered no shiver or chattering of teeth. She was kept warm by a thick, woven scarf, wool coat and a large hooded sweatshirt, bearing the logo "Anaal Nathrakh" on its breast, which was much larger than what would fit her. It enveloped her like the embrace of a cherished one. The hood veiled her from the snowfall, although flakes still collected on her long, unkempt red hair. She took a deep drag from her cigarette and exhaled slowly, pushing with her diaphragm. It was cold enough where even her natural breath would hang in the air like a memory of a dream fading from consciousness; the solitary cloud in the otherwise clear night sky.

"Evening," a voice called out.

She looked to her left to see who had greeted her. A young man stood next to her; couldn't be a day over seventeen, dressed in tattered jeans and a worn-out unzipped sweatshirt, and wearing one of the goofiest smiles that anyone could conceive of.

"I hope you don't mind if I stand here with you," he said, still smiling, "I'm waiting for a friend to meet up with me here." He was obviously American, judging by his accent. He stood there for a moment, looking both ways down the street, presumably keeping watch for his friend. As she was about to take another drag from her cigarette, he turned back to her and offered his hand.

"Sorry, I'm probably being rude. I'm Brandon." He was still smiling.

Startled slightly, she nearly shook his hand with the one she still held her cigarette in. Correcting herself, she reached her right hand around and shook his hand.

"No worries," she said, "I'm Natalie. Sorry I nearly burned you there."

"Ah, that's okay," Brandon said, "I'm a little awkward. I didn't mean to be random like that."

"It's quite alright," Natalie said, offering a brief smile so as not to be seen as terse.

"So, why're you out here all alone? You can't be comfortable with the cold out here."

"I'm quite comfortable in the cold, actually," she said. "And I'm just having a quick smoke before heading home."

Silence fell between them, which Natalie welcomed. After a minute, however, Brandon, bless his heart, broke it.

"So, uh..." he began. "You live around here?" He asked, as awkward as he had described himself.

"Yeah," she replied. "I live in a flat a few blocks away."

As he turned his gaze away from her, she turned hers to him. He stood there awkwardly, fidgeting and playing with his phone. He wasn't a terribly handsome young man, but he looked as though he groomed relatively nicely. He was rather lanky, as well. Being tall isn't a bad thing, not by any means, but having no real bulk isn't terribly attractive. He could also afford to take more care in dressing himself; no one makes a very good impression with faded or worn out clothes. He could very well mature into a fine man some day and find himself a nice lady, but contrary to what he may have wished, it would not be her. While she observed her admirer, he settled himself against the wall and opened his sweatshirt. As Natalie glance at him again, his shirt caught her eye. Its design depicted a large face, with hands covering its eyes, looking down on a city with buildings reminiscent of American architecture, bordered by trees. Shades of greyish-blue and white saturated the image like an alcoholic drowning himself in pint after pint of lager. It was an image that she knew fondly and painfully well. Even though he was not facing her, she turned away from him, took another drag from her cigarette and bit her lip as her eyes began to well up.

"The bleak life and modern times, of grey skies and electric light," she said, smiling and wiping the tears from her eyes as she spoke, "Mortal men are living gods, more real than any god ever was." She took another drag of her cigarette and turned to face him. He stared at her, wide-eyed and smiling.

"You know Woods of Ypres?!" he exclaimed, completely gobsmacked.

"Sure do," she said, smirking with more warmth than she'd shown anyone in several months.

"They were a brilliant band. My boyfriend and I loved them. It's a shame, what happened to David."

"You're not kidding! December 21st, 2011; a month before Grey Skies and Electric Light came out and the day he died in a car accident. Almost two years ago now, to the day." As Brandon continued to muse about David Gold and his musical legacy with Woods of Ypres, Natalie just nodded and agreed, taking drags of her cigarettes and biting her lip to stop herself from crying.

"They were just getting the recognition they deserved after the Green Album. It's unfortunate that Grey Skies and Electric Light ended up being a posthumous release. It's a fucking masterpiece."

"Yeah, I know what you mean," she said, forcing a smile.

"What I love most about it is the message behind it," he said as he looked to the

other side of the street. "‘Love the living while they’re still alive,’ ‘death is not an exit,’ ‘so life is precious after all.’ It’s as if David foresaw his own death, in a lot of ways.

"Mm-hmm." Natalie said, her voice trembling slightly.

"It’s pretty clear that he went through a lot of bullshit, too. Take a look at the Green Album; ‘By the Time You Read This (I Will Already be Dead)’ is one of the most emotionally intense songs I’ve ever heard. ‘Wet Leather’ has some pretty odd lyrics with ‘life is just pain and piss,’ but like the rest of the album, it’s an honest expression of heartache."

Tears began to stream down Natalie’s cheeks as she took a final drag from her cigarette. She tossed it in the snow and quickly wiped her eyes before turning to Brandon again.

"Well, I’m going to head out now," she said, her composure regained. "I hope your friend doesn’t keep you waiting for much longer."

"Alright," he replied, still smiling. "It was nice meeting you! It’s not every day that I can actually talk metal with people. The scene in America sucks."

Natalie smiled in response, lifted herself from the wall and began to walk away, she hadn’t walked three steps before Brandon called out to her again.

"Hey, I didn’t upset you did I?" he asked.

"No," Natalie replied, smiling as she turned her head back to him. "I enjoyed listening. It brought back some good memories." She readjusted her hood and turned around again. "Take care of yourself," she said. "Love the living while they’re still alive."

With that final farewell Natalie began to walk home. The snow was still falling and she was still biting her lip.

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Natalie opened the door of her flat and walked inside. It was pitch black, save for the light of the hallway that briefly illuminated the disarray and neglect that her living space was in; dishes piled in the sink and countertop, trash bags lining the wall next to the door, and all manner of trash littered nearly the entirety of the floor. The only area that was relatively tidy was the bed, where a dresser stood with a stereo on it and had an end table with a picture frame facedown and folded piece of paper next to it.

As she closed the door, she left the room in darkness and made her way to her bed. She undressed herself of her snow-dampened clothes, setting the hooded sweatshirt on the bed. In her underclothes, she made her way to her dresser. She opened the topmost drawer on the left side, in which there were men’s underclothes. She stood there in silence and eventually opened every subsequent drawer, all of which contained men’s clothes. She eventually turned her attention to the stereo. There was a single CD case on top of it; its cover was an image that she knew fondly and painfully well. She listlessly pressed a button on the stereo and it

clicked to life. She pressed another button until the stereo display said "Track 10." As the stereo read the CD already inside, she laid herself in the bed, grabbing the sweatshirt as she settled herself. She glanced to her side and looked at the picture frame. She reached for it, but pulled her hand back before touching it. Instead, she grabbed the piece of paper next to it. It was impossible to read in the dark, but she knew what it said. She didn't unfold it, leaving as it was; showing only her name and the date "12/21/2012." The stereo finally began playing the CD as the melody of a piano filled the room. She held the sweatshirt with her entire body, as an embrace of a cherished one. As the melody played on she began to softly whimper, just barely holding back the weight of hot tears from flowing on her still-cold cheeks. Suddenly, she tightened her pained embrace on the sweatshirt. Seconds later, the deep bass that consoled her departed for the past year love began to resonate throughout the flat and, once again, in her heart.

*"When we all have gone, to the silence of eternity...  
To first be forgotten, and lost in the records of the earth  
Could I still miss you then, in the time and space after life?  
When no one is searching anymore,  
And we are nowhere to be found"*

As the words entered the hollow space of the flat, her face gradually crumbled from a faint and distant sadness in her eyes and slight frown to shut eyes brimming with tears and a fully pursed and pained frown. When her tears finally broke through her shut eyes and flowed freely on her cheeks, she buried her face in the sweatshirt, tightening her embrace even more.

*"We didn't spend our life together  
And I will miss you forever"*

Her shoulders began to heave, softly and then forcefully, as the buried sobs wracked her body. No sounds escaped from the wreck of a woman clinging to the memory of her man.

*"The choice was mine, to long for a time that will never come  
Though we leave the world apart, I still went peacefully  
Quietly, with you still firmly in my heart"*

*"I will wait forever. I wait..."*

Woods of Ypres. Woods 5: Grey Skies and Electric Light. Perf. David Gold, Joel Violette, Raphael Weinroth-Browne, Angela Schielhauf. Aug. 2011. Earache Records. 2012. CD.

# Katie Wolden

## *Wood and Wind*

The field is in bloom, the air thick and sweet as honey. Flowers bend and bob under the weight of fat, drowsy bees. A chorus of grasshoppers thrums beneath the shivering sigh of wind in the trees. The sun winks through oak leaves above, dappling light and shadow. The bark is rough against my back and grass blades scratch at my bare ankles. I barely feel it; I am here and not here, everywhere and nowhere. He is carving, slender brown hands moving quick and deft, wood shavings scattering in the breeze. He pauses, examining his creation and then lifts it to his lips. A clear, high note sounds, not breaking the tranquility but rather joining it, weaving through the song of wind and insects in perfect harmony. He lowers the flute and smiles at me in unsuppressed satisfaction, eyes flickering green and gold as the oak leaves overhead. I return the smile, absently. He sees that I am far away and his dusty brown feet twitch with impatience. He restrains himself from speaking, lifts the flute to his lips again and waits. He knows I will come back to him.

I must be five or six when my mother's sister begins to visit often. She has long, wild brown hair that gets in my mouth when she hugs me. She wears loose, flowing clothing that envelops me in strange smells: sweet, salty, spicy all at once. When she speaks to me, she gets down on her knees and looks into my eyes. Her eyes are light brown like my mother's but they are not ringed in black. They seem smaller, plainer, and more alive. She lives on a farm, she tells me, a big farm with lots of people and animals. They grow their own food she says, they make their own clothing, and they do not go to work or school. It is like a different world, she says, and it is perfect for her because she has never felt like she belongs in this one. I do not understand but I listen very closely because no one else has ever talked to me this way. My mother and aunt drink wine and laugh. But after they put me to bed, I hear my mother cry. It is a sound I am used to. My father comes home very late most nights and when my aunt is here, he does not come home at all.

I must be seven when my mother packs up my toys and clothing and puts me in the car. We are going to visit Aunt Marta, she says. My aunt's house is old, wooden, and full of cats. I fall asleep on the living room floor with a grey tabby curled up beside me, purring. I wake up on the couch under a patchwork quilt and my mother is gone. She had to leave early this morning, my aunt tells me. She will come back soon and until then, we will have lots of fun. We have blueberry pancakes for breakfast and then she takes me to the chicken coop and shows me how to gather eggs. "Like Easter morning, every day!" she laughs and I laugh too. Then, we milk goats. I am there for two months. When I come home, my parents are divorced.

I see my father every weekend, then every other weekend, then once a month, then less. My mother works and I go to school and then after-school programs until she can pick me up. She is often too tired to cook dinner; we get fast

food and watch TV while we eat. Summer comes and I go back to the farm.

There are many people on the farm who live in many different houses. They grow tomatoes, cucumbers, zucchini, squash, carrots, potatoes, and other things. Some of them have chickens, some have goats, ducks, cows, or pigs. Some sew, some weave, some whittle, some build, some cook, some brew; they trade. They live as a community. There are a few children but most are girls and too young to be playmates of mine. The adults are kind to me but they are adults. I keep to myself, wandering, exploring, daydreaming. There is only one person close to my age and I do not like him.

"Why don't you play with Linden?" I am asked again and again. Linden is a wonderful boy, the adults say. Bright, compassionate, well-spoken, and wise beyond his years. But lonely with only his grandmother for family and no children his age for miles around. I am the ideal companion for him, am I not? I am not. Adults never understand these things.

Linden has long, tangled blonde hair like a girl's. He wears hand-sewn smocks. He is dirty and barefoot. He has no parents and has never been to school. He is alien to me. I avoid him. But he watches me. I see him when I least expect it; when I am most immersed in my world, he invades. He is across the field, down the path, in the branches of a tree. Poised with unnatural stillness, head tilted, eyes wide and unfathomable. He is like a wild animal; curious, cautious, ready to flee or if necessary, attack. He unnerves me.

The summer I am ten, I do not go to the farm. My father takes me camping instead. He teaches me how to start a fire, how to clean and gut a fish, how to set traps for squirrels and rabbits, how to shoot a gun. It's important for men to know these things, he tells me, and I will be a man sooner than I think. I am amazed; the prospect has never crossed my mind. There are things about men, he says, that women are not able to comprehend. He's going to try to be there from now on to teach me things I can't learn from my mother and aunt. I can spend summers with him now, he says. I don't have to go back to that hippie place ever again. I am ten and will be a man soon. I nod seriously to show I understand.

In junior high, I am bullied. I come home to an empty house each day. I eat instant noodles and frozen pizza. By the time my mother gets home, I am locked in my room with the music on loud. She is too tired to make an effort. My father gets me a membership at his gym. We lift weights and take boxing and wrestling classes. One day, a bully gets a bloody nose. I must have done it but I don't remember how. More similar events occur. By high school, the bullying has stopped but I do not have many friends. The rift between my mother and I grows. My grades plunge. I skip class, choosing to wander alone instead, lost in thought. Even my father thinks I am strange. The military, he says. That will straighten me out just like it did for him when he was my age. I will be eighteen in a few months and then I can join. I agree, passively. When my mother hears, her lips grow thin and white. "I will not have you turning into your father."

The next day, I am seven years old again. I am bundled into the car with my things in a duffle bag. We are going to visit Aunt Marta.

My aunt is the same only now there are streaks of silver in her long brown hair. I am different. I am stiff and awkward when she hugs me, uncomfortably aware of her lack of a bra. She does not seem to notice. She still looks into my eyes when she speaks to me only now she is looking up. "I'm so happy to have you here, Stephen," she tells me, "We all are. Everyone has missed you so." Her brown eyes are clear with honesty.

My mother and aunt go into the kitchen for iced tea and to talk about me. I go outside and begin to walk. My feet find their way down familiar paths. In the city it is only spring but here, the haze of summer has begun to settle. I pass the wooden houses, smaller now than they were in my memory. I pass grazing cows. I cross the old bridge, damp and dilapidated but still standing. The river runs swift and clear. I pass under trees, shimmering shade. I lose myself in fragments. And then, I am back at my aunt's house and there are three people on the porch, two women and a boy.

"You remember Linden," my aunt says.

My mother is gone and Aunt Marta makes me blueberry pancakes. We gather eggs and milk goats. The other farmers come and greet me like a long-lost son. I am stunned; I barely even spoke to them as a child. They hug me and shake my hand. "Welcome back," they say. The little girls are young teenagers now and they smile at me, shyly. Linden is nowhere to be seen. When the chores are done, I go to the field and sit under an oak tree. The grass is crisp, new, and bright with dew. There are no flowers yet but I can image them. I sink into a peaceful daze. I know he is coming before he arrives.

"Are you going to run away?" Head tilted, poised like a wild animal, looking down at me. Simple white shirt, brown pants too short and frayed at the bottom, dirty bare feet. Tangled golden hair alight in the morning sun.

"No," my voice comes, "Are you?"

In answer, he sits, long limbs folding gracefully.

"I should not have come to Marta's house yesterday." His voice is low and smooth, his speech measured and articulate. "It was intrusive of me. I was curious. I did not think that I would see you again."

His eyes are wide, searching, deep green touched by fingers of gold. I have never been this close to him. A moment of silence and I reply,

"I didn't think I would be here again."

A polite pause and then, "How long will you stay?"

"I don't know. I'll turn eighteen in August and then I'll be free to do what I want."

"And what do you want?"



He studies me avidly and I feel a prickle of irritation.

"If you really have to know, I'm going to join the military."

"Oh," he says, finally averting his gaze. I tell myself not to blame him for his lack of social awareness. He was raised by an old woman with no friends his age. I am grown up now and should be more sympathetic.

"What will you do when you turn eighteen?" I ask with forced interest.

He smiles, suddenly and brightly like the sun emerging from a wisp of cloud. "I am eighteen!"

And still here, surrounded by elders and children. The boy doesn't know what to do with himself. And how could he? He has no father.

He finds me in the same place the next day and the next. I do not know why I keep coming back; I suppose there is nothing else to do. I do not talk much but I listen out of pity. How much can someone who has never been anywhere really have to say?

A lot. He amazes me with how much he knows.

He has read every book I've ever heard of—and many more besides. Novels, histories, academic journals, poetry, plays, ancient writings, entire textbooks. Many once belonged to the adults on the farm and were passed to him when his love for reading began to grow. Eventually, it became unspoken custom that whenever anyone left the farm, they returned with a book for Linden.

"Marta has given me the most of all," he tells me. "She used to bring me one every time she went to visit her sister. Never children's books; real books, serious books, and then she would talk to me about them."

I imagine her wandering dusty aisles of used book stores, fingers trailing over the worn spines. Finally she sees it and her brown eyes brighten; the perfect book for Linden. She places it into his grubby hands, on her knees where they can speak as equals. It is strange to think of her existing outside the summers she spent with me. But all the time I have been living my life, she has been living hers too. And what an immensely greater role this boy has played in it than I have. I have a strange feeling that I do not recognize at first. It reminds me of school lunches eaten alone. It is inferiority.

He knows a lot but he does not know more than me and suddenly, I must demonstrate this. I must prove that my twelve years of education were worth something. The words come, first sharp and insistent, then, meeting no resistance, they begin to flow. I amaze myself with how much I know. When he listens, the unnatural stillness settles over him. He is like a deer standing in the forest, ears pricked. I am not unnerved anymore; I have grown used to him.

I find myself immersed in inner thoughts less and less. I talk to Linden, I talk to Aunt Marta, I talk to the other farmers. One evening, there is a bonfire and everyone gathers. Children chase crickets and tiny frogs in the tall grass. Tomatoes, zucchini, and corn are roasted over embers. I am handed a tall glass of home-

brewed ale. It goes down smooth and settles warm and buzzing in my stomach. Wood crackles and pops and sparks shower the night sky. A guitar is brought out, and then another, and then a tambourine. Last of all, a wooden flute trills, weaving into the music a sound that is ageless, unearthly, and enthralling.

"He makes them himself, you know, the instruments. And teaches himself to play them," a woman tells me proudly. Other adults nod and murmur, admiringly. The younger girls are dancing, skirts swirling around their ankles. A woman with long, silver hair sways, eyes closed, smiling. She is Linden's grandmother.

He sits on a log beside the other musicians. His head is bent over the flute. His hair flickers red and gold in the firelight, becoming a fire itself. His bare feet tap a rhythm in the dust. Faces are turned to him in loving veneration. He is the center of this world. He belongs here in a way I have never belonged anywhere. The sudden, piercing envy is rivaled only by enchantment. Both feelings are unsettling. I quaff the rest of the ale to numb them.

"I would like to show you my house," he announces one day under the oak tree. I am caught off guard. I have no idea where his house is; I have never even thought of it before.

"Alright," I say and he bounds to his feet like a dog at the sound of a whistle.

We turn on a path I have never taken before and go deep into the forest. I do not know what to expect: a hut, a cave, a gingerbread house? What I find is a small, square, cedar-wood cabin with porch columns wrapped in flowering vines. The inside is simple and pleasant, hand-crafted wood furniture and woven rugs. Bright paintings of plants, birds, and insects adorn the walls. "My grandmother's work," he says with unabashed pride. He leads me to his room. Stepping through the door, my breath catches in my throat.

The walls are windows, thrown wide to let in sun, breeze, and bird song. The air wafts, cool, and heavily scented of flowers, cedar wood, and old books. The books are everywhere, stacks upon stacks, some open with pages fluttering. They cover the floor; a city of books, a labyrinth. Only a narrow, twisting path is clear from door to bed. He navigates it expertly, feet moving with a dancer's precision. An agile leap and he is on the bed, an island amidst a sea. I wade after him, slowly.

The bed is large, low, and soft. I sink into it like sitting on a cloud.

"Pick one," he says, "Any one you like." His arms gesture widely at the ocean around us. Pick one. He may as well ask me to pick a star. He laughs at my overwhelmed expression. "It's easy, just close your eyes and reach out." He does so, himself, hand closing on a small, green book. "The Hobbit. Your turn."

Caught between irritation and amusement, I humor him. My hand goes out, grasps something, and comes back. My eyes open. Blue cover with a crude sketch of a man holding a spear. "The Iliad," I say.

“Marta got me that one.”

“Figures.” I flip it open. I failed this unit in ninth grade. But he will never know that. The pages of his book turn. I steal a glance at him. His green eyes flick back and forth, lips parted and moving slightly. A smirk pulls at my mouth and I begin to read. Half an hour later, I am five pages in and the words blur until they might be hieroglyphs. I am regretting my book choice. I look up and see that he is watching me. For how long, I have no idea.

“Enjoying the read?” His eyes glitter. He is teasing me. I throw the book at his face and he falls backwards, laughing. Then, still lying down, he holds it above him and begins to read aloud. His words are slow, measured, rhythmic. I am reminded of his feet tapping in the dirt as he plays the pipes. His voice is music. I do not know all the words he speaks but I understand. I close my eyes and I see the glint of golden armor and the shock of red blood on white sand.

When my eyes open again, there is only moonlight. Crickets chorus outside the windows. It is too dark to read but he lies with the book open on his chest. I can barely make out his features, eyes more black than green now and hair more silver than gold.

“Do you still want to do it?” he asks, suddenly.

“Do what?” I am bleary, half awake.

“Join the military.”

“Huh?” I slowly latch on. “Well yeah, why not? What else am I going to do?”

“You can do anything,” he says. “Anything you want. Just reach out and pick something.”

“Easy for you to say. You don’t know what the real world is like.” My words are harsh. He does not seem to mind.

“I suppose you’re right. That must be why you despise me so much.”

“I like you,” I say. It comes out before I can think it through. It hangs in the air, too late to take back.

He glances at me, amused. “I know. But you also despise me.”

He does not bring up the subject again.

I spend more and more time at Linden’s house, falling asleep to his reading or the piping of his flute. If his grandmother is surprised to see me in the mornings, she does not show it. She makes us omelets with fresh vegetables and asks me to help her weed the garden. Sometimes, she lets me watch her paint and once, she even places the brush in my hands. I do my best to paint a bee. It looks like some sort of mutant. Linden hangs it on his wall.

I apologize to my aunt for being gone so often. She protests, zealously.

“I’m just so happy you two are friends.”

There is another bonfire and this time the young girls get me to dance

with them. Laughing, tugging at me, they guide my clumsy movements. Our feet churn the warm, dry earth. Aunt Marta joins in, taking my hand and twirling. Linden's grandmother takes my other hand, moving like a woman half her age. They spin me until my head reels. Across the flames, he sways to ethereal sound of his flute. Only the crinkle around his eyes betrays his humor as he watches us.

We drink home-brewed ale until even his nimble feet have difficulty following the forest path. The maze of his room, which I have grown accustomed to, is now a minefield. I take one step, trip, and pitch forward into an avalanche of books. I groan, trying to appear injured, but unable to repress the laughter bubbling from my chest. He reaches out a hand to help me but, with his animal balance off-kilter, it only takes a light tug to topple him as well. Buried in books, we lie still, breathing.

The smell of ancient pages mingles with wood-fire smoke from our hair and skin. His arm is hot against mine. Time ceases. This moment will never end.

It is August and the field is in bloom. His long, tapered fingers fly over the new flute he has created. I am drifting, thoughts carried away on the breeze. His feet tap harder than usual, crushing grass blades, trying to catch my attention. Reluctantly, I pull myself into the present. I turn to him, eyebrows raised in expectation. He grins, innocently.

"I made it for you." He holds it up for my admiration.

"Why?"

"Because it's your birthday."

"How do you know?"

"Marta told me."

I look away. A bee floats lazily nearby. He waits. Finally I sigh and say, "I don't know how to play."

"Well then," he taunts in a sing-song voice. "It's a good thing I'm here." The flute begins to trill again. I roll my eyes and give in to a slight smile. Fluid, fluttering, the music entwines me, almost making me forget the stone that has been sitting in my chest since I woke up this morning. Some time later, the music trails off.

"You know," he says, "you are awfully morose for someone who is finally free to do whatever they want."

"And you are awfully cheerful for someone who doesn't want to do anything," I retort. I feel his eyes on my face but I do not meet them.

"Why do you think I don't want to do anything?"

"Because you haven't. You've been eighteen all summer and all you've done is play with books and flutes. You're a man now and you've never been anywhere, doesn't that bother you?" He is silent. I do not look at him. I am afraid that he will be angry. I am afraid that he will not be.

"If the whole point of being a man," he speaks slowly, deliberately, "is doing whatever you want... then I do not understand the harm in doing what I want."

"But the things you do aren't what men are supposed to do," I snap, both irritated

and ashamed. "You'd realize that if you had a father."

A pause, a strange chill in the air.

"Enlighten me, Stephen. What are men supposed to do?"

"They're supposed to—we're supposed to—" I fumble for words.

"Fish? Hunt? Fight? Kill? Is that what your father taught you?"

My face burns and my fists clench with a frustration that I do not understand. Before I realize it, I am standing and walking away. I pass by houses, grazing cows. The farmers wave to me but I do not wave back and their cheeriness only adds to my aggravation. How can they treat me like I am one of them? I cross the old bridge, groaning under my feet as though it will collapse. The river is sluggish, choked with flowering weeds. Then, I am at Aunt Marta's house. There is a silver Chevy in the driveway and a man on the porch.

"There's my son," my father says, "And what a fine young man he is."

"We didn't expect you, Robert." My aunt's smile is taut as a bow string. My father sits, stiff and uncomfortable, on the living room couch. He looks out of place there and strangely diminished, perhaps because I am used to seeing him in action.

"You must be tired after that long drive; let me get you a cup of coffee." Aunt Marta swoops to the kitchen where she will try to call my mother whom I know to be at work.

My father lets out a long breath of air and leans forward, hands on his knees.

"Sorry about this, kiddo. I would have busted you out sooner but your mother really laid down the law on this one. Nothing she can do now, though. You're an adult and you make your own decisions." He gives me a wink of camaraderie, white teeth flashing in a grin. I look out the window. I do not feel surprised at that he is here; I do not feel anything. Aunt Marta comes back with a mug of coffee. Her lips are strained. She could not get ahold of my mother.

"I hope you'll be able to stay for dinner," she says, "We've planned a bit of a gathering for Stephen's birthday."

My father sips his coffee, politely. "I hate to spoil the fun but it's a long drive back and we should probably head out." They both look at me. I say nothing. My father clears his throat. "Er, isn't that right, son?"

I look out the window. He is standing in the back yard, perfectly still, as though he has been there for hours. His hair glows in the sunlight, becoming sunlight itself. I turn to my father.

"Right. I'm ready to go."

Aunt Marta stands on the porch, her hands clasped to her chest. The wind pulls at her long, silver-streaked hair, hiding her face from view. My father carries my duffle bag to the car. In motion, he is once again the authoritative figure I remember. There is something on the windshield. A stick—no, a flute. I take it and shove it in my pocket. As we back out of the driveway, Linden crosses the yard in

swift, graceful strides. He goes to Aunt Marta and her arms unfold, reaching out to him. I look away. When I look back, the porch is empty. My father is chuckling.

“Did you see that? Aren’t you glad I didn’t let them raise you into that?”

He slaps my knee, affectionately. My hand closes around the narrow piece of wood in my pocket, feeling the smooth surface, the perfectly rounded holes.

“By rights, he oughtta be coming with us,” my father says. “Some hard basic training would do him a world of good.”

I imagine Linden’s hair falling in golden ringlets to the floor under the buzz-cutter. I imagine his lean, brown, dusty feet stuffed into combat boots. The idea is so ludicrous, it makes me want to laugh or cry.

“He’s not cut out for it,” I say. Aunt Marta’s house dwindles in the rear view mirror.

“Too soft, is he?” my father scoffs.

I grip the flute tighter. “Something like that.”

# Samantha Wolf

## *Death's Horse*

Death does not ride a black horse. It does not glare through red eyes. It does not race through the night, screaming with excitement at the tasks ahead. Death's horse is not a slim wraith of a creature. Its heart is not still, nor does he carelessly place his feet.

Death's horse is pale grey. It is a most gentle being. It is a draft – slow, steady, dependable. It has kind eyes. It does not take pleasure in its task, but bears its burden dutifully. Death's horse is beautiful, but nonetheless terrible – after all, it is Death's horse.

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It was my sister first. The winter had been hard. Our summer crop had been poor, making for less money and less food. Then the fever swept through the county. I was told to stay home from school, lest I catch it and perish. It wasn't me that my parents had to worry about. My older sister had been meeting with her beau for some time after the fever broke out. That was how we figured she'd caught it. She lay covered in blankets for five days, not able to keep anything down, cold and burning at the same time. The last day I went out to tend to our horses. I hugged my slim bay, fighting to keep down the tears. No one we'd heard of survived this fever.

I began walking to the house when something moved out the corner of my eye. I looked, and for the briefest moment I beheld the shape of a grey Percheron, magnificent in its stature. He stood alone, awaiting the return of its master. I turned toward the house, wondering if its master was indeed visiting. I turned back to find it gone. Upon entering the house, I was about to inquire whether there had been a caller, but the words died on my lips. My sister's heart had played its final beat.

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The following year took a toll on my mother. She couldn't bear to look toward the room where my sister used to sleep. She would go off on her own, saying she needed time to think. Meanwhile, I returned to school. I kept to myself. Too many false condolences were flying in the air. None were meant; all had lost someone that winter. I threw myself into work with my father. We tilled the craggy field where this year's potato crop would grow. We fed the cattle and turned them out into the first spring field. We rode our horses into town for supplies like twine and nails. We buried my sister, Siobhan, after the ground thawed.

Did I miss my sister? Every day. She taught me to sew. Strictly a woman's job, of course, but how else was I going to sneak my ruined clothes past mother? Romping around in the local ravines did nothing but shred my shirts on the thorn bushes. We were not close to the casual onlooker, but a day didn't go by where we didn't tease each other or tell stories before bed. Her beau found another girl almost too quickly. But who was I to defend my sister? She was gone - he said that this was

his way of moving on.

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Spring turned into summer. When not busy at the farm, I was working as a groom at the local inn – taking care of traveler’s horses. I always kept an eye out for the large grey. Never did see it come through. I rode my little bay home one summer’s eve, when out of nowhere I saw the beast. It was grazing in an empty field alongside the road. My little bay shuddered beneath my tight grip. He shied away from where the grey stood. I got him under control, only to look up and find the grey had gone again. By the time I arrived home and put my little bay to his pasture it was night. I walked in to find my father sitting at the kitchen table, hands folded, red eyes. He told me that my mother had been out on one of her walks when a racing coach had run her down. She didn’t make the trip to the doctor.

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We helped pick the apples off the trees in the fall. For our troubles, the orchard owner gave us plenty to take home. We harvested our potatoes, and butchered some of our cattle. It was a good harvest season.

We buried my mother, Catriona, before the ground froze.

The leaves were turning colors once again. Mother used to tell us stories about the daemons that come out during this time of year. As we got older, these stories never scared my sister and I as much as they used to. We would have pumpkin to eat, and maybe a bit of something sweet around the hearth. This year my father and I worked until sun down, ate whatever we could find quickly with minimal candlelight, and went to bed exhausted.

\*\*\*

Years passed. I traveled as a blacksmith. My visits home became brief and far between. My father seemed to be getting by fairly well. I didn’t like leaving him home so often, but he insisted that everything was fine. I always sent home half of my wages to make certain that he could sustain himself lest another bad year of crops passed.

I was on my way home from a month’s stay in a nearby town when I saw the grey. It walked along side my little bay and I the last mile to the house. My bay was quiet this time, seeming to enjoy the company of another equine. I was unnerved. A draft horse, extremely valuable in these farming towns, all on its own? Come to think of it, hadn’t it always been alone? I rode to the house, dismounted, and looked for the grey. Once again, it was gone.

Walking in, I called out to my father. I wasn’t expected until the week after next, but I had finished early. I ran up the stairs, into the room that he and my mother used to share. He lay on the bed, for all the world looking asleep. He would never open his eyes.

\*\*\*



I made preparations to sell the farm and most of the livestock. I kept my little bay. I picked out the most valuable of the family heirlooms and temporarily moved them into a small apartment above the inn.

I buried my father, Aedan, on a clear, sunny day.

He was the last of my family. He was the man that I spent the longest time with. He taught me to be a man, to grow up strong and useful. And he was gone. I found a job with the military. I took care of the horses, made sure they didn't grow fat in this time of peace.

\*\*\*

War broke out, as it always tends to. Men have a bloodthirst that must be sated. I was shipped to the front as a vet – patching up the horses that once lived in the lap of luxury. My little bay was the only constant. I could count on him to ride through the worst carnage to bring back men, living or dead, and to calm the spooked horses on the battlefield.

I was riding out after a long and bloody skirmish, looking for survivors and horses that weren't beaten up too badly. My little bay slipped a bit; it had been raining for the better part of the day. I had reached about the middle of the field when I saw the grey. He stood in the field, staring directly at me. His eyes held my attention. They seemed so sad. I heard the sharp reports of many rifles. I felt my little bay begin to fall, myself falling with him. I stared up at the sky, my little bay lying next to me.

A sharply-dressed man stood over me. He wore a fine pair of leather boots, comfortable traveling clothes, and a well-worn black cloak. He extended his hand to me, and I took it. Once on my feet, I realized that this man was Death. His hair matched that of his horse, the grey I had seen throughout my life. Death didn't say a word. He didn't need to.

They buried me, Keiran, on a dreary, stormy day.

They buried my little bay, Turlough, a few hours later.

I rode away on my little bay after the service. Death and his grey rode with us for a time. I didn't notice when they disappeared. They left without a trace, as they had my whole life. I understood, then. I rode on, bearing my new burden heavily.

\*\*\*

Death does not ride a black horse. It does not glare through red eyes. It does not race through the night, screaming with excitement at the tasks ahead. Death's horse is not a slim wraith of a creature. Its heart is not still, nor does he carelessly place his feet.

Death's horse a little bay. It is a most gentle being. It is a slight creature – a little on the skinny side, unassuming, but dependable. It has kind eyes. It does not take pleasure in its task, but bears its burden dutifully. Death's horse is loyal, but it is sad – after all, it is Death's horse.

# Kourtney Sande

## *Fantasy Lover*

### Act One

Outside the Saturn Bar in New Orleans, a young woman named Aeila Thompson works at the bar. She ponders to herself about her best friend, Trista Calltex. Trista is an eccentric woman who is a Prada designer/ vampire slayer. Aeila doesn't want part of the world that Trista and her husband, Kris are a part of. Though Aeila works in an eccentric setting every day, she just wants a normal life; which doesn't involve Trista.

Scene I (Saturn Bar, 8pm: Dark and neon lights are flashing constantly. Small round, glass bar tables clutter around the dance floor. The bar is themed with gothic, punk, and any other person with countless tattoos and piercings.

**AEILA**-behind the bar cleaning glasses

Amazing what you can friggin' find out that your friend is a crazy vampire obsessed chick AND a supposed immortal. Gee, speak of the devil herself.

*(Enter Trista walking up to the neon green bar stool.)*

**TRISTA**

Yeah, I am crazy. Don't judge. Listen Aeila, you are judging me, when you yourself are supervoman. Don't complain how I have kept this. I only turned one last year when I met Kris because we are now married, and...I just didn't want to scare you and thinking I'm a loon.

**AELIA**

I already think that.

**TRISTA**

Yeah, don't take it hard just because you aren't. Damn, this place must be rubbing off on you, knowing how it creeps me out.

**AELIA**

You're one to talk; you always have on black too. Please, I make damn good money here.

**TRISTA**

Yeah, and so does leather and spiked Prada bags, but living in New

Orleans, I get my kicks ‘n’ kills. (Smug laughter.)

**AELIA**

Not the point, look I have customers waiting, as well as tips, see you around Trista, Please take care of yourself

*(Exeunt Aeila, with drinks on a tray.) (Enter Kris, Trista's husband.)*

**TRISTA**

What the hell was that!? I get dumped for being myself around the only one who I really thought accepted me. Whatever.

**KRIS**

(Stops Trista) Babe, I understand, but give her time to get used to it; God knows that it gave you a shock when I came out and told you. Let her think it out.

*(Exeunt Kris to the bar.)*

**TRISTA**

Well at least I have him. He gives me light when I least expect it. If only Aeila would understand. I better go and follow her.

*(Exeunt Trista)*

*Scene II: (Enter Aeila, Kris.) Saturn Bar, 10pm.)*

**AELIA**-waiting on customer.

There you go hon.

*(Enter Kris)*

**KRIS**

Aeila, I need to talk to you. About Trista.

**AELIA**

I don't want to talk Kris, I'm busy.

**KRIS**

You going to keep telling me that all night?

**AELIA**

Probably. Besides you already know the statement I'm going to say. I love Trista, she's my best friend. But this craziness is not for me. She believes in vampires, werewolves, and all the other fantasy creatures of the world. She is insane...

**KRIS**

That is why we both love her.

**AELIA**

You're the one who put it into her head in the first place!!

**KRIS**

Only because I love her, and I didn't want the biggest detail to be held from her. I am truly immortal, and now she is too. She is my soul mate, and I can't let her go. It would be the end of both –

**AEILA**

Stop right there, Kris! I for one don't believe in this garbage, and don't want any part of this. Trista was always eccentric, but in a way that balanced us both out. Not into Fantasy Land. Why her, Kris?

**KRIS**

Don't you dare blame me! I can't believe you can't accept her for who she is, your best friend. Trista wants to be with me, as I do more than anything else in the world! She gives me happiness I never found in a woman before. I would think you would be there for her for her, especially now, because she still needs to understand her new life. You're her best friend.

**AEILA**

Don't guilt trip me. I know, but she has others there who actually like this, and want her life just as bad as she did.

**KRIS**

Well, opposites do attract, why do you think you are her best friend, and me her husband?

**AEILA**-waiting on people at the bar.

Yeah, but she doesn't understand that I don't want any part in it. That last time I loved someone who had thoughts like hers, they ended up being killed.

**KRIS**

By what?

**AEILA**

I don't know, some animal outside of town.

**KRIS**

I rest my case.

**AEILA**

About what?

**KRIS**

Nothing.

**AEILA**

My behind nothing! (walks away)

**KRIS**

Just walk away from her, being the biggest snob- (people screaming)

**AEILA**-runs away from bar counter

Oh God! Not another brawl, Paul!

*(Enter Molly, another waitress, hands bloodied.)*

**MOLLY**

(sobbing) Someone help her! She is bleeding to death!

**KRIS**

Who Molly, why are you battered up?

**MOLLY**

Some woman came through the door, and as Trista was talking to someone, the woman came up and grabbed Trista, then threw her across the room on a table!

Then bit down on her neck!

**KRIS**

Oh God! NO! (running)

**AEILA**

What did she look like, Molly?!

**MOLLY**

She had long blonde hair, tall, leather gloves, sunglasses.

**KRIS**

Fallon!

**AEILA**-running

Oh God, TRISTA!

*Scene III: (Saturn Bar: 11pm, near the stage where band plays.) (Enter Fallon and Trista. Trista at this point is on top of the glass tabletop mess where she was thrown. Fallon is the head vampire mistress. She was stationed in New Orleans to watch over the new herd of vampires.)*

**TRISTA**

What the f-

**FALLON**

Well, well. Looks like I found some dinner tonight after all (Maniacal laugh). There's dinner for everybody. I'll give you the pleasure of suffering with plenty of pain. So your lover can watch you die, and you can kiss him good-bye.

**TRISTA**

Yeah, you and your pathetic army of cattle? Please, their screams are a symphony to my ear drums. Ha! (Fallon slaps Trista in anger.)

**FALLON**

Yeah, you're gonna suffer. Most definitely. If you think your meat puppet friend

and husband would literally risk her neck, and his immortality, then you seriously could have learned more.

**TRISTA**

(Sits up, and kicks Fallon to the floor.) You're right. But I don't need lectures from a soul sucker, especially since you have to take care of new-borns. The Council must seriously hate you.

**FALLON**

(punches Trista in the chest with a shard of glass.) Why am I talking when I should be eating?

(Trista falls to the floor in even more agony.)

*(Enter Aeila and Kris)*

**AEILA**

Because you'll be dead in the next ten seconds! (Pounces on Fallon and kicks her against the bar.)

**KRIS**

There are so many names that are worthy for you, but I am much more of a gentleman than that. (grabs a stake and aims it for Fallon's heart, but gets her shoulder.)

Fallon: And you're worth nothing less than garbage! (Scratches at Kris's face, then aims at Aeila's neck, but misses.)

**AEILA**

Now you are seriously annoying me! Kris, can I end this?

Kris: (Sneaks up behind Fallon and stakes her.)

**FALLON**

(Falls to the floor. Every person in the club runs out screaming.)

(Fallon moans in pain, then dies.)

*(Exeunt Fallon)*

**KRIS**

Sorry, Aeila I kind of stole your part.

**AEILA**

Okay, but the next one is mine.

**KRIS**

(Laughs) Trista? Trista!!

**TRISTA**

(To Aeila) I thought you wanted no part of my world? I'm not that blonde to where I can't remember.

**AEILA**

Now that I see what she did to you, how can I let that happen when you're down?

Kris needs a partner for the time being.

**KRIS**

(To Trista) Why did I let this happen? I should have stopped bickering to check up on you. I love you; I should have been there...

**TRISTA**

Baby, you can't be there for me every time we are apart.

**KRIS**

(takes Trista in his arms) "Until death do we part", but in our case "As long as both shall live", I can't live without you.

**TRISTA**

As you, my love. You are my other half. Nothing can separate us, not even death.

Take me home, both of you.

**AELIA**

I am so sorry, I may have wanted a normal life, but it was never normal. Ever since we were kids, nothing was ever normal; and I wouldn't abandon my best girl.

**TRISTA**

Now that's the Aeila I know. What would this world be without the both of us?

**KRIS**

Boring, and plus I wouldn't have as much fun at the movies.

**AELIA**

(Laughing) So I'm with both of you.

**TRISTA**

Meaning? You want to be a hunter?

**AELIA**

yes.... Until you get better. Then I'll be a fill in.

**TRISTA**

(To Kris) Now you won't be alone when I have to watch Moonlight re-runs.

**KRIS**

(Laughing) Hon, you need your rest. Coming Aeila?

**AELIA**

Sorry, I want to help clean up here. It was partially my fault.

Trista: I should, my ribs will be fine by tomorrow, but I'm missing my favorite movie.

**AELIA and TRISTA**

(In unison) Phantom of the Opera

**KRIS**

Yeah (sarcasm)

(To Aeila) Just remember, I need you by the house around 8, or sundown so we can patrol. I'll teach you, and I have some friends who will help you.

**AELIA**

Thank you. I'm still sorry.

**TRISTA**

Hey, you have to vent sometimes. Seriously, quit here and you can get a job with us. We have some job hookups. (thumbs up, then Kris carries Trista off.)

*(Exeunt Kris and Trista) (Enter Molly)*

**AELIA**

(Walks up to Molly) Need some help?

**MOLLY**

Yeah, but are they okay?

**AELIA**

Yeah, Kris took her home to rest. She just has some back bruises.

*(Exeunt Molly)*

**AELIA**

My life will never be normal, but I wouldn't have it any other way.

*(Exeunt all)*



*Creative Non-Fiction*



## Xuan Chen

### *Leaving and Left*

She was sitting in the car and suddenly did not know what to say. They turned down a quiet street and parked under a tree. It was midnight, and there was no car passing by. The small town was going to sleep but the cold wind still did not want to stop. She opened the window of the car. He was smoking and looked up to the moon, and waited for her answer.

“Do you want to leave with me?”

She was still a young woman, who just stopped her studying at high school. She used to be a very diligent and well-behaved daughter, but she gradually changed to be rebellious since her father accidentally died because of an explosion in the factory. She was so depressed to lose the father who was a hero in her mind and was widely respected by people in the town. She started to hang out with friends frequently and played around till the late of night to forget the huge grief.

She thought this was another normal date night. She looked at the guy who sat beside her, and she found out that she did not really know too much about him. Months ago they met in her friend's clothes shop. She caught his attention when he was lying on the sofa and trying to kill time, and after that he came for her every time he went to the town. They fell in love quickly.

“We lost the first battle. We have to retreat to another place. I do not know when I can see you again, but, do you want to leave with me?” he calmly told her those words like he was talking about what the weather looked like tomorrow.

She was lost in the deep silence, and forgot to blink her eyes. She knew he was a private soldier and his commander was fighting for the territory, but she never thought that she would encounter this situation which would require her to make a tough decision one day.

“Where are you going?” She finally said something.

“I have no idea, but it is most far away from here.” He kept smoking but this time he closed his eyes, and leant on the chair. “I will not force you.”

“You know what I would lose if I leave with you?”

He opened his eyes and slowly said “Your family, your friends, all things and all people you are familiar with.”

She turned to look at him, and he turned his head toward her as well, then he said “But, you will get your whole world, if you consider me as the one.”

She just listened.

The tears eventually could not hold back in her eyes, but she smiled.

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A year later, he got an instruction that they would go back to the battle, so she finally could go home to see her elder and sick mother. When she finally stood in front of her family, they had tons of words they wanted to yell at her, but they noticed a baby in her hands.

Her mother tremblingly stepped back and sat down to the seat, asked “What is the name of this baby?”

“Xuan.” She smiled.

## Jordan DeWanz-Titus

### *Change in Nature*

The first five years of my life were spent in a concrete jungle and the following thirteen were spent in a woodsy one. And, you don't know what you've got 'till it's gone.

In those first five years, various aspects of the natural world would occasionally strike my curiosity. Behind my grandmother's town home in the concrete jungle there was a hill, the top of which had yet to be claimed and tamed by city planners and construction companies.

I remember running up the hill at different times during the days when I was babysat by my grandmother. While charging up it, I could always tell when I was reaching the top not by my eyes, but by my feet. At a certain point the dark, fresh soil which securely held the soft, kelly green blades of grass would start to become lighter, warmer, sandier. The grass faded into a shade of light brown and became thinner and more sharp against the sides of my feet and prickly underneath them. About ten energetic youthful strides passed the point where the perfectly manicured lawn of my grandmother's complex met the undeveloped land sat two things: a tree and a hole.

Together, they balance out the picture in my mind of the landscape as it was then; as if the tree were Ying and the hole were Yang. Up and down, placed side by side. The unexplained hole in the ground seemed to be about six feet deep and around ten feet in diameter. Translated into grownup eyes, it was probably as big around as a plastic kiddie-pool. But I remain firm in my belief that it was six feet deep; I never climbed down into it due to intimidation by the depth.

The tree was stout and thick. Its branches were round and curvy which seemed welcoming to me. It was filled out and thriving. I never played in the hole, but I played in the tree. The first set of branches reached out not too high off the ground, low enough that I could hoist myself onto them. They had a wide diameter too, and their safety was never questioned. The thick bark was rich in black and browns and felt cool to the touch even on the hottest days. Even though the tree seemed to serve more purpose, the unexplained hole was what drew me up that hill every few hours. Maybe it's because I could see the tree from the bottom, even from inside; the sliding glass door in my grandmother's dining room offered a perfect view at meal times. The tree's existence was never in jeopardy, but I needed to check up on that hole as much as I could, just to stare down into it from the ground or from the tree.

When I was uprooted from the concrete jungle and thrown into a different atmosphere hundreds of miles north, I forgot about the hole and the tree. The environment around my new home was all natural. Everywhere I turned I saw trees, and not one was welcoming. It was an overload-- too many of a good thing

decreases value and my choosy attitude wasn't interested in any branch they held out to me. These new trees were so plentiful and because of that they didn't seem climbable, I wasn't *George of the Jungle*, I was *Jordan of the Hole and the Tree*.

After I had moved away, the majority of time spent at my grandmother's was short and for holidays, many of which fall in seasons not suited for outside play.

While sipping a coke and talking to a boring uncle or two I would occasionally glance out the sliding glass door and eye up the hill, scanning the top while wondering if the hole was still there, but finding out certainly wasn't on my to-do list. I never even gave serious thought to trudging up that hill in my early teenage years to find a hole. The tree was still there, which was all the affirmation I sought at the time.

Time went by and I grew up. A few years after my grandfather passed away, my grandmother put her town house up for sale. I was fifteen years old. I accompanied my parents to help with her move into another town house twenty minutes away with much more brick and much less nature. When we pulled into her driveway, it occurred to me that I hadn't been to her house in a long time. It must have been over a year; Thanksgiving, Christmas and Easter were all spent with other sides of my family. I had completely forgotten about the hole and the tree, my mind was focused on the many possible things I would be asked to lift and move that day, for the sole fact that I was a teenager.

About half way through the day, I was asked to bring in the few potted plants from her deck, which was on the other side of the sliding glass doors in her dining room. My attention was on the floor full of boxes as I glided through the kitchen, into the dining room and pulled the door open. Being the good worker bee I was, I started to collect her plants. After they were securely in my arms, I looked up the hill beyond the deck.

Homes. Brick. Endless shades of brown plastic siding was all I saw. It was jolting and at first glance intimidating. They were so close to her deck, so close to me, I felt claustrophobic. The urban sprawl of the suburbs of the Twin Cities had made its way to within fifty yards of my eyes, nose, and ears. They had seemed to literally come out of nowhere. My mind immediately retracted to toddler status; I guess I had never given thought to who owned the land on top of the hill, how large it spread out to be, and what would become of it. My memories of the landscape don't stretch far beyond the area of the hole and tree. What I see in my head of it today is like a sunset on the ocean, the horizon is hard to determine but you just know it's there. The land seems to meet sky just beyond the far side of the tree.

I went into the dining room and inquired about the homes. I remember the look of surprise on my mom's face at how frantic I was being, demanding answers as to when these houses were built and why. She said I was being over-dramatic, while my grandmother looked beyond my left shoulder and out the window and started to explain the recent developments being constructed and which homes already occupied families and which ones were not quite move-in ready. Her words seemed impartial to the whole thing, but her eyes stayed focused over my shoulder

as she spoke and I saw disappointment in them. She started to tell me how much I used to love running up that hill and play when I was little.

I know, Grandma.

Eva Eriksen

*Life as we Live*

Have you ever thought of life in a way that makes you feel like you are going insane? I do that all the time. However, I do not consider myself insane, just curious.

I remember this one time in the summer a few years back; the sun was shining, people were smiling and the wind was flirting with everybody's minds because nobody really understood how they could be so happy in such trivial locations. I later found out why, but that kind of celebration is now a busted party forgotten like lost memories on a Monday morning. Nevertheless, that feeling of happiness the very first time somehow seems to stick with me and it reminds me of how insane life can be when it is best. I mean the joy I felt was faked, it was created by substances that tricked my brain into thinking something was much more enchanting than it really was, but the feelings I had existed, they were real.

I suppose that summer, measured in smiles, was just as good as anybody else's. However, I cannot help but thinking that I in some way cheated. Did I lie to myself? Maybe there is a difference between feeling happy and actually being happy, but how would I know, if I had never been both. I explore the world and the possibilities it gives me. I do not judge it and I certainly do not fear it. I was not losing my senses I was evolving my sanity. The artificiality I had inside of me changed the way I now look upon the truth.

Life was given to me and so I decide how to live it. I decide if my life is important or not. I decide if I am happy or not. I decide what is real and what is not.

I am real, right?

# Dara Fillmore

## *Writing Life*

### Seven Years Old

"Is this good enough?" The words came out as some sort of a mumble while I stared at the tiled floor. I was nervous. I handed my cursive story - writing assignment to my first grade teacher and she looked it over. I hoped she would like it because I knew I had given it everything I had. I worked on that little story for hours, trying to make it the very best I could. And then I had written it in cursive, no less. I hoped she didn't notice all those little spots where I had erased my pathetic penmanship and tried again. The silence was loud. I realized I was holding my breath. I just couldn't get the nerve to look up at my teacher as I waited for her to reply. "Yes, Dara. It's fine." There was air in the room again and the sunlight shown brighter. I decided since she liked my writing, my teacher would get my best tales every assignment and I would keep all the stories in my head that I had created in the past few years. Those would be what I drew from as I watched life happen around me.

### Five Years Later

"Mom! Mom! Guess what I got! Mom!" I ran up the drive from the mailbox, waving an opened letter above my head. She looked up from what she was doing and smiled at my overzealous screeching. When I reached her, I handed her the letter and stared at the gravel, breathless. I suddenly realized I was very embarrassed. Mom read the letter and I held my breath. She finished reading and smiled at me. "Good job, Dara." She hugged me and handed back the letter. I started breathing again. I had won a local writing contest. Elated, I tried to find other avenues to publish my writing. Home school newsletters, 4-H contests, regional writing contests, writing clubs, anthologies. My parents edited my work over and over until I decided it was good enough to be entered as my submission. I knew I had to keep writing down all the stories and essays I had been working on in my head for years. I thought maybe I could find a way to get more people to read my writing since I liked to make people think by the way I wrote and by the way I made mental pictures while I wrote. People who read my work did seem to enjoy it, but I was never sure if they were just being nice.

### Five Years Later

"Dara, we were talking about adding a column for teens. Do you think you'd be interested in writing it for us?" The editor of the newspaper watched me as I thought about it. I fidgeted as the people at the meeting stared at me and I stared at my folded hands. Writing a column sounded like a lot of responsibility. I'd already been helping write for the kids' page, and had done occasional articles in the past few months since I started writing for the paper. But I thought I'd be up for the challenge



of trying to engage teens like myself in living life as followers of Christ. The deadlines would probably come too quickly even though they were only monthly, and at times I knew I would struggle to come up with an idea. "Um, that actually sounds really fun. And I think I have a couple ideas I could start with. I'd really like the job if that's okay." I looked up at the editor. She grinned. Others smiled. I got the job. I breathed in again.

### Seven Years Later

"At the end of the semester, I will expect you to have written a 20 page historical argument paper. Then next semester comes your thesis." The professor eyed me, grinning almost evilly. I swallowed. My mind raced to the harrowing end of the present semester and the next. I will have no life. My brain would be so totally immersed in whatever I chose for my thesis that I would not be able to do basic addition. I would have no time for thoughts of my own, and no time to write my stories and essays. "Wow that sounds challenging. I'll do my best." I muttered the words while I stared at my notebook. The air became thick like stew. I knew I had a lot of work ahead of me, but I wanted to somehow enjoy my thesis while I worked so hard on it.

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College has been my life for the past several years. I have taken every possible opportunity to write creatively whether I'm attending a writing course or, for that matter, a history, anthropology, or communications course. I've tried to write using genres that don't yet exist in the mainstream, and also I've written for teachers who aren't interested in my creativity. Many past experiences have helped prepare me for what I am doing in the university setting. But at times my mind still wanders off and I think up a story to write.

Nowadays, the stories often sit in my head for a year or two because they get shoved to the back in all the hubbub of homework and real work. Am I losing my creativity? Will these stories and essays eventually disappear because I don't rework them in my head or write them down? What will happen after I graduate? What will I do with my life? What will I do with my stories? "When are you going to think like you did when you were little?" I ask myself questions all the time. I get a little scared. The room turns a little dark. What am I doing to myself - paying money so I can think for my professors instead of thinking well like I used to? I have no interest in losing the gains I've made in my writing over the years. "Right now," I answer myself quickly, looking life straight in the eye. I breathe in. The future brightens. I will keep pressing on, working on my stories and essays so people who read them can learn to think deeper or differently. Writing creatively will always matter to me.

# Laura Halvorsen

## *Skydiving in the Alps*

I used to be an assassin. I was a slave driver, too, and at other times a slave. I was Addy, the American girl who carried everything she owned in a hand-sewn pouch; I was Laura Ingalls Wilder leaping through sun-washed fields, my bonnet streaming behind me. I used to transform into a glistening stallion or morph into a kitten and spend my days cleaning behind my ears. I spent an entire afternoon as a dog, uttering nothing more than mewling barks. I worked as an artist, a business owner, a pilot, and a secret service agent. I disarmed bombs, painted masterpieces, and still had time to concoct delicacies for teatime. I discovered buried treasure in the Amazon, explored uncharted territory near the North Pole, and single-handedly defeated an army of rabid Mongolians. With a spork. I caught prisoners and chained them to trees. I was merciless. When I tired of torture, I wowed millions of people with my operatic singing voice.

I used to be an American Indian. I canoed the Mississippi river, my paddle expertly directing the water and my bow slung leisurely across my shoulder. I won awards for interior decorating. I was the first female American president, I invented the European Union, and I solitarily negotiated peace in the Middle East. I swam the English Channel, skydived in the Alps, and reached the summit of Mount Everest. Without oxygen. I snuck into North Korea and founded a battalion of guerilla warriors. I had two pet panthers that slept in my bed and sucked my thumbs.

And I married Alex Erikson. It was a small affair—an aspiring pastor, a witness, and us. We had no money for diamonds, so we wound twisty ties around our fingers as we solemnly pledged our lives to each other.

It was all my brother's idea. We were bored, waiting in the R.V. while our parents prayed in the Oval Office. We were also a little sullen about being left behind, just outside the White House while the adults, the ones of import, were ushered in. So David, my older brother, said that I should marry Alex, and of course I agreed! I moaned and complained at first, like all good seven-year-olds do, but my eyes couldn't quite conceal their sudden gleam.

*I was five when we met, and Alex was a studly eight. I remember facing him, my inquisitive eyes playing over his fluffy brown hair and smile that didn't quite show his teeth. He wasn't thin exactly, a bit thicker than my wiry frame, but he wasn't fat either. He was solid, I thought, and the world's wisdom emanated from his every word. Our parents informed us we were going to be "buddies." My dad was about to embark on his 14-month walk across America—both ways, north to south and west to east—and the Eriksons were coming with. We were to live in RV's, homeschool on the side of the road, and pretty much spend every waking moment together.*

*After walking across America, my parents started doing tent crusades around the country. The Eriksons were heavily involved with this, and our first stop*

*was Florida. Our tent seated over 2,000 people, and it took an entire team of men three days to pitch. Alex and I were too young to help, so we decided to raid a neighboring orange orchard and make the workers fresh-squeezed orange juice.*

*We spent the entire afternoon under Florida's blazing sun, ran back to our RV and hand-squeezed all of the oranges only to find that they were almost as sour as lemons. A lady then informed us that the particular field we were in was infested with rattlesnakes. I'm not sure which worried our parents more, the fact that we stole fruit or the fact that we almost became rattlesnake teething toys.*

*After yawning through the deluge of reprimands, we abandoned trying to help and played with Whoopee Cushions instead.*

When the wedding ceremony was over, Alex leaned over in all his 10-year-old suavity and planted a shy peck on my cheek, at which point I'm sure my pale skin lit up like a firecracker. My brother was not content, though, and said that we were married now and needed to do it right. My firecracker cheeks throbbed, but I didn't look away when he tipped his head and kissed me. Claire, Alex's sister, held her toilet paper bouquet and regarded us with silent approval.

When I was sixteen, I saw him for what must have been the first time in four years. I had finally become a woman, and he towered over me in his 6'2" muscular frame. I was playing my violin at worship practice before church when he strode into the building, up the center aisle, and held his arms wide.

"Laura!" He exclaimed, his face breaking into a grin that got even wider as I leapt from the stage and flung myself into his embrace. My feet swished through the air as he spun me around, and I was suddenly unaware of everything apart from our reckless, giddy laughter.

We went up the North Shore after church with our families; Alex and I crowded into the back of his van, our bodies pressing together as we squeezed into our seatbelts. I sat next to him, all too aware of his arm resting against mine, and considered how right we were together. In that moment I knew that he was the only man I could ever marry.

We started talking regularly after that, but we didn't see much of each other because I left the country to walk across Eurasia with my parents. Alex told me that he was going to join us during his Christmas break; I couldn't think of anything better, but he didn't come. He never told me why.

We never had a serious fight; there was no particular moment when disillusionment sprang into my heart. It was a process—a slow, steady creep towards disappointment. Maybe I realized it when he took me out to eat and, after paying for me and opening all of my doors, he told me about the last three women in his life. I've gone on my fair share of dates, but I don't date like he does. I don't get "seriously serious." When I settle down with somebody, I like to think it will be forever.

We were sitting in that restaurant eating chicken when it hit me: he wasn't interested. At all. He was attracted to me, I could tell that much, but it didn't go

any farther than that, and it never would.

I was going through my closet the other day—sifting through the endless piles of dust bunnies and dirty clothes—when I uncovered a box I hadn't seen in years. It was full of old scrapbooks and pictures, most of them from my elementary school days. I picked up a pink plastic album that used to be sparkly and opened it to find my six-year-old-self looking up at me. My arms were wrapped around Alex's bicep and my cheek was resting on his shoulder. We were both smiling, grins that started on the inside and worked their way out.

If I close my eyes I can imagine being there again, beside him, secure in the knowledge that I am his and he is mine—as much as children can be, anyway. I can't, however, remember that day. We took so many pictures, I hugged him so many times, that my brain did not deem it necessary to catalogue that particular instant.

I might have cried a little, sitting on my bedroom floor looking at myself. Or I might have been looking at Alex; I guess I can't really be sure. Sometimes the heart has memories that the brain does not and, sometimes, the oldest emotions can be the most potent. And Alex Erikson is an old emotion; one I have hidden away amongst the dust bunnies of my childhood, along with my memories of figure skating, discovering the wild, and singing before thousands of people.

I have a niece; her name is Abigail and she just turned six. One of her best friends is a 9-year-old boy named Jacob. They were both playing at my house the other day, and as I watched them I suddenly recognized the look in Abigail's eyes. I imagine my eyes looked the same as I ran after Alex, excitedly playing whatever game he wanted.

I think we all look like that at some point or another—like the universe shines in his, or her, eyes. Whether six or sixty, we offer our hearts knowing that they might be trampled. We can't help ourselves, and we don't want to. To love, and to be loved, is one of our deepest, most human desires. I still love Alex Erikson, but not romantically, and I'm actually quite grateful we grew apart the way we did. As funny as it is to say this, we really aren't right for each other. Dreams don't always come true, and I doubt we'd be very happy if they did. Alex isn't the superhero of my childhood anymore.

Also, I don't think I'll decide to be a professional singer after all. I really can't sing. I could be an assassin, but I'd rather not. I'm glad I'm not a cat, or a dog, or a horse, for that matter, and the only thing I ever learned to paint was a stickman. I think I'll leave the rabid Mongolians alone and, let's face it, will there ever be peace in the Middle East? North Korea probably doesn't need any more guerrilla warriors, and I might not have quite enough energy to swim the English Channel.

I'm still going to go skydiving, though; preferably in the Alps.

# Freya Johnson

## *I Am Not Here: A Memoir*

Orange scrubs, mug shots, cold food. All that was missing were the bars; I was slightly disappointed by that. Instead, there was just a very thick heavy door that would lock every time it was shut. As I expected, the toilet was out in the open as well. I wasn't a fan of popping a squat out in the open with absolutely no privacy. Then again, it was jail. Privacy is not allowed.

It was all an out-of-body experience. I wished my whole self could take off and hide like my mind did the moment the police officer answered "yes" to my question: "Are you arresting me?" I clutched my car for support while my breathing picked up and my head spun. He escorted me to his vehicle and sat me in the back seat. I leaked tears as the metal cuffs were placed around my wrists. The drive to the jail was torture. I couldn't stop my tears, and I kept repeating to myself: this isn't happening. He pulled around to the back of the jail and opened the car door for me. Shaking, I got out.

When I stepped inside, another police officer asked for my name. He couldn't understand me through my tears, so the officer who brought me in answered for me. I was stripped of the handcuffs as well as my jewelry, my shoes, and my sweater. I was placed in the waiting room where Wheel of Fortune was playing. I curled up on a chair and let out several more cries of fear. Another girl came in to join me. She looked far calmer than I did, as though being in this situation was no big deal. Sitting there for what seemed like hours, I played with some strands of my hair. My crying finally stopped.

The door to the waiting room opened. A female officer addressed me by my last name. She brought me to the showers. "Get out of your clothes and rinse down. You'll have clothes out here when you are finished." Her words were tough and stern. She turned sharply and left me to peel out of my clothing and step into the shower. The water was cold: not ice-cold, but not warm. I shoved my face under the faucet, wondering if I could drown this way. Shivering, I stepped out of the shower, my wet hair hanging in front of my face. My clothes were gone, replaced by the world-famous orange scrubs, along with a white undershirt, orange rubber sandals, socks, a sports bra, and granny-panties, all marked with *St. Louis County Jail* in permanent marker. Disgusted, repulsed, and cold, I had no choice but to put them on.

I was placed in a chair at the front desk as another officer began asking me the basic questions: my birthday, where I lived, medical history, and the like. Then it was time for the mug-shot, the one thing that would surely mark me as "criminal." My damp hair still hung in front of my face. I stood in front of the camera and clenched my jaws together as the picture was snapped. To follow were the fingerprints. Everything was digital, so that left the paper and ink out. The officer rolled my fingers across the screen, re-doing a few fingers to fix smudges.

When that was finished, I was escorted in another room to talk with a counselor.

According to my answers about my medical history, I have a past of depression, cutting, and suicidal tendencies. I was interviewed about the deep cuts that decorated my left arm that was applied only weeks before, the abuse in my parents' household, and my over-dosing experiences. I gave short, un-thorough answers; I felt as if the interrogation was irrelevant to why I was here. The counselor didn't know of my crime but asked me if there was someone I wanted to contact to let them know where I was. I was staying with my grandmother and uncle at the time, but there was no way in hell I'd tell them where I was; they weren't the most understanding people when it comes to messed-up situations I got myself in. As unhappy and possibly scared as she'd be, calling Mom would be the easier, and more understanding, route. I gave the counselor the phone number to my parents' house, and she stepped out of the room to make the phone call. Food was brought in for me to eat: a sandwich with mashed potatoes and a carton of milk. I was too distraught to eat. I kept still, with my arms folded over my chest, grinding my teeth together. The counselor returned to tell me she'd spoken with my mom. Tears fell down my face as I pictured my mother getting a phone call saying her daughter was headed to jail.

Before I entered the jail unit, I was given a bed cover, a sheet, a pillowcase, a towel, a toothbrush, and a bar of soap. I was placed in another room to watch a video of the rules: it was full of useless information. I didn't plan to pick a fight with the other inmates, so I wouldn't have to be hauled away to a separate room for a time-out. My plan was to keep to myself, keep my mouth shut, and hope to God that I'd get out of this place with some sanity left.

The officer brought me into the unit. To be honest, I was disappointed not to see jail bars. The officer stood over me as I made my bed. She showed me the bin that I could put my personal stuff in: the towel, soap, and toothbrush. She gave me a card with my cell ID so I could make outgoing phone calls. Then she left me alone.

I walked back out to the unit, where there were about two dozen other women, wearing either orange or navy blue scrubs. None of them looked bothered about where they were. Several were watching television, others had a few games of cards going – and having a good laugh among themselves – and some were alone, writing or reading. The phones were occupied, so I had to wait to call Mom. I took a seat at an empty table, fighting back tears of fear, crossing my arms tighter against my chest. I tried to avoid eye-contact with everyone, so I kept my stare at the unit television, but I was nowhere near interested in the news.

I must have stuck out because one lady sat next to me and told me I looked scared as hell. I nodded, biting down on my lip. She asked me if there was anyone I wanted to talk to. When I told her I wanted to call my mom, she walked with me over to the phones, which were now vacant. She helped me punch in the numbers to call out, but one number on my card was written funny; we couldn't tell if it was a zero, a two, or a six. After a few frustrated attempts to figure out my ID number,

she punched in her own ID number and had me dial my parents' house number. The comforting voice of my mom set my tears flowing. "I'm sorry, Mom, I'm so sorry," I kept repeating. She told me she wished she was there to hold and soothe me; that only made me cry harder. I explained to her what happened.

"So how hard did you punch him?" Mom asked me.

Smiling for the first time, I responded with a snicker, "Pretty hard."

"Good!" Mom laughed back.

"My hand is swelled up from it." I admired my enlarged knuckles.

Before we hung up, I asked her to call Grandma and tell her I was sleeping over at a friend's house and that my cell phone died. Our conversation ended when she told me she loved me. I put the phone back on the receiver, light tears still falling down my cheeks. I kept my back to the room to catch my breath before returning to sit down.

I was called over to a table where a few ladies were chatting over a game of cards. I joined them.

"What are you in for?" one of them asked me.

"Fifth degree domestic battery and a hit and run," I answered.

"Are you serious? That's nothing!" another lady with long hair and glasses said. Her front tooth was chipped. "I beat up a cop!" She looked pretty pleased with herself. I couldn't help but smile.

A dark-skinned girl, who didn't look much older than me, introduced herself as my cellmate from Chicago. She was in for possession of drugs.

I grabbed a sheet of paper and a pencil and doodled to myself as the other ladies continued with their card game. Keeping my mind and hands busy helped me become content; the fear I had earlier started to disappear. Every so often, I glanced around the unit. I spotted the girl who'd been in the waiting room with me; she was getting her hair braided by another inmate. Lucky her, she got out that night.

Around ten o'clock, bedtime was announced by the guards. As several of the girls picked up the chairs and stacked them in a corner, I snuck off to my room. My cellmate followed. She climbed up to her bunk and got herself settled into bed. I sat, cross-legged, on mine.

Unable to sleep, I drew. In the corner of the cell, a desk was nailed to the wall and there was a window narrower than my forearm. I drew the desk and window. My cellmate peeked down from the top bunk. "You should be drawing the comics for the newspaper," she told me. I didn't answer, but kept on drawing. She kept talking to herself, fast, using "fuck" and "shit" with every other word, so I couldn't understand anything she was saying. As the minutes slowly passed, her chatter died down. I shaded the walls of my drawing with my finger to add the finishing touches. *I am not here*, I titled the drawing. I placed the paper and pencil in the bin under my bed. I crawled under the thin sheet, laying my head down on the flat pillow, shivering. Taking in several deep breaths to keep myself calm, I shut my eyes and prepared to face a sleepless night.

# Seth Love

## *First Forest*

Our ride over the gravel of a mile long driveway and into the arms of the first deep forest I had ever known seemed impossibly long. The experience irrigated introspection. My customary silence as we traveled along the dust laden path was shared by my sister.

Grandpa Morris, in between reaches for his spitter, was peering over the steering wheel while telling one of his nonsensical stories. The man's stutter was enhanced by our bumping progress and the occasional backfire of his rusted pickup truck. Upon arrival, he ushered us from torn velvet seats and the sharp scent of Copenhagen.

Grandma Cheryl was waiting at the doorstep of our new home, with her wringing hands and thick glasses. The three of us approached her across the small lot, tasting dust and sweat. The sun had fixed the forest and the small grove with a particularly heated glare. The power of it was enough to still the wind and sag the forms of our forest's dried evergreens. Grandma Cheryl made an effort at a smile before demanding that we take a shower. We must have blanched, because she ran her hands through tight curls and said that there would be time to play later. Through the dust of the driveway and beneath a sheen of sweat that couldn't possibly be showered away, the arrangement seemed ridiculous. But once we were polished, she was off on some other task.

The day was finally allowed to begin after we were dressed in new clothes. I wore rubber boots and jean shorts that had belonged to my father. My blue shirt had been shoved on against my will. What my sister wore didn't reach my notice. Except for the Barney shirt. I remember that because it was mine.

We were joined in the yard only by the heat and baked green of deep summer. My dog, a grown mass of auburn fur and muscle, was intent on being part of the picture. Sager had an affectionate obsession with me that made it hard to deny that he was the dumbest animal I had ever met. By way of case and point, we were playing fetch. With a rock. Sager lived as a rare diversion from the subspecies of Golden Retrievers. He was specialized, or at least special, in that he wouldn't return a stick or ball.

So, with the focused gracelessness of a six-year old, I heaved Sager's favorite piece of gravel in one direction and ran in the other.

My sister followed as I tore across the untamed yard, making sure to allow me to stay in the lead. Jessica was faster then, and is still cleverer by half. Where I led, she would follow with enough distance to ensure I would be the only one to fall into trouble.

The pair of us raced over a lawn that still belonged to the forest. With cautious glances, we vanished among the boughs of the only living witnesses to our escape. The branches drooped with satisfied fatigue, and barely shifted in the



abruptness of our passing. A varied bed of brown and green absorbed our steps. We remained silent, with ears strained for the worried and unwelcome calls of our grandparents, and even the aroma of needles had been distilled to a whisper. Soon, we burst through the evergreens and onto the bank of our favorite place: the river.

Sunlight that had been diffused by the canopy was funneled onto our own piece of Lester River. Of course, the strip of water was only ours in terms of firsts. We had been the first to launch our hand- made boats from the mud and detritus of the river's edge. I held the personal prize of being the first to nearly drown beneath the roiling flow.

But pine shepherds and the sun had brought enough heat to seduce Lester. Most of his strength had evaporated.

My shirt was left on the bank, because clothing was coarse and the fabric did not remember my father. Wobbling in, the water soon came to just below my knees. Boots two sizes too big wriggled with the insistent current. A partially submerged rock lay just ahead and the moss covered island was the perfect first target. I set to conquering.

Jessica stayed barefoot on the banks. Mud and leaves never seemed to mark her. The clay of the banks might paint the sides of her feet and the tips of her fingers. Sometimes the earth would give her a mustache when she wiped a nose that was always running. But the marks could not be more than subtle, because I would not have been surprised to learn that she had risen from a faded mass of clay. Her single black braid, too, recalled her heritage. I was sure the river and woods remembered her fondly. Both would only allow the rare fall; either onto moss or over the slickest of rocks and into shallow pools.

The sun always made sure to burn me, and I was always falling. I rarely made it to the front porch of Grandma's house without being hosed down. Regardless, my sister and I were always quick to laugh incredulously when it was mentioned that we didn't share blood.

I panted exultantly from my newest rocky throne. Grandma had given me a bowl cut that always needed to be brushed out of my eyes. I would stomp away when she mentioned how blonde and curly it was; and that it would be a shame to cut it short. This meant that I had to paw at my bangs each time I paused to look upriver.

My knees soon were bleeding with pulse and affect alongside my hands. This was because the as yet unsmoothed patches of the river stones had agreed to refine me. Soon, I was sure, my hands would be ingrained with even more calloused roughness than my father had earned.

So I bled joyously while leaping from rock to rock. With the sting of each fall I could drift farther away from the knowledge that the banks would remain silent. My father had vacated his right to order me harshly back to shore, to fix me with a scathing glare before grinning warmly and pressing a fishing pole into my hand.

But the game was still ours, as long as I kept my gaze focused on the next obstacle.

The brown eyes of my sister stayed mostly on me and simultaneously said, "*Grandma would spank you for that.*" And, "*I'm so much better at climbing than you*". I was safe though. Jess was the type to hold secrets and wear masks. So I knew to follow her eyes closely while trusting her with everything. She liked to sing, too, and spent the day humming wordlessly.

I had heard it whispered among adults that Jess hummed as a coping mechanism; in order to help forget. They also said that I had throttled a classmate named Tyler as a way of projecting my pain.

Jess and I thought the adults were silly. She loved to sing. She was going to be a singer someday. Tyler said he was better at soccer and had earned an adjustment.

We both knew where the hurt came from. Remembering or forgetting wasn't a concern for Jess. Scars would come and fade with time, so she sang. I would later read, as was my way, the words of Alexis Carrel that read, "Man cannot remake himself without suffering; for he is both the artist and sculptor," and know why I craved the chisel. I wouldn't know this until much later, but it was the Lester River that told me it first.

So we continued up the river—farther than ever before. My sister sang and danced lightly over exposed roots and sharp stones, heedless of what lay behind. She could have been ahead and out of sight. But Jessica remained behind and let me listen to her song flirted with the splashing notes of the water, making sure that I never waded in too far or fell too hard. What's more, she didn't speak when helping me upright. It was the same way she gave me pilfered candy or let me win at *Go Fish* when I cried and couldn't make it to the top bunk. Jessica and my first forest were content to hum softly while I wore my sadness.

Our progress halted as the light began to fade.

What we found on that day doesn't have a geographic location. But I remember it was beside our river for a day. The place was absolute peace. The cool passing of the river was a rubbery breeze behind my boots. There was a mineral taste that may have ran from the hand I used to wipe at my bangs. I know that it smelled like saturated earth and the suggestion of sap.

What stays with me most was that there were no words. Of course there was music, with my sister's notes and Lester's grumbles rolling amid the perforations of clattering branches and birdsong. But we couldn't hear or feel the stinging balm of, "I'm sorry for your loss". We didn't wrestle out from under the pity of, "You know I'm here for you". Instead, peace placed some of the first bandages with silence.

My sister and I remained there for a time. We were bonded with shared agony and all the colors greater than red. Between the two of us there were fresh wounds and fresher air.

The pines stood patiently, too, as they watched over Lester. We shared peace for some time. When we were ready, the glare of the funneled light turned to a warm grin.

# Jakob Randa

## *My Sanctuary*

*Pieces of me are buried on the trails I've tramped. There are no eyes here full of judgment or contempt.*

*My life here is not vacant or available for rent, whatever tears and fears I have I have come here to spend.*

Before me is a mountain reaching high up to the sky. I know not of God, nor am I wholly convinced of science, but my sanctuary is a convergence of the two. A wooden post is planted before me, nailed to it is a brown sign warning me of its difficulty. I'm fool-heartly; I believe men are forged by the difficult journeys they make. I'll exert everything that I am here to feel whole. I belong in the woods, for modern society moves too fast and I need someplace slow. I revel in solitude. This is my home. I am safe here, even as I make this journey alone.

The trail juts up at a 45 degree angle. It is narrow and hazardous and I thirst for what awaits. I linger for a moment, the June sun beats on my bare back. I lift up, swinging onto my shoulders my canvas Duluth Pack. I close my eyes while inhaling and exhaling slowly. The soles of my shoes grind in the gravel preparing for travel. In my hands I hold my five and a half foot poplar bo. I open my eyes, it is time. I am ready to go.

My feet dig in and I make my climb. The wind whispers secrets and clears my mind. The trail rut is surrounded by tall birch and maples and the grass grows in patches that curl downhill. With each step I can feel the burn in my hips, thighs and calves. There is no need to move fast. I take in the beauty surrounding me, and tap into a state of understanding.

*I am a refugee amongst magnificent trees, the ancient wisdom of these woods ease my miseries.*

*I listen to the wind, to the birds, and to the crickets as they speak, I will tell them the secrets I keep.*

The trail winds like a slithering snake as I climb. It cuts right behind a poplar and plateaus for twenty feet. I stop for a drink, and bask in radiating heat. My lungs burn and I shake off the effects of having spent the winter months in hibernation growing fat. Each day away from this place was far too long. The trail begins to widen as I carry on. I hike past a wooden bench and I near the entrance of the groomed ski trail. I have reached the peak and gaze out on all that is below. Down in the valley the St. Louis River gently flows.

*There is innocence here and I am free, I bury my failures and the things that pain me,*

*And what might have been lost, will someday no longer bother me.*

*I'm led by the sun without any ideas of what may come.*

I head east on Gill Creek Trail. It gently slopes down and rises just as quickly. I am at peace, and lost in the swaying of the tall grass on either side of me. Leaping over a stretch of mud, I breathe in the musk of the earth. This short section of trail curves like an upside down U and before I know it, I have returned to a narrower path lined by walls of brush. The branches are dense the leaves lush, I have never loved coming to a place so much. The trail breaks over a valley of trees, and I am filled with serenity. I keep going, for the best parts of the trail are still yet come. I have seen no one as I come upon a clearing where a single daisy grows, and I am possessed by the wonders of nature and everything she owns.

*I come to this place for it makes me most happy. I am at peace alone here,  
nothing to distract me.*

*Nothing here is ever out of place. It is beautiful, it is wonderful, it is the definition  
of grace.*

The S shaped trail descends steeply into a valley. I am lead to a creek that has made its own path, I hop on rocks making my way across. The trail leads back up and I tip toe over the roots of a lone spruce that grows on top. The trail is much narrower here than anywhere else. For a while it plateaus, and it makes the hike easy as it goes. But it does not last long as the trail descends again, and I come upon a whitetail doe. She bounds off in a flash, bouncing gracefully as if she's gliding over the grass.

*This place is sacred; I hope it remains so until the end of time. Too much has been  
lost,*

*In the advancements of mankind. I close my eyes and bow my head,  
Vowing to myself, that I will not follow in the footsteps of those men.*

Before me is a dried creek bed. I walk across the rocks and uphill. I am close to the end, coming to the place on the trail where I found my bo. It was a gift from the conservationist that had been clearing the trail. I am fast approaching where the trail rolls and plateaus three times. Each time, I envision it as flights of stairs. The rut is soft and I feel mud beneath my feet, it makes the climb that much more sweet. There is not much trail left and before I know it, I come to the road, I have reached the end. I stand on the gravel shoulder of Highway 210, exhausted from being pushed so hard by my old friend.

*There is no place like Grand Portage Trail and I miss her terribly.  
I don't know how much she has changed. I curse those June rains.  
My home is gone, the other trails I've tramped do not compare.*

*I am counting down the days until I can return there.  
When she's finally reopened you know I'll be there.  
And if you ever get the chance let her take you for a dance.*

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The Grand Portage Trail is found in Jay Cooke State Park, Carlton MN. According to officials in the park the trail remains closed due to the Great Flood of 2012. It is unknown to the author at this time if the trail will reopen.





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