

The Mockingbird

The Student Literary/Arts Magazine
of East Tennessee State University



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The Mockingbird

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of East Tennessee State University

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**Mockingbird
2011**

The Mockingbird

2010



2010 Editor's Note

Jeff Holland

For the 2010 edition of *The Mockingbird*, I wanted to make a couple of changes from the past issues. First, I wanted a broader range of judges. I feel that increasing the number of judges makes for a more accurate selection of the works. Furthermore, my staff possessed a varied range of experience levels. Instead of having one extremely knowledgeable judge, I incorporated seventeen judges who ranged from sophomores to graduate students. Second, I wanted to eliminate placement of the chosen works. We should embrace all inclusions without placing one above another. Therefore, I have eliminated the designation of first place, second place, and third place; all literary works are equal. With the aforementioned changes, I feel that the 2010 edition of *The Mockingbird* will be a memorable experience for all readers. It will hatch a refreshing change from past issues so that our magazine can soar into the new decade.

Student Literary Judges for the 2010 Issue:

Alex Blumenstock	Brittany Hall	Sam Smith
Kayla Boring	Ray "Sweetpea" Jones	Sara Styles
Tiffany Brown	Keely Mohon	Mary Tapp
Leslie Cassell	Audrey Peters	Jessica Tweed
Rebecca Catron	Ellie Rinehart	Isaac Wilson
Adam Fletcher	Brett Seybert	

*Note: no judge was allowed to review any category in which he/she submitted works.

Special Thanks:

I would like to extend many thanks to my wonderful and talented staff, the art staff, Ms. Lisa Jones, Mr. Wayne Dyer, Dr. Thomas Alan Holmes, Mr. Joseph Arnett, and the true love of my life, my wife Jodi. Without everyone's support, this magazine would not have reached its full potential.

The Pub and Roy Harper

Fiction • Adam Lambert

I was sitting at the bar with Roy Harper the night Jameson got engaged. It was as appropriate a place as any. He and Randaline had their first date there as well (another event at which I was present), and they'd met one another's parents there, too. There was history in that pub, but not a history that would be scratched into a book or put onto a calendar. It was a history, however, that would be just as important (or more) for those it involved. It was not Appomattox courthouse, but there had been many a man surrender there. It was not Washington, but hundreds of oaths had been taken. That pub was every event in history, but on a personal, diminutive scale. However, the particular instance I would like to recall involves the patron, and tenant of the next to last barstool from the right, Roy Harper.

Roy Harper was about five feet seven inches tall, but his voice was that of a man at least five foot nine. He had brown hair (as far as anyone could tell) that he kept covered up with an assortment of brown hats. He usually had a green shirt or sweater on under his jackets, and wore corduroy pants five nights a week. Occasionally he would sport a dark red shirt, which matched his burgundy barstool to a tee. There was the intermittent occasion when Roy Harper might spill his drink on his shirt, mismatching him from his seat. Nevertheless, Roy Harper was probably as close to a best friend as I ever knew in my adult life.

"No, I suppose I wasn't meant to be a millionaire," Roy Harper burred.

"What are you talking about, Harper?" I replied.

"I was just recalling the day I thought I was gonna have it made, the day I almost became a millionaire."

"Another?" asked Jack from behind the counter.

"Always," Roy Harper said, "always another, friend."

"Yep," Jack whispered grabbing a frosted mug.

"Like I was saying," he continued, "I was thinking about the day I almost struck it rich. Practically holding a barrel full of money. I'da had to call you to come help me carry it all."

By this time, as was common, Roy Harper had attracted the attention of three strangers and a boy, who had already angled their chairs to hear the tale.

"I was up at Lonesome Pine, playing golf... it must'a been about twenty years

ago now, playing with Dog Houndshell, Browning Wynn and Shannon. It was more than twenty, cause that's the year before Shannon got diagnosed– it was seventy-three I think. We all rode up there in my old blue Shelby Mustang for a best ball tournament, and if we didn't have the best team there, I'm not Roy Benjamin Harper. Shannon could knock down twenty footers left and right. Hell, you know Leonard, you played with him.”

I nodded and inhaled.

Roy took another drink, and pulled on his collar, wincing and turning his head towards the strangers. The young boy stood looking at him with his hands at his sides, white shirt untucked. I sat still facing the bar, but listening to Roy, slightly curious of the story *I* had even yet to hear. I thought there was probably good reason for that.

“So, there we are on the first tee. Shannon went first puttin’ a safe one out there in the middle with a three wood. I followed ‘im. Pushed mine right.”

He drank again with his eyes closed.

“Then Hound Dog stepped up there. Now, Dog is a lefty, and on this particular hole, there was a tree about twenty yards in front of the tee box, reaching out to the left middle fairway. So Dog steps up there, and tees his ball up. Then, he stepped back, and looked at his shot. He walks back up to his ball, and re-tees it up on the right side of the tee box, and steps back to look at it again. He leaned left and right, a’lookin’ at that shot, then huffed back up there and re-teed on the left side. He backed up again, and leaned up against his club on his hip. He stood there lookin’ for a minute, and then turned around to all of us. He stared at us, and at the other ten or fifteen people for a second...”

Roy looked around, imitating a stooped Hound Dog. “Threw his hands up in the air and said, ‘Well Goddamn boys! I ain’t never been tree-hooked on the first fuckin’ hole!’ ”

The strangers started to cry they were laughing so hard. I chucked to myself, holding my drink in my right hand, propped. Roy was sitting to my left staring and laughing, wide eyed at the strangers. I suppose Jack and I were expecting something about like that, so it didn’t catch us off guard right away. I noticed Jack sniggered himself, wiping off a bourbon glass with his apron and shaking his head.

“Oh shit. I tell ya,” Roy Harper wheezed.

The naïve boy stood staring at Roy Harper with a look of confusion washed over with boredom, like he might at a monument on a field trip.

“So what about the million dollars?” the boy asked.

“I’m getting’ to that, son,” Roy Harper replied.

“Harumph,” the youngster puffed as he stuck his hands in the pockets of his rolled up jeans.

“Hound Dog just picked his ball up, and we played Shan’n’s.”

Roy raised his glass to his lips for another drink, but words starting coming out before he could sip.

“So we finally get around to hole twelve, a par three. And that’s where I nearly became a millionaire, gentleman.”

The strangers became more attentive, and the boy was now slightly leaning on Roy’s knee, craning his neck up at him on the barstool. I turned my head away from the Regulator clock I’d been staring at to see Roy sitting up like a marine with his chest out. You’d think he had the million dollars in his pockets at that very moment, or a corn cob in his ass.

“We were taking a break up on the hill where the tee box sat, overlooking the liver-shaped green below. I stood there leaning on my club and chewing on a tee. Wynn was over there arguing with Dog about something, and Shan’ was next to the fence taking a piss. So, I went over there to see what they were fussin’ about. Turns out that Dog claimed he’d nearly made a hole-in-one on this hole before. Said he’d done it last week, and was betting that he could get closer to that hole than Browning could every time. Browning Wynn, as you well know, is a proud man, and wasn’t having Hound Dog talk to him that way. I swear, you can’t put stock in a damn thing Dog says, but you know the Wynn’s, ev’ry one of them rich and proud.”

The strangers ignorantly nodded in puzzled affirmation, but they weren’t wrong. The Wynn family was extremely wealthy. Hell, they used to own the land the golf course itself sat on, until they sold it for that purpose. Their great grandfather (also named Browning Wynn), had set up businesses all over the county on various land plots he owned, and half of those had become convenience stores. The entire, massive Wynn family didn’t have to work another day if they didn’t feel like it, but they all still went to school. Eventually each would wind up holding some high-ranking legal position throughout the state of Virginia, simply to remain in the aristocracy. I’d say by this point in their lineage, it wasn’t optional. I doubt they gave much thought to that, though.

“...and Hound Dog called him an uppity bastard,” Roy Harper said in a disapproving tone.

“He is,” Jack barked from across the bar, now engaged with another customer, but obviously still listening in.

“That’s why I wouldn’t have had a problem taking his money! ‘A fool and his money,’ they say. So, like I was sayin’, they were about to start talking about one another’s mothers. That’s when I walked up to ‘em.”

“What’d you say?” questioned the boy, whose hands were now tugging on the sides of his shirt.

“I told ‘em both they were fools. I told ‘em that if they stepped up in that tee box right there, and hit a ball each, that I knew who’d get closer.”

“Well,” said one stranger in a suggestive tone.

“Me!” Roy bellowed.

The strangers cackled and rolled their eyes, as the lad smiled admiringly up at Roy. He mimicked him, putting his elbow on the back of a chair, like Harper’s was on the bar.

“So Wynn calls me a boostful asshole, or something like that, and I told him I’d wager with ‘im,” he said, then stopped to take a long swig.

“Well, what went wrong, Roy? Let’s hear it,” I said.

“I reckon I was getting’ to that Leonard,” he condescended, and took another panicky sip to buy time.

“So Wynn asks me what kind of wager I’d like to put on the shot, and I joked back with him that I wanted all his stores he owned. To my surprise, his pride spoke before he had a chance to say anything, and he agreed. I asked him what he wanted of mine—which was to me, a blame joke, and he said he’d settle for my good plot of land there next to the river.”

I bluntly spoke, “You still live next to the river, Harper.”

“I know that! -But *they* didn’t!” he spouted. “Damn, Leonard,” he said with the last wisp of a breath.

“So I told him, I’d bet him the land. We shook on it squarely, like men, and agreed. Old Shan’ would attest to it if he was still here. So Wynn says he’d go first. I told him to go right on, that way I’d know whether I should knock it in, or if I could just wear a blindfold and hit it.”

“Where’d he hit it?” asked the boy, removing his propped arm and becoming a kid again.

“On the green, about six feet from the flag,” Roy replied.

The guests looked on anxiously, waiting to hear the ending they already knew.

“So I nodded at him, stepped up, and hit my ball.”

The boy again spoke, his grubby hands grasping tightly to a wadded, white dress that nearly hung to his knees.

“Where’d it go?”

“It hit right next to the pin, son. But, the damn thing had so much backspin on it, that it jumped back, and rolled off the front, into the fringe.”

“So you lost?” asked the stranger in the middle, slightly bemused.

“Sure did,” he replied in a satisfied fashion.

“But he said you still lived next to the river,” the boy said pointing at me.

“Well, I told him that he couldn’t have my land. Where would I live? I told ‘im it’s the only valuable thing I had besides my ol’ Shelby.”

The boy was quiet for a moment, then asked, "So what did you lose?"

A grinning Roy Harper paused for a second and glanced at me. He looked back down at the kid.

"Ask him," Roy said, pointing to me with his head, "he drove me here."



In Search of Thebes

Poetry • *Anthony B. Cole*

It started out with books,
searching them out in the library, always keeping an
eye out
for something.
I didn't know it then, but I was looking for people like
me, not knowing why but still in search of the intangible
something—
a something that would tell me I wasn't alone.

The Sacred Band of Thebes, their struggles,
cornered into history books, nothing more than a band
of friends.

Your passion so diluted I didn't know what to make
of you,
the books spoke of timeless love but love without
consummation;
was this unrequited, platonic love all you were?

I've spent my life searching for you,
a way to recapture the magic I felt looking on Greek vistas,
imagining the brute call of the men to arms,
charging their enemies, each man with his lover;
I've been looking for you as long as I can remember.

A nation not once again,
but once for all,
a way for us to stand together and not shrink for who we are,
but to expand.

The ancient books were always indirect,
coded language that I spent years deciphering.
They talked of comrades and companionship,
of ancient soldiers' bonds and the strength of them.

I didn't know they meant the kind of strength you feel

when the full flushed dilation of a man astride you,
or the strength of his hips pressing into your own.

I didn't know, and so forgot the books.

The next time it was poetry.

Bullish assignments for poetry readings,
summers spent in banal verse long dead,
I finally found something that spoke to me.

I was in the back of the library searching out poetry,
courtesy of the public school system I had little choice,
but found something else entirely.

I don't know who ordered it,
what daring librarian imported such a work,
but staring at me in the back of a musty library were the
works of Walt Whitman.

O rhymeless verse, rhyme without measure, rhyme not
concerned with your iambs!
You truly were my first love.
Your graying hair and pot-belly intrigued me,
and your verse,
I fell in love with your verse.

For a little while, I fell in love with everything.



Desert Whispers

Fiction • Rebecca Catron

October 2001

Gently he bends down to wet the cracked corners of her mouth. Cool crisp drops run down his fingers and trickle across her lips. She opens her eyes slowly, the lashes stuck together with the cobwebs of her dreams.

“John,” she whispers.

Touching her lips, he quiets her. She lays back, resigned to the continuing silence. There will be time for secrets later. He sits back on his heels and watches her. Their eyes meet too often to ignore the weight of what lies between them. They try to look elsewhere, but see nothing that holds even the slightest bit of comfort, only the dry sterility of the hospital room. He is hot. Unbearably hot. Sweat pours down his forehead and pools around his temples. The heat transports him back fifty-six years to the New Mexico desert, and he is caught up in the remembering.

July 16, 1945. 110 degrees.

John walks to the edge of the testing sight with an overwhelming feeling of excitement, and, inexplicably, dread, though he considers himself lucky to witness firsthand the detonation of an atomic bomb. He is about to see the weapon that will end the war, end the loss of American lives! He puts on his goggles, follows his colleagues into the steel bunker, and prepares as best he knows how for the blast. Though he tries to keep his mind on the upcoming detonation, his thoughts inadvertently drift back to Betty, his new bride with hair the color of fire and eyes the color of ice. They were married less than a year ago, in the quick style fashionable at the time, the air of death and desperate celebration all around. Of course, his job assured him that he would see no combat, though he was no less a part of the war effort. He and Betty had moved from their small hometown of Rogersville, Tennessee, to the booming town of Oak Ridge. Few people knew why all the new factories had emerged seemingly overnight in the sleepy Tennessee town, though some mused the factories were producing suitcases for Eleanor Roosevelt. John could laugh at all the rumors surrounding Oak Ridge, as he was one of the few who knew the truth behind the operations.

Unfortunately, Betty knew nothing of the joy he felt as he and his colleagues grew closer to perfecting the bomb, and began to understand, though only vaguely, the amazing possibilities and responsibilities that followed the harnessing of nuclear power. Keeping a secret from Betty, no matter how

critical the secret, seemed like a breach of their sacred trust. Sometimes, to ease his conscience, he whispered everything to her when he knew she was asleep, after her breathing had become shallow and regular. After admiring her for a few moments and running his large hands over the length of her satin nightgown, he would pour out his soul to the rhythm of her breaths.

“Thirty seconds!” The tension was mounting amongst all present, as they waited to see if everything they had worked for would come to pass. A collective breath was held.

“Ten seconds!”

John held on to a post to steady himself. Would the bomb work? Would his sacrifice be worthwhile? Could they end the war?

“One second.”

Then the blast, the blinding light, and the deafening silence. For an eternity, it seemed, no one breathed or moved. Everyone was caught in his own thoughts, his own justifications and rationales. Everyone breathed with the bomb, their breath sucked in and forced out again. Imploding then exploding. Silence. Breath. Silence. Breath. The bomb was beautiful. And terrible. Terribly beautiful. The world changed in a moment. In the back of the room, a few men jumped and yelled, and congratulated each other with pats on the back. John was near the front, close enough to hear Dr. Oppenheimer whisper:

“We have become death. The destroyer of worlds.”

“The destroyer of worlds,” John repeated. He chose to see himself as the savior of worlds. They had witnessed the end of the war! And yet he knew, as they all knew, that they had also witnessed a beginning, though no one spoke of that then.

Betty let out a yell of her own as she won her first round of blackjack in Las Vegas. She and some of the other wives were passing their time at the casinos, waiting for their husbands to finish their business trip. She thought of how jealous the other girls back home would be when she told them she had driven halfway across the country with her handsome new husband to vacation in Las Vegas! Of course, she would leave out the part about gambling, and the fact that her husband was not there to share her adventures. She would also leave out the fights they had had more frequently lately, and the fact that they had run out of things to talk about. John couldn't talk about his work, which she understood, but resented anyway. She could only talk about playing bridge with the girls so many times, for heaven's sakes! They had drifted into silence after only six months of marriage. Truth be told, she missed her family, the gossip of her girlfriends, and the slow familiar rhythm of her hometown. This, too, she kept tucked inside her heart. She thought back to the last time she saw him:

Betty had stared out the window of the black '39 Chevy at the miles and miles of nothingness, and felt an almost physical ache for the enveloping lushness of her mountains. Finally, the heat, the acrid air, and the silence converged inside her, and she began to shout into the vacuum of the desert:

“John, I can’t take it anymore! I need you to talk to me! Please!”

“What! What do you want me to say?”

“Anything! We can talk about the weather for all I care. Before we moved to Oak Ridge, ”

“Oh, life was so much better when we lived in Rogersville?”

“Yes! We had our families. And a house. And plenty of land. And we talked. And laughed!” By this time tears were falling freely.

“We still laugh,” he said defensively.

“No, John, we don’t. We don’t talk. We don’t make love. We never spend time together. We’ve only been married for six months for heaven’s sake!”

John wiped his head with a faded blue handkerchief before replying.

“Well, what do you want to talk about?”

Betty paused to think, but realized she had nothing to say either. Both their lives had turned into barren wastelands. The heat from the desert killed off the last of her anger and sapped every inch of caring out of her. They both resigned themselves to the silence. In her heart, she prayed that she would get pregnant soon so they would have a new life to talk about, a shared life of their own creation.

But the girls back home didn’t need to know anything about all that. All they needed to know was that she was having a ball in the big city.

“Hit me again!” she cried, and was soon caught up in the fever of the cards.

The next evening when John returned to the hotel room, his joy was almost tangible. He swept Betty up in his arms, kissed her more passionately than he ever had, and whispered to her how much he loved her. After they made love, she lay in his arms and prayed that she would get pregnant at this moment, when their happiness was strongest.

August 06, 1945.

Betty switched on the radio as she and John waited anxiously for President Truman’s announcement.

“Sixteen hours ago an American airplane dropped one bomb on Hiroshima, an important Japanese Army base. That bomb had more power than 20,000 tons of TNT. It had more than 2,000 times the blast power of the British ‘Grand Slam,’ which is the largest bomb ever yet used in the history of warfare.

The Japanese began the war from the air at Pearl Harbor. They have been repaid manyfold. And the end is not yet. . . . It is an atomic bomb. It is a harnessing of the basic power of the universe. The force from which the sun draws its power has been loosed against those who brought war to the Far East.”

Betty and John stared at each other, visibly stunned, not knowing whether to celebrate or to grieve.

“We are now prepared to obliterate more rapidly and completely every productive enterprise the Japanese have above ground in any city. We shall destroy their docks, their factories, and their communications. Let there be no mistake; we shall completely destroy Japan’s power to make war.”

Finally, the end of the war in sight! Betty breathed a sigh of relief, as she realized that John would not have to enter the war after all. No more names of dead American soldiers to be read over the radio each night. No more comforting her friends who had lost husbands and brothers. But at what cost?

“If they do not now accept our terms they may expect a rain of ruin from the air, the like of which has never been seen on this earth.”

John suddenly realized that the destruction might continue, and his mind could not begin to grasp all the implications of the bomb’s continued use. He tried to focus instead on the inevitable end of the war, and the end of the loss of American lives. But he knew that the joy could not long overshadow the stench of human suffering, the extent of which had not yet been disclosed to the public.

“The secretary of war, who has kept in personal touch with all phases of the project, will immediately make public a statement giving further details. His statement will give facts concerning the sites at Oak Ridge near Knoxville, Tennessee, and at Richland near Pasco, Washington, and an installation near Santa Fe, New Mexico.”

They both stared at each other, the weight of the secret spilling itself out upon them. She looked at him as though he were a stranger, amazed that the man she had been sharing a bed with, sharing a life with, had been involved in the creation of a weapon which was more destructive than anything the world had ever seen. How could her husband, who caused life to jump in her womb, also contribute to the creation of death? And yet he and the bomb also signified the end of American deaths. She ran from the room, unsure of everything.

John sat, numb with the sudden revelation of the secret for which he had almost sacrificed his marriage. His sanity. Now that everything was out in the open, he realized that his life had become that secret. He felt like an empty shell, waiting to be filled with something new. He said a prayer that his wife’s pregnancy would be a signal of a new beginning, an era of life.

March 11, 1946.

“We have become death. The destroyer of worlds.” The haunting words of Dr. Oppenheimer had become a tortuous mantra in John’s mind over the past few months. He repeated the words to himself now as he watched his wife hover near death. He held her hand and gently wiped her hair back from her sweat drenched forehead. His tears mingled with hers as she struggled to find the words to say all that she wanted to say to him before she died. Here. In this hospital room. Childless and hopeless at 23.

“Is this all I get?” she thought to herself. “Is this all there is to life?”

The past two years, her adult married years which should have been the culmination of womanly happiness had been nothing but a wasteland filled with too small patches of quiet happiness. And yet, here was her husband, holding her hand. A husband whom she both loved and loathed. He was the one who harbored the poison which had killed their son. He was the destruction of the East and the hope of the West. He was the beginning and end of her pain, and her only promise of happiness. How had it happened that she had nothing else to live for? Nothing else which defined her? Her only hope had been the promise of children. And now . . . She shuddered as she remembered the disfigured stillborn she had given birth to only hours before, and realized that no healthy life would come of this union. She knew John understood this as well. What point was there in saying that which would only bring more pain? She grabbed his hand and waited for death to come. They lost themselves in their own silent vigils.

October 2001.

“How long have you two been married?” inquired the nurse’s aide, as she fluffed the pillows and tightened the sheets.

John added up the years, all the years of quiet longing, all the years of hopeful waiting, all the years of sadness mixed with beauty, all the years that could have been so much more had they only been able to let go and love each other through the pain.

“Fifty-seven years,” he said, after a moment’s thought.

The number was as shocking to him as it was to the twenty year old aide, who could not yet comprehend the meaning of a lifetime together.

“Fifty-seven years.” John repeated the number to himself under his breath.

“That’s quite a long time! How did you two meet?” she inquired, chipper, as she busied herself emptying the bedpan.

Kari loved to ask this question of all her married patients and cherished the wistful, romantic look couples got in their eyes when they talked of the first time they had seen each other. She felt this question was her small gift to her patients, as the answer could often restore a tenderness that was in danger of being worn out. Their responses gave her hope that there was indeed someone out there for her, too.

John thought over her question for a moment, and realized a better question would be how they had managed to love each other for so long. Through so much. Through the realization that they would be childless, to the loss of his job after the war efforts slowed. Through the silent years to the years that they could not talk enough. Through the adoption of their Japanese son, one of the orphans of the atomic blast, to the Vietnam war, when they cried together over the limitless expanse of man’s desire for destruction. Through their son’s disillusionment with them to his eventual marriage. Through the empty nest years and the slow descent into old age. And now, here they were, no words left, as in their early years. They were left now with all the things they

had not said, and might not ever say, and with the secrets that inevitably build over a fifty-seven year marriage.

He knew, for instance, though she did not know that he knew, of the time she had almost had an affair. It was in the years following the loss of his job, when they were still young and did not yet know how to love each other through difficult times.

December 31, 1947.

“He betrayed me, and I will betray him,” Betty thought as she mentally prepared herself to have an affair. She tossed back another glass of wine, and checked her makeup in the bathroom mirror. Despite the fact that she was 25 and had given birth to two stillborn babies, the sadness did not show on her face. In fact, she looked better than she ever had with her copper red hair tied back in a sleek ponytail, her lithe figure accentuated by a hunter green dress she had bought that afternoon. Outside, she could hear the men laughing over the barbeque in the backyard while the women chattered incessantly in the kitchen. All the pointless frivolity! She had become so weary with everything.

“Everything is meaningless under the sun.”

Betty had never before understood King Solomon’s words, but when she had heard them again in Sunday school the week before, the words had resonated in her soul and given voice to all that she could not say.

She repeated the words now so that she could hear her soul speak again.

“Everything is meaningless under the sun.”

She stared hard at herself one last time, her hair the color of fire, her face flushed with the anticipation of what she was about to do, the heat of her body emanating out of her. With a mixture of dread and anticipation, she made her way to the front parlor where she and Rob had agreed to meet. After they met, they planned to sneak out the front door and steal an hour at Rob’s house while Judy, his wife, and John were busy at the block party.

After an eternity, it seemed, her feet finally led her to the parlor. When she saw Rob in the corner, book in hand, he looked less like her savior and more like a desperate last resort. With his nondescript features and bland clothing, he looked like all the other men at the party. Yet something in his eyes let her know he shared her special sadness. And so they would spend an hour escaping their sadness together. When she moved towards him, he looked up with eyes that seemed to see through her soul, and began to read from a book of poetry by Stephen Crane chosen from her private collection.

Slowly, with full understanding and tangible sorrow, he read,

Yes, I have a thousand tongues,
And nine and ninety-nine lie.
Though I strive to use the one,
It will make no melody at my will,
But is dead in my mouth.

An admission, a silent understanding. Softly, she began to cry, and he tenderly kissed her tears and brushed his lips against hers. Then, placing his hand over her heart, he spoke to her soul as he read:

I walked in a desert.
And I cried,
“Ah, God, take me from this place!”
A voice said, “It is no desert.”
I cried, “Well, But-
The sand, the heat, the vacant horizon.”
A voice said, “It is no desert.”

Then, Betty began to weep. Rob led her out the front door and she screamed to the unforgiving night and heartless world. He kissed her softly, his gift to her sadness. John watched from the parlor window as his wife kissed another man. He turned away and said nothing, returning to the kitchen to retrieve another Manhattan for the men out back.

That night, Betty put on her best satin nightgown, and crawled into bed beside her husband. He understood that she had come back to him from her own private desert, and he accepted her silent admission.

“I want to read you something,” she said, as she retrieved her bible from her nightstand.

“OK,” he whispered, afraid to hear the words.

I denied myself nothing my eyes desired;
I refused my heart no pleasure.
My heart took delight in all my work,
And this was my reward for all my labor.
Yet when I surveyed all that my hands had done
And what I had toiled to achieve,
Everything was meaningless, a chasing after the wind;
Nothing was gained under the sun.

John leaned back and thought about the words as she looked at him expectantly. With great tenderness, he recited, “I have experienced much of wisdom and knowledge. Then I applied myself to the understanding of wisdom, and also of madness and folly, but I learned that this, too, is a chasing after the wind. For with much wisdom comes much sorrow; the more knowledge, the more grief.” Through the words of King Solomon, they gave voice to the silence of their souls. Rain came to the desert and they bloomed in each other’s arms.

October 2001.

“That,” John thought, “is how we met.”

Instead he told Kari that he and Betty had met at a college dance.

“It was World War II, and the only time we were guaranteed was the present. We married six months after we met and moved to Oak Ridge.”

“That’s sweet,” Kari said, not really listening at this point. She was ready to go to lunch to meet a cute doctor she had recently started seeing. Caught up in the promise of love, she excused herself from the room.

John turned to his wife, and ached to see her so close to the end. Her mouth was gaping, breath and secrets rattling in and out of the dry hollows. Her grey hair was matted to her forehead, her brittle skin stretched tight against the bony contours of her face.

He bent close to her chest, and could still hear her heart beating faintly. She inhaled. Exhaled. A muted moan caught in her chest. He quieted her, kissed her cheek, squeezed her hand.

“I love you,” he whispered directly into her ear.

Two tears slipped from the corners of her eyes.

“I know you love me too.” He said the words for both of them.

She closed her eyes. Inhaled. Exhaled.

Nothing. Nothing.

He waited for another breath. Expectantly. Full of hope that she would not leave him yet.

Nothing. Nothing.

A young nurse came in to disconnect her from all the tubes which had fed her medicine and oxygen. When he knew that she would speak no more, he was suddenly filled with words. He wanted to talk to anyone who would listen. Even this young nurse who had only a vague concept of war, or atomic bombs, or love, or death, or real suffering.

“I helped build the atomic bomb,” John said, a little too loudly, with the mixture of madness, regret, and glee that comes with all resolutions.



Done Playing

Poetry • Luke Champouillon

There are brief moments
when you have to wonder
when the curtains will come down;
the lights fade,
and the actors come out
before us,
thank us for watching,
and let us get on
with the real thing



The Ojibwa Dictionary of Phrases: Gii-ayaa (ge-a-ya) • v. 1. He became my hero

Non Fiction Prose • Leona Holman

When I was nine years old, growing up in Alberta, Canada, I had a very extraordinary friend. Of course, an extraordinary friend sometimes risks becoming a hero: a champion of everything you hold high and noble. He was nothing less. And, like any kid without a father, his friendship filled a familial gap. In the time I knew him, he taught me the stories, songs, and lessons of an Old People, walking an Old Road.

His name was Juuyaay, meaning “sun” in his native Haida language. And if you could once more see through the eyes of a child, you would easily see how I came to call him Jay.

It’s still right on the edge of my memory how we came to be friends.

He was a giant man who thumped around in the apartment below ours. He had a Mt. Sinai voice when he spoke—or laughed. For a man of such strength, his gentleness surprised me. He was a storyteller and an artisan of American Indian crafts: totem poles, grizzly bears, and flightless eagles all fashioned from cedar and cottonwood and all brought to life in narrative time. Only after I finished an extra page of long division, would Mam let me visit with Jay and listen to the stories. I’d grab four lemon cookies and race down the stairs. Jay would wait until my foot hit the last step to begin, “Be careful how you walk, kid. The Old Ones say that in springtime, when all things blossom with new life, we must be careful where to step, for mother earth is pregnant.”

One early morning, Jay knocked on the door. Mam answered. Jay stood, wearing muck boots and toting a canvas bag, asking if I could go arrowhead hunting.

I had only ever seen arrowheads at flint knapping events held during the Calgary Stampede. Every summer, cowboys and Indians came together at the Stampede to re-enact treaties of the Old West and demonstrate bygone skills; arrowhead making was one of them. Back then, and for as long as Mam would let me, I’d sit and watch old men with skilled and fibrous hands replicate tiny bird points and complicated early woodland pieces, noting their

patience. I must have had that same look of astonishment in my eyes that day, waiting for her to say yes and that I could go.

Mam found a pair of old galoshes and stuffed my pockets with tissue. The whole time she fluttered about the apartment looking for extra sweaters and wool socks, Jay stood at the door, grinning. I hated all the fuss, but, according to Mam, it was nothing to hear of hikers freezing to death up at Banff National Park because they didn't wear galoshes or take tissue. Maybe, that was true. For sure, the nature of spring in western Canada was as indecisive as a green-broke horse and just as dangerous. Mam wrapped two peanut butter sandwiches and gave me strict orders to say "yes, sir" and "no, sir." She smiled and thanked Jay for including me. There was a moment of silence that passed between them.

My brother and I lived alone with Mam. She worked in a manufacturing plant making metal rods. Every payday, she took us to our favorite restaurant, where my brother and I ordered a platter of Texas-style fries with brown gravy and chipped beef. We ordered vanilla milkshakes, and Mam watched on, sipping creamed coffee. There was no need to ask about our father; it was understood that, for the last three years, life was calmer without him. Mam was careful about where we went and with whom, but she knew Jay and didn't feel the need to say all the cautionary things mother's usually say.

It was still early when we left out in Jay's truck. We drove past acres of grass-fed buffalo; their bodies looked like obsidian boulders standing odd distances apart. Their eyelids flickered and absorbed the morning frost.

While we drove, Jay explained how arrowhead hunting was addictive. How easy it was to keep looking for just one more, even if your pockets were full. He told me about the time he went to the river, closed his eyes, and prayed: "If I can find just one more, one complete one, I won't look down again." That was the day he found a perfect Clovis. He even kept his promise: he walked in careful strides over uneven ground, trying not to look down at his feet.

On our outing, Jay talked about the arrowheads he had collected over the years and called each one by name, all beloved . . . all distinct. He talked while guiding the truck down roads that weren't really roads at all. He followed grooved tracks until the shape of Milk River came into view. It was the same river he had tracked the year before, and all the years before that one, hoping to discover anything he might have missed.

We parked against a row of Juniper trees, and when I stepped out of the truck, I felt like I had stepped instantly into another world: a time that was not my own.

We started toward the river. The ground was still frozen in places and mud-soaked in others. The evergreen aroma added to the ambiance. The grasses were still the color of winter wheat, and they crunched underfoot. Nearer the river, in the hollow places by the river bank, the water sprayed like sparks from a welding machine.

Jay explained the best way to find arrowheads, and I listened intently, determined to make him proud. He said that the trick was to pay attention and that a good hunter could hear the rocks talking. Furthermore, the trick was to look for rocks with teeth

marks in them: rocks that looked like they had been chewed around the edges. To me, however, all rocks looked the same; they had the same quality—nearly. They had the same color and same hardness. I told him what I was thinking.

“That’s not true,” he said, “Rocks are like snowflakes. They’re unique. And not just rocks and snowflakes, all things organic are unique—like twins.”

Still, all the rocks looked the same to me.

He assigned a portion of ground for me to work, and, as I worked, he told me about antler billets, how to chip small flakes from the stone, and that a bifurcated stem is what dissects the arrowhead base from the body, making it look like a capital “A.” He told me about edges, outlines, and long, slender grooves channeled from the center to the point, and I looked for those qualities. I looked scrupulously over every small bit of earth, one portion at a time. He was more adept and worked swiftly through his portion, and so we worked accordingly.

Above us, the hawks soared like figure skaters, coasting the rim of a denim-washed sky, calling and calling: it was mating season. One red tail hawk dipped its wings, and I got to see how its belly outlined a flush of vertical feathers, light and long.

We worked in silence most of the morning, knowing there was an unspoken reverence in what we were doing. From time to time, I’d stop to look up at Jay. He looked like Paul Bunyan and his shadow like Babe the Blue Ox. His long hair was drawn back into a ponytail, and it rose at the tip when the wind blew. His skin was not unlike Mam’s: she was Indian, too, a half-breed Indian with fawn-colored skin. Her people were from the Ojibwa nation.

I was not without the knowledge of Mam’s Indian-ness but rather, my own. There was a missing part to my collective whole that I had not yet discovered, and, somehow, Jay knew that. He knew that I would one day feel the need to reach in and examine the color of my own heart. Arrowhead hunting was a preview of that journey—a lesson in seeing through the layers of things to find the particular.

“Do you believe you can do anything, kid?” Jay asked.

It was a simple enough question, yet I felt embarrassed to answer. He asked the same question, rephrased.

“Do you believe you can be anybody you want to be?”

“Mam always told me that if I tried hard enough, I could become anything I wanted.”

Jay agreed and then added something I had never considered. He said that I should be mindful of self-assurance: if I tried long enough and hard enough at anything, I would indeed become good at it. And that was why I should never lie, trick, take, or use more than I needed.

“Never risk becoming good at being bad,” he said.

So I promised I never would and went back to looking for arrowheads, not thinking about his words but feeling their truthfulness.

Just then, a sedge wren flew under some bottle brush grass near a felled log. It looked curiously at me. There was something the color of aluminum glimmering in the sunlight near the log. I walked over to it. It was an arrow shaft from a compound bow. Some small evidence, bits of skeleton, was left where a doe must have fallen, fatigued after vaulting through the field: a hunter's failure.

"See something?" Jay asked.

I didn't want to tell him about the aluminum arrow, the unused deer, or the way things were sometimes left and forgotten. Looking at the remains of a once living thing, I wanted to tell him about Mam and how lonely she was. And how she still kept shirts in the back of the closet, unused, hanging like ghosts waiting for a body to inhabit them. I wanted to tell him about school and how my classmates had parents—not parent. I wanted to say all that, but I didn't. I didn't because he already knew.

"No. It's nothing," I said.

In the distance, a train wailed, breaking a certain feeling of the day because, before its shrill pitch and before the aluminum arrow—signs of the new world—we were like two ancient warriors searching an ancient land for clues and remnants of our own forefathers, like eagle brothers hunting prey, like father and son chasing an elusive stallion down a spiral canyon.

At that moment, watching him there at that river, I surrendered to the idea that having a hero was just as good as having a father.

• • •

He was a hunter of history, and the rocks spoke to him; we were looking for rocks with teeth marks in them, and we were just getting started.



September

Drama • Robert Kottage

Cast

John— an Irish-looking man in his early 30s.

Sophie— an Irish-looking woman in her mid 20s

A waiter

A crowd of bar patrons

A dim, crowded Irish pub in North Boston called The Black Rose. Thursday, September 20th 2001, 900 PM. A mahogany bar is visible upstage, a brass railing in front of it, tapestries with Celtic family crests hanging by drop wires from the “ceiling.” Several small black tables are arranged downstage, and a wrought iron staircase on stage right leads to the second floor. The crowd talks in dumb show, waiters bustle. White noise hisses from all the televisions at once, reaching a crescendo, and then stops abruptly as the camera zooms in on its subject. George W. Bush. He approaches a podium, wearing a sky-blue tie and navy suit, framed by teleprompters, while all of Congress gives him a standing ovation. Everyone in the bar spontaneously stands and applauds as well.

Throughout the rest of the play, Bush delivers his September 20th Address to a Joint Session of Congress on all the televisions, but the audio should be “doctored” so that it becomes unintelligible, bass-heavy background noise until specific lines from the speech are quoted in the text.

Everyone sits again. Lighting frames a table just left of center, where John and Sophie are sitting. Sophie is looking down at the table. She wears a burnt orange turtleneck and jeans. John wears a charcoal woolen trench coat with a white shirt underneath, and jeans. He is visibly shaken. Two beer mugs and two double shot glasses lie empty on the table between them.

SOPHIE. It all comes down to this, then.

JOHN. *(smiling nervously)* Is this wild or what?

Sophie nods once.

JOHN. I mean is this not fucking *wild*?

SOPHIE. *(looking up)* I mean, yeah. It doesn't make me smile, honestly.

JOHN. It's just nerves, Sophie.

The waiter is passing in front of the table, staring at a television along with everyone else. John flags him down and points at the glasses, reordering, two and two.

JOHN. You know what it reminds me of? Whitewater rafting.

SOPHIE. Hmmm, right. Exhilarating.

JOHN. No, of course not. More like you're trapped. There's the current, and there's the rubber raft, and that's it. Once you hit that first hole, if you decide—You know what? Maybe I don't want to be whitewater rafting after all . . .

BUSH. Whether we bring our enemies to justice or bring justice to our enemies, justice will be done.

Congress stands and applauds on television, and the whole bar follows suit again, including John and Sophie. This lasts for about fifteen seconds. Once they all sit back down, John is wide-eyed. A long pause follows.

JOHN. Sophie?

SOPHIE. John.

JOHN. We're trapped in this, aren't we? It really is—it's just like rafting. Or being in the stands at a soccer match.

Sophie is silent.

JOHN. (*pensive*) Poor Sophie. Poor, poor Sophie. ("Trying on" the thought of this) Sophie talking to John again—imagine that. And all is right with the world, as they say.

SOPHIE. (*suppressing a smile, then changing the subject*) Are they going to keep making us fucking stand up, then? I'm already sick of it.

JOHN. (*nervously*) Shhh. Keep it down, Soph. And I double-dog dare you—

SOPHIE. I'm not doing it again.

JOHN. Oh, you'll stand all right. Don't, and you'll be marked a Muslim.

SOPHIE. Fuck that.

JOHN. (*teasing*) I might have to change tables if you don't. Disappear into the crowd.

The waiter arrives with two shots and two beers, and sets them on the table. He hesitates.

JOHN. (*to waiter*) Oh—I started a tab with the other dude that was here before.

Waiter nods and leaves.

SOPHIE. I hate that you would even say that. "Marked a Muslim." What does that mean? I don't even know what to think about that.

JOHN. Hey, don't blame me.

SOPHIE. Well, who the hell said it?

JOHN. (*raising his shot glass*) Speaking of bitter arguments about nothing, here's to old times. Salut.

They both down the shots. John shivers violently from the alcohol, but Sophie is still.

BUSH. Those who commit evil in the name of Allah blaspheme the name of Allah.

Congress stands on television, applauding respectfully, but the bar patrons remain seated this time. Sophie alone stands, but her body language indicates she immediately regrets calling attention to herself. She doesn't clap.

SOPHIE. *(in a hiss)* Would you look at these bastards?

JOHN. Sophie.

SOPHIE. Bunch of cigar-chewing, seersucker—

JOHN. Sophie, sit down, I'm begging you.

Sophie sits, privately relieved to have been forced. But she realizes this about herself right away and is filled with self-loathing.

JOHN. *(impishly)* Told ya you'd stand.

SOPHIE. *(despondent)* What are we even doing here?

JOHN. What are we doing here—are you kidding? “The Black Rose”? “Over the highways and byways the pilgrim goes aflame with the name of my small black rose”?

SOPHIE. Oh, I see. What are we doing here?

JOHN. Laden with meaning. Symbolism.

SOPHIE. Ah.

JOHN. Eighteenth century. Language of flowers. Each one meant something different. Back when people passed messages to one another through plants. “Say it with flowers,” they'd say.

SOPHIE. And now we just fly into buildings.

JOHN. *(shrugs)* People have grown denser. Tougher to get a message through. *(long pause)* Funny thing about symbolism—when you're an English major, you spend so much time digging through the facts to find the symbols, like a dog looking for a buried bone. “Look, everybody—I found a symbol!” *(pats like a dog)* But when you start looking around the real world and all you see anymore are symbols, you realize. I've gotta start trying to dig my way back to the facts. You know?

SOPHIE. Not really.

JOHN. Yeah you do. It's like what you just said about flying into buildings. We're gonna have those towers blazing in our brains forever. This guy they're saying was behind it—this...bin something, bin Osama—hell, his face is going to be like a picture on a stamp. I give it a month, he'll join the ranks of Elvis and Hitler.

SOPHIE. I don't think he'll be on any stamps.

JOHN. No, I'm serious. I need to know— *(hesitates, realizing he's raising his voice, looks*

around sheepishly, and continues sotto voce)—I need to know what happened here. They're saying, "We will never forget." Ha! It's been nine days and we already don't quite remember. We never knew! And this (*looks behind him*)—this s.o.b. on the television? He's blowing it up. Penetrate, inflate, obfuscate. I need to know the facts, before they get so buried in flags and flowers that no one can even tell me what they are anymore. (*pause. continues desperately*) I need to know what happened here.

BUSH. Every nation in every region now has a decision to make. Either you are with us or you are with the terrorists.

Everyone in the bar stands and applauds again. John and Sophie are the last on their feet, but they just stand looking at one another, not clapping, while everyone else stares at the nearest television. They are somewhat obscured by other bar patrons milling about. Everyone sits again.

SOPHIE. (*lightening the mood*) I hope Jesus has been charging royalties on that sentiment.

JOHN. (*smiles sadly*) You're so beautiful, Sophie. I want to remember what this is like, looking at you. In eight years, it'll be all blown out of proportion.

Sophie is silent.

JOHN. I'm afraid. Your eyes—your eyes were always so black. Like falling off my feet, up into something. Nobody ever looks as hard as you do at things. You're unrelenting.

Sophie is silent.

JOHN. We haven't talked in years now, Sophie. You realize that? Years. That makes me afraid, too. Did we have an argument? Can you remember?

Sophie is silent.

JOHN. Was it something . . . something to do with your car? An accident? (*pause*) Say something, goddamnit, or I'll—. (*pauses and contains himself, then continues, quietly*) Please say something, will you? One blink for yes, two blinks for no. (*He laughs, but it comes out a cry.*)

Sophie is silent.

JOHN. I know what. I know how you can say something without even opening your mouth. don't stand. Next time all these fuckers start applauding, just don't stand. I dare you.

BUSH. Our nation, this generation, will lift the dark threat of violence from our people and our future. We will rally the world to this cause by our efforts, by our courage. We will not tire, we will not falter, and we will not fail.

Everyone stands again, including John, who is shaking his head wistfully and looking down at Sophie where she sits. Sophie isn't visible to the audience behind the people standing in front of her. The ovation lasts about fifteen seconds. When everyone sits again, Sophie has vanished. John is not surprised—he appears to have expected this.

All the lights go down except that of a single television (the largest one, which should be stage right), and a spotlight on John, who remains standing. Everyone else is invisible and still from here to the end.

BUSH. Even grief recedes with time and grace. But our resolve must not pass. Each of us will remember what happened that day and to whom it happened. We will remember the moment the news came, where we were and what we were doing. Some will remember an image of a fire or story or rescue. Some will carry memories of a face and a voice gone forever.

JOHN. There were things I wanted to tell you. I wanted to say something like this. the reason I never really loved you? It had nothing at all to do with you. It was my fault. (long pause) I guess it's way too late to be honest now. No way to dig the facts back up. But . . . I need to know what happened here.

BUSH. Fellow citizens, we'll meet violence with patient justice, assured of the rightness of our cause and confident of the victories to come. In all that lies before us, may God grant us wisdom and may he watch over the United States of America. Thank—.

A burst of gray interference fills the television screen before Congress can begin applauding, as though the cable has gone out, and after a brief pause the spotlight on John is killed. The television hisses static for fifteen seconds before slowly dimming to black, the sound fading to silence.

Curtain.



Oil Spill

Poetry • *Derek Slagle*

the smell of gas floating
on surface tension of water's rainbow.

the spectrum waiting and sliding
as burnt webbed feet holding indigo plumage.

the silver hull of a ship is a fan
breaking water surfaces. tossing waves smacking
its cold side like a buoy.

a photo negative of clouds swimming,
rolling their weight onto sand and rocks,
blackness creeps through a white sea foam.

father and I in our boat with automatic fishing
poles watching a ribbon trail
as we leave the Carolina shore.



Denial

Fiction • Caron Castle

The Five Stages of Grief

- Denial (*this is not happening*)
- Anger (*why is this happening*)
- Bargaining (*I promise I'll be a better person if..*)
- Depression (*I don't care anymore*)
- Acceptance (*I'm ready for whatever comes*)

I'm exhausted. I'm unwell. I'm losing weight, my head aches, and I'm having trouble concentrating. I'm winter-tired. My limbs are heavy, and cold seeps under my clothing. If not for my bony hips, my jeans would be in a puddle around my ankles. My glands are swollen; my throat is sore—something's got me. I study, walk the dog, keep my appointments, pretend to be happy and healthy, but I only want to lie on my back in bed. I sleep more than I am awake, but these ever-darkening circles around my eyes prompt concerned questions at first from family, then from friends, and finally from strangers. The lady at the salon suggests highlights for my hair, concealer for my eyes, and pizza and burgers for my thin frame, though she compliments my protruding hipbones. I tell everyone cheerily, "I'm fine," and I am pretty sure I mean it. J. handles me as though I'm made of glass when we make love and then makes a sad face when he catches me leaving the shower. He insists I seek help. I visit the doctor on August 17th

• • •

"What is your primary complaint?" the lady in scrubs inquires.

"I've lost thirteen pounds in three weeks."

The big-boned nurse says dryly, "Congratulations. Dr. Smith will be with you in a few minutes. Undress and put on this gown."

"Open in the front, or back?"

She shrugs, "Doesn't matter."

When I unfold the tiny rectangle of scratchy paper, it becomes a not-much-larger rectangle of paper with a circle cut out of the middle. While I'm working out the mathematics of how to cover seventy-one inches of girl with seventeen inches of paper, Dr. Smith knocks and enters without waiting for a reply. I stand there, naked in socks, freezing.

“Here. I don’t know what this is.” I thrust the crumpled paper at her, and she impatiently slides the hole over my head, walks to her computer, and enters a password. I catch sight of myself in the mirror and note that the paper does not drape compliantly over my upper body, but extends stiffly outward on either side of my shoulders. I’m a scarecrow: skinny, unhealthy, ridiculous, but I’m grateful that the mirror is too high to include my fresh bikini wax. At least I am spared the indignity of viewing my newly childish nether regions. The lady at the salon was right: I need a pizza. Dr. Smith types madly, and I shiver. I look around for something, anything with which to cover myself, and see that the doctor has placed her plump behind on the other, more generous square of paper that was meant to offer my lower body some degree of modesty. She types. I decide to stand there, bare-assed and bare breasted, sheltered by nothing but my paper collar, and force her to deal with my protruding ribs, bony legs, and shiny crotch.

The doctor finally turns to face me, and I’m disappointed when she doesn’t flinch.

“So, what’s going on with you?”

“I’ve lost thirteen pounds in two weeks. I feel awful. I look awful. My glands are swollen. My boyfriend says I’m not sleeping well, but I sleep eleven hours a day, am tired all the time, and always cold. Something is wrong, and I don’t know what it is.”

“Hmmm. Have a seat.”

The doctor opens the paper blanket with one expert flick and then ungraciously tucks it between my sharp knees. The blanket is temporarily warm from her body heat. This seems like a small kindness, and I’m caught off guard for a moment . . . and grateful. Both the moment and the warmth pass, and I shiver. She takes my temperature (low), looks in my ears, at my throat, and asks about my periods.

“Are you coughing?”

“No.”

“Had any nausea, cramps; any other complaints?”

“No.”

“Could you be pregnant?”

“No.”

“Hmmm.”

“Do you have any joint or muscle pain?”

“No.”

“Not even your back?”

I don’t answer.

Dr. Smith feels the glands in my neck, makes a face, then suddenly yanks the stirrups out and hits the call button for a nurse. “I need to examine her.”

Caron, I think you need to examine Caron. I'm right here in the room, and I can hear you.

"Raise your arm."

She pokes around in my armpit, finds something tender, moves her cold hands down to the side of my breast, and finds another one.

"That hurts. What is that? Are *all* of my glands swollen?"

Her turn to snub: no answer. She taps, bangs on my stomach, runs her hard fingers down to my hipbones, and finds another painfully sensitive spot.

"How long has this been here?"

"I don't know. I wasn't aware of it."

I rise up to see what "this" is, and feel a cold alarm climb the back of my neck. There are large . . . lumps just under my skin next to my hip.

"Get dressed, and walk down the hall to the lab. We will need to do some tests."

"What are those lumps? Are those lymph nodes? But I don't have a fever, so I don't have an infection, right? What is wrong with me?"

"I'm not sure; that is why we need to draw some blood. The nurse will help you."

The nurse will help me. In my recent experience, the nurse wasn't very goddamned helpful, but the naked have few options. The nurse appraises me, frankly, while I am getting dressed; she takes a deliberate look at the landing strip below my navel, snarls, and quickly pulls the door open wide before I have my pants back up.

I sit in the next waiting room for more than an hour as other lab patients come and go. The lab technician's eyes slide past me each time he calls another patient, even though I'm seated in the first chair, right in the doorway. I stare at the wall, leaving a month-old copy of *Newsweek* unopened on my lap. An elderly man takes it without asking. I'm cold, tired, uncomfortable, and wondering, at this point, if I give a shit if the other patients will be offended if I scratch my itchy bikini line. The urge becomes unbearable; I scratch good and long, but no one notices.

Seven vials of blood later, I drive home with shaky hands and two stiffly bandaged elbows. The next few months are a hazy, slow-motion blur. A doctor who calls me "Carol" scrapes out my uterus. It takes several days to recover, but my condition doesn't improve. I'm sent to an otolaryngologist who surgically scrubs my sinuses with what must have been steel wool and mustard gas, and I spend three weeks inhaling fire, slowly healing. No improvement. My tonsils are removed by the same doctor, who introduces himself before the second surgery. He clearly has no memory of having buried his instruments in my face just three weeks before. Recovery is brutal and takes five more weeks from my life, but nothing changes. I'm down to 103 pounds now, and my family has stopped making comments about my weight. But the concerned looks are beginning to take a toll.

I no longer hear anything about the dark circles from my friends, but that may be because they stopped calling. Strangers no longer ask if I'm tired, but they have begun to bump into me with such frequency that I sport bruises on my feet, arms, and elbows that match those under my eyes. I'm too weak to protest, and the assaults continue. I feel insignificant, unsubstantial: a nuisance. Even in my dreams, I am made of paper, glass, and cobwebs. J. comes to the door with sympathy now instead of flowers and calls more than he visits, but my pride doesn't know the difference. He tells me that he loves me and is always there for me, ready to help me with anything I need, but he only kisses my forehead.

Dr. Smith arranges a biopsy of my stubborn lymph nodes, and I find I'm no longer alarmed by sharp metal needles and knives and the indifferent eyes that peek out from white caps and masks. I'm cooperative: there is a devil in me, and I want it out. Though she doesn't know it, the anesthesiologist has become my most caring and considerate friend. She gives me permission to sleep

. . . .

I receive a call from the doctor's office: "Come in and discuss the results of the biopsy."

I ask: "What have I got? What has got me?" The voice on the phone says, "Policy doesn't allow us to give results over the phone, but can you come in right away?" I should be frightened by the urgency implied in her request, but a relieved "finally" is all that I can summon.

An hour later, Dr. Smith thrusts my test results in my hands, along with pamphlets explaining the connection between the Epstein-Barr virus and Burkitt's lymphoma. She tells me three things: I have an appointment with an oncologist on April 17th, Burkitt's is a form of cancer, and that it is possible that I just have a chronic case of mononucleosis.

"Since August?" I ask, but she doesn't answer.

It is spring now; nothing has improved, and I have begun to contemplate my death. I have nightmares and awkward conversations with my family and boyfriend that end with "Oh, don't worry. I am sure you will be fine." I *will be* fine. I am fine. I'm *fine*.

My bed is my refuge and my hell. Exhaustion and insomnia fight over me, and I lie on my back for hours, in the dark, wondering if I am asleep or awake. It is March 1st, and I have begun working on a will, making a senseless list of account numbers, bills, and balances. I try to come up with profound words for my loved ones, but since they seem unconcerned and unaffected, the cold list of debts and assets is all I can manage. I'm strangely unemotional about this . . . affliction. I haven't shed a tear in months. I haven't the energy.

J. comes over and finds the pile of documents that define me: my car titles, property deeds, certificates of deposit, and utility bills. He tells me, "Don't be so dramatic. You will be fine," and goes to bed angry, but, of course, I am already there, shivering under

a pile of blankets. Anxiety floods my veins, and I am suddenly drenched and cold. My pillow is wet and hair is soaked. I sit up quickly and turn on the bedside lamp. J. snores beside me, dry, comfortable, oblivious. I put my hands to my face and feel something moist pour out of my right ear. I hold my hand tightly to my head, run to the bathroom, and flip on the light.

I stand in front of the mirror, shaking so hard that I hear my own teeth chatter and force myself to pull my hand away. Water, not blood, pours from my ear and slides coldly down my cheek and neck. Only slightly relieved, I step back into the bedroom and scan the ceiling for a leak: nothing. Back in front of the mirror, bewildered, I turn my head. My hair is plastered to my forehead, and my other cheek is also wet and sticky. I drag my fingers down my face and put them to my mouth. I taste salt. Salt? I've been crying? And it all comes rushing back . . .

• • •

It is raining, I am in the passenger seat, and J. is driving. "I'm tired of this song. Can I turn the station?" but he doesn't answer. *Jerk*, I think. I know he likes this song, but I'm sick and don't know *how* sick; *he* doesn't know how sick either, and you would think I could switch the goddamn radio station if I wanted to. Angry, I lean up and punch the button, *hard*. Harder . . . nothing. "What is wrong with the stereo? Do you have the remote?" He ignores me. I smash the buttons with more force and with both hands. I turn the knob, but the station won't change. I stare at J's face, it is incredulous that he is ignoring me while I beat his expensive receiver in a fury. J. signals, turns onto Center, and parks in front of the post office. I scream, "What is wrong with you? Why won't you answer me?! Are you a ghost? Am I?" But he turns off the key, steps out of the car, and coolly walks towards the post office. I watch as J. holds the door for a pretty blonde carrying a newborn in a snuggly. She prances through the door, blond curls bouncing, and a slight grin crosses his face as he stares at her ass. J. obligingly takes her flowered umbrella, shakes it, folds it, and places it carefully against the door. I step out of the car in a red daze, determined to walk home. Damn him. Blind with rage at his silent hostility and blatant flirting, I step into four lanes of oncoming traffic, but, miraculously, the cars miss me. I make it to the other side of the road and try to step up onto the sidewalk, but I'm so weak I have to sit on the curb for a moment, ankle deep in a cold puddle with my hands and knees shaking. I realize that I am seven miles from home and far too ill to walk.

I left my purse and cell phone in the car. I've been sleeping for eleven plus hours since at least July. I'm sick, useless, whiny. My underweight body is boyish and weak; the dark circles under my eyes age me. I haven't been fun, attractive, or productive since last summer. No wonder J. ignores me. I have used him up. He is too young to deal with a major illness, too young to settle for a debilitated, deteriorating, demanding girlfriend. I should apologize. I should suck it up and work hard at getting well. I'll fix this. I'll win him back, regain my health and my strength, highlight my hair, dab on concealer, gain a few pounds, and make him love me again.

I watch J. exit with the pretty young mother: laughing, chatting, and holding the door as she unfurls her bright umbrella. She is curvy, cute . . . healthy. I can make out her

blushing cheeks and freckles from here. She tosses her hair and laughs as J. makes a silly face at her fat, pink, wriggling baby.

My lip quivers. I can't do this. I don't deserve this. I took care of him when he had kidney stones . . . when he had that liver condition that turned him yellow for weeks. I've nursed him through colds, hangovers, and the loss of his mother. I fix my hair, smear on lipstick, and try to look pretty. Push up bras, bikini waxes . . . he hasn't kissed me in weeks and spends his charm on a stranger. I try to be fun, try to be upbeat, and try to pretend I don't feel like warm death. I'm tired. I'm *unwell*.

I see an eighteen-wheeler speeding towards me, trying to beat the yellow light. I realize that I am going to get soaked, and I'm trying to climb up onto the sidewalk with shaky legs when I hear a musical giggle from across the street. Fuck waiting for the oncologist. Fuck Dr. Smith and the whole crew of indifferent surgeons. Fuck my disinterested family, absent friends, and insensitive boyfriend. I'm tired. Sick of being bumped into, ignored, belittled, and treated as though I am invisible. I cover my ears with my hands, hold my breath, and step off the curb. I feel the wind and rain whip around me; my hair blows across my face, and I catch J's eye just before the truck reaches me. The freezing rain whips sideways, and the noise of the speeding truck on wet pavement is deafening. I breathe out, "*finally*," and all goes silent and black as the water hits my face. I put my fingers to my lips and taste salt.



Words Matter

Poetry • *Audrey Peters*

Your metaphors are obvious,
Like that bird represents freedom,
Or this ink stands for death.
You should know that even fools
Can be right on occasion, bright
Tongues whose words we should
Know, like Camus and Rilke
And that guy who stands
On the streetcorner, the man
Who speaks in tongues and wears
Too many coats, wondering
How many words it takes
To make a poem, how many
Scars to make skin entirely new.
He stands there thinking of how
Much matter words have,
And how little words matter.
And so he digs, he pries
And pierces the leather that binds
His body in—dismantling
Is one way to God, one way
To let the soul go free.



Whisper Whisper

Poetry • *Jacob Vines*

Whisper. Whisper.

Listen!

The brittle rain crackles
On the tin of my roof!
My head placed on my pillow,
My eyes closed to the light,
My legs and arms tingling,
My nostrils rotating with patterns,
My ears wild and thriving;
Wild to the voices
Of rain on a tin roof!

Shhh! Listen!

Whisper, whisper.

Hear the timid whispers
As each drip and drop tells
What they have seen on
Their fall from the heavens?

Have they seen the Hosts
With blinding light and radiance?
Did their bodies act as a prism
And cast a colored arch across Earth's prison?
(A medium of God's covenant.)

Have they spoken to stars
And heard their cosmic reply?
Or blown a kiss to Paris
As they fell from their height?
Or viewed the mountains of God
For any length of time?
Or heard the deep deep diesel
Resonate so high?
Or shook at all earthly wives,
Destructs of nature's life?
Or did their death did they question
Just seconds to their good-bye?
Or rejoice at the time they had,
That time was still alive?
Did they pitter about the heat,
Or patter about the tax?
Or did they live to die?
Or did they learn to relax?

Oh, listen to their simple replies
Of the death on my tin roof:

Despite their journeys, accomplishments,
Failures and wishes,
Regrets and aspirations,
Wants, lives,
They all end on a tin roof.
And they all breathe the
exact
same
sigh.

Listen!

Whisper, whisper.



Here

Drama • Daia Stager

Night. High amongst a bridge buttress with lights flashing from cars passing above, three women—1, 2, and 3—with filthy faces and hair, dressed in cast-offs, sit like Buddhas.

1: Here I am, under the bridge, as if I have nowhere else to go, by choice. Unthreading the loom.

2: I am stationed here, tuned to the heartbeats carried by the tires that whine overhead, the Unweaver.

Sirens wail.

3: They're coming! (*In the cadence of the siren*) AAAAAH! Too late for my children. Too late. Pushed aside. Ear-piercing cries, hear me.

1: Hear us.

3: The heart screams for the burnt bodies of my babies, seared into the skin on the back of my eyes.

1: Time-lines skewed.

2: Am I riding with Khan again?

3: No. That was then.

2: When?

3: When you burnt my house with my children and me in it.

2: We re-member. We did, didn't we?

1: Yes. Swinging swords. Thundering hooves.

2: Shattering the old ways.

3: Stirring the pot.

1: Now, marauders dress in grey flannel.

3: And chinos. Punching 9 keys with eyebrows raised.

2: Yes, that's a good one.

3: 8.9 revenues even with the collateral damage.

1: Justified. They weren't ours.

Pause.

2: Banshees chant in blood-stained voices, their condemnation.

1, 2, 3: Men

2: As if it's them—the others.

3: The others.

They snicker.

3: Sarah said—the truth which no one ever utters.

2: The truth is—there are no others—only us.

1: In the killing fields. On the killings. Under the killing field. Backs to the killing fields.

Slow hissing chant.

1, 2, 3: Only us.

1, 2, 3: Only (*pause, in breath*) you.

2: The night I lay dying, belly down, suffocating in eosinophils' toxins, paralyzed, earnestly praying to the Punishing One and the Redeemer, do not make my children orphans, the voices started in low whispers, we must take her out.

3: Take her out.

1: Take her out.

2: She's too damaged. I knew what they meant! Death to me?

3: Death.

2: In a vacuum of elephantine darkness I screamed.

1: Noooooooo.

2: Don't make my children orphans. I'll do anything.

1: Through threats of death and pain, anything?

2: What? Anything?

1: Yes, anything.

3: Forgive the unforgivable gropings of the demented ones.

2: They poured their pain into that small body in blind grouping and thrashing, smearing the cum and blood in hasty attempts to make it go away.

1: What?

3: It?

2: You know, the guilty evidence of their . . .

3: Even Here . . .

1: Now.

2: I can hardly bring my mouth to form the words . . .

1: Now.

2: No, I won't yet.

3: Not here.

2: Who is there to trust with this suffocating darkness?

3: I can't breathe.

A panting pause. Tires whine. Puddles are splashed. Lights flash by. Their Buddha faces return.

3: My son's soft skin, weathered and whiskered now, is scarred from the banshee voices' fangs.

2: Wanting to clip his manhood with their highbrow-glazed, fury-infected sanctimonious venoms:

1, 2, 3 Men Men

3: Not my son, you vicious bitches. I silenced them. With the eyes of a Mother and a heart once wounded by cum and spiteful censorship, I stripped them of their—get over it.

2: They limp and crawl through existence, cowering or preening.

3: I stripped their gory armor from soft, white shoulders to bare their anguished yokes to barren fields.

2: Killing fields.

1: Time-lines skewed

2: Didn't we burn together during the Inquisition?

3: Who burnt whom?

2: Does it matter?

1: Or was that Salem?

2: Was that you who sent the first born sons of Judah wailing to the crocodile God, Baal?

1: Yes, that was then. This is now. I have paid in full.

3: Remember death's last thought? Oh God, how could I – have you forsaken us?

1: Dharam Rai stuffs Kal Narinjin's maw with writhing souls.

2: Grinning cohorts savoring the sweet spice of regret and succulent guilt.

3: That guarantees the spinning of the Wheel.

Pause.

1: I remember.

2: I saw them when I lay dying.

3: I promised.

2: I will do anything.

3: I was sucked through an intestine of slick orange into the flaming bowels of Hell.

1: (*Screams*) Noooooo!

3: A small, soot-smudged face peered through gnarled hands. Tear trails down her cheeks. Eyes begged, free me. She was four.

1: Here.

3: Nothing mattered.

2: Only her.

3: In the name of Love, Life, and the Divine, you have no right to that child's soul.

1: I am, she is, I am, she is me.

3: She flew without hesitation into my embrace, a searing moment of my chest ripped open wide enough to let her in, stinking of torture, ripped and burning flesh.

1: How could they watch as one tied the body to a slab of cold concrete and that time mounted it and ripping his way in?

2: To one so small, like my children were, like my grandchildren are.

3: How?

Pause. Grieve.

3: I remember.

2: Time-lines skewed.

1: Tightly raveled knots of frantic suppression in my guts, muted until touched.

2: By some unexpected flash of tenderness that made it past the barricade, in the most unlikely place.

3: The cereal aisle.

1: That song played that reminded me of love like so much water under the bridge.

2: The brain as a fragment of the hologram of the universe requires periods of time for the focusing on and the grasping of its own contents.

1: So I escaped.

3: Here.

1: Under the bridge.

2: The biological time framework set genetically for all human experiences.

3: If not successfully absorbed, experienced, or learned.

1: For some reason.

2: Within the set bio-time framework, makes further development, absorption and experience incomplete.

1: Now.

2: Under the bridge, I am undone.

3: Or done.

1, 2, 3: Let go . . . (*in a softer tone*) let go.

1: My naked face recoils from eyes that would have it be another.

2: Wrinkles and scars, wrinkles and scars.

3: First, give up what you want to gain.

1: Let go of control.

2: Help me.

3: Let go of needing to be heard.

2: Hear me.

1: Let go of righteousness.

2: They hurt me.

3: Let go of ignoring the voices.

1: Speak now.

1, 2, 3: Shhhhhh.

3: Hear.

1, 2, 3: Shhhhhh.

3: Listen.



Their Daily Bread

Poetry • *Isaac Wilson*

Deserted streets
Empty yards
No June bugs dancing in the porch light
Hell! No porch lights
No dogs barking or cats clawing
Not even the crickets make a peep
Perhaps they weep
For having nothing to do
And no one to sing to
Only sounds of television screens
In this bizarre world
We call
THE AMERICAN DREAM
Where everyone is trapped
By the magic machine
That comes to us in primetime
And fills our heads
With garbage trucks and stop signs
Empty pizza boxes and used condoms
Bullet holes and dirty magazines
Road-kill, landfills, and prescription pills
Ads for weight loss and brain loss
Dried-up pimps and crooked bosses and
Dental floss the crevices of your mind
And wipe clean the slate of your being
Because there's no need to keep your mind fed
It's the place where everyone goes for their daily bread



That's the Way I've Always Heard It Should Be:

A Single Woman's Questions on True Love

Non Fiction Prose • Victoria Vanderveer

Of course, it all begins with a boy. That one we think is Mr. Right, our Prince Charming that we can't wait to bring home and show off to our parents. Tonight began with a boy. I'm sick of boys. At twenty-two, I want to date a man. There's a big difference. Sometimes I really think of swearing them off. But then a cute one walks by and gives you a wink. I never get winks! So, maybe there is something redeeming to the male breed. (Dude that gave me a wink is now hovering over his girlfriend. Yeah, I feel so good about myself . . . Waiter, another shot please?!)

– Journal, August 2, 2009

I'm reminded constantly of this Delbert McClinton-Bonnie Raitt duet, "Good Woman, Good Man." In the song, the two are searching for the proverbial good woman and good man: proverbial because the "good man" does not exist. He was our fathers and grandfathers, occasionally the heroic uncle, but somewhere in the gene pool, the "good man" disappeared, leaving all of us girls scrambling to cover our asses in tight jeans and miniskirts. We have spent years since praying for and trying to will into existence this "good man."

And what if he did exist? Would we not classify him as "not cute enough," "not muscular enough," "not smart enough"? If we can get past our inhibitions with his appearance and intelligence, would we not load him down with our incredibly heavy emotional baggage and run him off? Men are not made like they used to be, as if they were assembled in some factory somewhere. They don't open doors or pull out chairs; we're expected to pay half the bill, tip, and valet; we can't even ask them to take us to the hospital.

Everywhere I look, I see "shiny, happy people," as REM says. They flit, prance, hold hands, and smile candid one-sided smiles as they share plates of sushi. I look down at my Boston Roll and Vandy Roll, then back at the room full of couples, then back to the sushi.

Across from me sits the newly-married Larissa. She can tell what I'm thinking . . . I think. From the way I peel the label off the bottle of hana-awaka sake to the lifeless way I push my sushi around, she can at least take a good guess and figure out what I'm thinking.

“Don’t worry. He’s out there!”

This has to be about the millionth time she’s said that. Since we worked together at Walgreens and struck up a friendship at Volunteer State College, we’ve been hanging out on most Tuesdays, either studying together over pizza and beer or making the rare extravagance away from tests and homework to indulge in some of Nashville’s finest sushi and sake.

I try to raise an eyebrow but get off with only half-squinting an eye. “Yeah . . . then *where* is he?”

“Well, James and I met when I was workin’ at the pharmacy,” she answers with her sweet country girl accent kicking in. “He was a customer. We really hit it off, then he walked away, and I thought, ‘Damn!’ A few months later, here he comes again. And that was it.” A month after they started dating, they moved in together. A few months after that, he proposed. And now Mrs. James Austin is just another one of my friends happy with a ring on her finger.

Underneath the table, I trace my empty left ring finger, trying not to remember that it had been a year since I ended my engagement.

I’m not sad that it was over. When it was over, it was just that: over. He left without speaking, so I had a destructive moment throughout the house and pawned the jewelry. What else can you do?

Since then, there has been the Sexual Harassment Boy, the Wiccan, the Ex-Marine, Urinal Boy, and James—the James I knew and still longed for.

“Just make sure any new guy you date knows the difference between a urinal and a sink!” she laughs.

Yeah, it’s really funny to me, too. Ha ha. Well, maybe a little. I had invited a guy out to a dinner of pizza and beer with Larissa and her James, and he showed up in a shirt that looked like it had been vomited on, grey sweatpants, and with dirty hair. Unable to cancel at that point—and *believe me*, I tried—we went on to Brixx Pizzeria. At one point, he went to the bathroom, came back, and announced that he wasn’t sure if he had used the sink or urinal; they looked the same.

(*Cue the board that smashes me in the head.*)

Eventually, Chris came along. He was 24, an accomplished genius in a new field of computer science, and mature beyond his years. It had been a long time since I had fallen for someone, and throughout our friendship, I could see myself with Chris on a more frequent basis. He never told me why, but my feelings were never reciprocated. Maybe he had been hurt just like me. Regardless, we rarely—if ever—talk now.

At 22, I was more mature and experienced with romance than most of the girls I knew; I wasn’t going to put myself through any pain because some guy I liked didn’t feel the same. If I could move on, with my head held high, the day after I dumped my fiancé, then I could move on from him . . .

I go on and laugh at her joke. After a few bites of sushi, I shrug off most of the overwhelming feeling of loneliness. “I just have to keep looking forward. God will put someone in my path.”

After some more sushi, we talk about other things. It never seems to leave her mind, though, that I’m “the Single One.” “We really need to get you someone,” she says, picking up her sushi with her fingers. I laugh because she can’t use chopsticks.

“Well, if he’s out there, I’m one day closer to him.” That makes her smile. “Besides, God and I have a deal. If I don’t find a good man to marry, He will always give me good dogs. Just look at my pugs.”

Again, I trace the empty left ring finger.

Yes, I’d been engaged before

His name was Adam, and he seemed like Prince Charming for eleven months. We were constantly together, got two pug puppies, and had a fairly normal life. We both worked and took time off from school. In May of 2008, we went to Indiana to see my childhood friend, Kelly, graduate from Indiana University. Our time in Indiana was wonderful. He had chosen a quaint little inn for us, and across the street, there was a small restaurant that served breakfast and afternoon tea. Even now, I wouldn’t trade those days for anything.

The problems started when we returned. He became addicted to “Lord of the Rings Online”—LOTRO, as it was nicknamed, and that was the final nail in the coffin of our relationship. His life revolved around that damned game . . . and a girl he met while playing: “L.” I never knew her by any other name than “L.” When I had to have surgery that summer, in mid-June, my mother asked Adam if he still loved me. He said no. On August 1st, I kicked him out.

I think, perhaps, that my karma with love has simply ran out.

Larissa talks about something James was doing at work and then about their cats. I listen, nod, eat my sushi, and pour us both sake.

She asks about the well-being of my friend, Jessica, who suffers from cystic fibrosis. “Twenty-nine and doing well. She’s still having some trouble with her stomach but is fighting like mad.” We both admire Jessica for her strength. I want to be more like her.

Later, I drop Larissa off at her car. Turning on my iPod, Carly Simon’s song “That’s the Way I’ve Always Heard It Should Be” comes through the speakers. The words sting and hit me in the gut like a sucker punch, but I don’t change the song. Maybe it’s a sick part of me that listens to this song over and over. Maybe I just can’t help it. The situation is just too real:

*My friends from college they’re all married now,
They have their houses, and their lawns.
They have their silent noons, tearful nights, angry dawns
And yet they drink, they laugh,
close the wound, hide the scar.*

*But you say it's time we moved in together,
and raised a family of our own, you and me.
Well that's the way I've always heard it should be.
You want to marry me.
We'll marry.*

“How absolutely freakin’ true!” I think as I drive fast down the back roads to my parents’ house, my temporary residence. I have the top down on the convertible and let the wind whistle through my hair. My tears grow cold on my face, but I can’t hold them back.

Kelly is engaged to a man I can’t stand—but whom she loves.

Larissa just got married.

Jessica has been with the same man for eleven years, and they live together happily.

At night, I share my bed with the two pugs that Adam and I bought together.

I’m not unhappy, but I’m not happy. I feel so incomplete, like something is wrong with me. At a red light, I look in the mirror: aqua eyes, pale skin, pink lips . . . cowl-neck blue shirt, jeans, and moccasins. Subconsciously, I toy with my moonstone necklace.

But for tonight, I’ll go home, settle into bed with Milla and Otis, pray the same prayer I always pray, and try to sleep . . . maybe tomorrow.

Yeah, maybe tomorrow. Maybe tomorrow is one day closer to that man.



Anonymous

Fiction • Victoria Vanderveer

I have a photograph of a man whose name I don't know. Sometimes, I stare at it for a long time. Sometimes, I hate it and want to throw it away. Sometimes, I wish it would fall out of my limp fingers into the fire.

His face is pleasant enough: brown eyes, black hair, a cocky grin, a mole above the corner of his left lip. When I stare at it, I try to imagine his voice, what he would sound like if he spoke to me through the photograph. I can almost hear him: his voice is light and soft, like a gentleman's, not rough and throaty like the heavy smokers I pass in the park.

He sits on my nightstand in a broken frame. He stares at me at night. Occasionally, I stare back.

Today, I will take the photograph with me. Today, I will find this man, understand him, learn his name. Perhaps, I will come to know why I have this picture. I will go to the police and hand his photograph to them. Surely, they will know him or how to contact him. I will go to the fire station and ask for him there. Perhaps, they will tell me where he is. I will go to the newspaper and look him up. I will go to the library and find his name.

I sit up from my ashen bed and shake off the dust of the night. Looking over, I see his cocky smile and brown eyes. He is staring at me again.

No, I will not take him anywhere.

I remove his picture from the broken frame and walk into the kitchen. From my pocket, I take out my lighter; I hold it to the photo. Slowly, the flames eat it up, like orange caterpillars eating a brown leaf. I drop the burning mess into the sink and watch as it fades into ashes.

This is the last of me that I care to remember. That picture of me when I was young – that picture of a man I no longer know. I can't even remember him. He died years ago and was replaced by a heavy smoker with a throaty, rough voice.



Ensenserian Stanza

Poetry • Caron Castle

Lo I am mere American moderne

For whom it paynes to conform rigid verse
Whilst paying homage to a man well-learned
Homer inspired, rhythm and rhymes coerced
To wax romantic on Reformation
Epic ambition exalts the faire queen
Retires to deathbed; leaves restless nation
To lament noble unfinished decree
Despite heroic worke; *still* disagree.

Tortured language truly this madness be
Obsessive compulsive disorder, yes?
Tho I admire Spenser's consistency
Can structure set creativity free?
His untimely midlife death suggests stress
Worke unfinished; no resolution be.
His country still in religious duress
If only Spense hadde finished his duty
Great Britain's Church mighte know true unity.



Mother's Postcards

Poetry • *Tina Michael*

Postcard pictures of my mother
float on stacks of takeout menus
and magazine renewal notices.
Her face from a millennia ago
smiling at me from light years away.
A snapshot to tell me
today they had blood sausage
and her tongue curled into a knot
to avoid it.
This wrinkled and yellowed rectangle
promises that dad caught fish
as big as dogs
and she could not cut them
as they gasped on the counter.
Here my postcard reply
to tell her that she must be vegetarian
was marked "RETURN TO SENDER."
Her heavy penmanship proclaimed
in the margin that I was
"as absurd as the stars.
How, here in this Montana wide open,
could I avoid meat with
your father's family of hunters?"
Remembered stories of their trips
to be there with his people
reach through years
of passed over holidays
and unattended weddings and funerals
to make my heart feel heavy with guilt.
Guilt from knowing that her love for him
carried her miles and miles
across the country
year after year,
yet my love for them
was not enough
to bring me back home
across only a couple of hours.
Today I will go in search of blood sausage
and feel my tongue tie in a knot to avoid it.
This I will do for my mother
who waits somewhere among those
absurd stars
watching my guilt gasp on the counter.

A Trip to the Farm: An Unexpected Day at the Knox County Correctional Facility

Non Fiction Prose • Isaac Wilson

It's Football Time in Tennessee

It was a beautiful fall afternoon in Knoxville, Tennessee. Located along the banks of the Tennessee River, the University of Tennessee campus was alive with fans from all over the region that had traveled to support their football team, the Tennessee Volunteers, in what would prove to be a battle against the Auburn Tigers. Many had been tailgating since the early morning hours. Grills were fired up and loaded with a plethora of greasy treats, footballs were being thrown between little kids idolizing their Volunteer heroes, and of course, as with any football tailgate anywhere in the country, the alcohol was flowing like a mighty river.

Halfway through the third quarter of the game, the Cumberland Avenue strip, the heart of downtown Knoxville, was still very much alive with activity. All of the bars were packed to full capacity with Vol fans periodically pouring onto sidewalks trying to catch a glimpse of the game on one of many gigantic televisions that dot the strip. With Tennessee locked in a close battle against Auburn, spirits were high, and hopes of a much-needed victory were within the fans' grasps. However, I cannot relate any of this first-hand because I was sitting in the back of a dark, crowded paddy wagon awaiting transport to the Knox County Correctional Facility, or the Penal Farm, as it is also known. And so began the worst twenty-four hour period of my life.

Moonshine, Whiskey Look Out!

I suppose the best place to start any story is at the beginning, but unlike most true accounts, I will not include any names of the people that I met or came across in my experiences at the Farm. One reason being that some might not want it known that they were in such a dreadful place as The Farm; the other being that, while I was at The Farm, I did not really attempt to make too many friends or care to, for that matter. Being filled with shame, regret, and confusion as to how I arrived at my present location, I just wanted to get out as quickly as possible.

With the game set to begin at 7:45 p.m., I arrive on campus with some friends around two o'clock to begin the festivities. We walk to a tailgate that is located behind the Roaming Gnome, a bar on the Strip. While at the tailgate I catch up with some old friends of mine that are in town for the game, many of

them having traveled from Nashville and even one friend that has come all the way from Redlands, California. There is a spread of food that would make anyone's mouth water. Pigs-in-a-blanket, sandwiches, chips and multiple dips, fruit and veggie trays, b-b-q weenies, hot dogs and burgers, and much more line the food tables. We have two kegs of beer and a variety of liquors for cocktails. Also, someone has managed to acquire some moonshine for the occasion. The problem with moonshine, for those that have never experienced it, is that if you're not careful it will sneak up on you in the blink of an eye. There are few things as terrifying in this world as a man in the midst of a moonshine spell.

As the game begins, I travel a few blocks down the Strip to the Tin Roofs with some friends to watch the game. After more beers and cocktails, I decide to go across the street and get a pack of cigarettes because I am running low. This is where my memory gets a little cloudy and I can't recall exactly what happened. To the best of my recollection, I am leaving the bar when I notice there is a line forming to get in. I approach the bouncer watching the door and proceed to ask him a question.

"So, if I go across the street and get some smokes, will I be able to get back in?"

"No," he replies to my astonishment.

"What a bunch of bullshit," I replied, or something along those lines.

Apparently, bouncers don't appreciate it when you call bullshit on them. Next thing I know I am being helped out of the bar towards the street. Now, when I say that I am being helped I mean that this tree trunk of a man has lifted me by the back of my pants and is carrying me to the sidewalk, my toes barely dragging the ground, where he proceeds to throw me down on the side of the street. Being man handled and thrown down in public would normally hurt my pride, but I am more confused than anything. Sure, I have just called bullshit on him, but I mean the man no offense; it is said jokingly in sort of an "Ah, that sucks" kind of tone.

As I sit on the sidewalk bleeding, trying to gain a grasp on the situation at hand, I become more and more confused. Now remember: I am not sure if that is exactly what I said to the man. For all I know I could have called his mother a hamster and his father a ballerina. I pick up my cell phone, call my friend S and inform him of what just happened.

"Hey, I just got tossed out of the bar."

"What? What for?"

"I don't know. I'm going to go find out."

Click.

As I return to the scene of my recent eviction, the bouncer notices me coming and intercepts me. I throw my arms up in a defensive motion as if to say *I give up*.

"Look brother, I don't want any trouble. I just want to know why you threw me out of the bar like that. What did I do to be tossed out like that?"

My pleas go unnoticed. He grabs me again, one hand secured to the back of my waist with the other secured tightly around my neck. This time I find it rather ridiculous and continue to tell him so, even though I am having difficulty breathing.

“Listen, man, I really don’t know what your problem is, but if you want me to leave, all you have to do is ask. Honestly, what’s the point of all this bullshit?”

This time he launches me a good five feet before I manage to use my hands and face to break my fall. Fortunately for me, two of Knoxville’s finest happen to be walking by at that particular moment.

“Citizen’s arrest, citizen’s arr...” I begin, but am quickly cut off by the bouncer.

“Get this motherfucker outta here,” he barks at the officers.

To my dismay, they listen, scraping me off the sidewalk, putting my hands around my back, securing the hand cuffs tightly, and walking me two blocks to the paddy wagon. *Well, this is just great, I remember thinking. What a bunch of bullshit.*

Three Hours in the Paddy Wagon

I suppose it was a blessing that I was the first one loaded in the paddy wagon. I was worried about stepping into a crowded wagon with nowhere to sit. I did not want to get on bad terms with anyone, so the fact that the wagon was empty brought some relief to my otherwise troubled mind. I took a seat in the corner at the very back; that way I wouldn’t have people stepping over me. My mind was racing, mostly with thoughts of anger towards the bouncer. I imagine he gets off on roughing up people smaller than him, or maybe he’s trying to make up for a lack of something else. It wasn’t long, though, until I got some company. An older man who looked more like a bum than a football fan, a notion that would later be confirmed, was the first of eight to join me in the paddy wagon. Sitting in the dark on a metal bench is not particularly comfortable, especially when your hands are constrained behind you. The wagon was cramped; it smelled of booze and sweat. I lost track of time and tried to imagine myself someplace else.

When we finally began to move I felt a sense of relief. I knew our final destination and what awaited us was the Farm. I had never been to the Farm as a prisoner but had made a few trips there in the past to bail a couple of friends out of jail. I just tried to relax and play it cool in front of the others. The Penal Farm is located in north Knoxville, out past East Town Mall, near Three Ridges Golf Course. It is usually about a ten- to fifteen-minute drive from downtown, depending on traffic. For reasons unknown to me, our trip took well over forty-five minutes.

We finally pulled into the Farm unloading area, where the engine was shut off and we were left to sit in the dark for a while longer. I could hear people all around us. It sounded as if they were playing cards, just sitting around letting us marinate in our own misery. They didn’t seem to be in any hurry to get us unloaded and into the holding area. One man in the wagon began cursing and kicking the inside wall, which only infuriated the officers more. They began kicking in return and shouting curses at all of us that would make their mothers cringe.

Another man began shouting about how much he had to pee. He managed to slide his arms under his waist and pull his legs through so that his handcuffs were now in front of him instead of behind him. He then unzipped his pants and began to piss all over the paddy wagon floor. I propped my legs up against the opposite wall from me while a stream of urine crept its way slowly towards the rear of the paddy wagon. This put the officers over the edge. I honestly thought they were going to pull us off the wagon and begin beating us or leave us in the heat, dark, and pee for another hour or two. The man that couldn't hold his liquid was the first to be unloaded. They then began taking us off, two at a time, every fifteen minutes or so. After about three and half hours, I was finally unloaded, placed against a wall and patted down rather thoroughly, and placed in a holding cell to await further directions. I was the first one on the wagon but the last one off, my palms were bloody, I was almost pissed on and very pissed off, and there wasn't a chance of breathing the free air until morning at the earliest.

The Drunk Tank

After being stripped of all my possessions, pride included, I am issued standard Penal Farm clothing: one pair of orange boxers; one pair of orange socks that do not fit no matter how you arrange them on your feet; one button-up, one-piece, black and white striped suit; and one pair of orange slippers—left foot size twelve, right foot size sixteen. The alternate shoe sizes prove troublesome considering the fact that I wear a size ten and a half. I guess they are afraid of my making a run for it.

I am then escorted to the drunk tank: a twenty by twenty-five room at best, with one bathroom and no toilet paper. The first person I notice is an old friend of mine that I used to run around with in high school. We haven't spoken in years, but we both get a laugh out of seeing each other in our current location. It's the first time I have cracked a smile since my ordeal began four hours earlier.

Bodies litter the floor with everyone ranging from your common college student facing a public intoxication charge to your more professional criminal types that have obviously been through the system a time or two before. I assume this because they are on a first-name basis with many of the guards. Some men are sprawled out on the floor, while others lie prone under the benches—wherever there appears to be room enough to sleep. These repeat offenders have no difficulty getting a peaceful night's sleep amongst such company. I try mostly to stay out of everyone's way without giving off the impression that I am weak or scared. I am not fearful or intimidated at this time, nor do I ever feel these emotions throughout my time at the Farm. I still have plenty of "riot punch" running through my veins and find my situation rather laughable. It still seems that I have been unjustly imprisoned and am awaiting my release which, I imagine, will be followed by a chorus of apologies from the many officers for the inconveniences enacted against me.

Three hours later, I am pacing the drunk tank, which is growing with bodies every few minutes, when I notice someone being brought in. It is one of my friends that I had been tailgating with earlier in the afternoon. He walks into the tank, and I begin laughing at him because he looks like hell.

“I was at the bar and they told me you had gotten arrested,” he said, “and then, three hours later, I get arrested, too.”

“If you wanted to see me that bad, you should have just posted my bond.”

Ten minutes later he lays spread across the ground like butter on toast snoring loudly. A few minutes after that, all of the prisoners receive a very balanced and nutritious breakfast which consists of two small boxes of Frosted Flakes and a carton of milk. Since this is the first thing I have had to eat or drink in the last seven hours, I find it quite pleasant.

About an hour later, around seven thirty, I am moved to an adjoining cell, which contains about twelve prisoners. We are then filed out, issued plastic containers, and ordered to march down a long corridor in single file. It reminds me of being in a hospital with the long hallways, bad lighting, and a peculiar odor that is neither foul nor pleasing; it lies somewhere in the midst of stinky limbo.

We are placed into a pod in the jail and all issued a cell. None of us are fortunate to have a cell to ourselves for the police have been very busy this weekend, no doubt making the streets safe for the citizens of Knoxville. *Ha!* If you ask me, the police are just making as many arrests as possible in order to make money off the people, but I won't get into any conspiracies—if you can call them that—involving the local law enforcement agencies.

All I want to do is get in touch with someone on the phone and then go to my cell for some sleep. It has been nearly twenty-four hours since I have slept or taken my medication for epilepsy, and my mind is beginning to wander from me. I have to do something to reel it back in before it strays too far.

Time to make a phone call? Great, but who do I call?

Some Bird's Feathers Are Too Bright to Be Caged

Those of us that had just been issued cells were given fifteen minutes to get a shower, grab a drink of water, or make phone calls on one of two phones. Having been unsuccessful in my earlier attempts at contacting the outside world, I decided to try another phone call. The problem with the telephones at the Farm is that calls being made to land lines are the only calls that go through on a regular basis. I haven't known anyone with a land line (house phone) in some time, so to claim it was difficult to contact anyone would be a serious understatement.

I first tried to call my parents. When I called my dad, the phone rang twice and went to his voice mail. The telephones at the Farm don't allow the caller to leave a message, either; why, is beyond me. Instead, an automated message is left which mentions nothing of the caller's situation, nothing about where the call is being made from, nothing. Just to emphasize that one more time—nothing. All that this message states is something about a 1-800 number that you can call for more information. My dad, being the type that ignores calls from 1-800 numbers due to his justified detestation of telemarketers, did not attempt to call the number to find out any more information. I

received the same response upon calling my mother. I then called three friends whose numbers I knew by heart but was not able to reach any of them. After five minutes of attempted calls, I gave up and headed towards my cell defeated.

When I reached my new home, I was greeted by my cell mate, though he was no mate of mine. To my great surprise and comfort, he turned out to be a decent fellow. He was around my age and had already been in jail for a week and a half. That was the extent of our conversation. We had a mutual understanding between us. We both knew that the other man did not want to be there, we both understood that like the old song goes, “silence is golden,” and we both understood that respecting each other’s privacy would be essential to our getting along. It was rather nice, actually, feeling secure enough to go to sleep without having to worry about what the other guy was doing.

The cells themselves were appalling. They were maybe eight by twelve feet with one bunk fastened to the wall, a small sink that offered lukewarm water, and a steel-framed toilet that would prove to be my rival later. Since my cell mate was the first one there, he laid claim to the bunk, which I did not detest. It wouldn’t have been worth it to cause trouble over something so insignificant. My sleeping arrangement consisted of a blue mat that folded in threes, like the ones from nap time in kindergarten, laid between the bunk and the toilet on the cold cement floor. It had some thin blankets spread across it to protect my exposed skin from the cold and the staph that was known to be hiding on the mats, according to my cell mate. There was also a small table with two round seats protruding out of the wall. Above this table there sat a window.

Looking through this window, I was able to look across the yard to another set of pods. If I knelt low enough, I could barely make out the morning sky in the left corner of the window. I began to feel dizzy and light-headed as I gazed out the window, so I took a seat on one of the round seats and tried to gather my thoughts. The “riot punch” had definitely worn off: my eyes were blurred and heavy, my body ached, and my mind raced. I hadn’t been able to reach anyone on the phone and didn’t even know if anyone knew where I was. I was beginning to give up. I fell onto my filth-covered mat in exhaustion and sunk into a deep sleep.

I wonder what’s next.

Shit or Get off the Pot

I find myself being shaken by my cell mate a few hours later. He informs me that it’s time for lunch. I stumble to my feet and have a brown paper bag tossed at me from an officer that passes by. I find myself ripping the bag open to see what it contains. The Frosted Flakes and milk didn’t do much for me and that was nearly six hours ago.

Let’s see, what do we have here? One ham sandwich with hardly any ham, one dried up, bitter orange that has too many seeds, and one generic Swiss-cake roll without the cake or the roll. Not quite Christmas morning, but I suppose it could be worse. Ooh, what is that?

I am beginning to experience the early stages of mud butt, or diarrhea, as it is otherwise known. I guess all the beer, Jaeger shots, and “riot punch” did a real number on my stomach yesterday. Prison food doesn’t help, either. This isn’t going to be good. Every

minute lasts an eternity as I try to hold in my gas with an extraordinary amount of stomach shifting and cheek clenching. The more I try to fight it the worse it gets. I decide to let one little, harmless fart out.

Whoa, I'm glad that was silent.

An overwhelming stench envelops the cell as my cell mate begins to writhe in agony. There is not a single vent in the cell and no path for this cloud of death to escape from us or for us to escape from it. All there is to do is wait it out like a nuclear winter and hope for the best.

“Dude, I’m really sorry about that. My stomach’s pretty torn up.”

“You can’t be doing that again.”

But it won’t be that simple. I can’t just “not do that again,” even if I want to. Another hour passes as the feeling of eventual demise continues to mount in my stomach. I begin to pace the cell holding my stomach in discomfort.

“You need to shit?” he asks.

“You have no idea. I’ve been trying to hold it, but I don’t think I can.”

“Well, just make sure you keep flushing it down. Keep water on it and it won’t be so bad.”

“I’ll try.”

I hate to cut you short here, but I will not continue down this disastrous road because I fear that I have already lost you back during the early stages of mud butt. Let it be known that my attempt at “keeping the water on it” did not do much good. No amount of water would have done any good at that particular moment in time. There is a lighter side of this unfortunate setback, however. My cell mate, through all his understanding and compassion for my delicate situation, remained in good spirits throughout this ordeal. Now remember: there is no wall separating the two of us, and he is lying on his bunk not five feet from me. I can reach out and touch his foot if I so choose, but I don’t. As I sit there, fiercely trying to finish this as quickly as possible, I notice that my cell mate is wrapped in a blanket, mummy-style, and appears to be sniffing on something.

“What’s that in your hand?” I ask.

“Oh, nothing. Just my orange from earlier. They’re great when someone’s got to shit.”

“Interesting.”

“Not really. Keep that water going.”

And in the End . . .

The next seven hours were spent in a daze. I moved between two spots—the first being my uncomfortable, disease-ridden bed, and the second being the cell door for prisoner count. This was done to ensure that none of the prisoners had escaped

through the plumbing system or the window that didn't open. After being served dinner, I remember thinking, I'm going to stay another night here. Fortunately for me, I was called out of my cell two hours later. Along with three other prisoners, I was filed back down the long hallway with the bad lighting and the peculiar odor. My clothes were returned to me, and I waited for my turn to fill out the release papers that notified me of my court date. This process took another hour; then, we were finally led through a door out into the lobby of the Penal Farm, the place where I had been before to pick up friends in the past. I glanced around the crowd and noticed my parents in the corner, so I walked over to them.

"I'm so sorry, you guys. I swear I'll make it up to you."

"Don't worry, we're just glad you're ok," my mom says.

I walked out the doors and into the parking lot where it had begun to rain steadily. It was dark as midnight, and the headlights of oncoming traffic were streaking along the wet cement as we drove home. I lit up a smoke and inhaled deeply, blowing out a large cloud of heaven.

"So what happened exactly," my dad asked.

"Ah, just a bunch of bullshit."



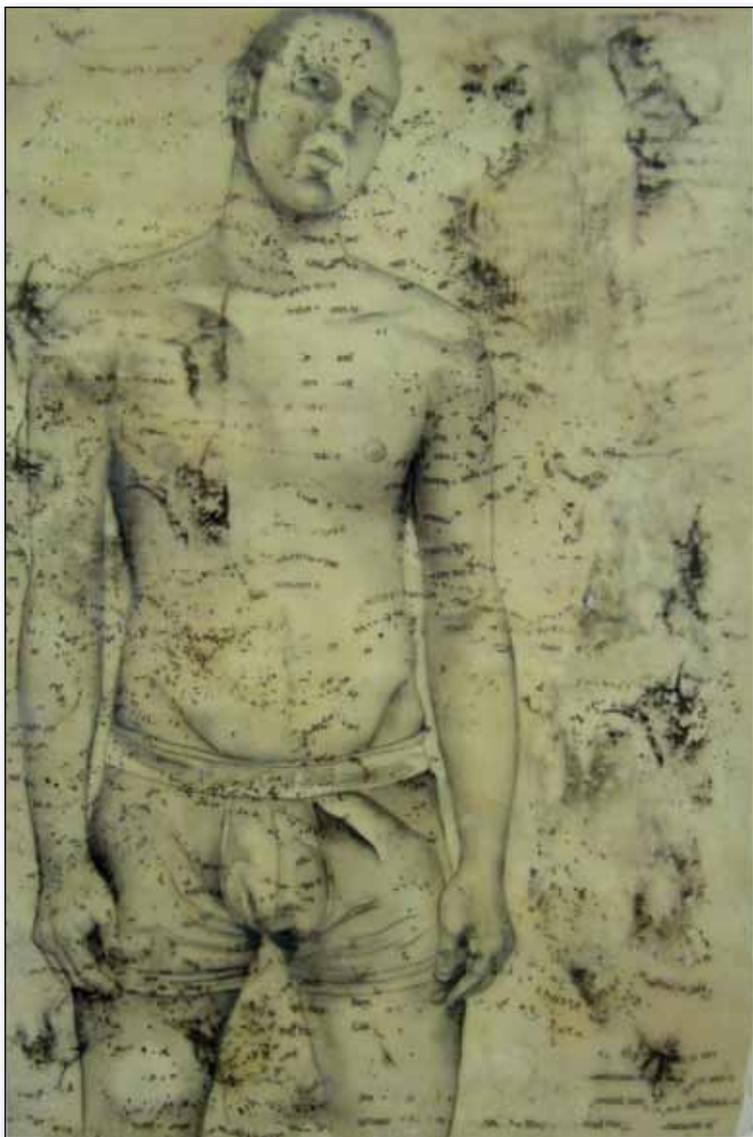
2010 Art Juror

Kathleen Campbell

Kathleen Campbell is an artist, teacher, and writer. Her interests lie both in the visual arts and in art history and criticism. Her work in photography and mixed media has been exhibited widely at such places as Soho Photo Gallery, NYC, The Philadelphia Print Center, the Schneider Gallery, Chicago, Houston Foto Fest, the Houston Center for Photography, CEPA Gallery, the Asheville Museum, and the Albright-Knox Art Gallery, Buffalo. She has published reviews and critical/historical articles on photography in a number of journals, including *exposure*, the San Francisco *Camerawork Quarterly*, the *CEPA Journal* and *Photo Metro*. Her work is in the collections of the George Eastman House, Rochester, NY, the Asheville Art Museum, Asheville, NC, the Museum of New Mexico in Santa Fe, and other venues. In 1998 she was awarded a Visual Artist's Grant from the North Carolina Arts Council. She is currently a Professor of Art at Appalachian State University in Boone, North Carolina.

Adam Stanifer

First Place Artwork



Greg Houser • print/encaustic

Step

Second Place Artwork



Jessica Augier • oil on panel

Corset

Third Place Artwork



Lanora Davis • black and white photography

March of the Dead

Fourth Place Artwork



Justin Kyle • ink

Inland

Honorable Mention



Sherry Tucciarone • soda-fired porcelain

She's long gone, snapshot 1

Honorable Mention



Ani Volkan • intaglio on cotton batting with tea staining

Untitled

Honorable Mention



Brittany Willis • acrylic on cow skull

Ben and David

Runner-up Artwork



Andrew Frost • silver gelatin print

Untitled #3

Runner-up Artwork



Andrew M. Scott • photograph

7:17

Honorable Mention



Evan Walker • digital photograph

Marble Bowl

Runner-up Artwork



Joshua Burd • cone 9, gas reduction, soda firing, stoneware

The Mockingbird

2011



2011 Editor's Note

Jasen Bacon

This edition of *The Mockingbird* is rife with transitions. We are making the slow and tedious transition to a new format, as well as trying new methods of jurying the submissions to find what is going to work best for the future. We are making the transition between faculty advisers, and I am making the transition from being a writer to being an editor.

Moving from a writer to an editor is a very interesting experience. The little tasks that I, at first, believed would be easy eventually turned out to be the tasks that took the longest. Faced with the responsibility to give the entire magazine its cohesion and flow, to allow the reader an enjoyable experience from cover to cover, is a difficult task when dealing with the diversity of our students and their creativity.

Dealing with the diverse pieces represented in the 2011 edition forced me to make some serious decisions on how to transition between the pieces. I can only hope that the experience that the reader enjoys will flow as smoothly as I intend for it to.

The only way that this magazine could have come together was through the support of my literary staff, who took the short list of entries and helped me to rank them based on my high ideas of literary merit. This very dedicated group of literature scholars had a very daunting task, and they all handled the added workload with a level of professionalism that went above and beyond what I was expecting from volunteers. I thank Bret Seybert, Lori Ann Manis, Erik Hunt, Tiffany Brown, Natasha Snyder, Adam Lambert, Hannah Ruehl, Matt Wampler, Sean Levenson, Jessica Bettini, April Massey, Alex Blumenstock, and Kari Keeling.

Of course the literary staff and I could not have finished this without the expert guidance from the experienced leader who has made *The Mockingbird* the high quality publication it is during his many years of leadership. Dr. Holmes not only provided invaluable guidance for me, but also for Dr. Graves who, after this year of transition, gets to lead the new guard of *The Mockingbird* editors through the new paths that we have forged for them.

Mission Statement

First Place Poetry • Jacob Vines

I am no Russian writer,
Who sits on the Nevsky
And observes life
From a park bench,
Who smiles
At the sight of a troika
And dreams in blankets
Of snow:
Blankets of snow,
The greatest irony,
A wishful irony:
Comparing warmth
And freezing, white-powdered
Death.

I am no French Romanticist,
Who creates caches
Of individuals,
And praises that which never exists,
Nor ever will:
The individual.

I am no British novelist,
Whose pen is wit
And words are crafted
(Sometimes invented),
Who is exiled
By satiric remarks
And structured,
Oh so structured,
Grammarians.

I don't write about love,
For I even doubt if there is love.

I don't write about peace,
I don't believe in fairy tales.

I don't write about dreams
Nor men
Nor women
Nor the insane
Nor the sane
Nor the artist
Nor the mathematician,
Nor the rich,
Nor the poor,
Nor the starving middle class.
No,
I don't write about such things,
Nor will I ever write about such things.

I am not even a poet,
Not even a wordsmith,
And, some days,
Hardly a writer.

No, I don't write about such things.

I write concerning life,
And all it encompasses,
And all its oddities
And mysteries.
I write concerning death,
And all it destroys,
And all it witholds
From its victims.
I write of all in between,
As well,
Such as men,
Women,
The insane,
The sane,
The artist,
The mathematician,
The rich,
The poor,
The starving middle class.

But all of these are tools
With which life is scribbled.

Life holds no grudges
Nor favorites,
And neither shall I.



Women's Home Companion

***Women's Home Companion was a very successful "lady's magazine" that was in print from 1873 to 1957**

First Place Drama • Natasha Snyder

Daughter: Joy

Nurse: Ms. Bailey

Mother: Constance

Husband: Ralph

Son-in-law: Will (*seen only as a corpse)

Voiceover: male and female

Episode 1: Present

The scene opens with a light on Joy, face lined and hair straggling out of a messy grey-streaked ponytail, wearing a hospital gown and slippers. Her eyes are glazed over in a "thorazine coma" and her hands pick absently at a baby blanket she holds compulsively in both hands as she rocks slightly back and forth. The light comes into the small lit area of the stage through a barred "window" on stage right. Upstage left is a door.

The door opens and a woman in a white nurse's uniform with an old fashioned triangle hat comes in the room carrying a tray with a pill cup and a plastic water glass on it.

Joy: *(without turning or letting go of the blanket)* Mama? Mama is that you? Did you come to see the new baby furniture mama?

Ms. Bailey: No Joy, I am Ms. Bailey, and you're going to take your medicine like a good girl.

Joy: *(looking anxiously toward the window, seeing not the bars but a world of her own imagining)* It's almost time for Will to be home now. I have to get everything fixed up. He wants his dinner at six on the dot. *(Starts fidgeting anxiously- nerves are building to a fever pitch)* Oh, oh no, I forgot the bread. Oh no, what can I do now? *(Stands, begins compulsively pulling at her hair, her clothes, wild eyed)* I have to make biscuits-they're quick...but Will hates biscuits with his dinner... Oh Oh what am I going to do? *(Starts toward Ms. Bailey in an imploring posture)* Oh what can I do? Yesterday I forgot to

put the vacuum away after I cleaned and now this! (*Spiraling into a panic attack*) the vacuum....the bread... sit up straight (*lights fade quickly and voice continues throughout scene change*) small bites... leave the bread on the plate...sit quietly...always look your best in public.....

(*On this last line Joy's voice overlaps with, fades out, and is replaced by an older, stronger woman's voice from offstage as the lights come back up*)

Blackout

Episode 2: Thirty Years Earlier

Lights come up on a dressing room where a young Constance sits ramrod straight in an uncomfortable looking chair looking swallowed up by her wedding finery while the voice from offstage reminds her of all the etiquette she might forget.

Wedding music plays quietly in the background. It comes up with the lights, and fades out with them too

Voiceover: you must stop slouching! Always look your best in public... especially today! Modesty is the most attractive thing a wife can wear.

Constance: (*looking like she's heard this all before*) Yes, mama

Voiceover: Remember that this man will be your husband now and you owe him all of your time, effort, and devotion from now on. He works hard, don't be tiresome and argue with him when he comes home. It isn't his job to entertain you.

Constance: Yes, Mama

Voiceover: And remember, his happiness is your duty. Even if you don't want to, a wife's place is to submit. (*Fading as the lights go down*) Submission and gratitude. That's what makes a happy marriage. And for heaven's sake put on some lipstick, you look half dead...

Blackout

Episode 3: Five Years Later

The idea of a comfortable suburban living room, a sofa, and a child's toys scattered on a rug in the center. From the unseen next room, Constance can be heard singing a lullaby and shushing a child off to sleep..

She tiptoes into the living room from an upstage left door. She is flawless, the ideal mother in dress, apron, and heels, without a hair out of place.

Constance: (*sighs to herself, wipes her brow with her forearm*) (*mustering cheer*) Well, better get the mess cleaned up and dinner on the table. Ralph likes his dinner at six on the dot, and Joy's toys are thrown everywhere.

Sound of a door opening offstage

Constance: (*looking surprised and anxious...even a little frightened*) what's... (*Looks out*

the “window” on stage left) Oh no... it can't be... It's only five o'clock. Oh no, the mess! And dinner's only half cooked...There's no bread yet... (*Anxiously pats her hair, which is flawless*) I look terrible, where's my lipstick...

Ralph enters. He is a “business man” in the iconic 1950's sense. He begins speaking before he is entirely in the door.

Ralph: It's been a rotten day. First client was late, then showed up and demanded to be seen anyway. Which overlapped the guy after him. Demanding bastards, all think they're entitled to a piece of me... (*Ralph has hung up his hat and turns to face into the room, then stops, and stands watching Constance's furious effort to get the toys off of the rug and into a small toy bin*) (*He roars*) What the hell? So you sit here on your ass all day and the minute I walk in the door you start running and scratching around like a hen gone mad? Stop that! Get that mess cleaned up! (*Confused by his contradictory demands, Constance is unsure what to do and cowers fearfully as she quickly picks up the last few toys*) (*Loudly, sarcastically*) So will we be having dinner tonight, or did you screw that up too? (*Begins to reach threateningly for Constance as the lights fade to blackout before he comes too close to completing his gesture*)

Blackout

Constance: (*during blackout*) (*pleading, frightened*) No please!

Child cries

Episode 4: Ten Years Later

Lights come up on same living room, but toys are gone and an entertainment unit has taken the place of the toy bin against the wall.

Joy enters, she has become a rebellious teenager and looks it. Not too far over the top though, because her parents would never allow it. She walks over, turns the stereo up a bit too loud to the music we all loved to hate fifteen years ago, and starts dancing around the room.

Constance comes rushing in, somewhat older, still perfect, but with an obvious black eye.

Constance: Joy! Would you turn that racket down? Your father will be here any minute and you know how he feels about that music!

Joy: Oh mama! Don't be so old-fashioned. This is worth listening to. The world is changing you know.

Constance: (*turning off radio herself*) Changing! The only thing that needs changing around here is your attitude. Help me get your father's dinner on the table. He works hard for this family you know. And wash that garbage off of your face, and stand up straight for Heaven's sake. (*Wringing hands, looks worried*) And please, Joy, please don't upset your father or start any arguments tonight.

Joy: (*noticing the black eye*) Hey, What happened to your eye? Let me guess—you “ran into” something again, right?

Constance: (*turning away, fidgeting nervously*) I...I just...had a little accident...I bumped

my eye I guess... (*With frustration*) Oh, just clean off that makeup and behave!

Constance stalks out of the room with as much dignity as she can gather.

Joy: (*to herself*) I'm never getting married!

Slow fade to blackout

Episode 5: Joy's Wedding Day

In the same dressing room where Constance prepared for her wedding, she now prepares Joy for hers. As the lights come up she is adjusting Joy's dress and reiterating the rules for the millionth time to Joy.

Once again, wedding music plays quietly in the background.

Constance: Remember, a wife's first duty is to her husband's happiness. (*Seriously, but with some hesitation and embarrassment*) His pleasure should be your pleasure, even if you don't think you...want to...do that...thing. And for heaven's sake stand up straight, you look so sloppy when you slouch. Put on a little lipstick at least...

Joy: (*trying to escape the lipstick*) But Mama I don't like that stuff, it never seems to stay put on me...

Constance: I hope you aren't going to be one of those disgusting women who takes to wearing sweat pants once she's married... Don't do that. And don't do noisy irritating things like run the vacuum when your husband's home. How can he relax with all that noise? Stop slouching! It is a wife's duty to be a source of pride to her husband, and a help in all things.

Fade to blackout, Male voiceover during blackout

Voiceover: Do you, Joy, promise to love, serve, honor, and obey Will as long as you both shall live?

Joy: (*timidly*) I...do.

Episode 6: One Year Later

Episode 6 takes place as a double silhouette- on one side of the stage towards the back, Constance, in the "living room" from earlier, with phone; on the other side, Joy in her new home, a more modern version of the home she grew up in, but the furniture is reversed in position from stage left to stage right. She also has a phone. Each side should be delineated by a dim pool of light, with darkness in the center to imply distance. Constance is a dumb show at this point.

Lights come up on conversation already in progress

Joy: But Mama, it's so cold here. And I still don't know anyone, I feel like I'm going to go crazy from sitting here alone all the time. (*Pause for Constance to speak on other end*) Yes, Mama, I am grateful for all the work he does. (*Pause*) No Mama, we aren't fighting. I'm just so...lonely. (*Pause*) I KNOW you think a baby would fix everything

Mama, but there's so much...never mind. (*Longer pause*) Yes Mama, I get dressed every day, and I put on lipstick, and yes, the house is as clean as a surgical ward. (*Pause*) (*Near tears*) But Mama, you don't understand... I KNOW I'm supposed to do all those things...but still, it isn't enough. (*Pause*) Ok, I will. I love you too. Bye Mama.

Blackout

Episode 7: Several Months Later

Same as episode 6- EXCEPT-this time it is Constance who we hear while Joy is in pantomime.

Constance: Joy, Joy what's wrong sweetie? (*pause, for Joy to speak on the other end*) Now, you have to stop crying or I can't understand a word you're saying...(pause) Now, now, it can't be as bad as all that...(pause)...Oh, sweetie, it'll be okay...it's...it's just something men go through...(pause) (*sternly*) No, now let's not hear any silly talk like that. It is your duty to stand beside your husband. (*Pause*) Don't be ridiculous. You will stay right where you are in your own home like an adult. Now, straighten up. Go wash your face and get fixed up, and when your husband comes home you will meet him at the door like a proper wife. (*Pause*) (*Softly*) Darling, if you will do as I'm telling you, fix his favorite dinner and be your very sweetest self, it will all be fine. (*Pause*) I love you, my own Joy. Now off to the kitchen with you!

Blackout

Episode 8: A Momentous Occasion

Same as episode 6, again Joy speaks while Constance is in pantomime.

Joy: (*uncertain of herself*) Mama? Mama, I want to see you. I have the news you've been waiting to hear. (*Pause for Constance to speak on the other end*) I'm going to have a baby. I just found out today, so it's still seven months away, but... (*Pause*) Of course I'm sure, I went to the doctor and everything. (*Pause*) He said I need to be very careful for a while, and I need to eat well, and take vitamins...and he gave me some... brochures. (*Longer pause*) No Mama, I didn't say anything to embarrass my husband. I didn't say...anything at all. (*Pause*) (*Exasperated*) Mama, all I am doing is trying to make a happy family. Just like you did. (*Near tears*) I am going to have a baby and we are going to take it to the park in a little stroller and be a perfect family just like in the magazines. (*Pause*) (*Smiling through tears*) Yes Mama. Of course. I'll call every week. I mean, I'll call whenever I can at least. Can you get away, can you come visit? (*Pause*) Can you at least try? Sometimes...sometimes I'm really scared. (*Pause*) No, not of the baby coming...just...some things have happened...it's nothing I'm sure. I need to get off of the phone Mama. It's almost six o'clock and dinner is only half done, and I look like death. I need to run a brush through my hair, put on some lipstick. (*Pause*) Try to come over soon and see all the new baby furniture. I love you too Mama. Call if you don't hear from me. I miss you. Bye.

Blackout

Episode 9: Several Months Later

This episode takes place in Joy's home, a more modern version of the home she grew up in, but the furniture is reversed in position from stage left to stage right. When the lights come up, Joy is visibly pregnant, kneeling on the floor in the living room sweeping the remains of a potted plant and a dinner plate full of food off of the rug, where they have been smashed. A stroller with an enormous pink bow stands at the back of the "room." Joy is sobbing quietly. She stands and empties the dustpan, then crosses to the sofa, retrieves a pink bear, and places it in the seat of the stroller. Joy then picks up the telephone receiver, considers for a moment, and replaces it in the cradle. She crosses back and resumes her work. The sound of a door opening causes her to cringe, fearful.

Blackout

Episode 10: Several Weeks Later

Constance's home. A funeral dirge plays in the background. Funeral flower arrangements sitting around and black crepe fabric is hung everywhere. Constance and Joy both in black mourning clothes, though Joy is obviously near her due date. They cling together silently for a time before Constance speaks.

Constance: *(firmly, drying her tears)* Your father was a wonderful provider. He was a good man, and now he's looking down at us from heaven. We should be grateful for him. *(Becoming matter-of-fact)* We have to have a funeral that would make him proud. We will have a lot of cooking to do. Let's go to the kitchen and get started. It's our duty to uphold his image now.

Joy: Mama...ok. Ok Mama, let's go cook.

As they get up to go off to the kitchen, the lights fade.

In the darkness, as the dirge fades, the voiceover is heard: Ashes to ashes, dust to dust...

Episode 11: a Few Days Later

Constance's home again, and the crepe and flowers are gone except for a large black wreath. Constance is still dressed in the dark colors of mourning, but not so formally as before. She has exchanged her ever-present dress and pumps for black slacks and her perennially polished hairdo for a ponytail. She is home, alone.

Telephone rings.

We hear only Constance's side of the conversation.

Constance: Hello? *(Pause)* Yes, I'm Constance. *(Pause)* Who? *(Pause)* Oh, memorial hospital. I suppose Constance is there having the baby? *(Pause)* A problem? What do you mean? What happened? *(Pause)* I'll be right there. *(Pause)* Oh please take care of my Joy. I should have let her stay when she was here... *(Pause)* Ok, I'll be on the first flight. Thank you. Tell her to hang in there.

As Constance stands to take action, fade to blackout

Episode 12: After the Flight

Joy's home, the living room. A huge noise, like a gunshot, rings out. The lights come up to disclose Constance, still in the mourning clothes from the last scene. No longer perfect, her hair is mussed, her lipstick non-existent. She is sobbing, standing in a wide stance, with a handgun held out at arm's length, gripped in both hands. She has clearly just fired.

On the floor lies a body, male, about the same age as Joy. Dead.

Lights fade to blackout.

The end.



Skulk Tale

First Place Non Fiction Prose • Sam Smith

I was seven and spring was beginning. The day had gone by quietly, with a hurried sun and the complete set of the “Mighty Morphin Power Rangers” action figures I had gotten a year ago at Myrtle Beach. My dad had put them in a box and set them on my lap while I was sleeping in the backseat on the way home. I was thrilled when I woke to the surprise. I felt lucky and loved.

A year had passed and I was still far from bored with the toys. Mom called me to dinner when I was near the end of the Rangers’ crusade against Lord Zedd, who had technically died days ago with his batteries.

I sat across from my mom in the kitchen, looking out the window that displayed our backyard and the woods beyond. The sun would be setting in an hour, but the beauty of the day though fleeting was undeniably vibrant.

It would be a decade until I saw the season as the continuation of life, of rebirth and return to watching the world spin from the warmth of a patch of grass. Spring was starting; I was content with no further insight into the matter. There would be rain, but there would be hours outside that promised the end of winter’s bitter fringes.

The sun was shining, and beams were cascading among the swaying branches. I didn’t have much interest in dinner. Mom noticed.

“Your food will get cold,” she said. I nodded and took a bite, my glance already returning to the woods. A shape was growing from further within, and the hint of its color became a glowing orange by the beams of light. I had never seen a fox so close. I was hypnotized.

I dropped my fork on the table and leaned toward the window. Any desire I might have had to finish my meal stood no chance against my fixation with the fox. By now she was at the boundary between the woods and the yard, twenty feet from my home. I considered her a female because two pups followed behind. Their leader, she trailed toward our home like a Big Bad Wolf about to huff and puff a more subtle way inside.

The pups followed, stopping occasionally to play on the grass. As the mother came closer, she sniffed alongside the house until she was out of view. Still entranced, I wanted badly to see her again.

I considered going outside but knew it would have been dangerous. I waited for her to return to my view, watching her pups jump at each other and roll in the grass.

“How old are they?” I asked my mom.

“Probably a few months old,” she answered. “Cute, aren’t they?” I nodded, looking out the window and hoping they would return.

The smaller one bit the tail of the sibling, who yelped and countered with a paw to the ear. They hurried toward where their mother had gone, reminding me of my sisters when they had a vendetta that called for parental authority. They were visiting our grandmother, missing a furry sight. I wondered why more foxes didn’t play in our backyard.

“Where did they go?” I looked at her, hoping she knew.

“I guess they went back,” she said, brushing her bangs out of her eyes. My mom is pretty, I thought.

“You should finish your food,” she told me. I was beginning to get frustrated. I picked up my fork and had another bite. Even if I could remember what I was eating that day, I wouldn’t be able to describe the taste; my attention was elsewhere, beyond the threat of food getting cold. How much longer until I would see a fox again?

I continued looking out the window, considering again the possibility of going outside for another look at them. I wondered if I would be bitten. I had never been bitten before, except by my aunt’s overprotective chihuahua. A fox’s teeth looked much sharper.

I was not prepared for the sound of Mom’s fork tapping my plate. I was envisioning teeth on skin, and the noise had scared me. The sound – TRINK! –was amplified, an invasive force I had not known was possible. It was as if I had been in a daze and there was a gunshot. The foxes were gone. I blamed my mother.

“I hate you.”

Like most, if not all, seven-year-olds, I regretted the words as I said them. The exclamation was a reflex, a side effect of an uncharacteristic tantrum. I knew I had hurt her. The sound of tapped glass was harmless, but those three words could break someone. I felt a disquieting fury but didn’t know how to channel it or to whom, so I went to my room and slammed the door behind me. I didn’t like being responsible for the stunned look in my mother’s eyes.

I went to my bed and concealed myself under the blankets until I fell asleep. A couple of hours had passed before I woke to thunder. I emerged from my quilted cocoon and was frightened: this noise was the real terror, an unapologetic boom signified by one pulsating flash after another. How could something be so loud?

The skylight above my bed was no longer a window from which I could look out and observe the lazy passing of clouds or the lightning bugs that had gone astray. I saw with frequent bursts of lightning that the skylight was being beaten with rain and wind. A series of cracks in the sky preceded their respective crashes of thunder. Not once did I think of the foxes; I was alone.

“Mommy,” I said, too quietly. I cowered out of bed and crept toward the door. I felt that if I ran, the storm might see me. When I opened the door, I heard footsteps and knew my mother was walking toward me.

Relief. The word was its own sentence.

“Let’s go to bed,” she said, holding my hand as we returned to my room. The thunder remained deafening and the rain poured no less, but I was not alone. She was here.

“I’m sorry,” I said after we had gotten settled, the events of the day replaying in my head. “I didn’t mean it.”

“I know,” she answered.

The thunder stopped or I had gotten used to it, and the rain began to lull me to sleep. The foxes never came back.



Balloon Fruit

First Place Fiction • Juliet Ramirez

I was just developing breasts when I first bought an intentionally black dress, ate pimento cheese sandwich triangles, and witnessed the socially acceptable forms of the adult fake cry. My grandmother died. (And to put this in a more telling time line, I was a late bloomer.) I can tell you how the dress made me feel entitled, how the sandwiches made me feel like shit, but as for the fake cry, the only adjective I can provide is this memory from another time (but only another time when you must think of time as linear).

I was in fifth grade when Beth Anne invited me to the Pentecostal church.

“Sit on the floor” she said; “Put your face in your chair and make some mumbly-weepish sounds.”

“That’s all it takes?”

“Yes, that is how we pray.

I never did figure out whether she believed that or was simply teaching me how to please the adults. I do not know how many of them thought they were the only ones faking it—thinking they were the only one the spirit didn’t pass through that evening.

But like I said, my grandmother died, and oh she was such a lovely lady. Lucy was her name, and I think that serves as adequate description of her age. After well-lived years of boxed wine and rosary beads, Lucy fell the victim of organ failure, in turn making her the victim of my mother’s CPR and a dead mouth full of accidentally transferred spearmint gum. She loved Christmas more than any other woman, and when the holiday came around, Aunt Penny couldn’t help but one-up everyone else’s grief.

December 25th Aunt Penny showed up two hours early for the usual Christmas lunch. She had a helium tank and exactly thirty pieces of precut paper. No one questioned her gadgets. My sister, Monah and I did spend some time sucking in the air and singing Chipmunk songs until she shooed us off; but that was the extent of its glory.

As soon as the rest of the family arrived she rounded us up, summer camp style. We stood there, sweated shoulder to sweated shoulder, patiently acting like we did not mind waiting to eat our potato salads and chocolates.

“Let’s all go around” she said, “and say what we are thankful for.”

After a repetitive round of ‘family’, ‘all of you, here today’, etc, we finally breathed. I cannot remember now, but I am pretty sure Aunt Penny won that round.

And then she really began- She handed each of us a little sheet of paper. (Mine had an advertisement for karate lessons on the back.)

“Let us each take a moment to think about Lucy and her presence on this special day. I gave you each a sheet of paper, so that you could write her a short letter; let her know you care about her and miss her today. Say whatever you need to say. You know, she would love to hear what you are up to. I brought this helium tank so that each of us could put our messages in a balloon and send them off to Heaven. We all know she’s there.”

Good lord.

So there we stood, thirty minutes later, shivering in the yard—most of us holding our floating messages of love and care, some of us secretly holding nothing more than helium-fueled doodles and jokes about our brother’s homosexuality. It was a little awkward.

1, 2, and 3. We released our penciled down love and memories.

“We love you, Lucy.”

Arm in arm we put our gaze upwards and watched our sailing balloons. We looked, but we couldn’t see Heaven; there was a magnolia tree in the way. So we watched our souring emotions...soar straight into that tree. Every last balloon popped on what may have been Heaven’s dream catcher. Our messages littered the ground, and I watched, as Aunt Penny had no reserve about picking them up and reading each one. I will admit; the paper snow show was quite lovely, and the tree looked like it was growing balloon fruit. And as the paper grew cold with the grass, Monah turned to me saying, “Maybe there is no Heaven.”



By and By

Third Place Drama • Bradley Hartsel

Two men sitting on a dark front porch. They're exchanging passing dialogue while staring off into the night sky. They have quick glances of acknowledgment, but otherwise, they focus towards the sky.

Henry: Have you ever been able to pick out Orion or any of that horoscope shit?

Walt: They taught me where the North Star was in high school. Oh, and the Little Dipper, too.

Henry: I saw a picture of Cancer the other day, you know, where they outline the crab in the stars. There's like, four stars in the whole damn thing, and some idiot got a crab out of it.

Walt: Isn't that strange? Stars--space in general, really—are so fascinating and amazing, but people want to still see them as a crab or lion or something. It's kind of insulting to the stars, I think.

Henry: People *(pauses...shakes head)*. They're so backwards sometimes *(significant pause)*. But I guess that's how God intended us.

Henry continues scanning the sky. Walt hesitates a few times before continuing the conversation.

Walt: I think people are just people.

Henry: What?

Walt: People are just people.

Henry: I heard. How are people just people?

Walt: You said something about God. I just don't see divinity in backwardness. People are just...who they are.

Henry: What is that? Some sort of Buddhist bullshit?

Walt: It's not anything. Just the way I feel.

Henry: I bet your parents would love that.

Walt: The way I feel isn't worth...not worth doing *that*.

Henry: And you're not worried about your soul?

Walt: I have a soul?

Henry: Fuck off.

Walt: I think that's about how Pastor Birch would have put it.

Henry: You know what the Bible says about nonbelievers?

Walt: Why are you citing the Bible for information? Isn't that the book in question?

Henry: Should I be reading from Gandhi's journal or some shit?

Walt: Gandhi? I already told you.

There's a pause, sharing a glance.

Walt: I figured it would have cooled off tonight.

Henry: That bothers me.

Walt: (*laughs*) I've learned not to be bothered by what the weather does.

Henry: No, not about that.

Walt: Oh...okay.

Henry: You just have to have faith, man.

Walt: I tried that.

Henry: It's not a fly-by-night thing.

Walt: It was a longer process than you think.

Henry: What was the process?

Walt: I mean, I was in church from the moment I was born. I was a kid, so you know, I was earnest about everything. My parents were. Still are.

Henry: God, me too. The only Sunday I remember ever missing was when my family took a vacation to Florida for a week. I don't think my parents could really enjoy that trip because of it, either. Confused the hell out of me; they'd rather be in a dingy church than walking on a damn beach? I never got that.

Walt: I prefer South Carolina to Florida.

Henry: When did you stop going to church?

Walt: I don't really think of it like that.

Henry: Like what?

Walt: My religion in terms of being in or out of church.

Henry: So you *are* religious?

Walt: Well, no. My former religion.

Henry: That just bothers me.

Walt: Sorry, man.

Henry: You've gotta be scared. You know, to think nobody's watching after you. It'd scare the hell out of me. I guess that's why my faith is so strong.

Walt: I feel better, actually.

Henry: Better? How?

Walt: It never really suited me, you know? I was a kid trying to talk myself into being saved. The whole invitation prayer seemed really flimsy to me. I mean, you'd think there would be a more concrete way of making the biggest decision of your life (*pauses...Henry realizes Walt is still formulating thought*). I was just filled with too much anxiety over the whole thing. And it wasn't even like I was scared of Hell or coming up short to God or anything. I understood that being saved was being saved. I think I just had so many questions about the logistics of everything. I saw my mom, who lived with so much peace because she believed God was always with her. So, I think I wanted to believe so much but some question was always blocking me and I never felt fulfilled. And you know, if that's the Devil or something testing me, I could understand. I think that was what I told myself for a long time. But months turned into years, and pretty soon you wonder just how hard the Devil could work without God intervening and rewarding his naive servant. Maybe that's selfish, but it gets to be twenty years and it's like, "shouldn't I feel *something*?" And probably the weirdest part about it was Heaven. I thought heaven sounded awful. Here I am ten years old, and I'm scared to death of Heaven. I should be at the ripe age of eating out of Heaven's hands, but I could only think how I'd miss my video games, and toys and friends and family. I didn't want to live forever on a cloud worshipping God. Sometimes I'd ask myself how I could possibly be disappointed with Paradise but sure enough, I thought it sounded terrible. Eventually, I just felt empty, over-anxious, very unresolved, and really disappointed. I gave faith a chance. I really did. But at some point, I couldn't keep up the façade.

Henry: You're okay with dying like that? Being nothing?

Walt: It's odd to think about. But I'm at peace with being nothing than being cognitive of forever. I'll die either way. I'd rather live free from some inscrutable ideal. I feel so much better nowadays.



Vinyl

Third Place Fiction • Bradley Hartsell

“Matthew, telephone.”

He buried the last of the pale pumpkin seeds beneath a shallow patch of rocky soil. Arising from his crouch, he shuffled his hands together and against his weathered jeans. Jeans are better to be dirtied than hands, anyway. He made his way from the field, towards the house, where he would kick off his grimy shoes and hustle over to his mother holding the phone. People were probably irked by the time they had to hold while he made his way, he thought.

“Hello?”

“Matt?” sounded a voice that didn’t seem the least bit annoyed. “It’s Jacob. How’s it going, buddy?”

The two made small talk that was friendly enough. Matt found he was doing a lot of unnecessary nodding as conversation filler. He reminded himself of the inherent limitations of the telephone. Sensing a lull, Jacob revealed his provocation for the call.

“I’m coming back to town this weekend, I was seeing if you wanted to hang out, catch up.”

“Of course. I don’t have anything to do this weekend, so sure. Absolutely.” Matt affirmed.

“Great. I’m leaving in the morning. I’ll give you a call when I’m close. I’ll come by and we can swing by town or something.”

They wrapped up with warm goodbyes and a loose itinerary for the next afternoon. It’s going to be good to see Jacob again, thought Matt. The two were best friends throughout their formative years, before Jacob, a year Matt’s senior, went away for college. Jacob wanted to stay close to home, but there weren’t any collegiate opportunities in the small, rural, mountain town. The nearest university was two hours away, in a progressive city, shockingly different than home. Jacob and Matt did their best to keep in touch, but they would often go a couple of months without talking. Busy schedules. Early into Jacob’s first semester, he came home to see everybody, and he tentatively promised to make such a trip routine. However, the roundtrip proved to be too taxing, and Jacob couldn’t sacrifice academic responsibilities for his distant friends and family. That’s where he stayed until he enjoyed a couple of weeks in town for Christmas break. During the break, Matt and Jacob speculated over how potentially exciting the summer could be, when Jacob and the rest

of the gang were home for a 3 month stay. There wasn't very much to do, so friends were the determining factor of whether you were having fun or not. Matt was not having fun.

College was a looming decision for Matt. He was turned off by Jacob's rough transition to a new culture and all of the added pressure. There was also the unspoken notion that if Matt left for college, he'd leave his father with a weighty workload around the house. Matt hated working, particularly in the field, but he respected and liked his father too much to let him do it alone. He also had trouble reconciling his feelings for the town in which he lived. It bored him. When he wasn't helping his father, he had to strain to think of anything he could do to keep entertained. He felt like he was missing out on something, but then again, college life sounded terrible. It all seemed awful, with deadlines, finals, dorms, the jerks who partied too much, the girls who hung out with the jerks who partied too much. More and more, Matt was thinking that the pros outweighed the cons, and that he should just stay home after he graduated. He thought if he could leverage that decision into making his parents get a decent Internet connection, then it'd be worth it. After all, even if the town was boring, everybody was friendly, he had a few decent friends, and everything was fairly relaxed. He might even come to enjoy the field as long as he had something fun to do afterwards. In fact, with no more high school, there would be plenty of downtime while his father worked as an electrician. Yes, this idea was starting to sound better and better! Helping plant corn is nowhere near as bad when you have the whole rest of the day to do as you please, something he learned while being out of school every summer. Why not have summer year-round?

Early Saturday morning, Matt woke up and figured he would get a little bit of work done before noon. There was a lingering feeling of excitement that Jacob was coming in that afternoon. Doing some work should make the time pass by faster anyway.

He put on his ragged work clothes, and marched outside, intent on mulching the flowerbed that he knew his mother was dreading to do. Matt worked diligently, as each parent came out at different times to the proud sight of unrequested labor. Grab a handful, throw it around the flowers, and smear it out evenly. Matt continued to piddle around the yard, and upon his father coming out to tinker with the old car, stood beside him with his hands on his hips and forced look of puzzlement. This is how you fake interest in car repair when you have no clue what's going on. His mother summoned him for another phone call, releasing him from his fauxduty. He took the phone and proceeded to get confirmation that Jacob was just around the bin.

Matt had just finished putting on civilized clothes, when he heard a car pull up. He made his way outside, emerging from the porch, and greeted Jacob.

"Hey buddy!" Jacob exclaimed. They exchanged a smooth hand slap, followed by a half-hug. This kind of thing rarely happened before, but after extended time between visits, exceptions are made.

They spoke cheerfully about nothing in particular, until Jacob suggested they hop in the car and ride down to grab some pizza. Matt agreed, as he hadn't eaten all day, and popped open the passenger door. He halted when he saw a cardboard box in the seat,

stuffed with packaged vinyl records. “Oh yeah, sorry, just toss those in the back.” In the backseat the records went, and the car reversed out of the driveway and onto the road.

“That’s a ton of records! Where’d you get all of those?” Matt inquired.

“Some guy in my hall. Apparently he collects an obscene amount of records. One night I was carrying around a couple of records back to my dorm, and he stopped me and asked about them. So, we started talking, and this guy is serious business when it comes to records. He said he’s collected so many that he actually had a box that he wanted to donate, you know, to clear some space. His girlfriend was getting sick of seeing them. He asked if I wanted them, and I was like, ‘yeah, why not?’”

“You collect records? Since when?” Matt asked with a wry chuckle.

Jacob shrugged with a thin grin on his face. “I don’t know. The place around my dorm is all restaurants and then there’s a record store and a theatre. If you’ve already seen the movie playing, then that only leaves the record store. The people were really nice in there and I’ve bought a few records from them. Good business tactic—being nice, I mean.”

Matt scrunched up his face before letting out a soft laugh. “But you don’t even have a record player. They conned you!”

“My roommate has one. But yeah, you’re right. I’ve only listened to them twice. I get distracted too easily, which makes it hard to sit all the way through.”

They both shrugged. Jacob pulled in and parked the car. They sat down and placed their order for a large pizza and two sodas. They talked the whole time, swapped stories, and plowed through four sodas apiece. They just didn’t kill an hour and a half—they bludgeoned it—inside of that pizza joint. They each strolled out like they had conquered something, feeling triumphant.

Jacob segued the conversation as they headed towards the car. “Hey, do your parents still have that old record player?”

“Yeah, probably. They don’t get rid of things.” Matt replied. He was worried that Jacob was going to suggest they have a listening party or something.

“Well, that box has a record in it that I already had bought, which was wild since I only had four. But I was going to see if you wanted it. I don’t need two. I at least know that you own a record player.”

Relieved, Matt agreed, as Jacob shuffled through the box to find the right one. “Here you go. I haven’t listened to it yet. It looks pretty cool, though.” Matt took it and thanked him as they reverted back to the car. The two had made plans through Jacob to meet their old friends at the baseball field. The whole way, Matt kept staring at the record. It appeared new, with a black glossy cover looking back at him. An odd, glass world laid ominously amid the glossy black. He had never heard of the band, and could only imagine what type of music this thing was. Matt mostly imagined records as having a close-up of the band, with long hair, burley chest hair bursting from their v-necks, and looking a little bit too cool.

“My hall guy said that band played a show a couple of years ago at the theatre down the street from our dorm. He was raving about it. He’s amazed I haven’t listened to that record yet. I keep telling him I haven’t had time.” Jacob recounted. Matt had to wrap his head around the thought of this band with such an entrancing cover playing on the fringe of the Appalachian Mountains. He thought of the town’s reaction if they somehow played at their auditorium, in the heart of the mountains. The townspeople might riot. Or just not show up. Probably the latter.

Later that night, Jacob dropped Matt off at his house. Jacob was going to come by the next evening to hang out some more, but for now, Matt thanked him for the ride and walked inside. He made a hurried dash to his room to put away the record; he wouldn’t feel comfortable showing his parents such a weird album cover. His father would probably go on a rant about how nobody knows how to make good music anymore. After the record was put away, he ventured into the living room and made conversation with Mom and Dad, until everyone agreed they were tired and sleep was in order. Before Matt turned out his light, he took another curious look at the record under his own illumination. He felt sorry for those who inhabited the glass world, as they dealt with the poisonous sky and fiery eruptions in the background. Once he realized he was feeling sorry for things that didn’t exist, he knew it was time to sleep.

In the morning, Matt’s mother informed him she was on her way out to visit his grandparents, and he could stay if he wanted. He said he would, and after realizing that his father was working a job downtown, he revealed the record to the morning light. He advanced through the empty house with the record in hand, aimed towards the storage room downstairs. He found the record player mingling with junk, so he cleared a nice space for it. Years ago, it sat in the corner of the living room, once in a while hosting a fuzzy gospel record. Its use became too scarce to justify its place in the prominent room, so to the storage room it went, untouched every since. Matt dragged a mattress over to the record player, and covered it with a suitable blanket. Now he had a place to sit. He plugged up the player and quickly dusted it off, for aesthetic purposes. He slid the vinyl from its sleeve, gently, as if to not damage its quality. He aligned the record properly, easing it down until it was pressed up against the turntable’s face perfectly. He pulled back and regrouped as if the first phase had been completed. He then delicately reached down for the needle and lifted it. Too delicately, perhaps, because it slipped from his fingers and dropped back down to its original point of rest. Matt shook his head in disappointment with his inability to handle a turntable needle. He took a little firmer approach this time, and guided the needle over to the first groove. He tried lowering it ever so slowly, and for a second, even realized that his hand wasn’t even moving. Down the needle began, rendezvousing with the first groove, as the initial sound was emitted.

Matt lay back onto the mattress and took the album cover in hand. He began to trace over each line with his eyes, as the music flourished around the cluttered room. Each sound was rich, strange, and unlike anything he had heard before. The needle popped up, signaling the end of the first side. Matt repeated his carefulness, flipped over the record, and steadied the needle onto the vinyl. A new side began. The electronic beeps, robotic percussion, harmonic flares, and isolated atmosphere was

entrancing to Matt. He envisioned himself inside of that glass world, his back to a dark forest and looking ahead at a volcanic eruption. He was fascinated by the way the music seemed to represent the art that harbored it. It was sad, it was lonely, it felt doomed, but it was good.

The needle finished its work and reemerged from the vinyl. The record rounded down its revolutions, finally coming to a complete stop. Matt returned it to its sleeve, and held the entire package in front of him. He gave it another good look. He felt challenged, but there was no way to retaliate. He furrowed his brow, unable to reconcile the sounds he had just heard. He walked slowly, taking half steps at a time, back to his room and put the record on his bed. He knew it was the best thing he had ever heard, but he wasn't sure why. Being raised on gospel and Country & Western, and having his peers blast whatever rock song the radio playing, Matt had no context in which to place this new music. It sounded electronic, but it certainly wasn't dance music, not like the techno Jacob played for ironic purposes. He wanted to be associated with it, he knew that much. And certainly that couldn't be the only transcendent record ever recorded, there had to be more like it. Jacob might have picked up a few recommendations from the guy in his hall, Matt thought. Oh, and that guy. He had to have all sorts of information stored up like a computer about this type of music. This thought reminded Matt of the story Jacob told about the band playing at their local theatre. They might play there again sometime! Then the record store became a pulsating destination in Matt's mind, where he was suddenly dying to visit.

It was then that he realized he hadn't been this excited about anything in years. He was reminded of when his cousin happened to read a great novel, and from then on, she digested books like they were dessert. And then something he knew all along suddenly soured his excitement; there were no record stores where he lived, there were no concert halls, there were no music experts. The town's simple charm had quickly been exhausted. He was finally ready to dig for something, only the mountains couldn't provide a worthy shovel. Matt thought of his father rebuilding the old car's engine alone. Then, he thought of drifting off into a glass world, braving the unforgiving elements that must lie within. He couldn't wait to tell Jacob the good news.



Love Song for a Potential Woman Who Will More than Likely Not Exist

Second Place Poetry • Ethan Palmer

This moment now is a haunted knell
whispered by a cosmic mind
 The city stands a shining monolith
 and I cannot see what lies below its borders
In San Lucas Tolimán, by that magnificent lake-
 if only the mountains too were safe
 Perpetual rain is ever-pelting

The streets of stone overflow
a moving layer of liquid brown
 dirt and debris and a sense of urgency
 lifting and shifting the micro-world
 relocating insects and chasing away the sad yet
frightening dogs

But we feel welcome every place we go
and the food is cheap
as is the beer
six or seven quetzals a Gallo
And a white pimp helped me order a fish sandwich
“You boys into gettin’ some fine pussy?”
“We came here with a church, man.”
 he calls his girls on an ancient cell phone

And the brigade of melancholy whores arrives
something is not right
we should leave
but maybe one more beer
 we shouldn't be rude
 but oh we have to leave
"Hi. I can't speak any Spanish."
 we gulp the tangy brew
 so fast it burns
 I cough and sputter and the barman chortles amuzed
 "We have to leave now."

The dissonant howl has ceased now
I blink twice
sip reluctantly stale greasy coffee
 in a diner you and I have never heard of
and in this brief attempt to restore that former self
 that clarity and comfort
 I am born again and so are you
 but who will we become?
 Are we to fall in love?

I see your short ferocious hair
 all clumped together in one spot
 your spunky unwavering smirk
 and we are up so late
 the room has left time behind
 I feel I may truly know you

Yes you and I are love
 Clinging to a couch as if falling through clouds
 Minds intertwined
We are naked and giggling
 Puffing on a fat stinky bag of grass
 Playing obscure music
 Praying for aliens
 Discussing 9/11 conspiracies
Reading comic books
Watching the kinkiest of porn
 Hunting for ghosts on private property
 Arm wrestling-I didn't let you win I just don't get a lot of protein alright?
 Pretending to be walri wrestling on the carpet
 Letting me play with your boobs
 Shoving our heads together to make a Sci-Fi Unimind
 Thinking of ways to save the world-oh with our powers combined...

You don't mind my shoulders popping
At least you don't mention it
I listen to some really bad tunes
because baby, I'm an anarchist

and no I'm not too into this capitalism
no I guess I won't be buying you many gifts

and when I wake up crying every night
how are you supposed to handle that?

when I tell you to strike down your gods
and take their place, to make things right-

I realize now I am afraid to talk to you
this setting never existed- neither did we

the cathode ray projects nothing in particular on mute
is romance that fucking dead?
No no it cannot be

Oh your face is all but perfect damnit
why do your eyes tell the manufactured story of infinite plastics
of those dismal yet enchanting streets of rain
sloshing around the gutters of our minds
the privileged few have indoctrinated us all

and I am a useless and forgotten stream of numbers in the Program
this moment now is forever



Floundering

Second Place Fiction • Sterlin Hammond

The smell of pot wafted through the air and there was something crunchy stuck to the bottom of my shoe. It was one of those moments that made me stop and trace my actions to figure out how I even ended up here. It was a party, for lack of better words. I had promised myself I would try to be more social since well, I don't seem to be making many friends these days. I became bored of getting bored. I was exhausted from wasting time thinking about how I had wasted time.

People in their own clusters were spread throughout a narrow hall that seemed to go on forever. Walking through I took notice of three pictures hanging on the wall; one an old portrait, the other some Kinkadee bullshit, and lastly a circus themed image. I liked that one because it was out of place and had clowns. It looked sad.

Making a left in the hallway I found myself in the kitchen, this time aware of how I got there. There were four or five others engaged in their own conversation, occasionally tipping bottles up to their lips. I debated the wisdom of trying to become involved.

"I did it! They'll never even know. What they perceive as fate is really just an altered form of reality." The loudest member of the group was tall and had a face I wanted to punch. The bird's nest that adorned his head looked like it was months overdue for an oil change. "I fucked with fate. I pulled the strings, changed people's minds without them ever knowing." Some beer dribbled down his chin, like a scholarly roach trying to escape the stupidity splashing around in his mouth. One of the girls surrounding him pretended to give a shit and looked on. She wore a face that reminded me of a parrot. The makeup was caked on and while I could tell that she was attractive sometimes, tonight wasn't sometimes.

While his story seemed interesting, he wasn't revealing many facts to his listeners which seemed odd. He was seemingly bragging about what he had done but when the others prodded him for more details he was hesitant to spill.

Finally, I chimed in.

"Or was it fate for you to fuck with it?"

He looked lost. Lost in a way he'd possibly never felt before. So many times people throw their hats into the ring just to have them placed right back on top of their heads. Instead he wore my hat like a dunce cap, and stared deeply into the floor.

I looked down and noticed the rug corner folded over. I folded it back flat and left the kitchen. I walked back through the crowded hall and went into an open room and sat in a cozy green recliner. Green is my favorite color. Sometimes leaves are green but they never remain that way. I don't like leaves.

I sat silently and admired the ticking of a clock that adorned a nearby wall. I thought about "Araby" by James Joyce, having read it the night before, and about wanting to jog. Jogging had become a large part of my life in this recent time I had been spending alone.

I heard the floor creak near the doorway and directed my glare towards it.

"Wh-what did you mean back there?" It was the lumbering fool from the kitchen.

"About what?" I knew about what.

"What you said about fate..That maybe it was fate for me to mess with it." He wiped his chin.

"Yes?"

I had nothing else to do. I figured I'd at least shake his tree and see what fell out.

He sat down in a chair beside me. He talked about the drastic actions he had taken to manipulate people's lives. He told me all of the interesting details of the reality he had created for his unsuspecting victims. This man had altered fate, for God's sake! Well, not really.

He simply used some basic info to do some blackmailing, cryptically crushing an ex-girlfriend's world in hopes she'd come crawling back into his. It wasn't quite the picture he was painting in the kitchen, but it made sense now.

"It's useless to chalk any of it up to fate. What is done is done. Girls will make you do funny things." He finally started to talk some sense. I didn't really have to say anything. Although he was a moron, I stayed and talked with him. He told me to call him Spinner. I didn't ask why. He left to fetch some drinks and said he'd be back. I found myself alone in the room again. I wanted to go for a jog.

I heard a voice from the hallway. The kind of voice that makes you wish you had twelve ears. I turned and gazed out, hoping to see exactly what I had seen every weekday on the bus at 8 a.m. every morning for the last two years. It was Carrington. The girl that's written in the script of every obscure independent film you've ever seen that you wish actually existed. I see her on that bus everyday at the same time, never knowing where she is going or what she is thinking. What I do know is she drinks a tea with her breakfast and bites her lip a lot. Her eyes are blue like the ocean, not the sky, and her hair is red like the fire that enflames your heart when you see something beautifully sad. Everything I know about her makes me feel like a stalker, like how her shirt clings so tightly to her body unadorned by ripples or any imperfections. Her skin looks soft, but I wouldn't know. I have never spoken more than a word to her. That one word was "no," when she once sat dangerously close to me on the bus and asked if I had a pen. I guess it's a bad habit. It's like when someone else in class asks me if I have a pen to

use and I say “no sorry, this is my only one,” even though I have more. I don’t know why I do things like that.

I could hear Spinner making his way back, verbally, so I shifted my vision back to the clock and tried to follow the pattern of the tick again. I couldn’t follow the pattern and I felt frustrated. I could hear his voice getting louder when finally I heard it shriek “Carrington!”

My eyes bugged. This guy knew her, this buffoon? I got up and walked to where they were standing to leave. Instead of leaving though, Spinner introduced us.

“Ah, I know you. You’re the unreliable guy with no pen on the bus every day.” She bit her lip and raised her brows. I wanted to marry her.

“Well, you didn’t have one either.” It was anything but a move I’d replicate. In humoring myself I always seem to forget the task at hand. Still she laughed. Her teeth weren’t perfect but the way she wore them made them shine.

She asked Spinner and me if we were going to the Bush Street Festival. I could tell by the look on his face he also had no idea what she was talking about.

“Maybe.”

Spinner agreed, “Yeah, maybe.”

“Oh, I wish I could go. I’ll be working. You guys should go there’s always some really cool stuff to buy. I’m so bummed I won’t have anything from it this year.” She moved a ring up and down her finger as she spoke.

With “Araby” still on my mind, I told her I’d bring her something back from it. This was a chance to become interesting in her eyes and an excuse to get out and actually do something.

She smiled in a way that made a shitty world seem almost decent. We briefly chatted some more until she parted ways, as did Spinner and I after we discussed plans to go to this festival of sorts that we knew nothing about.

Walking back home I noticed the glow of the streetlights and how the glow forms a circle around the light. I passed the same houses I always do, taking notice of the last one on the block as usual. The TV was always on in the living room along with a small lamp. I could always count on that TV and lamp being on, and it made me feel alright.

I got home and changed clothes. I finally jogged, and slightly stopped caring about the situation I had just gotten myself into. I thought about “Araby” some more while lying in my bed. My mind began to wander. At night I seemingly explore any and all topics. I was thinking about if there was a place like Heaven people go to when they die. I tried to grasp the thought of existing forever. It became nauseating and I had to sit up. I saw a spider crawling on my ceiling and I didn’t get much sleep until I got up and killed it.

Saturday morning arrived and I didn’t. I awoke around noon and immediately hoped that Spinner had done the same. I went in the bathroom and stood a moment, temporarily wondering where I was even supposed to go today. I scratched my neck

and continued my normal routine. I put on a blue shirt and wore the same shorts from yesterday. I stepped onto the bus close to one o' clock. Once I reached my meeting point with Spinner I saw him standing there wearing a grin that could only be described as shit-eating.

"Sorry I'm late." I expected to be scolded.

"It's cool. I've looked around a bit. This festival is more of a glorified yard sale than anything."

He was right. Tents, tables, and trinkets peppered the grounds like a broke down circus with clowns running around trying to make people feel something they didn't want to feel. It wasn't somewhere I'd typically like to be. I split up from Spinner and vaguely looked at items as if I had any sort of intention to even haggle a price for them. I looked at some ceramic figurines that would make Precious Moments seem sincere.

"These are all handmade!"

I could tell. There was nothing here, nothing here worthy of showing who I was or what I'd like to be. Frustrated, I wandered off to the nearby park and sat on a bench facing the fountain. I observed a young couple tossing some coins into it, small flashes of copper picked out of a small dark space flying from an unknown palm into a cesspool of more coins without a pocket to call their own. It seemed counterproductive. I heard some kids nearby whining to their mother. I recalled a time when I was a child and my mother had gone to the grocery store. I was home in bed because I had a mildly upset stomach. My mother brought me back a toy baseball she had purchased along with our groceries. It said something like "fireballer" on it and I said it was stupid and threw it down. She told me they didn't have much there and she was sorry I didn't like it. Later on that night before I went to sleep I thought of my mother at the store and not having much money to spend but seeing the baseball and thinking of me and smiling. I cried myself to sleep that night.

I walked back to the festival and most people were packing their things. Cardboard boxes filled with once prized possessions returned back to their ungrateful owner. I was too upset to find Spinner. I wanted to jog. I don't care about much after I jog.

I walked down to a diner and sat with my head in my hand. The waitress, dressed in all white, asked kindly if I needed anything. "No, ma'm."

"Don't call me ma'm, it makes me feel old." She was old.

"Sorry, good habit."

She pursed her lips into some excuse for a smile and walked away. I kept thinking about *Araby* and what it all meant and why I had become so obsessed with it. Spinner walked in and made his way over to the small booth I had sat in. "Well, did you get anything?" He already knew the answer.

"Nothing." It appeared as though he had the same thoughts I did, albeit he really knew nothing about me. I looked around and watched other people in their ways, occasionally saying something about them or their mannerisms. One of the cooks had

noticeably yellow teeth and I referred to him as “buttertooth.” Another guy sitting at the bar had on a jean jacket. I looked at Spinner and asked him if he thought that guy knew how stupid he looked. Spinner pointed out another person in the diner and asked if I’d rather be that guy. He looked stupid and goofy. I said “no” and Spinner didn’t say anything else. I kept watching the guy and he seemed happy, like really happy. I wondered if I had ever even been as happy as this guy. I looked around the diner and observed everyone in their own conversations. Occasionally they would direct their empty stares towards me as if I were the new kid in class. My heart started to beat faster and I sat back and took a deep breath. I felt anxious and looked up, where I could count on there being no people. The red neon lights that aligned the ceiling coupled with the clanking of the restaurant silverware didn’t balance in my mind. I felt wrong. I saw smiles on ugly faces. I couldn’t fathom how so many people that I’d rather not be all seem to be living a better life. A few seconds had passed and Carrington came in. I felt like throwing up. I waited for her to spot us and come over. Instead she went up behind the guy Spinner asked me if I’d rather be and surprised him. This was a planned meeting. They hugged and I observed her observing him, her eyes had the blue of birds. She was unattainable, the kind of girl you’d fuck with fate to be with. My chest was trampled, heart concaved, stomach churned, and I kept thinking “my eyes feel like turtles.” I kept looking around and began to see everyone else as a deformed, hideous creature, taking time to stop and roar in my face periodically. Once every bit of normalcy had faded I walked with my head down to the bathroom, shaking.

I splashed water in my face and looked deeply into the mirror. The faucet had a leak that I couldn’t fix by tightening the knob and it made me anxious. I thought of “Araby”, the girl, and jogging. I felt guilt and obsession flow from my every pore and I wanted to be anyone else.



Losing It

Second Place Non Fiction Prose • Brittany Shope

As a young girl, I was never naturally skinny. I fluctuated between chubby and overweight all throughout my youth. When I look back and think about my life, I try to pinpoint the exact moment that my weight went from being the youthful chubbiness that was natural for a girl that age, to the gradual gain that would lead me to obesity. At thirteen, on the brink of the high school years that would help define who I was supposed to be, tragedy struck. Whoever I was supposed to be, whatever path my life was on, it was taken from me completely the moment I touched my mother's cheek and realized that she was gone.

When I found my mother's lifeless body on our living room couch, it broke my spirit and fractured my soul. From then on, I was no longer the Brittany that I was before that day. The pain that I carried with me would affect every choice and every moment from that day on and my weight would be a reflection of that pain.

At thirteen, I was too young to properly process the loss of my mother and the traumatic experience of being the one who found her. My mother's death was caused by an accidental overdose of prescription medications. She suffered for years trying to fight an addiction to the very medications that were supposed to be healing her body, not harming it. In the wake of her death, I found myself consumed with guilt.

When I was a baby, my mother tripped over the baby gate as she tried to step over it at the top of the stairs. She started to fall and instead of falling on top of me and possibly killing me, she chose to jump. She jumped as she tripped and managed to sit me on the floor safely right before she landed and broke both of her ankles, injuring her back in the process.

This fall, over in mere seconds, was the start of my mother's health problems. All of her back surgeries and her dependence on pain medications resulted because of me. I watched her slowly fall apart over the thirteen years she was in my life, and every day I felt the weight of my guilt.

Beginning at the age of thirteen, I gradually started to pack on the pounds. Never truly getting over my mother's death, I hid those feelings with food. I became a picky eater and ate only those foods that I liked. Fast food, soda and highly processed foods made up the majority of my diet. After graduating from high school, I weighed 190 pounds, too much for my 5'5" frame.

I was depressed about all of the things my mother would never get to see.

She didn't see me graduate from high school and she'd never see me go to college. She wouldn't be there the day that I fell in love and she wouldn't be there the day of my wedding. She wouldn't be there for any of it. Although I was depressed, I wasn't at all depressed about my weight or my body. Of course I wanted to lose weight. I wanted to be thin. It just wasn't a priority for me. I liked food and I didn't like exercise. My weight was not going to change any time soon.

Three years after high school, I fell in love. I started feeling emotions I hadn't felt since my mother's death. I started loving again and began to feel alive for the first time in years. I had a boyfriend who was paying attention to me and loving me in ways that no one had since my mother had died. I began to want to do things with him that I couldn't because of my weight. I wanted to go hiking. He stayed in shape for his physical training requirements in the National Guard and I wanted to go running with him on a summer afternoon.

One day I set my mind to it and eventually, I lost the weight. It took a year and a half, lots of exercising and lots of vegetables, but I finally settled in at 125 pounds and said goodbye to the sixty-five pounds of weight and grief that I had carried around for almost eight years. At first, the weight loss was everything I could have ever hoped for. I had tried several times over the past few years to lose weight and this time I actually did it. The first ten pounds that came off felt like 200. I felt incredibly proud of myself during those first few months that I worked out and saw the number go down on the scale. I felt invincible. I felt like a new person every time I saw on the scale that I had lost another ten pounds.

I started to feel beautiful in front of my boyfriend and I even began to not mind when he would touch my stomach, an area that was always a sensitive subject for me since that's where I felt like I carried a lot of my weight. Although the first few months of my weight loss journey were some of the most inspiring months of my life, that quickly changed after I had lost around thirty to forty pounds.

For years I was numb to the emotional trauma I experienced as a young girl and later I was blind to how overweight I was. The weight loss opened these wounds up for me. Although I was getting smaller, healthier and happier by losing weight, I was forcing myself to look at my body every day. I was forcing myself to look at those things in my life that had been the catalyst to me reaching 190 pounds.

At about forty pounds lighter, I felt huge. Every stretch mark, every bit of saggy skin left behind by the weight loss, every inch of my body was under the magnifying glass of my scrutinizing eyes and what I saw shocked me. I realized that when I was 190 pounds, I didn't see how big I really was. The way I looked forty pounds lighter is how I had thought I looked at my heaviest weight. Looking at old pictures of myself, I was unbelievably heartbroken to see that I had let myself get that unhealthy.

The last twenty-five pounds came off much slower than the first 40 but they eventually came off. The morning I saw 125.6 on the scale was one of the best moments of my life. Never could I have dreamed that I would lose sixty-five pounds and be in the coveted 120s. My boyfriend had loved me through every pound, watching my stomach and

arms shrink, watching my bra size get smaller and smaller. He loved me at 125 pounds as much as he had at 190 pounds and every weight in between. The day I reached 125 pounds should have been the end of my journey.

It wasn't. Everything that I thought 125 pounds would fix was still broken. At my heaviest weight, I had never worried about what my boyfriend thought of my body or what others thought of my size. At my lowest weight, I felt like every inch of my body was under inspection by everyone I came in contact with. When I sat down in the car next to my boyfriend, I would secretly wonder if he was looking over at my stomach and thinking it was still too big, that he wished it was smaller and so flat that no rolls sat on top of my belt buckle. When I met new people I wondered if they considered me chunky or if they thought the stretched out skin of my underarms was unattractive.

It got so bad that I felt like women who were much larger than me were secretly judging me and thinking that I was overweight as well. Food became my enemy. I felt guilty every time I ate something that was too high in calories or too delicious. My boyfriend can eat fast food and maintain his seven percent body fat, purely muscle frame. When I ate out with him, I felt like I was failing and tomorrow the scale would be up a pound, the weight would creep back on.

Although my weight loss had helped me to begin to deal with the issues surrounding my mother's death, I was now being weighed down by a new depression. I felt like I would never be skinny enough. I was sure that my skin would never be smooth. I worried that the stretch marks would haunt me for the rest of my life. They'd be a constant reminder of my failure to take care of myself and would sit there on my skin, embedded white lines that proved that if I weren't vigilant in my diet and exercise, I would gain the weight back.

It wasn't just the weight I was afraid of. I was also afraid people would stop treating me with respect and showing me attention the way that they had since I had lost the weight. I didn't want to go back to being invisible. Although I was devoted to my boyfriend of over two years, I relished the attention I was receiving from everyone. Boys were more interested in me and flirted with me like they never would have done when I was 190 pounds. Girls acted differently towards me as well and were more likely to talk to me in class or on campus.

I never hid the fact that I used to be overweight. I always found a way to work it into the conversation with every new person I met. I wanted people to know that that was who I used to be. I'm still not sure why. As depressed as I was about my body in its current state, I needed everyone to know that it used to be much bigger. Maybe I thought that if people knew I used to be that big, they'd be more likely to look at me as small now. I was comforted by that comparison. No matter how much I hated myself at this low weight, at least it wasn't 190 pounds. I felt huge after losing 65 pounds. I couldn't imagine how huge I would feel if I gained it back.

By the summer after my junior year in college, I had been 125 pounds for a couple of months and was about to embark on an overseas study abroad program. My boyfriend drove me to the airport and on the way, I began to cry. I told him that I felt like I was

hopelessly drowning in my body image issues. I knew that my anxieties and issues were affecting us as a couple and I promised him that when I came home, I would have a new perspective. I wasn't sure how, but I knew I needed to find a way to heal in Scotland.

Two weeks into my trip to Scotland, while struggling with eating outside of my comfort zone, something happened that would forever change the way I viewed my body. Early one Friday morning on the streets of Edinburgh, I began to feel nauseous. A couple of hours later I was back in bed and in more pain than I had ever experienced in my entire life. I knew instinctively what was wrong, as I lay there dizzy and throbbing all over: It was food poisoning. A couple of months before I had had a mild two-day case of food poisoning so I knew what this was. As much pain as I was in that day, I thought the next morning it would all be over like it had been the last time.

I was bed-ridden for six days. For six days, I didn't eat. I vomited and I emptied myself in every way imaginable, over and over again. I spent just as much time in the bathroom as I did in bed. It was miserable. As each day went on with no food and continuous trips to the bathroom, I thought that although I was living proof, it had to be impossible to be continuously emptying my body without replenishing it.

By the sixth day of this torture, my body was broken. I was smaller than I had ever been before in my life. My pants hung loosely on my hips and could slide off easily without unbuttoning them. My face was gaunt. I stood naked in front of my mirror in my little bedroom in Scotland, moving my arms and running my fingers over my stomach. I spent a long time that day, just standing there, looking at my body. I was tiny. I was insignificant. I was empty.

On that sixth day, when I was well enough to really process my new, smaller frame, I wanted to weigh myself. I hadn't weighed myself during the past two weeks that I had been overseas and I still had no scale in Scotland. In front of the mirror, I dipped my fingers into my collarbones and thought, "I bet I weigh 117 pounds." The thought that I could be that small, that somewhere in the world there was a scale that would show me a number so much smaller than I had ever seen before, excited me.

It pleased me only for a moment and quickly I came back down from this euphoria. I had these thoughts and before they could even settle comfortably in my mind, I began to feel sick. Not food poisoning sick. Just emotionally sick. A wave of disgust was washing over me: I felt fragile. After six days without food, spending most of my time emptying my body over and over again, what was left was nothing but bones and skin. Those stretch marks that I had hated so fervently before, sat delicately on my taut stomach. I traced them and felt as if they were a kind of kindred spirit. Like me, they had survived the food poisoning and came out on the other side, changed, not quite the same, but still there.

After nearly a week without food, I was ravenous. I wanted only one thing: a McDonald's Big Mac. Still tender and weak from the poisoning, my stomach could only handle so much in a day. So for my last three days in Scotland, I slept as long as I could to try and regain some strength, and then I made the three-block trek to the nearest McDonald's

where I ordered a Big Mac meal and ate in bliss. It was all I ate my last three days in Scotland. On the last night there, I plucked up the strength to go out to a bar with my friends and while they drank and ate dinner, I quietly ordered the chocolate fudge cake and ate half of it, a small smile sitting at the corner of my lips.

On the plane ride home from Scotland, I lifted up my sweater to look at my stomach. My pants were a full size too big and I had to belt them to keep them on. I watched movie after movie on the in-flight system, and all the while I daydreamed about all of the delicious American food I would be eating as soon as the plane touched down. A couple of days before, still in the midst of my torture, I had sat up in bed and written my boyfriend a letter. I wrote to him about how sorry I was that I had let my life get so consumed by my view of my body. I wrote that I was coming home with a new perspective.

Less than an hour after landing in America, my boyfriend took me to Cracker Barrel. The next morning it was Waffle House. That night, it was Krystal. Two months after my fast food tour of America, I am 125 pounds and happy. Sometimes I eat healthy food, and sometimes I eat chocolate cake. I exercise when I have the time and when I want to. When the number on the scale goes up a pound or two, I watch the chocolate cake for the next day or so and it goes right back down to that familiar 125.

I would love to say that I never look at my body and hate what I see. Sometimes I still struggle with my body image but it's nowhere near what it had been when I was drowning in it. I feel so lucky to have survived not only the food poisoning, but also the depression that I experienced during my weight loss. While losing weight, I felt alone in what I was feeling, even though at the time a friend of mine also was losing weight and experiencing the same feelings. Magazines and talk shows only highlighted the positive aspects of weight loss. I couldn't find anyone in the magazines or on television that was talking about depression coupled with weight loss.

I know there are women out there who have felt the way I did when I lost my weight. My story ends with an epiphany, health, happiness and lots of good food. I know that it could have ended with tragedy, an eating disorder and a never ending cycle that young girls and women all over the world often find themselves in and unable to escape.

I lost sixty-five pounds. Then I lost myself. It took a life-threatening illness and six days of emptiness to fulfill me. I am full now. I'm full of love and compassion for myself and for every woman out there who looks in the mirror and feels helpless to change herself. I know I still have a lifetime of battling weight gain and weight loss ahead of me. All I can hope for is that I'll never forget what it felt like standing in front of that mirror in Scotland, wasted away, insignificant, not hungry for anything. I'm hungry now. I'm hungry for life, love and happiness. I'm hungry for fruits, salads and vegetables. Occasionally, I'm hungry for Big Macs.



Man's Man

Third Place Non Fiction Prose • Sam Smith

No matter how many posters covered the walls, my dorm was still 150 square feet.

I was lucky my freshman year. I had to stay in the Comfort Inn for three weeks because there was no housing available, but the predicament led to my assigned living in one of the apartment complexes at Buccaneer Village, where married couples lived. I had my own kitchen, bathroom, and a bed big enough for two.

My sophomore year was less deluxe. I had to live in Lucille-Clement. My best friend and I shared the dorm, and we ended up failing the spring semester because we were too busy trying to figure out if either of us had feelings for the other. We had been friends since middle school, but there was a tension growing between us. Such tension tends to happen when one person has agreed to be in an open relationship in which the other person is allowed to sleep around.

The following summer, he had decided to “work on us” and take time from college. I decided it was in my best interest not to live in Campbell County, with its medley of meth labs, Confederate flags, and rightwing fundamentalists unlikely to get along with a gay vegetarian atheist. I also missed college too much, along with not having much interest in pursuing a relationship that died several months prior to any attempt to revive it. The summer ended and I returned without him. We haven’t spoken since.

I had failed the spring semester, so I began my third year in the fall as a sophomore. I moved into Lucille, and covered the walls and closet doors with posters to confirm that I had returned, my former best friend three hours away and no one but myself to tell me I had made the right choice. The stifling heat of the dorm was strengthened by the window’s inability to open. I found solace in the fact my assigned roommate – a stranger about whom I knew nothing beyond the fact he was male – had not yet arrived.

A couple of weeks passed before I met him. His name was Andrew, and he seemed too tall and wide to be a track star but I felt it best not to contradict him. He looked around my side of the room, and I wondered if he was going to be able to live with a homosexual.

None of my posters were of shirtless men or the cast of *Sex and the City*, mind you. I had posters of films like *Closer*, *Dawn of the Dead*, and *V for Vendetta* – relatively unthreatening expressions of interest in film. I even had a *Sin City*

frame of Jessica Alba, swinging a rope in her midriff-exposed outfit. It wasn't like I had a hot pink disco ball nail-gunned to the ceiling. I'm a rather low-maintenance kind of gay.

"What's your major? I asked Andrew, when he seemed finished scanning my side of the room. He set a couple bags on his bed and sat at the edge.

"Sport and Leisure Management," he said gruffly, his voice deeper and speech slower than my own. I tended to talk too fast in a low monotone; being a closet case for nearly a decade impacted my speech, and I still have trouble enunciating at times. So far Andrew and I had nothing substantial in common beyond our housing assignment. I asked another easy question.

"Are you a freshman?"

"Yep. You?" His eyes glazed over as he asked. He seemed to hope I wasn't a freshman, or else we would have more to talk about.

"I'm a sophomore and a half." His right eyebrow lifted as he searched my face. I began to feel awkward standing in the middle of the room. I sat in the chair by my desk. The dorm was pathetically small. Of course I was assigned a roommate the size of a small rhino.

"Sophomore and a half?" He asked as I took my seat.

"I'll be a junior in the spring," I said, hoping it was explanation enough. He nodded and I noticed he was growing a unibrow, highlighted by his crooked eyes and offset goatee. Few men can pull off a goatee, and Andrew was not an attractive fellow. He had an understated resemblance to the linebacker at my high school who hanged himself. I kept the thought to myself.

"Do you have any plans for the weekend?" He asked. We might as well have been on a less successful episode of *Blind Date*.

"I'm probably going to hang out with Whitney," I told him. I hadn't made any official plans but I usually went to Whitney's apartment, where we played video games and listened to Bob Marley.

"Whitney?" Andrew's eyes lit up. I knew what he was thinking. Four years of high school with a plethora of jocks is quite revealing of the general mindset that less evolved heterosexual men tend to have.

"Yeah, we're good friends," I explained, happy to drop 'friend' before he could drop 'girlfriend.'

"Oh. Are you a ladies' man?"

I had never been asked if I was a ladies' man. The phrase reminded me of the *Saturday Night Live* character Leon Phelps, radio DJ and self-prescribed love guru. In the skit-to-film adaptation, *The Ladies Man*, Phelps says things like, "I have made love to many fine ladies from the lowliest bus station skank to the classiest most sophisticated, educated, debutant, high society ... bus station skank." The movie isn't that great, but my main

point is that I am not a ladies' man. I don't even like how the word "ladies" looks with an apostrophe at the end. It looks sloppy.

Another poster on my wall is of Kinsey, a film about the scientist who came up with the Kinsey scale. From zero to six, Kinsey categorized people who were completely heterosexual (zero) to those who were completely homosexual (six).

The scale is based on sexual activity, preferences, and generally any criteria you can imagine that would help an observer pinpoint your orientation. I haven't taken the Kinsey test, but I daresay that I am a complete six. The only heterosexual activity of which I can claim is when I had a girlfriend in the third and fifth grades. Neither relationship was more than handholding status symbols. From what I hear, both girls are lesbians. I'm as experienced with vaginas as Sarah Palin is with newspapers.

"I'm not really a ladies' man," I told him after some consideration. I didn't want to come out to him so quickly. I was only a couple months out of the closet. I wanted to focus on passing the semester instead of complicating it with politics.

"You don't have a girlfriend?" He asked. As if that weren't enough, he added, "And you're not a ladies' man?"

Twice I had been asked a question that reminded me of a substandard *SNL* skit. I was glad that I didn't have a boyfriend, or else I would have felt compelled to say what kind of man I was.

"No girlfriend. And nope ... I'm not really a ladies' man." The conversation was getting painful. I was in a Cracker Jack box of a living situation, and I didn't know if I was sharing the space with someone who could turn green and snap my neck at the mention of the word "homosexual."

Andrew bit his lip and stood up. He walked to his closet and slid the door open, looking inside and probably searching for an escape route or a ladies' man. I picked up a pen and started clicking its cap; if I hadn't bitten all my nails to the quick, I would have resorted to those instead. He sat back down and looked at me as if he had accidentally discovered me, a lump on one of his breasts. He cleared his throat.

"So. I'm not living with a ladies' man?"

Something in me burned as if I had taken a shot of 80-proof, anger-flavored tequila. My heart was racing. I hated repetition, nosiness, and unoriginality. Andrew was not giving me much else.

"I'm gay, actually." Silence in the room. *Avenged Sevenfold* or something equally terrible was playing somewhere down the hall. In a way, I was a ladies' man: I was probably the only *Dixie Chicks* fan on the entire floor. I waited for Andrew to say anything to show he wasn't traumatically scarred that he was living with a minority. He said nothing, folding his arms and sighing quietly as if I weren't fluent in body language.

"Are you okay with that?" I asked. "It's not a big deal." He shook his head, clearing his throat again.

“Well, it was nice meeting you. I’m going to go get the rest of my things.” I nodded and told him it was nice to meet him. I can’t say who was the bigger liar. He closed the door behind him, and I never saw him again.

A week had passed and I found a note on my desk. It said I had an appointment with an official in the Department of Housing. It was no mystery to me, the nature of the appointment. Andrew the track star had stampeded from our room to the authorities.

I walked to the Housing Department and met with the official. He ironically resembled a typical Bear in the gay community, a Bear being a type of gay male who rarely shaves and often goes camping. I’ve never been a devoted supporter of The Gay Flow Chart, but some people seem born to be labeled. There are Bears, Cubs, Twinks, Twunks, and Otters. There are Yestergays and Hasbians, gays in non-gay relationships. When I have a five o’clock shadow, I’m an Otter. Without facial hair, I’m a Twink, which sounds like a Dr. Seuss villain. In a couple of years, I’ll be a Twunk. In a couple of decades, I’ll be a century old.

I don’t like labels, so I must say again The Gay Flow Chart is not something I take seriously – even if the Housing official looked and sounded like a Bear.

“Hello, Mr. Smith. Nice to meet you,” he began. I noticed a triangle logo above his desk, a sticker that implied he wasn’t homophobic and that the environment was a “safe zone.” He began to synopsise what happened the day Andrew found out I wasn’t a ladies’ man. Andrew was in distress. He didn’t want to live with someone who would hit on him or his friends. After all, each gay man desires every penis at all costs, at all times, and at the request of the Devil.

For the record, Andrew could never be so lucky.

“He seemed okay with it when I finally told him,” I said. “I didn’t think he was going to file a complaint against me. Has he been reassigned?” I heard my voice breaking. I felt my hands shaking, my back sweating, and my mind processing shock.

“That’s not what we’re here to talk about,” he said. “There are some issues I’d like cleared up with you. I have some questions.”

“Okay.”

“Is it true you asked for your own room this semester?”

“Yes. I didn’t want to risk living with a homophobe. I asked to live in a private room in the event my financial aid allowed it.”

“You understand that it seems like you might have come on too strongly? Maybe you should have waited a few days before coming out to him?” The questions infuriated me. I knew then I was eventually going to cry, and I’m not the type to cry. It was all I could do to figure out what to say without expressing the anger or hurt I was feeling. I focused and maintained eye contact with the Bear look-alike.

“He asked me three times if I was a ladies’ man. It wouldn’t have helped much if he had unpacked and everything before he realized I’m gay. I feel that I’m being treated

like the one in this situation who has done wrong.” It was as I said the word “feel” that I began to cry. When I cry, I tend to ramble. “I’ve been struggling with depression over what’s happened last year, and here you are telling me I should have stayed in the closet to keep a fucking homophobe happy. This is an issue about a homophobic moron.”

“That may be the case,” he said. He spoke more quietly and leaned back in his chair. “I can see this is an issue that is bothering you both. He is sleeping on the couch at a friend’s house, and I feel that you were not wrong to tell him the truth.” At this, I began to feel more in control. I couldn’t uncover an ounce of sympathy for a bigot compelled to sleep on a couch because I am somehow a threat to his well-being.

“Do you have any more questions?” I asked him.

“Well, I wanted to add that you can speak with the Housing Director if you would like, and your new roommate will be assigned within the week.”

“Thanks,” I said as I left.

I spoke with the Housing Director for nearly an hour and a half. She “sympathized” with me and said she would take my suggestion “to the Board” that housing applications be adjusted to ask students if they are comfortable living with minorities. She never told me what the Board said.

I wrote an article in the campus paper about my experience with Andrew and the Department of Housing, and I moved out at the end of the semester. Housing didn’t let me break my contract, saying I had “insufficient documentation.” A homophobe could express his fear of being groped in the night, but I couldn’t leave with the rest of my financial aid in order to pursue a healthier environment. They charged me for the entire spring semester, even though I didn’t spend a single moment living there after December. Intent to marry is a sufficient reason to break the housing contract.

Looking back, Andrew and the Department of Housing did me a favor. I severed ties with the extremity of my shyness and marched in the Pride Rally a month after meeting Andrew. I marched at the lead, going throughout and around campus with people who have become close friends years later. Andrew may never have another roommate quite like me, but he will again be exposed to the fact that gay people and straight people have more in common than not.

The traditional idea is that one year a man and a woman kiss, make love, and bring a child into existence. That child is you, me, Andrew the track star, the *SNL* cast, the Dixie Chicks, every Bear, every Bear look-alike, and every member of the human race.



The Collapse

Second Place Drama • Ethan Palmer

Cast

ORG- Primitive Neanderthal. Long, wild, black hair. Dirty body. Dirty fur clothes (clothing optional). Spear.

CHARLIE PEARSON- Soda Jerk and Pharmacist. Greasy, short, black hair. White dress shirt, suspenders, slacks, well-polished shoes. Pocket watch and chain.

ROY AND DONALD- Children (played by adults) dressed in Sunday school outfits.

OLD MISSUS SPRUCE- Decrepit and confused woman. Constantly shaking.

CHUCKIE P- Mob Doctor and Hero. Same hair as CHARLIE PEARSON. Ruffled and slightly stained version of CHARLIE PEARSON'S attire. No Pocket watch and chain.

RALPHIE- Rigid and hot-tempered mobster. Chest bloodied. Sweaty brow.

SNEEZERS- Compassionate mobster. Dressed in generic 1930s mobster attire, bowler hat included.

BETTY P- Heartthrob mob nurse. Short hair. Colorful, spunky attire.

CHARLES PIERSON- WWI Veteran. Longer, unkempt hair. Ripped, dirtied uniform. Missing left shoe.

SEA GULL- A somewhat fictitious figment of CHARLES PIERSON'S imagination. Sports Mascot-esque costume, or just a mask of a sea gull's head will suffice.

HAZ PIERSON- Mental voyager. Long, untamed hair and viking beard. Wide eyes. Bell bottom jeans and paisley shirt.

UP CHUCK- Anarcho-Punk Messiah. Colorful hair. Multiple piercings. Black eye. Patched, home-made jacket with band logos painted. Futuristic mini-skirt. Combat boots. Accompanied by three or four unnamed punks with exotic hair, tight jeans, t-shirts, and home-made cloth accessories.

CHARLES WASHINGTON- Super Patriot: Cyborg Soldier of American Justice. Well-groomed, curly moustache. Robotic right arm. Sci-fi industrial military armor and uniform. Monocle and Robotic Hammer.

C694110- Nihilistic Work-Being. Black Morphsuit. Stiff in movement.

Surrounded by other unnamed monochromatic figures in morphsuits. Essential throughout the play as the Movers of the paths of different possible existences.

CHORGOFF THE FOUL- Lizard-like barbarian. Fur clothing, battle armor and gladiator spear

CHARLAEUS- Supreme God of the Known Cosmos. Wild white hair. Constantly in haze of smoke, illuminated by black lights. Tribal mask painted with glow in dark/blacklight paint. Glow stick pendants and jewelry.

Backdrops

The title of each backdrop should be written boldly across the top. Backdrops are to be painted, though a collage of images may be used. The backdrops and are pushed in front of one another by the unnamed figures in morphsuits as a representation of different universes colliding. At no time are props detached from characters. For this reason be sure to include objects mentioned on stage in the appropriate backdrop.

MECHANICS OF THE GARDEN: EARTH 1, MANY YEARS AGO- Overwhelming abundance of luscious trees and exotic wildlife of Earth 400,000 years ago.

PREDESTINATION FAÇADE: EARTH 2, 1919- Typical interior of mom and pop drug stores of small Southern towns in the early 1900s. Jars of candy in front of cash register. Tonics and herbal remedies with randomly picked, extra large, exaggerated letters such as H or DuTr written on extra large bottles.

FALSE REFLECTIONS: EARTH 3, 1930- Dusty, neglected attic-space. Shadows and decay. Stacks of boxes. A large trunk.

HOW FOUL THE ODOR OF LOSS: EARTH 4, CHRISTMAS DAY, 1941- Dirty, hazy city streets. Signs blurred so audience cannot make out street names. Telephone poles. Grey debris scattered about. One Christmas tree, lacking decorations, standing ominous.

REALITY'S DISTORTION PEDAL: EARTH 5, 1971- Dingy bar atmosphere. Psychedelic geometric designs on posters. Salvador Dali's "Nude with Snail Breasts" hanging crooked. A map of Scandinavia with five X marks on random Norwegian cities.

STATIONS OF THE CRUST: EARTH 6, 1984- Spacious basement. Written sloppily or stenciled across the walls are phrases such as "Destroy Power, Not People," "Wealth is a Ghetto," and "Where's the Freedom?" A drum set. Big, cheap amps.

DAWN'S EARLY BLIGHT: EARTH 7, 2015- 3:30 A.M. in a lifeless desert. Burning buildings and smoke in the distant background. A vast, starry sky.

TO HAVE NOTHING IS EVERYTHING: EARTH 63, 2310- Solid color. A light shade of gray.

THE ENDLESS EBB: EARTH 147, 25147- Similar to, if not the same as, MECHANICS

OF THE GARDEN backdrop.

THE EMBRACE OF DIVINE APOPTOSIS: INFINITY, FOREVER- Many stars, planets, suns, etc. illuminating the black abyss of space.

ACT 1

Lights slowly illuminate the front of the stage so that the MECHANICS OF THE GARDEN: EARTH 1, MANY YEARS AGO backdrop is only slightly visible. ORG enters stage left, spear in hand. He begins pacing slowly, uninterested. He looks at something on the ground, a sharp pebble perhaps, when an intense beam of green light strikes the forest backdrop and disappears. ORG is startled and frightened. He waves his spear in the air, unsure whether or not to cry out. He starts his pace again, slightly frenzied, looking in all directions and calling out to his unseen family. The stage becomes fully lit.

Slowly the PETULANT FAÇADE: EARTH 2, 1919 backdrop is pushed from stage right to stage left, eventually covering half of the first backdrop. CHARLIE PEARSON, OLD MISSUS SPRUCE, ROY and DONALD casually walk with the backdrop, CHARLIE PEARSON and OLD MISSUS SPRUCE standing at the back end of the stage and the two children playing a mindless game like bloody knuckles at the front end. CHARLIE PEARSON is holding an unopened briefcase with a syringe and small bottle inside. The already alert ORG sees the other characters, becomes silent and poised, pointing his spear in their direction like an instinctive hunter.

CHARLIE PEARSON. So how's Walter, Missus Spruce? He still got that job?

OLD MISSUS SPRUCE. Ah! Willie's a fine young man! An excellent man! So honest, so noble, compassionate...

CHARLIE PEARSON. Yes, good to hear, but I said Walter, not Willie. Do you even know a Willie?

OLD MISSUS SPRUCE. (sourly) None of your business who I know and who I don't. (looks towards children and smiles at them)

CHARLIE PEARSON. Just a question, ma'am. Never heard of a Willie is all.

OLD MISSUS SPRUCE. Stick to what you know. What you're best at. You ain't too good at talking. Ain't to good at making a tired old woman feel welcome. Get me my medicine and shoot your questions at someone that's got time on this Earth to hear them.

CHARLIE PEARSON. Right. OK.

DONALD. (*pulling back his hands*) Ow!

ROY. I win then!

DONALD. You said you wouldn't hit so hard! That's cheating!

OLD MISSUS SPRUCE. (*irritated*) Have you got my medicine?

CHARLIE PEARSON. Certainly.

ROY. He owes me one of those new chocolate things!

CHARLIE PEARSON. You're going to have to wait your turn, Roy. It's this (*slightly sarcastic*) kind woman's turn.

ROY. What's the old bat gotta do that's so damn important?

CHARLIE PEARSON. That's enough! How'd your mom like to know how you're speaking these days? She know you're here?

OLD MISSUS SPRUCE. Questions, questions...

ROY. (*grinning*) She'd probably say something like...piss off, runt! (*runs and kicks CHARLIE PEARSON in the shin. Runs stage left, directly into ORG.*)

ORG. (*terrified*) AGH!

ORG grabs ROY and throws him to the ground. He lifts his spear. ROY is on his knees, crying and babbling. As soon as he sees ORG, CHARLIE PEARSON reaches into his briefcase and loads the syringe. DONALD runs away, stage left. OLD MISSUS SPRUCE faints. As ORG is about to stab ROY, CHARLIE PEARSON stabs ORG. All fall on top of one another. Curtains.

ACT 2

CHARLIE PEARSON is pacing back and forth within the confines of the drug store, peering towards the jungle world nervously and tending to the semi-unconscious OLD MISSUS SPRUCE. ORG is relatively lifeless, center stage. We can only assume that ROY has run away.

CHARLIE PEARSON. Oh God, oh Heaven. What am I going to do? (*Glancing out the window*) Did someone hear? (*Glancing at ORG*) What is this thing? (*Walking to OLD MISSUS SPRUCE and wiping her forehead*) For Chrissake, wake the fuck up, lady!

OLD MISSUS SPRUCE. (*coming out of a dream, pulling away from CHARLIE PEARSON*) Well I never!

CHARLIE PEARSON. I'm so, so sorry, Missus! You've gotta understand. This here monster attacked young Roy and I barely saved him in time. Didn't even get a chance to talk to the ungrateful little snot.

OLD MISSUS SPRUCE. The way you talk to people, doctor, it's no wonder the poor boy didn't stick around.

CHARLIE PEARSON. (*distraught and facetious*) Alright, lady, I s'pose I need to be more professional when dealing with cave men attacking my customers. I beg your pardon. (*to himself*) As if thinks ain't bad enough as it is. No, 'course you can't have a normal job. 'Course things gotta be ruined. 'Course Elizabeth won't give you the bleeding time of day. Just makes sense, doesn't it? Life can't just gimme a break, can it?

OLD MISSUS SPRUCE. Now look here, kid. I've got griping of my own to do, thank you very much. I don't need some young fool with all the opportunity in the

world trying to bring me down when I've got so little time left. I want my medicine, doctor man.

CHARLIE PEARSON looks clumsily through his shelves of medicines. A green light strikes a random spot on the stage. Slowly the FALSE REFLECTIONS: EARTH 3, 1930 backdrop is pushed from stage left to stage right, covering up what is left of the original backdrop. CHUCKIE P, RALPHIE, SNEEZERS and BETTY P enter in front of backdrop. RALPHIE limps, holding his wound. CHUCKIE P carries a wooden stool, sets it down, and then gently sets RALPHIE on top of it. The characters grimly converse in silence with one another. CHARLIE PEARSON finally examines the contents of his briefcase.

CHARLIE PEARSON. I don't know how to tell you this, ma'am.

OLD MISSUS SPRUCE. (*fully crotchety*) If you ask one more pointless question-

CHARLIE PEARSON. I had to use your medicine to take out the beast man. I'm afraid I haven't got any more.

OLD MISSUS SPRUCE. You mean that monkey man's loopy on my medicine?

CHARLIE PEARSON. All of it, I'm afraid. Should've been a lethal dosage, but he's still twitching now and again.

OLD MISSUS SPRUCE. I don't know what kind of drug store you're trying to run, mister, but I haven't-

CHARLIE PEARSON. Yeah? Well let me ask you-

OLD MISSUS SPRUCE. (*triumphantly*) No, thank you!

Hearing the old woman's outburst and immediately recognizing her voice, SNEEZERS runs into the drug store, tripping and falling in front of CHARLIE PEARSON and OLD MISSUS SPRUCE. The old woman faints again.

SNEEZERS. What is this? What's here?

CHARLIE PEARSON. Damnit, she's out again!

SNEEZERS. (*examining the collapsed old woman thoroughly*) Sure looks like her. Livelier than when I last saw her. But how?

CHARLIE PEARSON. She won't be alive much longer with all this commotion. Please. I don't know who you are. I don't care. Please. Leave my shop.

SNEEZERS. Just a minute, just a minute. It's like a dream or something. It can't be her. Old Missus Spruce. She died when I was such a small lad. (To his associates) Hey! Over here! You won't believe this!

CHUCKIE P and BETTY P rush into the drug store, leaving RALPHIE alone in the attic, clutching his chest.

CHUCKIE P. Lookit that! Sneezy's found us a dope shop right in the next room! Ralphie might be saved!

BETTY P. (*looking at CHARLIE PEARSON in disbelief*) I think I'm going to be sick!
(*Looks back and forth at CHARLIE PEARSON and CHUCKIE P*)

CHUCKIE P. Wuzzat?

BETTY P. Look at him! He's you! A younger you!

CHARLIE PEARSON. (*seeing the resemblance*) Well I- Betty?

SNEEZERS. Hot dog! What is this? What's here? Two Chucks? A living dead woman?
Ape man? What is this?

In the attic RALPHIE collapses onto the floor, twitches several times, then is quite still.

CHARLIE PEARSON. Old Missus Spruce is not dead! She just fainted.

SNEEZERS. Horse hockey! She was a mother to me when I's in the home, she taught me to read, she bought me pants when mine's too holey to wear no more, and she died, by God, right before I got my grade school diploma.

CHARLIE PEARSON. I can't take this. I'm going to lose my job.

CHUCKIE P. Hold everything. First of all, we got a guy in what I thought was an attic that's gonna die no matter what if we don't get him medicine from this fine establishment. If you don't mind, mister...

CHARLIE PEARSON. Charlie Pearson's the name.

CHUCKIE P. (*not amused*) Cut out the crap, kid. Give us the drugs or we'll take 'em.

BETTY P. Don't you see, Chuckie P? He's you!

CHARLIE PEARSON. Elizabeth Ingles. It is you. Come to mock me after all these years, then?

BETTY P. It's Betty P to you. I'm Chuckie P's gal, forevermore.

CHARLIE PEARSON. You left me. I gave everything I had to you and you left me. Led me thinking for years and years that we'd be something, something incredible together. (*in tears suddenly*) You squeezed out every dime and left me alone. Said I was too boring. Too selfish! I gave it all for you, and it wasn't enough! Now I've worked away my youth in this piss poor drug store, trying to win you back someday with an income that will never be! How dare you-

CHUCKIE P. (*flashing a small pistol in CHARLIE PEARSON's face*) That'll do. That'll do. I don't know who you are. I don't know why you look like me. All I know is that I need you to stop talking, and I need your drugs. Where's your blasted morphine?

CHARLIE PEARSON. I haven't got any morphine! I used it to sedate the hairy monster! (*gaining composure*) Even if I did have some, it would go to Old Missus Spruce, who needs it more than you three scoundrels!

CHUCKIE P. Scoundrels?

CHARLIE PEARSON. I know what kind of lot you are! Waving guns in the faces

of strangers! Don't think I'm blind to it. You're lawbreakers. Ruffians. You're no good.

SNEEZERS. Hold on, then! What's this? Doping up the frail, old woman? That what she needs? The Old Missus Spruce I knew died from that morphine you been giving out like it's candy or something. You been killing her a long time I'll bet, seein' as a loud noise is enough to make her faint. (*Pointing his index finger at CHARLIE PEARSON*) You's the scoundrel! (*pointing at ORG*) And what's this, anyway? You got more explaining to do to the cops'n we do.

CHARLIE PEARSON. What do you even mean by that? A cave man attacked my customer. I attacked the cave man. (*to BETTY P*) What's he got that I don't? I been trying my whole life to make the money you demanded! To build the life you wanted with these hands! He makes dirty money. He's done bad things with his hands, he has. He's a bad man. Don't you see it? How can you not see it?

SNEEZERS. Hey! Chuckie P's a saint. Only money he makes is for bein' the best damn doctor we could ever ask for.

CHARLIE PEARSON. That's it, then. He patches up the thugs and lowlifes that can't go to a normal doctor without being arrested. That's the man you love, Betty Ingles? What the hell? What's he got that I don't? What's he done for you?

CHUCKIE P. Hey now-

BETTY P. I don't know what you're talking about! I've never met you before, and I wish I'd never met you at all. The man I love helps anyone, despite their professions. He cherishes all life. He doesn't care about money-

SNEEZERS. Though we make sure he don't starve.

BETTY P. He's not some self-absorbed ass like you've made yourself out to be today.

SNEEZERS. Ha! Eh? What's this?

CHUCKIE P. Ralphie's not gonna-

BETTY P. Oh, no, Ralphie!

All characters run to the attic space. BETTY P rushes to RALPHIE's side, lifting his head, then setting it back down. She lunges into CHARLIE PEARSON's arms, hugging him vehemently. CHARLIE PEARSON closes his eyes and smiles. Suddenly realizing who she is embracing, BETTY P lets out a faint sound of disgust and detaches, looking away from all characters. CHUCKIE P delivers a menacing glare, then hurries by the two frozen figures, checking for signs of vitality in RALPHIE. SNEEZERS looks at the body then looks away. He runs into the drug store, seeing the collapsed cave man and old woman. He shakes his head in disbelief and sprints back to the other room.

SNEEZERS. (*muttering frantically to himself while slowly pacing*) Oh God, oh fuck, Ralphie! God! Agh! Ralphie! Mom? Ape man! Ralphie! Damn it! Spruce! God! Instructor! Ralphie! Oh no! Please no! Winter? Best friend! Ralphie! Fuck! God! Agh! No!

CHUCKIE P stands, his head held down. All characters do likewise. Curtain.

Act 3

CHARLIE PEARSON, CHUCKIE P, and BETTY P Stand rigid in the attic. The three collapsed bodies, briefcase, and chair are no longer on stage. SNEEZERS is rocking back and forth, shaking. A bright green light strikes twice in random spots on the stage.

Slightly faster the HOW FOUL THE ODOR OF LOSS: EARTH 4, CHRISTMAS DAY, 1941 backdrop is pushed in front of the drug store. CHARLES PIERSON and SEA GULL enter in front of the new backdrop. Both lie down to sleep, exhausted.

CHUCKIE P. Alright we gotta figure this out. (BETTY P and SNEEZERS begin sobbing uncontrollably) Listen! They ain't staying in the trunk for long. We just gotta figure out just what the hell is happening here, why this attic has a built in drug store, why this loser looks like a younger me, why a big hairy freak tried to maul a little kid, why a dying old lady should already be dead-Christ! (*forcing BETTY P to look him directly in the eyes*) They won't be in the trunk long. They won't be in the trunk long.

CHARLIE PEARSON. People always complain when I ask questions, so I'll let you people figure it all out.

SNEEZERS. Come off it! Shut up! Just stop talking you greasy bastard!

CHARLIE PEARSON. Nice base of operations, lad. Clean. Really set your friend Ralphie up like a pal would, didn't you?

SNEEZERS. That's it! (*Lunges, falls short, and begins weeping*)

CHUCKIE P. (*pointing his pistol at CHARLIE PEARSON*) If we're going to figure this out you've got to stop talking.

BETTY P. How the hell's your drug store built into our attic like that? We're supposed to be secluded up here.

CHARLIE PEARSON. You got me. Before it was an attic it was a wild jungle with that savage, hairy fellow.

SNEEZERS. Let me plug him! Let me plug that fucking hole in his face up! How'd you like that?

CHARLIE PEARSON. (*Looking at SNEEZERS nervously*) I'm going back to my shop.

CHUCKIE P. Not without me, you're not.

CHARLIE PEARSON. Very well. Let's just go.

Both characters travel in front of the new backdrop and fall down in shock.

CHUCKIE P. Gah!

CHARLIE PEARSON. My girl's come back to haunt me, my shop's taken away...

CHARLES PIERSON. (*surlly and apathetic*) Let me sleep, will ya?

CHARLIE PEARSON. This is my property and I-well, at least I think-

CHUCKIE P. Let him be. (*Points to CHARLES PIERSON's uniform*) Colors.

CHARLIE PEARSON. My store! My love? My life!

CHARLES PIERSON. 'Spect my colors he says. It's a uniform makes a man. Without the colors, I'm not much. Gave my life up early. Didn't find love, oh no. Gal said I was too greedy. Said I didn't know sacrifice, so when I got the chance to stop Europe from destroying itself I threw myself in. (*CHARLIE PEARSON and CHUCKIE P stop listening. SEA GULL wakes up, sits attentively, listening to the veteran*) War to end all wars, eh? Ha. Here we go again. Fact that it took them attacking us shows just how selfish we all are deep down. Shows the greed. 'Course I say us, but where's the us? You two, well, you're just like me, even if you can't see it. We're all in it together I say. All aboard! 'Course you two are higher up there. You two are too good to listen to the lower order. (*CHUCKIE P lets out a sigh and begins listening to the veteran. CHARLIE PEARSON returns to the attic.*) I just wanted to be a man. Just wanted to give what was asked. Sacrifice. See where it got us? They say it's the Second World War. What good was the first? Now there's a fresh new batch to choke on the smoke, to get cut by shrapnel, to lose their legs, their friends, themselves.

CHUCKIE P. You were in the Great War, then?

For a moment all lights go out and green light strikes the stage multiple times. The stage becomes fully lit again. Slightly faster the REALITY'S DISTORTION PEDAL: EARTH 5, 1971 backdrop is pushed in front of the attic. CHAZ PIERSON enters with the backdrop and begins flailing around. The other characters nearby subdue him.

CHARLES PIERSON. Aye. But no one gives a damn about what that war was like. Now we've got a new one. No one gives a damn about what's left behind, or rather, what's lost and might never be found again. It's just go, fight, win. A game. Well I played. I played my fucking heart out and here I am. No one listens but my gull.

CHUCKIE P. (*Losing interest*) Your what now?

CHARLES PIERSON. Sea gull. He's my only pal. He listens to all of it.

CHUCKIE P. Oh boy. I can see why.

CHARLES PIERSON. I was one of the only sheep in my flock to make it back. Some of the others blamed me for the slaughter of so many of our friends. Some just didn't like me much to begin with I'm thinking. I just wanted to give everything. Lost the job they gave me real quick. Family ashamed of me. "Why couldn't he be Alvin fuckin' York?" But some gave more than me. Others- others just took. It was a nightmare I'll never fully wake out of. I'm just lucky my sea gull buddy's here. Without him it'd all be nightmares. Without him, what is there?

CHUCKIE P. Where is this buddy of yours?

CHARLES PIERSON. You haven't got many dreams, have you?

CHUCKIE P. (*Annoyed*) I've got to get back. Nice meeting you mister...

CHARLES PIERSON. Private Charles Pierson.

CHUCKIE P. (*Deeply disturbed*) Alright. See you later, friend. (*He leaves to see what the commotion is in what he thinks to be the attic. SEA GULL follows him.*)

CHARLES PIERSON. (*Crawling feebly towards them*) Don't leave me, brother gull! Not you too! My gull! My life! How will I sleep? How will I find love in the world without you as a pillow? (*Stops crawling.*) Where do I go now? My home! My happiness! Prosperity! No, just loneliness... (*Falls asleep*)

In the dingy bar atmosphere, CHAZ PIERSON is going ballistic, trying to break free of the grasp of BETTY P and CHARLIE PEARSON. SNEEZERS is still sitting nervously. A medley of songs by King Crimson, Yes, and Gentle Giant begins to play.

CHUCKIE P. What's this guy's deal?

SNEEZERS. Says he's taking a trip, but when we ask where he just laughs. Seems like a crazy person if I've ever seen one, way he's rambling. Wants to be left alone. Reminds me of you with one of your woeful hangovers. (*CHUCKIE P shudders at this comment*)

CHAZ PIERSON. Stop-stop holding me down! Always holding me down!

CHUCKIE P. Might as well let him go. He seems more frightened than anything.

CHAZ PIERSON. (*breaking free and falling on his knees in front of CHUCKIE P*) Oh my savior! I was on this quest alone, but I'm so glad you're here to show me the way!

CHUCKIE P. I need a cigarette.

CHAZ PIERSON. Your needs are my needs, oh holy leader! I, too, am in desperate need of a cigarette. It is no coincidence. You must've gone a long way. Did you cross Bifröst, my All-Father? Who gave you your knowledge? Can I meet him? (*Looking at his own hand, amazed yet horrified*) Can you-Woah.

CHUCKIE P. (*Enunciating each word clearly*) You aren't making any sense. We need to make sense. We need a way of explaining this to, to, who?

CHAZ PIERSON. No need to explain because the explanation is already there! It's measured in micrograms! So small a product but-yet-yet will this catharsis it provides me ever end? Seriously will it end? The solution, what breaks the dividing line between the senses, the astral planes-

SNEEZERS. (*Walking to the street*) I'm going out for some fresh air.

As SNEEZERS approaches the street, the backdrop is replaced by the STATIONS OF THE CRUST: EARTH 6, 1984 backdrop. UP CHUCK enters with the backdrop, a megaphone in his hand. The people in morphsuits pick up CHARLES PIERSON and carry him offstage with him screaming in protest. SNEEZERS, seeing UP CHUCK, sits with his legs crossed, and his body wavers slightly back and forth.

CHAZ PIERSON. It's all here in front of us. I've never seen it like this, and it's never seen me like this either! We are unique, now we are unique again! It never stops!

CHARLIE PEARSON. I'll say. Can we stuff a rag in his mouth?

CHUCKIE P. He's better company than you. Even that homeless man was.

CHARLIE PEARSON. (*Defeated*) You're on your own. I don't know you. I don't want to know you. I'm going to find my shop and regain a sense of sanity. (Exits stage left)

BETTY P. Good luck with that!

CHAZ PIERSON. The rainbow infinity! It's spinning and twisting and grinding and sliding and- Now? Now is gone! What is there? Past, present, future? Where do we belong? I know where my faith is, where it could be. Could it be? Anything can be, just don't hold me down! Your strong arms, rules-clothes! (*Rips off shirt*) I can breathe! So free, so in love!

SNEEZERS gets up and returns calmly to the three in the bar.

BETTY P. Oh God...

CHUCKIE P. Hey now-What is this? (*Looking up*) What is this?

SNEEZERS. There's someone on the-the other side. Someone strange.

CHUCKIE P. Stay here, Betty P.

BETTY P. Forget that. I'm going with you.

CHAZ PIERSON. Can I come?

SNEEZERS. Thought you wanted to be alone.

CHAZ PIERSON. I'm never alone, not now. My mind is everywhere, so everyone is in me, within the-the-

CHUCKIE P. We'll all go.

The music stops. A medley of songs by Crass, Flux of Pink Indians, the Subhumans, and Rudimentary Peni begins playing as the motley crew travels into the basement to meet UP CHUCK. Curtains. Music continues.

Act 4

The characters of the previous scene are gathered around UP CHUCK, who is screaming into his megaphone.

UP CHUCK. Finally the exploited, the brainwashed, the institutionalized have arrived! Come my children, be not ashamed, for you know not what you do. Why do you do it? It's all you know! You may ask yourself, "What is it I'm doing?" I'll answer. Destroying. You're taking and raping and leaving nothing for anyone, not even yourselves. What am I talking about? I'm talking about changing the world by refusing to take part in it!

CHUCKIE P. Who is this guy?

UP CHUCK. You've no reason to believe me, but again, you've no reason to believe yourself. The war is within and without.

CHAZ PIERSON. Exactly!

UP CHUCK. Hear me, brothers and sister. What reason do you have to listen to me? What reason do you have to listen to yourselves? You're just like anyone else, which must make it OK, right? It's not OK.

CHAZ PIERSON. (*worried*) It's not?

UP CHUCK. But it can be! Join me by abandoning your humanity as defined by society.

BETTY P. By...abandoning society?

UP CHUCK. Exactly! Don't like the rules? Don't follow them! You, sir, why do you think I'm dressed like this?

SNEEZERS. Because you're a fool.

Green lights flash chaotically while the rest of the lights flash on and off. Eventually, the lighting is normal again. The DAWN'S EARLY BLIGHT: EARTH 7, 2015 is pushed in front of the bar backdrop. CHARLES WASHINGTON enters with the new backdrop.

UP CHUCK. What is foolish about questioning my role in this world? A man doesn't wear a skirt, does he? But here I am! Am I not a man?

BETTY P. Not much of one.

UP CHUCK. But who says? What makes a man? That which isn't a woman? What makes a woman, then? Does the cloth covering my genitals make my identity more than my genitals? I ask you. Am I just a child because my clothes don't match? Who decides what's proper and what's not?

BETTY P. We can just-we can just tell what's good and what's not.

UP CHUCK. You can just tell, can you? It's good to submit. To know your place. Wear your make-up. Paint a new face. A face like anyone else's. And for me it's good to conquer, to assert my self-righteousness. My place was that of a pawn, a money-making robot named Charles Pierson. I threw out my identity and was reborn as Up Chuck, defender of human dignity. But for you, it's good. Become the norm and shun the subverts. We see the flow, the ways of mankind, and how often do we think if it's really good, if it's really for the best? Never. That's good, too, eh? It's all good as long as it works for us and anyone it doesn't work for should be shunned. Go ahead! Shun me! Shun Up Chuck! (*All characters look patiently at the rowdy punk*) I stand here today begging that you follow my example and follow no one's example. Discover your own morals, become your own God. Destroy that which causes pain, that which exploits, that which holds you down! (*CHARLES WASHINGTON hears this remark and enters the basement area cautiously*) Abandon your church, your preachers. Leave behind your parents, their parents, your children. Forget wise words from elders and teachers. Don't let someone else tell you what divinity is, what life is all about. It's up to you! Don't trust the system! It's up to you! This reality is a lie! Find the truth! Don't accept!

CHARLES WASHINGTON walks next to UP CHUCK. He swings his hammer, knocking UP CHUCK to the floor. He looks menacingly at the crowd of listeners. No one says anything. SNEEZERS starts to cry. The music stops.

CHARLES WASHINGTON. Move along, now. The man was insane. He is now where he belongs. Move along.

CHUCKIE P. Just who are you to be telling us what to do? (CHARLES WASHINGTON *raises his hammer*) Sir?

CHARLES WASHINGTON. My name is Charles Washington. I am one of seventy elite units programmed by the United States government to maintain a strict sense of justice, peace, and unity within this great nation.

CHAZ PIERSON. (*hysterically*) A fuckin' cop! I'm freaking out!

Lights out. All characters look at one another, then in the distance. A beam of green light strikes CHARLIE P. directly; Lights go back to normal, and the TO HAVE NO THING IS EVERYTHING: EARTH 63, 2310 backdrop is pushed hastily in front of CHARLES WASHINGTON's short-lived desert backdrop. Several of the characters in morphsuits stay on stage so that the remainder are capable of pushing the final backdrop. C694110 stands in front of the other unnamed figures. All characters in morphsuits line up and begin marching in an uncomfortable and meticulous fashion back and forth perfectly in step with one another within the confines of their section of backdrop, turning in step as well.

CHUCKIE P. What made you want to do what it is you do, sir?

CHARLES WASHINGTON. I am doing what I was born to do. It is my duty, and my duty is my life. I must uphold the law of this land, lest we perish into nothingness. (*After a long silence*) Move along, now, or I will not hesitate to use force.

CHUCKIE P. (*Defiantly*) And what if no one else believed in what you believe in? If you were the only one. Would you still force these laws down other people's throats? How are you so sure you're right? How are you so sure your ways are right for everyone?

CHARLES WASHINGTON. I have a plethora of documents to validate my beliefs.

CHUCKIE P. Who wrote those documents, eh? The right ones?

CHARLES WASHINGTON. Such questions lead quickly to treason. Treason leads to death. Be wise and move along.

CHAZ PIERSON. Let's just do what he says.

CHARLES WASHINGTON. (*Looking at watch*) Oh my, oh my. You threats to American Security just became more threatening. You're out past curfew.

CHAZ PIERSON. Fuck man! I been busted way too many times! I'll never see daylight again! (*Tears his pants off, leaving modest underwear of the early 1970s exposed*) For Freedom! From myself, and from this world! I am God! (*Tries running, is immediately struck down by CHARLES WASHINGTON. Lies lifeless next to UP CHUCK*)

CHARLES WASHINGTON. Follow in his example if you must, or follow me to taste the sweet, divine virtue: American Justice.

All characters reluctantly follow CHARLES WASHINGTON to C694110's domain. C694110's feet begin to fall several inches ahead of the other marching drones. Droning, eerie, ambient synthesizer music begins playing. All characters not in morphsuits stare in bewilderment at the tedious marching. After several moments SNEEZERS steps forth.

SNEEZERS. A bit eager, there are we?

BETTY P. Sneezers!

C694110 corrects himself, falling into line with the other mindless marchers.

SNEEZERS. Hey! See there? He's got it!

CHUCKIE P. (*Looking into the nothingness of the backdrop*) This where you're booking us, George Washington? I don't see any jail cells.

CHARLES WASHINGTON. (*Looking at watch grimly*) They warned us about this... Time Terrorism. I didn't think it could be true! But I was ready, by God! Thought it was like Seasonal Terrorism or Dream Terrorism. Most other soldiers skim right through this section of the instruction manual, but I'm no ordinary soldier, by God! I'm Charles Washington: Soldier 62 of 70 of the highest ranking officials. (*Seeing no one is impressed and needing to prove something, perhaps to himself*) I knew all the signs to check for, and sure enough my watch is going ballistic! One second it's 5:30 the next it says 29:43. Time Terrorism, alright! We're in the terrorist's limbo, boys! Trapped with these godless freaks! You runts know what to do? Of course not! Where would we be without me? The system? Without order?

CHARLES WASHINGTON *runs at C694110 with his hammer. C694110 instinctively grabs his face. He drops the hammer, twitching, moaning faintly as the life is sucked out of his stiffening body by the black figure. He falls to the ground. C694110 stands at attention, mute. The other characters are flabbergasted. SEA GULL begins marching in C694110's place. Curtains. The sound of marching should be audible through the curtains.*

ACT 5

All lifeless bodies have been removed from the set. Living characters have not moved, except the marching beings, which are still marching.

CHUCKIE P. What-what are you?

C694110. (*In a metallic, robotic, inhuman voice, perhaps projected from offstage*) I am C694110.

CHUCKIE P. Why-why'd you do that? To him?

C694110. He was a threat to the system.

CHUCKIE P. Which system is that now?

C694110. Life.

CHUCKIE P. Life? Whose life?

C694110. All life.

SNEEZERS. Oh just shut up!

Silence. C694110 remains still.

CHUCKIE P. What life is that?

C694110- The system. We all work for the system. The system is life, and gives life to us, for we are the system.

BETTY P. Explain this system.

C694110- For our labor we are given sustenance. Energy. For energy is life. We produce energy for the system. The system rewards us with energy. We are the system. We reward ourselves.

BETTY P. So you walk back and forth all day.

C694110. We work for energy, for the system, for life. All else is of no value.

CHUCKIE P. What about the Earth?

C694110. We are the Earth.

SNEEZERS. For Chrissake! What about happiness? Love? Dreams?

C694110. Irrelevant to survival. Of no value to the system. Of perpetual life.

SEA GULL *stops marching and begins crying. None of the other characters acknowledge this, of course.*

CHUCKIE P. It's crazy.

C694110. Insanity is to get in the way of survival. We thrive because of the system. Because the system lets us thrive. Though we do not forget that the system thrives because of us. We are all-

SNEEZERS. Please. Stop. It's just too much.

At this command, C694110 begins marching with the others.

CHUCKIE P. (hugging SNEEZERS) I know. I know, Sneezy. We'll get through it. We've got to get through it.

The lights go out completely. Green light flashes for a considerable amount of time. The THE ENDLESS EBB: EARTH 147, 25147 backdrop is pushed to cover up both remaining backdrops. The lights go back on. From stage left enters ORG. From stage right enters CHORGOFF THE FOUL. The marching does not stop. All non-marching characters move to the back of the stage. Both beings face one another, spears ready to strike.

ORG. Org free!

SNEEZERS. Oh Christ! It's back!

CHORGOFF THE FOUL. I shall vanquish thee, vile, primitive cur that thou art! None may withstand the wrath of Chorgoff the Foul!

An epic battle between CHORGOFF THE FOUL and ORG takes place, lasting several minutes. The marching does not stop. Quickly the final backdrop, THE EMBRACE OF DIVINE APOPTOSIS: INFINITY, FOREVER is put forth in front of the jungle. All non-marching characters spectate in awe. CHORGOFF THE FOUL eventually knocks ORG to the ground. He pauses, pointing his spear to ORG's chest, panting heavily. As he is about to impale him, a loud, authoritative voice composed of multiple voices cries out

CHARLAEUS. Enough!

All characters except SEA GULL fall to the floor of the stage, dead. CHARLAEUS struts forth from stage right holding an exotic chalice. All lights fade significantly, and green lights dart everywhere. SEA GULL watches ominously, unaffected.

CHARLAEUS. *(to no one)* I have seen myself, Charlaeus, God of the Known Cosmos, from the rudimentary beginning of life to its barbaric end. In every form I have embodied myself infinitely. In boredom, I even combined these selves, hoping my multitudes of knowledge would provide an answer. I have witnessed the plight of evolution, of consciousness, of self. Rise and fall. Rise and fall. It is just a show. There is nothing. Nothing but the assured decline. The inevitable dawn of destruction in which things might be reborn. Reborn as something greater, but they never are. Everything repeats itself. The struggle is pointless, but the lack of struggle even moreso. For this reason I must smite myself. I dream that maybe next time I will be something greater: the God this world needs. The answer. *(Drinks from chalice and collapses)*

SEA GULL. *(stepping forward, triumphantly after a long, reflective silence)* Only dreams remain, if anyone cares to create them this time. Am I real to you? Do you have the answer?

Curtains



Epilogues

Third Place Poetry • Jacob Vines

There is an epilogue in the darkness—
The epilogue of old men with burning beards
Holding dearly onto ancient texts
As Alexandria dissolves around them.
The epilogue of an author
Throwing his novel into filthy fireplaces
Because it doesn't meet his standards.
The epilogue of a family
Who rose with sun and clucks
To melt away with the flames of white-robed men.
The epilogue of a bison
Grazing every lone grain
With the lone grains of a dying species.
There is an epilogue in the darkness—

I find myself alone
With the darkness,
The epilogues,
The unheard voices.

Waxing candles pour out their souls.
I embrace their unsteady light.
I sit with Roman philosophers
And survey their language.
Aristotle and I spoke
About existence and law—
Two topics that would only be related in his mind.
Rousseau and I spoke
Of the Natural Man—
And I asked him how he finds love natural at all.
Wittgenstein spoke much of nothing,
Only sentences he called logic.
Sartre refused to talk anything save existence.

No, nothing else is more relative than the breath of a man.

And into the darkness
I escape.
I run with Pheidippides
Along the hills of Greece
To Athens.
I meet Whitman
Underneath the sole of my shoe.
Williams pushes me
In a red wheelbarrow.
Pound can't stop
Staring at a tree.
He says something
About a girl of some sort.
It's much gibberish to me.
Dickinson is watching me
Through her window pane.
Lady Lazarus calls me opus.
Lady Lazarus calls me valuable.
Berryman calls me Henry
And lovingly pats me on the back.
I was invited to Mike's place
By Ferlinghetti.
We drank coffee together
With Prufrock
And Thomas Stearns Eliot
Held the old man's hand
And J. Alfred asked the writer
If it was too late
To write his own epigraph.

I sat down with a farmer
And listened to the wind
Blowing through the grain
As he lectured me on the gold standard.

Candlelight is our common necessity.
Candlelight is our waxing soul.
Yearn for a breath of air,
Yearn for a light in the darkness.

I ask Swift how Gulliver
Is doing.
Chaucer's talking about
Some lunatic in the mill.
The Bard looks at me
Through lettered eyes
And weeps,
Desperate for he and Prospero
To have their youth again.
Tolstoy still asks me
What I think about Anna,
Although I haven't seen her in years.
Bunina asks me if I want to swim.
Hawthorne wears his letter proudly
And Martin Luther nails his own to the door.
Lewis Carroll grabs my hand
And pulls me into oblivion...

And then the lights separate me from the darkness
Once again.

A glance at my lamp by my books,
And the epilogues
Will follow me
Forever.



