

Obscura

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RRCC's Art & Literary Magazine
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Letter from the Staff

*D*ear Reader,

You hold in your hand the final product of a semester long adventure, the creation of which was a constantly exciting, and occasionally trying, experience. During the course of this literary escapade, we were continually amazed by the talent and creativity of the student body, and we are delighted to offer you a small sample of its work. This magazine has been our pride and joy, and the reason why so many of us have gotten so little sleep this semester. If the truth be told, we are all a little sad to let it go, but as Emerson says, "Tis the good reader that makes the good book." We hope you will treasure this magazine as much as we have, and that you will take as much joy in the reading of it as we have in its creation.

Happy reading,

The Obscura Staff

Artistic Mind and Traffic Jams

Myriah Wilkins

condensed reactions
contemplations contradictions
fantasy and written fiction
running through the artist's mind
through tin cans and plastic lines
roiling toiling argue visions
sharing thoughts and collisions
space and time no longer matter
only thoughts and useless chatter
writing the scripts of mankind
all the centuries are deaf and blind
we don't look upon the skies
and fling the clock so time will fly
spending time with those endeared
not shedding joyful tears
guitar solos and blaring neighbors
advantage taken of freedom labor
explicit children are the future
yet abused and cancelled suitors
give up now cry wicked men
here is our unprovoked revenge
Time

Falls

Down.

Down Town Writer's Block: Alone in the Crowd

Leonard Alexander Hanson

Tonight, I'm searching for my muse. Down town, city lights and car exhaust float along the chilling breeze to hit me in the face. A bum is getting arrested for being drunk; perhaps it was part of the plan- now he has a warm place to sleep. A woman yells at a man by the bus stop, the other would-be bus passengers move on to a stop further down the block; anything to be away from that berating. Poor abused bastard. I look up at the reflections on the windows to see one star, wait- it's a plane. There are no stars in the city. I rub my numb hands together and watch my breath rush through my fingers, violently escaping my lungs, like it is hoping to find another warm place before dissipating into nothingness. It reminds me of an old steam engine coming to a crossing; I can even hear the sounds of the light rail playing into my imagination's ambience; my ears tingle and the brisk air soothes my irritated lungs.

On the corner, two cop cars pull up, and a man in an Avalanche hockey jersey is sitting on the ground looking at the guardians of down town with glassy eyes and what looks like vomit on his chin. An ambulance arrives, and an unusually pretty EMT steps out with her tall chauffeur, as I imagine him to be, though they had matching uniforms. She jokes with the officers, they laugh more than they need to, perhaps because she is to be the highlight of their long night in the cold, and they both know it.

The chauffeur lifts the man into the ambulance and they talk and laugh, then looks sternly at the man who seems to have lost the \$6 worth of nachos and \$7 beer he had in the second half of the game all over his current surroundings. The EMT floats away. The lights clear the traffic and they're all gone in a matter of minutes. The boys in blue cast a few lingering looks at the serpents on the back of the ambulance and conjure images only to ever be seen or acted on in the depths of their own minds.

~

I walk in the door of my favorite night time haunt, the only place I can seem to get anything done. I attribute this geographically associated productivity to the clamouring sounds of the other late night wanderers who seem to find refuge in one of the only places open round the clock in my lonely city. The smell of coffee and cigarettes replaces the carbon monoxide as I push through the gauntlet of lesbians and goths in line by the door, and take my seat on the fringe of this little society.

I see two tables, obviously first dates, both parties are smiling but neither couple looks comfortable; or compatible, for that matter. There is a well dressed young man who won't stop staring at me, I notice a table directly next to me talking about childhood stories with hurried, forced voices, both look constipated and neither finish their plate before leaving in a hurry. Weird. Must be another first date. God, that's awkward.

I've taken a few first dates here and never felt like it was difficult or tense; I just hope I didn't look like that. I couldn't possibly look that bad. I work out and bathe regularly. At least, I did back before my current girlfriend left. God, I miss her. I look at the women in the bar and wish mine was there. That's why I wander around at night instead of sleeping; why I've been staying up until dawn and then sleeping on the couch. I need to stay awake, I hate being alone at night. It seems to be a theme of mine nowadays.

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I get a coffee, black, like the demeanour of the homeless man who just threw up in the bathroom while I was taking a leak. "GO AWAY!" he pointed as I imagine Moses did a few thousand years ago, sans the slumping down against that porcelain throne. I'm sure he wasn't a proud man, or at least, couldn't really afford to be in his position, so I left him to recover and returned to my faux zebra chair. I'm glad I didn't need to use that stall.

I came here to write, I came here to observe. I came here without direction. I think I absorb direction from those people who seem more productive than I do; thus, in trying to keep up I actually accomplish something. I am not competitive by nature, but I like to feel that I am at least on par with the rest of these derelict looking coffee bar patrons. I cannot write. I do not know what to write. I feel myself start to get frustrated, but stop. What is the point of being anything but relaxed? I look around again at everyone in the room.

Different emotions, from as many different people; I like it here. 47 people, to be exact. Minus one bum, or, residentially challenged individual, who just "heiled Hitler" all the way to the door and staggered into the street. The coffee is good, a cigarette would be better; I quit years ago.

~

For the first time, my productivity seems to have found another place to meet me. Too bad I did not get the memo. It looks like another night will have to do it. I am tired of the well-dressed men staring at me. There are two more of them now, all at different locations. Maybe they should look at each other; they could share a cab home. I am leaving alone. I step back out into the night, leaving the warmth and all the strangers I did not even pretend were friends. I love the city, and hate it. I walk the two blocks back to my car, contemplating the shadows and dark alleys; I catch myself whistling a Beatles song I used to know about an Eleanor Rigby, as I get into my cold car and drive away.

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A Politician Walks into a Bar

Robert Cope

A politician walks in a bar
Looking around he sets his sites on the average man.
Thinking to himself; how can I abuse this poor sap.
Oh Slap, I got it.
Lets take away his health insurance, make it
Totally unaffordable.
This will make him uncomfortable. Lets next take his freedom.
Tap his phone and put him in prison, with
No trial by his peers. Interrogate him till he cracks.
Instigate his willingness to lie.
Now lets take his rights, starting with free speech.
The internet will help gather all those free-minded thinkers.
What a ploy; oh joy, he sees this as fun now.
The Politician hears a sound, his heart beat?
Not for a minute, maybe just another thought.
Of how to screw the ones who gave him a job.

That Pleasant Smile

Beatrice Maus

The girl who sits at the table in the corner has a very pleasant smile. She comes in every Saturday and just sits with her hands cupped around a hot cocoa. You don't mind; she doesn't disturb your business. Though it's mid-summer, she's wearing a long dress with long sleeves and a high collar. The only thing summery about this dress is the light blue tint and golden flowers stitched into the hem and collar. The collar is held closed by a brooch depicting a Victorian cameo. Her glasses have a dangling gold chain from one side, almost like a monocle chain. You've never really spoken to her, but her smile never ceases to catch your eye.

"Would you like another?" The sound of your voice makes her jump and look up from the book she's reading. She smiles, just barely, and shakes her head. Her eyes are blue-green and practically glow behind her spectacles.

"Are you sure?" you offer, "It's on the house."

A slow smile crosses her face, but her eyebrows quirk upward in slight confusion, "To offer me such a thing, you're too kind. Yet my cup is not yet half-empty," she murmurs.

"Then the glass is half-full?" You inwardly cringe as the words leave your lips. She covers her mouth with her right hand as she laughs. God, couldn't you have come up with a better joke than that? Her smile quells any fears that she is merely laughing to be polite.

"Why would you offer such a thing to me? Am I the one thousandth customer or something?"

You shake your head and shrug in response, "You're just always here, that's all. I've figured with all the business you've given me that you're entitled to a free drink every once and a while."

She smiles in response and looks down at her book shyly. Her cheeks have started to burn red. The color in her cheeks almost matches the burgundy color of the walls.

"Hm, some would call that favoritism." Her voice is soft, almost a whisper. You see her lips move more than you hear her voice. You smile and the bell above the door rings. It is bingo night, after all, and you nod in greeting to the elderly folks who emerge in from the warm night. For a few minutes you are preoccupied with the elderly, setting up tables and the like, while a lovely old woman named Doris brings out the cage and balls. The next you look up at the corner table, she's gone, and she's folded her dollar bills into little shirts on the table. You smile and pick up the money, finding a few coins on the table as well. Exact change, you think, with a wider smile, she's the same as always.

She returns the next Saturday. A gentle wave she sends you as she moves to her table. Since the first week, when you treated her to a free drink because of her endearing smile, you've been seating other people away from that table to keep it open for her. If she's noticed this, then she hasn't said anything, but that's a normal occurrence. She's dressed in another full-length dress, this one of a rich golden hue; it warms her snowy skin just slightly. There's something wrong about her smile today, something that irks you, but you can't put your finger on it.

"Good morning."

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She smiles at you when you speak and then moves over to her usual table and sits down, "Good morning to you. Are you well?" her reply is quiet and slightly airy, as if she's just been jogging.

"I've got no complaints. The usual?" you offer.

She nods, "Please; if it wouldn't be too much trouble," she says.

You shake your head, and smile as you get down a mug.

"It's a little warm for hot cocoa, isn't it?" you ask. You don't have to turn around to know she's shrugging her shoulders daintily.

"People come here and buy hot coffee every morning, no matter what the heat, right?" she asks. You smile to yourself as you add the cocoa to the mix. It smells like something dark; the steam from the boiling water feels like satin. You turn to find the cherry flavoring and see her staring out the window, bathed in sunlight. She's resting her head on her right hand, watching with a soft smile as people pass in front of the café with haste enough to make you think they have invisible dogs nipping at their heels. You place the mug of cocoa on a tray and step around the counter to her table. Your dress shoes click softly on the wood as you cross the floor.

"I don't think I've ever made you coffee before."

She turns her head to face you when you speak, a smile teasing her lips, "Cocoa helps ease my mind. Besides, coffee's so bitter; it doesn't suit me at all," she responds lightly.

You chuckle and set the mug onto the table. You use your pinky as a cushion so that the porcelain mug doesn't make a loud noise on the wooden table. Her eyes catch yours, but she closes them with her smile before you can read them. She lifts her left hand and elegantly indicates for you to take the seat across from her. You comply easily; the chair creaks slightly as you sit in it. Her right hand is still supporting her head.

"Not all coffee is bitter." Your voice is low; as you two are the only ones in here, there really is no reason to speak loudly. She rolls her shoulders slightly as if shaking off a cloak and lets out a soft sigh.

"I'm sharing a room with a fellow who, I swear, bathes in the stuff. It's..." she pauses to find the right word. Her eyes close and her slim brows tilt down as she thinks, "Unbearable? Overpowering? Overwhelming? Oppressive? No, no, those aren't right at all."

"Stifling?" you offer helpfully. A slow smile spreads her face and she nods. Her eyes remain closed and she sits up straight and uses both hands to wrap around the mug of cocoa. The heat of the mug doesn't faze her a bit and she lifts it off of the table slightly.

"Yes." The word comes out slow and breathy, a pleasurable sigh. Her face relaxes sweetly, as if she's just recalled some fond memory. She lifts the mug to her lips and takes a sip. Her smile is that to rival the sunlight pouring across the table like golden mead, "Yes, that's the word."

"Glad to be of assistance."

Her eyes open slowly behind her glasses when you speak. Her pupils grow and then shrink in the bright morning light. She nods and makes a humming sound in her throat. You look at the pile of books she's brought today, but you can't read the titles. They seem to be written in a different language. Before you can ask about them, the bell above the door rings and you stand and turn to greet the customers who have just arrived. You excuse yourself politely from her, but her eyes are focused outside the

window, caught in the stare of a thousand miles. Her lips are frowning slightly and the thumb on her left hand is stroking the mug lightly as she holds it.

The next you look at her, she's reading quietly. The café smells like coffee now, as that's all anyone's been ordering for the past hour. You don't mind, business is business. You consider making her another hot cocoa, but she looks so peaceful that you decide to wait. Well, what about a cocoa for yourself? It would certainly break up the monotony of the iced tea you've been drinking until now.

You glance out at the thermometer dangling outside the window.

Hahahahahaha! As if! Well, if there was any other way than the heat to dissuade you from hot cocoa, you had yet to find it. It's 102 degrees outside! You can see the heat waves rising from the asphalt and cement outside. The world is hazy, wavering. No wonder no one has passed in front of the store for a while. You look over at her; surely she's melted by now! After all, that table is always bathed in sunlight.

She's not. She's sitting quite comfortably with her book in front of her face. The book is held by the very tips of her fingers, as if she's afraid to hold it properly. Well, the book does look old. You pick up your glass of iced tea and move the only stool behind the counter to stand right beneath an A/C vent. You've rolled the sleeves of your uniform up and taken your heavy black apron off. The condensation on the glass of iced tea has made it slick and you wrap a cloth around the glass in order to soak up the moisture.

"Hey," she looks up from her book when the word comes from your mouth, "What's your name?"

"Ah," she says. She seems to think about it for a while, but then smiles and shakes her head as if recalling a fond memory, "That's right; we've never been properly introduced, have we? How long have we known each other again?"

"About a year and a half now, right?" you pose the question to her. She makes a humming noise in her throat and closes her book. The smile is still there, and something still bothers you about it. If only you could place your finger on it...

"It doesn't seem like that long, does it? Though, now that I think about it, that's true," she says.

"And we've never introduced ourselves," you state.

"How strange...it's usually the first thing people do when they meet each other isn't it?"

You nod to her question. She turns to look out the window.

"That's right," you reply.

"Well, if that's the case, my name is..." She turns to look at you again and opens her mouth to speak. Before you hear her name, the door bursts open to admit your roommate. All six feet two inches of him is drenched. It looks like he's been running through sprinklers trying to cool off. His short brown hair is plastered to his face and his face is flushed a bright and sweaty red. He's wearing only a pair of cut off shorts and sandals. What appears to be a tank top is clenched in his hand.

"Damn it all; it's hot as bloody hell out there!" Without a glance around the café, he stumbles over to the counter, "Give me a scotch!"

"I've told you a thousand times; we don't serve alcohol here."

Your roommate looks at you with eyes blurred by heat, "Eh?" It is certainly not the smartest thing you've ever heard your roommate say. You look over at her; she's gone back to reading. You can feel your cheeks burning.

"Erm, sorry about him; he's usually much smarter than this."

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She looks up from her book when you speak and smiles softly. All of your embarrassment is lost in the laughter that shows in her eyes. Your roommate turns his massive frame to face the table, obviously just noticing that she is here, and whether he blushes out of embarrassment or is still cooling off you can't tell. He levels a glare at you, as if he's blaming you for not alerting him to a girl's presence before he made a total ass out of himself.

"Fine...er, I'll have whatever she's having. Hell, another round for the entire house, eh? All...," he looks around the empty café quickly, "All three of us then."

"Alright." You have to turn away quickly to hide your cynical smile. Your roommate leans against the counter, attempting to gain her attention, but she's turned back to her book. You inwardly cheer as you fix two steaming mugs of hot cocoa. Your roommate is so bent on gaining her attention that he doesn't notice what you're making. Just like him, really, annoying git. You put the two mugs of cocoa on the counter and your roommate glances down at them before doing a double take. He looks at you as if he can't believe what he's seeing.

"Seriously?" he asks.

"Seriously," you respond. Your roommate looks exasperated for a moment before he picks up the mugs of cocoa and heads toward the table in the corner.

"Er...you mind if I join you?" he asks.

She looks up at him and nods barely at the sight of his gargantuan frame. She closes her book politely as your roommate tries a smile. He sits down and puts the two mugs on the table. She looks at the two mugs and then him, "Two glasses of cocoa? Gracious, you must be very cold indeed," she says softly.

Your roommate swallows hard and pushes one of the mugs over to her, "For you," he says.

Her slim brows raise, but she accepts the mug nonetheless, "And whom do I have the pleasure of being treated by?" she queries.

Your roommate flashes a dashing smile; you inwardly roll your eyes. He's done this before, "My name's Marcol. And what is the name of the fair lady I'm treating?"

She turns away at his voice with a sweet smile and then looks at the mug in front of her. Your roommate holds out his hand across the table in the familiar position of a handshake.

"I'm Ahna; it's a pleasure to make your acquaintance," she murmurs. She lifts her hand daintily and places it in Marcol's. He flashes a grin and then lifts her fingers to his lips and kisses them gently. She turns a ferocious shade of red and her eyes widen. Her smile drops for the briefest moment and you can see raw fear in her eyes. She closes them too quickly for Marcol to pick up on, though. Her smile returns.

"The pleasure's all mine, I assure you," Marcol lets go of Ahna's hand and she draws it to her quickly as though burned, "Are your hands always so cold?"

"Always," Ahna replies and rubs her hands together almost self-consciously, "Poor circulation, I'm afraid."

"I see." Really, he doesn't care. He glances at her books, "You're taking Gibson's Latin class?"

Ahna's eyes widen in shock. She looks down at the book and then picks it up.

"Yes, you've taken him before?" she asks timidly.

Marcol nods and then swells with pride, "Passed with flying colors, I would be glad to help if you're having trouble."

Ahna shakes her head to his offer, "Thank you, but I prefer to learn things on my own," she says. Marcol nods, but his smile fades slightly.

They talk for half an hour. You add tidbits in here and there, but mostly you watch. Marcol asks Ahna what other classes she's taking, and she answers. It's the first time you've heard her speak so much about herself. She still hasn't told him her major, but it sounds like she's going into history.

"So, you're going to become a history teacher? That sounds exciting."

Ahna nods slowly, cautiously, to Marcol's voice, "Yes, but you have yet to tell me what you're at University for." Her statement is leading. Marcol grins.

"I'd like to consider myself a...Renaissance man; I'm addicted to learning," he says.

She nods, "I see; so you've no desire to leave this place?" she asks.

Marcol chuckles, "Of course not, especially when I've found such wonderful company."

Ahna looks out the window to hide the blush that stains her cheeks. You're jealous; Marcol has learned more about Ahna in half an hour than you have in all the time you've known her. Of course, Marcol's always been very good at making other people talk to him. He has a very disarming personality, something you wish you possessed.

"If that is how you see it, then I won't argue." Her voice sounds strained as she speaks. You can see her shoulders stiffen and she sits up straight. Marcol hasn't noticed the way she's tensed and now she seems more uneasy than anything. Her face shows nervous lines when she smiles; her eyes close more often behind her glasses. Her breathing is still quiet, but she's breathing as shallowly as a kitten. You think you can see her shivering, but it must be a trick of the light. You look for the cause of her discomfort and see that Marcol's hand is covering hers. It's time to end the conversation, you decide.

"Yo, you guys want another round?"

Marcol turns to look at you when you speak and you see Ahna try to calm her breathing as she slides her hand out from under Marcol's, "Naw; it's cool. I'd have come down here long ago if I'd known she was here!"

You sniff in annoyance at his blatant ignorance of Ahna's discomfort, "Why should I tell you about my business? You don't care anyway."

Marcol laughs at your tone, "There's no need to get defensive; jeez, you're so uptight!" Marcol's mood is all sunshine and daisies, that's clear enough in the way he speaks.

"Whatever, when do you have work?" you glance at Ahna as you speak, but she's staring at her lap; her eyes are hidden behind the sun's glare off of her lenses.

"Around three," Marcol says, "why do you ask?"

"It's two thirty."

Marcol leaps up from his seat, banging the table, and Ahna slides back quickly as if shot from a cannon. Marcol doesn't even apologize, just dashes out the door, screaming vulgarities as he goes. You stare at the door as it closes slowly. The bell tinkles almost deafeningly in the café. The A/C is too loud, like the roar of a beast. You look over at Ahna, but she's looking at her hands in her lap. Her hands are clenched into tight fists, her knuckles white, and she's trembling slightly. You step over to her, but she stands with the speed of a cobra and excuses herself politely before picking up the tab. She's gone into the afternoon heat before you can say a word.

The girl who sits in the corner table has a very endearing smile, but you haven't seen it lately. The table where she usually sits is always bathed in sunlight, but she hasn't warmed herself in it recently. She has a kind laugh, a warm smile, and everybody loves her. She comes in almost every Saturday and stays all day, but nobody has seen her in over a month. Your roommate has come every day, hoping to catch a glimpse of her. It provides you only cold comfort that she hasn't showed up.

She comes in again when Marcol stops showing up. You have kept her table open all this time and she goes to sit at it as if she's not missed a week. She's clad in a dress the color of pine trees, but she still wears a high collar and long sleeves. It's late in summer now, and the heat has only been getting worse, but she still asks for hot chocolate. Your hands are familiar with the making of the cocoa now and your mind wanders. Where has she been? You take the steaming mug over to her; her gaze is focused out the window, "Your cocoa."

She jumps slightly when you speak and then turns her pleasant smile to you. She motions for you to sit down and you comply, "Forgive my absence. Please know that you are not the cause of it," she says softly.

You nod, "Was it Marcol?"

She stiffens slightly for just a moment when you mention Marcol and then her shoulders shake as if she's taken by an extreme chill, "Hm," the low hum in her throat is comfortingly familiar. She doesn't answer you for a long while, but turns her gaze to stare out the window. Of course it was Marcol, you answer yourself, but you want to hear her say it.

She sighs softly and then looks at you straight on; there is no smile in her eyes now, "I dislike anyone who can make me feel so comfortable."

She regards you quietly with eyes as piercing as diamonds, but her voice wavers when she continues, "Anyone who can make me trust them that much is the one I distrust the most. It's like," She wraps her hands around the mug and pauses as she tries to find the right words to describe the feeling; you notice the middle and ring finger on her right hand are bandaged together. She moves to place the points of her elbows on the table, and the sleeves of her dress draw back slightly. You can see what look to be finger marks or welts around her slim wrists. She's wearing a black glove on her left hand. When she tilts her head to the side to look out the window, you can see dark bruises against the ivory skin of her neck, as well as angry red blotches in small circles. She turns back to face you and you snap your eyes up to hers. You see anxiety cross her features for only a millisecond, but then she smiles slightly and closes her eyes, "It's like coffee. It doesn't look or smell bad, and it even tastes all right, but I dislike it because I dislike it."

A pregnant pause.

"As if that makes any sense, right?" she laughs at her own explanation, but it's slightly more shrill than usual. She covers her mouth with her right hand and the nervous lines come to her face again. There it is again, that something about her smile that irks you. There's something you want to know.

"Is that why you dislike your roommate?"

Her shoulders tense at your voice and her eyes snap open, "Wh-what do you mean?"

Bingo, you think. Her reaction is enough to tell you where those bruises came from. You shrug your shoulders lightly, playing along, "You said that he always smells

like coffee, right?" you ask.

She nods and her hands drop to the table. She looks out the window again, "Yeah it's really awful."

"If you hate it so much you should leave."

She shakes her head, "It doesn't really matter. It's just one of those things."

"You shouldn't stay, Ahna." Her name rolls off of your tongue, "'Life, Liberty, and the Pursuit of Happiness', right?"

She smiles at your quote and then takes a sip of the cocoa, "Hm."

It's useless. The humming sound is just about as committed as a brick wall. You sigh and then go behind the counter. For some reason, all the energy in the café has been sucked away. You take up post on the stool situated beneath an A/C vent. She makes another humming sound low in her throat, "Hm, you know, they say that people who drink coffee have a stronger will?" she's staring out the window now.

"Is that so?" you ask.

She nods, but keeps her gaze out the window., "It's the caffeine. It makes people decide things quicker, but they're prone to being rash. People without much caffeine are calmer, but they're also much too cautious and often have a weak constitution. They are easy to break and take longer to do things, but they do get things done." You look at her and she smiles back at you. Her smile soothes you and instills a sense of peace. You find your annoyance and anger at her hesitance disappearing, "I'll leave, but it'll just take some time."

"Fine then, but if the stench gets to be too much, you're always welcome here."

Her smile in response is warmer than the heat outside, "I am unwelcome otherwise?"

You look at her, about to apologize for the way that sounded, but the laughter in her eyes stops you. Her smile is soft and gentle, just the slightest tilt of the lips upward. The A/C grows quiet; the smell of coffee all but disappears. The café is empty except for her at the table and you behind the counter. You can't look away from her face, bathed in the golden light of the sun; the bruises vanish. She's untouched...and untouchable; you tremble slightly beneath her gaze. She's golden.

Suddenly, the telephone rings. The A/C is pounding back to life, too loud. The smell of coffee overwhelms you, makes you nauseous. The telephone's insistent ringing screams at you, and she winces at each loud ring. She has turned away to look out the window and you stumble over to the telephone against the wall. You lift the receiver to your ear and wait. A man's voice sounds on the other end of the line, asking for Ahna. The man's voice is pleasant enough, but you can hear an underlying danger beneath his pleasant façade.

She seemingly glides over to the phone, pale as snow, and holds out her hand for the phone. Her right hand brushes yours as she takes the receiver; it's as cold as ice! You don't hear the conversation, but what little color there was in her face drains. Her eyes widen and the raw fear returns to her face; she doesn't bother hiding it. She begins to tremble, and she draws her left arm around her stomach as if she's going to be sick. And still the A/C is roaring. And the coffee, oh the coffee! You want to throw up; the smell's too strong! Your heart's racing; your head's pounding.

The receiver clacks back into place as she hangs up. She stands motionless at the wall. Her left arm has fallen to her side, but soon lifts to cover her mouth. You can no longer hear your blood rushing to your brain in painful rhythm. You can feel your hands again; and you no longer feel like throwing up. Her face is a mask, white por-

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celain without expression. Her eyes are fixed on the phone, and she's trembling. She looks at you and then smiles. Her eyes close and she lets out a long breath. She moves back over to her table and sits down heavily before hiding her face in her hands.

"Your roommate?" you ask, stunned.

She nods and her hands drop from her face, "He wants me home. Now."

Her voice betrays no fear, but then she looks at you. Her eyes are wide and remind you of a caged animal's. They are bright with fear and threaten to release tears, but she somehow holds them in. Her lips are twitching slightly, the porcelain cracking, and her face looks gaunt. Her small frame trembles and she bites her lower lip so hard that she draws blood. Yet, she still stands up and quietly collects her books. She drops them a few times; she's failing. You can almost hear the snapping of her inner restraining cables, the cables that tell her to stay calm and not run. She moves to the door calmly enough; she has left her money on the table, exact change. The bell above the door rings and she pauses before stepping out into the blazing heat.

You didn't know that you could move so fast. You cross the room in three bounds and grab her arm. She faces you, but doesn't have time to speak before you pull her to you in a hug. She trembles more, but doesn't move. No, the shock is still setting in. You can feel the wet drops of overflowing tears on your shoulder. She's splitting.

"No," you say, "You're staying here."

And she breaks.

Devastation

Ann Van Dyke

Black holes in space
 Hit the wall
 Meteors crashing into each
 Other, disintegrating
 Fragments burning up in space
 Confusion, mind doesn't work
 Can't remember the day
 Write it down

Emptiness rolls over me
 Like a lime green tank
 Rumbling across the scarred
 Battlefield of my heart
 Its turret gun blazing,
 Lobbing mortars that leave
 Gaping Craters of
 loneliness and sorrow

Black holes in space
 Vast cavity with no gravity
 Sucked into emptiness
 Hopelessly going nowhere
 Confusion, mind doesn't work
 Can't remember the day
 Write it down

Silence screams
 Ancient spectre from a recent grave
 Wandering lost and alone
 Down through the centuries
 Shut up! I challenge
 The screaming silence,
 That pays no heed.

Black holes in space
 Silently screaming
 Crashing meteors disintegrate
 Fragments of dark loneliness
 Eternally wander in space
 Confusion, mind doesn't work
 Can't remember the day
 Write it down

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Burning Moon

Josh Hildebrand

Bodiless souls rise from lands,
Laid waste by the hands of power-hungry men.

Dirt and dust,
All that remain.
Skies are dead, no more rain,
No one
Left to feel the pain.

The sun burned out that
Final Day.
The day that man stole life away.
All for freedom and a noble cause.
Ceasing the breath that never was.

Money, fortune, none of it matters.
There's no one
Left,
To follow these patterns.

Hatred, rage, plagued that land.
That demented world,
The heart of man.

A moon now burning.
A sun now frozen.
Death
Before self destruction.

Abandoned hopes destroyed by lust.
A barren world left and lost.
Blotted out,
Life is gone.
Countless ways that it went wrong.
The world has crumbled, the souls are
Burning.
Motionless hearts lie dead.
Still yearning.

The sun burned out that
Final Day.
The day that man stole life away.
All for freedom and a noble cause.
Ceasing the breath that never was.

Everything gone.
No life.
No love.

A moon now burning.
A sun now frozen.
Death
Before self destruction.

Twenty-Nine Nights

S. C. Townsley

Twin superhero aliens prepare to display my future to my dreaming two-year-old self. Their enormous television fills with static—

~

—there is a city standing tall, spread long, crossing islands and oceanic clefts with snow-packed suspension bridges. It is the One City, the place that resides in America's heartlands but sports a sign notating the mileage to Paris, France (aside the road which leads exactly there). I sit on the late-night rooftops and learn secrets from a young orangutan. Her voice is disturbing, unnatural; it makes me sad. The sky is such an ugly orange. You die.

~

Lady Baby Jesus appears in a tree house after a snowstorm. There are deer tracks in the silent night. My suggestion is that we name her "Peter." You adopt a small village of tribal Africans in my name and move them in while I'm at work. This severely complicates my plans for the evening. You die.

~

Gripping the grass, toes and fingers, I run on all fours. Earth tilts to accommodate me; it feels good. I stake a poodle to my leg with a large knife. The blood becomes polygons. I fuck a decapitated horse's head. My penis secretes small plastic beads, but they all have a sharp seam. The process is painfully fascinating. You die.

~

There is music in a colony of aspen. The coming storm is angry lavender; yellow leaves plaster the soft ground. I find a tape deck buried in a tree's roots, speaker wires stretching up, across, out in every direction, to hundreds of speakers hidden among a forest of bare branches. I can't wait to tell you. You wreck the car. It's never your fault; I'm never the one at the wheel. You die.

~

Duty demands that I must impregnate the moon. A woman grows out of the lunar surface and I strap a rocket to my celestial dick to combat my apparent erectile malfunction. She cannot make me cum. You tell me you hate me. I cry. We move to another city—a place of sacrifice, where wild packs of tornados reduce work to rubble, where we watch and are amazed. Movie theatres go green, selling only green peppers. I get a job being a blue whale. You die.

~

We are going on vacation to Hawaii. I've never been before. You will leave me alone in the hotel and a horrible chain of events will unfold. Lucille Ball, telekinetic witch, invades a department store—murder burns in her eyes. Screaming threats, she assists Captain Ahab into cajoling me to haul two tons of chum. The bartender serves us the surprise special of the evening: a pink lemonade spewed forth from his right nostril. You die.

~

One of my sheets hangs in an airplane hangar. It isn't right. The Jakobi have come. I hide, terrified in deep sublevels, but I know. I know what comes for us. My teeth fall out. You die.

~

OBSCURA

Mom is forced to stop the truck on a hill in the jungle. A white gorilla blocks the mud road. It signs something; we don't know sign language. A man rushes into the room and shoots me five times. I bleed to death. The funeral is later today; I'll be attending in spirit. You die, and die, and die. My world falls apart.

~

An asteroid collides with the Earth. I wake as a zombie under a mattress in the street, surrounded by body parts and rubble. A second moon hangs in the sky. The Universe is suddenly blank—nothing—dark. I am told to create my own world. Like magic, I fold in half and my dick finds my mouth. Dreaming under the Yamazaki's kotatsu in Japan, I suck myself off.

The Dream Merchant

Kara O' Brien

Clair woke with a start, grasping wildly at the melting images of the dream that had disturbed her sleep. For a moment, a scant few remained—isolated fragments of the whole, like shallow pools left behind by the retreating tide: a narrow road, winding away through tall trees, the flickering shadows of men moving stealthily between the mighty trunks, and Jamie...Jamie...then there had been another face, one which she did not know: merry and laughing, with bright blue eyes beneath a tangle of golden curls.

But too late, one by one, the images slipped away, like mist through her grasping fingers, and she was left alone in the icy room, with no company but her thoughts, and the cold hand of fear drawing frost patterns on her heart.

Today, she thought, today he will come, riding like a shaft of sunlight up from the seaward road. Today...today, he must...

Shaking her head to clear it of the last vestiges of sleep, she pulled her nightgown tighter around herself, and scrambled out of bed. The cold hit her like a physical barrier as she threw back the covers and slid her reluctant feet onto the floor. Shivering, her breath coming in little clouds before her, she hurried across the large room and opened the heavy wooden shutters. Oh, if only he were there now, she thought, if only...

A grey day. A hopeless day. The sun was shrouded from view by heavy dark clouds and a white mist crept up from the lowlands. From her high vantage point at the tower window, the world appeared to be besieged by clouds. Grey clouds above, white fog below, and in between, the castle and its surrounding hilltop stood like a lonely bastion of reality against the silently massing forces of blankness.

Clair looked down, far down, to the base of the tower, where grasping, writhing tendrils of white fog already clutched possessively at the tower walls. Beyond that, the seaward road stood mocking her with its eternal emptiness and still more fog. A rap on the door behind her made her jump. Biting back her disappointment, Clair fumbled with the shutters, pulling them back into place and bolting them firmly—as if somehow the heavy wood and iron could keep out the crawling blankness and the image of the empty road.

"Come in!" her voice sounded harsh and loud in the crystalline silence. The door opened, and a small plump woman bustled in, talking before she was even in the room. Clair turned, and stood with her back to the window, trying desperately to look unconcerned. The good lady was not fooled however; as soon as she caught sight of Clair, she stopped, midsentence, and narrowed her sharp black eyes.

"Heavens above, my lady, are ye at the window already then? Ye'll catch your death standin' there in weather such as this. Not that it's a healthy occupation for a lady at any time, but what wi' all that clammy fog creepin' about, it'll be the end of ye, so it will." Hands on her hips, she stomped across the room and shook the heavy shutters to ensure they were properly bolted.

"There's no good in staring out the windows, m'dear," she continued, "it shan't bring him home any sooner. Besides, ye'd better pray he isn't out in all this, for 'tis no weather for a body to be exposed to, so it's isn't. It's hard enough on the spirits, heaven knows, I shudder to think of what it'll do to your health."

Clair said nothing, but her face must have shown her thoughts, for the old housekeeper softened and patted Clair's cheek with a work-hardened hand.

"There, there, m'dear, he'll come, just you wait and see, he'll come ridin' up any moment now."

"Oh, I hope so, Mrs. Moncrieff!" Clair was surprised at the sound of her own voice, "if he delays any longer he shall come back only to find me wed to another!"

"Tut, tut, m'dear, I told you no' to worry. I've been leaving porridge out every night for the Dream Merchant. He'll not let you down, he never does. You just wait and see."

Turning, she began to lay a fire in the broad hearth. Clair started to protest that she did not share Mrs. Moncrieff's faith in local legends and would rather not trust her life's happiness to an old wives' tale, but she stopped, knowing that the housekeeper was quite unshakable in these matters. "What I'd like t'know," said Mrs. Moncrieff over her shoulder, "is why can't we have some nice honest rain, instead of all this thrice-blasted fog? Why, when that young man turned up 'ere last night, I was sure he must've died from the cold, but you know y..."

Clair was only half listening to Mrs. Moncrieff's babbling, "What young man?" she asked.

"Why, good heavens, m'dear," Mrs. Moncrieff turned around with a look of surprise on her good natured face, "me being such a foolish creature, I clean forgot ye was a-bed when he come in. Poor creature, so wet and bedraggled he was, ye'd think he swum here."

"What young man, Mrs. Moncrieff?" Clair repeated impatiently.

"Why to be sure, how I do go on!" she chuckled good-humouredly, "Well now, I don't rightly know much about him. He arrived about ten o'clock last night, just as this awful weather was really setting in. As I said, the poor creature was wet right through, and I hadn't the heart to turn him away, so I made up a bed by the kitchen fire. A right charmin' lad he is, one of those travelling musicians that still comes round now and then; rather handsome, too, and he's got a tame bird, a skylark, I think, very nice pair." She bent to hold her candle to the ready fire, "I donno as I hold with people as says ye can turn away a traveler as comes to ye for help, in my day we knew how to treat people proper. 'Do unto others' as it says in..."

"Yes, yes, Mrs. Moncrieff, the world has deteriorated shockingly, but this traveler, what is he like?"

Mrs. Moncrieff paused, her head tilted on one side as she pondered this question, "Well now, I dunno as I could rightly say what he's like. Charmin', as I said, but a bit odd, too. Reminds me of a story I heard when I was a girl..."

Clair was all too familiar with Mrs. Moncrieff's girlhood stories, which always tended towards the Epic in length, if not in beauty, and so she broke in rather hastily, "How interesting, Mrs. Moncrieff, I really think I must meet this singular young man. Perhaps you would give me a few minutes to dress and then ask him to come up." Clair was not really interested in the stranger, but she had nothing else to do, and perhaps a man with a pet bird could keep her mind off the encroaching fog, and the emptiness of the seaward road.

Not in the least irritated at being interrupted, Mrs. Moncrieff endowed Clair with one of her motherly smiles, "I'll send him up with breakfast, m'dear," and she retreated, still talking, and leaving a merry blaze on the hearth.

Clair found a moment's amusement in the notion of being sent a man with her

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breakfast. Her amusement ceased, however, when she saw that the water in the basin had frozen during the night. She wasn't exactly surprised, but she muttered an oath that would have shocked Mrs. Moncrieff as she broke the thin ice and began splashing her face with the frigid water.

Ten minutes later she stood, fully dressed, by the roaring fire. Her long black hair was loose, and she was impatiently dragging a reluctant comb through it, when there was a polite tap on the door.

"Come in!" Clair called, turning away from the fire to face the newcomer. She had no expectations of the mysterious visitor, but at the sight of him, she dropped the heavy comb in surprise. Images from the dream, images she had thought forgotten, came suddenly rushing back. There before her, his sparkling blue eyes flashing beneath golden curls, was the unknown face from her dream.

She bent quickly, partly to recover the comb, and partly to hide her own confusion. Somewhat more composed; she straightened and turned once again to face her visitor. He had placed the heavy breakfast tray on the room's only table, and now stood politely before it, hands behind his back, "Good morning, milady, I hope I'm not disturbing you, the Housekeeper said..."

"No, no you are not disturbing me in the least," it was only a partial lie, "Mrs. Moncrieff said you arrived last night?"

"Yes, milady, I came with the fog," his voice was quite serious, but a smile played on his lips, and made it hard tell if he was joking. He was tall and slender, with handsome features and strong, delicately formed hands. His golden hair showed signs of its recent trials with the weather; his coat, tunic, and breaches were distinctly tattered, and a thin scratch, probably made by a bramble thorn, ran lengthwise down his aquiline nose. The overall effect was oddly pleasing, however, and contrary to her intentions, Clair felt herself warming to him.

It was only as she seated herself at the table, gesturing politely for him to do the same, that she noticed the bird on his shoulder. "Oh, this is Cear, a skylark," said the young man, indicating the bird, "She sings a very fine harmony when properly persuaded, and has the sharpest eyes in the country." The bird chirped in acknowledgment and fixed Clair with one beady black eye.

"I hope she likes scones," said Clair as she poured the tea.

The stranger ate with good appetite, now and then offering the bird a few crumbs, and talking blithely about this and that. Clair poked at her breakfast, trying to distract herself by listening to the stranger's idle talk, and all the while straining her ears for the sound of hooves.

There came a lull when Clair rose to stir up the fire. The flames danced and laughed and sputtered as she poked them, chiding her with crackling voices and laughing at some private joke of their own. As she returned to her seat, the bird chirped suddenly, and Clair could have sworn that the young man nodded in reply. She was about to comment on this, when he cut her short with a question.

"You aren't married?" he asked, watching her closely.

The question took Clair by surprise, "No, not yet," she replied, pleased at the evenness of her voice, "my fiancé is a sailor, First Mate aboard the Lady Bridget. We are to be wed when he returns from his present assignment."

"When should that be?" there was kindness in the piercing blue eyes as he spoke, and yet Clair had the odd feeling that he knew the answer, and what it would cost her to admit it. There was an uncomfortable silence as they regarded one another

across the table.

"The end of last August," she replied finally.

He continued to hold her gaze, as if he saw in her eyes all the anguish and doubt of the last four months. "You've had no word?" he asked softly. Clair looked away, toward the shuttered window, and the road beyond. There was no need to answer.

"If he does not return by the end of the month, I shall be forced to marry a man called Donald Campbell, friend of my father's," she said finally, shuddering at the thought.

"The end of this month? But that is only three days away."

Clair nodded.

Neither spoke for a few minutes. The silence was broken only by the harsh laughter of the fire, and an occasional chirp from the little bird. The stranger sat calmly, never taking his eyes from the girl opposite him. Clair felt his gaze, but refused to look up. Instead, she kept her eyes firmly on the large silver teapot, seeing in its polished surface the reflections of brighter days.

"I told him not to go," she burst out suddenly, her voice cracking with suppressed emotion. The stranger's eyes did not shift, but gazed at her with a steady, calm light.

"I told him not to go, there was no reason...but my father would not allow us to wed until he was made a Captain. I tried to persuade him to run away with me, to leave it all behind, all the snobbery and denial, all the pretence that a title and a station make a man great, that the clan you were born into defines whom you can love and whom you can call a friend. But he wouldn't listen to me, he wouldn't," behind her, the fire jeered mockingly, but the young man had not changed.

Clair looked up at him, confusion in her eyes as she fought to keep her voice steady, "I suppose he was too proud," she said, "he refused to marry me without my father's consent, and he was so sure that he would be promoted on this voyage..." despite her fierce attempts at controlling her voice, a small sob escaped her, "so I let him go, I let him go, when I should have cast myself at his feet and begged him never to leave me..."

She stopped, realizing that she was sobbing violently, her cheeks wet with the suppressed tears of four long months. She hadn't realized how much she had wanted to say all this until now, and she found that she had to keep going.

"I keep telling myself he's just been delayed," she said, drying her eyes on her sleeve, "every morning I tell myself that today he'll come, today he'll ride up jauntily and tell me it was all some mistake. Mrs. Moncrieff says the wind must be blowing in the wrong direction and keeping his ship away, and mother tells me it's not uncommon for ships to be delayed for all sorts of reasons. But I don't even believe myself anymore, and keep having these dreams..." she stopped, shuddering.

She felt a light touch on her face, and turned her head to see the little skylark sitting on her shoulder, resting its tiny head against her tear-stained cheek. She looked back at the stranger, "Who are you?" she asked suddenly, wondering why she hadn't asked it before.

The stranger laughed heartily, "That is a question with many answers, but none of them is the one you seek."

"I don't understand."

"No," he smiled sadly, "but fortunately you don't have to."

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Just then, there was a rap on the door, and Mrs. Moncrieff entered. "Well, well, and don't you two look cozy in here," Mrs. Moncrieff seemed to fill the room in an instant. "It's nigh on teatime and ye've not cleared away the breakfast things! By the way m'dear," she turned to Clair, "your father wants to speak wi' you, he said he'd be down in a moment."

The stranger stood up as Mrs. Moncrieff began to clear the table. Stepping quickly over to the window, he unlatched one of the great shutters and, coaxing the skylark onto his hand, held it out into the mist enshrouded air. Obediently, the little bird spread its wings, and disappeared into the fog.

Meanwhile, Mrs. Moncrieff had finished loading the tray with the empty dishes, and was just lifting it, when the stranger intervened with his most charming smile. "Now, my dear Mrs. Moncrieff, you are far too valuable a creature to be doing such menial tasks. You will, I am sure, allow me to..." he scooped up the heavy tray, and balancing it precariously on one hand, bowed himself out of the room.

"Young rascal," Mrs. Moncrieff muttered, then louder, "Don't you break anything, or I'll have your hide, so I will!"

Clair wondered if he had purposefully left her on her own to meet her father. Nervously, she opened the shutters again, just a crack, but enough to see the road below, which was empty as always.

"Tut, m'dear, will you come away from that window?" Mrs. Moncrieff said irritably, "There's no use in frettin', it'll all come well in the end, the Dream Merchant will see to that."

"Mrs. Moncrieff," unseen, Clair's father had arrived, and now stood frowning in the doorway, "How many times must I repeat that I will not tolerate such foolish, blasphemous tales in my house?"

Mrs. Moncrieff sniffed, "I meant no offence I'm sure, sir," and she swept from the room with her head held high. At the door, she paused and gave Clair a parting look, as if to say, there, what did I tell you? I don't know what has come over everybody, but in my day... Another stern look from Laird Murray reminded her of her purpose, and she retreated, closing the door behind her.

Laird Murray was a tall, graying man, with a high forehead and a long, curved nose. His dress was, as always, impeccable, and his manners were at once stern and gracious. "Good Afternoon, my dear," he said, looking down his long nose at her, "I wish to speak to you regarding your forthcoming marriage."

"But..." Clair began.

"Now, now, my dear, don't interrupt. As I was saying, I know that we agreed to give you until the end of the month, but in the light of recent events I believe it is as well that we rethink that."

"What recent events?" Clair asked.

"Young Donald Campbell has returned from England sooner than expected. He will arrive here this evening and..."

"But I am still engaged to Jamie!"

Laird Murray halted his recital and looked at her for a moment. "Now look here, my girl, we have been more than adequately patient with you in this matter. Jamie Raeburn should have returned over four months ago and he has not sent so much as a postcard. Either he has decided not to do so, or he is unable to. In either case, it is high time you moved on. The Campbell's are a good family, and Donald is as fine a boy as Jamie, so let's have no more fuss."

"Donald Campbell is a brute! I refuse to marry him! Besides, Jamie might still return..."

At that moment, the door opened quietly, and the stranger stepped calmly inside. So intent were the father and daughter, that neither observed him as he made his way unobtrusively to the open window.

"...Perhaps he is on his way at this very instant!" Clair realized that she was being petulant, but she didn't care.

Behind her, the skylark had appeared at the window. With a flip of its wings, it shot through the narrow opening, and landed on the stranger's shoulder. Clapped in its beak was a letter, which the stranger quickly took, opened, and scanned, an odd smile on his face. Then, refolding it, he tucked it into the pocket of his tattered coat, and turned his attention to the scene before him.

Laird Murray sighed, "I had hoped to spare you this, but I see now that it is impossible, since you will not take my advice."

"Hoped to spare me what?" asked Clair, knowing that she did not want to hear the answer.

"We have received news..."

"I say," said the stranger, making the other two jump, "you aren't a relation of General George Murray are you? You do look a bit like him."

This unexpected remark silenced her father for a moment. Shifting his un-approving gaze, he slowly summed up the quarter from which it had come. The stranger was suddenly all innocence and awe, a combination that suited Laird Murray's pride very nicely. After a moment, he decided not to be offended by the interruption.

"Why, yes, he was my cousin. A fine man, don't you think?" he gave the stranger a condescending smile.

"The very best sir, if only Prince Charlie had listened to him, we would be living in a very different Scotland today."

"We would indeed," her father sighed, "but I do not believe I am acquainted with you, sir."

Clair stood by the window, shaken. One second an almighty row and the threat of decisive news about Jamie, and the next second the stranger had neatly diverted the whole thing to a calm discussion of families. She couldn't for the life of her see what he was playing at, but she had the feeling she would do well to play along.

Suddenly, a movement outside caught her eye. For a moment, she thought it was only a trick of the fog, but from old habit, she pushed the window until she had a clear view of the seaward road. Upon which, a single rider was advancing towards the castle.

The admiring discussion of General Murray's battle tactics was cut short by Clair's exhilarated cry as she ran from the room. Down the long winding flight of steps from the tower she went, across the wide hall, and, pausing to wrench the great oak doors open, out into the cold fog and the arms of the weary rider who half fell from his horse to catch her up in an embrace.

Silence followed her departure from the tower room. Laird Murray stood close by the open window, watching the joyful reunion below with a sour face. With a sudden, irritated gesture, he drew a letter from his coat pocket, crumpled it, and threw it at the fire. Unseen by him, the stranger caught it inches from the flames, and smoothed it out to read. With one last angry glance out the window, Laird Murray pivoted on his heel and strode purposefully towards the door.

A sudden peel of laughter arrested his momentum. He turned to see the stranger, whom he had all but forgotten in the light of recent events, and who was leaning indolently against the fireplace. In one hand, he held the letter Laird Murray had tried to burn, and the light in his eyes was far from kind.

"I thought I had missed something," he said quietly, "I thought that I had made a mistake somewhere, but no. The only mistake was in not realizing just what a desperate scoundrel you are."

As he approached, Laird Murray found himself backing away nervously. He was rather amazed by the sudden change that had come over his former admirer. "I assure you, sir, on my word of honor, that I have no idea of what you are referring to."

"Oh, really? Then perhaps you would kindly explain this to me?" and he held out the crumpled paper.

At the sight of the letter, Laird Murray thought wildly of making a dash for the open door, but something about the hard glitter in the stranger's blue eyes told him that this was not a wise decision. Instead, he was forced to re-read the accusing black script before him.

Do not worry, it will be done as you suggested. The Raeburn lad is no fighter, and as you said, he carries no arms. You will hear from me when he is dead, look for my letter by the end of the month. I trust you will remember your end of the bargain, it would be a pity to come this far only to face arrest and disgrace. And this time, the charges would be much more serious than debt.

~Sincerely, Donald Campbell.

"It would appear, my Laird," said the stranger, "that your word of honor is not worth very much at the present rate of exchange."

"Well, what of it? I do not see what any of this has to do with you, and in any case, all your meddling has done no good: I can still forbid the marriage."

A grin twisted the stranger's handsome face as he shook his head, "Oh, I do not think you would do that, for I do not think you would want the world to know what you had done to the poor Raeburn lad."

"What I tried to have done!" the Laird's courage was reviving with his anger, "Obviously, they failed."

The grin turned into a rather malicious smile as the stranger reached into his tattered coat and pulled out the letter the bird had brought to him shortly before. "Oh no, my Laird, they did not fail in the least," and he held out the accusing letter.

It is done. As I suspected the lad put up no fight at all, weak fool. As long as you uphold your bargain, you may rest assured that no one will be the wiser. ~D. C.

For a moment, Laird Murray said nothing, but continued to stare at the mocking words, no one will be the wiser. Then, the import of the letter hit him. He rushed to the window and looked down into the courtyard, where Jamie Raeburn still held Clair in a tight embrace.

"Who are you?" he spun to face the stranger, who smiled complacently as the bird landed on his shoulder.

"You would do well to pay more heed to your excellent housekeeper's tales, my Laird. Also, in the future, I trust you will not try to pay your own debts with other people's lives." He lingered a moment longer, until he was certain that both points had been well and truly made. Then he turned, and strode nonchalantly from the room.

Standing in the courtyard, the young man watched the joyful couple. On his shoulder, the little skylark chirped wistfully, and the young man shook his head. "They

will neither of them ever know," he said. For a moment, the two of them stood in silence, then the stranger spoke again, quietly, as if to himself, "It is a very simple matter, happiness, and one should always bestow it when one has the chance."

The skylark chirped in agreement, and the young man smiled. Then he turned, and started off across the heather covered hills, singing softly as he went. And the merry little wind that followed him, blew away the tattered remnants of fog, and left the evening radiant with sunlight.

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Seasons of Her

Andria Davis

her curious eyes hold the green
new spring.
snow drifts her sinuous
stature, she's dressing
crisp in autumn leaves.

her resplendent grin blinding,
vernal sunshine.
mirrored pools avert
my gaze, glinting
from her gypsy skirt.

her carnival cotton candy hued
hair, spun from spiders
drunk with pink champagne,
as were we
our first sovereign summer

her scarlet sweet lips,
screamed when my sled crashed.
hot blood,
striking vivid the
flurried hill we rushed down.

her fragrant lily-petal dress,
skin effervescent.
delayed by a sunlit storm,
heels slip clumsy
through mud toward her mister

our faces long ago stained
from luscious midsummer plums.
her woeful eye now
holds violet
from his frigid sharp fury.

Turning Lucid

Andria Davis

Elijah still pretends nothing is wrong. He thinks he's fooling me, but every time I stand to leave, his face cracks. Panic manifests behind his eyes; his expression perfectly mimics a child when the babysitter arrives. I have to smirk at the patchy beard that, although pitiful, is the only indication he's past puberty. Sadly, my grin disappears quickly, like everything else these days.

It would be easier to ignore the truth, but he's much better at it than I am. How funny to think that I was oblivious to every person around me, and wouldn't have noticed if I walked past my own mother on the street. This could be karma, or that old BS of never realizing what you have until it's gone. Maybe it's just chance: this round of Russian roulette, I got the loaded chamber.

Elijah can't really pretend anymore, after last week. Mild annoyance at the Starbuck's barista forgetting my drink Monday, turned to rude complaints about Wednesday's waiter who neglected to ask my order. By Saturday morning, we stood in an awkward tension inside Beautiful Brides, where the fitting for my dream gown was scheduled. Elijah was growing crimson, screaming and sputtering into the unflinching face of an old Chinese woman.

"What do you mean, you've never seen her before?" Elijah wiped spit from his lower lip. The woman quietly, but firmly, repeated that he must be mistaken.

I remembered her, this woman whose gentle smile had beamed at me as we set up the appointment. When her eyes met mine, I had felt a final flicker of hope. Elijah cursed loudly and broke me out of nostalgia. Outside a minute later, I could catch tears teasing the corners of his eyes.

Now we lay under that tattered comforter, his arms tightening around me, refusing to let me slip away.

"Please," he's pleading, "tell me how it ends. Tell me about how happy we'll be." I pull on his beard, pale ghostly fingers in the moonlight.

"Nobody has talked to me in four months," I tell him, smiling, "nobody but you." My voice sounds so faint; I can barely whisper this last sentence. I kiss his lips, and his face says he's done pretending. Tears fill his eyes and drop down in streaks; he says he never learned to be alone. But I have no more words left, my touch is growing flimsy as my fingertips brush his forehead the last time. The shadows are endless and lonely, begging for my company. He wrestles collapse, in time losing the battle to stay awake.

I slip easily around his sleeping form and to the window. Small rays of sunlight creep into the dark room. With light comes absence. When the first beam touches my skin, translucence overtakes me as dawn the night.

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Mary Dreams

Elle Hiatt

underneath the magic tree
is an underwater world
where the mermaid queen once bore
a sunflower baby.
she shines so bright and happy
full of love
behind the blue lagoon sun
casting forth a most beautiful light
the color of the seahorse king's eye

fancy me a star
or a music note
most unusual
out it pours
from inside
your carnival
mind.

In the Service of the Badb

Beatrice Maus

“Awaken, my daughter.”

The old woman smiled smugly as her new daughter’s fingers twitched. Five years she had been waiting for this day and her goddess did not disappoint. Her new daughter had been plucked from the grave twice now; the first attempt to reclaim her soul had been disastrous. The old woman unconsciously traced a hand over the space where her right ear had been.

Who would have guessed that dead men’s teeth were so sharp?

“My daughter,” the old woman cooed again, pleased so see her new daughter’s head move beneath the grey death-shroud, “There is much for you to do today.”

There was a soft groan this time and more movement. The old woman nodded approvingly; this resurrection would be different. This new daughter would be compliant, the spitting image of a woman’s servitude sought after by men in life. Except, this new daughter would not remember her past life.

That had been the trouble with the miserable first attempt to bring her new daughter from the Otherworld: she remembered too much. Again, the old woman held a hand against the empty place where her right ear had been. Her fingers traced the sensitive skin, still feeling the gouges left by her first daughter’s reanimated corpse. This time would be much different; this time the old woman had the blessing of her goddess to perform this ritual.

Everything was for the Badb, the goddess of death.

Her new daughter rose stiffly to a sitting position and the shroud pulled away. The old woman gasped in awe; here was her daughter completely intact! The same pale skin, but without the roses in her cheeks, the same long limbs, the same long hair...except now that hair was white.

“Keep your eyes closed for just a minute more, dearie.” This was the most important part of the ceremony. Oh, the old woman could taste the success of this venture; it tasted like the sweet cakes her daughter used to make; perhaps she would teach her new daughter to make the same cakes.

The old woman turned to a bowl that had cloth floating in it and smelled of roses; roses had been her daughter’s favorite flower, but the old woman didn’t expect her new daughter to remember such things. The old woman chanted over the bowl and poured some white wine into the water; this would preserve her new daughter’s eyes and that was very important.

The old woman plucked the blindfold from the bowl and wrung it out. Her new daughter remained motionless except for the plucking at the shroud of her new daughter’s slim fingers; her daughter never could keep her hands still. The old woman shrugged this new insight away; this time would be different. This time, she had the Badb’s blessing.

Her new daughter didn’t move as the old woman tied the blindfold around her new daughter’s eyes. The rustle of the fabric being drawn tight was almost as loud as the old woman’s breathing in this cavern. Still, her new daughter didn’t move, just sat and waited complacently for the old woman to give her permission to move. The old woman drew away, pleased that she had all of her fingers and other limbs still attached. She again brushed the place her ear had been.

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"What do you remember, my dear Nothing, my dear Aon?" asked the old woman.

~

She remembered starlight and moonlight. She remembered the crash of waves on the shoreline. She remembered the sunlight, but couldn't remember what it felt like. She remembered throwing a silver knife into a black pool as deep and still as the night sky. She remembered this voice, this old wearied voice, the voice of her mother.

And she remembered the man. The man named Morin.

He had been tall and lean with eyes as green as summer leaves, with hair as black as coal. How it floated in the constant wind the sea had cast! She remembered his warmth when he held her in his arms, and she remembered the peppermint and jasmine smell that came from the herbs he surrounded himself with. She remembered the thickness of his coarse woolen raiment.

He should not have been able to touch her; what man of the cloth would be tempted by a woman who served the old gods? She had seen priests killed for less.

But he was warm and kind and his voice was like the thunder.

Where was he now?

~

The old woman did not like her new daughter's silence; it meant that something was going on in her daughter's mind. The thought that maybe her Aon was remembering the old woman made her smile.

But the smile was short lived, what if her Aon was remembering the man?

The old woman reached into her tunic and touched the silver dagger that rested next to her heart. Her eyes traveled to the thin line on her Aon's throat where she had killed her new daughter last time. Her fingers hesitated around the hilt of her blade; would she have enough strength of heart to kill her daughter again?

"What are you remembering, my Aon?" the old woman asked tentatively.

~

She remembered his gentle hands, his warm breath.

Where was the man now?

~

"Where," the word sounded strange coming from her new daughter's throat. Her Aon shook her head gently, reaching up slender fingers to brush over the blindfold. The old woman smiled at her cleverness; she had traveled far to get the finest satin for her Aon's blindfold. She had tried just a strip of leather the first time and that had not worked out so well.

"Who es this 'me Aon'?" her daughter asked softly; it was the same voice her daughter, her Aon, had in life: as soft as pillow feathers and about as firm as such. The old woman smiled; her daughter had always had her father's accent.

"That's who you are, my dearest; did you sleep well?" the old woman decided that this was the wisest course of action, to play her new daughter's death off as a dream.

"I was...dreamin'?" her Aon asked. The old woman nodded even though her Aon could not see.

"Yes, yes my dear," the old woman said softly, daring to touch her Aon's bare shoulder. The old woman drew her hand back instantly and saw that her fingertips were cracked and bleeding now. She shrugged this off as a side effect of being turned into one of the Badb's servants. "What were you dreaming of?"

"There was a man," the old woman's blood ran cold at her Aon's declaration. Her hand went to the blade again as her Aon continued. "And he was holdin' me and then there was nothin'."

Her Aon's head tilted to look at the old woman, "An' who are ye?"

"My dearest Aon," the old woman said as kindly as she could, "I am your mother. Don't you remember me?"

The answer should have been no.

Aon's nodding head said yes.

"It was a wonderful dream; why did ye wake me?" Aon asked. The old woman smiled, glad to have the topic away from the cursed man named Morin, the man who had stolen her daughter from her with his love. She would never forgive the man named Morin, the man who had made her vivacious daughter leap from the cliffs into the sea. The old woman could see the awkward bend in her Aon's spine, the place where her dearest daughter's spine had snapped.

"I am working for the Badb, my dearest Aon," the old woman said gently, "And so are you; I didn't want you to be late for her service."

"I am a servant to the Badb?" Aon asked gently, "F'rgive me poor memory, which service do I provide her?"

The old woman heard the trust in her new daughter's voice and knew that her daughter had dismissed the man as a dream. The old woman's hand relaxed away from the dagger hidden beneath her tunic. She kept her hand close to it, though; this had been the disastrous part the first time she had brought her Aon to life.

"My dear, you are a Herald for the Badb," the old woman continued when she saw her daughter's confusion, "You are a banshee."

The old woman did not miss the shudder that passed through her Aon's broken body. The old woman cringed at the sound of her dear Aon's upper spine scraping against the lower half of her spine.

"And what o' th' man, Mother?" Aon asked.

Fury rose in the old woman, but she hid it from her voice; any anger would rub off onto her Aon and she did not wish for her sweet, naïve Aon to become an angry spirit.

"He is nothing but a dream, my dear," the old woman said.

~

But she remembered him so vividly. He couldn't be just a dream.

Was Mother lying to her? It was quite possible; she remembered the lies the other women in the village spoke about the man named Morin. The slander they had sent his way when he had first arrived and had first held Aon in his gaze.

"Stay away from him," they had said to her, sending scathing looks his way, "He will bring you nothing but trouble, girl. Stay away from him."

How could she have? Those eyes pierced her soul and sent her blood racing through her veins. She remembered the man coming over and introducing himself to the women politely, but his gaze was always on her, even when she had blushed and turned away.

And, even though her father and mother had banned her from seeing him she would go to the shoreline and sit with him. How he would hold her and breathe whispered stories into her ear: stories of dragons and faeries. Such wonderful tales! Some were so frightening that they gave her gooseflesh and nightmares!

But he was always there when the nightmares came and he would comfort

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her and tell her stories of happy things: of gallant knights and valiant kings, of beautiful queens and princesses, of saints and angles.

And she had loved him; was it true that he had been a dream? She felt as if she had been asleep for ages.

And then she remembered something else.

~

"Aon?" the old woman ventured. Her Aon had begun to tremble and had hidden her face in her hands. The old woman hoped against hope that Aon had not remembered the incident with the man. If she did, then all of the old woman's hard work would be ruined! The old woman withdrew the dagger.

"Aon?" she ventured again, inching closer.

~

The man had been taken from her arms the morning after she had shared a bed with the priest. She remembered how he had stroked her long hair that morning, how he had kissed her and nuzzled her, promising marriage, promising himself to her.

Her heart wrenched at the pain of his words, at the emotion that had swept her when he had told her that his heart beat only for her. She had said nothing, but had smiled and had kissed him. Such an emotion made her fingers and toes tingle, her heart thudded against her chest like a bird trying to escape its cage. Such a wondrous feeling!

A new emotion tore through her, killed the bird in her chest, turned her body to ice.

He had been ripped from her arms that morning by her mother and father. Such things they called him! Such ways they tortured him!

And she had been held motionless by her mother as they had tied the man named Morin to a stake and piled wood and brush around his feet. How they had jeered at him, calling him a demon, a seducer of the innocent!

How she had screamed that they were wrong, that she was the one who had tempted him, that she was the one who should be tied to that stake! But no one would listen.

Five women had to keep her from leaping onto the pyre with him, to wrap him in her arms and burn away to nothing but shadows and dust with him. How she would have gone! And willingly!

And then he smiled at her.

Such a joyous smile, one of such beauty that she was struck dumb: her muscles had lost their strength and her tears now poured down her cheeks, unaccompanied by her screams and protests. Such a comforting smile, such a wondrous smile.

He had smiled a knowing smile and she knew what it meant. She saw the smile even as the flames stole his face, took his green eyes.

He had not screamed.

He had smiled, and in that smile was a final request.

She would obey that request with all of her heart.

She had run then to the sea before any of the women could stop her. The sea, so powerful, had greeted her. She had screamed for the man named Morin; such a terrible emotion was death!

How she had wailed! How she had howled!

Like a vixen, like a battle cry.

Like a banshee.

And then she had sailed down the cliffs willingly, diving to meet the man

named Morin in the Otherworld.

With tears of joy flowing down her cheeks.

~

The old woman watched her Aon groan with more than physical pain. The tears had started again, those terrible tears; they had started as a trickle, then as a flood. The old woman knew that they would not stop; a banshee's tears never stopped once they started.

She had wanted to protect her dear Aon from this!

The old woman fled the room, screaming a curse at the Badb for giving her daughter back her pain. The old woman dashed out beneath the night sky, tugging at her hair, tearing at her clothes, until nothing was left to tear but her own flesh.

She stayed away from the cavern for many hours, weeping and feeling every age her battered body had weathered. All for her Aon, all for her daughter.

No, the old woman corrected herself. All for the Badb.

The sound of a footfall gave the old woman pause in her thoughts and she turned to see her Aon standing quietly, glinting like a pearl in the moonlight. The silver knife was clenched in her Aon's hand; when had the old woman dropped it?

Well, it didn't matter. The old woman would take any consequence her Aon decided to deliver. After all, the dead were meant to remain dead, even if the Badb had ordered the revival. The old woman closed her eyes and felt the cool breeze blow at her few remaining tufts of hair, felt the chill of her Aon as her new daughter moved forward.

"Mother," Aon said gently, and the old woman opened her eyes to see that her Aon was kneeling gently before her. Her Aon was smiling as sweetly as she had in life, as sweetly as she had smiled at the man named Morin. The old woman remembered when her daughter would smile at her like that, as if the old woman could do no wrong, as if she were a goddess.

When the smile had turned toward such a strange man, the old woman had been jealous. Now, the smile evoked warm tears and warm memories: baking bread in the small kitchen, gathering flowers in the meadow behind the trees, telling stories by the fire...

Her daughter had always been fond of stories.

The old woman grabbed onto her Aon, not caring for the ice that settled into her bones, not caring for the tears that froze and cracked her skin, not caring that her Aon did not draw breath.

She didn't care that her Aon didn't have a heart beat; her daughter had returned! She clutched at her daughter's thin arms, tugged at her daughter's silky hair. She heard the air rushing past the blade of the knife as Aon drew it high into the air.

The old woman would accept her death, would accept all that her daughter gave to her. For the woman was the cause of her daughter's pain; the dead were never meant to walk the Earth again. She sighed softly against her daughter's cold flesh, prepared.

Her Aon paused and, after a few moments, the knife was flung to the ground. Her daughter's icy arms wrapped around the old woman and chilled her to her very blood. She could feel her skin breaking, cracking, bleeding. She didn't care if one of her eyes was frozen shut. She clung to her daughter's body with fingers that had long ago gone black with graveyard soil.

"It was a terrible dream, mother," her Aon said gently into the old woman's ear, "A terribly wonderful dream."

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Half-way Mark

Barbara Onorato

June connection died-
I do believe marriage is
No more on your mind

ARTWORK



DaVinci Tribute
~ Susan Amarillas ~

Red Japan
~ Robin Ackerman ~



Red
~ Sandra Abel ~

***Martini: Signed
Copy***
~ Sandra Abel ~



Persona
~ Brooke Lamb ~

Naptime



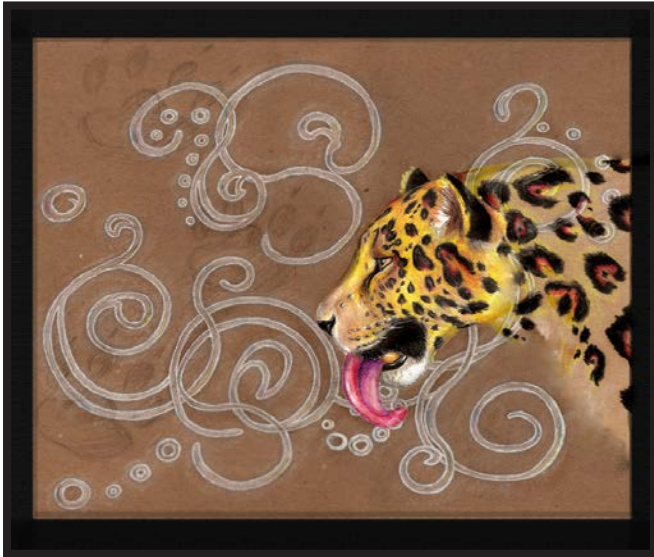
~ Brittany Sooter ~



Wocketfin

Drinking From The Pond

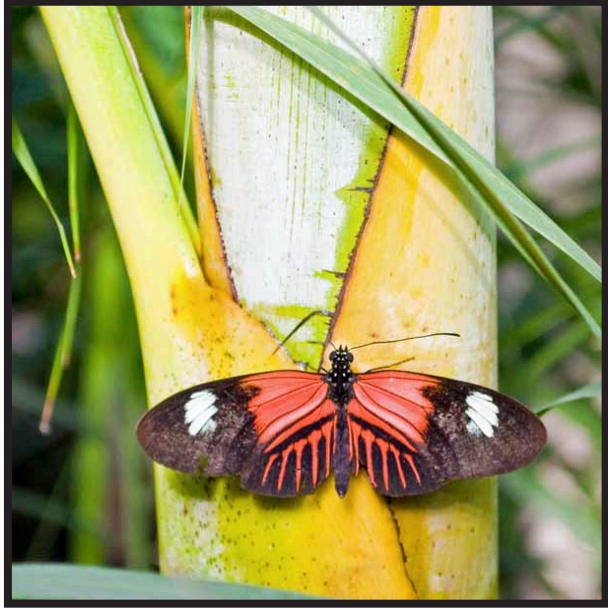
~ Robin Acherman ~



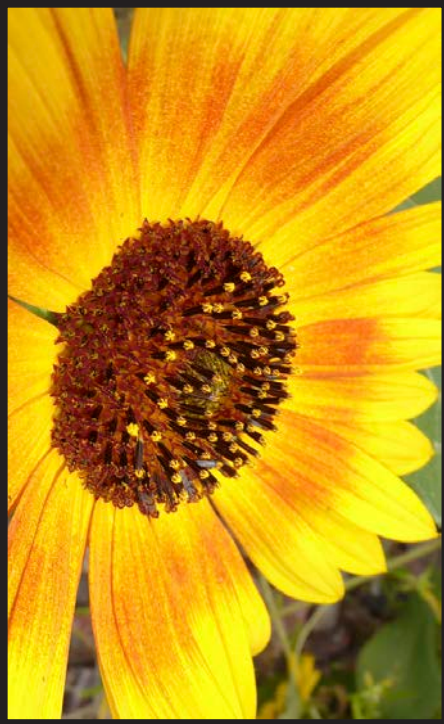
Swirlpool

~ Lauren Garrett ~

*Butterfly
Bamboo*



~ Brenda Fleishman ~



Sunflower

Untitled
~ Jenn Whalen ~



Fellow Traveler
~ Keith McGillivray ~



Literature
~ Stacey Zant ~



Paris
~ Kathleen Medina ~

The Path

Joshua Lagge

If I didn't know better, I'd swear I was a serial killer. I do know better. I'm just a normal guy, well, as normal as anyone can be. I've been living in my new apartment for the last twelve weeks. My parents helped me get the place and even cover part of the rent. It hasn't been easy finding a job after my two-year stint at a local community college. I never really knew what I wanted to do with my life. I thought that going to college would help. Now I have an Associate of Arts Degree, a butt load of debt, and still no idea what I want to do.

All of that is inconsequential though, I've been appointed a task by God. He has chosen me to be a protector. There is a girl that jogs past my apartment every week-day at four in the afternoon. She goes home to change after she gets out of her nursing class and then jogs this path behind my apartment. She attends the same college that I used to. The irony of it all amazes me. If I had known that I was to become her protector, I would have taken more P.E. classes, instead of Creative Writing or Japanese. I still don't know what the hell they are saying on *Naruto* unless I subtitle it.

I feel so creepy following her like I have been. I feel like some sort of stalker, but I know that she can't know that I am protecting her. I'm not certain why she cannot know that I am protecting her; I just know that I must remain hidden from her.

At first, I tried to dress up like a jogger and follow her along the path. I even bought the Rinkratz brand jogging pants she wears. I had no idea they were only for girls though. I wish I had known before I tried running in them. My first endeavor was very much a spectacle, I did my best to keep up with her and yet remain imperceptible about it. Well, to say the least, I ended up chafed from the stupid running pants, my lungs were on fire, and I couldn't even keep up with her moderate pace. I ended up coughing and sputtering myself into a fit of dry heaves on the side of the trail, as her cute little blonde ponytail bobbed off down the path. She kept running, and I had to make my way back to my apartment.

As I lay in my bed that night, and I tried to sleep, I was yet again haunted by her image. I was fearful that I had let God down and that she had been hurt somewhere. I did everything I could do to get her out of my head. I knew that I would not know any semblance of peace that night until I could verify her safety or demise the next morning. Fortunately for me, I was visited by an angel. He told me he had been sent to me because I had begun to lose faith. I cannot say whether I was conscious or if the angel came to me in a dream. His voice was calming, yet matter of fact. He was beautiful to behold and for a long time I could not find my voice to speak in his presence. He told me that I would see her on that path again the next day, just as I had for the last three months. I knew he was right. He was my guide and I had a job to do. I finally built up the strength to speak and I asked him if I was crazy or if he was really an angel.

His eyes locked with mine and it seemed as though he stared into my soul, "I am an angel," he said, "I kneel before God and swear this to you."

If it had not been for him encouraging me, I never would have been able to make it through any of my appointed tasks. The next day, at around 3:30, I positioned myself farther along the path, about fifteen blocks from where I had last seen her. I had brought along a stun gun that my mother had given me when I was getting my new

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apartment. I think that she thought I would be in danger here. This is a nice neighborhood though, bad things don't happen here.

The waiting, in spite of what the angel had told me, was torturous. I desperately needed to see her and confirm her safety for myself. After waiting for what seemed like days, I saw her running down the trail. She passed a brown-haired guy who was tying his shoe. She flashed him a polite smile as she passed and he smiled back. I felt bile rise in my throat at the very sight of him. His mere presence made me sick to my stomach.

"That's him!" rang out in my ears. The angel was back and verifying everything. I was so relieved that he was there to confirm this. Otherwise, I never would have had the courage to carry out my appointed task. I watched as he finished tying his shoes and began sprinting in her direction. He was moving so fast that I barely had time to think. I jumped on him, stun gun in hand.

The details are all a bit fuzzy; I think the stun gun must have hit me as well. I'm really not sure, though; after all, I am new to all of this. I remember standing up; we had apparently tumbled down the hill away from the path. The guy was dead. He had several stab wounds in his chest and was facing the sky.

I didn't run over into the bushes and throw up, like they do on TV. I did throw up in my mouth a little bit, but I think that was just the after effects of the stun gun. I was oddly comfortable with what had just happened. I am not certain why; I just know that I had a divine peace about it. I even tried to make myself feel bad about it, and I couldn't. He was going to hurt her and I had stopped him. As I was getting ready to hide the bastard's body, I heard the angel's unmistakable voice. He told me to leave it and that God would handle it. I was so relieved; I had no idea how to hide a body. It's not necessarily something they teach in my Communication Disorders class back in community college.

Every day I found myself on the jogging trail, but not every day was I forced into action. Sometimes it was weeks, or even months, before my hand was forced. I oftentimes positioned myself on the trail and nothing happened. There were no immediate threats that I detected. Just as often, she just jogged right past me. I am really starting to wonder why she is so important. She never once looks my way, nor does she have any idea as to what I have done for her. I wonder, if she knew what I had done, and what I had gone through, if she would appreciate it. It doesn't really matter though I guess. I am not doing this for her anyway. Well, not directly, I guess.

It's been several months since my first assignment, I have protected her seven more times since then, and I still don't know what's so special about her. The strange thing about this is that they are all about the same age and character of men. It seems that the enemy is not very creative in the array of assassins they are sending after her. I ask the angel why she is so significant, why these men want to kill her, and he keeps reassuring me that this question is not even relevant and that it is more important to be an obedient servant.

My first mission was rather sloppy, but I have become fairly honed at my new trade. My perceptions have gotten better too. My most recent assignment came to me five miles up the path. I went out in the middle of the night and found another assassin heading towards her apartment. I had seen him outside of my apartment window and I knew just where he was heading. I drove my car to her complex in order to cut him off. I was moving past her apartment window, which was on the ground floor of the complex, when she seemed to notice me. Oddly enough, this was the first time she

acknowledged me. As far as I could tell, she actually recognized me. I felt a little pride swell in me. I immediately checked that notion. That pride is a sin and I needed no part of it. I turned my gaze to the ground and moved decidedly towards the jogging path.

It was at that time that I realized my misstep. I had forgotten my stun gun! Just as I was trying to decide what to do next, her assailant came tearing down the path. I stood as nonchalantly as I could, but it was nearly impossible. I was nearly as nervous this time as I was the first mission. When he was perfectly even with me, I piled into him like a freight train. My knife was aimed for his heart, but it hit a rib and was deflected momentarily. He screamed and tried to push passed me and I fell as he did so. Luckily, I was able to sever his Achilles tendon as I did so. The tendon resounded with a snapping sound, similar to the retort of a pistol. He fell to the ground and put his hands up to deflect my attack.

I stabbed and slashed as quickly as I could. I had to kill him before he was able to get to the weapon he had stashed in his coat. I must have caught him completely by surprise. He died, fighting to the end. Unfortunately for him, he had chosen the wrong side and I knew he had no chance against me. My purpose was divine and my task was holy. I would have saluted him, but I had to drag him down into the ditch off of the jogging trail.

I opted to leave my car there that night and make my way home. The assignment had been less than surgical and the police had arrived rather quickly. I know that leaving the car behind and not walking right past the police was not really an act of faith, but I knew that I needed to keep a low profile this evening. I got up early that next morning and headed back to pick up my car. The walk back was pleasant. I felt oddly as if my assignment had been lifted. I can't explain why I felt this new change. There was no tension, no concern for her safety. For the first time in months, I was hearing the birds sing. It was a brisk day, but they seemed not to be effected by it. The closer I got to my car, the more glorious the day became. I almost wanted to run.

As I neared the fifth mile, I saw her standing on her porch. She seemed not to notice my approach at first. I was rather used to this. It did sting a bit at first, but as I began to analyze this notion, she noticed me. My heart honestly jumped in chest, I was elated. Was all this over?

Could I finally let her know what she meant to me?

She lifted her hand and waved at me. I was taken aback at first and rather uncertainly raised my hand to wave back. I started to wave, still rather uncertain of my actions. It was then that I noticed her wave turned into a downward pointing finger. I saw her mouth the words, "That's him."

I turned to see the policemen bearing down on me. I felt a wave of darkness hit me as I was forced to the ground with guns pointed at my head and back. They belted countless expletives, and I began to become fearful. The angel came to my side and yelled for me to rise up and that he was with me. I rolled one cop off of me and rose up against the rookie in front of me. I had no intention of killing them, as they were not enemies. They just didn't understand the situation.

My head slammed into his nose and sent him sprawling. The officer to my left fired his pistol at me and it tore into my side. It didn't really hurt like I thought it would. I was suddenly realizing that I was unstoppable. I turned on the police officer that was now behind me. He fired six shots into my chest. The slugs stopped me in my tracks, and I fell facedown. I heard the birds singing as the policemen rolled me over onto my back. The world around me was fading to gray, and as the policemen's voices

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and faces became softer, the angel's voice became more audible. For the first time in a long time, his face became more and more visible. The more everything else faded away, the more tangible he became. My questioning look apparently had gotten his attention.

"I do not owe you any explanation, but I will give you one nonetheless. I told you I was an angel. I just didn't tell you what kind."

As my perception of the world around me faded, the clarity of what I had become was apparent. My actions had apparently defined me more so than my faith. I had misplaced it somewhere and had left God out of the equation. Now, as I die, I wait to see where I will go.

Today, Tomorrow, Yesterday

Renee Warner

I remember back in the day
 when life was quite simple.
 Now there's a monkey
 just running my life.

Once I knew left
 from right.
 It kept me going straight.

I always wish I were a space cadet
 cause you know
 ignorance is bliss.

Now satan owns my soul
 I traded him for an orange zebra.
 Now I am happy
 (even w/out my soul)

I just simply wish
 you weren't so damned
 republican.
 I know we both wish for world peace
 it's all cause once there wasn't a fire.

Now Barbie's the president
 she knew how to get what she wanted.
 So once she dated goofy
 and so did I.

So why is she now president?
 While I'm missing a sandwich.

I wish you would quit lolligagging
 we need to get going.
 I wish you would just say
 Fuck It!

Once I leave
 I won't come back
 just like the man from Nantucket.

I always wish I were me
 and never you.

Once you gave me chocolate
you bought your way in.
Just hoping you could win.

Wishing I could grow up big and strong
I saw my wish come true
through you.

I saw my happier wish for tomorrow.
I saw it breaking on the horizon.
Now you know.
Tomorrow is the day!

Short Pier, Long Walk

S. C. Townsley

When I was seventeen, I lived in a Midwest town of 2,500 people. I went to school with four hundred of those people, and long before I ever understood that I was gay, high school placed the stereotype upon me. I resented that label for a long time. Being gay amounted to being hated by a significant portion of my peers, and I didn't want that. Who would? I wanted to be at least someone people could go a day without teasing or taunting. Or throwing things at. Or jabbing in the asshole with a screwdriver.

Sure—some kids were allies, consciously or not, but they were few and far between. Others were neutral, but many were jerks. Now, I like the word jerk because of its definition and connotation. By definition, it means someone who is contemptibly naïve, foolish, and inconsequential. By connotation, it means you're an asshole. In both regards, the word fits most testosterone-addled teenage boys.

I lost my virginity in my junior year to a girl in her junior year of college. I thought that this would help validate me, would change opinions of those around me. I thought that I could choose not to be gay, but every time I saw a cute guy, I saw a *cute* guy. I felt like a moon that was just a bit too close to a planet—slowly being torn in half by opposing tidal forces.

On a January night in 1998, my teenage angst reached a peak of depression and commingled with an ugly existential melt-down: I had finally realized that life was purposeless. The thought of "Life is an explosion of learning and experience, a cosmic soup of curiosity," fought bravely against "If there is no purpose, then why live?" and I struggled with them both, unable to decide between a hard life or the easy choice—suicide.

In a journal entry from that night, I wrote, "There are so many limitations and restrictions to living. I want to exist and enjoy my life, but I have to do all this stupid shit first. I just want to live. Experience. I want to go, to see, to be there. To do it. To love it. Create it, explore it, discover it. But I am held back, back, back. I still want to die. I'm only delaying the inevitable."

After writing until nearly two in the morning, I got in my car and drove around town one last time, breathing in the world of lower-middle class, and then circled out into the rural maze of dirt roads. Everything I'd just written in my journal ran through my head and branched into hundreds of other splinters of thought, building into that huge cascading web of options that we call the possible future. Questions poured forth, but no answers came.

Forty minutes of driving later, I arrived at the backside of the lake. Standing on the pier, I wrote: "The light is purple and hazy and the ice is gleaming with vagueness. I have asked God or whatever called me into existence to forgive me for all the stupidity in life. I didn't want to be here, but I am. I have asked to be let go."

In my hesitation I turned to pace—to incorporate physical motion into the thought process—and I saw my car...and a pool of black fluid beneath. I wondered: did this mystery matter? Was there any reason to investigate? I was about to commit suicide—right? And then it hit me: this was not only the sign I had been looking for, but a test. A test of my curiosity, and a sign that the meaning of life might just be to explore, discover, and learn.

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Later, I learned that the transmission pan tore open on a chunk of frozen mud lurking on a hill crest; the car, squatting over its black vomit, started, but wouldn't move. I decided to walk, choosing survival over death, choosing painful, unbearable, never-satisfiable curiosity over ignorance. The resulting walk, which was something out of a nightmare, introduced time for me to think about survival, about what it means to live.

Existence, I saw, is not hollow. It is a challenge—painful at times, certainly, but pain is temporary and must simply be dealt with. The hateful opinions of others, too, must simply be dealt with. There was suddenly no longer a reason for those hateful opinions to be molding me. What existed existed; and what I was was. There was more connotation to the words than I'd realized. I saw that I could own and utilize, capitalize on being the person my emotions dictated that I be.

This night brought about a slow change in my confidence, in my sexuality, in my love for the world. By no means am I now a flawless example of humanity, but I can at least say that I am a human striving for enlightenment, learning from my failures and achievements alike; embracing the challenge of each day.

If Only

Myriah Wilkins

I once knew a creature with a powerful dream
Though little, her heart was too big for its seams.
"To fly is my wish, and I just want it so!
To glide through the clouds, to come and to go!"
Closing eyes tight, she dashed up a steep hill
Dreaming of flying, using up all her will.
Up through the clouds- doing spirals and more
She spread her wings further, and started to soar.
But as she gained altitude, she lost her height
Beginning to plummet as the sky lost its light.
Her wings fell apart, the feathers all lost-
Her 'flying' was no more, and much it would cost.
As the ground rose to meet her, she closed her eyes tight
And with the hard impact, a soul lost its light.
And one of her feathers, serene and so dear
Drifted down and rested on the tip of her ear.
A twitch and a shudder was all she could do,
For her light was dying, though her heart was still true.
As the little fox stilled, I heard her last sigh
"Alas, if only, if only to fly."
I saw her eyes close, and the breath died in her chest,
And her still little body was all that was left.
The poor little fox, how cruel it does seem,
That a creature so pure was stripped of her dream.
As snow covered her body, I thought I could hear
Her last wish repeated, in an echo so clear.
Those last words of pure freedom rang out in the sky-
"Alas, if only, if only to fly."

In the Little Things

Stacey Zant

Heidi O'Donnell heard cars go by on the street below her building. Sometimes there was rain, and the metallic sound of tires through the deep puddles in the ruts and potholes filled the small bathroom. As she sat on the dirty toilet lid, she'd look out at the building across the street, where there was couple who'd just moved to Alphabet City and they yelled at each other all the time. Their voices were beautiful when they screamed, rough and low and real. Absolutely beautiful. Like Christmas, like autumn, like apple pie.

She worked sometimes, on Mondays and Wednesdays and Thursdays. She kept her Fridays and Saturdays open. Told them she had a class. They believed her, straight A student with lots of extracurricular activities in high school, dead parents, sad story. Benji's house was open all weekend, and that was as extracurricular as it got anymore.

~

There were ants on the sidewalk, marching in a straight line, and Heidi wondered where they were going.

"Hey."

She looked up at him, his fuzzy face and watery brown eyes. They were pretty in a way, though maybe only because they were so familiar.

"You doin' this or what?"

She nodded and reached up to shake his hand, the money for him concealed expertly in her palm. His was rough and calloused against hers and again a comforting familiar feeling. She slipped her product into her pocket and smiled as she turned away.

~

Her comforter was warm, fresh from the dryer. She laid it in her tub and climbed in, snuggling into the familiar warmth. She grabbed her bag and laid her small arsenal of equipment before her, in a straight line, in order.

~

They told her things. They told her about other people and sometimes even about herself. They told her about life, and sometimes, when they felt like it, they told her about love. She understood them, even though they all talked at once. Some of them screamed, and some of them whispered, and some of them only spoke what they could force through sobs. She knew every familiar voice, and could pick them each out, even sometimes guess what they'd say. Sometimes she didn't even miss her dead parents when these spoke to her. They never left her; even when they were silent, they were always there.

She saw the couple across the street kiss once. They were holding each other, and smiling and kissing, and she thought, There, that's what a couple is supposed to look like.

~

Rachet came to see her at work once. He looked at her, but didn't acknowledge her. They weren't supposed to openly know each other in public. He pretended like he was just there for some food. But as he gave her money, she saw him looking at her.

"Thanks, baby girl."

Her parents had called her that. Baby Girl. He knew that. She'd told him not to call her that, but he didn't listen. He sometimes said he liked the sound of it. She told him she didn't. Not anymore. But he still called her Baby Girl.

Rachet's real name was Glenn. He hated it. Said it was a fag's name. Said Rachet was his name, and he'd kill anyone who called him Glenn. She wondered if maybe his parents called him Glenn too, like hers used to say Baby Girl. She couldn't blame him then. She knew what it was like.

"You're welcome, Rachet" she whispered.

Heidi O'Donnell had hung beads in the doorway of the bathroom, so she could feel like she was entering a throne room when she walked through. They glittered with the orange light of the small lamp in her living room at night, and with the white-blue light that came in through her small window from outside during the day. The little plastic jewels tinkled together when she pushed them aside to go through. The sound was beautiful, sounded like a shooting star right there in her own house.

She thought about putting one in every doorway: the little arch to the kitchen, her bedroom doorway. But she didn't have money for those yet. Besides, then her little bathroom curtain wouldn't be so special anyway, so it could wait. She spent so little time anywhere else, anyway, except the couch.

Maybe one day Heidi would get a roommate, and they could put beaded curtains in all the doorways, and put posters on the wall, and play music through the rooms, and do dishes together after cooperatively cooking a delicious meal. Her roommate would be a good cook, and she'd teach Heidi how. She'd go to college and know how to do the cute things like crochet and make her own jewelry. May be she'd be pretty too, and they could go out clubbing on the weekends, and pick up boys and bring them back. She'd wear clothes that she'd buy on sale that were the kinds of things Heidi used to wear, and they'd start going shopping together, and share clothes.

"Come on, Rachet, you know I'm good for it."

He started to shake his head, but stopped, and she saw him get the idea. Her breath stalled.

"Pay me now."

He took her hand, and, briefly, she considered hesitating. And then he was pulling her, away from Benji's living room, away from the others who were all already wallowing in the glories of their buys. She didn't want him, but she wanted her buy: glories too great to resist. It wasn't just about feeling like a superhero anymore. She'd only do it once. She'd let him, and she'd get what she wanted. He thought he was the one who'd win, but she'd get what she wanted and he'd only be left wanting more.

They told her how. They helped her, told her when to groan, and when to wiggle, and when to scratch his beautiful soft skin and where. He was so into it, she wouldn't even have had to put any effort at all, but they wanted her to be happy, and so she listened. She could hear some of them crying for her, and screaming at him and calling him a pig. They helped her through it, taught her how. They showed her when the right moments were, and even though she felt nothing with him, even though the mattress beneath her back was lumpy and the sheets stained, she still felt something

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like contentment. She would get what she wanted, and she had friends to help her do it.

She made him think she liked it, giving him a show when she was supposed to have her perfection. And then he stood, and she pulled her black tights up and her denim skirt down and propped up on her elbows, looking at him.

~

Heidi O'Donnell loved to eat caramel apples. There was a vendor who sold hotdogs, and peanuts flavored with almost anything you can think of, and he sold caramel apples. He didn't used to, but every day on her way to work, Heidi would ask him if he had any yet. And he'd tell her, no, but he had the best chili cheese dogs in all of Alphabet City, and Heidi would say, no thanks, she didn't like hotdogs, and she'd go to work. And then one day, on her way by, she asked him if he had any caramel apples and he smiled, and said, "I've got one just for you, Ms. O."

~

"Okay. Alright. Give me my stuff."

He looked down at her as he shrugged into his brown leather jacket that smelled like cigarette smoke and chocolate.

"Sorry, doll face, I don't have any stuff. Doesn't matter though, it sucked." Liar.

"You told me you had some."

"I guess I was mistaken."

"Come on, Ratchet, I need some. I'm practically dying here. You told me you had some."

"I'd have said anything to tap you. Too bad it sucked." Liar.

"Ratchet, come on."

But he turned to the door.

"Hey!"

She'd never heard herself scream before. It was beautiful, like the couple across the street.

"Give me my stuff, Ratchet."

He looked at her with his watery brown eyes, and there was an unfamiliar evil in the familiar murkiness.

"Pay me."

She picked up the pillow and threw it at him, "Fuck you Glenn!" She was screaming again, and she loved it. "I get paid Friday, okay? Just...just give it to me."

He advanced on her, his fuzzy face angry, and he slapped her, throwing her back onto the mattress.

"I told you never to call me that!" he yelled, pointing at her with a calloused finger. He turned and stormed out, calling her a lousy bitch. She smiled. Didn't he realize he was expendable? She could get it anywhere. She didn't need him.

~

She held herself, her body cold, but sweating. She sat on the edge of her dirty tub in her little bathroom, rocking back and forth, shaking. She could see out her window, where the couple across the street was getting into a quiet argument. The girl kept hooking her short brown hair behind her ear, like she did when she was getting angry enough to scream.

They were talking to her, telling her how brave she was. Some of them cried for her, and some of them cooed comfortingly, and some of them screamed at the bastard who did this to her.

The couple was talking with raised voices. The woman had stood up. She'd start screaming soon.

~

Heidi O'Donnell pictured the ocean sometimes, when she tried to fall asleep on her couch. The sound of the waves drowned them out, for just long enough. And then she'd return and they'd be there, telling her things, about other people and herself and life, and she'd ask them questions they would gladly answer.

~

Heidi shook her head, watching, asking why it had to happen every day.

"He doesn't deserve this," she told them quietly. "It's always her that starts it."

She felt like she might be ill as her shaking became more violent.

The girl picked something up, and threw it at her husband, screaming at him.

"No!" Heidi wailed, throwing herself at the window. "How can you?!" She reached up and collected her knotted hair on top of her head, and grabbed the hair scissors from the medicine chest.

"Maybe," she was screaming, "if I had short hair and a cute smile, I could be just like you! And I could get a husband, and I could treat him like a human being!"

The scissors resisted, but she opened and closed, opened and closed them, harder and harder, until the knots were in her hand and there was only three inches left on her head and they all fell over her scalp. She stared at her reflection for a long time. Then she turned and stepped to the toilet, and shoved her fistful of hair into the water, and down into the hole at the bottom. She flushed, and held it down as it filled up and then tried to pull it all away to turn it into sewage.

~

She was a beautiful girl. Even after hunger had hollowed her cheeks, and daily repetition of habits that she claimed saved her, had given her skin a greyish hue, there was still a glitter in her blue eyes. There was a liveliness in her movements and body and smile that kept her gorgeous, and always would. They told her about herself sometimes, and their familiar voices made her believe they were telling the truth. They'd never lie to her. They'd been too good to her.

~

Heidi O'Donnell stood in the rain sometimes. She let the cold water slide over her, and seep into her clothes and her hair. She felt the thunder in her bones and wished the lightning would blind her with its beauty.

The rain cleaned her. It left her pure and reborn. Even scrubbing herself with soap under hot showers, even that left her dirty. The water was tainted and the soaps smelled fake. But the rain, the rain came from some height she could never see. It was a gift. It left her clean and new, even after all the horrible things that she did, or were done to her. She felt fresh and pink and soft like a baby, and she knew she could start over.

She knew maybe there really was a roommate in her future. She knew she could say hi to the vendors and eat a caramel apple on her way to work. He had one just for her. A gift, like the rain.

Maybe someday she'd really go back to school, and she would have a class when she said she did. She would learn new things, and go somewhere with her life, and make something of herself, and her parents would look down for the sky and be proud. They'd look at her from all the way up there, and they'd smile, and they'd say, "Way to go, Baby Girl."

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Blanket

Alexey Curchwell

Folded – sometimes neatly – and
Resting at the foot of my bed is
A blanket, faded and worn

The sunny yellow fabric
Has turned almost white, and
Prancing Peter Rabbit is
Pulling a disappearing trick.

There's a rip in the cloth, where
The stuffing pokes through, and
A mysterious blue stain
Adorns one ragged corner

It's been on family picnics, where
We sat upon prickly grass, and
I had my own seat, a
Soft picnic throne

When I was a superhero –
Princess Power, from the planet Pink,
Fighting crime and avoiding bedtime –
My cape was fluffy and yellow.

When the dark of the bedroom
Crept in around me, and
I feared the monsters under the bed, I
Hid beneath these yellow folds.

When the sheet of my bed were
Too hot and stuffy, and I
Threw them off in a fit
Of frustration

The soft cocoon of
This small baby blanket
Lulled me into a
Gentle sleep.

When cold winter struck, and
I shivered beneath those
Same summer sheets, and
I needed an extra layer,

I tucked my little blanket
Beneath the others, and
It worked its magic to
Deflect the cold.

For 16 years this blanket
Has been with me, witnessing
Moments of triumph, and comforting
Moments of grief.

Now it sits at
The foot of my bed, serving
As a pillow for
My aged cat

Who has lived for almost
As long as the blanket, born
Very near to it, in fact, and
Who now sleeps on it, day and night

I reach out and pull
My soft yellow blanket
Over my head, wrapping it
Around me like a cloak

It falls down my back, and
If I curl up into a tight
Ball, I can just make it
Cover me in its folds.

Inside the gentle comfort of
My blanket, I feel safe and
Warm. Not yet will I relinquish this
Remnant of my childhood.

The Dance

Amy Oliver

Seven years have passed since I last touched her. She places her trembling hands in mine, a symbol of acceptance, and we begin to swing dance. Confidently, feeling free, I twirl her maniacally across the dance floor. We make a striking couple in our matured forms, but I can't avoid the looks of perplexity and disbelief on the faces of old friends, some of which were there that night. That night seven years ago...

~

"Give me an R!" Ana chanted, a little too exuberantly to an affable round of, "Shhh!" from the rest of us. A group of friends and fellow classmates were celebrating at our favorite high school drinking spot, affectionately called The Hogback, really nothing more than a pathway and rest area carved on to the top of the foothills overlooking our sleeping small town. Our football team had just won a game against our biggest rivals, and our head cheerleader Ana was uncharacteristically on her way to being very drunk. Precisely in character, so were the rest of us, but Ana had always been a little different. An odd mix of Catholic do-gooder, doe-eyed Lolita, and total brainiac; she was what every girl wanted to be and what every guy wanted in their bed. She had a plan that she was sticking to, and that plan did not include three shots of tequila and moving on to a bottle of beer. Or boys.

"Fuck it!" she giggled, "I need to live a little! Right Matty Patty?" She sidled up to me, sitting in a striven-for casual pose on a boulder near her, using the nickname she reserved for when she wanted something. In a purposefully exaggerated fashion, she batted her sea glass eyes at me and I was helpless to resist her easy charm. I smiled my most alluring grin, the one that made skirts lift everywhere I went, and pulled her onto my lap. Like a newborn kitten she nuzzled up to me, spilling cold beer down my back as she pulled me close and took a little nip at my earlobe. Times like this I was almost positive she knew about her reputation as a cock tease. Then in the next moment she jumped up and left me behind with an innocent, yet completely genuine smile. That was the thing about Ana, most of the time she didn't even notice the power she held over me and every other red-blooded male she came into contact with. Guileless and naïve, she was painfully oblivious to the desires of the flesh, or the fact that she was a tease. I, well, I was a little different. I was a cad. I could have any girl I wanted and usually did, but what I really wanted, especially that night, was Ana. It would be such a coup; I'd be the envy of all my dudes.

As dusk turned to a deepening darkness, the waxing moon cast an ethereal glow over Ana. She was swaying to "Riders on the Storm" by The Doors, barely audible above the din of drunken high school kids. Hips swaying in the cheerleading skirt that narrowly concealed the edges of her round bottom, and, eyes half closed, she let her body flow naturally and sensuously to the music. From my perch, I couldn't stop staring at her, my eyes drinking her in from bottom to top, ending in a stare locked in on me. With her best attempt at a come-hither smile, she strode unsteadily toward me, stopping close enough for me to feel the heat of her body and smell the beer on her breath. From my seat, her five-foot frame left my mouth inches away from her long exposed neck, tickled by wisps of stray hair that had worked their way loose of her sensible chocolate-brown ponytail. She smelled of aloe and coconut milk and her impulsive, somewhat amateurish kiss intoxicated me far beyond the half bottle of tequila

I had polished off. I grabbed the back of that ponytail and possessed her mouth with my tongue, showing her how to kiss a man properly, and found her clumsily receptive. Straddling my lap and rubbing her body provocatively against mine, we made quite a spectacle of ourselves, but we were completely oblivious to the glances and giggles coming from our friends around us.

Time passed quickly. The drive back into town was a blur of this newly transformed Ana, in between short bouts of unconsciousness, quickly gaining experience in the desires of a man. There were plenty of high fives shared over her head between me and the guys.

That is why when our group snuck into my slightly renovated garage to crash on battered couches and futon mattresses I made sure to lay the snoring Ana next to me on one of the smaller, more private of the floor mattresses. Waiting in the dark, quietly trying to keep her stimulated and conscious, was torture. She was docile, silently accepting my roaming hands and exploring fingers. Occasionally giving an unintelligible moan and stretching her body to kiss mine for brief moments before going slack again. I was so close to having her, my drunken mind lost in the fantasy; I began to fondle her more aggressively mildly frustrated with her lack of response. By the time everyone else had quieted down and finally passed out, I was hard as a rock and desperate to remove the clothing preventing me from accessing what I most wanted to possess. Without hesitation I stripped down. Her body was pliant as I eased her top up exposing her to my eyes and slid her spanky pants down her legs and off at her ankles. Blind with desire, I covered her body with mine and with one swift thrust, I claimed her for my own.

Mere moments after I forced myself inside her, I felt her body stiffen beneath mine. She was so gratifyingly tight around me, I couldn't stifle the moan threatening to escape my silent lips as I moved my hips roughly against her body. Through the haze of passion and alcohol, I looked down at her now wide open eyes and saw an unexpected look of confusion, pain and betrayal. It was right then that I realized she was about to scream. I rushed to cover her mouth with mine to stifle her cry, my body still moving inside her, and tried to whisper that it was okay, that is was all going to be okay. A small sob escaped our locked lips and I was suddenly acutely aware of a rustling sound coming from the mattress wedged next to ours. "A mistake," I muttered to ease the panic growing in both of us. Tasting salty tears, I felt her body shaking as I tried to slowly withdraw myself from her, my fingers seeking to soothe the pain I had caused her virgin core and coming up bloody. Inanely, I wiped them on the bunched up cloth around her neck. It was that action that sobered Ana up. With shocking reserve and tattered dignity, she pushed me off of her, gathered herself and tiptoed to the bathroom. I closed my ears to the muffled sobbing, mostly covered by the sound of rushing water that seemed to go on forever, and avoided the questioning eyes of our friend Nick, who I worried had been witness to the whole ordeal. A quick beam of light fell upon me as Ana exited, wrapped securely in an old bathrobe; her face appeared to have been scrubbed almost raw. Without a word or even a glance in my direction, she eased in between Nick and me, careful to not touch me as she turned her back and silently closed her eyes.

The next morning I pretended not to notice Nick and Ana talking heatedly in the driveway. I think she may have been crying, but I just acted as confused as everyone else. Already there were whispers about what was going on. She left without looking back and avoided me at all costs for the remainder of the school year. Nick

reported what he saw to his father, and there was a brief investigation into the events of that night; Ana mercifully refused to cooperate. And then shortly after graduation, she moved away. I heard something about her modeling in New York City, but it was mostly just small-town gossip. The story of that night spread quickly and infiltrated our group in varying forms, becoming a sort of urban legend that in the end somehow transformed into her being the villain for breaking us all up with her lies and then running away. I kept silent and I've had to live with my cowardice ever since.

I've had a long time to think about that night, and I guess it really was rape, although that was never my intention. When she strolled superciliously into my cousin's wedding reception seven years later, in a slinky blood-red dress and lips to match, with the best man on her arm, fear reverberated through my whole body. I willed her to look my way, out of some perverse desire for her acceptance and perhaps even her forgiveness, yet when our eyes finally met, I saw only the same look I had seen the night I took her innocence, albeit only there a fleeting moment before her face went impassive. She whispered something to her date before making a slight gesture indicating I follow her out onto the terrace.

"I'm sorry," I blurted out within seconds of joining her outside. She lit a cigarette as rushed words tumbled over themselves, trying to explain. Silently blowing smoke rings, her face unreadable, she listened without reaction until I finished with, "I didn't know you were passed out. I don't know how I didn't know, but I... it was all just a mistake." Wide, heavily charcoal-rimmed eyes stared up at me through a wall of smoke. She stubbed out the cigarette on the bottom of her stiletto and shrugged. Then she suggested we dance.

~

Seeing him again was like taking a punch to her sternum. Her heart froze in her throat as her eyes were pulled into his intense gaze. She wanted to run away, but that was stupid. She had known he would be there, along with the "others," and she had opted to come anyway, had in fact wanted to come, to face the people who had changed her. After all these years, she had something to prove. Stuffing down her panic, she whispered to her date that she would be just a moment, and let him have a good long glimpse down her plunging neckline to make up for it. She understood men now. Then she met Matt's eyes again and coolly nodded her head towards the outside terrace.

Waiting for him, she gazed out at the shadowy mountains nestled against a midnight black sky brilliantly lit by the stars you couldn't see in the city. Where had her life gone? And what was she doing back here? Angrily, she swallowed the sob threatening her dry throat and pushed those betraying thoughts aside as she had learned to do over the years. By the time his hand tentatively brushed against her bare arm, she was able to control her internal flinch and when she turned to face him, her face was once again remote and expressionless.

Lighting a cigarette, she listened to him without really hearing much beyond the rush of blood between her ears and the repetitive and desperate thought, "I don't care. I don't care. I don't care." Life had been cruel, but she had learned to survive. It wasn't her life anymore and hadn't been since that night over seven years ago, but it didn't matter because she didn't care. Whispers in her head, "I don't care. I don't care. I don't care. I don't matter..." where did that last one come from? She'd show everybody.

"Let's dance."

Ephemeral Elegy

S. C. Townsley

Hands explore alone,
 tweaking, twisting, tugging,
 rousing these motes of memory
 in cascading cacophony.

Enter two bodies locking,
 we,
 reveling in a fluid exchange of words;
 hungry, pushing you pushing me,
 petrified
 by your lips,
 looking down on you looking up;
 testing harsh hands and
 teasing harsh heats with
 a slap to the face, a slap to the face;
 teeth gnashing threat displays,
 stubbled mouths fulfilling primal needs,
 panting,
 lost within mounting friction,
 begetting the unspooling
 binary
 nova
 of eruption:
 timing perfected.

The gentle juggernaut
 of your noncommittal nonchalance
 doubly drains my vessel;
 hands sleep alone.

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Ill Repute

Blake Cory

The big neon sign announces
We've arrived.
Her home and workplace
"The House of Ill Repute"

Our cheap room is illuminated
By the red-and-blue lights of
A passing pig
Out to ruin lives

She removes her top-
No bra-
No need- and sags
To the bed

Fishnets, skirt, and high heels
Still on, I take her
With pre-meditated fury
Into the experienced sheets

Her body stiff, unresponsive,
Surely dumbstruck by this passion
My eyes lock hers mid-coitus
And they tell me she adores me

Red-and-blue streaks shatter
My post-climactic reverie and
Remind me this tryst is
Forbidden

As I dress, I gaze upon her
Motionless form, save
The cigarette she lazily drags
Away as it ashes

At the door, my hand grazes
Her discarded neon halter
And I deposit five
Crumpled twenties

At the House of Ill Repute

Home for the Holidays

Phoenix Schroeder

We call him Wavy. He stands on the corner day after day holding a weather-beaten, rugged sign between his dirty and frost bitten fingers reading: Anything Helps GOD Bles! The clothes hang on him as would dead leaves on winter trees, the shoes are riddled with holes and his jacket will not stand against cold weather. His swaggered walk is not due to alcohol, rather the broken leg that was never fixed from last year. Behind that hooded figure and tattered sign is a friendly creature who says to passersby "Have a great day and a better tomorrow."

Today I see him as I usually do, dragging his leg and holding his busted-zipper coat together. A woman strides his way, a rather old thing dressed for the red light district. She stands in front of him smacking together lips with smudged lipstick pouring out steam breathed words that cast a white cloud. He slowly turns his head in a no gesture, resulting in an open palmed blow to the face followed by a stumbling fall. She bends over the decrepit man, reaching in his pocket to pull out a few wadded up paper bills. Holding the sign over his face in a balled up position as if not to be struck yet again, he cries and outstretches his hand toward her.

The weather forecaster said today it was supposed to reach negative fifteen degrees. Wavy is on the corner today, more wobbly than usual, holding his sign between bloody fingers. His face is red and blue, and his lips are chapped and torn. He must have gotten beaten, or maybe the weather is getting to him. I pause and ponder the thought for a few seconds before I get a call on my cell phone.

"Mom, I know that you want to see me for the holidays. Yes, I know you miss me. Yes, I know you think about me all the time and wonder how I'm doing." She just jabs on and on. "Yea, Mom, listen. I need to let you go." She tells me goodbye. "Yep, I love you too."

He looks so cold and his eyes barely stay open, although the wind is blowing pretty hard. Again, I just drive past as the light turns green.

I love Fridays, they are the end of my work week with the best part of my day being the drive home. Wavy is not standing today. His feet are exposed and he sits with the sign propped against his knees, rubbing the minimal warmth from torn gloves and blood stained fingers into black and blue toes. Today a few cars throw some money at him. It lands close to him, yet he does not really move to get it; just uses his sign as a reel to pull it in.

I never look forward to Mondays, they always seem so long and drawn out. The boss is angry that things did not get finished from the week prior, clients are jerks, and I don't want to listen to my employees. The day is over and Wavy is still missing his shoes. What the hell? You would figure he would at least get shoes from someone. Doesn't anyone care? Shit. He looks miserable; at least he's got some food that was given to him.

"Yea Mom, I'm not sure I can make it this year to the party. Yep, love you too." She talks on. "Gotta go, BYE!"

I really should get him some shoes.

~

Thursday, one day to go and I'm done! Ahha. That's the way to have it. Live for the weekends... Christ, this weekend is Christmas. He stands on the corner with trash bags wrapped around his feet. Wavy is so happy, his eyes are bright blue and the chicken feet around them are present. I'm not sure why he smiles. He drags himself up and down that little stretch of concrete three times before the light turns green.

~

Finally, Friday morning. About time! I'm brushing my teeth and trying to tie my shoe, late yet again. The news is on and they still have not told me the freaking weather. "Come on, get to the good stuff!" I yell, but the television does not respond with what I want. Rather it says that an older man walking from the corner one evening had been stabbed to death with a pair of stiletto heels. The woman is in custody but the unidentified homeless man lies in the city morgue waiting for someone to identify him.

It was a longer day than usual. The journey home is a real kicker; all the traffic can make someone want to beat the living crap out of other drivers. I wait for the light, it always takes forever; at least Wavy is there to look at. I scan the area but there was no one in sight, only a weathered sign and bloody sidewalk.

"Hi Mom. No, I did not forget you." She is pleased I called. "Listen, being that it's Christmas, I would love to see you. Do you mind if I came down and visited for awhile?" I hang up the phone and drive home for the holidays.

Early Frost

Kara O' Brien

I wake to find
 Frost patterns,
 Etched on the cold glass
 Of my window.
 Like the first news of death.

I stand, silhouetted,
 Tracing the filigree with my finger-tip,
 Until I find your face,
 With all its familiar lines and shapes
 Born from a wonderland of frost-written lace.

Outside,
 The ground beneath the postman's heavy boots
 Brakes and cracks,
 Like muffled sobs:
 Wracking the crystalline air with grief.

And I,
 Can only stand,
 Numb and helpless,
 And wonder if the snow which is to come,
 Will be as white,
 As the letter in my trembling hand.

For I have not the strength to dwell
 On the tiny black letters which mar the perfect whiteness of your face.

I wake to find
 Frost patterns
 Etched on the window-
 Pane.
 Like the first news of death.

It changed everything:
 Clothing the world anew
 In a shroud of glittering consciousness.
 Showing me new details,
 Tiny miracles, that I
 Had never noticed,
 Until now.

How odd that it took your death
 For me to understand.

Outside,
The air is brittle
And hard.
Like truth.

But it is so much easier to stay indoors,
Warm and oblivious,
By the fire.

So I,
Retreat
Back to my window,
And view the world
Through feathered lines
Of frost.

Beautiful

Katrina Pawlowski

“Wake up, Anna. It’s time to go,” a haunting voice whispers from the pillow next to mine. I am not quite ready to be roused just yet. I decide to make it a flirtatious game, stubbornly pulling the sheets over my head. He stands up next to my side of the bed, taking my hand gently away from my covers. He lifts me effortlessly from my place in the nice, warm, soft bed. I pout silently, as my body complains that my feet are ice cold on the bare floor, and my hands and arms are stiff from oversleep. I gaze at my companion momentarily. His dark hair, ivory skin, and bright eyes fill me with a soothing calm. He’s beautiful, just like me.

“What was your name again, hon?” I ask him in a groggy stupor, still recovering from my deep sleep.

“Beaumont,” he purrs in response. His accented dark voice casts a spell over me. I can’t do anything but stare and smile for several minutes. His name rings a distant bell in my tired mind, a modeling agent I’d heard about, I think. It’s about time I was truly recognized.

Beaumont takes my arm, guiding me to the door. “We’ll be late,” he warns, but before we hit the door’s threshold, I voice my protest. “Hold on. I can’t leave looking like this. What will everyone think of this mess?” I demand, breaking free of his firm grasp to set out on a morning mission to freshen up. He shadows my every move, so I don’t take my time as I normally would. I manage to wash my face and grab a yellow and red summer dress with a pair of adorable white heels to replace the pink nightgown—if I’m going to sport the grubby, hung-over college look, I will do it with my own style.

“Alright, ready?” he barely asks before taking my arm in his once again, resuming the forward march out my front door. I look at his tall, thin figure, mentally comparing it to mine. He’s beautiful, just like me. We’re perfect. I half-grin, knowing I’ve found someone perfect, like me, as we make our way down the stairs of my building, arm in arm. I make an effort to fix my hair while descending the first few flights of stairs, but give up.

“I really wish we’d had time for a shower and some mousse,” I mutter, hoping to catch a reflective surface on our way downstairs to aid my primping. Passing through the lobby, I try to catch a glimpse of myself on every surface in the room to see how I look. I crane my neck to look at the polished railings at the bottom of the stairs, the brass frame around the door, and even the greasy-fingerprint covered gloss-black surface of the doorman’s station. I’m swiftly pulled away from my efforts each time. I even squint to see myself in the glass doors, when Beaumont whispers, “We’ll be late, you look beautiful,” in his dark, soothing voice.

Once we are in view of the lobby breezeway, the pudgy doorman in his undersized uniform is the only person visible in the well-lit, spacious lobby. He’s sitting in his tattered black chair, pushed up to his desk as close as his waistline will allow, stuffing his round face with whatever is within arm’s reach. Disgusting. I wave politely, smiling slightly to hide my disgust. He ignores me anyway, not even standing to open the door for me as I glide toward the entrance.

It’s fortunate Beaumont has manners to make up for that slob of a doorman. Beaumont releases my arm to open the door for me, bowing slightly as I am expected

to pass him. I discontinue scanning inanimate surfaces for my own reflection and let my legs carry me mindlessly forward as my eyes examine his beautiful frame. It's just like mine. We're beautiful, and that's all that matters now.

I shiver after leaving the shelter of the apartment lobby, ice-cold wind is tearing through the city at street level. "It didn't look this cold from in there," I complain, glaring at the deceptively bright sun shining through the tall buildings. Beaumont removes his hooded jacket and offers it to me as a soft shield from the elements without so much as a word. I smile my thanks before walking to the curb with the intention of hailing a taxi— task I've become quite good at since moving to the city. However, this morning every cab drives past, in spite of my best efforts, "As if other fares are more important than me!" I complain loudly.

I spin on my heel in a huff, facing the building once again. "That lazy-ass doorman's going to work for me," I explain, as I adjust my skirt so I don't give the slob the wrong idea. I mutter under my breath as I head toward the door, when my calm companion catches my arm to slow my advance. He lifts his hand authoritatively, and a yellow taxi stops on the curb instantly. I make sure to roll my eyes and stomp my feet toward the taxi to assure my irritation is well known.

My tall, handsome Beaumont once again opens the door for a lady. How considerate! I enter the back seat, smiling as I sit comfortably awaiting my beautiful companion. Beaumont bows to me before entering the taxi, gesturing for the return of his jacket once I'm out of the wind. I am happy to hand it back. Black isn't really my color. I look at the driver, who is being careful not to be caught staring at me. His puffy round face is instead peering at Beaumont, awaiting instructions.

I fidget in the back seat, trying to get a good view of the side-mirrors. This driver doesn't keep his car very clean; both the mirrors are covered in mud. I open my mouth to complain, but Beaumont clutches my hand gently, silently assuring me that it's alright. He doesn't say much, but he sure is beautiful. This driver wasn't worth my time anyway, he disgusts me.

The cab moves steadily with the ebb and flow of the mid-morning traffic. I watch the city as it goes by, taking in every bit of it. I love the city, and the city loves me. I am its picture of perfection, and I can't wait to be appreciated every time I venture out. "Stop here," Beaumont orders, handing the driver a handful of cash. I sneer at the driver once more before leaving the car, to show my disgust for his unkempt vehicle and physical appearance. I am led out of the car by Beaumont's politely outstretched hand. I follow him up a row of cement stairs to a house I recognize, but can't quite place.

"I feel like I've been here," I whisper to him. "What is this place?" I inquire, unable to shake the haunting feeling of *Déjà Vu*.

"Your new home," he grins at me. "It's beautiful, isn't it?"

I stop on the steps and look up the lawn at a gorgeous house with wooden trellises covered in vines, a pair of iron French doors, and elaborate arched windows. "What? Who do I have to thank for that?" I ask, measuring the house by its outward appearance. I turn to face Beaumont waiting for a response.

"You earned it," his face tightens in a smug smile as he takes my arm gently to march forward again.

As we enter the sun-porch I begin to hear the humming of voices I recognize. I feel myself becoming nervous about my untidy appearance, regretting even more that I wasn't at least able to stop and fix my hair along the way. I look at Beaumont for

reassurance. He merely grins, pushing me forward gently “Have a look around and tell me what you think,” he whispers, “I’ll be waiting,” He raises my hand to his lips, brushing my skin with their touch before directing me toward the large open atrium. I glance around at the faces of all my friends from the shadow of the doorway’s massive arch. They were having a party in my new place, and no one even told me!

“A surprise party?” I whisper to myself, waiting impatiently for everyone to notice that the guest of honor had arrived. I wander around, sticking to the outside of the crowd to survey all in attendance as secretly as possible. I quickly notice Susan and Mary talking in the corner, sharing a bottle of wine between themselves, both dressed in a dreary shade of grey. Typical. I scoff at them before searching for a friendlier face to socialize with.

Kate is standing by herself near a window. She’s always pleasant, and she’s enjoyable enough company. Though I admit I’m somewhat jealous of her beautiful, simple, country girl appearance, blonde pigtails loosely curled around her un-pierced ears. I pick up my chin and stroll casually toward her, before seeing her intercepted by a man I don’t recognize. Ah, yes, Kate and her men—she even had the nerve to bring one to a party like this. Fine, to hell with her, too!

I allow my shoulders to slouch a bit, beginning my search for a glass of wine to call my own. Wine always helps, especially when “friends” come to call. What do I need them for, anyway? I make myself comfortable in an archway on the left side of the massive open room, keeping myself busy admiring the craftsmanship of the interior architecture. The walls are brilliantly white, with a floral design etched into the surface, connecting at the center of a high dome ceiling. The arched doorways are stained a dark brown to show off the wood they originally came from—it really is a gorgeous house, and it’s mine.

I people-watch for a while, picking up bits of conversation. I pick out my name among the echoing chatter, but nothing I can particularly make out. I see Beaumont mingling with a few of the guests near the entrance. I ignore the jealous twinge in my heart—perhaps he’s more beautiful than me. Why else would they notice him, but not me?

Kate and her mystery-man are spotted by the pair of gossiping geese, Susan and Mary. They gather together and begin to hunt for a semi-private spot to spill their lore. I secretly hope they don’t wander within earshot, which of course means, they do. They set up their wine glasses and an unopened, very expensive, bottle of Blackbird Merlot, before huddling together as they do only for the juiciest of gossip. The trio and their mystery-male escort are unaware that I am standing so close by, barely on the other side of the archway from their circle.

“I can’t say I’m surprised,” Susan begins, “She hardly ate anything! She was a skeleton last week when I saw her,” Susan drunkenly proclaims, sloshing her wine as she speaks.

“I dunno, it’s still kinda’ sad. No one ever said anything, because she was trying to be a model. It’s expected behavior for that type I guess,” Kate meekly retorts. She never could assert herself, really.

I keep listening to Susan, Mary and Kate for their latest victim’s name. Even if pitiful gossip generally doesn’t interest me, I rest easier knowing it’s not about me. As I focus my hearing, I catch the sound of another familiar voice. My mother’s voice is coming from beyond a pair of swinging doors that lead to a room I hadn’t yet seen. I lean my whole body toward her voice now, wondering what she’s doing at a distin-

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guished affair like this.

I hear my name uttered a few more times, pulling me from one brief excerpt of conversation to the next. My brain begins to throb in pained confusion—what am I even doing here? My vision clouds, and all sound becomes a dull buzz in my ears. Beaumont finds my arm once more, helping me find my feet just before I hit the floor. Although dazed, I manage to look at his face. It's pale and very thin, his eyes no longer reflect any light, and his hood obscures any other details surrounding his face. I shake off whatever dizzy spell came over me, regaining my composure, "I'm alright. What happened?" I ask him, hoping for a quick explanation.

He tugs at my arm gently to encourage forward movement without saying a word. I walk through the swinging doors toward the source of my mother's voice. I find myself standing in awe within a long banquet hall with elaborate wall mounts and a massive table in the center of the room. I glance at the faces in the room, before recognizing both of my parents standing with a few close family members. I call out to them, wanting my questions to be answered—or maybe just to ask to go home. My own voice doesn't make any sense to me, no words form at all.

"I told her this crowd was bad. She never listened to me, always talking down like I was a sore spot on her perfect body. Perfect." My mother spits the last word and bites off her sentence.

"I am perfect," I reassure myself quietly, frowning. I don't need to hear any more of her criticisms. I return to the atrium, looking for a seat to rest in. I stumble around the thinning crowd, closely followed by my taciturn companion.

My name is being tossed around like candy from a devastated piñata, yet no one seems to notice me stumbling around them. The room begins spinning, and I find myself looking straight up at the beautifully crafted ceiling. I grab my head to slow the spiral motion, shouting "What's going on!?" at the top of my lungs, not causing the slightest lull in the conversation that's flying around the room on the wings of the Merlot.

The room stops spinning abruptly, leaving me standing face to face with Beaumont. He lowers his hood, revealing his full face. It's different than I remember from the early hours of the morning. I can't take my eyes off him, his face pale and smooth as bone, with dark black eyes, and no hair on his head. He is more beautiful than I could ever hope to be. I take a step back against something hard. I take a moment to allow my hands to search along what I presume to be a table for a glass of wine or some other quick escape from this horrible house with these horrible people.

What my wandering hand finds behind me is not a flat tabletop even capable of holding wine glasses, but a soft blanket draped over a curved surface. I search Beaumont's now still features for some hint to what I'm leaning against, allowing my right hand to explore the surface a bit more. My hand scales the curved surface until it drops into a soft opening. I allow my eyes to leave Beaumont's black stare. I begin processing the image of cheap flowers, a picture frame, and a shoddy pine casket as I scan my new surroundings.

My body becomes cold again, as though a brisk wind cut through the atrium. I peer into the opening of the casket at the face that should be mine. My companion approaches me from behind, encouraging me to admire her cold beauty with a gesture of his bony hand. Her cheeks are deeply accentuated, her eyes peacefully closed. Her hips and rib cage frame her perfect waistline, clearly visible through the same yellow and red summer dress I am wearing. She is beautiful. Just like me.

A Cup of Stolen Wine

Kara O' Brien

The last rays of the setting sun light up the little town, setting the rooftops ablaze with sumptuous radiance and gilding the cobblestone streets with glittering gold. For a few moments, the great benefactor grants to this poor little town a glory more decadent than that of the richest palace on Earth.

Standing on the broad road leading up to this ephemeral Eldorado, is a lone man in a patched grey cloak. His clothes are torn, and his boots speak eloquently of their personal acquaintance with many and many a long mile of road. He stands calmly, hands in pockets, shoulders back, and an odd, half-wistful, half-fearful look upon his face.

It has been said that the face of man is a canvas upon which the forces of life play, writing their signatures for all the world to behold and say: Lo, here is a child of Fate. If this be so, then here, indeed, is a masterpiece. Here is a face carved by the hands of pride and regret, pinched by grief, and hardened by disappointment. The eyes were painted first a clear, sparkling grey, but have been stained since with saltwater, and varnished with bitter sorrow. It is a face across which passions have warred for many and many a year, and which plainly bears the scars of every battle.

The sun dips, the glory of the little town is diminished, though not altogether forsaken. The man in grey shakes himself and starts hesitantly towards the town. It has been a battle in itself to come this far, and although his pride still bids him turn and run, it has for once, been conquered, and with squared shoulders and proud head, the man walks slowly along the well-known street to the little town.

The marketplace is nearly deserted at this time of day. In the center, the fountain showers forth a joyful rain of molten gold in the last rays of sun: a final, defiant, youthful show of mirth before the aging night comes on, and turns the joyful rain to silver tears, unseen in the folds of darkness.

The man in grey pauses, watching the light play in the fountain and casting his glance around the little square with a sad smile of regret. Sitting on the edge of the fountain is an old woman whose bright eyes follow the stranger with a curious expression. Noticing her surveillance, the man in grey turns, tips a tattered hat, and addresses her with a polite, "Good evening, Ma'am. Very fine weather is it not?"

The old woman does not reply, but continues to watch him closely, trying to place the voice, the face, the man, in her memory.

The man in grey continues, "A beautiful town this, very beautiful. Who, may I ask, is its lord?" Hypocrite, as if he does not know, as if he has not always known, has not thought of this town, and of its Squire every day for ten years.

The old woman speaks now, still puzzled, still unsure why he seems so familiar, "Why bless you, sir, 'tis Squire James, so it is."

"I see," replies the stranger, glad at least that the old woman cannot see the inner turmoil which the mere name causes him, "and is he well liked, this Squire James?"

"Why, yes, sir, very well liked indeed. He's a good man, that he is, sir, a very good man."

"I have no doubt of it," is his reply, and his voice is distant and thoughtful.

He turns, looking up past the town, past the hall of the Squire, up and up to the top of the hill above the town. There, silhouetted against the dying sun, a great oak

tree leans precariously out, as if reaching down to touch the top of the steeple below.

Returning his gaze to the old lady, he again tips his hat, nods farewell and, with a last glance around, sets off up the street, squaring his shoulders and lifting his head as he walks.

And then she knows him, the old lady by the fountain, she remembers in a moment, though he is so changed, so changed. But he is not, for all the efforts of life, so changed that her old eyes cannot see the in him the boy who once sat in that same market square. With a little gasp, which he does not hear, the old woman rises and sets off towards the Squire's hall as fast as her old bones will carry her.

The setting sun still bathes the hilltop in light, but everything below is swallowed by shadow. The man in grey stands now, leaning against the mighty oak and looking down at the little town. He sees before him fleeting images, endless days and star-filled nights of long, long ago.

Behind him, he hears the sound of cautious footsteps. He knows who it is that approaches, knows so well, and longs to turn. But turn he cannot, some unseen force holds him with the grip of ten long years, and he stands frozen, looking out across the darkening valley. A faint wind ruffles his hair, and makes the scene before him swim and change, mingling past and present through a film of silver tears.

Keeping his eyes straight before him, he whispers a name, in a voice so soft that he fears its owner will not hear.

"James?"

~

"James? James!"

Out of the darkness, a tall, thin boy makes his way cautiously toward the towering oak. In one hand, he holds a flickering candle, much buffeted by the faint breeze, which he holds to a little pile of kindling well out of sight of the sleeping village.

The sudden flare of light illuminates the boy's face—the man's face of ten years before. Ah yes, it is undoubtedly the same, but the canvas is mostly blank now and has yet to become the medium of the Fates.

Standing again and peering out into the darkness, he repeats his call in a loud whisper, "James? Are you there?"

"Coming, Kay!" comes the reply, a second, younger, boy emerges into the light.

"What kept you?"

The smaller boy grins mischievously all over his good-natured face, and holds up a bottle of red wine and a single, cracked, glass. "I snuck this practically out from under Cook's nose!" He neglects to mention that Cook was in bed two floors away, or that the wine had in fact been disposed of, having become mostly vinegar and certainly not good enough for the Squire's table.

The elder boy, Kay, looks for a moment as if he will protest, but his brother's pride in his own daring is too great for disapproval. Changing his mind, Kay gives his brother a knowing wink and says, "Cook been at the sherry again?"

James' merry blue eyes grow wide in the firelight, and wider still as Kay removes the cork with a small pop. The smell is sour and unappetizing, but the boys take no notice. The color alone is intoxicating in the firelight, and they are too enthralled by the daringness of the adventure to care much about the taste.

Carefully, so as not to spill a drop of the precious liquid, Kay fills the glass about halfway and hands it to his brother. The cracked crystal sparkles and glitters,

catching the warm laughing light of the fire below, and the icy glitter of the stars above, "Your excellent health, my brother," James' voice is heavy with pretend pomp, but tingles beneath its surface with laughter and awe.

Raising the glass skyward, he swallows a large gulp. After a minute of spluttering and gasping—made more severe by trying to laugh and cough at the same time—James proudly hands the glass to his brother with undiminished enthusiasm.

Kay, cautious as ever, limits himself to a careful sip, grimacing at the taste before it has touched his lips.

Thus, the night passes in a dream of starlight and fire, while the village sleeps soundly below, and the boys sit beneath the jeweled vastness of the vaulting sky, talking and laughing, pledging each other a thousand loyalties, and drinking the health of the stars in a cup of stolen wine.

~

Market day, and the little town square is a riot of color and sound. Children scramble hither and thither through the tight packed crowd, squealing and laughing as they go; housewives barter loudly with burly tradesmen and sly wizards of the merchant class confound the unwary with their wares and bargains. The cries of animals and hawkers fill the air, adding a thunderous quality to the already raucous atmosphere.

On the main road leading to the square, James is hopping with impatience. Kay, walking calmly and sedately down the road, lifts an amused eyebrow. "It shall not end, you know, and even if it should, there will be another next week."

"Not like this!" James puffs with indignation, "How often do we get a troupe of players?"

Kay grins at his brother, and ruffles his hair, but does not quicken his pace.

Although there is only a few inches difference in the brothers' heights, there is a tilt to Kay's head, a sharpness in his eye, and a proud twist to his lip, that marks him immediately as the elder, and leader. James has no pretensions, but follows his brother with worshipful eyes, and never strays too far from his favor. Today, the two boys are accompanied by a governess, a plump, tired-looking woman, who is immensely grateful for the fact that Kay, at least, can make his brother behave.

Despite the younger boy's fears, the market is in full swing when the small party arrives. The crowd and the heat are, if anything, even greater than before, and the noise is deafening. Leaving the governess behind, much to the good lady's relief, the two boys make their way towards the center of the square where the players will soon appear.

James, all eagerness and youthful anticipation, darts ahead, pushing and squeezing his way through the packed crowd. Behind him, Kay follows at a stately pace, head held high, pride and condescension his every move as he waits for the crowd to part before him.

A shoulder jostles him, nearly knocking him to the ground, and he turns on the miscreant wrathfully. A tall, sallow-faced man smiles mockingly at him and touches his hat, "Beg pardon Gov'ner."

It is one of the Squire's grooms, an arrogant man, with all the vice of pride and none of its virtue. A man eaten away by jealousy, gnawed to the bone by hatred and anger for anyone more fortunate than he, a victim of discontent, a reveler in his own imagined misery.

With a muttered oath, Kay straightens, watching the disappearance of the

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man with narrowed eyes. He thinks briefly of following him, but a sudden hush falls over the crowd, and the boy's attention is diverted by the entrance of the players.

They really are quite remarkable, and of the Italian school, too. Within a matter of minutes, even Kay has become absorbed in the colorful world so lavishly depicted on the makeshift stage. Joining his brother, the two boys sit side by side on the edge of the fountain, watching in delight as the lively story unfolded before them.

When it is over, the two boys remain sitting, Kay watching the players pack away their little world, while James expounds their praise in heightened tones, "...and Harlequin! So clever, so cunning, the way he duped the Captain. I should like to be just like that!"

"I am very glad you are not," Kay raises an amused eyebrow, "you cause enough mischief as it is. Besides, Harlequin is a rascal, and a flighty rascal at that, not at all the proper sort of character for a young gentleman."

James looks a bit crestfallen, but recovers himself rapidly, "Well, then, who would you be?"

"Why, that's obvious ain't it?" a surly voice drawls, both boys look up to see the sallow groom leaning insolently against a nearby merchant's stall. His voice is raised to attract attention, and he slouches a little closer as he continues, "Only, I don't think there's a part for a maid's-son-masquerading-as-nobility, so I guess you'll have to play the dung-sweeper like you were born to."

Kay stands slowly, white with rage, his eyes never leaving those of the sallow groom. "How dare you," his voice is soft, and he struggles to keep it steady. He has a strong urge to strike the satisfied smile from the sallow lips before him, but he sternly refuses this impulse, and instead forces himself to speak quietly and calmly, "How dare you speak to me like this?"

Around them, the square is silent, even the players have stopped packing, still in their bright costumes, and the heads of nearly everyone in the crowd turns towards the two figures by the fountain.

"Why ever shouldn't I?" is the mocking reply.

"The minute my father hears of this, which he will, you will, sir, be out of a job."

The groom flashes a triumphant grin, "I very much doubt that your father will ever hear of this, because before you could tell him, you'd have to know who he was, and I believe that is more than anyone in this town can say."

Kay still looks his antagonist squarely in the face, but he is shaking, "How dare you!"

"Don't believe me?" the triumphant grin grows, "Why don't you go ask that his Lordship? See if he can look you in the face and tell you you're really his son."

For a moment, James thinks his brother will going to throw himself at the smug groom, but instead he turns and runs blindly back through the crowd, towards home. James starts after him, but the governess, who has seen the whole thing, catches his arm and holds him back, a worried look on her kindly face, "Let him go, dear, let him go."

~

Night falls again, as it is wont to do so often. But this time no stars glitter in the heavens, and the light of the tiny fire is timid and alone. Only one boy sits beside it now, James, and he is waiting anxiously. They had agreed to meet here—before the fateful scene at the market place. His brother has never missed a planned rendezvous

at the oak tree, never; his brother is always true to his word, his brother would never leave him out here alone, his brother...and once again he feels the tears trickle slowly down his cheeks. His brother, whom he has not seen since he ran from the square, who, by the time James and the governess returned, had shut himself away in his room and would speak to no one, not even to his own brother. So now, here is James, faithful as always, hopeful as always, waiting on the hilltop—just as he promised.

A sudden noise makes him spin around and hurriedly wipe the tears away. Kay has come, stepping out into the firelight as he has done so many times before, but tonight his cheeks are pale in the ruddy glow, and his eyes are red from crying. There is a moment of silence, and then Kay speaks.

"James," he says, in a voice that has never quivered until now, "James," and he is silent, for the words are lost, his whole world is lost, his whole mighty foundation is torn away by a few words from a spiteful stranger, and his brother cannot understand. His brother, and the word sticks in his throat, although he has only thought, and not uttered it. His brother, who has meant everything to him for as long as he can remember, whom he has protected and taught and comforted and laughed alongside many and many a star-filled night. What can he say to him now? I am lost, brother, lost; after all the endless days and nights, after all the merriment and love, after all the oaths and secrets and promises of everlasting loyalty, I am lost. The cup is empty, the sky is dark, there is nothing left, only darkness, and in darkness I am lost.

But he does not say these things, for the boy before him, who was once his brother, his dear brother, would not understand. And so he says only, "James," and sits by him in silence.

After several minutes of silence, James speaks, softly, timidly, "Kay? It isn't true, it just isn't. I don't believe it, and even if it were true, it wouldn't matter, you are still my brother."

Another silence, then Kay answers in broken tones, "It is true, James... it is. I spoke to fath...I spoke to the Squire, and it is true. It happened years before you were born, but it is true nonetheless. My real mother was a housemaid, who ran away after I was born and left me behind. The Squire and his lady had no children at the time, so they decided to raise me as their son—but I am not, I am not."

His voice shakes, and there are tears in his eyes, which he tries vainly to hide from his brother—no, not his brother, the Squire's son. His only son.

There is silence once more, James is trying to make sense of this, but he fails, "It doesn't matter," he says after a moment, "It doesn't matter to me, and it doesn't matter to Father and Mother. You are still my brother."

"I am not your brother. I ought to be your stable boy, or worse, but I am certainly not your brother."

There are tears in James' eyes now, Stolen, he thinks, my brother has been stolen, like the wine—stolen.

Stolen, the cracked wine glass still sits in the hideaway beneath the tree, but the wine has run out through the crack—spilled blood that is not his. Kay is silent, thinking, he has been thinking all afternoon, and now he has made a decision.

"I cannot stay here you know."

James does not answer, pretending not to hear.

"I must go, I must find out, if I can, who I really am."

Again James is silent, you are my brother, he thinks, what more matters? But

he does not say these things, for his brother has been stolen away, and would not understand.

So they sit in silence, side by side, staring at the fire as they have done so many times before. Above them, the clouds break, and the grieving face of the moon looks down from the tear-studded sky. The hours steal past one by one, star-filled grains of sand slipping inexorably through the glass, falling away without a sound.

At last, James falls into an uneasy sleep, and when he wakes, his brother is gone.

The last rays of the sun have faded now, abandoning the world to blackness. On the hilltop, two men—brothers in all but blood—regard one another in silence. The gulf between them holds each in mute as they search through all the long years for the words with which to build a bridge over time itself.

At last, Kay speaks, "The Squire?"

"Dead, but he never stopped looking for you. Neither of them did."

A fierce shake of his head, remorseless and tearful, "I did not deserve it, any of it."

James' eyes are full of kindness as he shakes his head softly, and Kay thinks how little change there is in that face: still so good-natured, his eyes so full of mischief and merriment, and now rimmed with tears.

Silence for a time, and then James asks timidly, "You found not what you sought?"

Kay laughs bitterly, "Oh, I found what I sought, but it was not what I had hoped to find."

"What do you mean?"

"I found a cruel, angry man, a bitter, greedy man who had chiseled his life from hatred's icy black marble. I found a mother dead from grief and hardship, and a father who never wanted to see me. Five years of searching, and that is what I found." James says nothing, but lays a hand on Kay's shoulder.

"So I left," Kay continues, "I left, and wandered hither and thither throughout the land, seeking for something I did not understand, and could not name. Then one day, I did the one thing I had refused to do since that day in the market: I sat and thought and pieced the world back together. And then, well, it became very obvious what I was looking for, what I had sought for so long without ever knowing, or at least admitting that I knew. So I turned my feet back, and...and here I am." He finished abruptly, looking anywhere but at James.

James' old grin is back, "And here, brother, you are welcome."

Kay looks up, half in surprise, half in immense relief, "You mean that? I do not deserve it."

"Nonsense, you were lost, now you are found, I shall not be the judge."

Kay's eyes begin to clear, and in the soft light of the evening his face softens and begins to look more like that of the boy who sat under this same tree all those years ago. "I had so hoped you would say that," and with an odd smile twisting his lips, he produces from his cloak, a bottle of wine.

Laughing, James takes it and examines the label, "Well, there is no doubt it is a better vintage." The cracked glass is still safe in its hiding place, and James fills it, and pauses suddenly, grinning at Kay, "You didn't steal it did you?"

Kay's laugh is bitter, "No, no, brother," he sips the wine tentatively, "no, this wine was bought and paid for."

Contributors' Notes

Sandra Abel

Sandra Abel is currently in her sixth fun-filled semester at Red Rocks. The classic lifetime student, she also has formal training as a chef and massage therapist and is finally pursuing her childhood dream of being an eccentric artistic-type. A full-time photography and graphic design student, she is also a fan of martinis.

Robin Ackerman

Robin is a student at Red Rocks Community College.

Susan Amarillas

Susan is a student at Red Rocks Community College.

Robert Cope

Robert is a returning after a ten year hiatus on college. He graduated from Warren tech in 2001 and went into the autobody trade. He has returned to get a better education and work toward a B.A. in Business Administration with a concentration in management. He is hoping to transfer to D.U. in two years.

Blake Cory

Blake Cory is currently finishing his first year of college after a five-year break from school. In his free time, he enjoys reading, playing games, and spending time on the Internet. After graduating, he hopes to become a professional writer.

Andria Davis

Andria K. Davis is currently working towards the completion of Associate of the Arts degree at RRCC, and will continue to cultivate her education the rest of her life. She enjoys reading, beautiful summer days and pondering philosophy into the wee hours of the night. She is delighted to be published in *Obscura!* As the great author Ray Bradbury once said, "We are cups, constantly and quietly being filled. The trick is, knowing how to tip ourselves over and let the beautiful stuff out."

Brenda Fleischman

Brenda Fleischman is in the process of starting her "second career" as a photographer. She particularly enjoys macro, nature, and portrait photography.

Lauren Garrett

"Color is the keyboard, the eyes are the harmonies, the soul is the piano with many strings. The artist is the hand that plays, touching one key or another, to cause vibrations in the soul." ~Wassily Kandinsky

RRCC

Leonard Alexander Hanson

Leonard began writing downtown, attempting to push writer's block off his mental desk. This narrative is the result of the two previous hours that pushed him along sans inspiration; he hopes you could relate to this one of many nights spent alone in Denver. He currently lives in Indiana, managed to get his girlfriend Rachel Grabill to follow; he wishes he could say likewise about his good friend, Danial Desaeagher, who still attends RRCC. Many at RRCC look up to Danny and him, so thank you all, and thanks to the great *Obscura* staff--glad you like his story!

Elle Hiatt

Elle is a student at Red Rocks Community College.

Josh Hildebrand

Music and lyrics have always been a part of his life. Words became a way for him to express the ideas and emotions that he felt no one else could understand. He sends thanks to his family, friends (Rachel, for listening to my poetry, good or bad), and to Paul Gallagher for helping expand his mind in the realm of poetry.

Joshua Lagge

Joshua is a student at Red Rocks Community College.

Brooke Lamb

"Great ideas often receive violent opposition from mediocre minds" ~Albert Einstein

Beatrice Maus

"If others are in doubt, cackle madly and throw a spoon against a window...at least then there won't be any doubt regarding your sanity." ~Anonymous

Keith McGillivary

Keith is a superb lover. Also, he has lofty educational and career goals and artistic hobbies about which he's guessing that you, the *Obscura* reader, don't particularly, or for that matter even casually or politely, give a damn. Consider yourself spared.

Kathleen Medina

Kathleen is a student at Red Rocks Community College.

Kara O'Brien

Kara O'Brien was homeschooled until she came to Red Rocks, where she is currently enjoying her fourth semester. An avid reader and vocalist, she hopes to one day write, perform, and travel the world in search of adventure and romance (or at least a really first-class library). "Don't walk behind me, I may not lead. Don't walk before me, I may not follow. There is only one happiness in this world: to love and to be loved." ~George Sand.

Amy Oliver

“She’s just a little mad, slightly sad and superbly imaginative.” ~ Linda Goodman

Barbara Onorato

Barbara has been taking college classes since 1976, and is currently a student at RRCC. Her interests range from literature and poetry to art and woodworking. She hopes to graduate from college some day, hopefully before her fourth child leaves for college!

Katrina Pawlowski

Kat Pawlowski is a late-blooming student rejoining the academic community after 6 years of the “real world,” where she finally figured out what she would like to do with her life. So far, it’s still a broad plan, but it’s leaning heavily toward entertaining people through her stories in various mediums including fiction, creative editorials, or screenplays. She’s looking forward to learning a lot, not only in the classroom, but also through the people she associates with—an ongoing process that will never stop expanding.

Phoenix Schroeder

Phoenix is a student at Red Rocks Community College.

Brittany Sooter

Brittany is a student at Red Rocks Community College.

S. C. Townsley

S. C. Townsley is a full-time student and full-time madman at RRCC, serving as PR Officer for Student Government, president of the English Club, co-president of the Queers and Allies Club, an emcee for countless *Obscura* open mics. He is proud to have worked with *Obscura* for the past three years, and hopes to see it grow bigger and better in the years to come.

Ann Van Dyke

Ann Van Dyke is semi-retired and has been writing since childhood. She writes poetry and prose to process her feelings.

Renee Warner

Renee is a student at Red Rocks Community College.

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Jhenn Whalen

Formally a CSU art student, Jhenn Whalen now enjoys an idiosyncratic environment of individual growth at Red Rocks Community College. Whalen's particular style focuses on realism with allusions to her own experiences, both hapless and auspicious. Hobbies include LAN gaming with her roommates, buying socks, and loitering at the Denver Lollicup Tea Bar. "Character, like a photograph, develops in darkness."
~Yousuf Karsh

Myriah Wilkins

"Some people have accused me of misanthropy; and yet, I know no more than the mahogany that forms the desk, of what they mean—Lycanthropy. I comprehend, for without transformation, men become wolves without any slight occasion." ~Lord Byron

Stacey Zant

"I write by the light of the bridges I burn behind me." - Anonymous