

Kansas State University
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Touchstone

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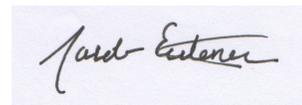
Editor's Note

In a presentation to the Royal Society of London, biologists Richard Dawkins and John Krebs put forth what is now known as the Red Queen Hypothesis. In *Alice's Adventures through the Looking-Glass*, the Red Queen says, "It takes all the running you can do, to keep in the same place." So it goes with evolution where each species must constantly keep adapting in order to stay ahead of predators and other competitors. Literary journals are their own odd species, and TOUCHSTONE has had to change and adapt as well. This year saw several changes: the inclusion of flash fiction as a genre, an increased focus on writers outside of academic communities, and, most importantly, the move to a fully digital published version of the magazine.

These changes reflect both the reality and the hopes of the editorial staff of TOUCHSTONE. Flash fictions recent rise to prominence may be a further symptom of our already ADD addled minds, but it has also produced interesting, entertaining work, some of which you will find in this very issue. By moving to an entirely digital format for the magazine, we hope to reach a wider audience, reduce environmental impact, and also reduce the costs and wastes associated with printing out hundreds of unused copies of literary magazines. We hope that our expanded call for submissions has elevated the level of quality in each issue, but we have also tried to remain true to our roots as K-Stater's and the quiet aesthetic of the Kansas prairies.

Over the course of the last year, a realization has struck me deep: TOUCHSTONE, and literary magazines in general, are a tremendous amount of work. However, it is the kind of work—reading, talking about writing, talking with writers, working with digital publishing—that is actually enjoyable. I would like to thank a handful of people starting with TOUCHSTONE's faculty advisor, Kim Smith. Kim's calm demeanor has helped us all persevere when things got crazy. Without his help, TOUCHSTONE would not be here. I would also like to thank my editors for the work they do both in reading and helping to manage staff. My copy editors proved invaluable as I often find myself spending ten minutes pondering on the placement of a comma. Finally, I would like to thank Tara Skaggs for her work in updating and renovating the TOUCHSTONE website. While last year's website was beautiful, it did not fit with new guidelines for webpages through Kansas State. It required a complete overhaul, and Tara was there to guide Kim and myself through the process.

So read on and keep reading. There is some great stuff in here.



Jacob Euteneuer
Editor-in-Chief
2012 Touchstone

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This Life More Sweet

by J.D. Isip

The alternative:

Ending in the bottle,
ending just before the ending
and forgetting
the number of drinks, the number of years,
the point
and washing away your shadow.

The alternative:

Melting away in a moment
when just a little resilience, even a step or two
away from the flame, away from the moment
might have saved us all
the trouble of scraping you up
from the bottom of our cares.

There are endings all around,
pacing the sidewalks and malls without a shadow
or a thought as to
where they might have gone.

And there are moments
who hunt us like oxygen
and crave to consume not only us
but every molecule
we connected to.

And the alternative:
endure.

“?”

by Forrest Helvie

I am Jack's raging seed.
Never sown in spring.
No chance for harvest in fall.
Wasted germ never blossomed.

The Suicide Artist

by Karen Ingram

The first time, she drowned herself. A weighted belt pulled her to the bottom of a swimming pool. She felt a twinge of something, not quite fear, as the cool water washed up over her head. There was the strange, pregnant sound of water in her ears, the pressure of it on her skull. Then she ran out of breath and was forced to draw the deadly fluid into her lungs. Her animal instincts took over instantly. She thrashed and treaded at the water, trying to reach the surface, but the belt was too heavy. She clawed at the belt in a final desperate attempt to free herself, but she didn't have the key. The horrible taste of chlorine and white panic were her last sensations.

And then she died. And here she learned the strange and sad truth: coming back to life was more painful than dying.

The world became pain. Pain as her nervous system twitched back to life and her diaphragm began to spasm. Pain as she vomited up the last of the water from her lungs and drew her first ragged breath of air. She had expected air to taste sweet, but it burned and screamed inside of her as she coughed and shuddered until there was no strength left to fight it.

She was alive.

A mask was fitted over her face and warm, stale-tasting oxygen worked its way into her body. She became aware of voices and her vision cleared. Kelmen hovered over her, talking to the doctors in serious tones while they worked on her. He made eye contact with her and flashed a huge grin.

"We got it," he said.

She managed a weak smile and a thumbs up.

* * *

All her life, she had dreamt about dying. Her father had chosen to put a gun in his mouth, but she decided this was not the way for her. She didn't even know the man, except for a few old photographs, some nasty words from her mother, and the sight of him in his coffin. She sometimes wondered if his reasons for leaving his family were the same as his reasons for leaving this earthly plane.

Eventually, she decided drowning appealed to her the most. It sounded quick, and she liked the idea of cleansing herself inside and out at death. It sounded soothing. Sometimes at night, when she had trouble sleeping, she would drive out to Observation Point to look out across the lake and dream about losing herself in the murky waters, trying to recall some vague memory or half-remembered dream about fishing with her father when she was very young. It was here that she first met Kelmen.

He just walked over and sat down next to her, as if she'd been waiting for him. When she turned to him in surprise, he smiled at her knowingly.

"Hello, Verity," he said in soothing tones. "My name is Kelmen, and I'm here to offer you a job. Have you ever heard of Precease, Inc.?"

Of course she had. Precease, Inc. was a huge global business that had started in her hometown just a year ago. It had started off with noble intentions, as so many bad things do. Several years ago, a device was created that enabled data to be recorded directly from the human brain. Viewers are placed in a sensory deprivation tank, and the recording could then be played by tapping into a viewer's thalamus, giving them every sight and sensation experienced by the recorder without being muddled with their own. It was all noninvasive, quite safe, and seemed very, very real.

The creators behind this device, and behind the company they formed, had thought that if people could experience what it was like to die, so many unnecessary deaths could be averted; homicide, suicide, war, abortion, and so on. But when the first terminally ill patient signed a waiver, allowing his last precious moments alive to be forever captured on computer, a Pandora's Box was opened. The public, instead of being appalled by the experience of death, was attracted to it. Bootleg copies of the recording were sold on the black market at an alarming rate.

Precease, Inc. changed their tune quickly and quietly, deciding to capitalize on this newfound opportunity. They began to record the deaths of death row prison inmates and terminally ill patients, but the most popular one of all was their first suicide.

The man, known only to the public as Karele, signed a waiver, plugged himself into the recorder and, in front of 20 scientists, doctors, computer specialists and psychologists, he hanged himself.

Karele's recording was, Kelmen explained to Verity, a bigger success than Precease, Inc. could have ever dreamed. Sales exploded and the word "precease" imbedded itself into the global lexicon. "Death Parties" became all the rage. Karele's death whetted the public's appetite for experiencing suicide safely and they demanded more.

Precease, Inc. then had their brightest idea, yet: hire people willing to die and be revived, over and over. Experienced "diers" would be, Precease, Inc. felt, valuable commodities. Much could be learned from them scientifically, and experience would surely make them more reliable. They soon learned the idea was more difficult to implement than they had expected. They had problems with recruitment, not because of a lack of volunteers, but because of a lack of dedication from them. Some volunteers changed their mind at the last minute, suddenly overcome with a case of stage fright or awareness of their own mortality. Others would quit after their first revival. The entire recording process, including revival, was expensive and the company could not afford to continue being slighted. They tried screening applicants more carefully and making them sign contracts requiring them to die five times, but the problems continued. A few people, unable to break their contract, simply packed their bags and disappeared. One, ironically, committed suicide at home and was discovered when he did not show up at work to die the next day. Then there were the pretenders, the people who sang praises about the company and how they'd die a hundred times for them, but as soon as their contract was up, they left.

Precease, Inc. came to the conclusion that they did not need volunteers; what they needed was recruitments. A team of researchers, including Kelmen, monitored Internet traffic and posts on social networks to compile a list of likely suicides near Precease, Inc. headquarters.

"You are number three on the list," Kelmen told her. "I've been following you for about two weeks, monitoring your habits and behavior to get an idea of your frame of mind. The more I observe you, the more I think you're perfect for the job."

"You've been following me?" she was too shocked to be angry.

He nodded. "When you bother to go anywhere, yeah, I follow you. The past few days, you've done little more than lie in bed and stare at your ceiling fan. But I knew you'd come back here before you did anything to yourself. That's why I chose to speak to you now."

Her face had gone numb from the cool wind coming off of the lake. She stared at her lap, where she'd tucked her hands between her legs to keep warm, and listened to Kelmen tell her about the money they would give her for each successful job. It was a lot of money. Even if the revival failed and she died, the money would be enough to pull her mother and her sister out of the crushing weight of poverty. She literally had nothing to lose.

Most recruits signed up for five deaths. Verity requested a contract for ten, and asked if she could die by drowning first as she signed her name on the dotted line. Kelmen swelled with pride. He had found their rising star. He was certain of it.

* * *

Her second time, she slit her wrists vertically and bled out in a bathtub, feeling the hot blood mingle with the warm bath water against her skin. She learned the smell of blood, massive amounts of blood. Just out of sight, mostly watching on closed circuit camera, were the usual team of scientists and doctors to study suicide firsthand for their research. She found that she was more self-conscious about being naked in front of so many people than she was about dying. The darkness was sad and lonesome, but it was also inviting. As she lost consciousness, the EMTs and surgeons stepped in to stop the bleeding, feed new blood and drugs into her system, patch her up, and bring her back into this world.

Kelmen was waiting for her when she woke up in the hospital bed. He told her how successful her first death was selling and how this one would surely be a big seller, too. He was talking very fast and it was difficult for her to focus on his words. She still felt groggy. As he talked, she carefully worked the tape off of her skin and peeled back the bandages to examine the sutures. She would have some very large, ugly scars, she realized. She turned her arms over and examined the practice cuts she had done in the days leading up to her death. They were not deep enough to require sutures, but there were many of them. She sighed and then realized the room was quiet enough for her to hear the sigh. Kelmen had stopped talking. She looked at him and saw him studying her carefully.

"I'm sure we can fix those," he said quietly. "Make them less noticeable."

She looked at her arms again and was reminded that life was not beautiful.

"No," she replied. "I don't think that's necessary. I'll just end up getting more in the future. It's almost win-

ter, anyway. I can wear long sleeves.”

* * *

Her third time was from anaphylactic shock. They'd discovered she was deathly allergic to bee stings and decided it would make an interesting recording.

“We're breaking new ground, here,” Kelmen said excitedly. “Nobody has ever recorded this before.”

It was, at first, very unpleasant and scary. Her throat itched and burned, her lips began to swell, and then she had trouble breathing. Soon, she found herself scratching at her neck, trying to loosen a too-tight collar that was not there. She didn't even notice the hives that covered her from head to foot until they told her about it later. Suddenly, it no longer felt uncomfortable. Everything just grew quieter and slowly faded to black.

They didn't make her stay overnight at the hospital, but the drugs they gave her made her very sleepy, so Kelmen offered to drive her home. Her memory blacked out at some point during the drive and she woke up an indeterminate number of hours later, not in her bed, but in Kelmen's.

“Did we have sex?” she puzzled. She lifted the covers and peered underneath, but found them both still fully dressed.

“Not yet,” he said and kissed her.

He made her heart pound, her breath become hard and desperate, and her nerves tingle, alive with energy.

* * *

Verity's deaths became Precease, Inc.'s most popular sellers, breaking records each time, and Verity became something of a celebrity. Public reaction varied greatly. Some decried Precease, Inc., labeling them as evil, moral-degrading fiends. Ironically enough, some sent death threats. Others lauded Precease, Inc. as visionaries of a new era in entertainment and hailed Verity as an artist.

She wasn't sure how she felt about all the attention, but she certainly understood it. Death was a very powerful, mysterious, and frightening thing, and she was helping redefine the way everyone perceived it. Here was death, raw and unedited, for all to touch and taste without personal risk. Natural thrill-seekers flocked to it, as one would expect. Why jump off a plane with a parachute when you could feel the real adrenaline rush of imminent death? But it also recruited millions of people who had never before taken any sort of risks in life. It soon became difficult to find anyone on the street who had not experienced a recording out of curiosity at least once, and the common question on everybody's lips was, “Have you ever been preceased?”

Life for Verity, in many respects, did not change. There were differences, of course. For the first time in her life, she had money. She had millions of fans that adored her and wanted to know everything about her. She declined all interviews, much to the annoyance of Precease, Inc., but her privacy seemed to bolster her career, rather than harm it. She was as enigmatic as death, itself.

Verity also had the rejuvenated love of her mother and sister, and the simple joy of providing for them. They had been almost as numb and beaten by life as she had been, but the simple act of not having to want for anything changed them, gave their lives hope and happiness. She was happy for them. She wished she could be happy, too.

She had Kelmen, who helped her to pack her things and move into his place shortly after her fourth death. Kelmen was always there for her when she woke up from a revival. He was always there for her when they got home, to touch her, and kiss her, and remind her that she was alive. But it all rang hollow, as if it were happening to someone else. She wondered, at times, if death had changed her, but she knew deep down inside nothing had changed. She liked all of these new things in her life, but life continued to mean nothing.

Life had always had no meaning to her, which was why she had become fixated on the end. After dying so many times, death had also become meaningless. There was simply nothing left with real meaning. She tried to explain this to Kelmen without success. Even other recruits at Precease, Inc. did not understand. Many of the new recruits in Kelmen's program credited the company with giving their lives real meaning for the first time. Precease, Inc. had given them a sense of purpose. They, and Kelmen, were completely, fully, and blindly devoted to Precease, Inc. It made her sad, and she wasn't quite sure why.

The changes in her body also made her sad, distantly. She was becoming a human patchwork quilt—a collage of mortality. The sutures in her arms were removed and the scars were fresh, red, and itchy. Her seventh

death had been exposure in the snowy and isolated woods. The doctors had injected her with an experimental drug that would, in theory, prevent frostbite and preserve her tissues. For the most part, it had worked, but she had still lost some sensation in her fingers and toes, and the skin took on a slightly grayish pallor. Kelmen insisted it would get better in time, although she didn't think he had any basis for this assumption.

"And even if it doesn't, you'll always be beautiful," he said, kissing her.

"I don't feel very beautiful," she said. "I feel useless. I don't feel like I'm doing any good at all."

"Are you kidding? You're the most devoted employee we have," he laughed. "I wish I had half of your dedication. I love my job, and I love the company, but I just can't bring myself to do the things that you do. I'm . . . I'm afraid of dying," he admitted. "I don't even watch recordings. I . . . can't imagine doing that. It's too much. It makes me feel sort of inadequate, at times. We could all take a page from your book. The company would be that much better if we did."

"I don't do it for the company," she told him. "I do it because I want to die."

"Oh, you do not," he scoffed. "Not really."

She didn't respond. She resumed writing her notes. She was working on a memoir about her experiences with the help of a ghostwriter, not because she wanted to, but because Precease, Inc. had insisted. She'd spoken to the ghostwriter a few times. He seemed nice. He wanted the title to be either "A Thousand Deaths to Live" or "Living a Thousand Ways to Die." She thought both titles were a little too flamboyant, but he said it had a nice ring to it. Precease, Inc. agreed, and so did Kelmen.

* * *

Her tenth death was murder. They hired a convicted killer on death row who took great pleasure in strangling young women, and he soaked up this final opportunity for all it was worth. Precease, Inc. had a set built at the prison, part of a house. The murderer was to simulate breaking into the house and attack Verity in her sleep. It took a while for her to fall asleep, as she did not know what to expect. Precease, Inc. had purposely been as vague as possible to make her fear that much more real.

It worked. He slapped her around violently, ripped off her clothing, and bit her on her back and buttocks. He did not rape her, as per his contract, but she did not know about this clause and fully expected him to. Verity cried and begged for him to stop. She begged for her life. He strangled her into silence. She later learned that, in exchange for his services, his own death sentence was commuted to life. He didn't want to die.

When she woke up in the hospital, Kelmen told her that this recording was their biggest seller yet. He looked so happy. When they got home, he tried to kiss her and she shrank away from him.

"He didn't rape you," Kelmen said. He was not angry, just confused.

She didn't answer. She curled up on her side in bed and prodded her split lip with her tongue, tasting the rawness. She didn't speak for two days.

* * *

When she had fully recovered from her injuries, she reported to Precease, Inc. for her usual meeting with the board of directors to determine her next fate. They suggested dehydration. She suggested decapitation.

"Uh. . . I don't think we could revive you from that," one of them said after an awkward pause. He turned to his compatriots for guidance. "Can we fix that?"

"I don't want to be revived," she said.

Kelmen leaned over and murmured to her, "Ver, you can't do this. You have an obligation to the company and to the interests of the public."

"I have fulfilled my contract," she reminded them, ignoring Kelmen. "Ten deaths. I'm no longer obligated to do anything. Will die for you once more. But this is the last time. It's time for me to go."

* * *

In bed that night, they both stared into the darkness, unable to sleep.

"In all the times I died," she said suddenly. "Were you ever afraid for me? Were you ever afraid they wouldn't be able to bring me back?"

"No," he said. "I always believed we could do it. We are the best in the world."

She chewed on this for a moment. “They can’t be perfect all the time. Everybody fails, sooner or later.”

He rolled over and looked at her, studied her shadowed features, brushed her hair back from her face.

“I never understood why you feel so uncomfortable with the company,” he said. “Especially considering all the sacrifices you made for them. It seems so. . . disloyal.”

“Somebody has to ask questions. Otherwise, they’d be unstoppable,” she said. She let the words hang between them for a while, feeling their weight.

“Will you cry for me at my funeral?” she asked finally.

“No,” he said.

* * *

She sat and waited patiently while the technicians argued. Decapitation had never been recorded before and they wanted everything to be perfect. This was, after all, Verity’s swan song. They couldn’t decide whether she should lie face up or face down in the guillotine. Some of them said it would be scarier to see the blade come down at her, while others thought it would be scarier just to hear the sound of it coming. Nobody asked her for her opinion, but had they, she would have said she had no preference. She was in no hurry, and she found their heated debate morbidly amusing.

Finally, Kelmen heaved a sigh and spoke up above the other voices. “Guys, the theory is that the head remains alive for up to a minute after it’s been severed from the body. Nobody knows for sure if that’s true, of course, but I prefer to err on the side of caution and assume that it’s true. That being the case, Verity will be aware of everything that’s going on when her head falls off. I don’t want her to land on her nose, or stare at the floor of the basket. That’s not very cinematic. So, we’ll put her in face up, and after she falls, I’ll pick up the head so she can see her body. Does that sound acceptable?”

There were murmurs of agreement among the doctors, scientists, and techs in attendance. It sounded like a fine plan. Verity said nothing. She lay down with her head in place and stared up at the massive blade while they fussed with her headset and ran final tests to ensure everything was working optimally. She was not afraid. She felt nothing at all. Kelmen leaned over into her field of vision suddenly and kissed her.

“I lied,” he whispered. “I will cry.”

“Thank you,” she said.

He kissed her one last time, stood up, and ordered the recorder to be activated.

Everyone was silent and hidden away from her sight. It was just Verity and death, now. She regarded her fate curiously, studying the details of the wood grain, the bolts, and the shiny, insidious blade. They used a silent countdown at her request, so that she would not know when it was coming. The less bracing time, the better the recording, as she had learned from experience.

Precease, Inc. loathed losing someone of her caliber and experience, but they were certain this death would be the most spectacular of all.

Suddenly, there was a lurch as some unseen switch was activated, and the blade rushed down to meet her. Time did not slow down. Her life did not flash before her eyes. It all happened rather suddenly. There was the sound of it sliding down, the smooth chop as it hit bottom, and then she experienced the oddest sensation as her head—just her head—tumbled down into the wicker basket below. She bounced once and rolled slightly to the right, her cheek coming to rest against the rough, woven surface. She tried to turn her head to look up and couldn’t. She had no neck. She realized she couldn’t breathe.

Hands reached down, gently lifted her up and cradled her. Kelmen. His smile was shaking and tears filled his eyes.

“You’re so beautiful,” he said, his voice cracking with emotion. “A true artist.”

He brushed her hair back from her face, his touch so familiar. Then he turned her in his arms to show her the fruits of her labor. Her masterpiece.

It was, indeed, beautiful.

We Hit the Ground, but We Never Ran

by Connor Krause

Hell and high water both held us back
As soot choked us, and hands from soot
Grabbed our legs to drag us under,
Happily singing hymns in place of terror
Where details of darkness became fairy tales,
Tales replaced with ice.
As bodies trapped under ice, we didn't repent
At all, salivating over meat
That makes solute from teeth.

Angels that find positives boost words
Until speeches cover what could be set simple;
As if speeches, like bullets, worked every time
To shift balances and power from side to side.
A banishment of true words, Fahrenheit,
Margin by margin, a single glance
Before taking to fire, the typewriter's gears
Wind down after being pushed past the line.

Fury and temper never killed a man
Or ever had to fight a battle;
Its soldiers, undercover for years, activate
On command, in their fight to push buttons
For push-buttons' sake, as Disjoint flicked his wrists
In our general direction; we obeyed not for
Reason or evidence, but for pats on the back.
An invisible inferno lives off our dead, and
Creates the dead, human self-cycles.

We find shelter out on these limbs, hoping
For things to correct themselves by their own accord;
Hoping to be taken by surprise with beauty and
The 'literary' form, the Muses waiting for themselves
To present the perfect work, as if praying for
A godly act to save you is on par
With deciding the fate of paper and ink.

All matter trades for more matter, and words
On the skin of teeth will fall into place.
As they say, the apple never falls far.
An abstraction of paper will one day come around,
Full circle, as it drives men and madams forward.
When stitches in time means burning the fabric,
When a rhetorical burning just means 'safety first'
As a physical fire frightens to elude.
Playing god must come slowly and carefully;
A quick motion could slice the thread of life
Before speech can ever be heard.

Nautical Notions

by Kelsey Hixon-Bowles

Brains are like oceans. Thinking creates waves
of kinetic energy that stir, whisk
sleepy musings out of their coral reef
homes. Sometimes cranky, sometimes difficult,
eventually the groggy ponderings
find their way out of the tangle of soft
seaweed into the expanse of endless
possibilities to swim free and grow
into thoughts. Treading through logic, each school
matures into a shoal of ideas
and dives into the ever flowing,
always cascading stream of consciousness.
Running through, between, across the synapse tides,
each brook weaves, wraps and pools into the whole.

Getting Ready for a First Date

by Lindsay Vannaman

Put on foundation first
Cover-up for the scars,
Even the intangible ones.
Eyeliner next, so the
Eyes seem less timid.
Make them look merry, unburdened.
Use waterproof mascara;
Rain comes unexpectedly.

Get dressed next.
Wear a skirt long enough.
Bare legs are good excuses
For wandering hands.
A favorite sweater
That shelters a scathed heart,
And comfortable shoes
For running.

The Creek

by Randall Goble

Running along side the acre of land where my grandparent's lived during the bulk of my childhood runs a quiet, spring-fed tributary. It flows north, meandering through pine forests, pastures and small patches of swamp. There were stretches of exposed, prehistoric limestone that would split true with the tap of a hammer, sometimes revealing the fossil of some prehistoric leaf within. Gentle rapids cascaded over these rocks, creating vortexes that sometimes trapped fish in isolated pools, leaving them hungry and ripe for the catching.

I can still taste the gritty water. I feel the aching ear infections and the cramping diarrhea that sometimes followed a day's swim. Miniature lawyers argued their cases before the judge and jury, better known as Grandma, about the possibility of being granted a motion to jump in. We swore oaths promising to never go under, to keep the creek out of our ears, to never swallow a drop—and we tried to do so earnestly—but it was nearly impossible to be an alligator, submarine, or sea monster without accidentally soaking our hair.

Spring yielded swarms of hummingbirds, which, by their playful and competitive nature, brought hours of entertainment to my Grandma's kitchen window. She would stand in front of the sink—the muted light of morning pouring in—and we'd talk about her hummingbirds while she sipped coffee from an olive green mug. I would use my arms to hold myself up, craning my neck to see out of the window, my hands firmly planted on the drain board, my legs dangling free with the effortless athleticism of a child. Hummingbirds are aerial jesters custom built for acrobatic flight, but such capabilities are versatile, and I still remember the dull thud of one's beak connecting with another's skull, the culmination of a high-speed dogfight.

At the creek there was always some critter to dispatch, and Grandpa spent hours setting and checking traps. There was the mole trap, that once inserted into the tunnel and set, was triggered by the weight of the animal scurrying through it. Three spring-loaded prongs were then driven through a small, blind, pointy skull—delivering a semi-instant death. Opossums were a constant problem, and they didn't take kindly to being thrown into the creek while still squirming in a live-trap. I got an eerie sense of finality when one disappeared beneath the calm surface, the violent thrashings concealed in the murk. I think of this and an axe, buried to the helve in the shell of an alligator snapping turtle, when people speak of violent video games.

East Texas summers could suck the air clean out of a young pair of lungs. It must have been hell for the old-timers. They slouched in their chairs at the bait shop, drinking coffee. Clear plastic tubes ran across their cheeks and underneath their noses, those same cheeks that sagged under the weight of seventy-odd years, molding their faces into permanent scowls. I know they remember their childhood in black and white, because mine is washed in the beige hue of a 1989 Polaroid. Wood grain paneling and avocado rugs, along with stenciled wallpaper bearing baskets of fruit, floral arrangements and owls, all trapped within a white border. Old men have been sitting in bait shops since the time of Peter, James and John, surrounded by myriad goods all sharing in common only their scarcity within a fifty-mile radius.

Grandpa would hand me a bag of minnows, the opening firmly secured with a rubber band. The bait swam in schools, staring out at me through the plastic, one doomed eye at a time. There were tubs of ice cream beneath the glass counter where the cash register rested. Every flavor a boy and his Grandpa could ask for lay beyond where I could see. The clerk read them all to me, like a teacher calling attendance: strawberry swirl, chocolate, cookies and cream, rocky road.

"Don't they got any banilla?" I would ask. "I want plain banilla." We could mail a letter, rent a VHS tape, get a breakfast taco, an ice cream, the latest lure, a box of fireworks, the weekly gossip rolled out between tobacco stained dentures, Little Debbie cupcakes, and a bucket of live night-crawlers, all in a seven-hundred square foot East Texas bait shop.

The hours we spent on the creek passed like drops of water over parched lips. Three boys of elementary school age could stare at corks for an entire morning, bare feet resting on the cool hull of an aluminum boat. Grandpa sat with us, listening to our stories, telling his own, teaching us how to fish, how to be boys, how to eventually become men.

Always wave to passing boats, but never show your stringer, and if you do, don't tell where you caught 'em – pick

up trash along the bank if you can reach it – crappie play with the bait for a while before they bite – did I ever tell you the one about the tongue tied fellow who sold an outhouse that he guaranteed wouldn't stink? – catfish like the eyes, so hook your minnow through the head and set the cork for deeper water – don't cast overhead – don't cast over another person's line – there's no difference between country-western and rock n' roll anymore – damn it, I said don't cross over my line – steer clear of alcohol – never throw back a snapping turtle, cut their heads off with pliers – that's a big fish – here, use the net – I'm proud of you – did I tell you the one about the guy who walks into a bar and bets the bartender he can bite his own left eye? I got a million of 'em .

The seventies model Oldsmobile station wagon rolling over caliche rocks could vibrate my cheeks to the point of numbness. Grandpa played the harmonica while driving. We seldom wore seat belts. I remember curling up on the warm, back-seat floorboard with my cousins, listening to the road just inches beneath our ears. I would stare into the treetops that rose like the Red Sea on either side of us. I used to believe that no matter where I was, if I stared into the treetops long and hard enough, they might become the same treetops that I longed for; that I might be transported to Riverside, Texas, 1989, by sheer will-of-consciousness. I find that I still do it from time to time, and I always get the same burning in my gut that I did as a child when I find it to be impossible.

I read, or maybe I heard—or did I dream it?—that some physicists hold time analogous to a record spinning on a turntable, the needle being the now. Maybe that's why I feel the past—at least my past—should be accessible, like an alphabetized album collection, to be experienced at my leisure. Perhaps consciousness is a multitude of intersecting record players, billions of needles traveling billions of tracks, but always there, even when the music has ended. The music ended on June 5th, 2003, for Grandpa. But it's comforting to think that we're still sitting in a boat, telling jokes and catching fish on some celestial turntable, even if the stylus has long since moved over and beyond our time together.

Time spent indoors revolved around the kitchen table. Dinner was always eaten there. Grandma's gravy was the color and consistency of muddy creek-water, tasted like childhood, and was at its best soaked into a slice of buttered bread. Sitting at the table for only nanoseconds at a time, she would watch for an empty glass or an uneaten vegetable. The corners of her mouth pulled downward when she smiled. Her eyes sparkled when Grandpa said, "Thank you, darlin'," as she passed him the peas. Grandmas like mine take pride in clean plates, full bellies and genuine appreciation.

In the mornings, our bare feet soaked with dew, the grass sticking to our toes, we raced across a sprawling lawn and leapt down onto a concrete pier, hoping to find a cork missing or a bamboo pole doubled over. As small children, we learned about life and death by smashing minnows here. They popped satisfyingly between concrete and stubby thumbs, much to the consternation of Grandma. As adolescents, we donned insect repellent and spent late nights talking about girls, second base, what beer tastes like, where the fish are probably biting, or where Grandpa might be hiding, waiting to scare the hell right out of us (or into us) with one heave of a rotten log. All disturbances sound like predators and cadavers at three o'clock in the morning on the creek.

* * *

Caney Creek is now a series of disparate puddles set in a contorted trench. When the rains come, the flood gates are opened and water rushes through for a day or so, piling sand upon the piers and fallen trees that line its banks. Between storms, the water stagnates, and the children grow and leave and spread out as the elders die off; and the fishing pole is passed to trembling, unprepared hands that aren't ready to hold it, because we're not ready. We were never ready. Just yesterday we were casting into the trees and crossing over your line and hanging up our lures on the bottom. Just yesterday we were sitting around the fire pile—I'd almost forgotten about the fire pile—waiting for the cane poles to pop, singeing our eyebrows, you singing and slapping your thighs; and I never did learn to play the bones; and I never ate that giant sandwich you wanted to take me to eat because I was vegetarian at the time and for some reason that was important; and I'll never have a million of 'em, because I keep forgetting things; and I never beat you at checkers. And I wasn't there when you thought you were on fire, when you thought you were in hell; but I was there when you sang Lucille, and I'm thankful for that. But all I truly want sometimes is to stare into those tree tops and put the record on and hear the one about the tongue-tied fellow who sold the outhouse that he guaranteed wouldn't stink, and then the one about the guy who walks

into a bar and bets the bartender that he can bite his own left eye; and most of all, I want to have been there holding your hand when you were in some kind of hell, because after what you did for me, after all the time you spent with me, after all the attention you paid me, it would mean that I was there in the end to give you that one moment; to have been strong and to not gone to pieces in front of you like I did; to have been the grandson Donald was in those final weeks, and.... Goddamn it, I miss you.



Desert Jazz (Ella & Louis)
Jesa Townsend

Protist
by Josie Doefer

The house smelled of rotten eggs and burnt toasties. I really feared for my life at this point. Really, I hadn't meant for it to get this far. There appeared to be glob creatures in every corner. They were hanging from the ceiling and leaking their musk. They were gliding slowly across the floor leaking more musk. They were in every room and on every floor in the entire house.

My parents are so going to kill me, I thought to myself.

It had started as a simple experiment. I was only trying to prove the possibility of creating macrobiotic organisms with harmless aerobic bacterium. Yeah, I suppose I might have been overreaching my means a little. Now I had foot-long single celled organisms everywhere in the house leaving rancid bodily fluids all over the carpet. My parents are so going to kill me.

I started gathering all the jars and empty boxes I could find. I piled them up in the middle of the kitchen. I started plopping the little buggers into the jars with a pair of tongs. They were rather disgusting little creatures. They were essentially little balls of mucus with phalanges. There were a great many massive little germs running loose around the house. I was trying very hard not to harm any of them because they were my first big breakthrough since I had started. They were the largest bacteria I had as of yet created. They were the culmination of months of testing and research. They were starting to eat my dog's food.

I hadn't told my parents what I was doing. I didn't think they would approve. So I suppose I was lucky in the sense that my parents were out for the day and would not see this horrifying mess.

I wasn't exactly sure what I would do now that I had collected all the creatures as far as I could figure. They reproduced exceedingly fast so their population had to be constantly monitored especially at their size. I had slept in, thus the population had grown out of their enclosures and had escaped.

I started my cleanup by studying the specimens and then eliminating the excess population. I put the rest of the creatures back into the tanks and went back upstairs. The house was covered in musk slime and smelled awful. I had a lot of work ahead of me before my parents got home. At least none of the creatures got out of the house . . . I hope.

The Ghazal of Distance

by Rebecca Papucaru

Love lost to reading! Books, journals, even signs in the distance.
Playbills before curtain. The crowd at a distance.

Suppressing my embarrassment by withdrawing into print.
Hubris! As if I could disinherit distance.

O why did I sit with the straps of my purse binding my feet,
reading discounted books? Learning love at a distance.

I should have asked the time, unashamed to be unoccupied.
Or dared to look up and off into the distance.

Afraid of eye contact, a smile, rejection? What did I fear
the most? Tell me, how does one know from a distance?

The Stage-Door Mirror

by Heather Etelamaki

Porter's eyes were watering, but Juliette wasn't going to put up with it. She was, after all, doing him a favor by doing his makeup. If it weren't for her, he'd have to go onstage without it, faceless in the glare of the lights on opening night.

"Are you riding with me after the show?" Teri said, peering over the top of Porter's head.

"Yeah." Juliette smiled. "Close your eyes, but not tightly, Porter. It's hard to get a clean line."

She rested the eyeliner-clad hand on Porter's forehead to get at a better angle. Porter's closed eyes relaxed a little, but they were still crinkled on the outside corners. Juliette rested her other hand on the side of his head to steady him. She fought the urge to curl her fingers into the mouse-brown hair behind Porter's left ear and distracted herself with the list of props she needed to get ready for Act Two.

"Is your mom coming?" Teri said, back to examining herself in the mirror.

Juliette nodded. "She's bringing bean dip."

Porter chuckled, momentarily at ease. "That's the best thing to bring to a drunken cast party. No one will care if you fart or not, because they'll be too wasted to pay attention."

Teri was applying the glitter she needed as Puck. Her dark hair had been cut short only two weeks before, and after three days of bed-rest and mourning, she had moved on with a renewed sense of self. She was now tenderly working glitter gel into each curl and around the tiny horns she had pinned in. Each movement had a beauty and grace to it. Juliette silently wished she could have that kind of fluidity. Teri wanted to move to Hollywood to act after high school. Juliette prayed for that kind of talent.

The make-shift make-up room was the eleventh-grade history classroom, almost directly below the back-stage area on the floor above. Four tables had been arranged in the limited empty space after the desks had been pushed to the walls, set somewhat haphazardly in stations for hair, foundation and powder, eye makeup. It was also one of the three rooms in use apart from the auditorium with air conditioning, but you couldn't tell when everyone was packed in there as they were, buzzing with opening-night nerves. One of the younger actors was messing with a battered stereo in the niche by the door, changing CDs. It didn't matter what it was, though, because no one could hear it over the chatter and the mic checks blaring from the speaker that had been wired from the auditorium for cues. Bottom was chattering about lions.

Juliette stepped back to evaluate her work. Porter smiled hopefully.

"Finished?"

"No," Juliette said. She pinched her chin as if deep in thought, looking over to her knapsack, which lay on a desk seat against the wall, far from where anyone could touch it. "Hold tight, though."

She walked over and started rummaging around the bottom of the sack. She pushed aside the newly developed picture packets her mother had brought home just that afternoon—from a few days previous, during tech rehearsals and a visit to the park—and grabbed her camera. Before heading back over to the table, she zipped the bag shut and flipped the patch-covered flap back over the top as if it were a shield.

Juliette had once read a book about the Grand Duchess Anastasia and her family. In the things found after their murder were some paintings Anastasia and her sisters had done. Juliette liked to think that if she were Anastasia, she would be pleased that the whole of Russia would get to see her artistic abilities. The book said they never found Anastasia's remains. There were some girls who came forward saying that they were the real grand duchess, but they were usually disproved. Anastasia liked taking pictures of everything, even herself in the mirror; one of the Russian fakers even did this, but she wasn't the real one in the end.

Juliette liked taking pictures of herself in mirrors. There was one by the stage door the actors used most often for checking costumes last-minute, and Juliette would sometimes stand there with her camera and take pictures of herself or with another member of the cast or crew. The actors would either stand behind her, in front, or up close so that there was only a portion of Juliette that could be seen. She would hold the camera steady at her hip, and then would press the shutter. Juliette always kept her head down in every picture she took, never looking into her reflection. It was this kind of documenting that she felt was important—the documentation of what goes on behind the illusion. She liked to think the audience would be interested in seeing that. But mostly she documented for herself.

She popped off the lens cap as she returned to the makeup table. "Hold still." Porter rolled his partially outlined eyes but sat quietly and stared into the lens as Juliette set the aperture and adjusted the focus. He raised one eyebrow just before she took the picture.

"Did you get the right amount of light?" he said.

Juliette pulled the camera down to chest level, advancing the film to the next frame. "Yes. You doubt me?"

She stepped to the other side of him to focus on the fold-out compartments of the tackle box of lipstick that lay open on the table. Rose reds to mauve, hidden in a strange half-shadow from the fluorescent lights above. Next, the group of fairies huddled around the foundation on the other side of the classroom, the tips of their wings radiating through the haze or trailing ribbons. Teri, first looking in the mirror, then directly at the camera, a glittery hand propped under her chin. Juliette swallowed the pang of jealousy that formed in her throat at the image through the viewfinder.

“Jealous boy, you don’t even know how to work a digital camera,” Teri said. She winked at Juliette and reached up with sparkling fingertips to work some glitter into Juliette’s red fringe. “Don’t listen to him, ma petite.”

The guilt was something she never fought. She deserved every delicious moment of it. She wondered if Anastasia ever envied anyone. Maybe her sisters, she decided.

Porter tapped Juliette on the shoulder. “Kind of have to get into costume. Can we finish this torture?”

Juliette sighed. She sympathized with his distress, but did not admit it. He was two years older than she was. She had hoped that going to college and doing shows would do Porter some good, maybe even give him the opportunity to grow up and learn to do his own stage makeup, but it hadn’t.

She sighed and set the camera down on the table, carefully replacing the lens cap. She picked up the pencil and resumed her earlier position. “I’m not going to make you late. Hold still, I’m doing the bottom lid now. Look up.”

Juliette knew this kind of hurried rush well, and she liked to think she knew it better than the actors themselves: the pumping adrenaline that comes from thirty-plus bodies in one tiny makeup room, powder clinging to the air in tiny pink puffs. There was a certain solemnity that traveled through each of their thoughts as well: reminders of cues, rants about smiling, costume changes woven through dance steps and memorized lines. Corinne, the stage manager, flung herself into the room in her usual frazzled manner to remind the men to hang up their stockings after the show and everyone else to take care of their mic checks. Outside of the community theatre, she was a secretary for a local insurance agency. That made her very much a people person. She surveyed the actors with an air of superiority before leaving the room. Someone had changed CDs; *Voulez-Vous* was now blasting from the dented speakers. The mass of actors around them started singing along and grooving out, wings glinting, glitter floating, bodies swaying. Juliette didn’t like this part. The room was too small to survive this magnitude of energy.

Porter blinked much more than was necessary as Juliette tried to make a clean line on the bottom lid. Surely Anastasia didn’t have to do this for anyone but herself or her sisters, and they probably sat still without complaint. Juliette finally decided that what was there—drawn from the midpoint to the outside corners—was enough to get him by.

“Done,” she told Porter, who grinned.

Juliette returned the eye pencil to its appropriate slot in the box on the next table over. She turned back and started walking to where Porter still sat. Porter had picked up the camera and was turning it over in his hands. He took the lens cap off and peered through the viewfinder.

“Porter.”

“Yes?” he said, pulling the camera down from his face and looking at her through his rimmed eyes.

Juliette had walked around the table and was now standing in her original position in front of him. She pulled the camera away and held out a hand for the cap, which he handed over, an eyebrow raised.

“Please don’t touch my camera.”

Teri turned her wide blue eyes to meet Juliette’s. “Jules, it’s fine. He was just looking at it.”

Juliette didn’t respond but set the camera back on the table and picked up the blush and a large powder brush. She loaded the brush up, each back-and-forth movement purposeful, a distraction. Then she dusted the burnt pink powder across his high cheekbones from the corner of his eyes down to the apples of his cheeks. She caught his eye and some of her anger faded. The tension, however, did not.

Teri had gone back to glittering. “Juliette, you have to try out for the next play. You promised me. You and I need to be on stage together. It was meant to be.”

In spite of herself, Juliette smiled. Teri didn’t deserve the jealousy.

“Okay,” Juliette said. “But if I make a fool of myself—”

“Nope, don’t you say it, Jules.” Teri’s grin met her eyes and ricocheted off the walls around them.

Juliette put a tiny amount of color on Porter’s lips to finish.

“You are a genius,” Porter said, and reached up for a high five, to which Juliette returned with an unexpected sense of foreboding. “I have one more favor to ask of you.”

“Sure.”

Porter stood up and handed her his mic and a roll of duct tape, which had been sitting on the table next to him. He then proceeded to pull down part of the waistline of his leggings to reveal his bare left hip, turning it toward her and jutting it out in contrapposto. “I have to do a mic check.”

Teri’s face lit up. “Nice form, Porter.”

A tensing seemed to cement itself upon Juliette’s spinal chord.

“You want me to tape the mic to you?” Juliette tumbled over the words, and could feel the heat rise up her cheeks.

Porter nodded.

She didn’t say a word as she tore a piece of tape away from the roll with her teeth, nor when she had to hold the cool plastic to his warm skin. She gingerly pressed the tape to the mic, then to the outside and inside of his hip.

Porter pulled his pants back up to where only the antennae and the microphone stuck out, dangling over the waistline. He thanked her then ran out of the room. Juliette turned back to the table and started putting the makeup away.

She did not document the mic incident.

* * *

There was a general rule in theatre that you couldn’t be seen by the audience unless you were onstage performing. If you were peeking out of the curtains, and you could see the audience, they could see you. Juliette had to be careful not to be seen especially as she was a techie—that’s why she had to wear black, to hide herself while she changed the scene in the absence of the spotlights, where the entire auditorium was dark. The actors, even more so, had to take care to be quiet, stay out of sight. She sometimes wished to walk to the edge of the stage, looking out into the audience, and bow, to have her own curtain call. The lights didn’t have to be on.

Teri’s turn to pose with Juliette before the show now existed in three pictures: one of her on her tiptoes, reaching to kiss Juliette on the cheek, one peeking out behind her, looking sheepish, and the last with her arm around her friend’s neck, dark brown and red. Juliette walked around during Act One taking pictures. She documented Corinne as she fussed around the prop table as well as the lonely donkey head that had been left on a folding chair in the hallway next to the water fountain. Then Teri wearing the donkey head, Porter standing next to her, pretending to whisper sweet nothings into her donkey ear. Porter wearing the head and hands held high and menacing, Teri terrified, face in a frozen shriek. Backstage, Juliette tiptoed around, documenting Corinne at the podium; the four lovers, huddled in a circle; Oberon sitting in one of the two chairs in the corner.

Juliette sat on Titania’s throne during Act Two. At her feet was her knapsack, kept close so no one could touch it. She was flipping through the picture packets. The first roll, the one that had been from tech rehearsals, had turned out well. She tilted them toward the floor as she studied them, holding them in as much light as possible.

The actors on stage were projecting clearly, but she did not pay attention to it; it was background noise to her. She was studying every picture carefully, taking in the color and detail. Anastasia would approve of these. Years from now, when people would find them tucked away in a box somewhere, they’d be fascinated. Who were these people? But Juliette would write the names on the back. There would be no doubt in anyone’s mind who they were.

She had just opened the second packet of pictures when Porter and Helena entered through the stage door, stepping gingerly around the squeaky bits of wood that had been marked in glow-in-the-dark tape. The top picture in the stack was one of her and Teri, sitting on swings, the sunlight so bright in the pictures it seemed to brighten up stage left. Porter waved at her from across the small space, settling himself into one of the folding chairs in the corner.

In the background, Teri was living her lines. Juliette absentmindedly traced the old patches on the flap of her knapsack, smiled at Porter, then turned for a moment to watch through the curtains. The heat in her cheeks returned.

Teri was onstage, waiting to climb down from the tree after her cue to exit. On the backside of the tree there was a ladder she was to stand on, peeking through the branches in her ways of mischief. When she disembarked at this particular moment, however, one of the rungs broke—a loose nail had been missed in the construction checks, and Teri had slipped down in a cloud of glitter. The audience laughed. This was nothing new for Puck.

Juliette had been the only one who’d seen what really happened. Leaving her things behind her, she rushed over to the furthest point she could stand without being seen. Teri stood up, glancing around, fearing Ly-sander and Hermia would wake. Positive she was safe, she said her last few lines, sprinkled the love potion, and flitted offstage.

There was no talking backstage, so all Teri could do was point at her bottom lip, which was puffy and bleeding a little. Juliette grabbed her friend's hand, motioned to Corinne who nodded in realization, then hurried out the door. Porter watched them go before he ran onstage, pursued closely by Helena.

They went to the makeup room downstairs. Teri hadn't started crying, which was good for the sake of her mascara and eyeliner.

"Are you okay?" Juliette asked, now pulling out some alcohol wipes. Two pages until cue. She focused on the lines coming out of the speaker.

"Yeah...ow." Teri picked up an abandoned mirror and inspected her lip, pulling it down to look at the other side.

Juliette leaned down to look, too. The wound was glorious, seeming to swell by the second. She wanted to take a picture of it but her camera was still upstairs sitting backstage.

"I think I just bit it."

"And banged it up on a knot. Here, I wanna help."

Juliette dabbed Teri's lip, cleaning up the blood, then touched up her foundation and lipstick to cover the now yellowish purple spot that threatened to overtake Teri's entire chin. Teri was humming to herself as she was being fixed up.

Teri smiled, somewhat distortedly. "I think it's going really well tonight. I love first night crowds."

Juliette nodded, but did not respond. Would anyone notice this? She was saving the show, after all.

Beginning of Act 3. One page until Puck's cue.

"Done." She straightened back up. "Do you think you can make it?"

Teri shrugged. "Yeah, it's not that big a deal. Thank you."

The door opened, and Porter came in, scanning the room until he saw them.

"Ah! Here you are." He walked over, holding out an icepack out to Teri.

The tension exploded in Juliette's shoulders. In Porter's other hand was her knapsack and her camera. Upon realizing they were there, betrayal traveled through her body to the tips of her fingers.

"Why do you have my stuff?" Her voice was so quiet that neither of the others had heard her.

"Thank you," Teri said, lifting the icepack to her wound.

"I almost didn't recognize you. Your lip's so huge it was hiding your big head," Porter said.

Teri pushed him playfully with the palm of her hand. "Jerk. You can walk to the Moose."

"I'm kidding. Corinne wanted me to check on you guys and remind you to be ready for your cue." Porter laughed a little. "I saved Juliette from certain death for leaving stuff on the set."

Juliette looked between the two of them, and then back at her things in Porter's hand.

"I'll be fine." Teri shrugged, then looked at Juliette. "What's up, Jules? Something wrong?"

Juliette grabbed her knapsack and her camera and yanked it from Porter's grasp. The force behind it surprised even her, and the bag slipped from her fingers, spilling its contents over the linoleum. The pictures from the second packet fanned out like they were rays of the sun, skimming across the cool surface, resting at different intervals. All three of them sprang to pick them up, but Juliette stopped as soon as she got a better look at how they'd turned out.

All but one of the pictures had been blotched out by the light—she had forgotten to set the aperture, and too much light had been let into the lens. Teri's face was barely visible in the majority of them, but Juliette's face was nowhere to be found. There was only a mass of white, blotchy in some places, the edges fringed in orange and yellow.

"Jules?" Teri asked, setting a hand on her friend's shoulder. "What's wrong?"

Juliette had disappeared into oblivion, not even a shadow in the haze of white.

* * *

The parking lot at the Moose Lodge had been emptied just minutes before. The last few people through the doors had been Porter and Teri, the latter having looked back at her friend, nervous about her silence on the ride over from the auditorium.

Juliette was sitting in partial view of the open door of the lodge, on the gravel between Teri's car and her mother's, looking at the stars that were still visible through the night light from the town. She could hear the sound of vintage dance music filtering through the door, the smell of shredded barbecue pork and the expectation of the accompanying potato salad following the sound as if trying to entice her to join the rest of the actors and crew.

She wondered if Anastasia had done this, looking at the sky. The summer heat had only subsided a little, and there was a slight breeze. Juliette brushed her bangs out of the way to get a better view of the stars. It probably had not been that different, she thought. Stars never seemed to change. It was, after all, the world that moved.

From the open door of the lodge could be heard the now tipsy sing-along to some popular seventies song. Teri, backlit by twinkle lights, stood at the door, calling for her. Juliette turned to look but did not respond. She stood up, wiping her other hand across her forehead. She gazed into her own reflection in the passenger window, the darkness blotting out the grey blue of her eyes, the flush of her cheeks, her face barely there in the darkness. She looked down, running a hand across the patches of her knapsack, then slowly pulled out her camera. It was too dark to use the shutter and aperture setting from back at the auditorium, and so she turned the dials, checking the light reading through the viewfinder until it read positive. Then, focusing on the window, she brought the camera down to her hip, looking up into her reflection, and pressed the shutter.

My first love, and the lake

by Lindsay Vannaman

Above me, nothing
But velvet sky, glittering stars.
My toes stuck in damp sand.

Every so often I steal a glance to my left.
I fight a silly smile from spreading.
I want to touch his arm,
To feel for goosebumps, matching mine.

With a novice dive,
I break the calm blanket
Of summer water.
For a moment, the lake conceals
My bare body.
Though for him,
I am unashamed.



Night Exposures #2
Zachary Powell
Photography

The Quarterback

by Maggie Stephens

There's a bar in Pittsburg, Kansas that seems to attract all the co-eds, and not just the Greeks or the philosophy majors or the student council, but really, all college students. I guess that's why I was there. Not that I fall into any of those three categories, but I am a college student.

I was home for Christmas and sitting at the bar with a few old friends from high school. It was something like a Wednesday night, so we seemed to be four of the eight people there. Around ten o'clock, a tall, built, blond man walked in. He was older than me; he even graduated high school before I got there. But I knew who he was. Everyone knew who he was. He walked right up to the bar, sat down next to me and ordered a beer. I sat next to him in silence for a few seconds, not sure whether or not to say anything. There's no way he remembers me right? He did.

"Hey Maggie, how's K-State?" he said.

"Oh, hey, Dylan. State is great, but you would know that," I said.

He chuckled. "I suppose I would."

Dylan Meier is Pittsburg bred. His parents, Dennis and Valerie Meier, raised four, blond, football-player-sized boys. And that's what they did—played football. In Pittsburg, playing football is equivalent to being the star of the latest summer blockbuster. You have the ability to be a god, if you so choose. All the boys want to be you, all the girls want to date you, and all those girls' parents will gladly let their daughters date you. You are an exception to all of the rules. Dylan, along with his three brothers, never chose that. They were good-grade-getting, curfew making, pleasant and mannerly football players. The Meiers were a breed of their own. Dylan used his mature decision making skills to get him the quarterback spot at Kansas State University, where I was studying.

"I assume you are in Pittsburg to celebrate the holidays. Where are you headed after that?" I asked.

"Well, I've got a few places I want to see, but I plan on going to South Korea in the spring," he replied.

"South Korea? What are you going to do there?"

"Teach English to children."

Dylan played football, but he did a lot more than that. He believed that, in order to understand our complex world and the people in it, you have to experience cultures, environments, and ideas outside of what you know and are comfortable with. Thus, he set out to find those niches and expose himself to all that he could. He traveled the world in hopes to find all that there is to find, opening his eyes wider and wider with each adventure.

"That's admirable. I envy your travels...and your ambition," I said.

"Who's to say it's mine? It's just as much yours. Do you want to stay in Pittsburg?"

"No."

"Then don't. Get busy livin'."

Those were the last words I ever heard Dylan Meier speak. And they were powerful words: Those words would become the phrase that exuded Dylan Meier. On April 19, 2010, Dylan Meier fell to his death while hiking with his family in Arkansas. It was a tragic and painfully unexpected death. Pittsburg took the hit hard. We had lost a town gem, one who could always be regarded as an inspiration to our kids and a point of pride to our parents. Dylan would forever be remembered as the man who was always busy livin'.

A year had passed since Dylan's death. Time had healed much of our grief, but he still lived on in the spirit of the town and those who lived there. It was May 18, 2011, and I was saying my goodbyes to my parents as I boarded a plane for Brazil. I hugged my father and then my mother. They instructed me to be safe, but always have fun. I turned around to walk away and my mother shouted out, "Get busy livin'!" And so I did.

Our first night in Brazil was spent in Manaus. We had spent about a day and a half in airports and airplanes before finally landing in Manaus on the evening of May 19. Once we were split into groups and settled into our rooms, we headed to dinner. By nature, I'm not an extrovert, but I'm not shy. Once I become comfortable with a person, I would assume it would be fairly easy for them to guess whom I voted for in the last presidential election and what genre of music I'm partial too. The issue is that initial meet-and-greet. I'm horrible at making new friends, so the idea of going to a foreign country with a group of people I don't know unnerved me. Naturally, dinner had me worried. This was the first time I would be in a relaxed setting with my peers and not having to worry about turbulence or if the tiny bathroom will ever be unoccupied. It was time to get down to

business and know these people. My greatest concern was not being able to relate to the younger students. A majority of the group were enough years my junior, and for most of my life, my friends and family have told me I'm an old soul, always feeling more comfortable at the grown-up table rather than the kid's table during holidays. Predictably, I sat next to the professors supervising the trip.

As the night carried on, my anxiety dissipated. In fact, I'm not sure what I was nervous about in the first place. I soon realized that all of these people, professors and students, were here to experience. Experience what? I'm not sure. But I made a mental note to find those answers before our two short weeks were up.

For dinner, Martha, the biology professor, and I shared a vegetarian plate and caipirinhas, the national drink of Brazil, were passed around. Conversations of music, family, and just pure fun filled the humid Brazilian air and before long I was laughing. Two men (from Colombia possibly) strutted to the patio where we were dining and began to play the guitar and ukulele while singing songs in Spanish.

It was a superb way to spend my first evening in Brazil. A sense of community had brought the table together. Our long table suddenly felt closer, shorter even. Our conversation spread to each end of the table. We passed around food and drinks were shared amongst each other, all while the (possibly) Colombian musicians provided our soundtrack. Our "Brazilian family" had begun to form

I took a deep breath and let what was happening around me filter through my body. Laughing, drinking, music, and soon to be friends surrounded me. Chris McCandleless' thoughts during his "Into the Wild" journey poured into my head, "True happiness is only real when shared." One traveler led me to think of another traveler.

Dylan understood true happiness and he definitely understood how to share that happiness with others. He shared that happiness with me on that Wednesday night in the local bar. He encouraged me to leave my comfort zone and discover how little I know about this world. I considered his words and what he had shared with the community during his travels abroad. In that moment, I decided I would get lost on this trip. Get lost in order to find myself.

This thought subsided and a rare and refreshing breeze blew our direction. I found it odd that on a night and in a climate where a breeze is hard to come by, one would grace me with its presence while my mind was wrapped around such a stirring message. I would later learn that this was not the last of Dylan Meier during my journey in Brazil. He would be back.

* * *

After a long day saturated with watching the sunrise, forest trekking, walking the boardwalks of Arianau, piranha fishing, and caiman catching, I couldn't imagine anything making it more fulfilling. Our night was coming to a close on a boat on the Arianau River. It was most likely around eight o'clock and dark as pitch on the water. We had just witnessed a man jump into the river and come up with a live alligator (without a shirt or shoes on, mind you). I felt as if I was on a Discovery Channel television show. Maybe I'd even have to eat some sort of insect next? But no, we began a peaceful boat ride back to our accommodations instead.

Riding back to the hotel turned out to be a sobering experience in comparison to the day's activities. My surroundings were black. I could see nothing, only hear faint whispers of the wildlife that refused to retire for the night. Our group had reached a numbing and comfortable low volume level. That is, until we looked up.

One by one, the stars emerged, the North Star, the big dipper (upside down!), and many other notable constellations. Ultimately, the entire night sky was lit. There were more stars than I had ever seen. So dense and compacted that it gave the impression of a milky canvas, swirled together in intricate loops and circles.

I thought about the vastness of up above, and the endlessness of the surrounding forest and realized the greatness of the world. And believe it or not, I was in it, under it, and all around it. My mind began to consider the implications this moment had, the balance and equilibrium that the planet and universe required in order to display such an image. Despite its limitless proportions, creation and space has the ability to share itself with one another. You can imagine in what direction my next thought went: Dylan.

I knew he had somehow allowed me to witness this. His desire for perception and experience would definitely have wanted me to witness this. I looked back up at the sky and imagined Dylan painting it, taking all of his travels and personal stories, painting an illuminated heaven, and then presenting it just like this for the entire world to see.

And then it trickled into my head again, "happiness is only real when shared." It was no longer advice—it was reality. I was busy living.

* * *

Our last days in Brazil were spent in a small town named Soure on Marajó Island. It seemed hard to believe that the trip was coming to an end and we all desperately tried to make the last days count. The professors had scheduled a trip to a nearby water buffalo farm for us to tour and explore. As we walked almost 7 kilometers around the farm, I did my best to observe and learn all that the tour guide offered us. The wildlife was rich, even on agricultural land. Every step you take there are more plants to be discovered.

We began to trek back to the road that brought us into the farm when dark, ominous clouds loomed ahead. At first, a slow and sinister wall wiped the clear, blue sky with tall and full clouds out of sight and lay stagnant, warning us of what was to come. Then, the clouds began to rotate, picking up speed with every revolution. Each loop was smaller than the next, making what looked like, to us Kansans, a funnel cloud. The cloud was circling faster and faster and soon more began to form.

Droplets began to fall out of the sky. They were large droplets, splashing against my skin in large puddles. Despite the heavy drops, the rain was light and could even be described as a sprinkle. After five minutes of only slightly getting wet, it stopped. And it seemed as if the worst was over.

We were then met with the wind—a wind of such ferocity that it even impressed a girl from the plains. It pushed against us at what could have been 48 kilometers per hour at a complete and impressive 90-degree angle. Walking became difficult. Our group began to stumble in all directions, hoping we were still on the correct path back to the dirt road.

I felt something pierce my skin, like a sharp stick blown into my arm. And then another, and another, and soon a fury of pricks perforating the flesh. The droplets became even larger and harder. It felt like a shower of hail. The hail-like rain became so dense that our vision was impaired. I reached my hand in front of me but saw nothing. We lost sight of the road and no longer knew if we were headed in the right direction.

The others fought the rain. They began to run, attempting to protect themselves with rain jackets and ponchos. After only three minutes of torrential downpour, I was completely soaking wet, from my head to my socks. I stood in the rain and opened my arms to the sky and accepted nature's acupuncture. What appeared to be a violent and vicious storm brought me absolute joy. I let it all, literally, soak in.

I continued to play in the rain, running frantically to keep up with our guide. The rain continued for 20 more minutes, as did my smile. It felt like a privilege to be graced with such a storm, a real Amazonian rain-storm. Never again will I experience a downpour to that degree. And, for that, I have Dylan to thank.

His persistence in making my trip to Brazil a more than memorable one was incessant. As the two weeks carried on, I allowed myself to open up to the experiences I was presented with as well as the people I shared them with. In the raging yet blissful storm, it came to me that this was my reward—a reward from him for my belief. I believed in his credo and his worth.

After we found shelter and settled down, I let the water run off of my body, letting the last of what Dylan had to teach me seep into my flesh and my soul. I no longer needed someone like him to guide me. I knew in that moment what I could find meaning in for the future and decided to let him set a precedent for my forthcoming resolutions. His need for knowledge and passion for experience will always be with me.

* * *

I was standing at baggage claim nervously waiting for my luggage when I heard my mother's voice.
"Maggie! You're home!"

I greeted my parents and introduced them to some of the friends I had made on the trip as well as the professors leading us on our excursion. As we said our goodbyes and walked away, my mother asked me,

"Did you get busy livin'?"

I replied, "Mom, I did so much living."



Kansas Skies #4
Tara Lynnette Skaggs
Oil on Canvas

Reverie

by April Avalon

I am breaking the vast glassy surface of make-believe seas,
As the moonlight is cutting the throat of scarlet sunrise,
I am screaming my heart out loud, I need to release
All my silently bitter emotions. I pray to the skies
To remain in this world for a lifetime and ruin it then,
In this perfect small drunken creation, in my fairytale,
In the land that's beyond now and never, some time and nowhen
And indulge in the smell of tranquility I can inhale,
Where the past in a twist with the present and future unknown
Is revealed in the blossom of orchids and blue camomiles,
Mighty lightnings of fate never strike in this land of my own,
In this place I'm the only survivor. I'll stay for a while,
Till you come to my shelter and sing me a love serenade,
As you own the key to the gates, and the key is my heart,
First you gift me a dream, then you steal it from me, then you fade,
And I wake. It's another new day. It's another new start.

Clay Chiclet

by David Shroyer

I was a shape form-fitted by a
 Firmly fitting form.
There was no wiggle room to
 Wheedle from whence
I was hatched and suckled.

I
 Leapt
 From bundled sticks
 And leaves,
My first encounter with the world outside
The molded form and...

 Gravity.

I plummeted, fast; death was a sure thing,
 But fatedly the quills emerged, then
Flight, and new life choices:
 Excessive in moderation.
And I glided,

 Hovering

The forest floor plastered with
Soggy, decomposing leaves,
And hapless decisions.

A Book of Hours
by Jefferson Holdridge

The one always contains the myriad.
The look of the individual child
Shaped by arbitrary forms
And faces not necessarily ours.
A moment at noon, a period
Of thought reflected off the stones
On the hill, so carefully piled
Surviving the Heraclitan storms
That bore such delicate flowers,
Gracing the moment, faces, bones
Of one and many. The wall warms
And Sofia walks out of the wild.
A symbol awaited and bid.
An unnamed god. A book of hours.

Come to test our faith and devotion
Mocking the “meta” and the “physics”
That built the church and support it
With the towering credo: God exists.
Come in unheralded exacting tasks
That demand our love not to fall short,
That demand again when we do,
And pound out thoughts and emotions
So supple we both become mere mimics,
Who take what we’ve shared and contort it
Beyond recognition. Each of us asks
How shall we return? The gods abort
Their plans. The woods in their darkest hue.

Lost in the wilderness, she cries
To see the animals stalk each other.
Enough once were mouth, nose, eyes.
Now the romance of father and mother
Begins with signs and the mark of the beast.
A primordial image and sweeping wind
Fecundate the scene of the feast,
Levi’s or the pagan who has sinned
Against his household gods and must
Propitiate with sacrifice
Or child murder — breaking trust.
While below the cross, they roll the dice,
The skies lower, the child is bidden.
Sofia stands who once was hidden.

Suffering like the open sea
That embraces the drowned sailor and
Offers succor in the form of Mary,
Starcrowned idol of the land,
We give her medicine and she
At first rejects it, then swallows
Its sweetness and wants more, free
For a moment from her sickness. She knows
The thin line between pain and pleasure.
We ourselves float past spheres of worry
Close by the beach's sensual leisure,
But are thrown in windless fury
To make her better tomorrow or soon.
Each day is a gift. She is our boon.

Christmas was in summer's shadow.
The trees around the house were hung
With paper ornaments. Our parents
Welcomed and walked us into the den
To say that they were dying. Each
Had been happy to be together,
As during their final years' escape
From decades of mending their lives. Again
We were packing our suitcases. We'd sung
Our carols and the pain began to show.
No one cared about the weather,
Only the atmosphere and the distance.
On google street, one cannot reach
Beyond the turn. The house is in landscape.

Poetry can't say what it meant
Later in the living room when they
Were so happy, except in the negative —
All that's never expressed is present —
And embodied: they'd watch play
Their fifth grandchild, who'd live
Only after his death and her stroke.
It must become something strange.
Making an art of how it broke
Or drifted through a mountain range.
A severed head upon a stream
Singing of the body left behind.
Out of sight, but still in mind.
It even fails its home in dream.

You know as no one else knows here
How intimate these ancient lands
Are with their coming and going
The presences that are never moral
Like time in nature, they meander
Through seaswept caves, on burning sands,
With fisherman who are towing
Their catch, on trains charging at night,
By flowering poison oleander,
In bedrooms meant to challenge sight,
With silverfish among the coral.
For those who feel their new emotion,
The gods appear and disappear,
Surface, light and vast as the ocean.

On the bottom of the sea, lights play
In shifting squares that match the surface
Waves, reflecting the sun in motion.
The two levels mirror, but only blend
At night, fractured every day.
Across the stones, an intricate lace
Of moss has grown in broken sun.
Subconsciousness will never end
In search of what is always missing.
The seafloor fissures. The water's wild,
As lava makes titanic war
Until it hits the surface hissing
Of currents, tides, the changing shore.
The waters break and bear the child.



Sirens
Jesa Townsend

My Blue Escape, My Otherness of Being by Catalina Florina Florescu

I have never exhibited an acrobat's skills, but I have decided to tightrope on myself, my past, and loss of mom. We are so in tune with pain, we do not want to escape its stickiness. From childhood onward, we keep a diary of what and when something went wrong (but rarely why that happened). Tonight we will play a game called "The moment we fell in love with ourselves. Part one: Dissection of the self." I close my eyes, and feel mom touching my forehead. She wears her exquisitely translucent, goddess-like nakedness. She assures me that the instant we lose our corporeality, we are evolutionarily superior, that is, pain-free. Then she adds that when people are finally disembodied, they experience the opposite of "dieting," restrictively short, earthly pleasure. People are in a waterfall of ecstasy throughout their afterlife. "Child, how did you find me? Do not get me wrong; I am actually thrilled that we have finally met again. I have been waving at you for eighteen years." I do not answer her. I let silence interfere for fear I might say something out of place, and make her disappear.

* * *

I am dressed up in a suave blue dress. I wear a hat with small blue appliqué flowers that mom has lent me. I am in the high school auditorium. We are about to start our graduation show. There is the unavoidable excitement and chaos. I have just finished first grade. Mom sits next to grandma in the front row. I think that Mari, my older sister, is there, too, but I cannot visually find her seat. As usual, dad is caught up at work, and misses the event. I wear a blue dress to symbolize a flower, like, maybe, a hydrangea. I am seven and a half years old. After ten years, mom is dead. I am 36 years old now.

Like her two favorite movie stars, Romy Schneider and Marilyn Monroe, mom died when she was young, too. She was only 45. Because of personal medical history, my doctor urges me to have mammograms ten years before the age of mom at death. I had one recently. The results were good, but for how long?! If mom had not died, she would have been 64 years old. How would she have looked in her fifties, sixties, seventies? My emotional retina has retained a special image of her, years before cancer abusively lodged rent free in her beautiful body.

* * *

When I grew up in communist Romania, few people had cameras. People used them for special, once-in-a-lifetime occasions, like weddings, graduations, or memorable summer vacations. No one would have ever dared to waste a frame on a person dying. It would have been outrageous and distasteful. Even more importantly, it would have denied our analog camera's main purpose that exclusively recorded edited happiness. In retrospect, I wish I had taken thousands of pictures of mom in order to better remember her ordeal visually, analyze her gradually emaciating body, and kiss her deformed-by-cancer right breast and armpit.

Instead, I possess a poetic image of mom. I wonder if I may, perhaps, use a computer's program to reconstruct mom's physiognomy. Usually desperate parents, who refuse to believe that their abducted kid is lost forever, rely on such programs. But could I ever muster the courage to accept an artificial image of mom? A computer rightly disregards people's variable emotions, pains, and longings. All this crazy stuff belongs only to human beings.

I have made a pact with myself to chant daily that mom is not exactly gone. I dream that, at her time of death, she let her body be transformed into sand. Every single time I go to a beach, I touch her, and she kisses my skin. This may also explain why I refuse to take a shower upon returning home. I want mom, now in a suave form of tiny particles of sand, to find a gate beyond my opaque epidermis. Once inside me, I allow mom to generously deposit herself into a huge castle of sand. I play a reversed, protective role now: I am mom's container, her hourglass. She is the sand that pours into me and makes my body rattle.

* * *

We wear our bodies almost uninterruptedly, from dawn until night. I admire my own fabric, stitches, meat, and bones. But fabrics do break eventually. We are made of wounds and of words. God yelled, "Let there be light!" to make us see one another and start talking and embracing. Or maybe he ordered light to be so that we may undress ourselves collectively, and expose our perpetually transforming nakedness. By the way, when one is close to dying, one is unrecognizable. That person has become a ruin, a site of accumulated lacerations. Paradoxically, even those corporeally stigmatic signs vanish, as if they never mocked an embodiment.

* * *

Traveling back and forth on partly recollected, half-erased images of mom, I reach my childhood. This time I do not play with dolls. Instead, mom is my partner on an old wooden seesaw. We tell each other stories to keep us warm and close. We sip wine infused with a touch of cinnamon. We wear matching turquoise scarves. I recount to her my becoming a mother. She almost faints at hearing the news. She travels in time to re-encounter

herself as mother. This shared space becomes our intimate closure. I have recently discovered that each night mom comes on an abundant tide into my dreams, and sneaks out when I yawn in the morning. She is my divine blue escape, my otherness of being.

Buttercream

by J.D. Isip

after she had worked her way through the Avon catalogue –
each of us acquiring a dozen flavored lip gloss tubes,
bottles of bubble gum bubble bath, scented candles
we'd light up over the sink (just in case)
black cherry kissing our hands
losing ourselves when it was okay –
she took a Wilton's class downtown on cakes

cross shaped and rabbit shaped and Easter egg oval
silver pans with convenient holes inviting the purchaser
to display them like trophies of culinary feats
artistic prowess never reached
in their splendid, dust-covered perfection
all gathered in enormous bags, put on layaway
to dream of being useful and providing

she flipped through photo albums
at the panadería – birthday cakes with plastic Smurfs,
tiny babies and storks, Mickey Mouse with off colors,
wedding cakes trying to outdo one another
like the dresses in the shop next-door
where Sylvia, the seamstress, told her
she looked like she could sew

she believed she could... or would
and poured herself, and, sometimes, the entire
check from Welfare, into the towers
of garish white cakes that climbed and climbed
to the PVC couples that always outlasted
some sailor who bought us ice cream
but never promised to do it again

one stick of soft butter, sugar, a little milk, mix
whatever flavor that fits, whatever color is left
my arm mimicking hers – the luxury of a mixer
I can afford now, but I like the motion
circles I can control
fist tight and sure, around and around
sweetness to cover any damn thing you please

I Drug Him Further

by Isaac Spear

Introduction

When you stand at the edge of a canyon, look down. You see the rock just beneath your feet that might be a million years old, then look all the way down to the bottom and see some that are billions. It's full history that stands strong enough to support me standing on the top. Yet I will never know what happened to cause this or, more importantly, why. Our lives are sculpted by those that came before us and gave us that granite foundation. We will sculpt our layer of the canyon by smoothing a sandstone blanket of knowledge, wisdom, and traditions on the very top. Sooner or later, we all will pass, leaving only that sandstone layer behind. It is only then that we will see how the wind and rain carve into the blanket of our whole life's work. It is our responsibility to smooth that layer well enough to someday form that strong granite foundation that we once stood upon. Without each of our strong layers, others after us building upon our layer would all fall, should ours crumble. We must enforce it with good morals, pack it with wisdom, smooth it with knowledge and coat it with tradition. It is only then that our layer will contain the ingredients for that granite layer for the many others that may come after us to stand upon.

This is the story of a man who lived his whole life fighting for that granite foundation, a man that understood that the future rests in the hands of the youth, they are a ball of clay, and we have the sculpting knife. It's about a man that wanted nothing more than for his layer of the canyon to last forever, and to allow the many others that will follow to stand atop and look down. They won't be looking down a rusted, sandstone canyon but rather on their own life, with experience to share and wisdom to pass down. It's this tradition that creates such a rich and valuable life for the many others that had the opportunity to absorb all that they could from this special man. It's all about what they contribute to the canyon and what they will leave for others to stand atop and build upon. This is his story.

His Story

I drug him further. Not because I wanted to, but because I had to. It was three years ago when I signed onto this mess. It was an early mornin', like every morning. It was still as dark as the coffee that filled my cup. If you listened closely you could hear the sun turning in bed and rubbing his eyes as he began to rise and put on his work boots.

I was out in the field when Mr. Gordan came up to me, "Follow me son," he said, squinting through the darkness.

His vision was rough when it was noon, lord knows what he was seein' now. I was extremely puzzled; work was nowhere near finished. I had only started bustin' the rows less than an hour ago.

"Wipe that look off your face boy, you look dumber than a stump."

"Yes sir" I replied with little hesitation.

"I been thinkin' 'bout it, you and I best take the weekend off, I believe we have a date," he said with a chuckle. "Go saddle up and pack things for three days. We'll be off at daybreak."

I did just that. I was excited to see what old man had in store for me. There was an odd feeling in my stomach, though, one I couldn't really explain. It's been nine years now since I started working for Mr. Gordan. I've been mad, pissed off, confused, disappointed, and about any other feeling you can choke out. I ain't never felt this way before, I was scared and I had no idea why.

I stumbled around in the haze back to the tack shed and threw two saddles on the fence. I grabbed our bedrolls and tied them behind the cantle on the saddle. I grabbed a pitchfork and fished around knocking things off the rafters where I remembered seeing the saddle bags. Finally the fourth one fell down and hit me in the head. I threw them on the fence along with the saddles. I packed some nuts and grain for the horses and filled up the canteens. The Old Man always liked to shoot small game along the way for supper, so the rifle came along, too. I threw all our things in the saddlebags, saddled up the old buckskin just as Mr. Gordan rode up beside me on his bay.

"We're burnin' daylight son, get a move on, we got things to do." He barked. And sure enough, just like the Old Man said, we were off at daybreak.

* * *

The cold bit at my ears. This wasn't like the friendly gnawing from an anxious puppy dog, but more like I had a Caiman chewing on my face. I have been out in the cold weather for long enough that the wishes of my body warming up turned to wishes that it would grow colder so I'd go numb. There was not a living thing in sight. Any animal out in this weather was plumb foolish. Would this be my last trip? Would I let Mr. Gordan down? Would this place be a good enough compromise for him? These questions crossed my mind over and over again.

"No, No, No!" I shouted, continuing to push on.

North and South turned to rough bark on an old spruce and an oddly plied heap of oak leaves. East and West turned to the gash from a lightning strike on an adolescent aspen and the ancient Liken perched atop a balanced boulder on the mountainside above me.

Icicles formed on his chin as two clouds of steam bellowed from his nostrils with every step. The weight of the sled was gaining on us and dragging us down. I had very little food left and my water was frozen. The old buckskin knew what we were doing and he knew where we were going: it seemed as though I was just along for the ride. I bowed my head as it was my last attempt to find strength. I finished my prayer, hoping that was enough. I just couldn't understand that a man could live for nearly a century and still be so damn heavy. We pressed on for five hours, right after left, right after left. My fingers froze to the reins.

* * *

We started riding; I grew more and more anxious as we went. So many things were downright strange today.

It was more than three hours before I rode up beside Mr. Gordan and piped up, "Are we going back to the Big Horns sir?"

"Well son, does a bear shit in the woods?" he said with the best condescending voice he could muster.

"Yes sir," I rambled off, "I was just curious as to where we might be headed so early in the mornin'."

He cut me off, "Son, you can't learn nothin' if your mouth's a-jawin'. Now hush up and listen," he said. "You think you know me, don't you?"

He looked at me with the deepest stare, like he was trying to get to know my ancestors.

He continued before I could answer, "Hell no you don't, and you ain't goin' to before I'm pushin' up daisies in some podunk corn field."

He looked back the other way, it was obvious he was making a point not to look at me.

"Looks like I best help you out a bit," he said as he replaced his condescending tone with compassion. I had never seen this side of him before; this tone grew in his voice and I didn't recognize it. It's a tone that only comes from wisdom. He was pulling from his whole life's experiences to finish each sentence. I rode along beside him and he continued to not look at me. His head was cocked sideways and he gazed off ahead of us, looking for something to help him put his pride away and tell me what he had to.

"What do I do, boy?" he asked. I looked at him with that puzzled look again. "Son, you know I don't like that look. You best wipe it off before I do." I smiled as he asked his question again, re-phrasing it slightly, "Why have I lived my life the way that I have? Why do I do what I do? Don't go answerin' it now, ride for a while, think about it son, it's why we're out here this mornin'. You go on ahead and enjoy the scenery for a while and pipe up when you think you've got it figured."

I thought for what must have been hours. The sun came up and it went back down. We didn't speak for the rest of the first day of our journey. The Old Man wasn't ever one to talk your ear off but it was obvious he was hittin' on a soft spot and didn't know how to handle it. We came to a clearing that was fit to stay the night. I unpacked my bedroll in a clearing about ten yards from Mr. Gordan and turned our horses out to graze for the evening.

I rose the next morning to Mr. Gordan sitting on a log around a pit of smoldering coals; I'm sure he'd been there all night long. The silence was so golden but I had to talk to him.

"Good mornin'," I said, as naturally as I could. It was obvious that I was nervous.

"You got it figured yet?" he ranted back.

"Is it. . . is it. . ." I stammered.

"Well don't choke on it son, I'd feel bad if I my horse had to drag you all the long way down the mountain if you died," he said laughing.

I laughed and tried again, "Because you love it sir? It's your life!"

“What is?” he asked.

“Everything sir,” I said. “Your work, your animals, your friends, your land.”

He looked at me for the first time in about three hours. Compassion leaked from his tone to his stare.

“Why do I treat them with such pride and respect?” he stuttered a bit as he blindly grabbed for the right word to start his sentence. Without leaving time for me to respond, he answered, “It’s because I want to leave them behind. I want my experience and wisdom to be passed on through the things I have left when I’m gone.”

I started to think about the significance of what I was hearing. He kept talking as my mind drifted everywhere. It could have been thirty seconds or it could have been hours. I’ll never know what he said as my mind wondered.

“Boy, are you listenin’ to a damn thing I’m sayin’?”

“Well, yes sir,” I lied. I couldn’t have told you if he was talkin’ about goats or about his mother-in-law.

“I’m bout to ask you somethin’ boy, and the ball, as they say, is gonna be in your court now.”

I smiled as if I knew what he was talking about. To tell you the truth, I was nervous to the core and I couldn’t even tell you the start of what he was about say.

“Are you listenin’ real careful-like, son? I’m only gonna say this once,” he spouted off.

* * *

I stopped and stepped off to check the riggin’. I pried my fingers from the rock-hard reins. The straps were wearing badly and there wasn’t much I could do now. I did the best I could to refasten the sled; there was a crack growing in the wood from all the bouncing around. I threw another strap around it and tied it off, hoping that would be enough. I have 13 more miles to go. I climbed on top again and gave him a kick. Thirteen, I thought, over and over again, it’s plumb straight bad luck. Again we got movin’, draggin’ one hundred years behind me, and back in the Big Horns we went. I drug him further and further.

* * *

He paused for a minute as we tacked up the horses and packed up camp. It was another 3 hours before he continued our morning conversation.

“I’ll have you do one last thing for me, and that’ll be all that’s left. Boy, it ain’t gonna be easy and my family will be as mad as a coop of old wet hens. You’ll know that it’s what I want and that’s all that matters.” He chuckled a bit as he looked up ahead of him. I could tell he was thinking long and hard. “I’ll warn you once about my wife, if there’s one thing I can teach you ‘bout her, like all women, it’s that you best not get into a pissing contest with a skunk.”

I laughed, perhaps a bit more than I should have. I was so grateful for a bit of humor though. There was enough of this serious stuff to last me for the next 10 years. “Gene,” he said loudly, like he was trying to wake me up or something. I spun my head around quick enough to get a crick in my neck. I thought something might have happened to the Old Man.

“We’re here,” he said. It was music to my ears. He stopped in a small clearing, not 10 yards long. “Look up!” he said, overjoyed.

I was able see forever. To the right I could see a farmer busy at work on his field. I could almost smell his sweat running from his forehead to his hands and onto the worn, cracked wood handles of the plow. Good-old-fashioned elbow grease, as Mr. Gordan liked to call it. If there was one thing I learned from him, it was hard work. Just beyond the plow lines, a tanker truck backed under a water tower. All day the sand will breathe its heat waves before being doused with a cold shower. There was a lake in the distance that reflected the snow-capped mountains with an effervescent glow. The many vehicles moving around reminded me of my favorite ant-hill I used to pester all summer long.

“Well, this is enough beatin’ round the bush ain’t it, least for a slick-nuttid kid like you.” he said as he stepped off his horse and grabbed a rein.

I snickered. I had no idea what he was implying at the time but I laughed anyway.

“Boy, when I die, you and I will take one last journey together, just you and I, for the last time, just how we are together now.”

He paused for a moment.

“I guess a bit different, there will be one horse and much more wood. I would like to see you as the last

person I see.”

He paused for a minute as he kicked around on the ground in search for something. It was then that it dawned on me: I started to choke up and it was all I could do to stop the tears—never could I let him see me cry. This was the first time I understood how much I meant to the man. My eyes puffed up like dead toads as a single tear made its trail from my eye, down my cheek and around my chin. I’ll never know if he saw it though. Mr. Gordan found the remnants of a termite-eaten pine branch and jammed it in the ground so it was standing tall and proud.

“Here,” he said, “right here, this is where I wish to spend all of eternity. Boy, you will never tell a soul where this is. I want to be cherished by the tangible, useful things I leave behind, not by my grave. I don’t want those damn flowers spread out everywhere like it’s New Year’s confetti and people blubbering like fools over my tombstone; people can find a better use for their time and money. Son, you just tell them I’m in the Big Horns and I’ll always be watching. Can you do that son?” he asked.

“Yes, sir,” I replied quickly with a choked voice. “I would be honored to, sir.”

* * *

I started counting the trees I passed. If the branch touched me, it got two points; if it was broken, it didn’t get any; and if it was close I gave it one point: 738, 740, 740, 741. I was being ridiculous and foolish but it was my only attempt to forget about my frost-bitten fingers, and the absence of a nose or ears. Sure enough, it passed the time, about nine and a half miles of it to be exact. I began to hear Mr. Gordan creakin’ behind me, like he could feel where we were. To me, it said that I was on the right path, but I was nervous. The Old Man always told me a solid nail never spoke. These nails were sure as hell speakin’; in fact, they were having a damn party. Nerves ran through my blood. Every time I looked back I feared I would see one side missing and something roll out on to the mountainside. Ahead I saw the gash I was looking for. That same young adolescent aspen was just to my left, and soon after that, I saw my oddly piled heap of stones and oak leaves. For three years they had stayed there. To think that the last person they looked up at was Mr. Gordan yellin’ at me, “Don’t destroy the landscape like a damn fool.”

I could see up ahead a small pointed branch leaning to one side, buried in the ground. I knew what that was. I stepped off my Buckskin and he just stood there. I lowered the sled and laid it on the ground. It was just then that he bowed his head and let it rest on the coffin. I untied my shovel and began to dig as once again a tear rolled its way down my cheek and over my chin where it sat for a moment and froze. I dug and dug, six feet down. I lifted the top of the sled as Mr. Gordan worked his way lower and lower into the earth. Old Buckskin left his muzzle on the head of the coffin till it was too low in the ground to reach. One more tear met the others now frozen on my chin. This one I am sure that Mr. Gordan saw.

What Poor Lighting Will Do To A Soul

by Elijah Kampsen

I sit across a crowded city bus,
my pencil scribbling this lead-based lust.
These days are short, my nights are long,
my thoughts of you have never been so wrong.

Such dreams whitewash my subconscious sub conscience.
The light is much too bright to see.
I throw off the covers and slide to the hardwood floor,
“What is it you want from me?”

I want the most pure of ideas to run over me, and
I want this train of thought to derail violently.



Night Exposures #1
Zachary Powell
Photography

Rule #25

by Dylan Bandel

How long have I been waiting for that day
When I make you smile, when I grant you mirth?
It is yet to come, to show me my worth.
With faith in my heart, for that chance I pray.

Never apart, with ambition I stay,
The purpose for which God designed my birth.
Sometimes I doubt that I'll ever unearth
The key to your smile, or my heart obey.

I'll walk but one path, for which I was bred;
The journey is long, the going is rough,
Yet I walk for you, lest my works be dead.

Should you give me your tears, my blood I'll shed;
Your content is for me more than enough
Might that I bear your ache and pain instead.

25. A true lover considers nothing good except what he thinks will please his beloved.
Andreas Capellanus, *The Art of Courtly Love*.

Dreaming Ophelia

by Angela Zito

Floating between banks, mallard hens call home
to chicks roaming the Kalamazoo, swollen
in springtime. Little girls race dandelions
and forget-me-nots near The Forks, where they
bob, drown, resurface in the turbulence
of rapids in separation—where north
and south branches lose touch with each other
as one splits town and one runs by First
United. But I know that branch paces
in the woods, impatiently, like women
in town pace waiting for husbands, boyfriends,
sons, fathers, brothers, someone to fix
the crack that's been in the Buick's windshield
to call come home to leave for good.

*

We had to leave at mom's call to come home.

North twenty miles, she took a back road alone.

We fought over music. Settled for radio.

As the last track finished, she hit eject.

My brother drove (going only ten over).

She filed the disc while coasting through a yellow.

He moved the rear-view to look at the storm.

She turned on the wipers, found a new CD.

I said, "It's probably raining in Clarkston,"

Her two-door slid, hissed, became a hydro-plane.

and I watched the sunset scarlet gray clouds.

Three youngish trees, the guardrail, her neck: snapped.

God, I'd never seen such a violet red.

Somewhere her father said, "No, she's not home."

*

No I said Home somewhere between the bar
and his apartment, but the cabbie didn't
hear me over his breathing on my neck—
warm tides of bottled ego imbibed
before the cab ride now inundate lips,
mouth, tongue motioning wildly for air
after he knocked the wind out of me
tackling me onto the bed, sweaty

fingers tearing dress down from pale breasts
rising and falling in strange darkness
that feels like water, kicking with heels on
and drowning under his heavier body—windless
in the Windy City—unromantic
tragedy I once saw on television.

*

I once saw on television a real
non-miracle: *Basiliscus plumifrons*
ran across the water's surface with wildly
beating limbs, reached the other side as if
it never left land.

The Jesus Christ Lizard.

Believers in miracles misunderstand
the tension beneath its feet, ten thousand
hydrogen bonds rallying at the moment
of impact.

Once, my father cried on my shoulder.

Without warning — Jesus — in the kitchen
his dihydrogen oxide beat atoms
of anguish across the surface of my skin.

And my molecules maintained their bonds, buoyed
my father from one side to the other.

*

From one side to the other, our father
laughed as we paddled across the Au Sable.
He sat behind my brother and me, steering
the vessel I couldn't help but think waterlogged.
Our mother sat at the bow, her back to us
stiff against her children's clumsy strokes
battling the current. There in the middle,
between his too-easy laugh and her silence,
I could see my mother's face in profile
watching wry water slip beneath the canoe
as if watching a bathtub drain empty.
I thought to tip the boat. Maybe then she'd speak
scream or sing. Maybe then her lips would part
that missed the chance to have said I'm leaving.

*

I missed the call that would have said Gina
died in a car crash last night. Instead,
I found it on the answering machine
after my grandma's coo: Just want to say hi.
Two calls confirmed that teenagers could die

and a third secured me a ride out
of this house I could not find God in, though
I dented deep through the drywall looking.
South, drive south. Away from where her widowed,
daughterless father grieved; He was down here,
near the Pontiac Silverdome where clouds
pelted pavement a darker gray. I stopped, ran,
kicked, splashed, knelt, cried against faithless thunder
bare-kneed somewhere beneath the dome's lighting.

*

Somewhere below bare knee islands I've lost
my hands and feet in tepid bathwater.
Couldn't recall them to action if I

wanted to. But I don't. Eyes closed,
I sing giddy, grieving ditties with no tune
to myself and the ghosts within me:

They bore me barefaced on the bier,
Hey non nonny, nonny, hey nonny.

I dream myself Ophelia, clothed in flowers
and madness, drifting in this river clogged
with dandelions, thoughts and remembrance,

singing (Dear Lord) we know what we are, but
not what we may be. Till heavy with drink,
I'll call this home : floating between banks.



Kansas Skies #2
Tara Lynnette Skaggs
Oil on Canvas

“You Gonna Be Up All Night”

by J.D. Isip

the black preacher on midnight radio warns
an emmm-hmming congregation
who might challenge him about, “Don’t nowhere
in the Bible say ten percent...” and he
laughing at their ignorance (though they are not)
says again, “You gonna be up all night!”
as I’ve decided against the porn and the dark room
of empty motions
and turned him on for a reprieve,
some easy grace about superhero Jesus
swooping down to hand me my mat and say, “Walk!”
this is not what I wanted

to hear
him tell it, I think to myself, now searching
through a million body frieze pages, to hear
him laughing all oooh-hoo “I’m tell-ing, you... yeees, sir!”
God’s got a sense of humor at least

live-chat rooms have that nostalgic 90s thing
when I’d type myself into an adult, experienced
enough to catch the innuendo, “I’d like to log onto you!”
so I pause when the offer blinks over the Coach
who just told a shirtless teammate, “How can I
keep you on the team, son?”
and he’s shirtless, too, because he knows
there’s gonna be hell to pay. But the memory
passes and I click to close the screen
but it misses and turns him back on
out of sight, just his voice under the teammate, under the Coach
“You gonna be up all night! Yeees, sir!”

On a Former Lover’s Hands (or Faith, Suspended)

by Angela Zito

I learn to pray	watching him play piano:
hands transpose	service sprawled in sheets
lined with Italian	italics (not the Latin my lips
puckered around	poised to sputter, spit up)
he lets fingers read	and write, ring black & white
knolls that hallow	each three-knuckled halleluiah
and I sing a subtle	diphthong: sing Amen—
choke at the harsh	annunciation of our discord.

Scenes
by Tucker Wilson

The Beginning

Sometime in the year 2003, DeAndre begins his fight in the world. He was planned, sort of, and is the fourth child of his 22 year-old mother. It was not a ceremonial birth. No bright stars, no balloons, no bubble gum cigars, no father. Although experienced, DeAndre's mother was not overly responsible with DeAndre throughout the pregnancy. She ate frequently, appeasing the appendage in her abdomen with Ramen Noodles, KFC, and Zebra Cakes. She washed it down with whatever alcohol she could find and the occasional hint of nicotine to aid digestion. Nevertheless, DeAndre is born, and his mother does love him. She loves him as much as a single mother, food stamps, and hand-me-downs can.

Elementary School

DeAndre loves school. He loves taking the bus and thinking of his favorite song, "The Wheels on the Bus." He sings it over and over under his breath the entire ride to and from school. Sometimes he doesn't want to leave the bus. He likes the mustache of the red-cheeked bus driver, the green seats with funny letters, and the way his body bounces up and down when they hit a bump.

He's a quiet kid in class. He listens, head perched up and eyes wide, when his teachers talk. In the first weeks-years of school, when he is called on by one of his teachers, DeAndre simply smiles at them and agrees with whatever they are saying.

"DeAndre, can you tell me what you are drawing there?"

"Yes."

"Is it a dinosaur?"

"Dinosaur. Yes."

"Or is it a dog?"

"Dog. Yes."

Only two weeks into his education he is labeled as remedial. He is placed into a one-on-one reading program. He loves hearing the way someone older than him reads. He listens intently to the way his clear, white-skinned and red-haired tutor reads with such emotion, slowing down and then racing and raising her voice when something important or exciting is about to happen. She helps him learn the alphabet and he reads the word "mop," but then she is gone. Meanwhile, his classmates shoot up their hands to read aloud and bring books home. DeAndre takes home a book from the library every week too. He likes ones with animals on the covers, and he likes the way the librarian smiles about every book he checks out.

When DeAndre goes home, he comes home to his mother on the couch. He is engrossed with Wiley the Coyote and Roadrunner; he wishes Wiley would catch him, just one time. Later in the evening, when he hears his mother shouting vulgarity or crying because of the many men that visit his home, he reaches for the plastic bag with a library book enclosed. He lies on his bed, stares at the pages, and imagines he is reading with his teacher or tutor, laughing or gasping depending on what he determines is going on.

Middle School

Now DeAndre walks to school. They are three blocks of head-down, hood up, and quick-footed travel. Some of the neighborhood guys already have tattoos declaring their induction to the local gang. DeAndre doesn't fit in with this crowd, but they follow him like a dark shadow.

Ever since "remedial" was labeled next to his name, teachers have treated DeAndre different. He can hear them slow down and announce their language when asking him a question; he can feel them squinting over his shoulder as he reads aloud at a fourth grade level, now in eighth. DeAndre doesn't take home books from the library anymore. Instead, when the class is brought to the library, he walks aimlessly through the adolescent literature aisles and scans the titles. When he is feeling brave he checks out a book he can read, and says to the librarian, "I hope my little sister likes this one," or, "My little brother likes mysteries, just like I do."

High School

This is where there is supposed to be a lucky break. There is supposed to be a cool teacher with black-rimmed glasses and nonchalant fashion, who inspires DeAndre. They study Shakespeare, examine metaphors, and talk about what it really means to be a "man." This teacher then helps DeAndre apply for college, and a student, who once didn't believe he would graduate high school, is going to college on a fully paid scholarship.

Either that, or DeAndre is supposed to develop a talent for writing raps, or impress wide-eyed scouts with his slam dunks and quarterback sacks, or somehow strike it rich, like his mother wins the lottery. Instead, DeAndre realizes he is not smart enough to go to college a few weeks into his freshman year. He doesn't have a computer to apply, he has never been able to form a strong thesis statement, and he starts hanging out with the kids from the neighborhood. Most days he ends up meeting his friends at the playground or an abandoned warehouse, not school. They smoke and steal. Because of his size, his friends use him to intimidate others. He relishes the role. Books slam to the ground, bodies against lockers, and his elbows against eye sockets. His heart develops a deep hate for his mother, his bastard father. His two younger siblings are the only things that keep him going home. One night he makes time for his younger sister to read to him. She is much smarter than him. He thinks she has a real chance to make it to college, but when she corrects him on the word, "responsibility," a word he didn't know and skipped, he silently stands up, tells his sister he has to go, and heads to the playground. He thinks of his mother, stoned and drooling on the couch, all the men at his house that he never could call dad, and how the darn coyote could never catch the stupid roadrunner. It's a cold night, and his tears feel warm falling down his face as he walks toward his future.

Prague Fugue for A.M. Klein

by Rebecca Papucaru

Captured curating loss:
A fraternity of specialists
In white coats under yellow badges.

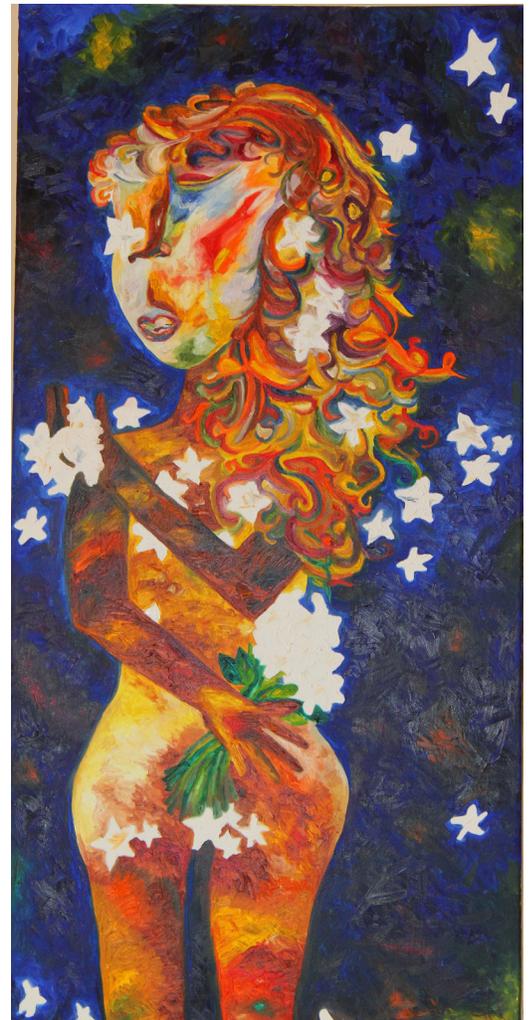
Kindlers of ash, they cull husks to be glassed,
Gather bones broken in far-ranging places.
No telling the temperature of their hours,
They have bankers' boxes for pillows,
And a private's rations.

How to keep hands steady while sorting
Jewish motes, indexing echoes?
I picture them, when marble heads are turned, filching
From the relics displayed before us.
A speck from a silver spice box, unembossed.
A blue thread dangling from a prayer shawl
For young boy, c. 1811.
A nail's worth of wax from the dormant
Pit of a menorah, provenance doubtful.

Smuggled under the tongue, a dot
Small enough to run any gauntlet
Will harden into new enamel for fissured souls.
But for now, the throbbing toothache of reprieve.

This is Holocaust Industry, this anthem
Composed for typewriter and index card.

Jews, where are your musicians?



Stars or Flowers
Jesa Townsend

The Worker

by David Shroyer

The saw blade takes small bites with every pull. The red-white fibers spray back and forth with every push and pull of the handle. Snap! The limb breaks off from too much pressure. Damnit, he thinks. That happened to half the limbs he cut today. He is doing a sloppy job, but he only has a little more to do. He grabs for the last limb and starts to go at it. It only takes a few seconds for the blade to find its groove—it always does. How long had he been doing this, and he was still the low man on the crew? He wants to do what the older guys do. He wants the other guys' job: the more important gig. They would come in first, like they were important or something, and whack away all day. Then he would come in, cut everything up, clean up their mess, and make everything look pretty.

"Hey, Blake. You almost done over there?" his boss shouts.

Blake? Why did everyone call him by his last name? Every crew he had ever been on, they would always call him by his last name.

"Yeah boss, I'm about done," he retorts quietly.

He is about halfway through the last limb; he knows this because the color and fibers of the mist change from reddish-white to yellowish-red. The middle was always the worst part to cut through. Not because it was hard or anything, but because it always seemed to take the longest after he got to the middle. Also, in his haste to cut all the way through, he would put too much down-pressure on the side he was holding and snap through, leaving a rough and jagged edge. It really didn't matter though—it just didn't look professional like that. . .to him at least. He knew it would all get destroyed. After every time he would break one, he would tell himself to slow down. The workload would never stop. After this job they would just head to the next: it never ended.

His boss would always harp at him to take pride in his job. He has been, but he hasn't got many advances for his efforts. That's why he has been jumping from crew to crew. He always feels like he is under appreciated and underpaid. He can't keep living on these wages for very much longer—he has kids to think about, a family. If he had a higher up position he would get a raise, but he's been waiting for a long time and gotten nothing.

"Wait until someone leaves and a spot opens up, then we'll get you right in."

How many times had he heard that one? He could do their job. Actually, he likes watching the other guys work, with their pride in "taking another one down." Watching them hit the ground always gave him chills. The other guys never mess one thing up, and nobody on the crew ever gets hurt. He could do that, but that's something he always thinks about, the danger. Even though he likes the work, sometimes he thinks about a different occupation. Even though he's a little peon, he still has a dangerous job. What if he got hurt—who would take care of his family? His crew? Yeah, right.

He gets down to the last strokes. This is when he needs the finesse of a woman—soft and easy strokes, and a light grip. He isn't going to break this one, not this time. He slows his strokes down and eases up on the pressure. Tink! He feels the saw blade cut clean through the bone. He smiles. The sinewy tendons pull and push with the blade. They always get caught under the notches, but he can't just rip it off: he's got to take pride in his work.

With the last few strokes through the flesh, the tendons sever and he slices the skin like bologna. He tosses the arm into the bathtub, drops the bloody saw on the plastic tarp, and walks over to the chemicals. He looks them over carefully, scanning them cautiously. Sulfuric or hydrofluoric acid, he thinks to himself. He looks back at the tub to see if it's porcelain or cast-iron. The claw feet of the tub indicate cast-iron. Half these chemicals will eat right through a porcelain tub and clean through the floor. He slips on black, glossy, industrial rubber gloves and grabs the hydrofluoric acid and walks casually to the tub, flips the cap, then slowly and methodically pours the acid in. Instantly he smells the chemical going to work: the acrid stench of the corroding flesh flows up his nostrils. Damn!—he forgot a mask. He cranes his neck back to avoid the solution's intoxicating power until the bottom of the tub is coated with a frothing soup of torso and limbs. It doesn't take much for this stuff to work. It will eat through anything.

As he hovers over the bathtub watching the acid work, he thinks about asking his boss one more time about a raise or a promotion. He can't keep doing this for chump-change. You would think working for the mob would pay better. If he doesn't get a raise then he might quit this time. He could probably find a job were he could utilize his skills. It might be a slight pay cut, but he could at least advance with his kind of aptitude. What could he be? A carpenter. . .no, a lumberjack.

**One Lost Year:
Photography, Haiti, and Recomposing a Few Memories**
by Christopher Garland

1. It's now more than a year after the earthquake—the catastrophe that transformed Haiti from just another “failed state” to a country worth international attention—and I am looking back over the photos I took when I visited Port-au-Prince.

2. I went to Haiti to write two stories: one for a newspaper in New Zealand, one for a magazine in New York. I had pitched a story about Cite Soleil, the largest slum in Western Hemisphere. I told the editors that it was about seeing the slum; this was before the earthquake, so the “unknown” element of Haiti may have been the reason it garnered interest from the two publications.

3. The thing is this: The people of Cite Soleil have seen people like me before. When I say people like me, I include a range of people who were, in my opinion, nothing like me. However, I now know that people like me could include any of the following: a filmmaker from Paris; a sociologist from a large public university in the Midwest of the United States; a print journalist from a big news outlet in Britain; an expert on sanitation from South Florida; a humanitarian from New York City. These people (of which I am one) go to Haiti and they take notes “on the ground.” We try to talk to the locals: Interview time! We take photos of the bullet-holes in the walls and the rivers of trash and the kids with no clothes. But most of all we look at the people of Cite Soleil and the spaces where they live. We take more photos.

4. The taking of photos is compulsive because I've stopped trusting my memory. The taking of photos is necessary because I've spent money to get to Haiti; moreover, the editor in New York told me the quality of the photos determines whether or not the article gets published.

5. Many of the people in Cite Soleil do not like this looking (understandably enough), so they will cover their faces before a camera is raised. They will shout—“No photo!”—before we clamber out of a truck. They will stare back, meeting the outsider's gaze with their own. They will act as if we are not there, because soon we won't be there.

6. In using the term “they,” I am identifying a subject; this is written into the design of a sentence. They being the “others”: the subjects in the photos whose images sit in a folder on the desktop of my computer.

7. The residents of Cite Soleil know that these photos and the film footage are worth money. They know that they fit an expectation of the worst of slum living. They know that the images are sometimes designed to evoke pity. They know that there is a “They.” They know that the photos are tied into the economy where “they” are sold: words and photos describing “them” between ads for cut-price furniture, perfume, and car rentals.

8. After reviewing a short piece I wrote about Cite Soleil, an editor tried to insert the phrase “inherently impoverished” into one of the opening paragraphs. It was an interesting suggestion because what I was trying to convey in the piece was the exact opposite. I felt really good about myself for knowing how wrong that was — “inherently”! — but I also knew I would compromise on other issues. Why? Because I had spent a lot of money and time getting to Haiti to take photographs of what the UN once called “the most dangerous place on earth.” I thought (think?) that I deserved to.

9. Another editor asked for more “blood and dust.” Even now I'm not sure that I know what that means. In the end the article was stripped down a bit, but it was published. Some money (not much) went into my bank account in New Zealand.

10. On my first night in Port-au-Prince the loud pops ringing out through the night are gunshots. My camera, which is a cheap thing, is in my backpack next to me. I think about trying to record the sounds.

11. I wake to the sound of a group of men, young and old, playing dominoes in the shade of a big tree that reaches over the wall by the street. Shortly after a group of kids will come and play basketball or run around. I take photos of them, no problem.

12. I write this sentence and watch as a storm is brewing not far away from the international airport in Brisbane, Australia. A couple of hours earlier I got a few pictures of my aunt; I hadn't seen her since I was a kid. Other travelers are at the window, using their cellphones to take photos of the blackened sky. I take a photo of the people taking photos.

13. We found the darkest corner of the room. There were benches that one would see in a poorer church anywhere in the world. She was from Texas and studied nursing. A few nights later we went to the Wyclef Jean concert in downtown Port-au-Prince. Even though we were amongst the very few white people in attendance, she just wanted to dance and not talk about what it meant to be the only white people there. I didn't take a photo

of her: I very much wish I had.

14. Before that: “Let’s stay in touch.” She writes her email addresses on a crumpled receipt, I write mine on a napkin.

15. One night, back home in Florida where it is colder during the winter than one would ever think, I dream of alligators. In one of them I have to walk a path down by a newly discovered river. I have hounds in my service—very good dogs for this purpose—but they have no respect for my authority. I hear the barks through a hearing aid that for the most part offers nothing but dull feedback. I skip over the “beasts”; I hear my heels clipping mid-jump.

16. For the next day, the night dreams infest my daydreams. The yellow light splitting through the limp clouds reminds me of the first part of the dream: a concert in a church with no roof.

17. I look back over my photos and I think about my friend, Barry. He was one of the first people I met when I moved to Florida. Barry’s family came from Port-au-Prince. Barry works at a popular retail store and everyone who knows him smiles when his name comes up and he’s not there. That is to say everyone loves him.

18. I’m away from home again a year or so after my trip to Haiti. I have spent the day doing interviews and taking photos. That night a good friend emails me several times and leaves a voicemail on my phone. Barry drowned at St. Augustine, a beach town that is the oldest European settlement in the United States. Barry, not a great swimmer, was body boarding with another friend. I hadn’t seen him in the days before I left, but a couple of weeks earlier we’d taken some photos together at a bar where a bunch of us would down cheap beers (and regularly get herded out at closing time). I looked back over the photos that night, moving them from one folder to another and back again.

19. For some people, the onset of rain gives them an ache deep in a broken bone, even if it has been healed for years. This skill of forecasting by bone is magic because the indicator lies beneath flesh and skin. For me it’s beyond reason or logic. It’s as magical as photography itself. The ability to know the future through a dull pain is an underrated gift.

20. A man in West Palm, Florida lost two fingers saving his pet dog from an alligator. The man says that it was a small price to pay, so great is his love for his dog. During his television interview, the man was calm and understated, as if this was a normal occurrence: to put one’s hands in the jaws of a seven-foot-long gator to retrieve a pet. The man patted his dog and smiled at the camera. When he did look down, he didn’t look at his hand for very long.

21. Those who have lost parts of the body sometimes talk about ‘phantom pain,’ wherein they feel the uncomfortable and indeed distressing sensation of the severed limb still being somehow present. This is the worst thing, they say, the way in which the mind and body lie; the way you might feel like something is still there when it’s truly gone. Do photos help the amputee? The ability to look back at the whole body? Or does that just make it worse?

22. The streets of Port-au-Prince are filled with people. The local hero, Wyclef Jean, who is also a global superstar, is playing a free concert. The air is sweet with the smell of sausage and spicy chicken. The air is filled with Haitian, that beautiful language. I leave my camera at home.

23. There is a Haitian songwriter in Miami, Dadou Pasquet, who wrote a song about Haitians who left the homeland for the United States. The words are gorgeous, but only if you don’t speak Creole. Or maybe they are beautiful words, either way.

24. Se zantray mwen fe mwen mal jisten m kriye... (My insides ache until I cry...).

25. The summer when Barry died didn’t feel very hot. The heat isn’t gone forever—not like that poor man’s fingers—but it’s somehow weaker, as if Florida has sunk a little bit, moving the flat land away from the sun. Today I took photos of the Spanish moss on the trees outside my apartment, and I thought about trying to catch the same light tomorrow.

26. Fok nou chita, pou n reflechi bagay sa yo... (We must sit down, and mull these things over...)

Eating Ananas and Anar—Throwing up Neda Agha-Soltan

by Roxanne Rashedi

Fishing for a bowl and knife, Neda cracked open a pomegranate. Her mother had just bought two dozen at Walnut Creek's local Sunday bazaar. Neda drew the pomegranate close to her nose and smiled. She knew that her mother, Sahar, had bought them for her big twenty-fifth. Tomorrow all of the Milani's—aunts, uncles, and cousins—would gather around bowls of ananas, anar, and baklava to celebrate not only Neda's twenty-fifth but the earning of her Doctorate of Law. The JD initials upheld the Milani legacy of pursuing "professional" fields like medicine (as her older sister Mojgan had done with nursing and her younger sister, Leila, with psychology—the "soft" medicine as Baba would say). Though the shortest of the three, all eyes always looked at Neda, her conspicuous Persian staple of a nose making her the center of attention. Loquacious and fervid, everyone always said she was meant to be named Neda—her destiny being to voice away the law with her sharp nose and chit-chatty mouth.

Plopping down on her father's La-Z-Boy chair, Neda flipped back and forth between CNN and Law & Order: SVU, a program she'd only indulge when left alone. Her nails, neatly French and white at the tips, now grew red as she dug her way through the anar, only pausing intermittently to lick the blood caked on each of her fingertips. Neda took a huge bite into a lump of anar. She licked her lips over the sweet and sour notes as Anderson Cooper ranted on and on about the same old stuff of Iran's Twitter, Myspace, and Facebook craze. "Folks, this is Iran's Internet revolution. Iranian youngsters are now prowling the streets of the capital, Tehran, and, apparently, marching outside the old Shah's Saadabad's Palace. The men are stampeding the streets, the women stomping along with their heels, and I think, yes. . .even some barefooted kids here parading with 'give me democracy' signs."

Neda shrugged her shoulders up and down, trying not to wince as Cooper reported the latest, his mouth spitting out Iran, Shah, and Tehran like old pieces of gum.

"This is Anderson Cooper reporting live from Iran. We'll be right back with the latest scoop in just five!" he said loud and proud with a huge smile.

How could he chirp like that after witnessing all the cries, yells, and bloodshed? Hundreds and thousands of kids had lost their mothers and fathers, sisters their sisters, cousins their cousins. Neda bit her lip and sucked on the anar—pathetic. Cachet of Harvard sealed on his chest and he thinks he can just waltz right into a mayhem that transpired not just the day after the "reelection," but since the fall of Shah thirty years back when that slip of hair or tint of red rouge on the lips would be calls for a stoning to death. Those times when students, fresh out of high school, would be thrown into jail without food or water for days, sometimes weeks—their punishment for singing and dancing to the lyrics of Iran's Madonna, Googoosh, in front of Tehran University. Those days when the SAVAK guards would take endless blows at youngsters caught making out in the secret alleyways of ice-cream parlors and boutique shops, their metal batons falling down to the ground with a heavy thud right at the precise moment in which the thirteen or fifteen year old perpetrator became as purple as a prune. Neda clenched her teeth and cracked into the anar seeds. She licked her lips twice over the sour notes. Where were the Twitter, YouTube, and Google headlines then? Where was CNN's most prized chirper? They always did that. Those slew of Coopers and "Joes" who smiled away at the brown and black blood of all countries with their CNN, FOX, and NEWSPAN badges, SONY microphones conveniently manufactured in China in-hand. Ridiculous, she thought.

But was it really? Her parents had named her Neda in hopes of instigating a voice—one that would speak up. She had once strived to change the world, imagining she could do so with a Juris Doctorate badge from one of the best schools that specialized in International Law: Stanford. Neda flicked the pomegranate seeds onto a napkin and rolled her eyes back as she recalled those earlier years when her dream was to make that difference. She laughed and threw in some ananas with the anar. Pineapple slices always sweetened up the anar, never failing to lighten up her spirits either.

Neda stared down at fingernails and frowned. She had just gotten a manicure for her birthday party and for what? Her nails were now as red as blood. Red and flushed as the day she bit her tongue and tucked her chin down. The day Bobby Williams in Ethics & Law 101 stood up proud in his neatly ironed Polo shirt and said that

he was tired of listening to the whines and groans of all the liberals living up and down the California coastline. They all should stop complaining, he had said. We should just drop a couple of nukes and be done with it, he had said. Blood had to be shed to civilize “them.” Free “their” peoples. Those Iraqis will become a democracy like us, he had said. All twenty blue, green, and blue-green eyes shifted to the back right corner of the room where Neda had sat. Her shoulders slouched as their eyes fell heavy onto her black eyes that had crashed and fallen, surrendering down low to the hardwood floors.

She switched over to patent law that day. Walked straight out of the room with her Mediterranean curves, swerves, and tush, all the while keeping her gaze down, trying to avoid the snarls and googly eyes of Bobby Williams, Joe Frankstein, and Professor Jim Stoops. No point in staying. It was her against a room full—a world full—of white and black polo equipped Williams and Stoops. No point in trying to save the world, she thought as she popped a handful of pomegranate seeds into her mouth. Might as well specialize in something that’ll pay the interest in year one, two and—

“And this is Anderson Cooper live and back again in what appears to be a mob of youngsters still stampeding the streets of Tehran. Looks like they’re not going to give in until those votes are recounted and their voices have been heard.”

Good luck with that, Neda thought. Those mullahs would never recast the votes. Batons busting out of their green, red, and white patrol cars, they’d quickly shut and close off the tweets, instant messages, and screams. Silence them all just like the subtle envelope of silence, lingering over brown and black American heads. At least their silence was for real—cut off with a seal of blood. Neda licked her fingertips, stained in a pomegranate red, off each of her fingertips. Which was better, Neda asked herself, a justice given when convenient—a veneer of having a voice—or no justice at all?

“Iranian forces have no compassion,” he said as the camera narrowed in on a stout, plump woman. Her face was all wrinkled up, aged with a history of tears beyond reason. Cooper interviewed the woman; an Iranian translator translating as the woman cried away, sharing how her granddaughter, of just four years, had lost her leg after walking home from school. “A misfire apparently by Iranian forces. They had sent their apologies to the uh. . .” Cooper leaned in towards the translator, “Jimad family, offering to pay 530,000 rials for any inconvenience. That comes up to about 53 American dollars.”

The camera focused in on the little girl’s amputated leg, then back to the crying grandmother. Neda nearly choked on her anar as the camera did a close-up of the little girl—her thick black braids undone and muddied, red blood still caked onto her wrists and remaining toes. Neda picked up her iPhone. Fifty-three American dollars, she thought. Couldn’t even buy an iPhone or a shuffle with 53 bucks. Neda drew the fruit bowl to her lips and tried not to wince as Cooper’s camera shot a close-up of the girl, her eyes all blotchy and red. The camera shifted back to the grandmother whose eyes were wide and hysterical. Her arms waved up muddily to the sky as she cursed away to He who was supposed to look down on them—to He who had allowed the Ayatollah regime to reign.

Neda turned the television off and dragged her way to the kitchen. She sliced open another pineapple and cracked a pomegranate. Eating her mother’s anar and ananas somehow always made things lighter. Like a soft lull, the bittersweet mix put her mind to sleep and closed off all that was too painful to watch, face, and read three or four times a day with her daily BBC and CNN iPhone and Twitter alerts. Besides, what could she do to stop the endless headlines of all the hearts and blood that were cut off and shredded to pieces only to become a slipped glimpse of history? That quick tap of the mouse on Twitter or YouTube? Nothing. Her JD initials could give her a brand new E-series Beemer in maybe two or three years, but they couldn’t assuage that grandmother’s grief or give a leg back to an eight-year-old girl. The two letters couldn’t even stop her from biting her tongue to keep her voice back from those Bobby Williams’ fired away.

Neda’s iPhone flashed red and then green. She sucked on the tangy core of the pineapple, cracking her neck to the right and left. Five e-mails, six tweets, and eight missed calls? Smart phones—both a blessing and a curse. What was going on? Why had her mother called six times? Her younger sister, Leila, twice? Neda clicked open her browser and logged onto her twitter account. Instantly, the headlines flashed, the tweets twitting away:

NEDA AGHA-SOLTAN (JAN 23, 1983-JUNE 20, 2009)—THE VOICE OF IRAN DIES AT 16:05PM 20JUNE 2009: TWEET.

Neda's hands froze over the tweet, which was highlighted in blue and linked to the full exclusive YouTube clip. Her nails, all sticky and red from the anar, clicked twice on the tweet.

Neda's eyes grew wide as she saw ripples of blood explode from the girl's head. Neda tried to swallow back her tears but they poured out like the ripples of blood twittering away—ripples of blood as red and sweet and bitter as the anar which traveled up and down Neda's throat. A man had bent down before Neda. Half crying and half screaming, he had placed both hands firmly over her chest, attempting to cease the wound shot right above her breast. He pressed and pressed, his eyes spilling out of their sockets with tears—tears reminiscent of the old grandmother's.

Neda drew her hand to her chest and placed her hand above her left breast. She closed her eyes and pressed her palm over her heart. Heart racing and tears streaming down her cheeks, Neda pressed her palm firmly over her chest, hoping each push and press would cease the endless ripples of blood—of the sirens, gun shots, and cries that screamed out from her iPhone screen.

With only two seconds remaining in the clip, Neda reopened her eyes. The tangy core of the ananas had worked its way back up her throat. She grabbed for a napkin and spit out the pomegranate seeds, all soaked and cloaked in pineapple juice. Her eyes grew wide as Neda's two hands rose up high towards the camera only to fall back down to the ground. The camera zeroed in on her arms, which were laid flaccidly by her hips and her lips—all red and bloody like fresh anar. Neda's thumb and pointer finger slid up and down Neda's bloodied lips. Her fingertips came to a halt as Neda's eyes widened to the realization of her final breath. Neda drew her fingertips over her mouth the voice through the screen shot straight through her own heart. . .

"I'm burning, I'm burning," the woman, Neda, had screamed.

Goosebumps ran up and down Neda's spine. Anar and ananas rose from the pit of her belly all the way to her throat. She cupped her mouth, attempting to hold the bittersweet seeds back but she couldn't. It was too late. Red and yellow chunks of the pomegranate and pineapple flew out of Neda's mouth. The anar shined like the glimmering sight of Neda's blood—red and fresh, twittering and tweeting away for all 10,000 viewers to see. Her shoulders jittered at the sight of her puke. . .the pineapple bits mixed in with the anar. Neda cleared her throat and grabbed for a glass of water. She guzzled the glass down, clearing out the lingering pieces that held her voice back—her Neda of voice.



Scotland #11
Tara Lynnette Skaggs
Oil on Canvas