

ELEMENTS

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WESTERN ILLINOIS UNIVERSITY

ELEMENTS 2014

Elements is the literary journal for Western Illinois University

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CONTENTS

Corin Bodenhamer

“Bibbidi-Bobbidi-Boo” - 2nd Prize Cordell Fiction Award.....	24
“Pa’s Skinny Baby with No Future” - Essay.....	120

Alden Braddock

“High” - Poem.....	79
“Noided” - Short Story.....	112

Dana Breen

“Old Things” - Poem.....	89
“Something Behind Me” - Poem.....	90
“When Memories Were Fresh” - Poem.....	92

Victoria Drews

“The Fallen Tree” - 3rd Prize Cordell Poetry Award.....	8
---	---

Joseph Fegan

“Strider” - Poem.....	78
-----------------------	----

Juliana Goodman

“Rosaleena” - 1st Prize Cordell Poetry Award.....	6
“Wing tips” - 2nd Prize Cordell Poetry Award.....	7
“Older in August” - 1st Prize Cordell Fiction Award.....	9
“Shangri-La Willa” - 3rd Prize Bruner Nonfiction Award.....	65

Jason Herbst

“A Princess by any Other Name” - Short Story.....	93
---	----

Sarah Lambach

“Snake House Daze”- 1st Prize Bruner Nonfiction Award.....40
“No One Noticed”- Poem.....105
“The Art of the Party”- Poem.....106
“Glass Hearts”- Poem.....107

Jessica Mason McFadden

“The Sack”- Poem.....116
“Martha Stewart Hades Me”- Poem.....117
“Mercy for the Monarch”- Poem.....118
“My Aunt, the Ox”- Poem.....119

Zach McGowan

“Sad, Queer, and Wearing Black”- 3rd Prize Cordell Fiction Award.....32

Shaun Robinson

“Monster”- Short Story.....108

Lucas Taylor

“Come Spring”- Short Story.....80

Thomas Waterford

“The Sky Tore”- Short Story.....133

DiAnn Vulich

“He’s a Doozy”- 2nd Prize Bruner Nonfiction Award.....52
“Open Doors”- Short Story.....143

1st Prize Cordell Larner Award for Poetry

Rosaleena

By Juliana Goodman

The woman who took my father away
Her name is Rosaleena
Like a rose bending towards the sun
Rosaleena is something else
Wet black curls drip down her peach back
Her hips are like WHAM
Her breasts are like BAM
Sit right up in your face
Hi, please touch me, they say
Yes, I'd like that, my father's hands say
Sundays when I'm over
Rosaleena is a red dragon
Her petal fuzz features
Sharp grinded pointed
Long black press-ons
Tightly curled talons
I am the tiny black scribble
The burnt part of the crust
The stranger who fucks up the Polaroid
Rosaleena has my father
At night
They make beats under the stars
Warm rhythms that go on and on

2nd Prize Cordell Larner Award for Poetry

Wing Tips

By Juliana Goodman

Grandpa goes to work on the wing tips
Says us young chirrens is wasteful
We leave sweet meat and tendons
Hanging from gray and black bones
He eats without restraint
Without a thought
As long as it's passed through grandma's
Sure and callused hands
It's good enough for him
But we're not from Mississippi
Some things you just don't eat
The gray veins that still hold life
A white joint that reminds us of a kneecap
These are the things we leave
Push to the side of the plate
Spoon into the trash can
Wait for Grandpa to go AAAAYYYY
Bring me them wing tips

3rd Prize Cordell Larner Award for Poetry

The Fallen Tree

By Victoria Drews

Half submerged, the tree
Face-down like a drowned woman,
leaf-hair rippling around
Her face Like Medusa
Or a pool of blood.

How embarrassed the
She-tree would be for
Her submerged barren branches,
Whose leaves have left,
Ripped away with the undercurrent,
Like the body's flesh
Ravaged by piranhas.

The on-looking others –
The still-standing trees,
The birds, the rodents –
Will watch her decay
With termites and time.
Until, finally, there is
Nothing at which to look.

1st Prize Cordell Larner Award for Fiction

Older in August

By Juliana Goodman

“No, *I have* money on this card. I checked the balance this morning, I can show you, I wrote it down.”

My mother fumbles around in her purse and the elastic strap that she sewed herself snaps at the seam. Makeup, tissues, pennies and red Jolly Ranchers go flying across the floor.

“Shit!” she says.

I am down on the floor with my mother, trying to help her pick her things up one by one when I see that her forehead is scrunched up and she is trying not to cry.

“Is there any way you can hold our food while we go and get the money to pay for it?” Lena asks the non-caring cashier.

Even though we still play tag sometimes, my sister knows how and when to speak like an adult.

“The meat’ll go bad,” the cashier says leaning her fat arm against the register like she’s tired or something.

“We won’t be gone that long, we just have to go and get the money from—“

“—If the card doesn’t swipe, it means there’s no money. Look, I gotta help these people behind you.”

I want to ask her why these other people are more important than us. We’ve been shopping and waiting in line forever! The bag boy wheels our cart of food away like the prize at the end of a game show we have just lost. My mother crams the rest of her things back in her purse and stands up. Lena falls behind her.

“I know I have money on this card” she growls.

“Lady, it doesn’t matter if you can’t—“

“—IT DOES MATTER!” my mother screams.

She screams so loud that everyone in the store gets quiet and starts staring at us. My mother looks at the cashier as though she will swallow her whole if she says something else.

We all stand there staring at each other for a long time, waiting for something to happen. But the only thing that happens is Lena grabbing our mother’s arm and saying “Mami, it’s okay, let’s just go.” We leave the store without our food as the customers with cash stare and the sky crashes down over us.

“I hate shrimp flavor!” I say when Lena sets my bowl in front of me. Our mother has locked herself in her bedroom again.

“It’s either shrimp flavor noodles or grits, and before you ask, no I am not making you any damn grits tonight,” Lena says, sitting down across from me with her own bowl.

Normally I would tell Mami on her because she would make Lena cook whatever I want, but I can tell my mother does not want to be bothered. And Lena is right, there is nothing but grits and noodles. Our food is still at the store.

I take a bite of the nasty soup even though I know Lena will not tell on me if I throw it away. Mami will not open the door for either of us tonight.

We eat in silence for a few minutes. But I want answers.

“Why can’t we ask Daddy for money?” I ask.

Lena laughs like I just told a hilarious joke.

“Because all of Daddy’s money goes to Rosaleena.”

Rosaleena is the woman who took my father away. She is short with long hair, wide hips and big boobs that sit on her chest like free samples. She is beautiful and I can tell why my father loves her, even though he’s supposed to love my mother.

“I don’t believe you. I’m going to call him and ask him to bring us some real food!”

Lena stops eating and gives me a look that says “sit down

before I hurt you”. She stole that from Mami.

“God! You are so stupid. You can’t tell Daddy anything that goes on in this house or ask him for anything, do you understand me?”

I glare at her. She is sixteen, but that does not make her the boss of me.

“Why can’t I tell him? We need money and he has some!”

“Because if you do, he’ll take you away and Rosaleena will be your mother with her big ta-ta’s in your face every morning. Is that what you want?”

I can’t imagine anyone but Mami being my mother and I know Rosaleena doesn’t even like me.

“No,” I say.

“Then keep your mouth shut. Our business is nobody else’s, Cookie.”

I listen to Lena. Not because she is the boss but because she is the only one who ever tells me the truth.

When I say Mami will not open the door for me and Lena, I am right, but she does open it for Baby. He is a man, but I hear my mother call him baby when he comes in, even when the bed is rocking and she is screaming “Baaabbbyyy!” like they’re on a rollercoaster and she can’t believe how fast they’re going.

I am laying next to Lena in our bed as we’re both trying not to laugh at the banging on the other side of the wall.

BANG! BANG! BANG!

After awhile, it is no longer funny. They have been whamming and bamming each other for so long that I think Baby has killed our mother.

“Don’t be stupid, she’s just laying there and enjoying it like women are supposed to. Now go to sleep,” Lena tells me even though neither one of us is going to get any sleep until Baby lets out a roar and Mami’s muffled voice tells him to be quiet before he wakes the kids.

We are sitting in the park, Petal, Tanika and me when Domo walks up in her new Gamma's. She is always trying to show off, but she's still our friend.

"Dang, yall ain't get the new Jordans?" she asks, looking at our feet dangle in shoes that are clearly not Jordans.

"Oh whatever. You didn't even buy those yourself," Petal says, rolling her eyes and kicking the dirt with her black Chuck Taylors.

"Nope, my daddy bought them. He buys me whatever I want. Tonight, I think I'll ask for a new puppy," Domo says, turning her ankle in a circular motion so the sunlight reflects off her sneakers. They look like black glass and I'm only sort of jealous because black is my favorite color.

"Shut up, Domo, all you do is brag. If your father is so rich, then why are you here trying to play with us?" Tanika says.

Domo rolls her bony neck at her.

"Because maybe I feel like it, that's why. But if you don't want me here, I'll leave. Who cares anyway?"

She always says she will leave like the rest of us are supposed to beg for her to stay. Pretty please with sugar on top? That's what she wants, but we don't care that much and she stays anyway.

"I brought Lena's mp3 player. Let's practice for the video shoot," I say.

Domo hands me her Beats Pill and I plug it in. We need to practice because we're going to dance in Kimmy Barz's next rap video. The sign in the park field house invited women of all ages to participate in "history in the making". Kimmy Barz lives two blocks down the street from me and everyone knows she's going to make it big. She can dance, she can rap and she's pretty. And when everybody on YouTube sees us in her video, we will be famous, too.

"Okay. Someone has to sit on the side so we know what we look like," Petal says.

We do rock paper scissors and I am the one who has to sit out and watch them do it first. I sit in the grass as my friends stand arms-width apart and try to remember the moves we've made up.

"Start the music, Cookie," Petal says.

I press play and Juicy J blares from the tiny speaker.

Don't Stop! Pop that—Don't stop! Pop that pop that pop that—Don't stop! (What you twerkin' wit?)

Domo puts her hands on her knees and squats low to the ground, popping so hard that she looks angry about it. Tanika pulls herself into a headstand trying to show off, but she can't shake her butt that fast or she'll lose her balance and tip over. It's Petal who is the best twerker in our group, mostly because she has the biggest butt. She doesn't have to do much work, she just bends over a little and it's like her booty has a mind of its own. It jiggles and bounces in every direction like it might fall off at any moment.

I watch my friends dance as the sun glows red and dips behind the buildings. They are beautiful black shadows twisting and growing in all directions. They move together like waves in an ocean and never miss a beat as the lavender streetlights flicker to life.

A group of boys from our school ride by on their mountain bikes. They stop when they see us, their jaws open like they want a taste of something good.

Even though I am supposed to be watching, I want to be a part of the show now that we have an audience. I take the spot next to Domo and try to make my cheeks clap like I've seen Lena do in the mirror, but no sound comes out.

The boys don't notice my non-clapping. To them, we are superstars, bad bitches like Beyonce and Rihanna, our long twists and braids whipping through the air and our bodies moving like we have no bones.

We dance until we get tired, then collapse in a pile on the cool grass as the stars light up the sky, our very own spotlights.

“Where were you at?” Mami asks when I walk in the door. It’s past nine and she has just gotten home from her shift at the nursing home.

“I was at Petal’s house,” I lie, but there’s no point. Mami is too tired to really care.

I try to curl up next to her on the couch but I am too big now, so I slide down on the floor instead.

She runs her sleepy fingers through my twists, scratching the back where it always itches the most.

“How was work?” I ask, even though I already know it wasn’t good. Mami hates her job.

She doesn’t say anything. I feel sorry for her. She should be working as a businesswoman or a teacher, not having to clean old people’s mess. Mami says Lena and I will go to college and have good jobs one day. When I do, I’ll take care of her.

“Did Daddy call?” I ask, because now I’m thinking about money again.

Mami makes a face like she has just smelled something nasty.

“No, he didn’t, Cookie. But don’t worry about it, baby, he’ll call soon. You’re just a child, it’s his fucking job to worry about you.”

The last part is not to me. She is looking at the phone when she says it, like maybe he will call now that she’s said something about it. But the phone is still silent.

I know my mother is right, but I can’t help but wonder why he’s not calling. Maybe he and Rosaleena are making their own baby. Or maybe he thinks I hate him like Lena does. I want to call him and tell him that I still love him and that I’ll stay the weekend with him even if Rosaleena is mean to me again the whole time. But our apartment is small and I know Mami would hear me say this to him and be mad.

She rubs my scalp for a few more minutes until she falls asleep with her mouth open. I cover her with my Hello Kitty blanket and kiss her on the forehead like I am the parent

and she is the baby.

When I tiptoe back into our room, Lena is still awake, sitting on the floor rubbing bright purple makeup on her eyes.

“Where are you going?” I ask when I see her street clothes laid out on the bed along with a pair of Mami’s old heels.

“Out” Lena says as if I don’t know this.

“Can I go this time?”

I only ask because I hate sleeping alone in our big bed without Lena on the other side between me and the door. Last winter, some people broke into Tanika’s house in the middle of the night. They crawled through her bedroom window and asked her where her brother was. She said they pointed a gun at her, although Petal says she probably made that part up. Still, I am scared in our tiny room without Lena.

“Aw Cookie, you don’t wanna come. It’s just gonna be me, Cherell and some other girls doing boring high school stuff. I’ll bring you back something. What kinda candy bar do you want?”

“Milky Way,” I say even though I don’t really want anything.

I watch her get dressed up and primp herself like she is probably doing something more than just high school stuff. Our mother sleeps hard on the sofa, so Lena walks right out like it’s morning and she’s just headed to another day of school. All night, I sit watching the door, waiting for her to come back. There’s nothing else I can do.

Petal uses a safety pin to keep Lena’s too-big shorts from falling off her while I tie Lena’s too-big belly top in a knot behind my back. Today is Kimmy Barz’s video shoot on Jackson Boulevard and we are trying to make ourselves look as grown as we wish we were.

“You three look ratchet. I look flawless,” Domo says, striking a pose in her stretch leggings and light blue tank top that matches her Jordans. She is wearing clumpy mascara on

her eyes and deep violet lipstick on her mouth.

“Where’d you get that makeup? Come and do mine!”
Tanika says, lacing up her metallic gold high tops.

“Can’t, I left it at home. Maybe if you guys had money you could buy your own,” Domo says like she is somebody important. But we are too excited to care or point out that just because she stole her mother’s makeup bag does not mean she has money either.

We twist our hair into big buns that sit on top of our heads and spray my mother’s White Diamonds on our necks like we are royalty. I don’t think she’ll mind since she’s always at work and never anywhere fun where you need perfume on. We check ourselves in the mirror, four brown girls in black leggings, chunky sneakers and thin tops. If you squint your eyes, you would see that we are the same.

Jackson Boulevard is hot and popping like grease on the stove. Everybody from the neighborhood is here, except those people who had to work or who think they’re too good to hang out in the streets. We say hi to Mr.Greenwall, the old man who owns the corner store and gives me black bananas so Mami can bake her famous banana bread; the China Dolls, a group of mixed girls from our class who think they are so sexy because their hair is straight but their skin is black; Ms.Carter who dragged a Puerto Rican lady by the hair after she caught her with her husband. She is here with her six kids, including little Man-Man who hangs on her hip in a cute Pamper. The boys from our class who watched us dancing yesterday are here, too, but they’re too busy bothering the China Dolls to remember us.

“Look there’s Kimmy Barz!” Domo says, pointing to a huge crowd of people in front of the building where she lives.

We can’t see much, but we know she is in there between all the big bodyguards and her girls. We all stand around, talking, laughing, joking, eating what little food is left on the snack table that has been set up for extras on the sidewalk. By the time the video shoot begins, we are sweaty

and bored on the curb. It's not even a professional camera man, just Big Kiwi from Shark's Fish and Chicken. He's always in there trying to sell bootleg DVD's and incense, but I guess he's also a video producer when he wants to be.

We are all sitting around in the heat, watching Kimmy shoot the same scene over and over again. Petal says it is because they have to get different angles to edit with, but that doesn't stop it from being boring. We nod our heads to the music blaring from someone's upstairs window, although it is too loud for us to really understand what Kimmy is rapping about. But from the way she is whipping her afro back and forth and pointing her middle finger at the camera, I can tell whatever she is saying is important and I have to agree with her.

Finally, it is the dance scene. I thought we would get to be right behind Kimmy, but the whole neighborhood didn't come out just to watch. They want to be in it, too. We all gather in a circle around Kimmy, waiting for her to tell us what to do. There are too many tall adults in front of us for me to see, even when I balance on Tanika's shoulders. We can hear her though.

"Alright, ladies and gentlemen, I want to thank you for coming out to support me and show me love. That's what this video is about, love, hip hop and the hood. So I want yall to get out here on this street, pop lock and drop it, shake what ya mammy gave you, twerk a lil sumn sumn and just have a good time. Have fun. That's what the song's all about. Yall think yall can handle that?"

We all shout and holler to let her know that we can handle that and that we love her. The music starts and everyone tries to get as close to the camera as they can without bumping into Kimmy. The China Dolls nudge some high school girls, who push them out of the way only to be shoved aside by somebody's mama who wants her daughter to have enough space to breakdance. We get shoved by some boys to the back, then pushed again by some grown men to the front who only want to see grown behinds shaking and not ours. We are in the

middle of the crowd being pulled and jostled in every direction. It is hot and sweaty and we are all on the streets fighting for the attention of a tiny camera in Big Kiwi's hand. It is absolute chaos, until the beat drops. We all dip and start swaying to the beat like we have been practicing for months. Kimmy is rapping again, but no one is listening, we are riding the beat and getting our feet wet in it.

“Aaaaayyyyy!” the men in the back yell.

They pump up the crowd even more and now that we have met the beat like an old friend, it's time to go to work. Some big girls bend over and put their hands on the ground, their giant butts waving in the air. The China Dolls are too prissy and dainty for this, so they start hip rolling in their baby tees while their silver belly rings flash in the sunlight. Even the grown women are getting loose with it, hiking up their sundresses and getting low to the ground. Ms. Williams is standing near the back with her daughter, trying to show her how to do it, but she is too little, so she just hops up and down and screams with joy. Big Kiwi weaves in and out of the crowd, trying to get us all in the video. When he comes over to us, we spread out and do our thing like this is our video in our street. We own this.

The beat keeps going and we all keep moving until a police car pulls up on the scene with his lights flashing. Somebody shuts off the music and Big Kiwi tries to hide behind a tree like he's not supposed to be here or something.

“Great, here comes another fucking pig to ruin another good time,” Tanika says. Everyone stops dancing because she's right. The police are in our neighborhood so often, it's like they live here, too.

A fat white man steps out of the cop car, talking gibberish into his radio and walking around us with a swagger that says What's going on here, huh? What do you think you're doing? We are just dancing, we all tell him. We're not doing anything wrong. We're dancing.

“Nothing wrong?” he says with his black sunglasses letting us know that he can see every one of us but we cannot

see him.

“You got little kids out here shaking their butts like strippers! You know, I could jail all of you for at least thirty counts of child pornography,” he says, pointing all the kids out. I don’t like the way it feels when he looks at us. We’re not strippers and only a pervert would think like that anyway. The adults step in front of us like they are shielding us all from something dangerous.

Two more squad cars show up, skidding on the asphalt and sirens blaring like this is *The Fast and The Furious*. All because we are dancing?

“I can’t stand these white muthafuckers. Always messin’ wit us for no damn reason,” Mr.Greenwall from the corner store says. The other adults nod silently like they want to say more but know that they shouldn’t, at least not now.

Kimmy Barz and her manager are talking to the cops, trying to explain that we are just having a little party. She keeps pressing her hands to her heart and shaking her head no, like she has been accused of something and has to prove that she’s innocent.

The cops who are not looking at Kimmy are keeping their sunglass eyes on the rest of us, like they are daring us to try to walk away so they can chase us. Like what they would enjoy more than anything right now is to put us all in handcuffs and be done with it. But we know the adults would never let them touch us.

“That’s the same cop who came to our house after it got broken into,” Tanika says, looking but not daring to point at a dark haired officer who looks like his shirt will split open if he moves the wrong way.

“What did he do?” I ask.

“Pssh, he didn’t do nothin’. He said we shouldn’t even bother filing a police report because whoever did it wouldn’t be caught anyway.”

“So they’ll ruin our music video but won’t try to catch the real criminals? I don’t know why we even have cops. Fat

fuckers,” Petal says with a frown.

After a few more minutes of Kimmy’s pleading, the cops tell us all to go on home because it’s not legal for us to be gathered in the street like this. Like this? Like it is our street? But now I understand that it is really their street. Their street that they can roll through all day until it gets dark, their street that they can walk around with guns hanging from their hips, their street that they can kick us off of any time they want to. Theirs.

“Where’s Mami?” I ask Lena, who is in the bathroom mirror sewing tracks of soft Peruvian hair into her cornrows.

“Probably with that man. She’s too tired to cook or clean but she’s got plenty of time to spend with that fool” she says angrily, stitching the tracks tight.

“Did daddy call?”

Lena stops and gives me a blank stare.

“They broke up Kimmy Barz video shoot today,” I say, because I’m still mad.

“Of course they did. A big group of black people crowded in the street? Just asking for trouble.”

“We weren’t asking for anything! We were just dancing.”

“You could be selling girl scout cookies for all they care. Cops hate black people.”

“Why?”

“Because that’s the world, Cookie. It’s not supposed to make sense, it just...is.”

I am about to tell her there has to be a reason. We learned it in science last year. Cause and effect, action and reaction. But then we hear a knock at the door.

I look at Lena, because she is the only near-adult home and it’s her job to answer whoever it is. But she just keeps stitching away like she doesn’t hear anything.

When I look through the peephole, it is just our landlady, Mrs. Haywood, in her dingy pink nightgown and silk

headscarf.

“Hi, Mrs. Haywood,” I say even though I have seen enough of this woman for a lifetime. Her thighs look like cottage cheese and her breath smells like rotten garbage.

“Hi. I need to talk to your mama,” she says, all nosy and trying to look past me into our living room.

I close the door and step outside. It’s not her business to know what we have in our home.

“She’s not here,” I say, just like Mami always tells us to tell landlords, even when she is here.

“It’s 10pm! I waited for her to get off work since I can’t catch her ass during the day. I know she’s in there, lil girl, don’t try to play me.”

“Nobody’s playing. She’s not here.”

“Well who’s in there with you?” she asks, motioning towards the door.

“Just my sister. She’s almost 17.”

“Your mother left you home alone at ten o clock at night? Trifling parents, these days. She could go to jail for that.”

Mrs. Haywood turns the idea over in her mind. She doesn’t care about me and Lena being alone, just ways to get Mami in trouble.

“Our Aunt Sheila is on her way over to check on us. She’ll be here any minute with her pitbull Rocky if you want to meet her.”

Mrs. Haywood narrows her eyes at me.

“You tell your mother I’m looking for her. That’s two months’ rent she owes!”

She leaves down the stairs and I hear her mumble something about welfare queens and how she’s not donating to the needy.

Summer is almost over now and Mami spends so much time with Baby that he has agreed to pay our rent. She says we will meet him soon, but Lena says our mother is just being trampy and this man will be gone again soon just like daddy. I

don't mind as long as he keeps Mrs. Haywood from bothering us.

“Unh-uh, Petal, don't give me the scrawny wing without any meat on it, I want one of the big ones!” We're eating at Shark's and Domo is still demanding the best of everything. But even I have to admit, the wing is pretty skinny and dry, like they either fried it too long or the chicken it came from was shriveled and elderly.

“Fine, here. Even though I shouldn't even give you that much, you only put in two dollars,” Petal says, her pink lips glistening with grease.

“Yeah whatever, I had money yesterday when I bought all yall ice cream, didn't I? Exactly, now shut up and pass me the mild sauce,” Domo says, tossing her brown dookie braids over her shoulder.

Big Kiwi comes over and asks if we want to buy Frozen or Ride Along, shoving the cases under our noses like they're perfume samples.

“Frozen? We're about to be 6th graders, we're too old for baby cartoons,” I say because we always feel older in August.

“I'll take a copy of Ride Along,” Tanika says, pulling a five spot from her pocket.

Big Kiwi thanks us, tells us to stay in school and just say no to drugs before he moves on to harassing some boys who have just walked in.

“Any new comments on the video?” I ask Tanika as she flicks the screen on her iPad.

“Not really. Just people saying the same mess over and over. One lady says anybody in this video should be ashamed of themselves. And some other crap about us not having home training.”

Domo tosses a bone into the paper boat.

“Home training? What are we, dogs? Let me guess, she's white, too. I don't know about yall, but I'm not ashamed. I had fun.”

“Me, too” Petal says.

“Me, three” Tanika says.

“Me, four” I add.

“Besides, they’re only talking down on us because they can’t shake it like we do.”

“Yeah, I bet that lady doesn’t even have enough ass to sit on.”

“They weren’t there, they didn’t see how good we were gettin’ it! Until the cops messed up the ending.”

“Yeah, this is our hood, what do these cornballs know about it anyway?”

“You know how white people are. They always wanna be in charge and act like they know about everything and everybody.”

“Exactly. They gon’ talk about it, gon’ talk about it, gon’ try to change yo mind about it,” Tanika croons the Chris Brown and Aaliyah joint that’s our favorite right now.

“Gon’ tell ya things ya don’t wanna hear, but we good!”

“So when they talk about it, they talk about it, just let em know we already got it.”

“They think they know the truth, say it ain’t soooo. How could they know? How could they knooooooowww?”

We sit in our little booth and sing from our mouths, from our throats, from our stomachs, from our hearts. We sing every word like we wrote it ourselves and even though our voices are loud and the workers behind the counter stare at us like we are crazy, we don’t care. We sing and sing and sing until we have convinced ourselves. They don’t know about us.

2nd Prize Cordell Larner Award for Fiction

Bibbidi-Bobbidi-Boo

By Corin Bodenhamer

An echo pulses throughout the house when Rickie slams the front door and marches straight to the kitchen. He glances at the time displayed on the microwave clock before addressing his mother.

“It’s 3:44. The school bus dropped me off seven minutes behind last week’s average arrival time,” Rickie says. As he speaks to Christina, his gaze focuses on the kitchen counter like he’s addressing the salt and pepper shakers. His words fly out of his mouth quickly and detached as if delivering a memorized report. “This means that you have six minutes to make my 3:50 snack. Today is Tuesday—apple slices and peanut butter day. I’ll be taking my snack in my room instead of on the couch. Knock before you enter. My day hasn’t been good. I need to think. Thank you.”

Christina watches her son silently as he exits the room and wonders if his new classmates have started to notice that Rickie is different; junior high kids are usually quick to point out that kind of thing. Doctor Morris made it clear that he believes integrating children like Rickie into public school is essential to their social growth, but part of her thinks that she should have kept him in private school for another year.

She grabs a granny smith from the refrigerator and rinses it at the sink before using her apple slicer to cut it into eight equal pieces, just the way Rickie likes. She sets a container of Jif To-Go peanut butter on the plate. You have to get Jif To-Go because it has the perfect amount of peanut butter for me to dip each of my eight slices twice. That’s sixteen dips.

When you spoon it on my plate from the jar you never get the proportion right. We need Jif To-Go. Rickie has always been obsessed with numbers. That started before his obsession with film.

Christina lightly raps on Rickie's bedroom door even though it's already open. He's lying on his twin-sized bed staring at the ceiling with a copy of Roger Ebert's *The Great Movies* on top of his chest, his bony fingers drumming rapidly on the hard cover. It's dark in here. Apparently Rickie ran out of room on the walls for his movie poster collection, so he taped up his newest one, *Moonrise Kingdom*, on the window, its wooded camping scenery blocking his view of the neighbor kids jumping on the trampoline and shunning all the sunlight.

"Can we talk about what happened at school today, honey?" Christina asks, handing him his afternoon snack.

Rickie peers at his plate through the curtain of dark hair shielding his eyes as he speaks. "I go to school with incompetent idiots."

"That's not how we talk about other people, Rickie."

"But they are. Today on the bus ride home, Keegan Cooper's mom stopped the bus driver and talked to him for three whole minutes. She was putting us behind schedule. It was unacceptable. I said that I wanted someone to make her shut up."

"Rickie!"

"She was making us late, mom," he defends. "So Max, the seventh grader sitting across from me, yelled to the front of the bus, 'Shut up, man. She doesn't want to have sex with you. You'd make her babies ugly.' Then Mrs. Cooper stopped talking and the bus could move again, so I thanked Max for making her shut up like I asked. He said, 'You're welcome,' and I said, 'I think this is the beginning of a beautiful friendship.' Just like in *Casablanca*. But he didn't get it because he's incompetent."

He pauses, peels the top off of the peanut butter, and scoops some up with his first slice of apple.

“Is that it then? Your day was bad because Max has never seen *Casablanca*?” she asks. A momentary rush of relief flows across her body. Every time Rickie complains of a rough day at school, she can’t control her imagination. She pictures a pudgy bully with dirt-smearred, flushed cheeks eyeing her scrawny son, the easy prey, with clenched fists ready to attack. “Rickie, a lot of sixth graders haven’t seen that movie. I didn’t watch it until I was in college.”

“No, that’s not it. But it’s 3:50. It’s snack time.”

“You can eat your apples and talk to me. I want to know about your day.”

Rickie lets out an exaggerated sigh before finishing his story in a rushed pace, talking at his snack more than to his mother. “When I said, ‘I think this is the beginning of a beautiful friendship,’ Max told me I was gay. Bobby Wright said that I was gay too. I told them that they were idiots because it’s obvious that Rick Blaine is in love with Ilsa Lund in *Casablanca*, and it would be a stupid reading of the film to assume that when Rick says that line to Captain Renault he implies homosexual feelings. They kept calling me a gay faggot, which is redundant, and poking me and shooting spitballs at me. I told them to leave me alone because they were distracting me from my book. Then they said I don’t have any friends that aren’t a book. And now I need to think about how to find friends, so Max and Bobby will leave me alone and let me read.”

Christina hesitates; her chest feels heavy. In the private school there was constant adult supervision. The children were never alone with each other. She didn’t have to worry about bullies picking on Rickie, but public school is different. Kids can be so mean. More than anything, Christina wants her son to be happy. Suddenly, she leaves the room to fetch something—a surprise to hopefully boost Rickie’s spirit.

She returns and sits at the foot of his unmade bed. “Remember these?” she asks. In her hand is a pair of fuzzy, turquoise-colored socks with lime green pinstripes. “Where do

you want to go?”

The first time Christina used the magic socks Rickie was in first grade. In the dead of the night she was jolted awake by her frightened son calling her name, and she rushed to his bedroom. Rickie was lying on his back, straight as an arrow, with his arms pressed against his sides, his muscles tense. His eyes were closed so tightly that his face was all scrunched.

“Are they gone?” he asked, refusing to look.

“Who, honey?”

“The flying monkeys. They want to take me with them, but I have school tomorrow.”

Of course, *The Wizard of Oz*—the only classic movie Rickie had watched with her so far that he didn’t like. The monkeys were too terrifying. She wanted to hug her son, cuddle him, and smother away his fear, but Rickie had never been very affectionate. He didn’t usually like to be touched. Instead, a new idea blossomed within Christina, and she sat at the foot of his bed stretching her legs towards the headboard.

“Open your eyes. I want to show you something.”

She flipped on the reading lamp on the nightstand using it as a spotlight for her feet. She was wearing the soft, calf-length, striped socks and wiggling her toes. “Do you know what these are?”

Rickie stared at his mom’s feet and shook his head.

“These are my special socks,” she explained. “They help me find my happy place. Do you know how they work?”

“Magic?” he guessed, hesitantly petting the fuzzy material.

“Exactly! When I wear these socks, all I have to do is close my eyes and say the magic words. Then I can go anywhere.”

“Show me!”

“Okay, I’ll go first. Squeeze my hand so I can take you

with me. Shut your eyes tight and I'll say the magic words. Ready?"

Rickie nodded and quickly grabbed his mother's hand. She smiled.

"Bibbidi-bobbidi-boo!"

With closed eyes, Christina imagined herself as a child again playing in her great-grandmother's backyard, like she used to do every Sunday. She tried her hardest to recall every detail and made sure to tell Rickie exactly what she was seeing.

Alone in the yard, she sat cross-legged under the shade of an old maple tree. The warm, late spring breeze fanned out her long hair while the red-breasted robins chirped a melody. Christina stared at the bark on the tree; it seemed to be moving. Hundreds of speckled, red ladybugs crawled up and down the valleys created by the ridges of bark. She wedged a small twig into the pack of bugs hoping to coax a few to crawl towards her. Two ladybugs walked onto the stick. She held the twig close to her face and tried to watch them without blinking. At the same time, both bugs revealed their wings and flew away into the breeze.

"Do you see it, Rickie?" she asked. "Are you under the tree with me?"

"Yes, but I like chocolate better than bugs," he said, letting go of his mother's hand. "Can I try the magic socks now?"

Christina pushed the elastic foot holes of Rickie's sweatpants up and over his knobby kneecaps, took the fuzzy, turquoise socks off her feet, and slid them on to Rickie's. They reached all the way to his knees.

"Can I come with you to your happy place?" she asked.

Rickie scrunched his eyes closed and grasped his mother's hand. "Bibbidi-bobbidi-boo!"

He brought his mother to the first room of Willy Wonka's psychedelic factory—the chocolate room. Just like in the movie, the room had flowers made out of rainbow colored lollipops, fruits that popped like piñatas, edible grass,

giant gummy bears growing from trees, boulders filled with fruity jelly, striped candy cane trees, and teacups disguised as daffodils. But the main attraction was the flowing river of pure liquid chocolate. Rickie scooped up a handful of marshmallow cream from the spots of a hot pink mushroom before yelling “cannonball!” and plunging into the sugary river. He resurfaced from under the river, and his entire body was cloaked in chocolate. He licked his lips revealing a pink, goofy grin.

Ever since that night, the magic socks helped Rickie face his biggest problems by giving him a way to escape reality and imagine the world he wanted to be a part of. He always chose a different film set for his happy place and squeezed Christina’s hand as he described every detail to her, painting his paradise. When he tumbled off his bicycle, the socks took him to Pride Rock to observe the exotic animals of the Pride Lands, allowing him to forget about the peroxide stinging his scraped elbows and chin underneath the bandages. A flock of seagulls carried Rickie and Christina through the air inside a giant peach when he was told that their sick housecat wouldn’t be returning from her emergency veterinarian visit. The pair spent more than an hour scouring over the Marauder’s Map and creeping through the secret passageways of Hogwarts castle the first night Rickie’s father neglected to show up and collect his son for their monthly weekend together. However, the socks seem to have been forgotten over the past couple of years as Rickie approached adolescence. Christina thought maybe it was time to bring them back, hoping to coax an illuminating smile to her son’s sullen face.

“Mom,” Rickie snaps. He uses an apple slice to stir the peanut butter around in its container. His circles start slow but then accelerate in speed the angrier he gets. “I can’t just go somewhere that will make Max and Bobby time travel and watch Casablanca so that they aren’t morons and actually

understand my jokes. There's not a movie like that unless I take them to 1941 Morocco and just show them the movie being made, but Max and Bobby aren't here! That won't work, mom. Those socks aren't even magic! How could you be so stupid?"

"Rickie! That is no way to talk to your mother! I'm just trying to help."

"You don't know anything," he yells, snatching the socks from his mom's hand. "I'm not a baby anymore; I'm in junior high! I know magic isn't real!"

Rickie pulls at the socks, his shaggy hair flipping wildly, trying to rip their seams and destroy their false sense of comfort for good. His scrawny arms bulge in an attempt to summon strength past his years, but he's unsuccessful. Christina can't make herself watch any longer.

"Stay in your room until I call you for supper," she orders weakly, failing to mask her defeat. "You need to calm yourself down."

"You don't need to call me for supper," Rickie says still tugging on a sock with both hands. He talks through gritted teeth. "We always eat at 6:15. That's in two hours and nineteen minutes. I'll be there."

Downstairs, Christina didn't want to think about the argument, so she began cooking supper to distract herself. It didn't work. The chicken breasts were seared to perfection, but it wasn't until after she plated them that she realized she forgot to add any type of seasoning. She forgot to flip her fried potatoes until the screeching of the smoke detector reminded her. The salad was great; it came from a bag. The table was set for the bland, burnt meal, but it was just barely 5:00. Christina chose to feed the food to the garbage can and order a pizza instead. Defeated, she sat at the dinner table alone in her immaculate kitchen drowning in a whirlpool of emotion.

Later, Rickie enters the kitchen with his head bowed, carrying a bright orange Nike shoe box under his arm. He sets it on his mother's lap before taking his seat across from her and

loading his plate with cheese pizza. “It’s 6:15. I’m eating.”

Rickie doesn’t look up from his plate as Christina opens the box. Scrawled in crooked handwriting on the lid of the shoebox are the words To: Mom. Inside lay the limp, turquoise magic socks—a peace offering. The elastic is stretched out so that they are twice their original size, but they’re still intact. She looks up at her son. Rickie chews, his cheeks bulging, struggling to keep hold of the entire slice of pizza he shoveled into his mouth, and for the first time in months, he actually looks into the eyes of his mother. They hold each other’s gaze for only a quick four seconds before Rickie lowers his head, but those seconds are just long enough to solidify his silent apology.

3rd Prize Cordell Larner Award for Fiction

Sad, Queer, and Wearing Black

By Zach McGowen

Me: 5'8", 23, anxious, slender, shaking slightly, postured, wearing predominantly black.

Andy: 6'0", 22, stocky build. Dark hair and eyes, supposedly. Still not here yet.

I'm starting to wonder if this guy will even show up. My hopes are a little too high and I know that usually means I will be let down one more time. That makes at least fifteen times since I started dating, but less than twenty-five. Actually, I don't even know if that's correct; I think I just need a figure to make myself feel better. There's a certain tangibility to numbers. I know that when someone is five minutes late, the chances of them not showing increases by about 300%. Again, I know it's not a scientific fact but I have a lot of time to kill since I got here twenty-five minutes early. I sat in my car for the first ten because I thought fifteen minutes early was more acceptable than twenty-five. Eager, but acceptable. I remember seeing Andy's profile online and there was something very appealing about him. He didn't look remarkably different than any of the other guys I have dated but there was something there. No, there probably wasn't. I think I was projecting what I wanted to see, but then again I could just be incredibly cynical and he could be genuinely different.

I have to say, I'm just getting a bit tired of guys who want sex so quickly. I'm not a virgin, nor a prude, but when I feel that emotional component first, I really like to let that soak in before hooking up in the back of a Jeep Cherokee. I prefer either sex with someone based solely on physical attraction, in

which that person will now be filed under One Night Stand, or sex after a period of dating which I file under Don't Touch Me Yet. One Night Stand members are not eligible for membership in the Don't Touch Me Yet program for obvious reasons.

I keep turning around whenever I hear the door open. It's almost poetic how the cold wind comes in to greet my face every time I realize it's not him. Not poetic really, ironic maybe? I don't feel like being literary right now. I'm positioned so that I am slightly obscured by a small arrangement of potted plants located on the table between myself and the door. I'm too nervous and the coffee cup is the only thing keeping my hands from shaking. Cream colored porcelain is providing an excuse to keep my hands in one place with the added effect of keeping them warm. You shake less when you're warm., but I don't know if the same applies when it comes from nerves.

I'm sitting about four meters from the door which has a small bell attached to the top that lets employees know they should stop smoking in the kitchen and come do their job. The bell itself is oddly out of season what with the holly berries and 82 degree heat. It could be said that I am also out of season as I am wearing long black pants, black and gray low cut boots, and an oversized black sweater. I feel a little ridiculous with my styled, short blonde hair which Andy referred to as cute in a message he sent to me. I don't know if that's why I felt I needed to ask him to get coffee with me. Maybe I was just so hungry for male attention that I took a compliment for a sign of interest as opposed to a mere polite gesture.

The door opens again, and I think it would be better to not even check. If it is Andy, then I will look like I am comfortable and not waiting too keenly. If it isn't Andy, then I will be right in my decision to stay put. I'm wondering if maybe by doing this, it will cause some cosmic shift that actual makes him appear. I'm not betting on it, but my hopes are up again.

Three more people have come in. I wonder if any of them are him. Maybe he went and ordered. There's a possibility

he didn't see me and he got nervous too. This makes me feel a little bit better. I like the image of him twiddling his thumbs even though nobody really does that. Either way, I think it's adorable that he does that hypothetically. His picture was really cute and I could tell that it wasn't one of those pictures that is the only good picture ever taken of a person. It wasn't great lighting, but you could tell how normal he seemed. Normal, at least, compared to me. He was smiling so it looked like he was growling, his teeth were not pure white and I liked that. It means he either smokes or drinks a lot of coffee or red wine. I can imagine us drinking wine together in a bathtub, candles everywhere, off white tiles surrounding the claw footed tub. And now my ears are warm because I feel embarrassed, as if he could hear such a forwardly romantic situation.

The door opens again and I forget my plan. I'm actually really glad because right now I see Andy entering behind the other person. Did they come here together? Was this like a 'bring a friend' date? I'm so embarrassed and I can't even tell if that's the situation but I can't turn my emotions off. He doesn't seem like he knows the person. He was just being polite and saying thank you. It's hard to get my heart rate down. I feel really intense right now.

"Hey, David."

"Oh, hey." He has such dark circles around his eyes. He had them in the picture too and I think it's one of the things that makes me attracted to him. A guy who always looks like he is wearing eyeliner just makes my brain get hard. I think it also makes him look a little bit sad, which I also like. I like a guy who isn't all there emotionally, a guy who is a bit messed up. Misery loves company and I'm just a big sack of misery underneath a fairly handsome outer layer of falsely tanned skin.

"I'm gonna go order. Did you want anything or are you all set?"

"I'm good, I'm just drinking coffee right now."

Shit. Should I have gotten him a cup of coffee too? I figured I was so early that it would have been cold by the

time he got here and maybe he would have seen it as a passive aggressive thing about him being late. Should I pull out his chair while he is gone? Is that emasculating? I wonder if he cares about stuff like that now. I'm reading into this so much and it's starting to make me nervous. I'm not even having fun right now, I'm just trying to get past the first seven minutes of formalities to where I can relax about twenty percent. Figures. Good, my brain is trying to remedy the situation.

"Have a good ride here?" I ask. God, what a stupid question. That's like something you ask a relative at Christmas because you don't want to ruffle any feathers, between questions of whether or not you found a job yet, or hints that a friend of a friend has a daughter who is single.

"Yeah, I guess. Couldn't find a parking spot so I just parked around the corner."

Should I ask another question? Does it seem like I'm grilling him too hard already? But if I start talking about myself he will probably think that I just asked him about the ride here so I could talk about myself. I have to decide quickly because otherwise there is going to be a lull and that will make things weird.

"So what's your last name? I feel like that's okay to ask since we decided to meet up. I just want to know in case you murder me. For some reason I would feel a lot better knowing the name of the man who chopped me into little bits," I blurt out.

"Arsenic."

"Your last name is Arsenic?"

"No, I would kill you with arsenic. I don't think I have the ability to cut up another human being. My last name is Noel." I can't help thinking back to the ridiculous berries above the door and wonder if there is any kind of connection here.

"Mine is Baron. You didn't ask but I figured I would offer it."

"I appreciate it."

He has a smirk on his face. At least I am interesting.

He might not like me at all but I am keeping him entertained. I would rather be disliked and entertaining than boring and agreeable. That's not true. I would rather someone actually like me romantically. I could care less about how it happens. I am putting a lot of pressure on this date. Wait, is this a date? We never actually used the word. Can coffee be a date? Yeah, it totally can. People in movies do it. Movies aren't real life but we emulate them so hopefully he has seen enough romantic comedies to think this counts as a date. Not too many though, romantic comedies are the worst.

"So what do you do?" he asks me. I like that he asked me about myself.

"I'm a student. I'm studying Psychology but I think it's a total waste of time. I want to be a writer for a feminist magazine."

"A feminist magazine? Weird, I wouldn't have guessed that. Gay guys don't even really need to worry about women right? Isn't that how being gay works?"

This makes me cringe. I wish a guy would just share my perspective on things. I don't think I am always right but there are a few things I am passionate about and it never gets easier finding out someone else thinks you're views are unnecessary.

"Queer."

"What?"

"I'm not gay, I'm queer."

"Oh. What's the difference exactly?"

"I guess, to me, queer means more than just being attracted to men. To me it means that I have rejected the social pressures put on me to act like a traditional male. I don't feel the need to appear more masculine than I am or hide any feminine traits that people see as a weakness. And while I know right now I am only attracted to guys, maybe one day I will meet a woman and settle down with her. Maybe I will marry someone who was born a woman and is now a man. Maybe the opposite. I just feel like queer is a much better word

for the possibilities of sexuality.”

He doesn't say anything. Four seconds pass. Four seconds doesn't seem like a long amount of time but in conversation it says a lot more than three and somewhat more than five. Four seconds means he was conscious of how long he was taking to respond but he was also caught off guard. Or maybe he is being thoughtful and trying to respond properly.

“I think that's very interesting. I guess you spend a lot of time thinking about stuff like that?”

“I guess so. I sometimes get really upset knowing other people don't.”

I said too much. I insulted him and called him dumb. I wasn't trying to, I was just being honest. At least now I know that the rest of the date will happen just to be polite and I don't have to try anymore.

“I never really had anyone explain it to me like that before,” he says. He looks genuinely interested. It's like when a dog doesn't understand something and it turns its head a bit to the side. I can't help but smile at the similarity. He notices.

“What's so funny?”

“Nothing, I just think it's really cute how you are able to admit to not knowing something. It's a really great quality in a person.”

“Cute?”

He slides his right fucking pointer and middle finger over mine. I didn't even realize I was still clutching the cold coffee cup in a death grip until now. He's flirting with me even though I already wrote him off.

“What do you do in your free time?” I ask him. I don't want to acknowledge the fact that I just felt my pants get a little tighter from the miniscule amount of contact we just had.

“I like painting. I usually do pictures of nature, I don't really do portraits or anything.”

Paint me. I want to know what you think. Show me through a brush your exact perception of me. God, what an egotistical thing to think so immediately.

“So do you just go out into like the woods and set up an easel or something?”

“No, I like to just make up a scene. Real nature is kind of limiting, and I like to put trees and fruits and geographical features wherever I want to put them.”

I wonder if my shirt could get tighter. I feel like my heart just got an erection. I’m immediately embarrassed for thinking of something so lame. He is opening a couple Splenda packets to mix into his coffee. He has black studs in both ears. Ears are not inherently sexual but I want to run my tongue along the outer length of his. I want to drag my teeth along the edge just lightly enough that every move will come as a surprise to his body.

“So, do you want to get out of here?” he asks with such a genuine smile. His eyebrows are raised and he is waiting for my reply.

“Yeah, sure, where do you want to go?”

“Up to you, would you prefer to go to my place or yours?” he asks me. I don’t need any clarification. I need a response that will get me out of here before I start crying.

“Oh, I have HPV. Yeah, sorry I was going to tell you earlier,” I lie, hearing my own voice get that sarcastic edge people tell me I have when I am upset. I hope he has HPV. What a fucking tool. Actually, I hope he doesn’t have HPV, that’s too rude. Maybe I hope he has one of the asymptomatic strains. Still, fuck this guy.

“Is something wrong? What’s your deal?” he asks me. My deal is that I got my hopes up and you ruined them by thinking with your dick. Do I want to have sex with you, Andy? Yes, I certainly do, but not tonight. Not when I first met you. Sex complicates everything and I wanted to get to know you first. Fuck you.

I attempt to calm myself, down enough to excuse myself.

“It’s nothing. I just realized that I don’t find you attractive so I’m gonna go. Good luck with all your future

endeavors.” Future endeavors? God, I must be upset if I am talking to him like a distance colleague saying good bye at the end of a summer job.

I get out of my chair and proceed to deposit my half full coffee cup in the bin on top of the garbage can a few tables back. The cup spills and makes a loud sound that startles a couple in the chairs by the electric fireplace. I don’t care, let them watch me make a scene. Actually, I do care, watch me make a scene because I need to feel in control right now and the attention is all that is keeping my eyes focused on the door and not on Andy who is starting to get out of his chair.

I don’t know how or why but I give him one look and he sits back down. I could feel the intense frustration welling up behind my eyes but my face was all business. I could feel the tin lightning bolts push him back down into his chair while he waited for me to pass through the glass door, leaving behind my encounter with Andy and the sound of Christmas bells closing the book on Mr. Noel.

I already have my keys clutched as I walk through the short parking lot to get in my car. I start the engine too angrily and begin to fumble with my stupid cassette player. I grab the one cassette I have in my Neon labeled *Elemental*. I just want to cry, drive too fast and smoke a cigarette while “Break It Down Again” plays in the background of my melodramatic tragedy of a romantic life. I blame myself for meeting a guy on a gay dating website but I also blame him for... for what? For not being in the same mood as I was? For wanting, or perhaps assuming I also wanted, a quick roll in the hay? I don’t think it’s Andy’s fault. He seemed like a nice enough guy. I count the beats to the intro of the song and wait 30 seconds before I smoke to that I can catch my breath.

I light my cigarette and put on my turn signal waiting to merge. I see Andy exit the coffee shop back door, walking slowly with his head down. I wonder what he is sad about, is it that I said I wasn’t attracted to him, or was it that he knew he said the wrong thing?

1st Prize Lois C. Bruner Creative Nonfiction Award

Snake House Daze

By Sarah Lambach

The house is nestled on a corner a few blocks up from the Oscar Meyer factory on the west side of Davenport, Iowa. It has aged, white paint that is slowly chipping away. I step onto the large, creaky front porch and scrape away a pile of dirt with my foot to reveal fading blue paint. The red front door stares at me; I can't decide if it is threatening or welcoming. I lean against the porch railing and am thankful that it doesn't give under my weight, not that a hundred pound, seventeen year old girl can do much damage. The grass is severely overgrown and the yard is lined with a rotting, little, wooden fence. I stretch my thin legs in front of me and wrap my jacket a little tighter around my bony shoulders. The air carries a promise of spring on remnants of winter. I turn and focus my pale blue eyes to watch Stephen with his permanent slouch approach carrying a plastic storage bin. He wears all black with cuffed, dirty jeans and a black bandana tied around his neck.

"This is it," he murmurs, scratching at his buzz cut hair with his free hand. He pushes through the red door and it gives with a moan.

Cold air races across dusty, barren wood floors. The stagnant air makes it hard to swallow. Inside isn't much warmer than outside. Stephen sets down the storage bin and the thud echoes through the empty house. The only furniture is an old, maroon couch in the first room and a dirty, yellow couch in the room beyond separated only by an archway. He shuffles across the floor in his heavy, black boots to light a candle here and there. The utilities still aren't on. Soon enough though they will

be and his claim to the house will slowly take hold. I am not sure who originally found the house and entered. All I know is a friend of Stephen's tipped him off to its location and that it would be an ideal place to start squatting. I choose not to think about the family who may have lived here before their home was foreclosed.

Stephen has just turned twenty-one and is hopeful that this house will grow into something good; I can see it in his baby blue eyes. Soon my boyfriend, Garrin, will join him here. I am also hopeful. I imagine long, summer nights with Garrin and my best friend doing something that just might matter. I believe that this house will grow into a space for like minded individuals to interact and give a resounding "fuck you" to the constraints of society and money shackles of consumerism.

Stephen and I crack open warm Miller High Lifes in the cold, candlelit house.

"To new beginnings."

There is a bench on the porch now. I sit on it surveying my surroundings with a cigarette hanging from my thin lips. The weather is warming, and soon, I will finish my junior year of high school. The grass still hasn't been mowed. The yard is overrun by colonies of garter snakes, and no one can bear to kill them. The boys decided they will call the squat "Snake House." I like it. Snakes are symbols of fertility and rebirth. Everyone is still hopeful that this house will blossom into something great, a catalysis for free-thinking within the Quad Cities. Garrin is all moved in. After the first night, he left Stephen a note reading, "This is the start of something great."

Stephen shuffles past me on the porch carrying in more boxes full of bare necessities like clothes and books. The neighborhood is quiet. All of the houses are run-down and in need of a fresh coat of paint, but at least they have four walls and a roof. Across the street, some young boys are watching Stephen anxiously as he stomps back out to the car for another

box. Dirty, black clothes hang from his frame revealing bits of tattoos. There still isn't a way to wash clothes in the house.

After much hesitation, a young, dark-skinned boy crosses the street and calls out to Stephen. "Yo man."

Stephen answers him with a welcoming demeanor. He doesn't want to make enemies of the neighbors. "Hey, what's up?"

"Are we like... cool?" the kid asks nervously.

"What?" Stephen asks slowly trying to process the question.

"You don't like, got a problem with us, right?"

The realization that the kid was worried he might be a white power skinhead reaches Stephen. "Oh!" Stephen extends a hand, "We cool!"

The kid shakes his hand before darting back across the street where he relays the message. The boys high five and wave across. I wave back from within my cloud of nicotine.

There isn't a real bed in the house. In fact, there is only one mattress that was pulled from a dumpster. The mattress has a giant spot in the middle, but we leave it in the sun a few days and decide it is good to go. We replace the pile of blankets on the floor in Garrin's room with the mattress. The addition of a bed does little to make the bland, white walls and dusty floors of the bedroom look any more welcoming. Tomorrow is May Day and Garrin is finally letting me stay over for the night now that the house has warmed up some and there is running water downstairs. Stephen had the utilities turned on and put in his name with no questions asked as to who actually owns the house. We have to haul a bucket up the stairs from the kitchen sink to flush the toilet. The rule "if it's yellow, let it mellow" is quickly embraced.

Upstairs, in Garrin's bedroom, we are playing a game of drunk Jenga giddy off wine. Garrin looks homey and almost out of place in the squat despite his recent buzz cut to match

Stephen. He has on clean, rip free blue jeans and a spotless, wine red button up shirt. He watches me with bright, blue eyes and offers a crooked smile as the blocks scatter loudly across the wooden floors.

I hear others downstairs returning from a dumpster diving adventure to gather food. Tomorrow will be the first event organized from within Snake House, a May Day public picnic in the park down the road. The dimly lit living room is littered with creations. There is a large carnival cutout of a wage slave leashed to a corporate pig that reeks of fresh paint. A corporate crown piñata is stuffed with candy waiting to be smashed.

I awake to dumpstered veggies sizzling on the stove in the kitchen. The kitchen is in decent shape with a good sized sink and fridge. The tiles shift between grease stained yellow and dirt-caked brown. I spilled wine on my jeans last night so I have to borrow a pair of Garrin's much larger jeans. Boyfriend fit isn't a good look for me, but no one says anything. Snake House is a judgment free zone and gender norms mean nothing to the growing number of people who have begun to frequent it like myself. The house always seems have bodies slipping from room to room although only Stephen and Garrin are living there. Our picnic goes off without a hitch. Positive energy fills the house as summer draws near.

Much has changed in the Snake House over the past month. Garrin moved out and not long after called it quits with me. I am not sure why he chose to part ways. All I know is he has returned to his parent's middle class home in a quaint neighborhood in Geneseo, Illinois. I miss him, but I am happy to still have Stephen to spend my summer with. Stephen's friend, Alex, and his girlfriend Madison have moved into Garrin's old room. Alex is in his early twenties and quiet with a long mess of dreads. Madison is in her early twenties as well and full of things to whine about with bleached hair, a side cut,

and face full of piercings. She boasts to me that she has never lived in one place for more than three months. As much as I quickly grow to despise her perpetual complaints, I pity her. She feels she always has something to run away from.

School is out, the heat has hit, and the house has become unbearably hot. Wasps have taken over the far back room and it was boarded off after Madison was stung in the foot. Madison's friends, Maggie and Sasha, have moved in for the summer with their puppy Freyja. I assume they are close to Madison in age, but I never know for sure. While Madison is always running away, Maggie and Sasha are always chasing new places and adventures. They crash on the living room floor in sleeping bags cuddled together.

I take a quick liking to Maggie. She has a blonde mohawk, a mouth overflowing with teeth and a raucous laugh that shakes her broad shoulders. She and I sit on the front porch sipping on cheap beer, chain smoking, and soaking in the sun. Snake House frequenter Dylan joins us outside. Lynyrd Skynyrd blares past the red door into the humid air. Dylan has declared this to be the summer of Skynyrd and no one objects. Slowly Skynyrd records are overwhelming the vinyl collection in the living room.

I am feeling pretty good about myself sunbathing on the front porch and flaunting a brand new little cloth dress. I like how the blues and purples in it look against my tan skin and sunshine blonde hair. Nobody on this side of town questions the beer and cigarette in my hand. I am relaxed into a summery daze.

The surrounding streets are less quiet now with children enjoying summer break in their less-than-pristine front yards. None of the neighbors mind our presence much. When they walk by, they offer a wave to us up on the front porch and we wave back through the tufts of overgrown grass.

A drunk comes stumbling up the porch pulling us from our sun induced stupor. Dylan quickly blocks the front door with his tall, wiry frame.

"Hey buddy, what's up?" Dylan offers.

"It my birthday today!" the drunk yells swaying side to side. His skin is pale and patchy.

"Well happy birthday." Dylan doesn't budge.

"Happy birthday," Maggie and I echo.

The drunk reaches into his pocket and pulls out a CD.

"I need to listen to this!"

"I'm sorry, man," Dylan answers, "We already have Skynyrd going, and I can't let a stranger in the house."

The drunk looks over at me though his eyes never focus. "Aren't you sweet? How old are you, sweetie?"

He takes a step toward me, and I am too frightened to answer.

"What's your name?"

"This is Tracey," Maggie invents as she leans protectively toward me.

"I like you so much I'm gonna give you my knife sweetheart," he slurs holding out a closed pocket knife.

A part of me wants nothing to do with the knife because knives and weapons in general scare the hell out of me. I am a pacifist to a fault. Another part of me screams take it for protection this guy is creepy as fuck. I am shocked and too uncomfortable to respond.

Dylan quickly moves in toward him. "Hey look. She's just a kid. I think you ought to get going."

He stumbles on his way with no more questions asked.

Another house member has been added. Nolan is in his mid-twenties and somehow a contact of Maggie and Sasha. Or maybe it was Madison. It's hard to keep track anymore. He got the wasps out of the far back room and has set up a bed roll and some milk crate furniture. Nolan is tan with dark hair and perpetual scruff. With him, comes his aging, fat cattle dog Galen who is slowing down but used to hop trains with Nolan.

I am perched with a cheap beer in my hand on the

yellow couch in the living room watching Sasha play SNES games. The cushions are lumpy and smell like beer. I am not sure when the television appeared or who brought it, but it has quickly attracted the attention of everyone in the house. The television sits in front of windows that moan in the wind and lack any curtains or blinds to shut out the sun. I watch Sasha's slim shoulders twitch in front of the colorful screen as he hits this button and that button.

Nolan's thing is he likes to do stick and poke tattoos, a method of creating simple tattoos without a tattoo gun. He is off to the right of Sasha giving some guy I've never met, who looks like the typical tramp with layers of ragged clothes, a stick and poke tattoo. Freyja wants to play, but Sasha is too entranced to put down the controller. She approaches Nolan her tail wagging her tiny frame earnestly. Her nose dives into the ink and she gives it a good lick.

"Oh fuck!" Nolan jumps to his feet wiping up ink with his hand. "God damn it, can someone get the dog?"

Maggie runs in and grabs Freyja to clean her up. "My poor puppy," she murmurs leading her shaky puppy to the kitchen.

Freyja's lips are stained black. The guy receiving the tattoo is unphased. Nolan doesn't bother to change the ink before continuing. The SNES blips on in the background. I crack open another beer.

Tramps and punks of all kinds slither throughout Snake House tonight. Everyone has a good energy about them, but no one seems to be sure of what's being celebrated. Something just feels right about this night in the dead of summer with Skynyrd blaring from the stereo. The air inside and out is heavy and hot. The whole house smells of body odor. Everybody's clothes are drenched with sweat and hang a little loose. Most of the partygoers are wearing some dingy, black getup plastered in patches.

Cheap beer permeates the house and a haze of cigarette smoke rests over each room. Laughter and high spirited conversations slip across the dusty, wood floors and bare walls. I stagger upstairs to use the bathroom. I lean out the bathroom window to see ten people sitting on the back roof.

"No one come in. I'm peeing!" I call out pushing my sweaty curls back from my face.

I pee quickly. There is never any toilet paper, but in my stupor, I don't mind. The hand soap has gone missing in action again off of the dirty, white sink streaked with rust and hair clippings. I don't bother to flush.

I decide to crawl through the window and join whoever is on the back roof. I pull my scrawny body through the frame. Madison is out here with a group of train hoppers who know somebody who knows somebody. A bottle of cheap vodka is being spun, and they welcome me with a swig. The alcohol burns so much I can't help but to cough and then laugh. The stars blur into the night sky.

Madison is impressing everyone by pissing off the roof without falling when red and blue lights flash down the street.

"Oh shit, cops," a train tramp slurs. We all slip quietly through the window.

"Cops are across the street," someone calls from off the porch as I reach the ground floor. I leave my beer in the kitchen and move outside to smoke and watch the scene unfold. At the house caddy-corner from Snake House, a young woman is clutching a small child to her chest crying. Her dark hair is piled on top of her head in a scarf and her pajamas hang from her tired frame. The cops have a man who can't stop yelling, "Is this what you want?" in hand cuffs.

"It looks like a domestic dispute." I turn to see a scrawny girl with a torn, black, Black Sabbath shirt. "It's a damn shame."

I can't bear to watch anymore. I flick my half-smoked cigarette into the snake infested yard and slink back through the red door.

Stephen is leaving Snake House to live with his mom in Las Vegas. I am beginning to realize the freedom to leave the decaying neighborhood is a huge difference between Snake House and the surrounding dilapidated homes. Everyone in Snake House is free to go. I choose to go home frequently to my quiet, middle class neighborhood where there is mom food, a hot shower, and clean laundry. My mother chooses not to question where I've been spending my nights and accepts "over at a friend's" and "out camping." Snake House's neighbors have no choice. They are trapped in the poverty stricken neighborhood with lumpy roads and rowdy squatters.

I am deeply saddened that Stephen is leaving. I feel like I am losing a brother. Over the past couple years, he has become a constant in my life, my best friend. When Garrin left me, I had Stephen to lean on. Now, Stephen is leaving, and I feel as though I will have no one. I spend every second at Snake House soaking up the last of summer with him.

The inhabitants and visitors of the house have taken a turn for the worse. The street drug "shrimp" is being shoved up a nose around every corner. I'm not sure what it is, but I help myself. It gives me a high and that's all I want at the moment. Sometimes, I'll stumble upon someone mainlining whatever drug they got their hands on that day. I quickly leave them to themselves pretending I saw nothing.

Morale is boosted a little when Alex gets a large shipment of molly to the house. Someone throws on a Skynyrd record. We all chip in a bit of cash and split off bits of yellow-white crystals. Some people break it down with razorblades and snort it in lines. I decide to bomb it, so the effects of the drug come on a little smoother and lasts longer. I wrap the molly in a bit of toilet paper and swallow like I remember seeing in the D.A.R.E. video in sixth grade.

My brain is flooded with serotonin and weightless

euphoria as my anxieties vaporize into the stagnant, humid air. Tactile sensations create ripples of pleasure through my body. I press against Stephen and rub his head in a daze. I tell him how much I love him and how much I'll miss him over and over again. We laugh a lot, and I cry a lot. We fall asleep with the sun blasting through the windows and birds singing.

Stephen is gone. My senior year of high school will start in less than a month. An old school bus converted into a hippie bus has stopped by Snake House. The sides of the bus are streaked with rainbows, flowers, and bright colors. Most of the seats have been removed and replaced with beddings and other necessities. The bus runs on vegetable oil. I do not know how they found out about the squat or who welcomed them in. The man who seems to head the bus is old and graying. Most of the men with him seem to be around their thirties. I walk into the kitchen am greeted by the smell of hot, rotting vegetables and beer. The men stand in a circle around their food humming "ohm." Their pupils are large and distant.

On the bus with them are young girls. Most of them are around my age and some are even younger. The majority of them came across the bus and ran away. One sixteen year old girl tells me her story. "I wasn't sure if I wanted to leave, but my mom insisted I go. She said 'if I was still young, I'd go with them in a heart beat.'" Her brown eyes are clouded and lack hope.

Before long into the night, the majority of the Snake House inhabitants are thoroughly freaked out by the cult-like atmosphere. The hippie bus men refuse to follow house rules and are growing argumentative. They are found in bedrooms without permission. Others are found in the basement that was declared a danger zone and locked and untouched since Stephen first began squatting. Young girls blindly follow them and are unresponsive as Snake House residents try to herd them back to the community rooms. Some of them stand on the front

porch yelling nonsense at passersby and neighbors drawing unwanted attention to the squat. Someone decides it's time for them to leave. They try to resist but are outnumbered by Snake House's inhabitants and frequenters like me. A few of the hippie bus girls choose to stay. Before long, they are out of their mind on whatever drugs their comrades fed them.

"I need a tattoo from you," an older brunette girl insists to Nolan. "On my boobs." She pulls off her shirt giggling.

"Whatever," Nolan says. "What do you want?"

"I love Jake." She plops down in front of him with wide, excited brown eyes.

No one in the house is sure who Jake is. Nolan can't resist the chance to embrace poor, permanent decision making. "Cool." He obliges while she whines and giggles that it hurts.

The house feels very wrong to me now. The stereo is off and voices bounce from wall to wall flooding each room. There are strangers everywhere and Stephen's familiar smile isn't there to comfort me. I am overwhelmed; I suddenly feel the need to go. I hitch a ride with the next group of friends leaving. I wonder how the brunette girl felt when she woke up and stumbled into the bathroom to see "I love Jake" across her chest. I imagine the hippie bus returning to scoop up the lost souls of young girls before leaving town. I see them squinting into the sunlight blinded in the destitute shambles of the neighborhood. I'll never enter the house again.

I hear Madison woke up to a notice from the sheriff's office. They are being fined for trash on the porch. The notice claims someone will be by to inspect the property in the near future. The whole house is spooked. Before night falls, everyone has packed their bags and hit the road to return home or take on a new adventure.

Not long after, I drive my car carefully into the west end up the road from the Oscar Meyer factory one last time to see Snake House. The lawn has been mowed and the red door

is boarded over. The neighbors sit on their porches in silence.

2nd Prize Lois C. Bruner Creative Nonfiction Award

He's a Doozy

By DiAnn Vulich

My fat cat, Gustav, loves laying on his back. His long haired, marmalade belly becomes an enticing handful of pleasure as I activate his purr. He cockily struts around our new, tiny apartment as if he is of regal lineage. I adopted him a month ago. He is one of the largest cats I've ever seen, and I am in awe of his powerful composure; his elegance and arrogance prominent in the lazy sway of his tail. He triggers an image of a fully maned lion snoozing in the African Savanna. He projects a picture of strength, vitality, and masculinity—until he meows. His meow belongs to a kitten a tenth his size. The meow is high pitched, squeaky, and in no way intimidating. After hearing his effeminate vocals I also notice how feminine and prissy he actually acts. He uses delicate, timid movements of a front paw to lick and wipe across his brow, smoothing whiskers and fur. He daintily and politely tap, tap, taps my arm to request a pet, and nestles against my thigh with a precise gentleness that doesn't disturb even the slip of paper on my lap I'd been using as a bookmark. As I read, and absentmindedly rub my Gus' handful of belly, I have an instant flash of an equal love from long ago; same androgynous familiarity, contentment, and languid disposition. My cat is Phineas. My old friend Phineas, a drag-queen performer known in the 1980's southern California club scene as "Miss Doozy," -- a raunchy, out-spoken, self-proclaimed Power-Plus-Size she-devil, and founding member of The Cosmetics drag show.

"Phinney, I don't want you to go. I'm kinda scared of

Doozy. She's mean. And crude. She isn't you at all. I love you, but I hate her." I sat on the ivory plush carpeted floor of the dressing room, flattening handprint angels into the nap as I watched Phineas transform his entire self into a different being.

"Oh, Baby, it's only because of Doozy that you love me. She unleashes all my anger, then I come home, take off her lipstick and eyelashes and I'm your Phineas again. I can't face the world, rant and rage, as an extra-extra-large, gay, black man--but they PAY me to do it as a 500 pound mountain of lipstick, teeth, and animal-print lingerie. When I wear that wig I wear a freedom no Emancipation Proclamation ever gave me. When I wear that wig, with those heels, and those fabulous diamond drop earrings—I let-loose all indignity and distain I have for society!" He told me this while he meticulously applied false lashes—the single kind, 'because only amateurs wear the strips.' His hulking body hunched forward toward the lighted make-up vanity as he concentrated on the magnifying mirror; his face elongated; stretched with dropped jaw and raised brow comically reflected back.

He paused in gluing, lash couplet still pinched between thick brown sausage fingers tipped in glamour-length scarlet, and shot me a spirited stare. "You lead a duel-life, too, you know. The left side of your head is shaved, the right is shagged and covers your face. You wear one big, ugly-ass earring on the shaved side, and the right is completely bare. You listen to angry, aggressive, loud music and wear clothes advertising sex, drugs, and rock-n-roll, yet blush every time you say the word, "fuck." You know what, Baby, just don't say it! It doesn't suit you."

"Do I blush?" My face flamed and I looked down to pick at my own glue covered fingers from a failed attempt at lash application days ago. "I guess I just don't know who I am. I think I'm afraid to be me. I'm scared of being hurt by other people."

"Baby Sister, that wall of ugly you wear to keep people out also keeps you trapped in." His deep brown eyes gaze

intensely into my blue eyes, challenging my mettle.

I look away to break the connection between us, ashamed that he reads me so well. "I'm really trying to change that," I struggled to say. "It's partly why I'm here,"

After an uncomfortable silence Phineas returns to his reflection and glue.

The following morning I woke him early, afraid to venture out on my own in his home after a show; leery of new strangers without Phineas nearby. Filled with an incredible fascination of his world, which my age kept me from, I shyly asked, "What exactly do you do when you go to the clubs as Doozy?" I secretly thought he was into prostitution or pornography, but was afraid to ask, and more afraid to hear confirmed. I sat beside him in his Caesar King Size bed in a nest of decorative pillows.

"Baby Sister" he laughingly responded, "you are too young and too Midwest to know all my secrets! When I'm home in the morning I'm Phineas. That's all you need to know. When you wake up I'm always Phineas. I make strawberry-banana pancakes and we spend the entire day together. I don't club again until Thursday, but I'll be walking "The Drawer" to drum up some gals for the show. I'll take you with me-- dress you up with Longstocking braids and striped thigh highs. We'll go buy a pair of High-top Converse, and some shiny patent leather, play up that incredible baby face you have".

Everywhere we went, Miss Doozy attracted crowds of fans and friends. Everyone seemed to know Miss Doozy. She had flocks of followers on every street corner who vied for her attention and a brief personal conversation. She was the Homecoming Queen/head cheerleader/teen idol/best friend of the street community. Whenever she heard her name repeated, "Doozy?" she would reply in a deep baritone voice, "You betta believe he do."

Walking "The Drawer" is a business stroll down El Cajon Boulevard. El Cajon Boulevard is the gay sex district of San Diego. The joke among the street people is, "Once

you leave the closet you are stuck in The Drawer.” (‘El Cajon’ is Spanish meaning “the box” or “the drawer”). Most of the people in The Drawer are stragglers, like lost, abandoned socks. Doozy always finds lost socks. Doozy brings them in, torn, dirty, and smelling of the street, and Phineas takes care of them. Doozy has brought in socks so stretched and misshapen they are almost unrecognizable. These people have sold their bodies to eat, get high, or out of the rain; some with needle marks and sores from head to toe. She has talked them down off the San Diego-Coronado Bridge (The Suicide Bridge) and made promises of a loving and better world. Doozy is the flash, the glamour, the recognizable-on-the-street or in clubs who draws people from the shadows. Doozy brings those abandoned souls, forlorn and forgotten, home. She’d then disappear into the bathroom and Phineas would walk back out. He openly and graciously offered stability, security, appreciation, and acceptance of all people. Phineas cooked for them, cleaned their infected, seeping, open sores, and made sure they had clean clothes and solid, sturdy street shoes. Phineas took street people shopping for shoes, clothes, and toiletry items. The people stayed as long as they want at Phineas’ beach house on Mission Bay. They left when they were ready. Usually people craved the life on the streets, refusing a home for long periods. They were afraid and mistrustful of kindness, felt boxed in and confined. Phineas sent everyone back on the street with indestructible backpacks filled with a reusable bottle of water, new underwear and socks, condoms, soap, toilet paper, rubbing alcohol wipes, toothpaste and toothbrush, and some with a copy of the Tao Te Ching, his favorite passages high-lighted.

Phineas found me, another lost sock, living under the Ingraham Street Bridge on Mission Bay. I was in San Diego only three days with no plans, no people, and no place to go. I was eighteen years and three days old when I met Phineas; on a quest to find my reason for being alive. I wanted to write a book. I needed freedom from my secure, sheltered home

life where I felt bored and unimportant. I was looking for that elusive spark everyone else had but me. Phineas invited me to stay at his house, free of charge, and I did. I stayed at Phineas' house for eight months. I had not yet met his female persona "Miss Doozy". I was a friend of Phineas from the start -- a distinction that determined how I fit in the social dynamics of the house. I wasn't a street person, I was a friend of the professional side of this human being.

I hadn't slept since I left Los Angeles. Los Angeles was where my latest and final thumbed ride left me, in Union Station with dark wood beamed ceilings, enormous arched windows, and gorgeous diamond patterned mosaic tiles on the floor. The woman who left me at the station gave me an unused train ticket she'd bought for her son. She decided instead to drive from Grand Junction, Colorado to Los Angeles to collect her boy from military school. I met her in a Denny's in Grand Junction. She thought I was a runaway and wanted to turn me over to the police. After I convinced her although I look like I am barely in my teens I had not run away but was eighteen years old, a legal adult. She offered a ride to L.A. Outside the train station I saw a billboard advertising a Judas Priest concert at the San Diego Sports Arena, October 12. I took the train to San Diego.

Walking into the beach house, Phineas liltingly called out to others, "Clean up, pets, my Baby Sister is here to stay awhile." Phineas was an enormous mass of humanity. His skin the shade of rich Iowa mud, and thick purple, pouty lips wore a perpetual dimpled grin. He completely filled every doorway, both in height and girth. He was soft-spoken and intelligent, with a palpable aura of kindness and genuine love. He led me down a peach colored hallway to an opulent white bedroom and private bath. The bed was a cloud of white down comforter and pillows floating in midair. The bed floated due to the clear acrylic pedestal foundation that stood waist high. Attached to the foot of the bed was a clear shaped bench and three steps wrapped around the length of the bed nearest

the windows. The acrylic also shaped into a suspended table hosting a purple, blue, and green cut glass lamp which I found absolutely breathtaking. He called it “Tiffany Wisteria”. Phineas walked behind the bed and pulled a rod which drew the white drapery open revealing a sliding glass door out to the beach. The ocean rolled silently behind the glass, seeming closer than the backyard outside my window when at home. The ceiling of the bedroom was painted sky blue, and had a textural application of white glaze clouds which reflected the light from outside. The clouds had silver linings. “This is the Princess room,” Phineas announced.

Gus makes an audible diaphragmatic squeak as he jumps on the twin bed. This tiny bedroom could possibly fit a full bed, but I have no money to buy one. The twin bed is a mere baby step in getting my apartment furnished for this newly liberated, oppressive-husband-free life. On this single bed my huge ball of Gus takes up half the room, knocking a pillow off the side. The side of the bed doubles as the chair to my desk, which holds laptop computer, printer, goose-neck lamp, organizational tray, and woven hemp storage basket filled with waiting bills and checkbook (a checkbook with only MY name). The desk runs the length of the bed, with legroom and nothing more—legroom barely able to pass the plush luxurious down pillows, which were my budgeted splurge from these past few months’ paychecks. Gazing around at my cramped, meager surroundings I relish in the few “fine” possessions I am so slowly accumulating to create my own Princess Lifestyle. The down pillows and comforter were greatly out of my budget, but after putting aside a little each paycheck, collecting lost change, taking lunch to work, and giving up carry-out Gus is now sleeping among those long ago remembered clouds. I bought king-size everything as a nudge toward my impending future. Right now the comforter can wrap the twin mattress three times over. A solid maple wood bedside table was a thrift shop find, and the grease penciled \$10 is still faintly visible,

despite the amount of lemon Pledge used. Hiding the price is another budgeted splurge, my very own Dale Tiffany Dragonfly stained glass mosaic lamp.

Gus leaves a trail of fur across my lap as he leaves me, fur as soft as the silk it befouls. I am writing this wearing a navy blue silk camisole/capri pajama that I have owned for years, but have only just begun to wear. Wearing this particular set means so much more to me than comfort, convenience, or even my taste.

“Young women today really need to learn proper style,” Phineas told me as I watched him steam press a long silk sari he was planning to wear over a slinky violet dress. “Take it from a man who thinks like a woman, dressing sexy will get attention, but the wrong attention. You women need to dress sensually. Sexy means you are trying too hard—doing it all for someone else. It cheapens you. You sell yourself low, and accept a price even lower. By dressing sensual you are dressing to please yourself. You reach a level of worth inside that raises you on a pedestal every time. There is nothing more sensual than silk. Silk is fluid; you’re floating in champagne, and you’re dressed in the nude. The drape is always flattering, yet you can’t feel a thing. Wear silk and you represent centuries of royalty. Of queens who were worshiped and desired by entire kingdoms. You wear an air of authority, of crowned elite. Grace Kelly, Audrey Hepburn and Sophia Loren were goddesses always in cashmere and silk scarves.”

I sat looking on, absorbing every hiss from the steam brush swishing up and down along the hanging print scarf, listening to him lecture while hiding my Airwalk spiderweb skateboard shoes under scabbed knees fringed in cut-off jeans-shorts. My grossly oversized Judas Priest concert tee billowed around me as I preferred to hide all my bodily curves. I watched Phineas iron and dreamed to one day have the charisma and confidence to try his suggestions. I desired that royal sensuality. I ached to be on a pedestal.



Gus spends his days sleeping sprawled in the sunshine, eating food I deliver to his bowl with regularity and love, and being played with and petted. He rolls around caressing a solid-packed compressed ball of catnip. His desires are met in a heavenly flood of indulgence; another common thread to my days living with Phineas. Mid-November as Phineas and I lounged on his deck, drinking morning mimosas and aiming binoculars at the Pacific horizon hoping to glimpse migrating whales, he spoke about his childhood. He carried a purse to school every morning in grade school, and was beaten for admitting his dream goal as an adult. He wanted to be married to the President of the United States of America. He told me he always wanted to decorate and throw lavish international dinner parties. He did have formal dinner parties where he would present plates filled with rumaki, seafood pastries, and curried scallops. At the dining table we set gold chargers, his peach and mint green china, peach colored crystal water and wine goblets, and seven-pieced gold plated silverware. Silverware pieces I learned to use from him, and which I now own, in silver, because of the unusual elegance of three extra-long tines on dinner forks, three short tines on the salad forks. I learned to swirl my pasta against the wide round pasta spoon with its flat side against the plate; and to break open steamed crab using crab crackers and long handled seafood forks. His parties were places where performers and artists, musicians and film makers connected without fanfare. Phineas knew influential people, without underhand agendas or motives. He staged, cooked, and hosted parties in both his guises. As Doozy he would call around and announce he will be holding a “Sisters of Soul” reunion, and the drag performers from all over would arrive in sequin costumes and shaped hairstyles worthy of Tina, Patti, and Aretha themselves. As Phineas he would arrange intimate dinner parties of his closest and dearest friends, people who exist as nicknames alone. I was

simply “Baby Sister” to everyone on Mission Bay during that time, names and pasts are unessential. To ask last names, occupations, or intimate details from any of these people was a great faux pas. We were judged, presented, and accepted in Phineas’ circle by character and nature of heart.

“May we live in today. May hedonism and fantasy always be our preferred lifestyle. Our search for pleasure is a search for God, and a taste of pleasure is a taste of God.” Doozy announced as an early toast to New Year’s, 1987, at a dinner party. The dinner party was held on Tuesday night, the day before New Year’s Eve, due to it being a busy time for performers. It was intended to be an intimate gathering for her closest friends. Like Doozy, things were loud, flashy, and over the top. Men and women were dressed formal, so I was, again, taken shopping. I bought my first pair of heeled shoes. After her giddy thrill of choosing a size 5 ½ shoe, Doozy taught me to step, heel to toe-tiny steps on an invisible line in front. We practiced walking the length of the hallway, into the tiled bathroom. “It’s important to feel the difference in flooring. Change your step on a smooth surface! Tip, tip, ankles straight! Girl, you’re getting it, now, keep trying!” After my afternoon of hobbled attempts proved fruitless, Doozy decided I would be her date for the party so she could help me keep my balance. We spent the New Year’s Eve eve arm in arm, wearing coordinating dresses, my holding on to Doozy to stay upright in my black high heels.

Around Phineas and company I learned that pleasure creates memories. Fear is only a sense of losing control, all things are designed to be enjoyed, and the greatest disappointment is to find shame in your pleasure. He would say, “If something feels good, it’s good. You become divine and should be worshipped.” I cannot decide if my most important life-lessons were from the heart of Phineas or the social graces taught by Doozy.

My stay on the beach involved experimenting with peyote, communing with the ocean and realizing that I am a

small particle of the great organism called life. I sat in the tideline, and fully understood that my part in the universe was a mutual co-existence. Sitting with my legs buried beneath the sand, the ocean rolling in like a million cheering fans, parting to accommodate me, then whispering as they left—each drop of water in the ocean a separate entity, and accepting me as an equal—I heard the ocean whisper to me it’s secret name, but I was yet too naïve to understand what it said. When my body absorbed the water I became a part of the ocean, the ocean became a part of me. In that time and place I knew my position and value in my life. I fit here. I was excited for the person I found here.

Gus is now in the kitchen knocking his food dish against the side of the stove. He does that either to verify to himself the bowl is empty, or to make such racket that I come solve the problem. I take my time to care for him, knowing he will certainly not starve in the meantime. No matter the situation, no matter the satisfaction and comfort there is always a need for more. There will always be that innate desire for the new right beside the old, the exciting along with the tried and true. Gus experiences that sensation through wanting fed multiple times a day, I find it whenever I wish to be in two places at once, with people from my different realities joining.

“Baby, I think you are ready to go home. You tell me how much your mom would love the marmalade toast, the mint tea, the smell of the flowers on the wind—you are finally missing your momma.” Phineas wore a flowing, ice-blue satin robe that the wind attempted to pull off him each time is blew off the Pacific. The winters in San Diego brought rain and temperatures in the 40’s, but that year was record-breaking cold for the area. By the time May came around we were anxious for the warmth to penetrate the gloomy clouds, but that day was overcast and chilled. The salty air whipped up the beach, threw sand in our faces, and knocked seagulls

off their flight paths. The two of us maintained our morning rituals, though, as if the day was bright and beautiful. Phineas reclined in a lounge chair, holding his robe closed with one hand and the other holding a cup of hot mint tea. On his eyes were yesterday's tea bags trailing the Lipton labels down his cheeks. Those fleshy dimpled cheeks were currently covered in an avocado, lanolin, and oatmeal mask which he blended fresh every morning. He kept used teabags in a container in the refrigerator so they stayed cold and refreshing. This was his daily morning beauty regimen. The teabags stood out against his face like mottled bandages over his eyes. He didn't even look at me.

I sat upright in a round-backed barrel chair, my feet tucked under my body as I leaned forward facing the ocean. I flung toast crusts from both our plates to the circling, screeching seagulls, having finally won the long debate whether feeding them causes them to become dependent. I think he just gave up the argument to please me. "I do miss my mom. I miss everyone, but I don't want to leave. I like who I am here. When I go back home I'll be gone again." I looked at him, hoping he would read my heart and remark on my new-improved outlook. I had grown accustomed and quite gluttonous of his praise and unconditional encouragement.

He still didn't look at me. He never took those teabags from his eyes. "You are the same person, no matter where you are, no matter who you are with you control the impact you have on people. You are yourself." He poured tea from the pot without looking, without adjusting his body at all. He poured fresh tea into his cup out of muscle memory, and sipped as he further said, "I bought you a plane ticket already. I bought it last Monday—the day you couldn't wait to get to the phone to call your twin and tell her what record album you just found. You leave tomorrow night." And he still didn't look at me. He sipped tea out of memory, and he dismissed me like it was something he did every day.

My body froze like he had just slapped me. Was he

tired of me? Did I do something? Say something? Was I not important? All my usual fears surfaced, the fears I thought I erased being with him. I looked deeply at him, and silently begged for him to make the intimate eye-to-eye connection again, the connection where we read each other's hearts.

He did look, then. He sat straight up in the lounge chair so quickly the ratcheting hinges protested and folded the upper end into him; as he moved the chair's attached pillow slapped against his shoulder. He swung his legs around to fully face me, and grabbed my left hand. In the same comforting way he always had, he lightly ran his thumb caressingly against my palm following what he called the "heart line" closest to my fingers. "You don't need to miss me, I'll be everywhere you find to remember me. All the things that you learned to love with me will be me. Same as every time I see the wonder and newness of something I will think of you. You will keep me from ever feeling old, or cynical. You'll always be with me." His deep brown eyes again erased those thoughts of inferiority.

And I flew home to Iowa the following night. I took all my new shoes and clothes, a jar full of sand from the beach outside my bedroom door, and three palm fronds from the tree in front of Phineas' house. I took my new-found identity, and all the social graces I learned these past eight months. I never heard from Phineas again, but I see him everywhere. I think of Phineas every time I make a major change in my life, and believe he would be proud of some of my choices, and very disappointed in others.

My cat, Gus, represents my freedom from married life, submission, and surrender. I have loved cats, had always owned cats, until I married twenty-two years ago. In giving away my last name, I gave away my identity. My needs were deferred in observation of my husband's. The more I gave of myself in order to create a partnership, the more I stopped—being. I took on a role of passive wallflower, diminishing the ever inquisitive, adventurous curiosity from before. In

taking back that projection of self, I now reclaim my identity. Gus reminds me daily that I am in charge. I control my own destiny, and make my decisions (both good and bad). If I want a cat, I'm getting a cat. I bought Gus a rhinestone studded collar to wear the flash and dazzle of Miss Doozy. I will never deny anyone an opportunity to display identity. I have been showered in a storm of "NO!" for so long I feel an almost joyful fear of making choices about how to spend money, what I am capable of doing, and who I am wanting to become as I rebuild myself. In recognizing my beloved Phineas in my cat, Gus, I do remember. I know who I want to be, again. I want to be the person Phineas saw in me back when I was eighteen years old. I want to be on that pedestal he placed me on, only find that confidence in myself. I wish to have the self-esteem and self-respect that Phineas tried to encourage in me all those years ago. I want to erase the coward who emotionally hid behind a gold band and called life "Good enough."

3rd Prize Lois C. Bruner Creative Nonfiction Award

Shangri-La Willa

By Juliana Goodman

B306 looked the same after my grandmother's death. The squishy leather sofa she'd found on the side of the road sat against the far wall, her jazz records collected dust in the old wooden aquarium and various framed photos of family members hung haphazardly on the wall undisturbed. It was not because no one had been there. The night of her death, uncles, aunts, grandchildren and friends had gathered in the tiny warm apartment, shocked at the sudden loss and curious as to how the family would move on without its leader.

Aunt Bridget let out a wail much too loud and exaggerated for someone who rarely visited her stepmother. My mother quickly ushered her into the kitchen.

"You need to calm down. You're upsetting Chee" she whispered to her, nodding towards the back room where my grandfather sat motionless, his two sons with their hands placed on his thin shoulders.

My sister Jill and I squeezed onto a bench near the front door, silent. I was 19 and she was 20. We weren't crying or upset, which confused us, as we had both bawled like babies when we'd found out our cat had died while we were away at college. But we were okay for the moment, temporarily distracted by the events that unraveled before anyone in the presence of a black family in mourning.

Some people say we all bleed the same, regardless of color, but there is a distinct difference between how white people mourn and how black people mourn. White funerals tend to be somewhat traditional with people crying, hugging

and maybe a little hymn here and there. But at black funerals, you are almost guaranteed to become witness to some sort of spectacle. A distraught mother might pencil roll across the floor, a bitter ex girlfriend might sing an inappropriately sexual Mary J. Blige song and a random fist fight is nothing out of the ordinary. Despite three of my grandmother's four children having college degrees, our family was no exception to the spectacle rule.

When our cousin Burt was shot and killed, my older male cousins stood outside the dilapidated funeral home, throwing wild punches into the air and shouting "he ain't deserve that shit, man!" Back inside, his younger sister passed out from grief in the middle of the wake and had to be taken to the hospital. Nobody gawked as she was loaded onto a stretcher, her thin brown arms hanging limply from the sides. The preacher continued his sermon on why some things cannot be questioned and the people in the pews continued to fan themselves with the programs in the warm chapel room as though nothing had happened.

After Aunt Bridget had been sufficiently subdued, we watched as my mother and uncle had a long discussion about who would pick up the fried chicken because in black families, there is always fried chicken when someone dies. They had just decided that they would have another relative stop at Shark's Chicken and Fish when I felt my phone vibrate in my pocket. It was Jarrett, one of my closest cousins who was only a year younger than me.

"Juli! What happened?! Somebody said grandma dead. Is it true?" he asked frantically.

"Yeah, she's dead."

"Like, forreal dead? You saw the body?"

I had seen the body. Just an hour earlier, I had crowded into the small curtained room at Stroger's hospital with my mother, aunt and uncles. My grandmother lay flat on the bed, her body covered with a white sheet up to her neck. I tried to shake the image of her mouth curved upwards in a smile and

her eyelids half closed; the feel of her soft curly hair that my mother encouraged me was okay to touch for the last time. It didn't seem real yet.

"Yeah, I saw her," I said.

"Grandma dead?! Are you serious, Juli? I don't--How did—But I saw her...I don't understand!"

"Well...what don't you understand?" I asked.

It sounded rude and I was surprised at my own frankness. Perhaps I was annoyed at having been the only kid there when the policeman broke the news in the waiting room. Or maybe I was just frustrated that someone expected me to make sense of something I didn't quite understand myself. I told Jarrett he should call his mom if he didn't believe me and hung up the phone.

Throughout the rest of the evening, some family members came bearing miscellaneous hot foods from grocery stores, but most came empty handed, including the step uncle whom my grandmother had just dropped off at home when she'd had the heart attack. He lingered in his father's bedroom, probably sensing the tension in the living room and not wanting to be the target of blame.

A brother from the Kingdom Hall my grandmother attended came over and offered a mangled hand to each of us. It was hanging at such an odd angle that I wasn't sure if I was supposed to shake it or not and there was an awkward pause as I tried to figure it out.

"I knew your grandmother. She was a wonderful woman," he said, a sentiment I had heard many times, even before her death. And I wondered how well these people really knew her.

When my grandmother was young, she worked at a bar called the Shangri-La and kept her tips in a purple velvet Crown Royal bag. Back then she was called Willa, by the cologne soaked black men with their open shirts and gold chains and also by her three children, Cynthia, Chip and my mother, Ginger.

In her thirties, my grandmother was an attractive although somewhat gaudy woman. With her light brown skin, full lips, chinky eyes and straight jet black hair parted down the center, she looked like a black Arabian princess. She wore no makeup but was rarely photographed without a pair of gold plated bamboo earrings and matching wrist bangles. My mother always said that my love of long hair and oversized earrings was hereditary.

Willa had married my grandfather, Jesse, in a desperate attempt to get out of her mother's house. Being a wife seemed better than being a daughter to her. But ten years and three children later, she had grown tired of the dull life of a homemaker. She had no education past middle school and did not aspire to begin a career. My grandmother was still young and acted like it. She would spend obscene amounts of her husband's money at the Evergreen plaza while my mother and her siblings were left to wait in the old white station wagon in the parking lot. Hours later, she'd return with beautiful bags, jewelry, wraps, gowns and anything she thought would make her look rich. She stayed out late most nights, claiming to be working at the bar, but her husband knew the truth. Perhaps it was his integrity or the deep love he had for his children, but my grandfather never cheated on my grandmother or confronted her. It seemed their marriage would struggle on until the day Willa met Charles Onayo.

In the streets, he was known as Chee. A half-Latino half-Black man with a muscular build, light skin and long wavy black hair slicked back on his head, he almost looked like El Debarge. No one saw it coming when Willa divorced her husband to be with him. No one understood it either. While Jesse was a calm, honest and hard-working provider, Chee was a rolling stone with a big ego and a short temper. He was already divorced from his first wife and had three kids, Linda, Bridget and Carter, each of whom would battle with serious addictions to crack and heroin in the future.

Over the next decade, Jesse died of a heart attack,

Willa gave birth to her only child with her new husband, a fat round boy they named Ali, and my mother and her siblings were left to live in a family where their own mother favored her stepchildren over them. After their father's death, my mother said they received a meager check from the insurance company. They were not allowed to attend the service in their father's hometown of Chandler, Oklahoma. Instead, my grandmother bought them new winter jackets and used the rest of the money to buy new clothes for their step siblings. The way she describes it, my mother's childhood was like a rougher version of Cinderella, with three bratty step siblings, a mother who made them clean every Saturday and an evil stepfather who once grabbed my Aunt Cynthia around the neck and tried to choke her against the wall, glass portraits falling and smashing on the linoleum kitchen floor.

A few days after her death, we were back at my grandmother's apartment, this time to take the cat, Mimo, home with us.

"Chee, does the cat have a carrier?!", my mother yelled, searching through the junk in their small bedroom.

"What?!"

"A carrier! Like a little cage to put her in? Did Willa have one?"

I interjected here and explained to my mother that my grandmother had originally brought the thin calico cat home in a cardboard box and usually carried her to the vet in a blue mesh tote bag. If there was a cheaper way to do something, my grandmother knew what it was.

Once we had wrestled the feisty cat into her bag and grabbed her dishes and bag of meow mix, we said goodbye to my grandfather for the night. As soon as he saw us heading to the door, he spoke.

"Aaaaawwww Willa would have wanted you and Jill to have her. I'm glad y'all are taking her, because I know I can't

take care of her,” he said, tearing up.

“Do you think you’ll miss her?” I asked, genuinely curious because he and my grandmother had treated the cat like a piece of awkwardly placed furniture, poking her with a walking stick whenever she happened to be in a place they didn’t want her.

“Yeah, I’ll miss her,” he said.

We had just loaded Mimo into the back seat of our SUV when we spotted my uncle Ali’s navy blue caravan pulling up. I waited in the car while my mother got out to speak with my uncle. He was apparently upset that we had taken the cat but not emptied her litter box, which, according to him, had been full and stinking for days.

“Ali, our hands were full! I’m already taking the stanky ass cat home with me, why can’t somebody else empty the litter box?! Damn!”

My uncle Ali, fatter, rounder and balder than he was as a child shook his head. He and my mother were the two comedians of the family and it was weird seeing them both angry at each other. My mother always resented the fact that he was the favorite based on his bloodline, but she never treated him differently because of it. She knew it was not his fault, but she did hold him accountable for being spoiled. He did the least work but took advantage of his parents’ old age.

“Ginger, that box has been sitting up there for days! All you had to do was throw it away!”

And that’s when my mother went into angry black woman mode. I could always see it coming. She sucked her lips in, looked him up and down and started clapping her hands in my uncle’s face, even though he was over a foot taller than her. Usually it was funny when she went off on people, because she made up hilarious words like ‘knucklefuck’, but this time was different.

**“THAT IS NOT MY MOTHAFUCKIN’ HOUSE!
THAT AIN’T MY GOT DAMN CAT AND I AM NOT
WILLA!”**

My uncle was taken aback for a moment but jumped back at her.

“Our mother is DEAD! SHE GONE! AND SHE’S NOT COMING BACK!”

By this time, my grandmother’s downstairs neighbor, Rosa, had come out onto her porch, being her usual nosy self. If some yelling could be heard outside, she would be the first one to see who it was.

“Noooo, don’t do that! You know what Willa would say,” she called down from her patio as my mother got back in the car and we sped off down the alley, leaving a shouting Uncle Ali behind us.

“I swear on Jehovah I will NEVER speak to him again,” my mother vowed. I wondered what my grandmother would have said about that.

They eventually did speak again, but their relationship is on and off. When they’re mad at each other, they won’t talk for weeks, but eventually they get over it and things go back to normal.

When my mother spoke to me about her childhood, she always made my grandmother out to be a villain. There were no redeeming qualities about her except that she was pretty and knew how to cook. She never spoke to her mother about how angry she was about the divorce or how much she hated Chee. If she did, she chose not to mention it to me. Despite the tension between them when she was a child, my mother grew very close with my grandmother as an adult, especially after Jill and I moved away to college. With no one left in the house to take care of, she spent evenings in my grandmother’s bedroom, watching television or just chatting about her day. My grandmother was a great listener. She might be doing 101 things at once, but she would always pay attention to what you had to say. Neither of them ever discussed the past, but they were close and loved each other just as much as any other mother and daughter.

By the time I knew my grandparents, they were old. They no longer lived in Chicago but had relocated to a medium sized apartment complex for senior citizens and people with section 8 in Blue Island, Il.

My grandmother's jet black hair had become short, gray and damaged from too many sewed in wefts. Her teeth had rotted without the routine care of a dentist and she had taken to wearing yellowed dencers, one of the faux teeth gold-plated. She grew black moles around her eyes, deep wrinkles beside her mouth and gained weight around her stomach and thighs, giving her a knock-kneed appearance. Without pictures, you would never have known how pretty she used to be.

My step grandfather's hair was still wavy, but it had turned gray and while he had more teeth left than my grandmother, they were crooked and black at the gum line. His stomach had grown big and tight like a pregnant woman's and he often ate Lay's potato chips off of it as he reclined in his lazy boy and watched Sanford and Son.

From kindergarten through high school, my sister and I used my grandparent's address and lived there in the mornings before school and into the late evening when my mother got off work and finished her night classes at Chicago State University. Looking back, we probably spent more time at my grandparent's apartment than we did in our own house. and we hated it.

"Ah Judy Booty, bring granny her knee jammer, I gots to get up and fry this chicken for Uncle Pete," my grandmother said.

Uncle Pete was not really our uncle. His name wasn't even Pete. It was John Watkins, best known for his very small role as Uncle Pete in Soul Food. He was also a jazz musician who played at the lounge my grandparents visited every weekend. They absolutely loved jazz, or bebop as they liked to call it. Mixed in with the hanging portraits of family members were signed photographs of John Watkins, Sonny Seale and some Asian saxophonist who looked like Yoko Ono.

I moved to hand the stretchy black Ace bandage to my grandmother, but she motioned for me to put it on for her. I tried not to grimace as I slipped the ‘knee jammer’ over her ashy feet and swollen joint then waited until she hobbled into the kitchen before I washed my hands.

While the small bathroom was tastefully designed by my grandmother with three floor length mirrors, a basket for tissue and magazines, and an abundance of towels, the bath tub was bone dry and filled with white bags of dirty clothes. They never showered. They never had toothpaste, mouthwash or floss. But there was always roll on deodorant, cologne and perfume. I imagined they just washed up in the sink, because they never smelled bad.

“You think she’ll give us any chicken this time?” I whispered to Jill as we waited by the front window for our ride.

“I hope so. Ginger rushed me out of the house before I could finish my waffle,” she said.

Despite not enjoying the life of a housewife, my grandmother was a great cook and she made everything from scratch. Sometimes I’d watch her pour flour and random seasonings into a Jewel paper bag, drop a few naked wings in, and shake it vigorously to make sure each piece was fully coated. She always seemed to know just how long to keep the chicken in the grease, because they always came out crispy, hot and delicious. I’ve tried to mimic her recipes, but the chicken always came out slightly pink on the inside. It is still one of many things I wish she had shown me.

When we heard the sizzling stop, we watched hungrily as she lined an aluminum pan with paper towels and placed each wing in a neat row. Right before she put on the lid, she told us to grab three wings each and we devoured them before our ride pulled up and it was time to go.

But my grandmother was not always fair. Just as she had favored her stepchildren over my mother and her siblings, she liked my Uncle Ali’s children better than us. They were her only biological grandchildren that had light

skin and thick black eyebrows like her husband. They were also devout Jehovah's witnesses, whereas my own family was so dismissive of religion that my mother once commented "if someone brought a bible into this house, it would burst into flames". Despite this statement, my mother claims to be a Jehovah's witness at heart, but she hasn't actually practiced it since she was a child.

When my younger cousins Jesemin, Jakob and Jameson came over, I knew it was going to be a bad day. We were not allowed to watch television programs with magic, birthdays or any holidays as these things were strictly forbidden to Jehovah's witnesses. This of course, meant Jill and I were forced to entertain ourselves. Whenever I cracked open a Harry Potter book, a seven year old Jesemin would continuously point out that it was bad and that I wasn't supposed to be reading it. I ignored her.

The final straw came when my grandmother asked me to sit in front of her knee to knee so she could rest baby Jameson's head in my lap as she changed his diaper. I refused and was proud of myself for taking a stand. However, I did follow her orders and allow him to fall asleep on my chest, despite the fact that he was heavier than a ton of bricks and I could barely breathe. Still, my mother made sure I was always aware of the difference.

"You know, she watches them for free. When you all were first born and I was saving up money for our house, granny and grandpa made me pay them to keep you there," my mother said as we drove home one eventful night after my grandmother had annoyed her.

I knew she had only meant to insult them, but it hurt my feelings all the same. I was also annoyed at the fact that she had been paying for us to stay in a postage stamp sized apartment where we were basically their slaves. Anytime they needed something, they would make us fetch it for them. On occasion, we had even been dragged off to work with my grandmother.

After her stint at the Shangri-La, she became a maid for rich white people in Olympia Fields. Three days out of the week, she would load up her car with pine sol, white rags and cleaning buckets. We dreaded going with her because she never let us watch TV and we couldn't sleep all day like Grandpa did.

My grandmother worked for several families, but the one I remember most is the Rudy's. We always came while they were at work and school, but their magnificent house spoke volumes. They had what seemed like a million rooms, each filled with expensive gadgets and sculptures that my grandmother told us not to touch. While she got down on her knees and scrubbed their floors with ammonia, we were allowed to play with the cats. They had a fat ugly brown one named Magellan who sat in the dishwasher and wasn't very friendly; an all white blue eyed cat who sat on their black grand piano named Dina; an all black one with white around his left eye that they called Socks; and our favorite, a brown cat with black stripes named Axel. While we played and wandered around the house, my grandmother cleaned everything from top to bottom. Toilets, mirrors, dishes, she did it all. I felt bad for her, having to clean up after other people while her own home was a disheveled mess of antique furniture and thrift shop knick knacks. Although I felt like a slave at her house, it was clear that she was more like a slave than anyone I ever knew.

My fondest memory of her was during a midnight thunderstorm. My mother had gone out to a late night event her advertising agency was hosting so my grandmother had made up two thin cots on the small floor for me and my sister. Jill was sound asleep and snoring, but the loud cracks of thunder outside the window had woken me up. I heard my grandmother come out of her bedroom and watched as she stood at the window in her ripped Mickey Mouse nightshirt.

"Did the thunder wake you up, too?" she asked, somehow sensing I was awake even though I had shut my eyes.

"Yeah" I admitted.

"Well I don't like thunderstorms either. Let's lay

together.”

And for the first and only time, my grandmother laid beside me on the floor and held me around the waist. I was uncomfortable because I had never spooned with anyone before and my grandmother’s breath smelled of corn chips and Old Milwaukee beer. But I laid as still as possible so as not to wake her because my mother never cared when a thunderstorm woke me up.

The first time I cried was at the memorial service. Our family entered the kingdom hall in rows of two. My mother had dressed my sister and me in matching green sweaters, and even though we were adults and past the age of being double mint twins, we obliged in honor of my grandmother. Our family lined up in order of lineage, my grandmother’s children in the front and all of the grandchildren in the back. The room was so crowded with people that some were standing politely at the back. They grabbed our hands and touched our shoulders as we made our way to the pews in front.

Despite being poor, my grandmother was the person everyone called when they were in trouble. She would pick you up from the train station, cook a meal for your family, buy you some decent clothes from the thrift shop and she always had plastic baggies with chocolate chip cookies and homemade banana bread. It did not surprise me that I had never met the majority of the people in the room. My grandmother was friendly like that and probably wouldn’t have been able to identify everyone herself. My mother sat in front of us, dabbing her nose with a tissue. She was upset, but my mother has always been one to hold things in while in public and then completely break down in private. She spent the next three years in intensive counseling.

The pastor took the podium and we looked at him expectedly, waiting for some words to make us feel better.

“Sister Willa was loved. She was a hard working woman and was kind to everyone she met. Your grandmother

was very special. Look behind you and see how many lives she has touched”.

All of the grandchildren and great grandchildren turned around and looked into the faces of at least two hundred people, some squatting in the back, others waiting in the foyer because there simply was not enough room for everyone. In that moment, I was proud to call myself her granddaughter. Sure these people loved her and were close to her, but she wasn't their grandmother, she was mine.

After the sermon, everyone rose and sang a depressing song that said “he will call. The dead will answer.” I cried then because I knew what it meant.

“Granny, what happens when you die?” I asked her one afternoon as we drove back from the Rudy's house.

She turned down the jazz on the radio and looked at me in the mirror. I could tell she was excited to talk about Jehovah.

“When you die, you're not really dead. You've just fallen asleep. And one day, Jehovah will wake all the good people up.”

“But what if you're cremated or you died in a bad accident?”

“That doesn't matter, he can gather your pieces and make you whole again.”

“Oh...and when is that going to happen?”

“Not for a long time. When everything on the Earth now is gone. But after that, it's going to be better, it's going to be paradise. Judy booty, do you believe in Jehovah?”

“I don't know. ..” I said. I still don't know, although I want to believe it happened for her.

We drove in silence until it was too much and the fuzzy static of the radio lingered between us.

Strider

By Joseph Fegan

Dreams of Alice,
Coffee with orange-cream.
Some like it black.
Weaving through the trees
Riding on the lone dusk
with leaves on a breeze
and sunset rivers with bronze filigree.

High

By Alden Braddock

Years fall away
like empty dope bags
scattered in the wind.
How bright they were,
how beautiful
atop the tin foil pyre.
A grave fit for kings
and queens.
Seasons change,
evaporating over glee and anguish alike.
We're all alone now.
May your kiss be soft
and your taste be sweet.
My goddess,
my love,
my fix.

Come Spring

By Luke Taylor

I stood in my regular spot, at my regular grocery store, staring idly out of the window as wet sleet fell heavily, with more force than grace. I was weary of winter and longing for spring. It was nearly March, right on the heels of winter's end. It was the time of year when all of the leftover snow is practically ice and an unappetizing tint of black, as a result of the cars on the road. The winter was frigid. I found my private moment of reflection quickly shattered, as I surfaced from my pool of thoughts to the sound of my boss exclaiming, "Chris. Chris! You have a customer." I fell back into my surroundings and turned my focus to my customer, as well as my cash register. Working the checkstand at a grocery store involved constant rehashing of the exact same conversations with nearly every customer.

I'd say, "How's it going?"

"Hi, how are you?"

I'd always smile a bit when they used that particular response. In my head I would say, "Really? You don't seem high." It was a corny joke, but everything was a little funnier during an 8 hour checking shift in my own personal purgatory. The conversation would then cover the important bases of grocery store banter. I'd ask if they found everything alright, and the customer would always respond with a yes. Honestly, I had no idea what I'd do if they ever said no. From there the conversation would surely stray to some mundane topic like the weather which would usually lead me into another daydream through the window.

I finished with the customer, and my shift manager asked me to go face the shelves on aisle 9. I nodded eagerly,

turned off the light, and logged off of the computer at my checkstand, making my way toward the aisle. I was thankful today that were two other checkers to help shoulder the load so I could break away from the front end for a bit. I reached aisle 9 and watched the cookies and crackers pass me by as I marched onward toward the back of the store. I loved when my manager had me face aisle 9, though I rarely finished making the shelves look full and pretty (or even started for that matter). I never deviated much from my usual plan of leaving busy work, such as facing shelves, unfinished. As soon as I was out of sight from my boss, I would always up my pace, through the dairy cove doors to the dairy cooler and emerge in the back of the store. As I opened the door of the cooler I saw my best friend, Jay, loading up his cart with dairy products in need of being filled on the shelves. Jay was an incredibly hard worker and arguably the best employee in the store. His sister helped him get the job, but she wasn't the reason he was able to keep it. I always marveled at his split persona. On the weekend and nights he wasn't working, he was partying hard. When it came time to work, however, he was all business. It was like turning the cold water knob on a sink and turning off the warm one. "How's it going back here, man?" I asked as he looked up and smirked at me.

"How do you never get caught sneaking back here?"

"You know I'm too damn good to get caught." I replied with sarcastic overconfidence. I took a seat upon the empty space on the surface of his pull cart, and he leaned back on a crate towering with stacks of yogurt. Jay was a diligent worker, but he would always choose to take a break for conversation when I made my little visits to his neck of the store. Best friends made exceptions like that.

"Dude, Chris, have you seen the new employee? She's a checker, and more importantly she's a female."

"No, I haven't. What's her name?"

"I think her name's Riley. I was working last night when she was getting trained. To put it elegantly, she's gorgeous. To put

it bluntly, she's such a babe."

"Did you say anything to her?"

"No. I was, uh, too busy." He stammered but seamlessly regained poise, "I did see on the schedule that she works today though. You should introduce yourself. It's been, like, over a year since you've even looked at a girl."

He was exaggerating of course. I had certainly looked at women in the last year. I couldn't deny that he had a point though. I hadn't looked at any girl in any particular romantic light for quite some time. It was last January that my girlfriend of two years, Taylor, abruptly decided it would better if we saw different people. The winter could be so cold. I assumed it had something to do with her entering her second semester of college in a city located a few hours away, but I was still pretty upended by the whole thing. The first month after the break-up was dark, gloomy, and dimly lit by a hope that she would come to her senses. That delusion was promptly shattered the following month after I learned via social media that she was in a new relationship. That felt great. It was only about four months ago that I heard through the grapevine that she was getting married. She hadn't dated this guy half as long as we'd been together, and she was engaged. That felt even better.

After about five minutes or so Jay was ready to get some of his work done and so I headed back to aisle 9 to try and look busy for as long as I could. After about fifteen minutes of checking my phone for text messages and shuffling cookies and crackers around on the shelf, my name was called over the intercom. My boss' voice rang out, "Chris to register four, please! Chris to register four!" I winced like I'd just pulled a muscle and shuffled my feet as I made my way to the front of the store. There was a customer waiting as I approached, and I began ringing up her groceries at once. The clocked rolled past noon as I made the usual small talk with the woman at my register. I had just read the total to the customer and was awaiting payment when I saw employees walking toward the front end to begin their shifts for the day. There was

one unfamiliar face among the cluster, and as she approached I saw her nametag. That was the first time I saw Riley, and Jay certainly had not been exaggerating. She was gorgeous. The newest employee took her place at the checkstand in front of my own and looked slightly apprehensive as she stood. My boss came to my register when I finished with my customer and told me that since Riley was a new employee and I was a veteran at the store, she would ask me any question she had while running the cash register. “Since you’re so busy, right, bossman?” I thought humorously. I had intended on forming an intricate plan regarding how to approach talking to her for the first time, and now I was being thrown into interaction. My round face felt hot. I had no idea what I was going to say to the new girl.

She seemed to have a decent grasp of how to do her job. I had no choice but to stare in her direction as her register was directly in front of my own. There was a mesmerizing nature about the vibrant red hair that went halfway down her back and stood in vast contrast to the gloomy landscape I could see in my peripheral vision. I noticed she was a few inches shorter than me and had a lone freckle just above the right side of her lips. I thought it made her look unique. I sort of felt strange noticing all these small details about the new employee, but I couldn’t help myself. Before long, she had a question on how to look up a certain produce product on her computer. She turned, as her eyes scanned my nametag.

“Hey. Chris? Where do I find red peppers in the system?” She asked in a friendly tone. As soon as she said my name I began to perspire. I walked around my register to hers and managed a friendly smile as I showed her what buttons to press. I was unable to detach from her gaze momentarily as her brilliant blue eyes seemed to freeze me in place.

“Thanks, Chris.”

“No problem...Riley?” I pretended I didn’t already know her name and made a phony glance toward her nametag to enhance that illusion. It was my attempt at playing it cool.

The remaining few hours of my shift went just like that. I stood there acting natural and hoping Riley had a question I could help answer. I was smitten by this woman, there was no doubting it. For the first time in a long while I actually felt attracted to someone. Why was this girl any different? I had seen many, many attractive women in the year or so that I'd been single.

As I walked through the parking lot and took refuge from the tundra inside the grocery store the next afternoon, I actually felt excited. I'd checked the schedule before and noticed Riley would be working again as well. She was standing in the back by the time clock awaiting 3:00 P.M. Her refreshing blue eyes looked at up at the sight of me walking through the doors. She smiled, and I wondered self-consciously if she was laughing at me or if she was just being friendly. I smiled back but said nothing. I was too rusty with women, it was embarrassing.

"So how about the weather today," I blurted out before I could stop myself. She giggled a little, and I was sure it was because I sounded like an 80-year-old man. I immediately wondered how I could have reverted to such an utterly uninteresting topic of conversation as if I were standing in a daze and regurgitating sentence fragments to a common customer. Miraculously, she decided to respond instead of walking away shaking her head, wondering who the hell under the age of 65 brings up the weather.

"Well, it's pretty chilly outside. I'm ready for winter to be over."

"I know what you mean. I like winter and snow for about one day a year, and that's Christmas."

"I prefer the spring. I love the warm sunlight, the fresh flowers, the thunderstorms..." She trailed off momentarily, seemingly beginning to drift into a fantasy not unlike the daydreams that frequented my own daily thought process. She found her train of thought and began again. "Well, it won't be long until spring is here. I couldn't be more excited. It's Chris, right?"

“Yeah, it’s Chris. Or Christopher if you prefer.” I hated to be called Christopher. I had no idea why I would say that. Before long it was time to punch into the time clock, and we made our way toward our respective cash registers.

The days following our first official introductions began to fall into a neat pattern. It was nothing like the boring choreographed dance I went through regularly with nearly every customer. No, these conversations were spontaneous, unscripted, and genuine. Riley had a sense of humor I hadn’t anticipated as I was engaged by the beauty of her. We liked to tease back and forth about different things throughout the work day, and I was fairly certain it was flirting. For the next week and a half I began to find Riley more intriguing by the minute, and people were beginning to take notice. During one of my frequent trips to visit Jay in the dairy cooler I was telling him a lot about my recent interactions with Riley.

“It sounds like she likes you, dude,” Jay said.

“No way. She’s just being friendly.”

“Look man, every time I go past the front registers for my break I see her talking to you. There are plenty other people she could be talking to. Think about it.”

“There’s something to that…” I trailed off in thought.

“Only one way to find out, amigo. It’s obvious you like her. I haven’t seen you get this way about a girl this way since Taylor.”

“Thanks, man. Well, what do I do about it? I haven’t really done this sort of thing in a bit.”

“Get her number. It’s all smooth sailing if you can score that, hombre.”

Every other day or so, Riley would work a shift that intersected with mine and waiting for her to get there started to make my anxious. My recurring worktime daydreams had begun to fade slowly from the dreary picture through the window, to visions of crackling red hair and cool blue eyes. I had developed confidence in our bond, and was beginning

to feel like Jay was correct when he said that Riley may be attracted to me. For once, I actually began to believe that was a possibility. I was beginning to learn a good deal about her life, and was always sure to remember the smallest details of what she told me as if I were preparing for a quiz. She was the middle child in her family, she had never been to Disney World, and she had a calico cat named Stephen. The little things she divulged, however unimportant they may have seemed, meant a great deal to me. I tried to reciprocate with stories of my own, but I was always afraid I'd bore her. Nevertheless she seemed entertained with what I had to offer during our conversations, so I assumed I was doing something right. I still wasn't sure how exactly to go about asking for her number, but I longed to converse with Riley outside the confines of work. Keeping with the spontaneous theme of our chats I decided the best way to do it was to simply dive in. A month ago, I would've never imagined myself thinking in such a manner, ready to take a leap of faith of all things. "Go for it" I thought to myself.

"I love when we work together, Riley. You're the only person on the front end that's even remotely interesting. I enjoy talking to you." I said, feeling triumphant at the sight of her actually blushing momentarily.

"Awww, Chris." She joked in a mocking tone before she continued, "No, but seriously. I definitely agree. It's nice talking to someone that's legitimately interested in what I have to say."

"You know, I'd really like to have one of these conversations outside of work sometime. Could I get your phone number, and maybe we could arrange something like that?" I was able to keep a smile on my face, but inside I was cringing. There was no way she'd say yes to that. "What the hell kind of way to ask was that?" I thought to myself, "Could you have sounded weirder?" As usual, she surprised me, and wrote her number down on a piece of receipt paper from her register. Success.

I waited a few days to call her after getting her number.

I wasn't sure if it was because I was nervous, or because I was attempting to play things cool once more. Regardless, the phone calls had gone well and we even planned a first date of sorts. It wasn't much. Riley was going to meet me after work and we were planning to walk to the park across the street from our faithful grocery store. It was March 18th, and the sun shone brightly with few clouds in the sky. It was an oddity to have a day warm enough to take a walk comfortably, and I wanted to take advantage of that. With my mind focused elsewhere, work had come and gone quickly, and I walked toward the back to punch out for the day. My phone's screen indicated the time was 5:00 P.M. I ran up the stairs to the break room to check myself in the mirror a final time before leaving the building. I stared at the reflection of my average, 6 foot frame. After running a quick hand through my wavy, light brown hair, I ran back downstairs to punch out for the day. As I walked out of work I read a text message from Riley that said, "I'm waiting outside". I took off my long sleeve button down shirt and tie and stowed it in my car's backseat so that I was only in a t-shirt.

"Put on a jacket, Chris. It's still cold outside."

"Nah, I'm fine. I'm warm." I said speaking truthfully.

We reached the park and walked through the scenery of omnipresent trees, and dead grass shining bright in the sunlight. Her red hair shimmered in the fresh rays of warmth. I took a deep breath of the cool air and felt the hairs raise on my forearms as the changing of seasons began to romance my senses. There was nothing in particular that made the park special, but to me it felt like walking through another one of my daydreams. The brief time Riley and I had gotten to know each other felt like months to me. We strode through the dead, moist grass alongside the road through the center of the park. Our relationship at that point had consisted largely of conversation, but little was said as we made our way side by side. The silence was strangely welcome. My instincts urged me to embrace her, and I reached out with my right

hand in an attempt to take her left one. In that reach, I felt a moment of clarity. I had been chilled to the bone after my past relationship, but none of that mattered to me anymore. The future wasn't frightening; the past was.

I scaled her face, past her single freckle until my brown eyes met her cerulean irises. As our fingers interlocked, she smiled up at me, which I reciprocated with a smile of my own. I actually felt "smooth" for a change. I didn't know what would come from the new relationship starting to form between Riley and I, but that was the emphatic beauty of it. I felt nearly euphoric as we walked through the park hand in hand. As we strolled through the crisp air with our hands intertwined I felt winter turn to spring.

Old Things

By Dana Breen

By now, the heat must feel old.
It must feel like an old newspaper,
ink set into the skin on the fingers.
A cold storm must feel fresh,
a pleasure only the next world over can enjoy.
The dirt is soft and the grass is crisp,
like standing atop a new grave.
This heat will melt you into the ground, though.
Freeze the earth and take away the mist
of sunlight that created this clouded screen.
Wait for the cold, like an icy blanket,
it will drag through the grime.

Something Behind Me

By Dana Breen

I stand in tall, uncut grass
letting heavy rain hit my face.
Everything is grey and dark.
I want to turn around and see my house
still in the same place as it was five minutes ago,
but I fear it may be gone.
I fear it will be nothing.

I try to imagine myself turning around.
The details of the old farm house are gone;
a simple silhouette of the wooden structure that once
stood there.
All I can make out are a few steps.
This dark rain devours every detail behind them;
a fuzzy television screen.
I imagine walking up to this black structure
in hopes that things will reappear.

The blackness stays,
it does not fade.
I close my eyes tight.
I feel comfortable not knowing if the house is still
there or not,
because I would be nowhere
if it wasn't.
I'd be a small, insignificant, soaking wet girl.

I have to turn around.
One foot up and I begin to spin my body around,
my eyes still closed.
When I am sure of what direction I am facing,
I open my eyes in a quick fashion and see
a white, strong wooden structure towering over me.
The house that turned grey in my head is still there.
I look up at the grey sky and am suddenly content
with the rain falling on me.

I sit in the grass beginning to flood.
The back of my dress immediately soaks up
the rain in the grass.
I look at my house where I had grown up
and see a small child
running along the porch with a plastic wand
and ribbons in her hair.
I smile at the child.

When Memories Were Fresh

By Dana Breen

My mind is getting older,
and I hold onto the young months
in the badlands of winter.

The skin on my fingers is raw and cracked.
I hold them tight in my head, as if I have
a bug trapped in my fist.
I deprive him of cracks between my fingers.

I play in my mind with a young child:
dark hair, crooked smile, and untried.
I am her, only wiser, and an older edition.
I watch her covered in a hot blaze,
while I am here as cold as fresh clay.

I stand in snow piles wishing to be there with her,
where I can feel the grass and the dirt under my
fingernails
from digging up worms and old coins.

A Princess By Any Other Name

By Jason Herbst

One more week, she kept repeating to herself. One more week and another year of school begins.

Cindy Beverly Worella sat alone at the park, quietly removed from most of the world. She preferred it that way. It was how she lived at home and it was how she lived away from home. Cindy was a quiet 17-year-old high school senior and prone to shift between moods at the drop of a hat. She wasn't bi-polar by any means but: *When you go through stuff you just stop caring sometimes*. She was the only legitimate daughter in a family of five and the heiress to an extensive Fortune 500 company—but you would never guess that. Her mother had died several years ago and her father became a distant, worthless drunk. He spent thousands on expensive alcohol every week. He even remarried, finding false solace in a gold-digging bitch of a woman that had two illiterate, degenerate daughters. Suddenly, Cindy wasn't important. Suddenly, she didn't exist in life. She was ignored, berated for nothing, and mistreated in the worst ways. If it weren't for the tight-knit group she was a part of she would have swallowed a bullet years ago.

Her little circle of friends included two other young ladies, one a senior like her and the other a sophomore. The girls were inseparable during school but summer was like being locked in a castle tower, forbidden from seeing others and restricted from doing little more than breathing *if* your captors gave you permission. They had no contact with each other during the summer days. It was like their parents (if they could be called as much) all had some secret agreement to prevent them from being friends.

Cindy sat at their favorite park table (also the only table

at the little park). It was their table. It even had a crude carving of a heart with arrows and a dagger piercing it, their names etched within. The park was situated in a quiet patch of green grass near a tree-encrusted ditch that served as a waterway for the nearby lake. The community preferred to call it a “stream” or “river” but that was just a pathetic attempt at making beauty out of nothing. These girls knew exactly what it was. Close to their favorite spot was a street that disappeared into the small patch of forest that the “stream” flowed into. Beyond the trees was the boring town where the girls went to school. On the other side of the table, about 20 yards away, was a small playground surrounded by a high chain-link fence. There was a metal slide with flaking green paint, a swing set with rusting chains that creaked and screamed, a deserted sandbox that saw little use, even a fire pit if you wanted to cook S’mores with friends some night.

They always met at this table in this particular park. It was the best place to be outside of town as far as they were concerned. The sun was shining through a cloud-studded sky, a cool breeze whispering through the trees and caressing the grass. It was beautiful and serene and the exact reason why the girls always chose this spot to meet.

“Hey, tall, blonde and sexy!” a voice called out. Cindy looked toward the ditch and saw a young woman heading her way, smiling and waving. It was Snow and she was carrying a bottle in one hand.

Snow was the eldest of the group at 18. She had a real name but no one ever used it. It was probably a safe bet she didn’t even remember it. If you were to ask her why she was called “Snow” she would just roll her eyes and make a remark about her dad being a funny man. Since birth her hair was an unnatural jet black. She had it dyed several times but that deep, eerie black always seemed to fight back, consuming whatever color was attempted, like a black hole devouring light and matter. Her dad thought it would be funny to nickname her “Snow”, a joke she never understood until later. At first she

thought it stupid but the name stuck and she eventually stopped complaining.

She never comes from that direction, Cindy thought as she waved back.

Snow took a long pull from the bottle and sat opposite Cindy. It was Jim Beam whiskey, most likely swiped from a cabinet at home. Today she wore her favorite leather jacket over a loose white Ramones t-shirt that was cut low enough to show just enough cleavage to make a rowdy high school freshman hard, and a pair of tight, dark blue Levi's to compliment her sex appeal. Her ebony hair was combed into the same short bob that she always sported, a red hairband settled just past her ears. She offered the bottle to Cindy but was met with a disinterested wave.

"Not today, Snow."

"Since when are you not interested in a drink?" Snow produced a pack of Pall Malls from her jacket pocket and lit one up then placed the pack on the table. It was at that moment, as she sucked in her first breath, she noticed the distant look in her friend's eyes.

"What's wrong, Ash?" she asked after taking a long drag on the cigarette.

Cindy sighed. "There's that name again. Do you really have to keep calling me that?"

Snow laughed and pretended to think really hard about her answer. "Yes."

Cindy rolled her eyes.

"I'm not the one who chugged a bottle of SoCo in ten minutes and passed out in the damn fireplace."

"It was one time! I hardly think that qualifies as justification for a nickname." Cindy stood up to fish something out of her pocket. It was an uncommon thing to see her in anything other than a dress but this day she opted for a very simple getup of dark capris and a cherry blossom-speckled tunic. Like Snow, she had one style for her shoulder length, blonde hair: loosely pulled into a fluffy tail and tied with a blue

bow. She tossed a five-dollar bill on the table.

“I owe this from last year.”

“I told you your real name is dead to me,” Snow said with a smile and pocketed the money.

Cindy shrugged her shoulders and sat down.

“Whatever.”

They sat in silence for a few moments, Cindy eyeing the whiskey and Snow watching her friend. It was not odd for Cindy to be withdrawn—she wouldn’t be the same otherwise—but today seemed especially different, and Snow could tell. She knew how to have a good laugh, was always genuinely concerned, and almost always off in another place. However, today, here at the park, Cindy was in a completely different place than was usual.

Snow was about to say something when Cindy suddenly reached for the bottle and unscrewed the cap. When Cindy extended her arm to snatch up the whiskey Snow felt her heart break. She saw several marks on the exposed flesh, just below the bend of the elbow. They were red, almost symmetrical cuts, and they were made recently. As Cindy took her first drink their eyes locked and she knew her secret was out. *She saw them. Oh, you stupid girl, why didn’t you cover them up before coming here?*

Snow took a long breath, trying to find the words to say, but something else grabbed her attention and she looked over her shoulder. Two children had entered the park from the opposite side. Snow silently watched them laughing and tossing a red Frisbee back and forth in the soft grass, their golden retriever barking happily and trying to snatch the plastic disc out of the air. Watching the kids and thinking about Cindy, she allowed herself to reflect on her own “family”. Her father abandoned her when she was twelve, leaving her to be raised by a witch of a stepmother (who was secretly and psychotically jealous of Snow’s good looks); she had no siblings, no pets, and no contact with the outside world beyond her two friends. Like Cindy, she was horribly neglected and mistreated. It was

no small wonder Cindy was using a knife on her arm. Snow wondered just how many more marks there were, hidden beneath the fabric of Cindy's clothes.

Momentarily forgetting her display of vulnerability Snow solemnly looked back at Cindy, who was avoiding eye contact while flicking on the Bic lighter for the Pall Mall she snatched when Snow was distracted. It was only when Snow felt her eyes beginning to water that she realized how far she had let her emotions go. She pretended to cough and wiped her eyes.

"What's up?" Cindy asked, tapping ash onto the ground and hoping to steer the attention away from her arm.

"Nothing." Snow forced another cough. "I think some of your ash got in my throat."

She's lying to me. Now it was Cindy's turn to be the analyst. She stared hard while Snow took a drink. The girl put on a tough show, like nothing in the world bothered her, but she couldn't fool her friends. They were too close for secrets. *Which is why I didn't cover up my cuts.* Cindy tried to casually look over Snow's shoulder, hoping to catch a glimpse of whatever made her try to lie. She saw two kids, a dog—

"Where the hell is that kid?!" Snow suddenly snapped, causing Cindy to flinch. "Doesn't she know what day it is?"

"It isn't like her to be late. Even I was able to sneak out today," Cindy added, ignoring the kids and resolving to investigate the matter later. She flicked more ash onto the ground. *Guess we've all had a bad summer.*

"If she misses today I'm gonna beat her ass."

The threat was enough to lighten the mood a little. Cindy chuckled and grabbed the Jim Beam. "You think you can beat her up? I'd pay to see that."

Snow made a sharp *psh!* sound as she eyed a checkered blue and yellow sedan that materialized from within the trees and rumbled along the street in their direction. "Well, speak of the devil."

Cindy looked over her shoulder in time to see a taxi pull

up to the grass. The back door opened and a short, 15-year-old girl with shiny blond hair hopped out. She was wearing a green miniskirt and top combo with a short denim jacket, sleeves rolled up, her hair in a tight top bun and a black studded band on her left wrist. The left side of her mouth was pierced with a pearlescent hoop and she had a single silver stud in her right eyebrow, two small diamond earrings in each ear. She passed the taxi driver his fare and walked away without saying a word. Cindy scooted aside on the bench and said, “It’s about time you got here, Tink.”

Tink flashed Cindy a pointed look. “Don’t even get me fucking started, Ash,” she warned as she sat on the bench.

“Oh my God, you’re calling me that, too? What is it with you two and that ridiculous name?”

“Bitch, I’m not the one who sleeps in fireplaces! You’re ‘Ash’ for the rest of your life. Get used to it.” Tink forced a smile.

Ash groaned. *I hate my life.*

Melinda “Tink” Belle may have been the youngest of the trio but she had a temper and attitude to match—and beat—either of them. She had been suspended from school multiple times for getting into fights (she won all of them, of course) and made it a point to prove that she was not a girl to be fucked with. Her parents disappeared when she was barely out of a diaper—she has no idea who they are—and has been bounced from one foster family to another for as long as she can remember.

“What kept you?” Snow wanted to know.

Tink reached for the Jim Beam and took several drinks. At fifteen she was surprisingly capable of holding her liquor. She managed to drink several people under the table, on multiple occasions. Although she didn’t want to discuss why she was late she relented. It was tough to not tell the girls anything. She sighed.

“Peter broke up with me.”

Snow was in the middle of lighting another cigarette.

“Really? Why?”

“Yeah, you two were so cute together,” Ash added.

“He’s been cheating on me with some bitch named Wendy.” Tink took another pull on the bottle. “She sings and dances or some shit like that.”

Ash’s mouthed dropped. *Oh, God, I think Wendy’s in choir with me!* “Is her last name Darling?”

Tink was reaching for Snow’s cigarette but stopped short. “Yeah. You know her?”

“I think she may be in choir.”

Snow passed on her cigarette and said, “You better tell her to find a new life in a different country.”

“Tell her if I ever see her I’m gonna cut her hand off and feed it to a crocodile while she watches.”

Tink said the threat so casually it made Snow smile. It always amazed her how calm Tink could be when she spoke seriously about murdering someone. In the short time the girls had known each other, Tink had proven to be nothing more than a firecracker on most occasions but there were times when her emotions didn’t erupt like a volcano and one had to wonder just how serious she was being.

“How are you holding up?” Ash asked.

Tink waved a dismissive hand. “I’m fine.” She blew a fountain of smoke into the air. “He was kind of a loser anyway. Always whining about growing up. Just a fucking baby.”

She’s trying hard to put on a good face, Ash silently observed. *She really loved him. I bet she cries herself to sleep tonight.*

“I’ll tell you what I will miss.” Tink had a mischievous smile. “I used to sneak out and go to his house, where we’d play ‘Pirates and Indians.’ He’d put on an eye patch and I would wear a feather headband. He would tie me down on his bed, like I was a little Indian slave-girl he captured from a merchant ship, and start licking—”

“Okay, Tink, that’s enough!” Ash squealed in protest.

“What, it was fucking hot. I’m getting wet just thinking

about it.”

Ash made a disgusted sound and screwed her eyes shut. *I'm not listening, I'm not listening, I'm not listening!*

Snow leaned forward with a teasing, lustful look in her eyes. “Maybe we should play some time, Tink,” she said, licking her lips.

“I will make you my *bitch*,” Tink replied with a grin.

Ash stood up and covered her ears with her hands.

“Stop it! You two are disgusting!”

As Ash stepped away from the table Snow reached out and gently caressed Tink’s hand. “Don’t worry about her, she’s just jealous.”

“Yeah, Ash is just upset because she can’t get a boyfriend.”

Snow’s immediate look of shock was all Tink needed to realize she just made a big mistake. As a feeling of horror washed over her she slowly looked in Ash’s direction. Ash was just staring at her. It looked as if she was about to cry.

“Oh, fuck. Ash I’m . . . I’m sorry, I didn’t mean—”

“No, you’re right. I can’t get a boyfriend.”

“Tink didn’t mean it like that, Ash. We were just kidding.”

Ash was slowly shaking her head as she sat back down. Her eyes had already moistened. “I mean it, though. As long as I live with my stepmother I can never date anyone.”

“Why not? What about David, I thought you two were starting to hit it off?”

I really didn’t want to talk about this. Ash took a deep breath. “He invited me to a party last month. I think it was his birthday. Well, my stepsisters decided they wanted to go to the party and didn’t want me around.” She paused to wipe a tear away before it could race down her cheek. “To make sure I wouldn’t interfere with her daughters, my stepmother locked me in my room for two days. My dad was drunk and oblivious, as usual, so he had no idea I was trapped upstairs.”

“Oh, shit,” Tink breathed.

Snow reached out to grasp Ash's hand. "I'm so sorry." She noticed Ash was absently feeling the cuts, and that was when her own tears began to form.

The sun had begun its slow free-fall through the sky. The clouds were still there but this time they were inked in fluffy reds and oranges and browns. The contrails of jets crisscrossed, leaving feathery trails in a grid like a tic tac toe game at 40,000 feet. The girls were laughing and talking about their expectations for the first week of school. There were two cigarettes left and Ash was about to finish off the last of the Jim Beam.

"Y'know, you still haven't told us about your summer, Snow," Tink said as she lit a Pall Mall.

Snow suddenly became serious. She seemed to get lost in thought, her eyes glossing over. She just stared silently, as if reliving some horrid memory that she had forgotten until now. Tink and Ash—who had stopped mid-drink, the bottle still pressed against her lips—looked at each other.

"Snow?"

Snow blinked and cleared her throat. She shook her head and said, "Sorry, I was just thinking. My summer was..." She hesitated. She didn't want to say it, knowing especially how Tink would react, but the girls needed to know. They both told their secrets, so it was only fair. Snow inhaled deeply, held it for a second, and then released it slowly.

"My stepmother tried to kill me last week."

Tink dropped the cigarette and Ash spit out a mouthful of whiskey. "What?!" they cried simultaneously. Snow was nodding as she spoke and stared at their carving on the tabletop. "Yeah, the bitch tried to poison me with an apple. Can you believe that? A goddamned apple!"

Tink was instantly furious. Her face began to color a dangerous shade of red. The last time she turned that color the other guy ended up in a hospital for a week. "I hope you bashed that fucking whore's face!" she seethed.

“What did you do?!” Ash desperately wanted to know. At this moment her summer problem was just a trivial thing. Being locked in her bedroom while everyone else went to a party was nothing compared to this. Her own stepmother hadn’t tried to kill her. Yet.

“I left. I packed up some of my things and I got the hell out of there.”

“Where did you go?” Ash pressed on. “Where have you been living? What have you been doing?”

Snow was instantly regretting the decision to tell them, despite it being necessary. Now she had to try and defuse the situation.

“It’s ok, just calm down,” Snow insisted. “No, Tink, I did not kill her you know me better than that,” she said as calmly as possible.

Tink pounded a fist onto the table. “Well you shoulda! You shoulda buried your fist in her face! Tell me where she is, I’ll fucking cut her heart out ‘n eat it!”

Snow looked at Ash, her eyes issuing a silent plea for help before things got out of control. It took Ash a moment to register the look but she then got to her feet and tried to gently—and very carefully—ease Tink back onto the bench. “Oookay, killer,” she said smoothly, almost whispering, “let’s just get you back to reality. C’mon, Tink, just sit down, take a deep breath, and have a dr—” She couldn’t finish the sentence as she remembered spitting the last of the whiskey out.

Surprisingly, Tink sat down without physically resisting—much to Ash’s relief. Snow calmly slid the last smoke her way. “No one’s killing anyone. It’s okay, Tink, it really is.”

“Like hell it is! This’s bullshit! Why am I the only one pissed about this?!”

You’re not the only one! The words burned through Ash’s mind but she didn’t let it show. She was always the calm and composed one.

“Because—” Snow paused and thought for a moment.

A smile slowly found its way to her lips. “Because I’m okay. I’m free. Don’t get me wrong, it sucks pretty bad, but I don’t have to worry about her anymore.”

Tink pushed the Pall Mall away so Ash picked it up and clicked on the lighter. She took a few puffs before asking, “So why did she try to poison you and where did you go?”

Snow shrugged her shoulders and looked off into the distance. “I don’t know; the woman is a damn lunatic. Ever since Dad ran off she . . . she’s had it out for me. I just don’t know why.”

“You still shoulda stabbed the bitch. I mean it, Snow, you just tell me where to go and I’ll end her worthless fucking life.”

Ash placed a hand on Tink’s wrist and patted it forcefully a few times. “Tink, honey, you’re not killing anyone, okay?” *Even if she deserves it!* She motioned toward Snow. “Snow’s fine, see? She’s alive and here with us and that’s *all that matters.*”

“I still wanna carve the face off that . . . *adult*”—she placed a lot of stress on the word—”or gouge her eyes out!”

Ash ignored Tink’s gruesome desire as she asked again, “Where do you live now, Snow?”

Snow hesitated again as she thought about how to best inform her friends of the new living arrangements she found. Especially since Tink was currently the livid, raging nucleus of an exploding star. “Well . . . That’s an interesting story. I found a place out in the country and . . . well, I . . .”

“Spit it out already!” Tink shouted. “Damn!”

“I live with seven other guys, okay!?” Snow blurted.

In an *extremely rare* instance the quiet and reserved, lady-like Ash broke character: “Oh, fuck.”

The black velvet blanket of night had been pulled close. Twinkling gems studded the sky and a warm puff of wind stroked the park. The girls were about to part ways. The taxi Tink summoned for her and Ash was pulling up to the park.

Snow had already started off towards the ditch.

“I’ll see you tomorrow, sexy bitch,” Tink said with a wink and a smile.

“I’ll get my headband ready for later,” Snow teased back.

I’m going to throw up. “You two are really gross, you know that?”

In a flash Tink smacked Ash in the pants. “Don’t worry, baby, I got something special in mind for you.”

“You are the dirtiest fifteen –year-old I know.”

Tink giggled as the taxi came to a stop at the edge of the road. She pulled the door open and hopped in, sliding across the backseat to provide room for Ash. Instead of entering the taxi right away Ash paused, one hand on the rusting yellow door, considering Snow as she walked away. For someone who was almost murdered a week ago the girl had a surprising amount of confidence in her step. Ash found a familiar knot of jealousy suddenly growing in her stomach. She never said as much to the girls but she envied Snow a great deal. Ash could never take the shit her world threw at her the way Snow was capable of doing. It was remarkable beyond words.

How does she do it?

“Hey, bitch, get in the car!”

Ash snapped out of her reverie and slipped into the taxi, apologizing to Tink.

“Some of us have a curfew, y’know. I’m only fifteen, I can’t stay out late like you older girls.”

Ash looked at Tink, almost taking her serious for a moment, then laughed softly and shook her head. She reached out to the pull the door closed, taking one last moment to glance back at Snow. A new smile formed on Ash’s lips as Snow disappeared into the dark covering of the trees. Things were going to be okay. They were all going to be okay. Despite everything, they would always have each other and there was nothing the three of them could not handle in this fucked up world. Tink gave the taxi driver the first address and the car eased back onto the pavement.

No One Noticed

By Sarah Lambach

There's a crack in that vase
No one noticed
When they filled it with fresh cut
Flowers and placed that vase
On the fine wood table.
The flowers are dead,
The table is ruined,
And all they do is blame that vase
No one noticed
Was broken.

The Art of the Party

By Sarah Lambach

Blacken your eyes.

Paint your lips.

Tidy your hair in tight curls.

Cry those thick, black tears.

Stamp your lipstick on strangers.

Yank back your hair heavy with sweat.

The early birds shame you.

Glass Hearts

By Sarah Lambach

You called last night.

The floorboards moaned
beneath my feet.

I paced the kitchen
that suddenly felt
so uncomfortably foreign
as my fingers fumbled
to answer.

"Hello," I whispered
as I tried to swallow
the mothballs which multiplied
within my mouth and throat
as you echoed my greeting
with your careless
precision.

The sound of your voice
turned my heart to glass
which would shatter
with any impact
and cut me inside,
making it impossible
to breathe.

Monster

by Shaun Robinson

It all started a couple months back. I was crafting a particular tale about a brave knight and his attempts to save a small village from a menacing dragon. I had spent weeks creating everything. The rolling hills filled with peppermint pansies. I shaped the golden Treasure Mountains and built the seaside ports manned by stout men with plump, little noses. From the huzzlepuffs and wifflebits that roamed the countryside to the bizzlebees and bufferfloats that fluttered through the meadows, I wielded my power of creation to cover the land.

The village of Willow's End was to be the setting of my tale. It was nestled in the shadow of a lonely mountain surrounded by flatland occupied by farms. The men of the village were squat, plump characters with the women being substantially taller and thinner. The men would tend the fields full of klumbobs, kitnups, and luluberries, while the women would take care of the various farm animals.

The small farming village was being terrorized by a dragon residing in the nearby mountain. The dragon wasn't purposely attacking the village. The real problem was that the dragon happened to be too fat and its wings too small to keep itself flying for long periods of time. As the dragon would leave its perch in the mountains in search of food, it would occasionally lose strength to keep flying and fall out of the sky. Most of the time, it would land in an open field and not cause much damage. Several times, however, it landed on a patch of crops, ruining them. The line was drawn when the dragon fell on one of the barns, killing a whole herd of kacklehogs.

The call went out for any available hero to come and slay the dragon, or convince it to move somewhere else, and

save the town from any more destruction. A valiant knight answered the town's plea, arriving on the scene in gallant armor and riding a pizzlebuck steed.

"Worry not, fair citizens! For I, Sir Hezzelkep, shall rid the land of this most ferocious beast and save thee from anymore turmoil," the knight boasted as he unsheathed his sword and thrust it into the air. "Onward, steed! To battle!" he shouted and raced off towards the mountain.

I do not know what happened to Sir Hezzelkep. He never returned from his quest, but the dragon never bothered the village again. I was troubled with their disappearances. This wasn't how the story was supposed to go. I went to look for any sign of the knight or the dragon, but turned up with nothing. It was as if they had never existed. What I found in the dragon's nest stunned me. Inside was a hole of nothingness. A room that had once held an amazing amount of treasure and jewels (what dragon didn't have a love for treasure and jewels) was now a gaping hole in my imagination. Thinking I was tired from all the story creating I had done, I thought it best to take a rest for a while. Perhaps after a break, things would start to come back to normal.

When I returned to my tale a few days later, I found that the entire mountain was gone. In its place was that same hole of nothingness I had first seen in the dragon's nest. I studied the hole, trying to figure out what was happening. Hesitantly, I brushed my hand through it. It felt neither cold nor hot. I heard a low grumbling coming from within the hole. I pulled my hand away and took a few steps back, anticipating something jumping out from within. But nothing happened.

I stood at the base of the former mountain for hours, looking for any clue to tell me what had happened. I heard a tweedle singing overhead as it flew through the air and into the hole. A moment later, the singing was replaced by a sharp squawk, then silence. That's when I knew something was in there.

I looked down towards the ground. Oddly, it looked

as though the ground was being pulled into the nothingness. No, it wasn't being pulled. Actually, it looked as though it was being eaten. I moved back as the blackness crept closer to me. I strained to see what was inside this thing. I could barely make out the silhouette of a strange creature inside, moving about near the edges of the void.

I stood by helplessly, watching the monster gradually eat away at everything I had created. It devoured the land, the sea, the sky, and everything in-between. Nothing was safe from its hunger. Since then, I have been unable to think of anything new to create. Every thought I have is immediately consumed by the beast.

This monster needed to be defeated, but I was unsure how to do it. I could not create any weapons to fight it for they are eaten by it. I could not create anyone to stand up against it for they are also eaten. Everything I did just made the monster grow larger and larger.

In my despair, I confronted the monster and threw at it everything I could think of. Clouds, buses, elephants; the monster ate them right up. Fairies, tulips, crocodiles, apes, trees, apartment complexes; it sucked them right up, too. Furiously, I threw more. Asteroids, hippos, battleships, a tow truck, lamp shades, even a kitchen sink.

The monster began to shake and moan in pain, but continued to eat. That's when it hit me. The monster didn't choose to eat; it had no choice but to eat. To defeat this thing, I had to throw everything I have at it. Rubbing my hands together, I drew up whatever creative strength I had left and unleashed a series of creative attacks. Dancing milk crates, flying jellyfish with purple ribbons, a comedic duo of ham sandwiches, an axe wielding leprechaun with a foul mouth, applesauce disguised as the Queen of England.

The monster began to moan more loudly now. It was working, but I couldn't stop there. I continued my assault. Clouds made of marshmallows, a car made of used shoes, a purple porcupine leading a parade, a vacuum cleaner that

recited Shakespeare, and to finish it off, a giant tornado of buttons.

The monster let out an ear piercing roar before suddenly exploding in a brilliance of colors and sounds. Everything that it had consumed began to rain down around me. Out came the knight and his steed. Down came the huzzlepuffs and wifflebits, followed by the other animals. The people came crashing down in the fields of peppermint pansies. And it rained buttons for days and days.

Noided

By Alden Braddock

Nights like these are the worst, the absolute fucking worst; nothing but infomercials on the television: steak knives, limited edition gold coins, OxiClean. It's mind numbing, but there isn't anything better to do. I haven't slept in two weeks. Sure, I nod off sometimes. I have these weird dreams where everything feels like a sitcom, some kind of twisted Kafkaesque audience babbling on the background with their ridiculous canned laughter while I eat my cereal, smoke a cigarette, fight with my piece of shit car, and head to work. But they all pass away as the day wears on.

I work as a medical records clerk in a small inner city hospital. It isn't much, but it gets the bills paid and keeps me at a safe distance from everyone else. The countertop between me and the rest of the world goes on for miles. The stacks of paper graze the sky like mountains. (Did you know that Mt. Everest is full of frozen bodies? The explorers who never made it back. There's no time to bury them and the cold keeps them perfectly preserved.) There are some interesting people that come in from time to time.

"I'm a recovering addict and want my records from the last time I OD'd. I think it would be good for my recovery to see it...I don't really remember much."

But that's beside the point. I can't sleep. I try and try and try. I've eaten as much as a month's worth of ambien in a single day. It wasn't a suicide attempt although I didn't really care if killed me just wanted to sleep...nothing. I got a pretty sweet buzz. Walls started breathing. Lights started flashing in my peripheral vision. My mind started playing tricks on me and

the sitcom became a little funnier, but other than that...nothing.

I've tried transcendental meditation. It was about as effective as Ambien. I've nearly given up but I'm not quite there. The past few nights, I've been walking along the long dusty road just outside of my neighborhood. It's pretty at night right when the sun sets and gradually creeps below the horizon. There are a few barns scattered along the vast expanse of corn and beans and God knows what else (let's play find the meth lab). But that's to be expected in God's country, my small, dull town of 938.

Despite all of this pessimistic dribble, I've come to cherish those twilight hours but not nearly as much as some decent sleep. I think the pursuit of a good 8 hours has become my religion. I converted from a moderate Baptist who never really gave a shit to a sleep evangelist. If hell is real, I think I'm already there.

There was one night not too long ago (it's hard to tell nowadays). When I came across something interesting; a large black van was parked on my road, my favorite road where I would stumble along during all hours of the night. Where I would drink cheap beer and smoke pot if there was nothing else better to do (there rarely was). It was a curious occurrence I wasn't used to having guests. As soon as I walked up the van took off. Oh well.

A few more nights have passed since. I've seen a total of two more vans. They aren't anything special. They're different but exactly the same. They're all black with tinted windows, they're all of different makes and models and there have never been any more than two at a time. It's quite odd. I don't really care, but I am starting to wonder about the whole thing. Who could be responsible for this and why? Why here in this corn cob of a town? The whole thing is starting to irk me. Maybe I'll take a walk somewhere else tonight.

I see one outside of my house...This is getting very strange. It's just sitting there. It may be a friend of my neighbor's, a chubby, greasy-haired neighbor who has loud,

sloppy sex with a string of uncharacteristically attractive women, while his 12 year old and her gangly group of rugrats smoke cigarettes behind my woodshed. I don't know. I can't tell. This is getting very strange.

"Mr. Anderson," I jumped as my cell phone rang.

My name isn't Mr. Anderson. I send out a bunch of fake names to those damn telemarketers. I've been Jose P. Smith, Todd Burroughs Sr., Jimmy (yes just Jimmy) and Mr. Robert H. Anderson. It's something to do; making up fake names, that is. I find a little bit of joy in it. I get the thrill of wearing another person's skin, of seeing the world through different eyes. It may not be the healthiest hobby, but it's something to do.

"Speaking," I replied.

"Mr. Anderson, this is Chloe Cole of Life Systems. Here to tell you about an important offer regarding your home security."

Chloe Cole...she sounded hot. I imagined all the sultry, vile things I would do to her as she spoke. I started getting hard.

"Mr. Anderson, according to a recent FBI study..."

The FBI? My dick went limp immediately after hearing those words. The fucking FBI? What do they have to do with this? Are they the ones that have been watching me? What would they possibly want with me?

"Wait. Did you say FBI?"

"Uh...yes that's right, according to a recent FBI study."

I hung up and shut my phone off.

It's been a few days since my FBI scare. I'm still seeing the vans everywhere I go. It's gotten worse. I see them at work sometimes. They pull up across the street by the bar and grill joint on South Jackson and start inching away as soon as I spot them on my smoke breaks. They're crawling all over my favorite road during all hours of the night and day. Something is very, very wrong with all of this. I don't know if I've gotten any more calls or not. I...misplaced my phone a few days ago.

I think I missed my sister's birthday. I don't know for sure though. It's all starting to run together.

I had another sitcom dream. I was waiting for the bus in the city (I don't drive in the city. I stick my car in the parking garage on West Ave. and do what I have to to get to work on time). A homeless man came up to me with some sob story about how his wife left him and how she was brainwashing his kid. I reached into my wallet to give him 5 bucks. I hand him the money and as he's walking away, a heroin needle falls out of his back pocket. They were roaring with laughter at that one.

I don't know where I am or what time it is. Everything except the black FBI vans is a mass of swirling grey confusion. I think I can smell the water treatment plant but I'm not sure. I want to go home...I just want to go home and sleep. I pulled a gun on the kids smoking behind my shed yesterday. I hope that little bitch doesn't tell her sex crazed father about it.

This is it the final act. I'm done. I've decided that the FBI is watching me. That they're going to break my door down and shoot me to death any day now. I've tried turning myself in, but as soon as I approach any one of that gaggle of vans, they vanish into thin air...I can't keep doing this. The sitcom in my head has overstayed its welcome and needs one hell of a good closer...I know what I have to do. The gun that I threatened the neighborhood kids with is cocked, loaded and ready to go. This may seem a tad melodramatic, but at least I'll finally be able to get some shut eye. Goodbye for now.

The Sack

By Jessica Mason McFadden

'See you later' drops like two sugar cubes,
clumped together, into my steaming
cup—the two never separate; even as they
dissolve, the sounds bounce up in a boiling shower
reversing themselves at my chin, promising a state
of lately
on her umbrella lips; if I can get to Heaven, or
halfway
up its splintered, wooden hill, then she will be
right and she will trickle or flop her belly
into my cup. I trust her sugar lumps.
I trust her walloping bumps. Her sharp, dissolving
glue, damp. I'll wait for her cubes to fall,
lump by sandy lump, into the sack.

Martha Stewart Hades Me

By Jessica Mason McFadden

I saw your knives, they were rusting
at me from afar. Those things are root

hackers; wherever they make a face,
they also leave a fist of brainly pulp

and a jagged mark. Hades Lady of the 80's
in your cupboard dark: better out

ergonomy, better pop some moles and poke
a few more holes before you get too sharp.

You would carbide and ceramic
me, would you hybrid handle me apart.

Mercy for the Monarch

By Jessica Mason McFadden

You fumbled to let loose
a butterfly from a netted wire
tower, while I stood
stoic, concrete on asphalt,
maybe helpless, in my humor, possessed
by the violet irony slicing
through the whites of your blank
mind. I watched you watch
me watch you set her
free, to have her holiday,
her only day. You called her
a he. You let her loose and lost
your grammar. You found me.

You lost your grammar
and found me. You moved me
by your mercy, the kind that unlatches
and is taken down in the broad
spreading of freedom's wings,
though you appeared to take it
in yourself. I enjoyed the act,
a climax of my life, a sigh hitting
the abrupt and absolute
face of autumn. I saw
your treasure; I saw wisdom
in your release. Butterfly
finder, you set me loose;
I'd rather you catch me this noon.

My Aunt, The Ox

By Jessica Mason McFadden

I was born in an ox's stall, too,
where bales were poking
and lambs squealing. I was born
and spent my life a dry seed,
buried under rock and stone clot,
fixed as a clod, waiting
for her to come and bring the water
from the well of righteousness,
to tip her watering can
upon my shrunken being,
to make a garden from my forsaken
pebble, to saturate my bed.

When I was born in an ox's stall,
where, my oxen aunt, were you?

Pa's Skinny Baby with No Future

By Corin Bodenhamer

It's the same scene every time. The front door makes an exaggerated squeak as I enter my grandparents' home through the kitchen. The scent of Grandma's daily pie baking lingers in the air. It's sweet but slightly scorched—the Dutch apple always boils over. My grandpa sleeps in his worn recliner. He's still wearing his glasses and his shoes. A harsh snore escapes from his parted lips which violently twitch about every six seconds. His trimmed white beard holds on to crumbs of potato chips, as does the blanket stretched around his frail frame. Pa is always cold.

“Pa,” I whisper to ease him out of his rest. Normally I'd never disrupt a sleeping person, but he takes at least three naps a day and gets upset if I don't wake him for my visits. “Hey, Pa. How's the chair today? Can I join?”

He peeks at me with one barely open eye as I seat myself on the arm of his recliner. His whiskers tickle my lips when I plant a kiss on his pale, wrinkled cheek. He can't hug me back as I squeeze his shoulders because he's too tightly wrapped up in his blanket to move. “Well hi, baby. Ain't seen you in a while.”

“I know. I miss you, Pa.”

“So pretty. You get skinnier and skinnier every time I see you. Coulda combed that hair of yours today, though,” he says with a mischievous wink. I run my fingers through my wild mane of brunette curls to make them even poufier and shoot him a playful glare. He chuckles and says, “I bet the boys like it. Got yourself a lucky boyfriend yet?”

“Twelve actually,” I answer. “You don't know any of

them. It's not a big deal. What can I say? Everyone loves me.”

My sarcasm doesn't faze him.

“I bet they do. I love ya, baby. Pretty as ever. Got me the best bunch of granddaughters an old fart could ask for. Ain't seen you in a while.” His watery, pale blue eyes look past me more than at me, but I know that no one is behind me. The repeating has started already.

“I know, Pa. I've been gone studying at school and working on weekends. I'll be around more when the next school break starts.”

“My smart girl. Smarter than me. Studying's good for you. Gonna be my successful one. I'm so proud. Wish I could see my skinny girl more often. It's sure been a while.”

This is the exact conversation I have with my grandpa every time I see him. It doesn't matter if there's two weeks between our visits or two days, it's always the same. Four years ago, he was diagnosed with Lewy body dementia—a sickness very similar to Alzheimer's disease. I've been watching his memory fade ever since that discovery. But still, without fail, his questions always center around the same topics I've been anxiously fixated on for years. He has no idea how much they consume my mind and suffocate my sanity.

The number 123 glowed red on the scale, weakly illuminating the dark bathroom because I couldn't sleep. When I laid down in my bed, I tossed and turned underneath the covers for about an hour replaying the conversation from class in my mind over and over before it became too much—I had to make sure I was right.

Earlier in sophomore rhetoric, my classmates and I were sent to the high school computer lab to work on our latest assignment. I sat next to Jordan. He pulled up a website displaying a large calculator in the middle of the screen.

“Hey Rin,” he whispered harshly. His long, box-dyed, black hair was a little greasier than usual, and even though it hid his forehead, I could tell he was wiggling his eyebrows at

me. “How much do you weigh?”

I narrowed my eyes at him, trying my best to look intimidating. “Didn’t your dad ever warn you about what happens when you ask a girl that question?”

“You’re not a girl. You’re Corin. And this is for science! I need to know how tall you are too.”

“I’m five foot eight. One hundred twenty pounds,” I responded.

That was a lie. I actually weighed one hundred twenty-three pounds. Every morning when I first woke up I stepped on the scale. I liked to know how much I weighed at my tiniest, so I chose to check in the mornings because by that time I likely hadn’t eaten anything in about twelve hours. Then I would eat my breakfast and come running straight back to the scale, right before my shower, to measure how my oatmeal and toast affected my weight—it usually didn’t. That was it, though. Two weigh-ins, both within my first half hour of being awake. I didn’t meticulously count calories. I ate three meals a day without shame. My thin build was natural, I didn’t have to work for it, but I cherished it by always keeping track of my weight to the pound. Possessing something that so many girls wished they had filled me with petty superiority, which is like a pool of wealth to a sixteen-year-old. Knowing my size provided a sense of comfort for me, but I thought Jordan might think it was strange that I knew my weight to the exact pound, so I rounded down.

“I knew it!” he laughed loudly with no regard for the students working around us. “You’re sick. See?”

The menacing bold title above the calculator read “Calculate Your Body Mass Index.” Jordan had entered my measurements and the website displayed a result reading 18.2 in bright red—red never seems to be a good sign. “What does that even mean?” I asked. “And fuck you. I’m not sick!”

“Fuck me? Fuck science. Fuck math. You’re underweight. The numbers don’t lie.”

The Body Mass Index (BMI) scale measures body

fat with a calculation of a person's height and weight. If the equation results in a number ranging from 18.5 to 24.9, then one falls into the "normal weight" category. A result of 25 or higher and one is labeled as overweight. My score was an 18.2. I felt like Jordan had taken a fat, wet marker to my forehead and written "skinny bitch" across it for everyone to gawk and point at. I wanted to be thin, but the kind of thin that girls envied, not the kind that fed rumors of eating disorders.

"You're too skinny," Jordan started up again. "Need some food? Here's a piece of gum. It's only, like, two calories but it's all I've got. Actually, here." He handed me a small green package. "You're gonna need the whole pack, anorexia. Eat up."

I threw his pack of Orbit at his pimply face, and he just laughed as he blocked it before it struck his cheek. I made him keep adding a pound to the calculation until the result switched from a red, underweight number to a green 18.5. That happened at one hundred twenty-two pounds—one pound lighter than my actual weight. I knew I wasn't too skinny. I felt good; I felt strong.

My mind swirled with thoughts of that conversation when I tried to sleep later that night. Maybe if I just saw one hundred twenty-three on the scale again I would be able to rest. That way, according to actual medical calculation, I didn't have to let anyone get away with calling me too skinny again. I crept down the stairs quietly so I didn't wake my parents, entered the dark bathroom, and stepped on the scale without even bothering to flip on the light. The familiar number one hundred twenty-three looked back at me like an opponent in a staring contest. I felt better, but only for a couple seconds.

A realization popped into my head. One hundred twenty-three is an entire pound heavier than one hundred twenty-two—that makes me bigger than 18.5 on the BMI scale! How nice would it be to be able to say I'm exactly 18.5, the skinniest I could be without being medically too thin? Not underweight; just perfect. Perfect. I could do it. One pound

isn't very much.

My hands trembled nervously as I flipped on the light switch and locked the bathroom door. How do the bulimic girls do it? I stared at the toilet, lost in thought, while keeping a safe three feet distance from its taunting presence. How loud will it be? I don't want to wake up Mom and Dad. Will it hurt? Will that pound be instantly gone? If so, will it still be gone in the morning? The gleam of the overhead light off the porcelain suddenly became too intense, and I could feel fiery tears pressing against the back of my eyes. I opened the door and turned out the light in one fluid motion. Back in my bed I sat up hugging my pillow with both my arms and legs as tightly as my muscles allowed. I rocked myself back and forth quickly then slower as I started to calm down. Finally, I rested in fetal position.

My freckle-peppered cheeks were red, but not just from the intense July sun. Maybe if I splashed around a little bit my grandma would think I didn't hear her tiring question. I dunked my arm under the cool pool water and obnoxiously threw some on my body, brown from sunbathing.

"Did ya hear me, hunny?" Grandma asked slightly louder than her last question. She leaned on the mat, her bottom half submerged in the sparkling water. The skirt of her swimming suit floated on the pool's surface, refusing to sink. Her glossy blue eyes were hidden behind dark prescription sunglasses, but I could tell that she was staring through me in an attempt for eye contact. "What are you gonna do when you're done? You ain't school teaching no more, so what are ya doing when you're done with college?"

I absolutely loathe this question. Why do adults always need an answer? I'm twenty years old; I don't even slightly have my life figured out. I'm still a child. I don't know anything about life outside of my tiny town, population nine hundred. There's too much gossip about Avon's residents filling every crevice of my brain to allow room for actually

usable information. I know intimate details about all seventy-three students I went to high school with, but I know nothing about getting a real job, filing taxes, or planning a budget. What do people do in the real world? Could I survive in a big city full of people whose middle names and birthdays are all a big mystery to me? That's what I want to find out. My only plan is to explore. It may not be a road to success and riches, but it's a path to freedom from the suffocation of Avon's cornfield barriers. For now, that's all I want; it's all I crave.

But this is a desire I can't tell my grandmother. Her entire family lives in central Illinois; no one lives more than an hour away and those closest to her, myself included, can drive to her home within five minutes. Siblings, children, cousins, grandchildren—her family is her livelihood. If I go more than a week without visiting her she acts as if I've led her to the front of a large crowd and screamed "I hate you, woman! You mean nothing to me!" for them all to hear, while encouraging them to throw garbage in her direction. She turns cold and standoffish, only perking up if I promise to visit again tomorrow. How would she react if I told her that I want to move to Chicago causing a four hour long drive to separate us?

So I didn't mention it. I told her that I can do just about anything with a degree in English, but she wanted examples.

"Do you write for a newspaper or do you just write books?" she asked.

"I could do either of those if I wanted to, I guess," I replied. "But it's not limited to that. I could write grants. Editing is pretty cool, too." Honestly, I struggled to come up with careers that matched my degree. The pressure of crafting a satisfying answer started to attack my stomach. Could she sense my discomfort?

"Where the hell you gonna do something like that around here?" Grandma asked. I think she knew where this conversation was headed because she stopped looking at me and placed her attention on the pool. She used her thumb and middle finger to splash the water. Little rings spread across the

pool's surface with every droplet that she flicked.

"Probably the city. I'd like to see what Chicago's like."

"What do you mean?" she asked. "You're leaving?"

"It's a pretty good possibility, Grandma."

"So I ain't never going to see you again." Her remark was definitely a statement, not a question.

Her wrinkled lips stopped moving and she fell silent. The only noise came from the red-breasted robins fighting in the neighbor's maple tree. While they squawked and flew in circles, my grandma turned her back towards me so that she didn't have to look at me anymore. I heard a few hushed snuffles. She only stayed in the pool for another three minutes before she had to completely remove herself from my presence.

I hate it when she acts like this. I know that I am a good granddaughter. When I'm not away at school I make a point to visit her and my grandpa at least twice a week. I help her conquer her ridiculous battles against technology, and I lend a hand washing her dishes. I never forget a birthday. I'm always there for my grandma and will perform whatever random task she asks of me, but I'm not the only one there. Her three children visit her every single day. Her other three grandchildren see her at least weekly. Why does she act as if my moving away means that I'll run away for forever?

Grandma didn't speak to me for the rest of the day, but she didn't completely ignore me either. She handed me a bag of Kitchen Cooked potato chips while I ate my peanut butter and jelly lunch. "Thanks," I replied. I received no response. She tried to hand me a fudgesicle for dessert, but I wasn't hungry so she threw it back into the freezer a little too aggressively. When I hugged her as I was leaving her house, she hugged me back tightly but didn't send me off with her usual "Love ya, hunny. Come back soon." Still, she was silent.

When I visited her and Pa a week later, she was back to her normal self. She showed her love for me by making sure I left her house filled up on Oreos and angel food cake. Even so,

I've been terrified of moving away ever since her cold shoulder froze me out for an entire afternoon.

I sat, wrapped in a dry towel, on my squishy, queen-sized bed holding my little green notebook whose pages are full with my dreams, thoughts, and struggles. Sometimes I find myself incapable of explaining my feelings to another breathing soul, so I bury those emotions into the pages of this notebook and carry it with me at all times.

Over the weekend, I went to a get-together at my grandparents' house. I had been swimming in the pool all afternoon and was letting the warm breeze air dry my crinkly hair and all black bikini swimming suit. I grabbed an ice cream bar from the frosty freezer before joining the party of people seated on the porch outside. I walked towards an empty seat on the metal glider beside the next door neighbor, but before I sat down she poked me in the gut directly beneath my bellybutton.

"Hey!" I cried dramatically as I took a seat. "What was that for?"

"Check out this beer gut," she said. Instead of poking my stomach again, she reached over, grabbed my pouch of fat between her thumb and forefinger and jiggled it up and down. "College seems to be doing some good for you, Rin. You always were too skinny."

I felt completely violated. All of the twenty people seated on the porch were looking at me. More precisely, they were looking at my stomach where a small pouch of fat hung over my bikini bottoms, bearing red fingermarks from her pinching. I tossed my ice cream bar onto the patio table; the chocolate melted in the warm August air, uneaten.

When I returned to my apartment, I stepped on a scale for the first time in two months and saw the biggest number it had ever calculated for me: 151. I wanted to quit eating.

I didn't have the will power.

Instead I chose to record in my notebook every time I ate something so that I had physical proof of my eating

habits, and I could figure out just what was causing these extra pounds. Maybe then I'd be able to regain control of weight. My list for the following day's consumption read as follows:

Two pieces of toast with peanut butter and honey
A chocolate chip cookie
A turkey sandwich with cheese
Sour cream and onion Pringles
A chocolate chip cookie
Three slices of pepperoni pizza
A chocolate chip cookie

I felt disgusted. Where were the fruits? I should have eaten an apple instead of those Pringles for lunch. Why didn't I eat any vegetables? And why did I have to bake god-damned cookies the night before last?

I needed to regain control of my life.

I tossed my towel aside and laid on my back on my floor completely naked. I lifted my legs slightly off the ground and began doing crunches. I watched the skin over my stomach muscles contract and expand with every sit up. I tried to speed up, figuring that the more crunches I complete, the more cookie calories would disappear. It didn't feel as good as crunching slowly. The longer I held a sit up position, the stronger the sting of the workout felt. The burn felt like a reward.

I didn't last very long. My breaths felt shortened and my lungs ached. I gave up.

I entered the bathroom and stepped on the scale again. It read 152.

Leaning up against the wall, I looked at my naked body in the mirror. All I could see was the gut that stuck out against the rest of a relatively thin frame. My teeth clenched and I held my breath as I tried to tighten my abdomen muscles. They didn't look as strong as they felt. I massaged my stomach with trembling fingers in a feeble attempt to coax the fat into evenly

dispersing itself throughout the rest of my body.

I felt sick. I felt dirty. Using only the red knob, I turned the water on in my stand up shower and let a cloud of steam take over the bathroom before getting in. I sat down on the floor of the shower allowing the water to first wet my long hair before turning my face upwards towards the stream, and letting the droplets blend with the wetness already present from my eyes, making the clean water indistinguishable from my pathetic tears.

I wiped away the small droplets of sweat that slid down my hairline as I swiped my timecard to clock out of work. It was a hot early June evening, and I had been working at the nursery all day. Two weeks into summer break from college, and I had been spending nine hours a day, six days a week, busying myself with odd jobs like watering annuals in the greenhouses, fertilizing roses, pulling dandelions out of flowerbeds, and loading mulch for customers. Finally, I was rewarded with a paycheck. Without humility, I ripped the sticky seal of the envelope to review my profits and was surprised with more than I expected. The figure 9.00 had been highlighted in neon pink marker, and an overly excited note reading “Thanks for your hard work!!!! We couldn’t survive here without you!!!!” had been inked onto the paystub. My boss, Pam, had given me a twenty-five cent pay raise. I now made nine dollars each hour.

I wanted to thank her before I left the property. The nursery stretches across ten acres of land, and I wasn’t sure where to start searching for her. There were no cars parked in the usually packed driveway. Instead, it was littered with animals. A skinny mama cat stretched in the sunlight licking the top of one of her five kitten’s heads. Another pregnant black and white spotted cat waddled slowly towards the dry grass, her swollen belly sagging dangerously close to the ground. Two of the nursery dogs, the German shepherd and the fluffy, blonde mutt, laid in the loose gravel under the shade

of the hedge. Brees, the hyperactive golden retriever puppy, charged toward me from the front yard. His orange, sour-smelling fur was wet and caked with mud. He greeted me with a whack of his tail, causing a trail of dingy water to race down my leg.

“Been cooling off in the pond, buddy?” I said to him, scratching under his chin while he drooled all over my hand.

I spotted Pam’s bicycle parked forty yards away at the edge of a block of young fruit trees. As I approached, I passed thousands of plants. To my right, an unstable shelter made of lath was built around the base of a sycamore tree, and it housed pots of hostas under its shade. On the left were rows of tables overflowing with perennials. Everything seemed the same boring shade of green. The beginning of June was too early for most of the perennials to be blooming, but the bell-shaped daylilies parted their buds exposing their banana cream colored souls. The wiry, golden coreopsis crept its tentacles into the pots of the neighboring plants. A thick garden hose stretched along the length of the rose bed. They’d soon flower into their undeniable beauty, but then they were only thorn covered stems. When I reached the parked bike, I called out Pam’s name.

“Coming!” She howled back at me enthusiastically. Her booming voice carried through the tree rows and startled Brees. He licked my fingers before running at Pam who was excitedly marching towards me in the ankle deep grass. She shoed him away. Pam looked at me from underneath her oversized sun visor and tinted, sports-styled sunglasses. I’ve never seen her without a grin on her sun-spotted face.

“I just wanted to say thank you for the raise,” I said. “I’m not sure exactly what I did to deserve it, but I really appreciate it. You’re too nice to me, Pam.”

“You deserve it for being a fantastic employee!” She always speaks with overwhelming excitement. “You’ve really stepped up since Heather left, and I appreciate your hard work! You know, if you decide to take over her role, there will be a

lot more where that quarter came from! Think about it!”

The idea of staying at this job after college graduation made a shiver creep up my spine. There’s no future here. I’ve seen the effects it has on people. Heather was the nursery’s store manager who quit a month earlier. When she left she was thirty-four years old and had been working here since she was sixteen. She earned only twelve dollars per hour, was not awarded any benefits, and struggled to make ends meet. Heather was unhappy and that discontent was apparent to everyone around her. She turned irritable, yelling at employees for insignificant things like walking too slowly and putting the pruners in the first drawer instead of the second. She worked all day in the hot sun, was therefore too tired to do anything with her personal life at night, and attributed that to her lack of a boyfriend. Heather wanted a family so badly. One time I witnessed her have an emotional break down because an employee’s mother announced her latest pregnancy. Heather cried claiming that it wasn’t fair that that woman got to have so many children while she could not. Her tears were unreasonable and embarrassing, but still, she couldn’t control them. Heather needed a break so she quit.

There was no way that I was going to let myself turn into a mess like her. I knew that I wouldn’t discover my true potential staying at the same low paying job I’ve had since I was a senior in high school. Pam kept trying to convince me, though. For Christmas, every one of her workers gets a twenty-five dollar gas card as a bonus. The Christmas after Heather quit, I was the lone receiver of the gas card with an extra fifty bucks. One morning it began storming as soon as I arrived at the nursery, so Pam apologized for making me drive on a gloomy day, handed me twenty-five dollars, and gave me the rest of the day off. My co-worker told me that he got the same special treatment after he graduated high school. Our boss gave him impromptu bonuses to show his importance to the nursery, but once he decided to quit college and stay at the nursery full time, the random acts of riches stopped.

I don't want to be bribed into choosing to make store manager my career. I deserve better than that. I need adventure in a new place. I see myself with a wide smile plastered on my tanned face, skipping down the streets of a city whose tall buildings kiss the blue sky. I want to fall hopelessly in love with a stranger when we realize we both chose the same afternoon to reread *Catcher in the Rye* for the sixth time in the same coffee shop. That can't happen here in my tiny town whose secrets have already been discovered and archived. I just hope that once graduation comes around I'll be able to work up the courage to start that new adventure. And hopefully Pa will stand by my side whispering "I'm so proud of you" as I close my full trunk and drive off to my new beginning.

The Sky Tore

By Thomas Waterford

*Many-Worlds Interpretation:
An interpretation of quantum mechanics based
on the idea that every possible event exists in its
own world and at the exact same time.*

At 11:30 AM Eastern Standard Time, at a cruising altitude of roughly 42,000 feet above the Atlantic Ocean, one of the engines to the Boeing 777 traveling from London Heathrow Airport to John F. Kennedy Airport gives out. Weeks later, the crash investigation team will decide that the plane simply failed due to pilot error.

The Boeing 777 is your standard commercial airliner. It has three seating sections to it: first class, business class and economy. The folks in first class sip orange juice and milk (some drink whiskey to numb the fear of flight) as the people behind them stuff their faces with complimentary peanuts and cookies. The plane has that distinct recycled air smell. It's not the same air that they're accustomed to breathing on land. It doesn't fill their lungs as well as the air you're breathing now does. The air in the cabin is comparable to drinking a flat cola. Although it tastes familiar, there's something missing.

The morning sun sits behind the plane so each window seat passenger has a clear, unobstructed view of the blue sky above them, and the grey mass of clouds below that flash bright lights with each lightning strike into the ocean. Some passengers in first class recline their seats all the way back, reminiscent of a bed where they will sleep until the 777 plummets to its demise.

At 11:00 AM, the captain, Ken Clementine, a veteran pilot who carries himself with a certain swagger that you'd expect from a former Air Force pilot, decides to perform a risky maneuver (that which he's done before in the Air Force) to outrun an oncoming storm, thus sealing his and the 240 passengers on board collective fates.

Ken is an older man; late 60's. He's been flying planes ever since he can remember. He used to fly his family's Cessna over the high plains of Wyoming where he grew up. Before enlisting, Ken grew up on a cattle ranch in southeastern Wyoming. Albin, Wyoming to be exact. It's about an hour outside Cheyenne. Albin is a very small town of 120 people; a small town even by Wyoming's standards. Albin is the complete antithesis to the sprawling metropolis of New York that he and the remaining passengers and crew unfortunately won't make it to.

If he was to land the plane safely in New York, Ken would have retired, happily married to his wife, Donna. He would have moved back to his family's cattle ranch and been a cowboy. He always wanted to be a cowboy. He thought of himself as a cowboy of the skies when he was flying. He was free and seemingly alone, just like out on the ranch, completely happy.

"Set cruising altitude to 43,000 feet," Ken says to his recently married co-pilot Jim. "I love it up here, Jimmy. We're above everything. Down there, it's all chaos, but up here it's nothing but blue skies."

"Agreed, captain, it really is beautiful." Jim admires the late morning sky and thinks of Reese. He thinks about her long, crimson hair and the way it falls over her face perfectly. He thinks of their future. Jim smiles to himself and a comfort settles over him, like slipping into clean sheets. The comfort rushes through his veins and spreads throughout his entire body.

Jim and Reese would have gone on to have a set of

beautiful twin boys, Derrick and Kyle. They would have raised their family in Long Island, living in a comfortable space. The twins would have idolized their father. Derrick, being the more adventurous one, would have gone on to become a pilot, just like his father. Kyle, being the better student would have gone to St. John's University in New York City to study Economics. The twins would both marry. Derrick would have married a stewardess of whom he traveled with frequently. Kyle would have found himself falling for and being married to a ballet dancer.

The twins would both have two children of their own, giving Jim and Reese four grandchildren that they would spoil and love like any good grandparents would do. The couple would pick a small town along the Hudson to retire in. The family would reconvene on weekends and holidays at Jim and Reese's home.

Although their love for each other would change, Jim and Reese's love wouldn't dull. When their bodies deteriorated, they would learn to love each other's minds. If it wasn't for the plane crash, Reese would have died first from breast cancer. She would fight hard and so would Jim. Jim would have died shortly thereafter from natural causes.

After Jim's untimely death, Reese will eventually re-marry a traveling salesman. She will refuse to marry a man similar to Jim because she can't be reminded of losing her one, irrefutable love, she will never get back. Reese will never have children. Not because she doesn't want kids of her own, but because there isn't anyone but Jim with whom she would reproduce with. Whenever her second husband travels, Reese wears a sweatshirt that Jim gave her when they were in school. Although it's been washed many times, she can still make out the faint lettering of "Vaughn College Aviation: New York City" and breathe in his presence whenever she wears it. She will pretend his arms are wrapped around her as she drifts off to sleep, dreaming of what could have been.

“Do you have an estimate of an arrival time, Captain?”
Jim asks Ken.

“Shit, let’s see, I’m already on New York time, and it’s about half passed eleven, so I’d say we’ll touch down at about 3:00 in the afternoon. You got somewhere to be, rook?”

Jim smiles and shakes his head, “No sir, just ready to be home.”

“I hear you, bud.”

An alarm goes off in the cockpit. Ken’s eyes immediately focus on the on-board computer, “Shit,” he says to himself, “Shit, shit, shit, shit!”

Sitting in row 5A, the business class section of the plane, is Hannah Montgomery. She’s looking out the window over the expansive blue sky above and the grey below. She looks down at her watch. *Quarter after* she thinks to herself. She then looks across the aisle to the other side of the 777. The cramped quarters of this section of the plane give Hannah a feeling of uneasiness. She can feel the heat radiating off of the large man beside her; she can smell him. He smells like stale beer and cheese. Hannah always hated being close to people, both mentally and physically. She refused to let anyone close to her drag her down; she’s determined to make something of herself. *Why did I leave? I should have stayed. It’s only been three months, but there’s something there. I know it,* she thinks to herself. She feels the pressure of her decision to leave and it pulls her back in her seat, as if a gigantic rubber band wrapped around Big Ben is pulling her back. Hannah opens her purse and looks at the note that was left on her door before she left:

I love you. I should have said it yesterday. I feel guilty for being selfish and asking you to stay. I would go anywhere for you.

*Love,
Marcus*

Hannah fights back tears. The pressure behind her

eyeballs is nothing compared to the growing ball in her throat that gets larger and larger with each thought of Marcus. She feels like her throat is about to explode. Her emotions are hardly unnoticeable; the large man to her right gives her an awkward eye. Hannah tries to muster up a smile but her bottom lip quivers. The man smiles back then continues to eat his cheese and drink his beer. Hannah takes a deep breath and gathers herself.

She rests her hands over her stomach. Underneath her palms, buried beneath her skin and muscle tissue, through her intestines, and inside her uterus sits a tiny zygote growing within her. Hannah is unaware of the cells that divide inside her.

If she stayed in London, Marcus would have run away at the discovery of the child. He would have panicked. Hannah would have kept the baby and named her Julia. Hannah would have raised Julia to become a strong, intellectual woman. Through Julia, Hannah herself would become strong and independent. They would learn from each other. Eventually, Hannah would have opened a daycare for single mothers. She would have become a community leader in the Wembly neighborhood of London.

Hannah closes her eyes and tries to relax. Not thinking about what could have been, rather what will be. One day at a time, she tells herself moments before the 777 takes its inevitable plunge to the ocean floor.

Chad Feldman drinks from his whiskey and coke. He sits cross legged in seat 1J, the first class section of the 777. It's an open space where one can have privacy, but still be able to see what is going on around them. Chad enjoys this voyeuristic aspect of first class. He looks back through the open curtains between first and business class. *That blond next to the fat ass ain't bad*, he thinks to himself. He looks out the window and

continues to think: *This fuckin' storm better not be all the way in New York. How am I not getting a signal up here? I have WiFi. We better touch down by 2:30. I have too much shit to do. London is such a piece of shit town. Thank God we're outta there.* "Excuse me," he motions towards the steward, raises his empty glass and shakes it. The ice rattles around the interior of the glass, further emphasizing the point that Chad wants another.

"Yes sir, right away," the steward responds.

"Fuckin' male flight attendants?" Chad mumbles to himself, "Jesus Christ." His mumbling is overheard by the elderly woman next to him. He plays it off with a charming smile and a nod, pretending he didn't say what he said.

Chad works for a large, international consulting firm based out of New York. He gets paid by selling the idea of hope to a struggling company. He's a self-proclaimed "fixer." He promises his clients that he will fix their problems. His promises are always as empty as the relationships that he's built in his life, yet his clients still give him money. When Chad walks into a room, people notice him. His tailored suits, business jargon and confident demeanor command the room's attention. He lies to people regularly and sells them false hope for a large amount of money. Chad is engaged, yet he is not faithful. Chad once told his best friend and associate consultant, Brian, that the reason for his engagement was, "She's hot, her dad's got some serious cash, and her mom's smokin'. That's the trifecta!"

If Chad were to land safely, he would have been named partner at his consulting firm, making him the youngest partner in the history of the company. He would have had two boys, naming one after himself, and the other after his father, Paul. The two of them would both be great athletes. Chad Jr. would play football in college and Paul would play lacrosse. They both would be spitting images of Chad. Tall, athletic, with a

jawline cut out of stone. Emotionally, they would be the same as Chad too; selfish and ruthless. After college, the two boys would go on to work for the company that Chad would have went on to own.

Chad would eventually, truly see himself through his children. Chad will see his own selfishness in the way that he raised his boys. By the time of Chad's realization, it will be too late to change his son's ways. After Chad's divorce, he would have been truly alone. He would never realize the true beauty in life until he rested on his deathbed after a series of heart attacks.

Madison Stevens, a recently widowed grandmother of ten sits across the aisle from Chad. She and her husband, Jack, originally planned to honeymoon in London when they married, but as things tend to go, life got in the way. Jack was stationed in Korea after they traded nuptials, in what seems like to her, a lifetime ago. With no window to look out, Madison leans back in her seat and lauds over her fallen lover. He would have loved this. London was beautiful.

Madison was right, Jack would have loved London. If they traveled together for their honeymoon, they wouldn't have left. They would have raised a family there. Jack was a writer, and Madison would have stayed at home with the children. Madison loved to paint and she would spend her days in her in-home studio while the kids were at school. Jack would have written for The Guardian. He would have been an acclaimed journalist with a consistent following.

Instead, after the war, Jack took a job at a local paper in upstate New York. Madison would continue to paint. She would paint the landscapes of the Appalachian Mountains that were visible while looking out the window of her studio. Madison would only show her work to her husband. She felt as though her art was too personal to share with anyone else. Although she painted the landscapes of Appalachia, she was really painting herself.

Madison thinks back to their wedding day. She remembers how in love her and Jack were with each other. She remembers her dress. She remembers her mother telling her how beautiful she was on that day. Madison can feel the fabric of her dress rubbing on her skin as she walked down the aisle. The white feathered pattern on top of the white lace will forever be tattooed in her mind. She remembers the satin gloves. She loved the gloves. Madison glanced down at her wedding ring and smiled. She rubbed the now cracked skin of her forearm that her white satin gloves once covered. She pictured the floral pattern of the gloves that opened to expose her hands where Jack placed the ring that he couldn't afford. She once again smiled to herself. *He never did tell me how he got around to buying that ring*, she thought to herself as she caressed her ring for the last time.

At 11:33 Eastern Standard Time, there is no hope. The 600,000 pound airplane has been reduced to a metal coffin for its passengers. The plane tears through the sky, spiraling downward. The collective stomachs of the 240 passengers drop as they tend to do when falling from such great heights. The sound of the plane ripping through the air is almost deafening, yet strangely enough the cries on board are louder. People are screaming, children are crying. The sad souls on board collectively know that this is the end, the bitter inevitable end.

Ken gets on the microphone to address the passengers; "I'm sorry, I'm sorry!" is all he can say. Ken thinks about his cattle ranch in Wyoming. He thinks about riding horses along the eastern front of the Rocky Mountains. As the 777 jet rips through the Atlantic atmosphere all he can picture is the blue of Wyoming sky.

Jim is aware that the black box in the cockpit is recording everything he's saying. "I love you, Reese. I love you so much. I'll always be with you, baby. Be happy." His voice is cracking. He thinks of her face. He knows she's waiting

for him right now, completely unaware of the 600,000 pound weight that she will carry in the back of her head for the rest of her life. His fear turns to guilt. He thinks of all the things he could have done to stay with her. His guilt turns to anger when he realizes that it was Reese who encouraged him to become an international pilot. He then accepts his fate, "I'm always with you, baby," he says one last time.

Hannah is silent. She thinks of what her future would have been like. She thinks about Marcus. She wonders what he's doing right now. Is he staring westward into the sky from which she's falling from? She realizes that she's fallen this hard before. She realizes that she's fallen for him. She can't let her last thoughts be thoughts of regret. She rests her hands over her stomach protecting the potential of what could have been. She realizes that love is worth dying for. *Love is dying*, she thinks to herself. She's never allowed herself to be as vulnerable as she is now. She closes her eyes and rests her head back into the headrest, accepting her fate.

"I don't wanna die!" Chad cries. His tears are dropping to his lap. His screams are the loudest on the plane. Louder than the child in row 3J. Louder than Ken's cries over the microphone. Louder than the failed engines trying to recalibrate as they fall downward at an unthinkable rate. Chad tries to pray. Chad has never prayed before. Chad cannot pray. He thinks of all the people that he's lied to. He thinks of all the people that he's hurt. He regrets it all. He has never been more aware of his life than he is right now. Chad looks across the aisle and sees Madison.

Madison has her eyes closed. She thinks back to when Jack returned from the war. She remembers the pure jubilation on Jack's face. His smile as wide as his jawline. His big white teeth glistening to her, welcoming her in his arms. She remembers when he lifted her up when they first saw each other for the first time in months and kissed her passionately. It was the same night her first son was conceived. Madison's thoughts are interrupted by Chad's cries.

“I don’t want to die! I’m too young! I’m too young!”
Chad is defeated. Madison grabs Chad’s hand and smiles to him.

“You are no longer a young man,” she says to him calmly, yet loud enough that only Chad can fully make out what she’s saying. “You are as old as me now. We are going somewhere. I don’t know where to, nor do I need to know just yet. All I know is that we are certainly going.”

Open Doors

By DiAnn Vulich

Prisoner 681111 of the Mississippi Women's Correctional Facility was a special security risk, and kept from the general population as a protective measure of her own safety and wellbeing. She slept in a single cell, ate alone, and spent one hour a day alone in the yard exercising under the watchful eye of three armed guards. It was no secret to the prison's other inmates that Regina Rae Harmon was a Baby Killer

The gray cinder block walls were moving in on her as she sat on a colorless gray-beige metal bench before an identically indefinable table; leg shackles cuffed to a single round link grounded into the concrete floor. The musty mildew stench of the room gave evidence of a water leak somewhere within the surrounding cement slabs. The earthy air around her felt grave-like and near death. Regina Rae had no slack from the shackles to cross her legs comfortably so she settled on nervously bouncing her knee in jack-hammer rhythm as she awaited the visit of a new lawyer. She looked long and deep at the only color in this medieval dungeon-- a bright green and blue poster of a cloud-free sky hovered over a field of grass, reading:

*When one door of happiness closes, another opens;
but often we look so long at the closed door that we do
not see the one which has been opened for us.*

— Helen Keller

Her eyes glazed and she started to shake at the thought of that one inspirational quote. She was here, in this red, death-row jumpsuit, nervously bouncing while her spastic mind went into

overload—all because of opening doors.

Her retrial lawyer promised to go with a different plea. He assured her that the death sentence would be lifted once the jury heard of her past abuse, abuse she kept to herself for reasons the lawyer would never understand. He was convinced she acted out of a mentally unstable compulsion of suicidal intent. His claim and evidence being the numerous self-inflicted wounds, now all raised keloid scars looking like shiny, pink zippers across her skin, visible on almost every accessible part of her body. He will argue on her behalf that what happened last summer was an insecurity of leaving her child alone once she killed herself. Her defense is "not guilty by reason of insanity." He said her Eighth Amendment rights were violated at her previous trial when her mental health was never considered upon the death sentencing. His claim was her intent for murder/suicide was interrupted before she could complete the act.

She told him nothing of the doors.

The doors were her secret, always a secret. A secret she kept as a prize. She felt somewhere deep inside that if she told anyone, or even hinted about the magic of the doors, she would forever be denied their access. She needed them as she needed air to breathe. They lead her into different worlds where she could escape life. She learned about the doors, traveling to different times and dimensions, the night her stepfather first lay beside her in bed. She quietly retched at the cigarette and beery breath against her neck as his hands played up and down her body under the flowered flannel nightgown and fumbled into the leg opening of pink cotton panties. She laid in the dark and pretended to sleep as he forced his hands deep into her innermost secret areas. She cried out in fear and pain when he violently flipped her onto her back and pried her knees apart, pulling the panties down and left dangling off one foot over the side of the twin canopied bed.

Each time he plunged into her he sent another blinding firework to burst behind her tightly clenched eyelids. The

entire time she concentrated on working her arm back and forth across the sharp edge of a protruding screw on the headboard--to the rhythms and motion of his forceful thrusts. The physical pain of skin sawed open allowed her to separate from the oppressive weight on top of her, the fermented, rancid breath exhaled on her face. The wound on her arm, from wrist to mid-forearm, opened wide. As she stared into it while trying to completely shut out her stepfather, she climbed completely in, through the door, and pulled herself out on the other side.

The door lead into a glade, bright and open with a fresh flower and summer rain smell which made her instantly think of happier times. She stood in a wide open space where lush green grass carpeting the expansive plain, grass so soft and warm on her bare feet she took off running just to feel the blades caress and cushion each step. When she came to a pillowy hilltop, she rolled down as if she were moving through cotton candy. She danced in the open air making her nightgown spread into a bell as she twirled. The sun gave a warmth and light she recognized as her dearest early childhood friend. She could be free without fear or guilty shame. She could stand and be proud in this realm, leaving behind the life she lived on the other side of her pain. For many years she used the doors to escape. For many years she escaped into worlds where she found peace and safety. She kept the doors secret to preserve their power and kept the weekly nighttime visits secret to preserve her self-respect. It all came crashing down around her anyway.

Her stepfather was given only three years of prison time for the continued rape of Regina Rae due to her age. If she had been younger, he may have served a longer sentence. If she would have subjected herself to the embarrassment of the witness stand, he may have been justly punished. If circumstances were as they should have been, she would have been given the proper counseling and support a young victim requires to live a decent and happy life. As it turned out, Regina Rae grew to confuse his abuse for love. By the

time she was sixteen years old, she believed the attention he gave her was courting, and the secrecy from her mother was to avoid jealousy. Her stepfather became a regular visitor to her bedroom. She was convinced the relationship was of equal grounds and she had complete control and consent over her destiny.

Baby TOOFAT once had a proper name. He was named Dwight Upton Harmon on his birth certificate. Regina Rae carefully, meticulously printed each letter on the hospital form when she named him after her dead, favorite brother. She had great plans for this baby. He was going to receive that special, deep love she felt down inside her soul but could never identify--that longing she desperately felt but couldn't claim. He was the magic that was going to make life better. She had high convictions that this baby would be her salvation, conceived in secret but revealed in joy. She soon found after six months of presenting this adored gift of human life, showing off her Baby Dwight, she was greeted with, "Girl, tha' baby TOOFAT!" That is exactly how she heard it. Every time. Always in all capital letters along with a look of disgust and disapproval. Where she wanted to find acceptance and love she was only given contempt. Where she was looking for regulation and support she was given disdain. She learned from the people in her life that her baby was a thing to hate. Her newfound enrapture of Baby Dwight was quickly stolen by the accusations of blame, shame, and guilt she felt to have birthed Baby TOOFAT. She soon forgot his name completely.

Baby TOOFAT didn't follow the standards of other babies. Regina Rae carried that universal image all girls (who played with baby dolls) create in their minds of what babies should be, and Baby TOOFAT broke every ideal she held. She imagined babies with mops of curling blond hair standing on end, cute drooling coos, and smelling of sweetbread and cinnamon buns. What she became conditioned to see was a bald ball of fat, spitting up and screaming with a constant smell of sour stink. (Curdled infant formula had collected in the

fleshy folds of his dimpled baby chins and was slowly eating into his tender skin.) The prideful joy of motherhood was lost in Regina Rae when she regarded herself a fool for caring so strongly for something no one could love. Baby TOOFAT was her cross to bear.

Her sense of emotional loss was overwhelming. She not so much as lived with a dark cloud constantly covering her but instead felt she was adrift in a dark, blinding fog where she could not see or feel direction or guidance anywhere around her. She stumbled alone in the fog, tripping and sometimes falling, dragging along Baby TOOFAT as an anchor that she loathed, feared and pitied at the same time. Her own mother disowned her after the truth came out and her husband sat on trial. Regina Rae was blamed for the relationship she hid, and the crimes committed against her. Her brothers disappeared long ago, one by overdose, and the other with a backpack, bass guitar under his arm, and a bus ticket fast to somewhere unknown. She was without friends or family and made her daily trek across town pushing a second hand stroller with a broken wheel to get to the high school daycare where Baby TOOFAT was deposited, much like the books she hid in her locker. She was not a good student, but was in fact, unmemorable. She sat on the edge of class and quietly waited for time to pass until the day was over and she could go home. She spent the days waiting until eventually enough credits had racked up to mean graduation. As long as she attended and graduated school she was eligible for public assistance.

She lived on the edge of town and quietly waited the passing of time for something magical and good to happen to her. She sensed life when she thought of that magic. She felt a hint of anticipation just around the bend, as long as she held on to hope she knew things would change. She was learning how to not actually live, but exist. She routinely went through the motions but refused to feel anything. She never felt of this world.

September brought heavy humid heat waves, one after

another until she couldn't remember a time she wasn't dripping and wiping sweat out of burning, bloodshot eyes. Her tiny efficiency apartment had room for a bed as the only furniture. She and Baby TOOFAT spent every moment in the stifling walk-up, together but alone. He was trying to begin a life and she was trying to find one.

As nightfall closed around her she sat beside Baby TOOFAT stretched out on the bed. In this instant as she watched him sleep she remembered tiny threads of that maternal pride she once felt before the baby was ruined for her. She traced a finger lightly over the groove between his pouty lip peaks causing his lips to suckle a ghost. He gave a gentle, contented sigh and Regina Rae felt a yearning so foreign to her she didn't recognize the emotion of loving her baby. She stroked aside pellets of sweat from his forehead and stretched her body across him to rearrange the fan in the screen-less open window to better circulate the stale heat around him. She caressed her palm over the bulging white mound of his belly and started to sing gently to him as he found comfort in his own dreams.

She stopped singing. The only time her body opened a door on its own was when she split from inside, and through the blood and pain that time entered Baby TOOFAT. She began to contemplate the door he opened on his side of the magic which he too opened to her. As she sat there gently comforting her infant son, she also dreamed of the magical world from where he must have emerged. She presumed it a world of the peace and contentment he wore on his face as he slept. He bridged the huge gaping span of the world she experienced and the peaceful, satisfying, fantastical world she found through the doors where she escaped. She reasoned that a doorway through him would lead into the very realms of pure pleasure and happiness she kept striving to reach.

She lovingly fondled his round pink belly, rising and falling with every breath he took, tracing her finger longwise over the tender, vulnerable flesh. She ran the nail of her finger

along the same line her fingertip followed as if trying to feel for the invisible latch where he opened. She started to use the sharp edge of her fingernail, but ended up with a kitchen knife. The neighbors responded to the screams before she had a chance to enter the door and pull herself through into his happiness.

She sits still, waiting to hear the tell-tale clang of the barred door slide open and rapidly close. This new lawyer will soon arrive and together they will plan her defense. She will probably have to talk about the doors once she meets with the psychologist. She thinks it's just as well: she hasn't been able to open herself since she arrived. As she waits, she sits, daring the barred door to open up for her full confession.



CORIN BODENHAMER

ALDEN BRADDOCK

DANA BREEN

VICTORIA DREWS

JOSEPH FEGAN

JULIANA GOODMAN

JASON HERBST

SARAH LAMBACH

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