

TOWERS

MMXX

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““ Where did I put my pieces? They
are shoved into some corner
of my cardboard memory.

— Jerene-Elise Nall, *My Cardboard Memory*

nonfiction

**editor's choice*

Boilvin

Gareth Slegner

Nearly every neighborhood has one: the derelict house. The kind of house that kids double-dare each other to knock on the rusted screen door, mothers spy on through window blinds while gossiping over the phone and fathers sneer at because the neglected lawn compromises the class of neighborhood. Most of the time, these vacant houses are cases of bank or government foreclosure. But to the wild imagination of a child, these eerie houses contain toothless axe murderers, cannibalistic old ladies, torture chambers, meth labs, or Boo Radley's evil twin.

That formulaic creepy house in my neighborhood was located on the opposite side of the block I grew up on.

The Churchill's Grove neighborhood in northwest Rockford, Illinois dates back to 1829, and during the Civil War was home to Camp Fuller, a training base for the Union Army's 74th Regiment. Ultimately, Churchill's Grove developed into quite the stately neighborhood. And now, well-to-do American Tudor, Dutch Colonial, Edwardian, Prairie, and Victorian homes make-up the historic 637-acre region, which runs along the west bank of the Rock River. In fact, nearly two dozen of these homes have been deemed worthy of historic preservation. But not even family neighborhoods as sophisticated as Churchill's Grove can avoid the eventual eyesore.

My family moved to Churchill's Grove in December of 1986 when my twin sister, Hannah, and I were just under three years old and my younger brother, Aaron, was eight months old. The two-story navy blue

stucco house my parents bought on Post Avenue was the largest house on one of the largest blocks in the neighborhood. It had the roomiest front porch and the widest driveway leading to the biggest backyard on Post's 1300-block.

The four-sided block was abstractly fashioned—almost like a disproportional kite—and featured an H-shaped alleyway system within it, separating the block into four parts. The unconventional layout of the block was perfect for a mischievously adventurous kid like me. And as the years went on, I became incredibly familiar with every square-foot of that alley, every crevice between garages, every loose fence panel, and every unlocked gate.

In 1993, I discovered two things while exploring the alleyway: the abandoned house on Boilvin and that my mom had a drinking problem. Being a naive 10-year-old, I wasn't sure which scared me more. At the time, I didn't fully understand my mom's alcohol addiction. I always assumed that my dad would be there to fix anything that went awry with our family.

One late afternoon that summer, I stumbled upon a large black garbage bag full of empty wine bottles behind the fence that separated my backyard and the alley. But these weren't the standard champagne-style bottles; these were one-gallon handle jugs. The garbage bag was so jam-packed with these jugs, that the plastic was stretching and tearing from the pressure. I immediately assumed the bag belonged to one of two people: my maniacal next door neighbor Jesse Styles or old

cantankerous Buck Kuss, whom lived directly across the alley from me. Standing there, I never imagined that one of my parents might be responsible for this mass consumption.

Yes, the pronunciation of Buck's last name was "cuss"—and it's almost as if he felt obligated to live up to it. He swore like a sailor with Tourette's syndrome. And he wasn't picky about what he cursed about. When it came to dropping the F-bomb, he was an equal opportunist: He cursed out everything from kids hitting wiffle balls into his garden to tree branches that extended too far into his yard. But the old man was a freak about keeping his property pristine, so the discarded wino bag—I thought—probably wasn't his.

If anyone was a suspect alcoholic, it was Jesse. He mostly kept to himself. The only time I would see him was when he was reading stacks of foreign newspapers on his porch, tanning in the backyard or going for a jog—seems fairly normal, except for the fact that he sometimes barked like a dog at night.

On numerous occasions, his loud, aggressive barking would awake my family and neighbors. Weather be damned, he would go outside to his front lawn, get down on all fours and just woof into the night. There never was a clear explanation for the strange behavior. No one except the police ever approached him about his canine tendency. Rumor has it, he once had an undisclosed job with the government. And since he also could speak several languages, my dad always joked that Jesse could bark in Japanese and German.

My dad often made jokes when coping with tough circumstances. And if he didn't have a dopey joke to crack, he just didn't say much at all; seldom a word of comfort. When it came to coping with my mom's drinking, he certainly tried his best at first. But private conversations

between him and my mom always shifted to her refusing to admit to her alcoholism, which, in turn, ended in shouting that rivaled Jesse's barking.

Ultimately, my dad made a selfish decision that sent my mom's drinking, their marriage, and our house on Post into a downward spiral. That same summer, he firmly announced that he was going to take a two-year sabbatical from teaching, starting in the fall of 1994, to get his Master of Arts in Theater Arts at Illinois State University in Bloomington...two and half hours south of Rockford. To my mom, Hannah, Aaron and me, that meant him making a long commute every day. To my dad, it meant moving to Bloomington for two years—leaving my alcoholic mom, who also worked as a fulltime high school teacher, to raise three children virtually by herself. To this day, I still can't fully forgive my dad for running away from my mom's addiction.

By the time my dad made his announcement, I had already found empty wine jugs hidden away in the basement laundry room that matched the jugs from the alley.

For the remainder of the 1993 summer, I spent much of my time scouting out the ominous Boilvin house with my neighbor and best friend Chris Gifford. It was basically a month long stakeout before we started fifth grade. We spent hours watching at the house, waiting for someone or something to come out or go in. Constantly, we would try to convince each other that we saw the window drapes sway or the front door crack open. In reality, we never saw anything except for maybe a bird fly from the rotting roof.

The Boilvin house consumed my thoughts at night. The stillness of its faded forest green painted wall panels, the dried out yellow lawn

and the shadowy porch made me anxious. Regardless of what angle the sun was shining, the porch always looked like a deep, dark cavern.

No, it wasn't Jesse's lunatic barking or even Buck's livid temper that scared me. I knew Jesse was kind of a crazy person and that Buck was going get pissed about everything. If anything, I found them both equally amusing. It was what I didn't know that had me unnerved: the unknown surrounding the Boilvin house. Why, if no one lived there, was there not a "For Sale" sign in the yard? Why were there still heavy drapes on the windows instead of boards? What the hell was inside?

During the final days of our summer vacation, Chris and I would one-up each other with dares. We would see who could make it farthest up the weedy driveway before turning to run back. We didn't risk daring the other person to do the ultimate dare: knock on the front door. That required stepping into the screened-off porch, sneaking past a large threatening window and standing face to face with the stained oak door. It also meant that as soon as one of us did this, the other person eventually had to as well. But we were out of ways to provoke each other; knocking was really all that remained.

For an entire day, we argued over who should go first. Of course, the only logical settlement we could agree on was to go up together. But before we could even make it past the large window, Chris swore he heard a noise and bolted. I ran because Chris ran. We then argued over who was the bigger chicken.

School finally started and we immediately began telling friends about the creepy house on our block. Chris and I of course exaggerated the extent of our dares; like that we spent an entire afternoon hanging out on the screened porch. Then a fellow fifth grader, Matt McKee, asked "Yeah, but did you go inside?"

Matt was the resident class clown. But he was a different breed of class clown, almost a borderline bully. He never gave swirlies or stole lunch money. Instead, he took pleasure in giving backhanded compliments and cleverly mocking classmates. Looking back on his obnoxious behavior, it seemed very developed for a fifth grader. I'd never met a kid with more convincing peer pressure.

That day after school, we walked two blocks west from P.R. Walker Elementary down to the Boilvin house. There were four of us: Chris, Matt, Steven Hesselberth and me. Hesselberth was an obese yet confident sixth grader. We didn't even call him by his first name; he was just "Hesselberth." The name "Hesselberth" alone resonates fatness, pudginess, portliness. Even now, whenever I see an overweight kid, I refer to him or her as a "Hesselberth."

We made our way around to the back of the house and found the backyard gate unlocked. I was surprisingly calm. Once we were able to push the gate open through the tall, deep weeds, we just stood there looking warily at the side-door leading into the garage. I genuinely believed there was no way we could actually get into the house—that must have been the source of my composure. Then, without any warning, Hesselberth dropped his fat shoulder squarely into the door. It swung open as he stumbled in. We were all taken back, and my composure was washed over with uneasiness. Right away, we saw that the door leading into the main part of the house was—as if someone was expecting us—already cracked open. Forget it. I didn't want to go in anymore. But everyone started walking inside. I followed. I was too terrified to be left by myself.

The house was absolutely filthy and smelled like the underside of an old, soggy rug. It was so dusty that the late afternoon sun coming through the blinds made the whole first floor look hazy. There was

no way to know when the last time someone occupied the house, but there were still old moldy dishes in the kitchen sink and a ratty couch in the living room. Other than that, there was indiscriminate rubbish everywhere.

I don't recall much else from the house except going into the upstairs bedroom at the end of the hallway. The door was already wide open and there, in the back corner of the room, were piles of magazines. And as we walked closer, we realized they were old nudie magazines from the 1970's. Vintage porn was the last thing I expected to be in the house. Finding a headless body would have been less surprising. I can't remember how long we snooped around inside. It could have been five minutes. It could have been a half an hour.

Walking home, I realized that was the first time I'd ever broken into anything and the first time I ever saw a naked woman. That combination in any other circumstance would end in a restraining order.

After the pseudo adventure inside the notorious Boilvin house, the intrigue wore off and life went on. My dad completed his two-year MA program in 1996, my mom's drinking got worse, and shortly after my dad returned, they got a divorce when I was in eighth grade. He moved out and my mom's drinking continued to worsen. The only people left to confront her about the addiction were my sister, brother and me. But my mom's denial was as strong as her addiction. She was very good at hiding consumption and passed her abnormal behavior off as exhaustion. That's what makes addiction so difficult to comprehend; it's a constant struggle between will power and disease.

I never witnessed her actually drink her poison. It was like the Superman effect. She would quietly leave the room and return a little later as a completely different person—smashed. The only evidence

left was the empty bottle she failed to hide during her drunken stupor. Minutes later, she would pass out, and not awake until she had to get up to teach in the morning. This was the routine. This was the secret.

My parents set up a dual custody system where Hannah, Aaron and I would move back and forth every three months. It was a dreadfully trying rotation, especially when we'd return to my mom's house in complete disarray. She wouldn't clean; just work, drink, sleep, repeat. Her house was void of any responsibility and slowly went to shambles.

Despite the prevailing sentiment that most children blame themselves for their parent's falling out, I never did. Not once did I ever wonder what I could have done differently to prevent the divorce. There was self-pity, frustration and embarrassment, but never guilt. I always recognized it was my mom's alcoholism and my dad's abandonment behind our broken family.

When I turned 18, I legally chose to live full-time with my dad. I only returned to my mom's house on Post when it was absolutely necessary. And that was few and far between. Even my mom began to distance herself from the house. Just as she began hiding her alcoholism, she then began hiding what her house had become as result of her depression and addiction.

She essentially moved into a different house with her boyfriend as an attempt to leave all the terrible memories behind, and her obligation as a homeowner. But she brought her addiction with. When I would see my mom, discussion about her alcoholism and her house on Post was always on the tip of my tongue. I loved my mom, but I hated her addiction more. I just didn't know how to approach it. No one did.

The unspoken heartbreak of my mom's alcohol dependence made it hard for me to fall asleep most nights. I couldn't just lie down and wait for sleep to come. Thoughts of my mom's misery wouldn't allow rest. I needed distraction. Even now, I can't fall asleep without watching TV or reading a book.

Intriguing how depression is the key to self-medication.

In the spring of 2006, after two years as a part-time clerk for the Rockford Register Star, I was offered a full-time assistant editing position on the sports desk. I quickly accepted. My first call to action was to move out of my dad's house. It came to my attention that a friend of mine, Blake Vendler, had just purchased a house and was looking for roommates. A couple weeks later, another friend, Anthony Standden, picked me up and we drove to Blake's new house. I couldn't help but notice the route we were taking: right through the Churchill's Grove neighborhood. Then Anthony turned right onto Boilvin. As we approached the vacant house that I broke into 13 years earlier, I prepared myself to tell him the story. But before I could even point out the house, we were in the driveway—it wasn't overrun with weeds anymore. Blake bought the Boilvin house? "This is the house," I repeated over and over. Anthony didn't understand what I meant. So I waited to tell the story until we got inside. And as soon as Blake opened the door, I said "You know, the last time I was here, I just broke in through the back."

The house no longer smelled like a musty bathroom rug, but it looked as if it had gone through several mediocre "flips." I couldn't get over my astonishment, which grew even more when I learned my bedroom would be the one at the end of the hallway, where the piles of '70s nudie magazines once were. Was I really going to sleep in the same room where some weird pervert stored all of his porn? Yes. I was

too compelled not to move in. The idea of living there seemed strange, but I almost felt it would be sweet ironic closure to what happened 13 years ago. Besides, I made it clear I wanted the entire room scrubbed down.

Nights were restless during my first two weeks in the Boilvin house. For almost four years I deliberately avoided all contact with the childhood home that my mom drowned in alcohol. Now it was only a short stroll away. One pleasant summer day, I finally worked up the nerve to take a walk around the block and through the alleyway I once roamed—albeit apprehensively. I knew what I was in store for with every step I took closer to my mom's house on Post.

Then there it was, the house I took comfort in as a child, peeling navy blue paint, rotting roof, heavily-draped windows, weedy driveway, shadowy porch. Derelict.

I turned around and walked back to the Boilvin house.

A Reflection on Becoming

Anne Darfler

My socialization as a girl and woman happened through observation. I curiously and silently watched my mother, my grandmother, my cousins, and my friends. I watched them at family gatherings, birthday parties, malls, and in school halls. I gathered information on this thing I was turning into while secretly listening from the darkened kitchen stairs. Watching and listening at gatherings I witnessed female interaction and sought access to the woman world. My mother did not show me the way. My mother walked ahead of me and let me follow two and a half steps behind. I'm not convinced she even knew I was there. Sometimes I was told I was not welcome in this world. I was still a child. It remained a mystery for a good portion of my young life. Since I did not have access to the conversations and rituals of womanhood that occurred behind closed bedroom doors while the men sat outside drinking beer, the most fruitful place to listen and watch was at showers, bridal and baby.

I remember being a curious pre-adolescent at my cousin's bridal shower, longing to be one of the women, fantasizing about uttering something so mature and witty that the women could not resist throwing their heads back and laughing. The sort of response elicited when women disclose wise or provocative truths about husbands and children, or the general tortured state of being a woman. I sat on the floor, legs carefully tucked under my flowery dress, at the foot of the creamy white leather ottoman in my grandmother's elegant home. The ladies sipped fizzy, pink, champagne punch out of carefully balanced crystal glasses while the bride opened gifts. Back then bridal shower

gifts were not selected from lengthy, barcode registries. Bridal gifts were for the bride. Woman to woman, here is my gift for you. You are entering a transformative ritual and this is what I give you to help you on your way. Not, "Here is that stainless steel toaster you wanted."

I sat eagerly trying to understand what exactly the meaning of all this was. What was the real point to have all these women here with punch and melt-a-way mints? The women filled out cards with advice, or maybe they went around and verbally gave their advice. They talked about the honeymoon with bright, mischievous eyes. My mother's advice: "Condoms, condoms, condoms!" She grinned and the other women laughed and laughed. I did not know what this meant. Nor dared I ask.

Recently, a pregnant friend's house was crowded with dozens of women, white, Latina, young and single, middle-aged and divorced, especially young mothers wanting to get their two cents in to the expectant mother so she doesn't have to go through quite the same degree of raw emotional exposure they did. We ate pasta salad and cookies, and politely mingled. We ran our fingers over delicately crocheted infant gowns from Puerto Rico and nodded our approval to the Diaper Genie and Onesies. We sniffed and guessed at guava and mango baby food. Then we played "dress the baby."

Two mothers raced to dress two infant dolls in various accoutrements. They stood side by side at the kitchen island with all eyes scrutinizing their diapering and dressing skills. Angle the shirt

hole over the head and slip socks on tiny plastic feet. Lucky for the contestants, these babies do not squirm, kick, scream, or poop. A twelve year old girl competed with a young woman as a younger five year-old girl stood front and center staring up at the excitement with near rapture. The activity filtered into her mind and crystallized. "This is what women do. Women love babies. Women dress babies."

Inside I deflated as I considered the message this young girl was receiving. What are we teaching her? Look how ridiculously excited we are to clothe this doll-baby! One day you can do it, too! If you practice and hope, you will have one of your very own to snap up in cotton, to which you can devote your time, your stamina, and soul. Then, I caught myself. I caught myself assuming that we should know better than to take pride in our work. I caught myself devaluing all the effort I have put into the last eight years of my own children's lives. I caught myself devaluing the sweaty, disgusting, bitter and reducing work of all the women in this room. The very work that binds us.

I was not told how to be a woman. Rather the unspoken gestures; the lipstick and the cooking and the dresses; the comparisons and the stories permeated the becoming. Young girls soak in the sound of women together without yet understanding the pain and joy that will one day make them laugh and laugh.

Dire Wolf

Stephan Mavrick

How fucking stupid? I'm talking major league stupid. I've done minor and bush league stupid before, but now I'd finally made it to the big dance. There I was, four thirty in the morning, hugging a soggy log and shaking so hard that my teeth were rattling in their sockets. Surrounded by four feet of water that was just warm enough to avoid freezing, I was soaked to the pockets, and as I sat there hugging my knees I felt icy water running in rivulets down my thighs and into the crack of my ass. I could feel my core cooling... it was slow at first but then the drop in temperature seemed to gain momentum. I hadn't been able to feel my toes for nearly eight hours and I checked them periodically to see if any had turned black. Even my breath came out cool as I exhaled. I nodded off from time to time, once nearly dunking myself headlong into the flood. I cursed myself once more for my stupidity and resituated myself.

Just hours earlier, I had been running along the trails chasing deer. They teased me, running almost up to meet me; then we'd stop and look at one another. I could almost see playfulness in the deer's eyes as they started and bounded away, not so far or so fast as to lose me, but just enough to set me in pursuit of them once more. For part of the evening I was merely shadowed down the trails by shaggy yearlings, holding half a conversation as we went. I wondered what they would say if they would only answer me. Other hikers would cross our path sometimes driving my companions bouncing into the forest until all that was visible were white tails seeking refuge among the trees. When the interlopers left, then my companions would return. Dutifully they paced my progress from just off the trail. From time to time I'd take a break to smoke. As I made my preparations they'd circle closer, probably wondering what I was doing. As I puffed on a butt they would

stand just out of range of the smell to wait, like I was their tour guide and they were lost without me. I'd finish my smoke and the tour would continue.

It became clear that I was off of the route when my companions headed away from me. They stopped every few feet to look at me, inviting me to not do something stupid. As I left the last two of them behind, they stared after me, tempting me back to the safe path, away from the watery torment which I later found myself taking refuge from on an eight inch wide fallen tree, sitting four inches above the water and two feet from hell.

It all began with stubbornness. I'd made good time, covering about two miles of bog in forty minutes. My feet were still dry at that point, but that would change very soon. I had foolishly believed that I could shadow the flooded trail and make my way around the water logged path.

That's when it began; I stepped ankle deep into the water. Pulling it free immediately I found that it had not soaked through once submerged. I stopped and looked around and could not honestly say where I had come from. By this point it seemed (and I stress the word seemed) that it would be better to push on than to turn back. This is the part where (regretfully) I got clever. It was clear that I was going to get wet at some point, so deciding that the rest of the walk after the water hazard would be closer to comfortable with dry feet, I took off my socks and shoes.

Let me take a moment right here to explain some things: First, this was early March, just outside of Chicago and the high temperature that day was about forty degrees (practically a fucking heat wave, all

things considered). Second; it had been snowing then raining for the previous three months. Not only was there far more melt water than the underground water table could contain, but after the initial flooding it had rained (hard) for a week. Not only was the water high, it was cold. Now that you have these facts let me just go on to point out that for one reason or another, these facts totally eluded me as I asked myself; how far could the flooding go on for? Let me tell you that I waded through that freezing muck for at least five miles.

Then it was too cold. Every forty yards or so after that I had to haul myself up onto a fallen tree; scrambling with numb naked feet onto logs and even into low trees. Once up I would start rubbing down my calves and feet, giving specific attention to each toe, not going on until I had restored feeling to my legs. By that point the only semblance of dry ground was the interwoven web work of fallen timber that created a series of bridges that led to nowhere. With every back-cut that I made my hope of making it to the edge of the forest shrank.

At some point, shadowing the trail no longer seemed like such a good idea. My legs were going numb faster and my ability to warm them had been gradually diminishing. I found myself out in the middle of a seemingly endless watery expanse; without options for respite from the wet and cold, I began to shake violently. My breath began coming in short heavy gasps. My mind began to shut down. The only thing that I could think was that I needed to be out of the water. Icy hands crept up my legs like Death's bony fingers. My vision tunneled and I started to panic. Hypothermia was setting in. Then my eyes locked a tree with a fork in the trunk just a couple of feet out of the water. Without a thought, I ran up the trunk of the tree, gripping at the ridges in the bark with my fingers and letting it cut into my feet (which by this point had about as much feeling in them as a couple of pork chops). I shot up the side of that tree like a cat with a firecracker tied to its tail.

As I situated myself, I once more began to review my options. They hadn't changed. My options were still; stay there and bemoan my own stupidity and my lousy lot in life until hypothermia took my consciousness and the cold took my life, or I could push on (as hopeless as that seemed) and make it out of that mess, probably in a physically damaged state. The only thing that seemed sure in the whole situation was the probability of death. These were not pleasant options, and reviewing them made me despair; but the simple logical constructs that I had to use in order to lay them out kept panic at bay. No matter how bad the options the only real hope that I had was to keep my head. Panic would ultimately equal death.

The sky was turning pink. This brought on fresh waves of low grade panic. Certainly if the sun went down on me while I was soaked to the balls with the frigid flood waters of the DesPlaines River, I'd never see another dawn. Panic gave way to urgency once I'd articulated this thought and I set out again; for the first time without feeling in my feet. That leg of the trek didn't last long. By some trick of the river's route or of my own reeling senses I was clearly headed toward the river again. The waters became noticeably colder with every step, and each step became more unsure and labored. I took my only option for safe haven. I clambered up onto a moss covered log that seemed utterly saturated; clearly it had been submerged more than once.

That log; my bed for the night, and quite possibly my funeral palette, sat no more than four inches out of the water and couldn't have been eight inches wide. It lifted from the forest floor on the rising flood waters and wedged against a young tree that after several failed attempts I found that I could not use to get any further from the soup that surrounded me. I couldn't remember dry or warm, or even my life before this misery.

I took off my jacket and wrapped it around my feet and lower legs providing them with a wind break at least. I settled back and lied to myself. "Just a few minutes rest, I'll head out again soon; I just need to warm up." In truth, I knew that there was no way that I was going to be warm again, short setting myself on fire. I watched helplessly as the pink tones of the sky deepened to red. The day sighed and left me to my fate as the sun finally finished its descent beyond the horizon. Would I ever see it again? I thought not. Worse than death it seems, is the anticipation of certain death.

My efforts had brought me as far as this soggy palette, and they wouldn't get me any further without some sort of help. So I sat and pondered at what was to be done. After an hour with no sun, and the increasingly cold air being pushed off of the river, into my face and down my shirt, I decided that that log would be my final resting place.

Finally, I gave into my urges and pulled a pack of cigarettes and a lighter out of my still dry breast pocket. Fully aware that nicotine constricts blood vessels and would therefore assist the cold and the wet in their deadly work. I lit up anyway. I was beyond hope. I hadn't given myself up for dead, but by that point I was certain that I was fighting a losing battle. The end seemed certain and that may have helped me to struggle on. If only death is certain, then the only decision that the doomed have left is how they meet the end. I refused to lovingly embrace death when he arrived and willingly accompany him on to Hell. When he showed up, he was going to have a fight on his hands.

Once I decided that I wasn't leaving my log for the night, I decided to put my shoes back on. At that point I was actually pleased that my feet were bare, because I found that once I untied my shoe laces which had been hanging around my neck... that they were dry on the inside. I

actually smiled. I lit my lighter inside of them and held it there for as long as I could stand to, then I pulled them on as quickly as I could. There was no affect. I felt nothing on my feet by this time; it felt as though novacain had been shot into my legs. I started picturing myself as a paraplegic, stuck in a wheelchair for the rest of my life. Suddenly I wasn't so sure that I wanted to survive. I halted this train of thought at the platform, reminding myself that I wasn't going to make it anyway and I was only not drowning myself for show (suicide is for pussies).

Again I smoked. I had pulled my arms inside of my sweatshirt to try to preserve some measure of warmth and was smoking my cigarette without taking it out of my mouth. Once I was done with it I simply spit it out. Again I began shuttering uncontrollably. I dipped my face into my shirt and breathed hard, trying to warm that small space with my breath to no avail. I tried my lighter instead.

I basked momentarily in the heat of the flame until I burned my thumb and let the light go out. I considered rationing the fluid, but my immediate need overrode any logic that remained at my disposal. Again I lit the lighter... and again... and again. The rising heat from the tiny flickering flame warmed my face and neck. I smiled, a genuine childish smile. I pretended that once I lifted my head again that I would be somewhere dry, warm, and safe. I knew this wasn't true, so I lit the lighter again and again, trying hard to hang on to the small piece of hope and sanity that remained to me. I rocked back and forth trying to create some small measure of body heat with the motion. My entire world became what was inside of that sweatshirt with me; it extended no farther than four inches from my nose... and I was well pleased with my domain. Despair had disappeared as had thoughts of home, rescue or most anything else. I believe that I touched madness shortly after that; my lighter ran out of fluid.

The cold overtook me fast after that. Within an hour the only thing that I could feel in my legs was the pain in my joints from sitting cross-legged for so long. Had I not been ten hours without a drink of water, maybe I would have been able to cry. As ridiculous as it may sound, one must remember that this was flood water from a river that runs through suburban Chicago (maybe I was just lost in the suburbs but this story, if nothing else, should be proof that fatal stupidity can happen anywhere). I didn't dare drink from the river. I was perched atop a soggy log, water as far as the eye could see, and there's me drying out like a prune (water, water everywhere and not a drop to drink).

I went through my options once more and decided that I wasn't going to make it out of there on my own power before sunup, and I had long since given up on ever seeing the sun again. I began talking to God... begging him to end my suffering. I wasn't looking for angels to come from on high and whisk me away to warmth and safety. I was begging for death. It had become clear to me that survival was the smallest of possibilities, if it was still one at all... so if Death was going to come, could God not send him now?

Then my own words came back to me. I'd spent countless breaths on complaints about my life; its emptiness, its loneliness, the abandonment that I felt, the abuse that I'd endured; the lies, the hate, and the absolute lack of respite from everyday horrors that seemed to bombard me minute by minute some days. Life's little indignities that piled high time after time, until they came crashing down to bury me. There had been countless times that I had wished for death, and now that it confronted me, I wanted nothing to do with it. "I want to live!" I yelled "I still have too much to do with this fucking life! I refuse to die here! I WANT TO LIVE!"

I began to call out for help. I'm not sure what it was exactly that I was expecting... but that was my last logical option. By that point I was clenched up and curled as closely to into a ball as I could possibly get on my soggy stretcher. I called out until my throat was raw, and then I continued until my throat refused to cooperate any further. Consciousness left me shortly after my voice did.

I awoke to the graying sky of pre-dawn. It made me giddy. I had never thought that I would see the sun again. When I tried to sit up though, my happiness was tempered by reality. My joints had locked in my sleep. My torso (which had been, until I passed out, the only relatively dry part of my body) was soaked because my sweatshirt had wicked up the moisture from the log and now I was thoroughly soaked from head to toe.

With no small amount of effort I struggled to my feet clinging to the young tree that my bed was wedged against. The seeds of hope that had been planted at sunrise had sprouted into saplings as I gained my feet. My short survey of my surroundings however plowed them under. When I could see nothing that seemed promising I looked up instead and surveyed the treetops, determining that in the direction of the rising sun was where the tree line ended soonest. Unable to support my own weight, I clutched that tree, swaying and trying to clear my mind.

I tried to talk myself out of getting back into the water, tried to rationalize sitting longer on the log. It nearly worked too. My body was wracked and shuddering, my feet and legs were bruised and bloodied from wild runs from haven to haven. In mid-excuse I jumped back into the flood, neutralizing any further argument that I might present myself with.

Icy hands gripped my heart and lungs with a vise-like hold. The time for excuses and despair, regret and self-recrimination was over. The only haven that I wanted now was dry ground and it was all that I could accept. Gasping for breath and clinging to consciousness, I pushed through chest deep water with no real hope in sight, only the rapidly thinning tree tops urged me on. My legs grew heavier as my blood flow slowed to a trickle and my nerve endings shut down. Failure was no longer an option; Death had showed up to take me home but I refused to be escorted. I fought through another two hundred yards or so of flood plain before finally breaking the tree line. There at long last, was dry ground. Between me and salvation however, was another twenty yards of flooding and then the river itself.

Suddenly it made sense. I hadn't been able to back away from the flooded bank of the river because I had come to within a mile of an almost ninety degree bend in its path. Rather than flooding directly out from the bank, the elbow that had been created by the bend in the river had been flooded diagonally across, creating several square miles of flood which I had spent the night wandering through.

I saved my self-loathing for when I could feel my feet again and pushed on, feeling the residual flow of the river's current beginning to take hold of the waters all around me. Step by step the water became colder and deeper until it was shoulder depth and I was standing, presumably, at the dry season bank of the river.

I took another step and lost my footing. I found that the river right at the bank had risen to be somewhere in the neighborhood of ten feet deep. I sucked my first lungful of water and back-pedaled quickly. New vigor came into me as Death reminded me that I wasn't the only one that was fighting for what they wanted that morning. I struggled

furiously to find the surface again and once I regained it I made sure to remind myself aloud of how stupid that had been.

I was visibly rattled as panic began to overtake me again. I plunged forward face first, attempting a freestyle stroke to make my crossing. Immediately I was pulled under by the flood-swollen strength of the current and pushed downstream. In a scramble I managed to make it back to the near bank of the river, about fifteen feet downstream of where I had initially attempted to cross. I half-caught my breath and before logic could interject, I tried again. This time I floated on my back, fighting the current, trying to make a direct crossing. Again my hastiness was obliged with a dunking, this one somewhat longer, which deposited me again on the near bank of the river, but downstream another twenty-five or thirty feet.

It took considerably longer to regain my breath that time. The numbness in my feet and legs was spreading now, as I had been fully submerged for the better part of an hour. Steely hands clamped down on my lungs, allowing me only short and shallow breaths. I could feel the pulse in my neck, fast but feeble. At that point I began to worry that I had gotten as close as I was going to, to success, to warmth and dryness, to life; and once more the thought that the end was upon me gave me the strength to go on. I wouldn't let it end with me clinging to a tree on the bank of a flooded river with salvation in sight. If I was going to die there, I wanted it to be a drowning in the undertow, or maybe my heart would give out from the exertion of fighting the river. With the state that I was in neither would have surprised me.

At that point in the river, it was maybe twenty feet to the other bank. Twenty feet of cold, green tinted, mean spirited hell. So once more, I let my legs go out from under me and, holding to another submerged tree, I aimed my head at the far bank of the river. I just

floated there for a minute, my body all but completely numb, staring up at the sky. My ears were submerged and all that I could hear was the rushing of the water all around me. The sky was so blue. Shreds of cloud ambled across the expanse; birds chased one another in high wide circles. How could I have thought of letting all this go?

I pushed off from the tree. I let myself drift downstream, kicking every few seconds to send me in the right direction. Fighting the river had been useless. Rather, I worked with it. I let the current do most of the work, only exerting enough energy to steer myself across as well as down the river. I made a crossing of over a hundred feet to get to the far bank, and once I did, I dragged myself up the bank and struggled to my feet, staggering as I got them set firmly between me and the ground. I stood up as straight as I could and then visibly sagged in my shoes. I had made it; but at what cost?

I didn't have the heart or the strength to take off my shoes or roll up my pant legs to examine the condition of my battered legs. I shuddered violently. I despaired to think of the rest of the journey home; ten or twelve more miles of urban and suburban sidewalks and streets. I wasn't sure that I'd even make it another ten or twelve feet. I looked over my shoulder at what, only minutes ago I had thought would be my watery grave and smiled. It probably looked like a half-hearted smile, but it came from the deepest well of emotion that I had left to offer.

I almost felt gratitude; to the forest and the river, to the water itself. It had given me back my life, a life that I had long since given up on. It reminded me that the struggle is the stuff that life is made of; without it, sometimes we have nothing. It reminded me that the struggle is the glory of life and to give in means to give up that life (although not always necessarily in a literal sense). Those realizations

fortified me. They allowed me to muster the little strength that still remained in my body for the final push home. I stood straight, affixed a determined expression to my face and marched out of the trees.

Me Without Makeup

Jerene-Elise Nall

The First Time You See Me Without Makeup is a special time. It is a ceremony, a point of reference in the timeline of Us. It is something that must happen almost naturally, almost by chance, or at least, that is what it must appear to you as— to me, it is something that has taken weeks of mental preparation, training, and the use of subliminal messages on tape while I sleep.

Preparing for the first makeupless encounter actually takes more time than preparing for the prepared encounter, generally speaking. Throwing a face together takes, oh, about five minutes, ten tops. Fighting the urge to scrutinize every blotch and bump and later correct them takes much longer. I stare at the makeup, it stares at me, and I twitch with the desire to apply it to my imperfect face. It will not cover everything, but it will cover some of the bad, and then I feel like you'll like me— or that it'd be easier to, at least.

But then comes the fateful Late-Night Encounter. The Sleepover, the I'm-Upset-About-Such-and-Such-May-I-Please-Drop-By night. And if I made myself up before any of the above situations, how would I look? Silly, vain, overdone. You would no longer respect or want me, we would most certainly break up. So, I must arrive au-natural, in my full, blemished splendor. I must arrive in my extra-large tee shirt, in my plaid boxer shorts, with my hair in an almost-mess. The moment must be perfectly imperfect.

I usually get very nervous before the first makeupless encounter. My palms sweat. My mind races to places I wish it wouldn't go. I

overanalyze, I pick and squirm. But, it must be done, of course. It is one of your tests. I may not be in love with you yet, and you probably aren't in love with me, but this moment could be a deciding factor in the possibility of love. If you can look at me and say the things you would say to me under more polished circumstances and kiss me the same way, I could probably love you. If not, this will never work, and I will walk away immediately and stop wasting my time and yours.

I am good at picking up on the subtle differences in the way your eyes move, and the way the muscles in your face relax or tense in response to me. I have been through this enough times to consider myself an expert. You are a new face, a new body, a new personality, but you are essentially no different than the others until I am able to gauge and then calculate your response to my imperfections, which I lay out as a sort of offering. Take them or leave them, they are who I am, they silently define me in ways that my actions and words cannot. This is when I lay my weapons at your feet and stand with empty palms open. I am laid bare, hoping you are able to find the beauty in my surrender.

Over and over again, I have been disappointed. Men prefer the pore-less, plasticized face, with bumps and scars smoothed over and eyes defined by liner instead of by life. Though they never admit it, the unspoken language of their faces says more than their inarticulate mouths ever could. Nevertheless, I refuse to give up, and for you, I have nothing but the highest hopes. You are genuine, you are intelligent.

You strike me as the type of person that finds beauty in the rough alluring. So, I will test you, and hope that you pass. I will not settle for another who does not. I only wish to be appreciated as the speckled, scarred and messy work of art that I am.

Learning to Escape

Tyler Hicks

The box was in the corner of the room. Had I not seen it move I don't think I would have known where Kenneth was. As I moved closer I could see a small opening where the cardboard flaps didn't quite meet. Expecting to see a set of small eyes peeking out at me, I was surprised to see only darkness. I could hear him though; muffled whimpers and cries betraying his goal of complete isolation. Were it up to him, my guess is the smallish 12-year-old would have had me focus on his statements just minutes earlier rather than the sobs coming from a large packing box in the corner of his dormitory style room.

"Fuck you! Fuck you all... Hahaha," he had screamed.

"Bitch... bitch... son of a bitch... TJ's a bitch!" the last part said under his breath, yet just loud enough that he knew I was the only one that could hear it.

Ten minutes after his outburst of profanity-laced declarations, I sat on the corner of his bed, staring at a box that I knew was full of disturbed adolescent, having been told to "deal with him." Looking up at posters of cars and Kenneth's drawings tacked to the wall up above the bed, I was not quite sure I could deal with this one week into my new job. All I knew about Kenneth was that he liked to scream cuss words and that he had apparently stolen his grandma's truck and taken it on a joyride around a small Iowa town. I certainly didn't want to screw up this kid more. How in the world was I supposed to relate to him?

My own "box" was a bit bigger than Kenneth's, and provided the complete privacy that I thought I wanted and needed at the time. At twenty-four years old the upstairs bedroom in my parent's house had become a hiding place. Originally supposed to be somewhere I could stay while I got "back on my feet" after finishing my degree and returning from an ill-fated trip to the Virgin Islands, the bedroom had morphed along with my illness into a den of isolation and avoidance.

I had used duct tape that I had managed to dig out of one of the boxes filled with my possessions to stick bed sheets in front of the windows as makeshift curtains. This allowed me to sleep well into the early afternoon without having to face the light of day. Junk food bags and wrappers littered the floor, desk, and dresser, along with pop cans, dishes, silverware, and a growing pile of laundry. Upon moving in I had lugged my large TV up into the room and managed to connect the cable line, providing a distraction and escape from my thoughts and life. I had also set up my computer from college and was able to connect to the Web. I found myself unable or unwilling to try to connect to the outside world, however, and Internet porn, similar to television, can only provide a distraction for so long.

Several weeks into my seclusion I remember looking at my cell phone as I let another call come in without picking it up. Twenty-eight voicemails. Twenty-eight. And I had not returned a single one. It didn't matter though, because at the time I truly believed that I was not worth

caring about, that no one would seriously want to speak to me about something.

Sleeping and crying took up the vast majority of my time. I probably slept about twelve to fifteen hours a day on average, and remember wishing that I could somehow force myself to sleep more. For whatever reason though, I never seriously considered suicide. I certainly thought about it on occasion, but not often. Why I didn't enter that realm of possibility often puzzles me. Perhaps I didn't want to hurt my family and those who loved me. The strange thing is that I was already putting them through absolute hell.

Hopelessness, fear, and guilt are probably the three best words to describe what I was going through at the time. There truly is no light at the end of the tunnel. I could not see myself being successful in any way. Worse yet, if I actually convinced myself to think about what it would be like to be a teacher or a writer, I'd immediately think of how far off and impossible that goal actually was. Because of the guilt I was feeling, I could barely say a word to my parents without immediately breaking down into tears. On a trip down to the kitchen to get food one day my mom asked me to try and explain how I was feeling and I actually managed to pour out some of my self-loathing.

"I have no money, no car, no job, no home, and no girlfriend... even if I could stop feeling like this, I have absolutely nothing."

And honestly, I think that is the biggest struggle for me in overcoming my depression – realizing just how self-absorbed and self-centered I had allowed myself to become. I think this is why people who haven't struggled with mental illness have a hard time relating to and understanding it. Not only can the people they see struggling not simply "snap out of it," they often appear to not care about anything or

anyone but themselves and their own problems, something for which great amounts of sympathy aren't often reserved.

I like to tell people that it was the pill that made me better, that brought me back to "normal." Ultimately, it is what keeps my balanced on a daily basis. But I needed more to dig out of the black hole I'd dug myself into, to escape my own cardboard box. The "more" turned out to be waiting in one of those twenty-eight phone messages. A friend from high school had recently been hired in human resources at a local treatment center that helps out kids who have serious behavioral and psychological problems.

"Hey TJ It's Deanne. I heard you were back in town and am wondering if you were looking for work. I know you like working with kids, and thought you'd be great as a treatment counselor in one of our residential houses. Give me a call if you are interested."

And so I sat with Kenneth, not knowing exactly what to do, listening to him cry. The first week had not been easy. The kids screamed, they swore, they punched and kicked. Reading through their histories and hearing about the backgrounds of abuse and other problems often made me feel sick to the point that I'd actually run to the bathroom. I was still feeling sorry for myself and this was all too much. But slowly I realized there was less time for crying, less time for pondering my own hopeless existence. Twelve children were now depending on me in some way. Sure, I was new and there were other counselors to help out, but only a week in I was now supposed to know exactly how to "deal with" Kenneth?

I think he thought I'd be mad, thought I'd be so mad he yelled and cussed and retreated to his room that I'd hold him down and hit him. For this is what he had become used to in the past. I was later

told that he was “testing me,” seeing how trustworthy I was. I didn’t have time to think about myself – all I wanted to do was make this kid feel better.

“Kleenex?” I said. There was a pause. A small hand slowly crept through the gap in the box, taking the tissue.

“Thanks.”

Thirty minutes later we were sitting with the other kids and the counselors eating peanut butter and jelly sandwiches for dinner. Life went on for both of us.

My Cardboard Memory

Jerene-Elise Nall

I had a box of the objects that my mother left behind.

It was cardboard, and I had covered it in red glitter and rhinestones—an art project I had been coerced into doing at a day camp for children who had lost their loved ones to cancer. It was childish, created by a six-year-old me. It was confused, covered in tempera paint bright and thick. It was not grieving. It didn't mean anything.

Inside the box, objects that I was able to pilfer and scrounge were thrown together in a meaningless pile created by my young and doubting hands: a photo of my mother holding an infant me—both of us barefaced, dark-haired, straight after my birth; a necklace that I had never seen her wear; a broken silver watch with a long-dead battery that had been small enough for her thin, delicate wrist. A piece of lined paper with a random sampling of her handwriting in blue ink. I loved to stare at it— not reading the sentences, just taking in her precise handwriting, her capital letters and commas, her spacing in between words.

The eyelash curler, gold with black rubber pads, fascinated me. It was the object that I held the most, that I tinkered with and clutched on those afternoons I felt something like grief. As a very young child, I had seen her use it many times as her reflection smiled at me through her bedroom mirror, applying just enough makeup, never too much, to her naturally beautiful face. It was familiar to me. It was— or, had been— part of my mother's daily ritual. This gold eyelash curler had framed her brown eyes, she had grasped it with her cool hands, and

I missed watching her live, watching her doing even such a mundane task as putting herself together.

Without knowing it, I grieved over my haphazard collection of my shattered mother. I stared blankly, I grabbed each tangible piece of her from that awkward cardboard box and I wished that she could see and hear me but never believed that she could. I remembered her; I wanted her back but knew nothing could change the facts of her slow and crumbling death.

I had watched her waste away. In various hospitals and nursing homes she lay stubbornly, not willing to die but knowing she would. She couldn't eat, she shriveled, she went deaf. Her beautiful long hair fell out in clumps and was washed down stainless steel drains and vacuumed up by night janitors. Her curves deflated, and her skin stretched tightly over her withering, increasingly sharp frame like a deerskin drum. She became a pale yellow shell. But somehow, even as she lay on a white hospital bed cradled in pain and the cancer ate her organs, she managed to smile at her six-year-old daughter who had come for a visit— maybe the last— dumbfounded, walking shyly behind her ten-year-old brother, and holding her father's hand and feeling his despair but never really knowing it.

The watch. The photo. The necklace. The piece of lined paper. The eyelash curler. They didn't fully make sense, didn't add up to any meaningful sum. I would pick up each object, trying to make sense of things. I would twist each object around in my tiny pink hands

reverently. The necklace became a rosary, the lined paper a Bible, the eyelash curler a golden crucifix. But, they were only material goods. They couldn't actually capture any important piece of her. They couldn't begin to rebuild her. She had touched them, but they weren't her.

So, over time, the collection disassembled. Its pieces dispersed into dresser drawers and got stuck in between pages of books. It slowly disintegrated. And the box lost its top, and the box was discarded.

And now, years later, I am thinking about that collection. Where did I put my pieces? They are shoved into some corner of my cardboard memory. They glow and float and can't be grasped anymore. I was a mouse, hoarding her memory, gnawing on her belongings; and now, my memory is an ocean, and those glowing, faraway objects are glittering treasure sunken among seaweed, waiting for a day when I am able to hold my breath long enough to swim down and grasp them again.

“and her body is cold
and her mind is a
shimmering diamond

— Jerene-Elise Nall, *Cracked Sugar*

poetry

That Summer in Grad School I Worked in a Fast Food Kitchen

**editor's choice*

Matt Maletz

I realized that sometimes academics go too far in their analyses.
Take, *exempli gratia*, Dave, whose task it
was to refill the horseradish at night
once the sallow drone of privileged preteen prattle had passed—
a job he accomplished with alacrity,
determined hand, and squinted face.

He was just a typically bored sixteen-year-old brat
with a mean streak, bad acne, and a severe case of virginity
but I'm sure one day someone with a Ph.D. will write that
he was engaged in an act of everyday resistance

against a hegemonic regime employing
obliquely coercive labor practices
while pursuing the continuation of the conformist ideal
(in keeping with the teleological paradigm of the day)
when he jerked off into that branded plastic jar.

Maybe it's just my weak mind's habit of simplifying
the bewildering complexity of early-twenty-first-century suburbia
but it seems to me kids like Dave are out
to prove something to somebody,
just what and to whom we've all lost the
eloquence and experience to express.

And so, unlikely as it may seem, Dave and his co-workers,
with their ovine sensibility and bovine countenance,
may one day prove worthy subjects of historical inquiry
insofar as they exemplify a generation without remorse or culpability
or purpose.

And This is Where the Child was Born, -Ladies Please

Anne Marie Stickse

Chewing red in a mouth of red and white,
It was cold, and when it turned to me
I asked, is this a horse? Are you a horse?
And nothing came from it but breathing.

A wing swept the floor of the stable
With a sound like dry paper, dry skin, my skin.
Warmth and wet touched the side of my leg.
I did not wish for the light then.

Still, I stayed until the sun came
And turned to torch the top of every tree and hill,
And I saw not a horse, not anything
But a bird, a bird, a bird and a bird:
Only one of which was moving.

It is an angry god that brings the day -
And with it the things we do not want to see.
It is what carried the cotton light of dawn
From the empty width of not-an-animal
To the gray breast of a dead pigeon.

Cracked Sugar

Jerene-Elise Nall

hungry, she sits
licking her lips in
the back bedroom

(her tears will continue
to erode the crumbling
rock candy exterior of
her sickened form)

and her body is cold
and her mind is a
shimmering diamond

("love me already,"
she thinks, but this
isn't love and never
could be)

he will take what he
needs and her splintered,
sugary pieces will disperse

Four Daughters Later

Allison Mass

In the corner
Glasses fit into his face and fuzz pokes out his ears.
He holds his Captain's Choice in a stout glass
as family gathers and
Life dances in front of him—his choreography.
He likes to watch from the corner sometimes
But he always leads the prayer.

Welcome, Rows of Teeth

Anne Marie Stickel

Eres conquistador.

An infection spreading as the day itself spreads
to cyclists at summer dawn.

El tamborilero,

dead fingernails, bone rattles in the bowl turn red
the rabid mouths on the lawn.

Y telepatía

by other means, a leaf in conversation's bed,
curtains, without windows, drawn.

To Smithereens

Jerene-Elise Nall

i soap and soak, coax
pain from my pores
but this baptism coats
me only with a thin
layer of my own filth
and decomposing hopes

so the battle wounds carved
by anxious sharp teeth
still pit and sting my tongue
and the insides of my cheeks

and like a lonely parakeet
who preens until she bleeds
i still gnaw my fingers
to bits and bite my lips
to smithereens

Wishes

Kyle Christensen

Treat my ears
like
a birthday cake.

When I turn out the lights,
blow your wishes across them.

And then
nibble
until your hungers are satisfied.

Arizona Snow

Byron Olson

Invisible ivory
fingers, against

bone backdrop.
Collapse and

crumble, you're made
of Arizona snow.

The storm's
rare, expired

warmth;
a tarnished,

musky veil amid
the citrus

breeze. Melt,
but leave

no water in
my glass. Just

let eggshell
feathers

descend, become
Arizona snow.

Record of a Brief, One-Sided Love Affair with a Girl I Saw Once on the Bus

Kari Castor

The girl on the bus has red wine hair
sand dune breasts
and mermaid eyes
and I recognize her like the Rapture.
I memorize every detail
cling to the rich brocade of the moment
and this girl with the blue river
of ribbon woven into merlot hair—
intoxicating hair, I want to drink it in,
pull corking bobby pins,
watch it spill like the Eucharist
across white sand skin.
Instead I sit urgently still,
silent, fossilized—
parched.

Excitement that the Dreams may be True

Allison Mass

To not write after that would be to not cross
my arms right over left or legs left over right
In a turning, spinning world
Where leaves skid across pavement
And treetops bend
Head turning, calling out into the wind
Teeth clenched
Both hands
Gripping hold of myself
The fear of losing this steadfast clutch if
Dangling, stretching, reaching
Out to take hold of another's
But like snow that falls in spring
Words misspoken but understood
I find myself in v-formation
It was not until I found what I was looking for
That I knew I was looking
As short as it may be and as
long as it may grow

As the geese know the direction
and not the destination
This is right.
Stare at the word
comfort
Stare at the word
certainty
Still I run like
A child to the wave
And back like
A child from the wave
But this is right.
And never
Head turning, calling out into the wind
Never
Would I have expected in
This place
This right
Never

And this is right.
Still I back away like
A thoroughbred with ears raised forward
The geese do not make their trip in one day
And
in
v-formation
I am moving.
Never
Never would I have thought
This right
Never
In another person
And sealed with the lightness of that touch
I felt my feet firmly plant in the path

And that
for me
Is flying.

The Second City

Devin Dion

Chicago,
you don't scare me like you used to.

Your long, lake shore arms screaming
across such posh palaces
while nightmares nest in the many pockets
where the sun can't poke through.

You had regimens of restless soldiers
that seemed to stand as tall as the towers
they tumbled through with hair-splitting looks
that all end with the same anonymous animosity.

I don't need nightlight safety
to walk on your frozen rivers of concrete and
the nickel-dime dances in the cups
of lost souls now play
like idle symphonies in the background.

Chicago,
you aren't the graveyard I'd hate to die alone in.

You're history exposed and mapped out
in checkerboard hide and seek.

I feel the electricity that smothers the lungs
in thick light pollution
between bars and empty alleys,
kickstarting my heart like a kiss of adrenaline.

I want to watch your mascara run
as you tell,
broken down,
that love is a wildfire you never get back
cascading in a dreamless sleep that leaves you...
but not really.

Chicago,
I missed you with firefly ferocity
that only five year olds feel.
So hold me in your skyline hands and I'll swear
to swirl this smog
into a song.

A Letter to You (From a Man Who Moved Out West)

Jessica Larson

times were simpler
then, my darling dear.
you were one of seven
children. you were
fair, plain but
pretty—soft-spoken,
you looked at me across
the train tracks
with those lovely
coquettish eyes. you
were a vision in
blue gingham plaid.

we shared but one dance,
that late summer night;
restless, we happened
upon the same clearing.
you were much more
beautiful and much more
brave than i ever imagined.
i took your hand and we
danced beneath the wide
open, star-filled sky

(to the rhythm of crickets
and rustling leaves.)

that was the last time
i saw you. the road took
me westward, to search
for the dream among the
canyons and peaks. (do
you remember?) i think
of you often, those
lovely eyes lit up with
fireflies, the pale
glow of the moon.

(i wish i could have known
you better, my darling dear.)

Two Cents

Kim Ruel

I stumbled upon your anguished eyes,
protruding from a lonely crevasse—
lifted you from somber dirt,
and made you one with a vagabond keeper.

You were one

Saw unmoved eyes blank in reflection,
no movement could break your infrangible frame.
Face posed as if an everlasting still picture,
your only visible hue the rusted hope.

A colorful turn

Took you past the sapphire lake
where time had only nodded to us.
Wanted to release you into blueberry skin,
but looked into those anguished eyes—
and I couldn't let you go.

A step ahead

I let you bathe in indigo—
saturate in its cleansing hands.
And lifted you from its nourishing womb,

revealing your copper vibrance.

Almost transformed

But at your peak you stumbled—
Your bronze skin turned to brown,
relapsing into a coat of despair—
that smothers the hope that lightened your eyes
and made your picture dark again.

Self-reflection

Dirt-filled nails scraped you up,
and you slept atop golden finger beds—
of a keeper whose crystal eyes painted the sky
and looked to the sweet fire brilliance.

To hopeful realization

The sun's reflection danced on your face,
and those anguished eyes turned a radiant glow.
Your picture of promise illuminated my hand,
kissing my palm as we traveled ahead—
and we made one with the emerald path.

We were one

Ninety-One Pages

Byron Olson

For every year in the Doctor's age,
There lies more knowledge than I comprehend,
More sorrow than I could ever gauge.
I wonder when he'll meet his end.

To his research he still does attend.
His life spent in work, his hair: faded grays.
What I would give to have a poem penned
For every year in the Doctor's age.

Five years ago, still teenage,
Into his laboratory, I did descend.
Within every rusty chicken cage,
There lies more knowledge than I comprehend.

His dying wife, his only friend.
Her fading mind he tries to assuage.
I see in his eyes something I cannot mend:
More sorrow than I could ever gauge.

I still work for him, still minimum wage,
And his efforts, yes, I do commend.
Yet when I look at this geriatric sage,
I wonder when he'll meet his end.

To the Doctor, my thanks, I do extend,
For telling me the story of all his days,
For being someone on whom I can depend.
I promised him I would write a page
For every year.

““ He was a man, not devoid of mistakes
but free of his father's sins.

— Devin Dion, *Himself*

fiction

**editor's choice*

Himself

Devin Dion

Cal looked quietly content at his grandchildren who were not really his grandchildren. They were him. Three boys chattered in loose change clamor beneath him, playing with transforming action figures. They rolled them about, making a ruckus of strange robotic noise: beeps, bleeps then vrooms and halting to a stop. They clenched their teeth together and churned out a crunch of sounds while they turned their toys into other things. Cal took his aged eyes away from the puzzle posted on the screen and tired to understand their game as Clark and Carl battled with a black and a red figurine.

"Oh nooooooooooooo..." Clark moaned as the figure's voice.

"Yes, I will stop you! Ha ha ha!" Carl responded with his best deep voice. Cal simply smiled and ceased his attempt at understanding. He relaxed back in the leather couch, cradled like a thick fog that folded to his thin legs. The boys bumbled, pushing plastic gun accessories into their toys. They were identical in appearance but behaved defiantly different. Clark was passive and placed last in the family, the youngest of the three. He willingly played the sidekick always wanting to be on the same team with his brothers, not in opposition. Carl never shared Clark's submissive nature. He was quick to frustration when anyone confused him with one of his brothers. There was a fierce independence to him, a feistiness Cal never had as a kid. He wondered if he looked like them at their age. He must have, he supposed, what else could he have looked like?

Clark suddenly glanced at his grandfather. Carl continued relentlessly smashing his toy atop of Clark's. The oldest of the trio, Cal III, got up, and upon looking at the clock, ran upstairs shouting that some television program was on. Carl let go of his assault and followed suit as Clark stayed his stare at Cal. The soft fog he sat on grew cold and uncomfortable until he shifted. Capillaries rushed with blood, and his ear pulsed with awkward silence. The child's eyes gazed at him with some impenetrable knowledge, which prompted Cal to ask slowly,

"What's, uh, wrong, Clark?"

"Can I ask a question, Grandpa?" Clark queried.

There was an unsettled subtlety somewhere in the intonation, a piercing honesty in what he was about to ask. Cal felt a blanket anxiety when he spoke, unsure whether to agree to such a thing. Children often inquire the most profoundly simple and simply profound questions adults fail to answer appropriately.

"What is it?" Cal asked, preparing for any possible question.

"Where do babies come from?"

Cal chuckled slightly.

His cheeks cooled as he considered how exactly to start. There was always the easy excuse of the mythical stork which would solve the situation with no complication. Or avoid it and push his father into the position of answering it, but he wanted to be honest with the boy, even if he didn't fully comprehend all he told. So Cal began in the beginning.

"Well, a long time ago; before you or your father and even before me, people gave birth; uh, they made babies differently."

"How did they do that?" Clark interrupted.

"Well," Cal continued, choosing his words carefully, "a mommy and daddy, when they were ready...would decide they wanted a child and, uh, they would..."

Make love? Have sexual intercourse? There were many idioms and expressions for it, but any one of them he would have to explain as well.

"They would," he went on in uncomfortable fragments, Clark sat poised and silent, "go to bed. Then they would take a part of the father and...put it in the mother and it would grow inside her."

"Like a marshmallow in a microwave?" Clark chimed in. Cal coughed a jarring laugh.

"Yes, like a marshmallow. But the marshmallow was a baby."

"There were babies inside the mommy?" Clark spoke amazed.

"Yes and when they were ready, they would come out and be born."

"So babies come from mommies' insides?"

"Well, no, they used to but not anymore."

"Where do they come from now?"

"Today all babies are clones."

"Cl-ones...?" Clark repeated slowly.

"Clones." Cal reiterated.

Clark was clueless about the word that came from his mouth like a foreign tongue. Cal tried to clear the confusion

"Cloning," Cal explained, "is when a scientist takes a small part of you and makes a copy." When that slipped out something flared in the boy and a lightning bolt blow flew in his eye. He should have fooled him with the fairy tale stork and left it to the child's father. There was no going back; he could only press on and attempt to calm him.

"Your dad," Cal continued, "Cal Jr., is my copy that Grandma Jessica and I raised. And you and your brothers are copies of your father."

"If I'm a copy," Clark started, trying hard to grasp such abstract concepts, "then how come I'm not as old as Daddy?"

Cal stopped. Again he knew the answer but explaining it was another obstacle entirely.

"Because...well, they only copy one part of him."

Cal was now patching fiction to fact as the subject began to make him uncomfortable, trying to find an end to the onslaught of inquiries.

"They copy that part," Cal resumed, "and that grows into a grown-up."

He smiled with a content satisfaction in the answer but the topic had twisted a splinter in his mind which often stung him. Unlike most children of his age, Cal was born completely naturally. It was an art on the edge of extinction with few doctors equipped to deal with it. Natural births drew the same stares as carnies, handled like a handicap and constantly poked with inadequacy. Cal recalled the dinners detonated with the bickering of his parents about how awful the nation had become, throwing phrases like 'morally bankrupt,' 'unscrupulously narcissistic' and 'unbearably egotistical.' They were words he learned at a young age, despite their grandeur. He specifically remembered one of his father's cynical rants: "It's that damn Hollywood!" he would rage.

As far as Cal could understand, cloning had not always been possible, quite the opposite. But some time after the turn of the century, cloning showered the country in popularity. Politics and public protests prevented it for years, until the taboo of it was toppled. The rich afforded it first, making miniature mirrors of their self-obsessed selves and 'that damn Hollywood' created it a status symbol. Celebrities held the wealth and prestige to supersede all the costs of cloning with enough vanity to make it the next necessary accessory. They preached all the benefits of cloning: pain-free births; anyone could use cloning, single, gay, or otherwise; and those taken by death were not lost. The liberal middle-class followed in throngs into the laboratories, each eager to brag they had a clone. Over time it became more affordable to the entire public, becoming a commonality among

all, save for the poverty stricken. Sexual contraceptives were almost entirely effective but most opted to have an operation preventing any accidents which might lead to an uncomfortable disgrace.

Sex was liberated from any anxiety, an addictive opium with an after-effect. Cal could never understand his parent's hatred for cloning; he only remembered being the brunt of the ostracizing. He submitted easily to society, perhaps out of spite or a desire to spare his son from the names he knew. His wife, Jessica, and he spoke of it for some months, both agreeing to undergo the procedure together. They had 'twins' of sorts, Cal Jr. and Jessie. Junior shared Carl's rambunctious behavior but Jessie was divine. From her youngest years she was polished with beauty which never truly tarnished. Cal watched meticulously as she blossomed into a sublime sunflower, skipping the awkward teenage years, and always holding the attention of boys. He bore through those years with overbearing protection, occasionally wondering if his withering wife had such ample breasts at her age, such supple embrace as Jessie did.

He woke up in cold, hard sweats and would wander to Jessie's room to watch her in the darkness then he would go to the bathroom. She would complain to her mother about lost underwear and Cal's cheeks would swell with heat. He held hugs too long with his daughter and would smell her. He would rub her perfume in his hands and let his mind meander corridors so dark the psyche often denies their existence. When Jessica died, a dam inside him erupted and barriers, which had long been ignored, became unbearable. His bed was quiet and chillingly lonely, never full, and always asking why one side didn't wrinkle with warmth. He still woke up in cold, hard sweats, which slid together with his tears crying for Jessica and Jessie.

His daughter rationalized his over affectionate actions as a reaction to losing his wife. She dismissed the kisses on the lips at age sixteen as nothing but fatherly love. But he sat too close on the couch to her, pinched her butt more than she would like, and still on occasion would she lose her underwear. Blood flowed through Cal, none of which he shared with Jessie. And she was young, so young and like his wife with her silky sides and soft skin. Her clothes squeezed her and poured beauty out of her pores, and at night, she slept soundly in her pajamas without underwear. Cal shifted uncomfortably once more on the couch thinking of how Jessie's hips swung back and forth while her butt winked seductively at him. The night he woke up drenched in a slush of sweat and tears. He walked over to Jessie room to watch her sleep. His cheeks beat as loud as his heartbeat. She was so young and beautiful.

Clark had resumed transforming his plastic figures, quietly content. Cal wanted to be honest with the boy, even if he didn't fully comprehend all he told. He wanted his grandsons to be better men than he, but they were him. Did they possess the same demons that slithered in Cal's veins? Would they succumb to the storms he had? They were good boys, perhaps without the imperfections imprisoned within him. Suddenly, there was a hard creeeeeeeeeee-eek and the screen door snapped on itself. Cal jerked in surprise at the spontaneity of the slam amongst the silence.

"Daddy's home!" Clark roared, which called the rest of his clan together. The three brothers came to their father's knees and clasped him, each trying to out-clench the other. Cal Jr. was flattered at the display of affection, but their grasps were so tight he felt his blood vessels constrict in his legs.

"Okay, okay, boys." Cal Jr. gave a smiling cringe, "Leggo, alright, hey you rascals!" He said playfully as they held on defiantly. He picked off the sons one by one, wrestling them down.

"I didn't expect you back so soon." Cal said, standing to meet his son.

"Yeah," Cal Jr. said, "I had lunch with Jessie, but she had to head out early. Thanks for picking up the boys and watching them."

"Sure, sure." Cal grinned delightfully. He missed raising children, being a parent, and being needed. He missed Jessica.

"Grandpa told me 'bout babies and clowns!" Clark shouted excitedly, his brothers laughing and pinned by their father.

"Clones." Cal corrected.

"I see," Cal Jr. said, releasing his sons. "You didn't have to." he got up, his voice shifting into a more distant tone. Carl made a churning sound effect and hunched, swinging his arms out, yelling;

"Rrrrrrrrrrr! I'm a griffin, now!"

"Me too! Me too!" Cal III piped in.

The boys ran after each other, scampering up the stairs to the quiet room which transformed into some deep cavern with the buried gold of their minds. Cal Jr. shook his head with a grin as he watched them. Bit by bit his face faded into a blank canvas stare that dissolved into a pensive gaze. The mechanics of his mind ticked and hummed and rolled with work loud enough to be heard.

"Whatever happened with you and Jessie?" Cal Jr. said abruptly, shattering the silence into broken glass. He stood there for a moment, without turning. Then with a slow methodical twist, he faced his father and repeated:

"Dad, what ever happened with you and Jessie? You guys never speak anymore."

The scene was a cold stare of a son looking hard into a placid pond of the future, distorted by the ripples and wrinkles of age. It was a portal in which the past could speak to the present and perhaps fix the mistakes, but in doing so alter destiny into indiscernible imagination. Cal swallowed. He could feel his Adam's apple fall from the tree of his throat then spring back to its position; his throat dry and unwilling.

"I guess..." Cal began.

Cal paused, looking at himself. There was a terrifying reality as he saw the face of a younger man: so much the same, and yet so different. He wanted to destroy him, rip him down, splash the pond into unrecognizable waves he could walk away from. His stomach churned like a supercharged engine on overdrive. Cogs spun madly and tore out of the sockets, ricocheting within him. The rising pressure pushed inside him as the burning flames of guilt singed internally. He wanted the shotgun of his stomach to explode and splatter himself onto a wild tapestry of truth. He wanted to take the dagger stares of his son and stab his eyes out so memory would stop repeating Jessie's seductive butt winking to him. He wanted the smell of his scorched internal flesh to overcome the scent of her lost panties and perfume. Cal Jr. stared closely at the internal torment, the torrents and tempests inside his father, waiting with open eyes for an answer.

"Dad?" He broke the silence of eternity once more. Cal wished he hadn't. He wanted the silence; it protected him, coddled him. It was over and done and nothing could be changed, he told himself, acknowledging it wouldn't alter anything. Cal smiled weakly and looked off to some veranda no one saw, maybe Jessica was waiting there.

"I guess people just change." Cal said peacefully, his body now cooling down from its critical mass. "There were some disagreements and misconceptions."

Cal Jr. gave a piercing glare that tried to unveil the truth hidden in his father. He blazed with disbelief and unattended anger. The searing glare burned into Cal as he looked to his veranda, too aware of the dryness of his eyes. He turned with a senile smile that was awarded in old age to dismiss all accusations as ignorance. Cal saw his son, and he saw himself at 39; and he saw an entirely different individual. He was a man, not devoid of mistakes but free of his father's sins. He thought about explaining it, not to come clean and clear his conscience but warn him in hopes of avoiding history's repetition. But Cal knew that before him was a better man, like some enlightened soul, benefiting from the lifetimes preceding him. Cal shoveled his secrets back into the sands of time and decided not to disturb the black waters of what was.

Cal stood alone for a long time.

He thought of Jessica and how her laughter broke into butterflies. How she always made the bed each morning. Nothing could replace her memory. Nothing could change what he had done. Finally, Cal Jr. turned away in frustration and walked through the kitchen.

"I'm sorry," Cal confessed to the vacant audience.

"I'm so sorry..."

creeeeeeeeeee-eek!

The screen door swung open violently then did a boomerang back, crashing into its frame. Little Clark came up to his grandfather and tugged on his shirt lightly. Cal looked down and saw himself again. So pure and so divinely innocent, an immaculate slate ready to become a man.

"Where did Daddy go?" Clark asked.

"He went for a walk." Cal spoke gravely, trying to hide his distress. "Why don't we give him some time alone?"

Cal knew his son would never become him and still sighed knowing there was no one else he could be. It was an endless struggle, an eternal cycle like rain. Perpetually ascending and exploding, gathering up, and condensing into clouds until they could no longer hold their tears. Rain is a pathetic fallacy of the sky sharing in human pain, full of cries and empathy. Like man, the water falls from heaven, speeding steadily on its course until it hits the world.

At its final impact, it is buried into the earth, nurturing life through death. Then slowly it rises again, returning to Grace to recollect itself as one. The showers fall indiscernibly different yet still unique. Clark was Cal and so was Carl and so was Cal III and so was Cal Jr. Each a separate storm, though barely noticeable, each fall learning anew. Cal hoped that Clark would never become him; he hoped Clark would learn from his father, or rather himself.

He was the same man watching again and again his life unfold. The past and the future ceased, only the present existed, containing all time and all periods of life. Cal knew his death would only be the end of a long fall to the earth. Then again he would return, slightly different, though indiscernibly.

Closed Doors

Eric Kappa

They eyed each other like they knew what could be, like they knew what would happen. Of course, they had no idea. One across a room from the other; they were magnets. A nudge here, a prod there, before you can snap your fingers they slam against each other, and stick. They sat alone, still, and eyeing. Outside, semi-trucks cut through the open air of the interstate with black puffs, leaving trails for others to follow. Other trucks off to haul something, for someone, to somewhere.

"Can I get you anything else, sir?" said a short, steady waitress, projecting a tired look on her face.

This time she knocked sharply at the table, "Sir, for the last time, will that be all?"

"Oh, um. I'm sorry," he said without taking his eyes off of the woman, his opposite, with a jangle against the saucer, "but, could I trouble you for another cup?"

"Yeah, sure thing," she said, dull and irritated, and returned with a full pot and placed it on the table, "that should last you 'til you leave... You know, you really should just go over there."

He suddenly glanced at the waitress and it nearly startled her, "Go over where? What's this, I only wanted one cup of coffee."

"Hun, I've played this game enough on my own, so you can't just close the door on me before I can squeeze in. Both you and that young

lady over there have been here for hours. I've poured you, on my count, nine cups of giddy-up, and there's no end in sight. At least she ate something... Now, either you're gonna sit there and keep drinking up, wishin' you'd of made a move, or just make one already. Maybe you'll wish that you wouldn't have, or maybe you'll be happy you did get off your ponderin' rump after all, but I..."

"Are you saying I should go talk to that girl over there?"

As if she were broadcasting to him the thoughts of the young woman, who watched their interaction closely, "What is it with some young fellas? Most you can't fend off with a chainsaw and cooties, but then those others that you wish would assert themselves just float through life belly-up, like dead fish. No, hun. I'm saying to stop thinkin' with your rear."

"Well, what should I say?"

"Sure, I'll just take a seat. Pour me a cup, dear, two lumps, if you please. You know, I do have other customers to serve; you've got to figure that much on your own. Besides, people are always sayin' somethin' like 'It's not what you say, it's what you do.'"

He sat there for another twenty minutes, indecisive and increasingly anxious. Needless to say, the caffeine did not help any. The young woman began shuffling with her coat, and some keys, and her purse, at which the young man tensed in fear. She arose, but placed the other

items neatly on the seat, still holding her purse. She was only going to the washroom, and that relieved him; though, he knew now what he would say.

Without her distracting presence abound, the siren she was, he noticed the setting he occupied all at once. There were about fifteen others in the humble and sad, old diner, not including the lean staff. The other vinyl booths, battered, had tears similar to the one he presently worsened with a wandering, nervous finger, with a mind autonomous from his own. Daylight escaped the space as the sun drove over the horizon in a crimson rush through the windows that faced the interstate, now much less busy with the bustling of life and its' many needs, wants, and in-betweens. The young man and the sun were one another; without that beautifully detached young woman, there was nothing for them to see, only, the sun did something about it.

In purgatory, he remembered that she was perfect in her uniqueness. She was his ideal of love, wrought from the intentionally hidden desires of his subconscious, buried to suppress the loss of hope associated with inevitable unlikelihood. Given the chance, he would do anything for her, and wanted to experience everything he could with her. The young man knew that his opinion of the young woman was at a perpetual peak; and, though they intrigued him, personal facts like what she did, where she was from, who she was, or that which she would become could never change his mind. He cared only to say his line, which he rehearsed obsessively, so he would not say one wrong word, and be shunned from some sort of secret society, for which she was doorkeeper. It was not a line in poor taste, but a line to define the feeling most die trying to attain, love. It would open her door to a true gentleman, so he could enter with a plea of emotion, in hope, no, need of her reciprocation.

A good deal of time had passed since the young woman entered the bathroom, so the young man began to wander in wonder. He thought, perhaps, she left without him noticing, but a quick scan to her booth showed her keys, "A coat you might leave behind," he murmured, then reasoned to himself, "but she would have to walk for miles to get anywhere civilized. She could hitchhike, but she didn't look the type."

He waited another ten minutes, and then gestured to the waitress from earlier. She laughed at him for remaining in self-imposed isolation, as she loosely described it, which he shrugged off politely. He explained that the woman had been in the restroom quite a while, and that he would appreciate it if she would go in, and check on her.

"She doesn't even have to know I sent you, you can just pop in and pop out. See, I'm afraid she left, and that I missed my chance. I think I really do like her."

"You certainly are one mighty mess in need of a tidyin'. Well, it seems like you don't plan on leavin' this alone, so there it is. I'll do it, but when it's done you better give me a few pretty pennies, and actually introduce yourself to the other one when she comes out."

He promised.

The waitress slowly strode to the ladies' room, each step an explosion in unison with his thundering heartbeat. The door creaked, in the face of what seemed to be utter silence, as it opened. The waitress, who had an innocent, girlish cuteness, despite being in her late-forties, disappeared as the door swung confidently closed. Three seconds more of silence, deeper still, passed, and then, the most shrill, violently beckoning scream had been was sounded. It was not over,

with its piercing, haunted ghastliness continued, as he reluctantly hurried into the room. He looked down onto the young woman, turned now an old girl. Life, blood were draining from her limp, coldly body, slouched body onto the greasy, checkered tile, as she occasionally flinched, moaning. The waitress, huddled in the corner weeping in hyperventilated shock, ricocheted drunkenly out of the room to call for medical attention.

The young man fell to his knees beside the old girl, and clenched her entirety. He looked into her eyes, glossed blue like cold steel, veiled with the cotton of fleeting life. As with the waitress, he, too, became overwhelmed with breathless gasps from tearing up quickly, like when he was a little boy.

Her gaze was a force of nature, with an inhuman loveliness in it. The woman reached up to him with her words, struggling, "What... took you so... long?"

"I was thinking of what to say, I'm so sorry, I can't help you. It's bad."

"...think of anything good?"

"Yeah," he felt guilty, but strangely comfortable with her in his embrace, "I was going to say to you, 'Hi, I'm Thomas. I'm depressed and self-destructive. I'm a doctor, but I mostly perform abortions. If you don't hate me after that last statement, I think you're very pretty, and want nothing else in the world than to get to know you.'"

He noticed that she laughed strangely at the mention of abortion. The laugh was her last bit of everything she once was, escaping. He

held her like the little note that she held in her hand, until he removed it. In the note, she said:

Two months ago. Something was taken, and something was given, unwanted. Today. I found out that I am pregnant, two months to the day. The bastard! He made me do this to myself. Made me do... things. I tried to leave, and he assaulted me. I left, but I couldn't forget. I started to get better, not much, but better. Then, today. I found out that I am pregnant, two months to the day. Life is but a curse to the good, an ever-present burden, and a gift to the evil, who take as they please, and do as they will.

Goodbye,

Annie Miller

Morality Tale

Michael Stanczak

My father once told me a story about the Devil. I remember him sitting beside my bed when I was young, leaning in conspiratorially and describing to me a village far away, in which the Devil wandered every night. He said the Devil used to hide and whisper into the ears of the townspeople. Fights broke out, and accusations were made, trusts were broken and murder was plotted. The village, he said, had fallen into the snare of the Devil's intrigues.

There was a secret meeting among the wise men in the village, in which it was decided that the fight against the Devil would be futile if allowed to continue as it was. The Devil, my father said, was ever in the company of his followers, and no one but those closest to his heart were allowed near him. It became clear that in order to make an attempt on the creature's life, the assassin would have to commit himself as a follower of the Enemy. It was a task for which none of the wise men were prepared. None were brave enough to volunteer their souls into the Devil's keeping.

A secret message was sent in secret among the villagers who could be trusted, : a call to anyone courageous enough to know the Devil's mind, and to pervade the contemplations of the Prince of Darkness. There was no guarantee that the volunteer would not, instead, lose his soul to the deceiver, and never return to the village. In fact, there was little hope that even the greatest of men could act as an agent of deception to the Devil himself, and keep his soul intact. He would

need to be a man clever enough to trick the demon, but pure enough to remain untainted in his presence: . A man who was truly good.

I had missed a spot shaving. Hopefully she would think it endearing, or at the very least not too repulsive. I stood in front of the mirror, toying with the collar on my shirt, unbuttoning, buttoning. I imagined a more casual appearance would be more attractive, but it would leave me feeling uneasy. I'm a formal dresser. There are few occasions I deem unworthy of an upstanding posture and a good suit. I decided to wear a vest over my shirt to put me more at ease. With any luck, she would think me artistic, rather than pretentious.

The time was 7:30. I was meeting her at 8:00. I quickly rearranged the decorations in my living room and straightened the picture frames. I removed the flowers from the refrigerator and placed them in a vase on the coffee table. Should we return to my apartment later I wanted to be comfortable, and I hoped she would be as soothed by order as I am. Of course, by the time we would return home, I would have a couple drinks in me. And she would too.

7:41. I intended to arrive slightly later than the scheduled time. Nonchalance is an attractive quality on first dates. It implies lack of commitment, confidence, and self-satisfaction. Aphrodisiacs to the modern humor. The less you seem willing to offer, the more others wish to gain from you. I hoped the rule would hold true in this case. I left the apartment.

It was a warm summer evening, a little humid, but pleasant. It was a night for driving with the windows open and breathing deeply. I made my way to the car and buckled in, careful not to wrinkle my vest. I considered rolling up my shirt sleeves, but decided against it. Perhaps a more uptight demeanor would induce her to initiate contact, to break the barrier of my projected timidity. If I could put her on the offensive conversationally, I knew I could win her trust. I couldn't come across too forward.

Over a month passed before the call was answered. The Devil's grasp extended, unheeded, into every household. His followers patrolled the streets and citizens were falling in with the demonic society. The wise men of the village met secretly, as often as they could, and in secret.

One night, as they were deliberating in the basement of one of the safe houses, they were interrupted by an old warrior, a man regarded by many in the village as a sort of father, a grave and decent man. He stepped quietly into the room and introduced himself as the answer to the call.

The wise men put him to the test in a meeting of tense judgment and mysterious ceremony, during which he proved himself capable in all areas. They examined his knowledge of the Scriptures, his ability to solve riddles, and even his ability to lie convincingly. how convincing he could be while lying. They saw that he had only lain with one woman, and that his wife. He was a good father, a good businessman, and had once been a formidable soldier. He seemed a pure and godly man, both clever and without sin, a snake and a dove.

And he was truly good.

The wise men took the steps necessary to present the old warrior to the Devil. They dressed him in sackcloth, and poured over his head the newly drawn blood of a lamb. God would understand. God would forgive.

They warned him against the Enemy's trickery, as the acts of the Evil One can seem good to those untrained in his ways. Soaked in blood, with head bowed and hands folded, the old warrior was sent out from the chambers of the wise men and into the streets of the town, a spectacle of humility and gruesome blasphemy. The villagers kept their peace as the once decent man penetrated the crowd of the Devil's followers, and requested entry into their midst.

Amy and I had worked at the library together for over a year now. She was stationed at the front desk, and I catalogued new acquisitions. We had little interaction at first, just the occasional light chat, goodbyes, and hellos. But as the year developed, we began to engage more often, and at a deeper level. I recognized her personable and trusting manner, her bright eyes, and her sweet nature. She was at once terribly attractive and terribly intimidating to me. I soon came to the realization that our acquaintance held a more profound meaning. She was perfect. I decided to ask her out.

I drove the speed limit all the way to her house, listening to Handel. After pulling into her driveway, I reached beneath the passenger seat and retrieved a plastic bag with copies of popular albums, scattering them across the back seat. I chose one at random and put it in the CD player, replacing the Handel in its proper case. I winced as my ears were suddenly berated with the discordant repetition and untrained vocalization of modern music. I would have to feign enjoyment. I didn't want to risk seeming too pompous by playing anything less recent than Elvis Presley.

I stepped out of the car and made my way through a row of well arranged flowers and greenery to the door of the house. I straightened my vest, quietly regretting that I had not worn a coat, and lightly rapped on the door. A crescendo of muffled steps neared the door, followed by the metallic click of the lock, and the turn of the knob.

I was surprised at how beautiful she looked. She had curled her hair, putting it up into a ponytail, exposing the perfect curve of her neck. She wore a red cardigan over a simple white dress that came just below the knees with a tantalizing lace at the bottom. A pair of elegant, black heels completed the outfit. She was an absolute picture of reserved sexuality and feminine sensibility. I wished I had worn my coat.

"Amy," I said, extending my hand. I hoped to project a sort of gentlemanly confidence over the anxiety that actually raged inside me. I needed a drink.

"Jacob." The way she said my name sent an unexpected flutter through my chest and into my pelvis. I felt myself redden. Her voice was so gentle and articulate, seductive to my old fashioned sensibility. She placed her hand in mine, so warm, so soft. I felt clumsy and knobby in comparison to her untainted femininity.

"I hope you're ready for a memorable evening," I stammered. The corner of my smile quivered slightly, and I hoped she didn't notice. I trusted my shyness and inexperience would come across as attractive, rather than immature and boyish. I realized I would be at a loss in terms of suave courtliness, and I would have to allow some of my actual feelings to rise to the surface. The truth of my emotion would be my charm. It was a dangerous necessity, and one that might jeopardize the night's success.

"Jacob, you look so nice tonight." She said, either unaware of my nervousness, or charmed by it. "I'll admit I was surprised when you asked me out. You don't seem like a dating sort of guy. At least, not at work."

I smiled. "I guess not. I suppose I get lost in what I'm doing."

She laughed, a floating, alluring sound. "Yea. I've noticed that." I tried laughing in return, hoping it seemed genuine as I opened the car door for her. She leaned in, promptly crossing her legs and folding her hands in her lap. She noticed me catch a glimpse of the curve of her thigh as I closed the door, and smiled to herself contentedly. Things were progressing well.

I climbed in and turned the key in the ignition. The radio switched on, and we were suddenly barraged by the inane musical accompaniment I had chosen for the ride to the restaurant. She began keeping time with the end of her foot.

"I like this!"

I forced a smile, resigning myself to the situation. We made small talk the entire way to the restaurant, as I regretted not desensitizing myself to this absurd music before tonight.

The Devil, my father used to say, is an individual who cannot be described. Suffice it to say that he is simultaneously terrifying and profanely beautiful. He is a seducer, a presence, a sickening tug at the pit of the stomach. The old warrior bowed his devotion to the Prince of Darkness, who stood behind a row of his most trusted followers, one of whom, the most precious and devoted, was cradled like a child in the demon's arms.

The Devil is a victim to vanity, and falls most readily into the hands of those who praise him. The old warrior worshipped at his feet and won the Devil's affections with words otherwise reserved for the Almighty. The creature spoke, whispering terrible, hypnotic words that seemed to play inside the old warrior's head; he smiled ing promises that would break the holiest of men. The followers blessed the old man's devotion, by which he so quickly gained the Devil's good will. But the old man was truly good, and was not deceived. The mission had begun.

We were seated as soon as we arrived. The restaurant to which I had taken took her to was one made famous by their romantic décor: low lighting and lace tablecloths. We were placed by the window, looking out into the moonlit street. Amy sighed contentedly, and a bit of my apprehension was alleviated. We were peacefully quiet until the server arrived and offered us the drink menus.

"Good evening." He said, and suggested a particular wine. I ordered a beer, assuming that a man acquainted with fine wines would make for an intimidating dinner date. She ordered a scotch. I gaped.

"I wouldn't expect you to be an advocate of fine whiskeys." I said, impressed.

She smiled devilishly. "I get around."

I recognized the subtext of the statement and returned the smile, attempting a sort of sexy, wry grin. I am guessing it came across more desperate than arousing, but she laughed anyway. Our drinks arrived.

"So, Jacob," she said, putting particular emphasis on my name. I was happy to see that she was already taking charge of the evening,

sparking conversation. She swirled the whiskey in the tumbler as I hungrily regretted ordering beer. "Tell me something about yourself." Common conversational tool. Ambiguous, but seemingly unselfish inquiry into another's affairs. I noted it as laziness, an unfortunate, but unforgivable flaw.

I hid my thoughts and replied amiably. "Well, as you may already know, I perform the ever so exciting job of cataloguing new acquisitions in our local library." She laughed, and the corners of her eyes crinkled. I felt myself melt a little. "But, outside of my life in the library," I continued, "I am an enthusiast of great literature, high society, and fine whiskeys, believe it or not."

"Quite the cultured gentleman." She was teasing. It aroused me slightly, and I diverted the conversation.

"And yourself? To what do you devote yourself when you're not at work?"

"Wow. That's a pretty fancy way of asking what I do for fun. I'm worried that I'm not gonna be able to keep up tonight." Shit. She was right. I would have to dilute my speech if I intended to create any sort of intimacy. I feared that I had already done too much damage and marked myself as a haughty prick. I would have to project a bit of vulnerability to retrieve the lost ground.

"Don't feel inadequate. I feel that way myself." I leaned in a bit. "I guess I'm just trying to impress you, Amy. I'm sorry."

She frowned. "Don't apologize. God, everyone feels that way on a first date. It's natural." She slipped her hand into mine, and I began to perspire. "Don't worry. I like you." She whispered confidentially.

I tried to collect myself. My heart was beating unnaturally fast, but I breathily managed a reply. "I like you too, Amy."

She withdrew her hand and smiled sweetly. Suddenly struck by how beautiful she was, I could not remove my gaze. I was becoming too attached, too revelatory. I needed to divert my attention, get a little drunk. I estimated that with a beer and two whiskeys in me by ten o'clock I would be able to go home and be detached enough to follow through. I could not betray myself too early. Too much was riding on my distance. We would all benefit if I could only get through the evening. She arranged the folds of her white dress on her lap. I wished I had worn my coat.

The way into the Devil's thoughts was one of intrigue, slow calculation, and flattery. The old warrior played constantly on the enemy's sense of vanity, using self-deprecation and adoring worship. It was a subtle courtship. The Devil requested tasks to be performed, undoubtedly meant to further taint his new follower's soul with sin. The old warrior was first asked to steal, cheat, and deceive; deeds he did without hesitation, never once forsaking his inner defense.

But soon the Devil's commands grew more awful and unthinkable. He was ordered to commit acts of atrocious violence and grotesque sacrifices. He became a hated figure in the village, a lost cause to all who hoped in his ability to overcome the Enemy. Blood was spilt at his hands. But he remained faithful, no act of evil casting a shadow over the light that was in his soul. He was truly good.

One day he was called into the Devil's company, a common occurrence for such a devoted follower. A loyal disciple was sleeping in the creature's arms. With a gruesome sneer, the Devil whispered his newest assignment. He said that there was a man in the village who

had been discovered as an agent against the Devil's rule, and the old warrior must send a message. His mission was not murder, but injury.

The warrior accepted the task without hesitation, and left immediately to carry out the task. His destination was a house in the village, but upon arriving, he realized that he was standing outside the home of one of the wise men.

Steeling himself against the pain of the act, he beat the man to within an inch of his life, and left him. Guilt filled his heart, but he knew that every awful task was a step closer to the Devil's heart. The Devil was slow to act, and slow to assign the most terrible of tests. Smaller sins gave way to greater evils, and the purest of hearts allowed the most terrible of concessions, with time.

We finished dinner and she invited me to her house. I obliged, attempting to hide my excitement at being so easily permitted into her trust. The mission would be much easier to execute outside of my own home. She kissed me on the cheek when I opened the car door for her, and it struck me suddenly how lonely she must have been. I pushed the thought from my mind. I had to keep my composure. Without the nonchalance, the cavalier aura, I am convinced I would not have gotten as far as I did.

I was a little drunk, but I managed to negotiate the roads without betraying how intoxicated I actually was. I knew it would be necessary to be a little inebriated, to lack judgment. She was looking out the window with a contented smile, dangling her shoe off her toes as she told me the directions to her house. I noticed a spark of excitement at my navel as we pulled into the driveway, an anticipatory arousal I had not felt before. She led me inside.

"Make yourself comfortable." She said as we entered, tossing her red cardigan on the sofa nearby. It made a significant contrast against the white fabric of the couch. I stood silently in the doorway as she disappeared into the kitchen. "Jacob, would you like a drink?"

"Scotch, if you've got any." I would need to be just a bit more drunk to accomplish the task. God, she was beautiful as she walked back inside, holding a glass of cheap whiskey for me, and a glass of wine for her.

She sat down on the couch, indicating that she wanted me to sit beside her. I managed to seat myself with some grace, although I was already anticipating the effects the next drink would have on my body. I felt heavy. She smiled that intoxicating grin, that mischievous, sexy smile undoubtedly reserved for nights such as these. I took a swig of my drink, cradling the glass tumbler in the palm of my hand as I took her in.

She had let her hair down. The curvature of her breasts played tauntingly beneath the lace straps of her dress. Her white dress. She swirled the wine in her glass as she reached her hand behind my neck and ran her fingers through my hair.

I reddened, suddenly aware of how close I was to accomplishing the mission. I couldn't do it. I was not prepared. She wanted it too bad. I liked her too much to go through with such a task. It was too grim. Everything would fall apart as soon as I made myself evident. I contemplated leaving immediately and trying to forget that I had ever tried to do something so terrible, so unspeakable. Her eyelids lowered into a seductive crescent. I had gone too far.

The old warrior returned to the enemy's lair, stone-faced. The Devil's followers parted as the man walked gravely into the midst of congregation, the proof his deed spattered on his clothing. The Devil grinned terribly. This time, no follower was to be found in his arms. He reached out with the patriarchal acceptance of a pleased father to a worthy son. The old warrior climbed into his arms, and felt himself cradled in the creature's awful embrace, brought close to the beating heart of the Enemy.

I felt myself becoming aroused. The room was spinning. She inched closer to me, gazing into my eyes, her breathing growing heavier as she neared for a kiss. Everything was falling to pieces. I would need to embarrass myself, to get angry. Too much was at risk. I would need to make a premature advance, cross a boundary. She was too excited.

I placed my hand on the end of her knee and dragged it up her thigh. I watched to see if I had made her uncomfortable, but instead she buried her head in my neck and began kissing me. Nothing I could do would dissuade her intentions. As far as she was concerned, I was doing exactly as she wanted, and as I wanted. I would have to make a move, get angry. I would have to lose myself.

The old warrior released into the hold of the Devil, feeling his body relax into the firm, cradling embrace. He could see the pulsating veins beneath the demon's chest, tributaries stemming from an evil source. Like a parent soothing its child, the Devil rocked the old warrior back and forth in a sleepy, quiet motion. But the old warrior remained unaffected, as he slipped his hand in his cloak to recover the dagger hidden within. No temptation or trick would deter him. He was truly good.

I reached in. She started at the sudden attempt and glared at me, jerking her hand from behind my neck. I needed to get embarrassed. I tried again and she slapped me. My whole body became hot. I felt my blood pulsing to the surface of my skin. She had struck me on the nose and I watched as a droplet of blood fell on her white dress. My hands were tingling.

I forced her down and covered her mouth with one of the couch cushions to stifle her scream. I was frothing at the mouth. She hit me in the chest and the legs. It only fueled me as I pushed my weight against her. I tasted blood.

The warrior extracted the hidden blade from his cloak, and in the presence of all the Devil's followers, drove the weapon into the beating heart of the enemy. Smoke shot from the wound as the old warrior pulled out the weapon and leapt from the creature's arms. The company of followers dispersed in a panic as their leader reeled from the blow, and the warrior ran from the scene. The Devil collapsed in a heap with a scream, smitten at the hands of purity.

There was red all over her dress and the white sofa. I hit her on the face and breasts, and the more I struck, the more enraged I became. I finished, and weakened, realized I had been screaming some animal nonsense. She didn't move. She was not breathing.

I got up from the couch and noticed what a terrible amount of blood had been spilt. There were bruises on the inside of my thighs and I had to limp into the bathroom to retrieve a towel and wash my face. Finding myself in the mirror, I discovered my entire body to be covered in blood. I would have to wash more thoroughly at home. My heart was slowing to its normal pace as I walked back into the living

room, suddenly aware of the fact that I had been successful. I sighed happily and walked out to my car.

I laughed to myself all the way home. I have been to Hell and back. I know the Devil's ways and have been cradled in his arms. But I am not bad.

I am truly good.

Shiola

Caitlin Brodie

I steal a look between the blinds, waiting for them to come for me. Nothing. No approaching dust cloud, which would indicate the coming of the police. Not even a tumble weed stirs outside. That doesn't mean they aren't coming though. I only have to wait. I unclench my fists. The knife drops to the ground.

Shiola sleeps next to me, her long, brown hair spilling over the pillow, creating an ocean of shimmering bronze. When anyone else looks upon her, they may see her plain face, her simple, cotton dress, and write her off as an unmarried woman, for no one could find anything tantalizing in that face, those dull eyes. Perhaps they are right. But she is mine. That is what matters. I brush a few strands of hair off of her forehead and bend down to kiss her. My touch awakens her and Shiola smiles up at me for a second, the first genuine smile I have seen from her in weeks. It lasts only a moment, before her face falls, and tears come to her eyes. She glances at the doorway, and turns away, trying to stifle her sobbing. I look and find our son, Adam, standing there, staring at us.

They should be here by now, but they aren't. Why? I don't know, I don't have an answer. My brain refuses to function, it only begs them to hurry. I step around the ever expanding pool of blood, which has already engulfed the knife that lay on the ground. That metallic scent fills the air, choking my breath. My foot accidentally bumps into something, and despite every effort not to, I look down.

"I'm to be sent away?" He asks, holding up that horrible sheet of paper that I had made the mistake of leaving on the table. Even from where I sit, I can still read the giant, bold script that says, "Your son, Adam Cooper, having reached the age of Ten, has been assigned to the 14th Batallion Battalion of the Youth Infantry. He will report for duty two weeks from today at the armory at New Phoenix. The refusal to do so will be regarded as treason, and will be treated as such." At the bottom of the paper there was a large, impersonal signature of one general or another. "Um, yes, son, you're....you're going away."

A hand, palm up, laying limp on the floor. My stomach pushes up into my throat, and I turn and retch in the corner, though nothing comes up. I haven't eaten all day, and won't eat for many more. There's no reason to try to anymore. I dry heave a few more times as my stomach tries to turn itself inside out. I can't breathe. I wish my lungs would close up forever, but they won't. I know they won't. I wouldn't be that lucky. I glance out the window once more. They still refuse to come, leaving me alone with what I've done.

"Dad, what am I being sent away to do?" Adam asks me, once we are away from his mother's room where Shiola still lies sobbing. I sigh. I hate lying to Adam. "You're going to protect your country, Adam. They're going to train you to fight." His face shows no sign of emotion. "Oh. Thats all? Then why are you and Mom so upset?" I look away, tears forming in my eyes. I try to pretend like that I wanted to look out of the window, trying to cover up my emotions. "Because we'll

miss you when you're gone, Adam." I looked back at him, unable and unwilling to hide my emotions any longer. A tear falls down my cheek. "Well, duh. I'll miss you guys too. But I'll come home eventually, won't I? I wouldn't be gone forever, right?" More tears. "Of course not, Son. You'll see us again before you know it."

A small buzzing suddenly distracts me from my thoughts. Movement catches my eye, and though I know the effect it will have on me, I look down again. Flies have come in. They cluster around their eyes, fighting for space on the good, fleshy, juicy parts. My stomach climbs my throat again, but the blind rage I feel shoves it back down again. I scream, a horrible, animalistic noise, and practically claw the flies away. I can't stand to watch them land on that once beautiful, living flesh. No matter how frantically I wave them away, the flies come back, landing again once I'm paying attention to something else. More and more seem to come, as if attracted by my frantic waving. Where are they coming from? I look up. The window stands open.

Shiola opens the window, a cool breeze enters, carrying the scent of the desert with it. The air feels refreshing in the stifling room where we sit. She stares at her reflection in the tin cup of coffee, regarding it solemnly, before grabbing the flask of whiskey and pouring more in. She sips it, shudders, and then gulps more down. "I don't like lying to him like this." Shiola says, not looking me in the eyes. "I know, I don't like it either. What else would we tell him? I couldn't very well tell him the truth." Tears fall into her coffee cup. She hasn't stopped crying since we made the decision. "And you're sure they would find him? Even if we ran away?" She asks, pleading. "They would find him. They put the microchip in him, they know where he is, even now. They would find him and kill him. He would die even more gruesomely than he would if we let him go into this army." Shiola knows I am right,

though we both wish I wasn't. "God damn them." She whispers, and then collapses onto the table once more in tears. I rest my hand on her arm, as a gesture of comfort and caring, but she jerks away from my touch, withdrawing into herself, trying to find the strength to do what needed to be done.

I trip over chairs and other furniture on my way to the window. In my haste to close it, I end up slamming my fingers between the window and the frame, though I barely feel the pain. My body and mind are both in a state of numb shock, refusing to believe what I've done. I fumble with the latch, locking the window for no reason other than to touch something that she last touched, as if maybe that would bring her back to me. I linger there at the window, staring at the latch, not thinking, not or feeling. I hardly notice that I have started to weep.

I have witnessed the boys leaving the training camp, young children just a little older than my boy is now. What goes in does not come out. There is no laughter, no games, and no hope. But what is waiting for them is worse. The government takes 10 year olds because they're energetic and strong, so they say. The real reason is because their impressionable, meaning that they can be brainwashed in a few weeks, or less, if even that. What goes in is a group of young, happy boys, eager to play with guns and knives and swords and fists and have it mean something. What comes out is a group of cold blooded killers. These children don't remember their families, their brothers, sisters, or parents. All they remember is how to kill. How to slit a throat, and how to crush a skull. They are murder machines, and there is no coming back from it. The government uses them as weapons because so many soldiers in other armies wouldn't dream of killing a child, even as while that same child is gouging the eyes out of those who hesitate to fire on him. Armies are catching on, however, and the supply of little

boys is dwindling, as more and more men get over their inability to kill these monstrous children. The government issued a draft for all of the small children to go and fight for their country not long after Adam was born. They implanted a microchip in all the little boys' skulls, so anyone who tries to run will be found, and punished.

My wife and I refuse to let our son become a monster.

That leaves only one option...only one chance to save him. Murder.

I hate sitting still. The waiting has become unbearable. How long has it been? A minute? An hour? A week? I can't tell. I've lost track. The only evidence of the passage of time is the slow advance of blood, seeping into the cracks of the wood floor, congealing and drying, releasing a sickening smell into the air. The smell permeates everything. The windows are all closed. I am trapped here with the reminder of what I have done. Her eyes stare up at me, forever frozen in the expression of anguish. My brain has shut down, repeating one phrase over and over again. I love you. I love you. I love you. I have done wrong. This is my punishment.

Guns were banned long ago, and Shiola and I are too poor to afford any poison. It seems the most effective weapon would be one of Shiola's kitchen knives. It lay on the counter in front of us, as my wife and I stare at it, our hearts racing and our stomachs twisting into knots. "I don't want to do this." She says. "I know, dear. I don't either." Her hand tightens on my shoulder. "We could still run." Her voice is pleading. "You know that isn't possible. This is the only way to save him." She nods. She knows. Silent sobs shake her body, and hot tears fall from her eyes. She is beautiful in her horrible fear and sorrow, but I am too numb to take her in my arms and comfort her as I should. I

have ceased to be human; my every movement is mechanical, and my voice has taken on an uncomfortable monotone. I feel nothing. The front door closes; a book bag drops to the floor with a clunk. "Hi mom! Hi dad! What're you standing around for? You guys have to help me pack! I'm leaving tomorrow!" I smile at him, though he still seems to sense something is wrong, frowning. Leaning back against the counter, I reach back and grip the handle of the knife. "Hello Adam. Would you come here for a second? Your mother and I have something we would like to speak to you about."

Pictures of our small but happy family adorn the walls of our tiny home in the desert. Sand is encrusted in the corners of every frame, as it is encrusted in everything. One picture catches my eye: a picture of Shiola in a dress the color of the sunset, dancing with a five-year-old Adam in the living room while the music from my harmonica echoes through the living room. Memories come flooding back to me, and for a minute, they are back with me. Shiola laughs and spins our son around. Light pours into the room from the evening sun, casting a fiery glow about everything. I dance and stomp my feet as I play, and they laugh as they watch. We were happy. If only it had lasted.

Adam sits in one of the kitchen chairs, his back to the table, facing us. "Sure, Dad, what's up?" He looks at me curiously, his angelic face creased in puzzlement, his legs bouncing up and down with excitement and nervousness for the days to come. My heart tightens in my chest and my breath comes quickly. Miraculously, my voice stays calm and even. "Your mother and I just want to prepare you for what's coming." He looks at me skeptically. "Is that it? The way you were talking about it, it sounded like something huge and important." My hand tightens around the knife. "It is, Adam. Close your eyes, we have something...a gift for you." His face lights up and he closes his eyes, holding his

hands out expectantly. In my head I scream in anguish, but my face stays calm and placid as I position the knife above him. I pull my arm back in preperation; the knife feels heavy and awkward in my hand. I squeeze my eyes shut so I won't have to watch. The second that I begin to bring my arm down, I hear a cry and a shuffle of movement. I open my eyes to see Shiola's bright, wide eyes looking into mine, her mouth whispering "No, no, no!" over and over again. I watch as she falls backwards, the long handle of the knife sticking out of her chest.

My eyes refocus and I am reminded of where I am...and what I have done. I let out a guttural yell, an animalistic noise, before I tear the pictures off of the walls. I throw them against the ground, smashing the frames. Shattered glass covers the floors and rains down upon the figures on the floor. My brain ceases to function. All I am aware of is the constant movement of my hands and the constant sound of breaking glass. Finding nothing more to destroy, my memories finally catch up to me, and I fall to the ground sobbing uncontrollably. Their eyes seem to stare at me, asking me why. I don't have an answer for them.

Shiola falls backwards, and my son lets out a horrified yelp as her body slams into his, knocking him backwards as well. The back of his head hits the edge of the kitchen table with a loud and ugly crack. The two of them hit the floor with a thud. I look into Adam's eyes and see nothing but a vacant expression; a pool of blood forms beneath his beautiful dark hair. He is gone. Shiola groans in pain, her body lying at an awkward angle, half of her on top of our son, half of her on the hard wood floor. I kneel down next to her, brushing the hair out of her eyes. I feel numb. "I had to try," she chokes out, in between fits of coughing as blood fills her lungs and spills out of the wound. The knife went all the way through her small, agile body, tearing apart skin and lung and muscle tissue. "I know, dearest. I know." I should feel

something, I know I should, but I am frozen. "I don't blame you...I...I love you." Her last words come out in a single breath...and then she breathes no more.

Their stiff limbs beckon me forward, and their vacant eyes beg me to join them. I glance towards the knife that lay on the floor by the window. Blood still stains the blade, and the sunlight reflects brightly off of the serrated edge, casting a faint, almost undetectable glow on the wall. The bright steel no longer looks as menacing as it once did, in fact, it is starting to look friendlier, almost welcoming. I crawl towards it slowly; it seems to call to me, as if to an old friend.

Blood still pours from the wound in her chest, though her heart is no longer beating. I sit next to her body, still in a state of shock. It hasn't hit me yet, the fact that my entire family, everything that mattered to me in this god-forsaken place, is gone, dead by my own hand. I know I will accept any punishment the courts see fit to give me; I know I will beg for even worse. I deserve the worst pain they can give me, though no amount of torture will equal the torture I will inflict upon myself when I wake up every morning, expecting to see Shiola and Adam smiling back at me. I look at their bodies again. The sight of that knife handle sticking out of her chest is too much for me. I tear it out with even more violence and effort than I had used to put it there in the first place. I curl up on the floor, sobbing uncontrollably again. I lay there for what seems like hours, cradling the knife as I once cradled Adam when he was a baby. At some point, the tears stop. I stand up. My mind feels clear and calm. If I can just avoid thinking about what I have just done, I should be okay until the government officials come to arrest me for treason and murder. If only they would hurry.

I pick the knife up by the blade. The cool steel feels nice against my blazing hot skin. I turn it over to examine the other side, and the

tip of the blade cuts my thumb, leaving behind a single bead of bright red blood. At first I recoil from the sight, as it reminds me of my most recent memories, but on second glance I become fascinated with the wound. I feel no pain, at least none that I recognize inside of my shattered mind. Suddenly an idea comes. I place the serrated edge of the knife against the skin of my wrist and press down. I know it hurts, but the pain is very far away, and I ignore it with ease. Entranced by the blood coming from my arm, I draw a thin, red line down the length of my forearm. I do the same on the left, and some remote portion of my brain reminds me that this is it; this will be the end of me. The idea is comforting to me. As the blood drips down my arms and my thoughts

become hazy, I imagine my wife and child welcoming me into their new world with open arms. I close my eyes and smile, and with what strength I have left, I whisper her name. Shiola.....

I steal a look between the blinds, waiting for them to come for me. Nothing. No approaching dust cloud, which would indicate the coming of the police. Not even a tumbleweed stirs outside. That doesn't mean they aren't coming though. I only have to wait. I unclench my fists. The knife drops to the ground.

His House

David Matz

It was a cold and windy autumn night. The brown dying leaves just started falling to their graves. I stood staring up the driveway to the small un-kept ranch house. Ever since I moved to this neighborhood, I knew where he resided but I've never climbed the step in front of the dark heavy brown door.

TJ had always been that troublesome kid. He'd constantly be getting into trouble, breaking the rules and making jokes at the teacher's expense. The first day I met him, in the fifth grade, he decided not to eat what they were serving in the cafeteria. Against the advice of his peers he scaled the fence at recess and ran across the road to McDonalds and came back with a Big Mac. I remember the short, fat teacher coming over and eclipsing the sun and staring down on the small child. Her head snapped back and wiggled a little as she connected the McDonalds wrapper to the store across the street. I didn't see him in class the next few days, and he had to eat lunch in the teacher's lounge.

TJ would always tell stories about his life; he bragged how his brother had stacks of money and would get all the new video games and TVs. He said Stories about how his dad ran from the cops, yet he told it like it was the best thing ever. He made it known that Stories how his parents didn't care when he went to bed, or if he got up for school. All sorts of his stories that sounded great in fifth grade, but later in life, I'd reflect and think they were sad stories. I never was impressed by him.

A tumble of leaves passed, and I started up the driveway. I thought of the mission ahead of me. This little prick conned me out of 600 dollars, and I wasn't going to let him push me around. Surely, at his own house, he wasn't going to start a fight. He wasn't going to say no, and I am not going to take anybody's crap anymore. I am not just another push over kid that anyone could can use and throw away. I knew he was a tough kid, but I knew in the right situation, he was as soft as a stuffed animal.

After the fifth grade, we went to different middle schools and hardly saw each other. I didn't see or hear of TJ until one night in high school when I saw him at the same McDonalds he went to in the fifth grade. He was short and stocky with shoulder length black hair. A white tee with the sleeves cut off and tight jeans with holes in the knees. His crew and he were outside with swirling smoke above their heads. Some other punk kids from a different high school shouted something fierce at them. Immediately, TJ and his crew turned, some yelled back at them, but TJ streaked across the parking lot, fist and jaw clenched; and two other friends were right behind him. Some vulgar words were exchanged between the rival kids, then all of a sudden, one of them fell to the ground clutching his face. TJ's friends started in on the other adversaries. I saw the glint of the blade swing out of TJ's pocket and disappear into the stranger's stomach. TJ's own crew stepped back by in the surprise, and some started to run. TJ stood over the body, and shoved the blade into his pocket, and walked toward his rust bucket of a car and drove off into the night. I left before the cops came.

But he wasn't going to stab me at his own front door. Besides, he's still on probation for breaking and entering into three houses, stealing one thousand dollars, and drug possession charges.

I stepped up to the dark, and heavy brown front door. It looked old and weathered with cracked paint and splinters hanging in dangerous directions. The doorbell hung out of its socket with its wires exposed; I assumed it was broken, so I pounded three times on the old faded brown door, avoiding the threatening splinters.

The palms of my hands moistened as I waited for a response. Foot steps came shuffling to the door. A short, but ripped, kid with short, jet black hair, wearing jeans and a flannel with cut off sleeves, answered. His hard cold eyes stared into mine; he noticed me avoid his. There was a pause until he said, in a deep scratchy voice, "What the hell do you want?" I opened my mouth, but nothing came out. Opened it again and spilled everything out at once. "You owe me 600 dollars because those wheels you sold me last month crapped out on me." I was slightly out of breath and shaking; why was I so nervous to stand up to such a good for nothing punk. "Look I'll help you out later; I'm am busy right now. So get the hell off my porch, and never come here again." His voice was as commanding as a drill sergeant and as cold as the night wind. A weak, quivering voice of a woman came from behind him, "Thaddeus, whose there baby? Bring them in; your letting all the heat out." "Thaddeus?" I inquired with one eyebrow up and the other down. He leaned forward, and in an ice cold, low hiss said: "Shut the hell up. I'll talk to you on Friday, and if I ever see you on my porch again, I will kill you." I took this threat seriously, but as he was swinging the door shut, I reminded myself of how that I am no longer going to be pushed around. Just as the door was about to slam shut, I made up my mind

and decided to be forceful for once in my life. I jammed my foot into the threshold of the door and shoved it back open again.

TJ's eyes grew bright with shock and anger as he saw me in the doorway. He approached me, about to slip his hand into his pocket, but I started first with the drill sergeant's command. "No, not good enough. I don't trust you anymore; I hardly ever see you and I want my money back, now. Those tires were crap; I want my money and am not taking no as an answer." "Now you listen here kid. I ain't gonna pay you. I'm sorry you got screwed. But I ain't going to pay you now, and I will call the cops on you for breaking into my house. Now get the hell out."

The weak voice came from a room down the hallway illuminated by the flashing blue glow of a TV. "Thaddeus what's going on out there? I am scared. Don't leave again Thaddeus. Don't leave us." He glanced over his shoulder and shot an evil, and annoyed look at me, "You move, and I break your nose." He turned and went into the blue glowing room.

It was in a long dim-lit hallway with peeling wallpaper leading from the front door to the kitchen in the back. An old dirty brown carpet stretched to a kitchen with white tiles tinted grey with dirt and grime. To my right, the old dirty brown carpet chased up the stairs where two pairs of eyes looked me over from the top. I heard some muttering coming from the glowing blue room. I took a few silent steps toward the threshold and peered around the corner. TJ was kneeling next to an old wrinkled woman, incapacitated in a dilapidated La-Z-Boy recliner with a moth eaten hand knitted quilt on her lap. Her glasses gleamed blue with the poor reception of a small TV. There was an oxygen tank and a walker next to her. She some how saw me, pointed a slow shaky hand at me and said, "Is that...Is that your friend Thaddeus. The one you said was here." He turned his head quickly

and gave me such an evil stare that the Devil himself would be scared. Slowly he nodded and turned his head back to the withering women. "Oh wondrous!" Although the woman looked frail and old, her voice was lively and joyous. She waved me into the middle of the living room, shaking almost uncontrollably: head, arms, and all. "Oh come here, come here. Thaddeus hasn't brought a friend here since his brother ran out." "Yes, grandma, well he's not going to stay for long, he was just about to leave," fired TJ, with the same evil stare. "Oh nonsense. Stay, stay, have some of these delicious cookies Thaddeus just baked." She pointed a shaking skeleton hand with liver spotted skin at a plate full of white sugar cookies with sprinkles in the form of smiley faces and hearts. TJ bit down on his bottom lip. Just then, two little girls snuck past me and gathered behind TJ. In a mouse like voice one whispered, "TJ we're all washed up and ready for bed; can you sing to us now."

I suddenly felt like I was intruding. This was his whole family and their time together, what was I thinking trying to get my money like this. "I better... um better leave now it's getting late." "Oh non-sense you stay. Thaddeus is a great musician. Go on play that nice tune you play." TJ didn't move at first, but eventually, after enough encouraging glances by the women, he raised himself from the woman's side and gave a short huff. He shuffled across the blue, flashing glow of the TV and picked up an acoustic guitar from behind a sofa. He strummed a few quick notes, paused, then started a song. It started with a nice deep, and warm melody, and it was pretty pleasant until he made eye contact with me and abruptly stopped. The girls and the frail woman moaned with objection. "Oh, come on play the whole song. I am sure your friend will like it," cried out the old woman. With another annoyed sigh and an evil stare at me, he bit down on his bottom lip and started again.

It was good. It was really good. His voice harmonized with the deep chords; it was in tune and on beat, really a beautiful, slow song. I stood in the threshold of the living room, watching. Watching how involved and focused TJ was when he sang and played the guitar, how much emotion, pain, and strife his face reflected as he went through the verses and chords. The verses were sad, but the chorus was happy, and the deep strumming of the guitar was calming. The old women looked lively and joyous, like her voice, no doubt remembering times of past when her body moved freely and her skin reflected the sun. The two little girls sat near TJ completely enveloped in the entire atmosphere of the blue glowing room.

When TJ finished, the girls jumped up and started cheering; , a barely noticeable smile, more like a smirk of joy, appeared across TJ's face. The old lady tried to stand as well; she was all worked up, huffing and puffing, struggling to get up, her arms weak and shaky as they tried with all their might to move the ailing women. She fell as TJ snapped into action. Throwing the acoustic guitar to the ground with a deep thud, he broke past the cheering girls and grabbed the woman in mid-air. His muscles were ripped and strong as he clenched onto the frail, skeleton woman and eased her back into the La-Z-Boy recliner. She was clutching her chest, wheezing traumatically, just barely able to breathe. TJ reached for the oxygen tank and put the mask to her mouth. The two girls had scared, blank, white faces and stood motionless where they once were cheering. I felt dizzy and thrown off guard; I have never seen someone this old and frail before; I have never seen a moving skeleton.

TJ brushed back the woman's thin, stiff, white hair behind her ears, picked up her glasses up off the ground and put them on for her. She was still breathing heavily when TJ straightened himself and turned to

the girls. "Alright girls, say good night to grandma, then go up stairs and get ready to pray." The girls slowly and gently approached their grandma then scampered by me and up the stairs. TJ turned his full attention on me. I walked toward the front door, fully willing to leave. I turned to say sorry for intruding, but he must have felt like I didn't understand, which I didn't, so in a quick monotone voice he blurted out an explanation.

"My dad ran off after I was born. My mom lost custody of us because of her drug problem and my brother is God knows where. My grandma is dying from ALS, and I do what I have to in order to get by. Do your self a favor and never repeat what you saw, never repeat what I just said, and never show your face here again." I gave a nervous nod and turned to open the door. I came here looking for 600 dollars and some dignity, but I left with a higher appreciation for what I have and what others don't.



art

— Randi Stella, detail from *Porch*

Downward it fled, her head of red

Sergio De Stefanis, Mixed media drawing on braille paper





Hunger Pains

Michelle Wanhala, Acrylic paint by numbers

Root

Natalia Bulsza, Digital Photograph





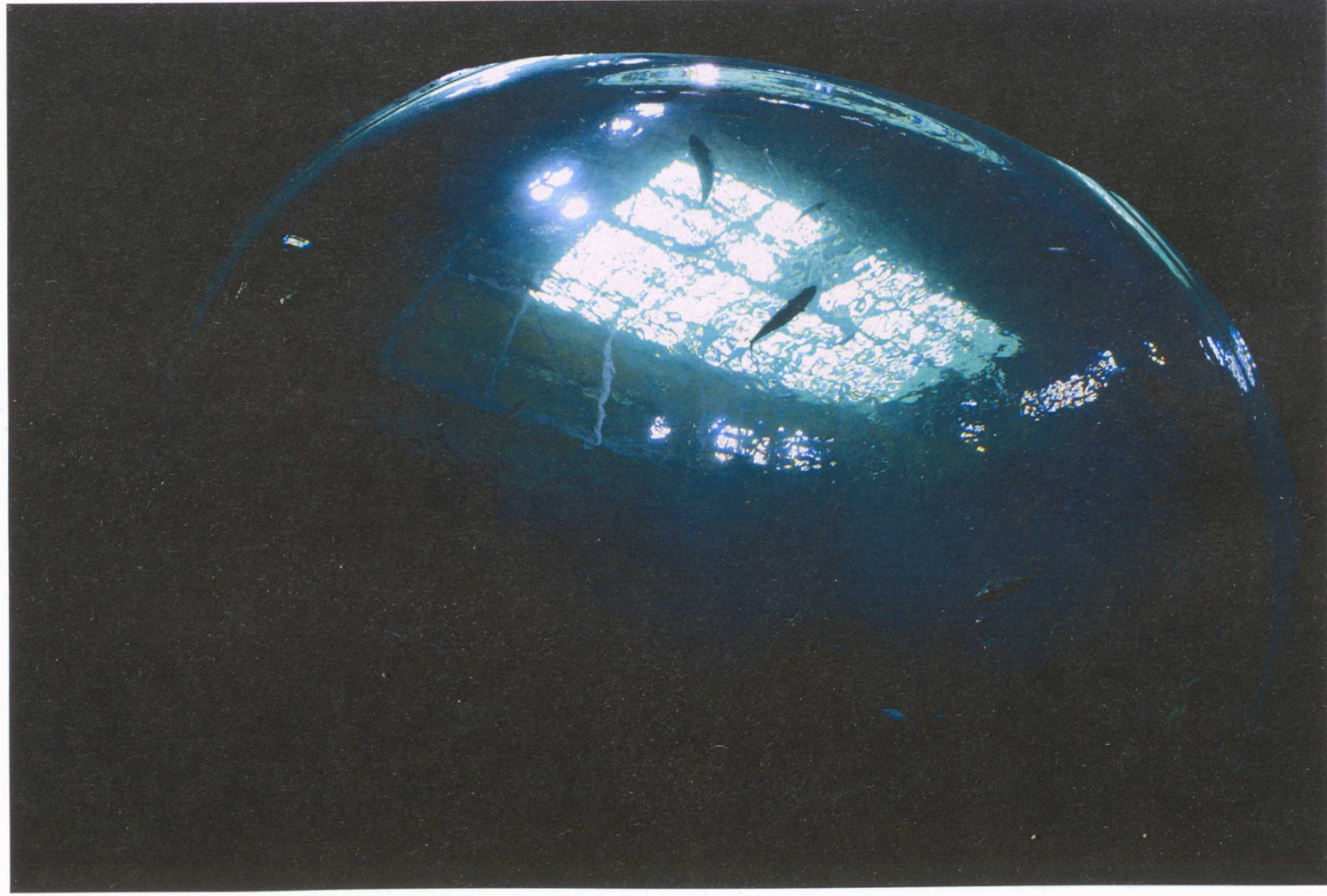
Delicate Beauty

Natalia Bulsza, Digital Photograph

**editor's choice*

The Fish

Randi Stella, Digital Photograph





Porch

Randi Stella, Digital Photograph

Ted

Melissa Rasor, Acrylic, charcoal, gesso, and conte crayon on paper





Up

Sergio De Stefanis, Mixed media drawing on braille paper

“ and her body is cold
and her mind is a
shimmering diamond

— Jerene-Elise Nall, *Cracked Sugar*

FEATURING

Caitlin Brodie
Natalia Bulsza
Anne Darfler
Kari Castor
Kyle Christensen
Devin Dion
Tyler Hicks
Eric Kappa

Jessica Larson
Matt Maletz
Allison Mass
David Matz
Stephan Mavrick
Jerene-Elise Nall
Byron Olson
Melissa Rasor

Kim Ruel
Gareth Slegner
Michael Stanczak
Anne Marie Stickse
Sergio De Stefanis
Randi Stella
Michelle Wanhala