

SINK HOLLOW



2020
USU CONTEST ISSUE

Letter from the Director

This special edition of Sink Hollow presents the winning entries of the Utah State University Creative Writing and Art Contest, which is open to all USU undergraduate and graduate students from all departments and disciplines. This magazine issue is all the more important this year because of the havoc the coronavirus has played with all the usual fanfare associated with winning the contest. This year there will be no public reading in celebration of the winners' work, and our whole writing community is feeling just how important the arts are to our daily and communal lives. So please, as you peruse this issue and are moved, send a note to the writer or artist to tell them just how terrific their work is—they will appreciate it!

In addition to congratulating the winners, we also want to thank *all* our contestants this year for the hard work they put into their art, for making the judges' jobs so difficult, and for helping to create such a vibrant and inclusive writing community here at USU and in Cache Valley.

Many thanks also go to our judges, for their generosity of time and discriminating taste: Chris Davis, Stacie Denetsosie, Brock Dethier, Matt DiOrio, Jordan Floyd, Justin Smith, and Russ Winn. Thanks also go to Sink Hollow faculty advisors Robb Kunz, Shanan Ballam, and Russ Beck, and to Nicole Cracroft, Sara Johns, and Annie Nielsen from the English Department administrative staff, whose assistance in running the contest has been invaluable.

And an extra special thanks goes to the amazing Sink Hollow staff who helped to run, organize and promote the contest: Maddie Barker, Justyn Hardy, Lexy Roberts, and Janell Schroeder. And also a great big thanks to our copyeditors: Justyn Hardy, Mira Davis, Britton Laing, Evan Rasmussen, Nate Nasvik, and Anne Schill. And finally, for putting together this gorgeous issue under extreme, pandemic-level catastrophe, a huge thank you to Janell Schroeder and Brianne Sorensen. All of you rock!

—Charles Waugh, Contest Director

Table of Contents-Undergraduate

Fiction

First Place	Justyn Hardy	In the Narrows South of Thayne	8
Second Place	Madison Silva	Good Will	17
Third Place	Claire Atwood	Take Once a Day	27

Poetry

First Place	Justyn Hardy	Losing virginity	35
		Wyoming	36
		My Thirty-Aught-Six	37
Second Place	Jordan Forest	Grief	40
		The Wicked Witch is Dead	41
		Oracle Bones	43
Third Place	Jacob Taylor	Doctor	44
		All the Ones I Cannot Love	45
		This is Me	46

Table of Contents-Undergraduate

Nonfiction

First Place	Marie Skinner	Slant Etymology	48
Second Place	Amrutha Obulasetty	The Best Shade of Brown	55
Third Place	Madison Silva	Conversion	59

Art

First Place	Michelle Harvigsen	<i>Trompe L'oeil</i>	Cover, 26
Second Place	Nikki Christensen	<i>Dragon</i>	34
Third Place	Amy Larsen	<i>Walking on Water</i>	54
Honorable Mentions	Amber Healey	<i>Broken Light</i>	32
	Michelle Hartvigsen	<i>Back Again</i>	58
		<i>Another Life</i>	20
		<i>Despondent</i>	14
		<i>Window View</i>	39
	Nikki Christensen	<i>Desert Snow</i>	64
		<i>Forgotten Spring</i>	69
	Amy Larsen	<i>Bomagotchi Girl</i>	7
		<i>Reflection of a Field Worker</i>	47

Table of Contents-Graduate

Fiction

First Place	Niyonta Nahia Chowdhury-Magaña	Brickland Redgreen	71
Second Place	Andrew Romriel	An Easy, 10-Step Guide to Painting Addiction	81
Third Place	Tyler Hurst	The Processor	82

Poetry

First Place	Britt Allen	Mastectomy	92
		January	93
		Domesticated	94
Second Place	Niyonta Nahia Chowdhury-Magaña	Dinner Time: Kurigram, 1917	95
		Goodnight Sweetheart	96
		How to Kill a Brown Mouse	97
Third Place	Andrew Romriell	3 a.m. Considerations	101
		I like to Sweep	102
		When he asks, “How are you?”	103

Table of Contents-Graduate

Nonfiction

First Place	Andrew Romriell	A Re-Established Poetic Dictionary of the Voiceless	108
Second Place	Alyssa Witbeck Alexander	Starved	118
Third Place	Kelsie Peterson	Rites of Passage	129

Art

First Place	Andrew Romriell	<i>Children of the World</i>	70
Honorable Men- tions	Andrew Romriell	<i>Winter Mists</i>	91
		<i>Swift</i>	107
		<i>Into the Mountain</i>	117
		<i>Spiraling</i>	139

Bomagotchi Girl
Amy Larsen
Honorable Mention



Undergraduate Fiction

1 In the Narrows South of Thayne

Justyn Hardy

Willowy cattails bowed under the autumn breeze and it was here, where the Salt River curled in silent eddies, where the banks cut deep into fields of alfalfa, where the early October dusk lit the Aspens alive in amber glow, that Don drained the last of his beer and shattered the bottle on an upturned stone. A thrush warbled. Don warbled back and pried the cap off another bottle with his knife. “You ain’t got nothing to cry about,” he whispered.

But Don did have something to cry about. He held his jaw taut as twined rope and focused on the silver scales fleeting beneath the current. The wind picked at his grey beard. A tangled fishing line unspooled next to an empty rod a few feet behind him. He hadn’t bothered to open his tackle box. A pickup rumbled along the dirt road a hundred yards east. Behind it trailed a plume of dust. The engine drowned Don’s labored breathing as he tried to conceal his pain. The longer he stood on the banks of the Salt, the longer his face stiffened like saddle-leather and the more he shook. He bit into his lip, over and over again, until he could taste the sweet of his own blood. His twenty-year-old son, Jake, his fag son, his gay son, his only son, had driven out here two weeks ago in a ratty sedan with nothing but a loaded twelve gauge and

a single slug. Somewhere right around here, Jake must have parked and wandered through the alfalfa like a stray dog. Don didn’t know if Jake had stood straight and tall or settled cross-legged near the riverbank. He only knew that his son had put the barrel to his chin and blew his brains into the field.

Don picked up the fishing line and poked at the knots. He hadn’t caught a fish in weeks. He didn’t even bother to cast. Each night after he closed up Will’s shop, Don drove out here, parked in the barrow pit, unloaded his fishing gear, swigged a six pack of Budweiser, and listened to the crickets’ chirping as the river dragged his pain beneath the current. It had snowed last night. Moonbeams had glanced off the fat flakes as they settled on the alfalfa. He had shivered. His teeth had chattered. He had worn some ragged Carhartts and an old sweatshirt Milly had bought him a dozen holidays ago. Don had mourned in the gentle flurry until his fingers and nose numbed before he had returned to his truck and drove it the thirty skittering miles back to his house in the narrows south of Thayne.

Each night he went home, he found his wife, Milly, locked in their bedroom. She wouldn’t let him in, not even to sleep, and had piled his clothes in the hall. He wanted to tell her he had been as much a father to her son as she was a mother to his, but he didn’t. He imagined her huddled under a patchwork comforter. Sometimes, after he stripped to his underwear and crammed himself into the sofa cushions, Don would hear her strangled

sobs. The noise sounded like a mad billy goat. It turned his teeth to chalk and scared him. He prayed to God that Milly would stop, but sometimes the howls carried on longer than his drunken stupor.

On the river, a cutthroat skipped near a willow bush at the opposite bank. Don finished the last beer. The glass bottle felt cool in his hand. He aimed at the ripples and reeled back, but he never threw it into the river. There was something about the waters that seemed sacred to him. He felt quiet when he listened to its rushes and burbles. This river might have been the last thing Jake saw before he pulled the trigger. Don couldn't risk polluting it with an empty bottle of Bud. He shattered the glass across the nearby stone as he had with the rest of the beers. The pile of shards grew deeper and wider with the passing of another day.

A dry tongue and heaving gut woke him the next morning, that and the alarm he'd set on the microwave oven. Milly always kept up the cabin while he worked in town at the auto repair shop. She vacuumed the brown carpet, mopped the peeling linoleum, read magazines about better gardening, varnished the deck and the log walls, and fixed up some of the finest raspberry chicken Don had ever tasted. He loved her. He always had. He still did. He buttoned up his Carhartts and stumbled through the narrow hallway. He checked the doorknob—still locked.

Once a week for the past four years since Jake had graduated high school, Milly

had always put on her finest cardigan and blue jeans and driven a hundred miles to Jackson Hole. Don hated that hoity-toity town. The men drove around in their Porsches with jeans so tight they might as well have been painted on, and they ate fifty-dollar steaks that didn't taste half as good as an elk ribeye cut from the fresh kill. Milly used to ask Don if he wanted to go. She only went there to see Jake. He had worked at the Four Seasons as a bellboy and spent the weekends fishing Jackson Lake with a group of fags. Milly said it didn't matter if Jake liked men. "*It don't make a difference to me as long as he keeps calling me every day,*" she would say.

Don didn't know about that. He always told her no. No, he didn't want to go to Jackson. No, it wasn't okay that other men fucked their son.

He twisted the door handle once more. Don didn't say a word but inside his head he bellowed at her to open the door, pleaded with her. A minute passed and he left the cabin. His truck fired to life with a steady incantation that bore into his skull like unending highway construction. He left their gravel driveway and headed south on 89 toward Af-ton. A chill shimmied through raggedy cloth seats, but he didn't turn on the heater. He felt cold. The heat would warm him, but he didn't want it. Somehow the cold felt good. Maybe he wanted to hurt himself, like Jake had. Maybe it would make things better if he burned through his hand with the welder or smashed his legs under the car-lift.

He had worked at Will's for the past twenty-two years, ever since Milly had given birth to Jake. Will paid him fair enough, better than most would, and gave him two weeks' vacation each year. Will also had a son, two of them, about the same age as Jake. They'd gone to middle and high school together, played football, lit bonfires on the holidays and got shitfaced down at Cottonwood Lake. Milly always hated that Jake went to those parties. She said Jake would end up sticking around the valley and never make anything of himself. Don didn't know what was wrong with sticking around the valley. Here, the pines grew thick and strong. Aspen groves scattered the prettiest light in early summer, and, during winter, the snow drifts climbed so fluffy and white it looked like God had frosted the world with salt. Wasn't there something to that, that saying—the salt of the earth?

Will greeted him inside the shop a half-hour later. Oil stained Will's breath as if he drank it straight from the sump pans. An air gun had knocked out one of his front teeth a decade ago so now his w's whistled whenever he got ramped up about one of those deep pocketed Jackson fuckers pulling into the bay.

"Any fish last night?"

Don shook his head and lied. "Saw one jump but my casts were shit."

"Ought to have Tim go with you this weekend. He's coming home for fall break. He's been catching all sorts of trout up by Laramie. You know him though, all arms and one hell of a cast. It'd be good for you to catch

something. Give you something fresh to filet up and fry for you and Milly, you know?"

Don half shrugged and shambled back past the lifts where Sam and Dawson were swapping out the exhaust on a new four-by-four. He picked up a cordless power drill from the floor and hung it on the rack by the open bay doors. Tim was Will's oldest son, a year older than Jake. They were the two who had played football together—Tim the quarterback and Jake a wide-receiver. Tim did have a good arm. Senior year, that good arm had thrown two-dozen touchdown passes and broken Jake's nose. His son had bled in the locker room until Milly had arrived and rushed him to the hospital. Will had apologized, of course, for his son's behavior and no one pressed charges. Don still remembered the words. *Tim was out of line, even considering. . . you know.*

Don placed a set of wrenches in descending order. His beard bristled against his upper chest until the itching grew so severe it felt like a dozen bees had stung him. He hated that Jake had been gay. He hated that the guys at the shop poked fun at his son whenever Jackson Hole entered the conversation. His throat dried. A power-drill whirred. An older lady with a terrible blonde wig pulled her rusted Cadillac into the second bay. All the noises grew worse than the itchiness of his chest. He wanted to bellow, to roar, to kick and bludgeon. He wanted to throw his wrenches across the shop. He wanted to hear windshields shatter and steel frames cave.

To the riverbank that night, Don brought a handle of vodka with his six-packs of Bud. He chased the liquor with the beer until the river turned an irksome ooze and threatened to reach out from the shallows and swallow him like some mythical catfish. He crawled into the alfalfa. A bitter wind sliced through his shirt. The earthy scent of farmed soil swamped him. He felt as if the field buoyed him up and carried him in rippling waves.

He hadn't cried at the funeral. They kept the casket closed for obvious reasons. Will had been there, along with Tim. He wondered if either of them knew his son's head had been blown clean off his shoulders. Don knew. The sight of his son's caved in skull, a collection of shattered bone and grey matter mixed with dirt, would plague him until the Lord stopped Don's heart from beating. The body in the coffin belonged to his son, sure, but it wasn't whole. It was only a part of his son. Would Tim have been more comfortable throwing Jake a Hail Mary in the bottom of the fourth if Jake hadn't had a head? Was it just the head that was gay, or the body too?

Don clambered upright and stumbled down the riverbank into the shallows. The frigid water soaked through his boots and froze his feet. It hurt. It stung. It brought tears to his eyes and still he stood there. He'd never hated his son, not once. He hated that he was gay, but he didn't hate Jake. How could he? Jake was his boy, his only boy. Don had

taught him how to thread his first reel, how to cast with the wrist instead of the arm, how to pull the hook without ripping the lips, how to cut a thick filet and grill it with chives, onion, and God's good potatoes. They rode dirt-bikes together up Red Top, glassed deer from the saddle behind Slide Lake. They camped on the banks of the Green and canoed from Palisades to Alpine—twenty-two miles—in a single day. Don had made only two rules—don't talk about it and don't bring anyone home for Thanksgiving.

The light in the sky drained and the pain in his feet departed. The frozen water had numbed him: skin, muscle, and bone. The sun dipped behind the Rockies. Night fell. Crickets chirped, their voices a sweet backdrop against the rush of the river over his ankles. Milly always told him to do more. She said it wasn't enough to just tolerate their son being gay. She begged him to visit Jake. She said no harm would come from it. Don told her he didn't want to walk around Jackson Hole with a bunch of fags. He'd never called his son a fag, or a faggot, or a queer. He always just called him Jake. That was his name.

Don whispered the name.

"Jake."

The thrushes didn't answer.

"Jake," he repeated. "Jake, Jake, Jake, why the fuck did you do it? You were my SON!"

The word exploded from his lips in spray of vodka spittle that sank into the current. No one heard him. No one listened. No

one cared that he ached.

He drove home drunk with wet shoes. He wondered if he'd veer off the road and wrap his truck around a powerline pole. He didn't. Instead he watched the yellow lines of the highway flash by like smeared mustard. He and Jake never could agree on how to dress a hotdog. Don believed in ketchup, sweet pickle slices, and a dollop of sour cream. Jake only ever squeezed a fat stripe of spicy mustard across his. Jake had told him ketchup was for pussies.

A pair of young bucks materialized in the headlights' shine. They froze in the barrow-pit, their tan coats smooth, their horns budding into three points, their eyes wide and frightened until his truck thundered past, trailing black smoke and the stink of gasoline.

Jake had never been frightened. He had never been a pussy. Jake had told half the school he was gay the day of homecoming and after the whole fucking town shined their headlights on him during the pregame warm-up, Jake had caught passes, sprinted his routes, rocked back and forth in the huddle, and scored the opening touchdown plus another in the third quarter.

Don and Milly had sat next to Will on the front-row bleacher. Will turned to Don at halftime when all the cheerleaders danced out onto the turf in their skimpy skirts.

You're telling me Jake doesn't want to peek up those thighs? Hell, I'd look and I'm almost fifty years old.

Don had laughed. Milly had scoot-

ed away from them and lost herself in her cellphone. They won that game, 28 to 6, and the marching band blasted their tubas and trumpets in a celebration march as the boys stomped around the endzone and bear hugged each other. Will had grabbed Don's jacket when they had all stood to shuttle out of the grandstands.

Make sure Jake don't hug my boy too long.

Off the highway and at the end of his short gravel drive, Don parked the truck and stared at his cold, lightless, cabin. The dark world spun around him like those storm cloud graphics on Channel Four. Milly used to keep flames in the hearth and the living room lamp lit. He would often see her chatting on the phone with her sister or sleeping on the couch as Tucker Carlson shouted something about the dirty Dems. If she was awake, she always waved at him, her freckled smile beaming in the hearth light. Tonight, he could see only the faint reflection of his rusting bumper in the black of the window.

Will's unanswered voice whispered in Don's head like some distant duck call. The logs of his cabin hid in the shadows. A semi rushed along the nearby highway. He should have told Will that Jake wasn't a fag, he was gay. He should have shoved the jack-ass down the steel stadium steps. He should have slapped him. He should have told him off, scorned him. He should have done something—anything but nothing.

thing—anything but nothing.

Don didn't step lightly as he entered the house. He could taste the vodka on his tongue. Amber beer stained his shirt. He shoved past the recliner and stomped down the hallway. He didn't twist the doorknob. He didn't call softly for his wife.

"Milly," he bellowed, "open the fucking door!"

He slammed his forearm into the pressed wood. A thud reverberated through the cabin. Will's voice echoed through his mind like a scratched CD. Don pounded the door.

"Right now, God dammit! You open it. Milly, please, for fuck's sake, open the door."

He leaned his back against the wall and slid downward until he sat on his ass in the hallway. He heard rustling inside the bedroom. He thought for a moment she might roll from beneath their comforter. She might unlock the door. He would see her red hair turned grey at the tips, her plump little lips, her blue eyes swollen from tears, her pudgy cheeks. She would hug him until the cold of the river and the chill of the wind vanished. They would cry together. They would fall into bed in a mess of pain and hurt and maybe, maybe she would talk to him.

"I just want to talk, Milly," he whispered into the blackness of the hallway.

Sunrise found him in the hallway. Puke dribbled down his chin and pooled on the carpet beside his hip. His back ached and his neck seized as he tried to stand. A crow cawed

somewhere outside, its empty call bouncing off the bare-leafed aspens before the undergrowth of willows and sagebrush swallowed the bird's voice. Don pushed through the pain of his stiff joints and climbed to his feet. The bedroom door was open.

The sheets curled in a mess atop the bed. Plates of half-eaten food crowded the dresser top. Mold puffed from bits of bread. Tissues littered the floor. The closet lay open; her clothes strewn everywhere. But she was not there. Water rushed from the sink in the kitchen, and that was where he found her, filling her watering pail and wearing a soft-blue robe, her hair a mess of red and grey clusters, her arms shaking, her face sallow and gaunt, her blue eyes aching. He didn't rush toward her, instead he stood near the dining table and watched as she watered the daisies perched along the cupboards. The yellow flowers had long since lost their blooms, their stalks stiff and dry. The soil about the stems cracked like sand cakes. Still, she filled each flower pot to its brim until she reached the last one and then she kept pouring until water spilled over the edge and carried with it clumps of arid soil that rushed across the countertop and fell in a murky waterfall to the floor.

Milly spoke to him for the first time since the funeral. She wasn't crying, but he could hear the hollow pang of her words.

"I'm empty."

Don didn't reply. He thought he'd wanted to talk, to tell her how he felt, but hearing

her voice shook him. It shook him like a dentist's drill, like a pavement cutter, like a woman he loved who felt a pain he couldn't help. He stared at her until the tears fell from her cheeks and then he walked out the front door and climbed into the truck. He didn't look back to see if she watched him pull out of the driveway. He couldn't. He couldn't see her hurt, not when he'd told her he wouldn't go to Jackson Hole a hundred times in the past two years. He couldn't watch her cry, not when he'd said nothing to Will when the bastard had called their son a fag. He couldn't bear to look at her.

Don drove past Dr. Farley's wheat fields as the cattle thrummed through the wild grass. Coleman's ranch stood empty except for the chickens that pecked away at beetles hidden in the late fall soil. A hundred or so head of elk siphoned out of Dry Creek canyon. Each year, they migrated to lower ground at the sign of the first snowfall. Even the mighty six points, with three-inch hafts and thick, matted beards, climbed down from the high mountain saddles. A giant set of antlers did little to help the bulls on the snowcapped ridges. Don pattered through Grover, through Bedford, past where the highway split into four lanes instead of two and the tiny city of Afton appeared through his cracked windshield.

He pulled into Will's shop. The pocked pavement of the back lot tugged against the tires as he rolled to a halt. A Land Rover with

Jackson county plates rested in the first bay. Don stumbled into the building. His body ached and his gut threatened to wretch at the first waft of oil. The four-by-four Sam and Dawson had been lifting no longer sat inside the shop and Don could see through the glass pane of the office all three of them laughing.

A man in a bright yellow North Face jacket and tight jeans stepped out from behind the Land Rover. He wore rectangular



Despondent
Michelle Hartvigsen
Honorable Mention

glasses and a ponytail dangled across his collar.

“Hey, excuse me, I just need to get a flat fixed. It’s been a half-hour, and no one’s done much of anything yet. I think it was Will I spoke with?”

Don wiped a clear grime from his lips. “Let me go find him for you.”

“Thank you, my wife and I need to reach Salt Lake City by early afternoon. So, the sooner the better.”

Don walked into the office. Will, Sam, and Dawson each sat in their chairs and sucked black coffee from their red-solo cups.

Sam slapped Don on the back. “Coffee?”

Don told them about the customer. They laughed and said they’d get to it when they got to it. The school calendar from 2017 hung, yellowed and wrinkled, on the wall. A picture of the varsity football team smiling poked at Don like a smoldering tire iron.

The last time Jake had visited the house, a month before he’d shot himself, he had told Don he was having a tough time. His boyfriend Josh had broken up with him after two years of going steady. Don stopped the conversation right there. Milly later told him that the breakup hadn’t been smooth. Josh had cheated on Jake with a gym rat at Gold’s—said he couldn’t ever think about marrying a man who wouldn’t stand up to a father, a father who still thought all gays slept with chimpanzees and had AIDS. Don had left before Milly could say anything more. He

hadn’t wanted to hear any more about it. He didn’t think those things anyway. But maybe Jake thought he did. Maybe Jake just needed to hear that he didn’t.

Don looked at Will as the burly man drained the rest of his coffee. Will still had both of his sons. Will could call them, visit them, write them a fucking letter if he wanted to. The cold of the river swept across Don’s feet. He wanted to shiver.

“Go change the fucking tire,” he said.

Will laughed. “What the hell? He ain’t in no rush. That car he’s driving costs more than Sam’s fucking house. I think the fag will be just fine.”

“He’s got a wife.”

“That don’t mean he ain’t a fag,” Will replied. “Did you see those pants?”

Sam and Dawson laughed, finished their coffees, and left the office to patch the tire.

“You need a day off?” Will asked. “You sure as hell look like it. Me and the wife have been talking and we thought a hike up Red Top might do us all some good. What do you think?”

Don lunged. He knocked Will off his feet. They smashed into the desk. He swung once, twice, three times. Will’s fist caught Don’s cheek. A dull pain rattled through Don’s molars and up the bridge of his nose. The pain felt good. It felt right and he punched Will a fourth time. Blood spurted from Will’s lips and he spat out a tooth. Will coughed and rolled to his side atop the desk. Don stood

over him, his knuckles smeared with crimson. Will put up his hands to fend against any more strikes. Coldness gripped at Don like a metal vice. His body quaked.

Sam or Dawson or maybe the man from Jackson must have called the police. Val and Pam's son, now Officer Putnam, led him away in handcuffs, shoved him into the backseat of a patrol car, and after a short ride to the station, locked him in a holding cell. Don spent the night there.

He curled up against the cold cement in the cell's corner and wondered if this is how Jake had felt—hollow and alone—when Tim had blackened his eye in the locker room after the homecoming game. Don slapped the floor. He should have driven to the high school, stormed into the coach's office and bitched and cursed and flailed until Tim had been kicked off the team. He should have prepped an icepack for Jake's eye and bought him a tub of vanilla ice cream. They had always argued over the best flavor. If Don could argue just one more time, he'd tell Jake he was right—that vanilla trumped chocolate any day, even if he didn't believe it. It didn't matter if he believed it or not, it never had, only his son mattered, and his son was dead. Jake was dead, and he was never coming back.

Officer Putnam released him the next morning. He said that the hospital had released Will with a busted lip and deep facial bruising, but despite the fight, Will had decided not to press charges. "Will said you two

are even now," Putnam said. "You should be grateful. He could have run you through the wringer at court."

Don said nothing. He walked the half mile down Main to where his truck was still parked behind the shop and a half-hour later he pulled off the dirt road into the barrow pit, climbed the barbed-wire fencing, and stepped through the stalks of late harvest alfalfa to where the river cut deep into the field. He had no more beer, no liquor, no fishing pole, or tackle. Don stood alone on the riverbank and stared into the empty current. ■

2 Good Will

Madison Silva

The rush Alicia Kendal-Rivera feels every time she walks in this room whirls like a tornado bringing good news. The air smells like stale coffee, hot paper, and millennial sweat. The campaign office for Percy Mendoza's 2020 senate run bustles with people. Men with pushed-up sleeves wipe their brows and write on whiteboards. Women with cardigans tied around their waists map out last-minute canvassing routes on posters of Georgia's voting districts. Alicia sits at a crowded table with earbuds in to block out the chattering as she calls the list of voters on the laptop in front of her. Chairs scrape across the linoleum floor. It's the middle of October. Only a few weeks until Election Day.

Alicia reminds another voter on the phone where his polling place is. His old crackly voice signals to her he'll probably vote for conservative incumbent Brent Parker, but she adds a final push for Mendoza before he hangs up. Blaire, the daughter of the deputy press secretary, does the same next to her. They've gotten close over the campaign. Alicia braids her blonde hair sometimes like they're at summer camp, and she and Blaire wear matching rainbow bracelets made of embroidery floss. Their knees touch under the table.

A group of UGA Young Democrats she recruited over the summer carries boxes of campaign handouts printed on recycled paper out the door. Even then, fifty or sixty people cram into the rented space of an abandoned strip mall in Monroe, Georgia. The corners of the metal-framed glass door and windows fog up from the humidity. A few TVs play the news, and Alicia pulls out her earbuds and watches as a CNN news anchor announces the beginning of new story featuring Mendoza. She straightens in her seat. Usually in a presidential year, long-shot candidates don't get a spotlight; national recognition is exactly what they could use right now. Except for people's phone notifications, the room stops, and staffers smile in anticipation.

"Oh my God," the boy, Demarcus, across from her says, staring at his phone. "Shit."

Before she can ask, the newswoman says, "Three women have come forward and accused Percy Mendoza, the Democratic senate candidate from Georgia, of sexual assault."

And the bullet pierces Alicia's heart. Except. There's no way this is true.

This half-Latino man who went to UGA wants to change the world, just like her. Her mother cried when she got into that school three years ago—first in her family to go to college. She made her famous tamales and invited their entire church over to their single-story home to celebrate. In the backyard, her father and his mechanic buddies sat in

plastic lawn chairs cheering her with the clanks of American beer bottles. She imagines Mendoza's mother did the same or, at least, wanted to; his father was deported when he was ten. Still, he got himself here, smiling down at her from a poster with tanned skin, dimples, and friendly brown eyes. She thought they matched—two scholarship kids with hard work tattooed on their bones.

The anchor continues with details—dates, names, faces—and Alicia watches in shock. One of the women was a staffer on his 2012 reelection campaign for state senator. Everybody unfreezes before the newswoman finishes the story. Blaire's mother, blonde hair tied up in a pencil, stands on a table and gives each team orders to proceed. The twitching fluorescent lights from above cut through the overcast white that come from the front windows. Response team members contact the campaign manager and his deputy for explicit instructions and an official statement from the Mendoza campaign. Alicia's stomach bubbles. The room buzzes like it did before, though the energy a little more frantic, and Blaire picks up her earbuds to put them back on.

"You're just going to go back to making calls?" Demarcus asks. His laptop is closed. Alicia ruffles her hair, and her leg shakes the table.

"I still have a lot of people on today's list to get through." Blaire shrugs. She tugs up the collar of her tank top.

Alicia wipes off the sweat on the back

of her neck. "You can't be serious, B." She doesn't know what she's supposed to do now, but this isn't it.

"Look," Blaire says to both of them, "this is going to be a bitch for the press team. It's the least we can do."

"A bitch.' Right." Demarcus scoffs and stands up to leave. The room looks about fifteen staffers short, though it's unclear whether they were called elsewhere or they just left. Alicia gets a Twitter notification from a Mendoza supporter she knows is on the response staff. On his personal account, Miguel, who she also knows from Young Democrats, asks for people to look past the candidate's "alleged mistakes" to focus on policy. Who's better for Georgia: Parker with his tax cuts for the upper class and his NRA and Big Pharma funding or the liberal Mendoza with a grass-root campaign?

Does that matter? She doesn't know. If those women are telling the truth, it doesn't. Even if Brent Parker wants to build the president's border wall, even if he hasn't done anything to prevent the murders of trans women of color, it doesn't matter. Right? But it's Mendoza. How could he do this?

Percy Mendoza, the son of a poor white mother and an undocumented father, is exactly who she wanted to be. He worked through high school to help pay the bills. He graduated early from UGA, top of his class. Law school at twenty-one. State senator at thirty-two in 2010. He was the first Democrat in years elected to represent the forty-sixth

district. When she was fifteen and saw his picture from his third state senate campaign in her father's newspaper, she knew this man, who looked like her, would do the things she could only dream of.

But now what?

"How did Miguel manage a positive tweet out of this?" she asks Blaire.

"Please, it's not like they haven't been preparing for this."

"What?" Alicia slams her laptop shut. Her hands feel hot.

Blaire squeezes her arm. "The opposition team knew about this. They have a plan. My mom only left to assist with damage control. We can still pull this off."

"You knew?" She searches Blaire's eyes for any resemblance of tenderness. It's like she's trying to bury it beneath responsibility or duty or something, but it's there, blue-gray like melted cotton candy ice cream.

Blaire stares down at her painted fingernails. "Alicia."

She knocks over a stack of "Mendoza for Change, Mendoza for Senate" yard signs on her way out the door. Alicia had spent all summer as a campaign fellow asking people to put those signs in their yards because she believed in the cause, in the Green New Deal, in universal healthcare, in easier access to U.S. citizenship. In him. Sweat from that hot summer stained her favorite shirt—the pink one with iron-on letters that spelled "Women for Mendoza"—and she chopped her thick black hair off because of that heat. Her moth-

er cursed in Spanish and signed the cross when she saw; her father jokingly slapped her with the *Times Georgian* and said she looked just like her younger brother Josh. It was the best summer of her life.

Now, it feels like a lie, like she should've seen it coming. She wants her feminist heart to say "I told you so." But instead, it tells her to take it home. Away from the faded awnings and 1980s red brick. Away from the cracked parking lot and the weeds that sprout like cancer in the webbed pavement. The humid Georgia air cups her cheeks like her mother would if she were here.

Her ten-year-old gold sedan with a busted air conditioner smells of the previous owner's cigarettes, but it drives the half-hour to Athens just fine. The blurs of orange, red, yellow, and brown trees whoosh past her rolled-down windows. The wind combs through her hair and makes her eyes water. In a few hours the street lights will turn on, and downtown Athens will glow in an eerie fall haze. Old buildings with columns and young adults kissing under arches remind passersby that this is a college town. Elite and traditional as campus may seem, the trash cans around student housing smell like beer, and girls walking home late at night thread their keys through their fingers.

Girls just like the ones in the news story. All around twenty-one like Alicia is. Gabby Nelson graduated UGA with a BA in English Education. During her sophomore year, she met Percy Mendoza at a Delta Sigma Phi par-

ty. Art student Lashinda Duncan worked at a café in Savannah when the young lawyer chatted her up during her closing shift. He took her out for a drink. Years later, Ariel Castillo-Vega, a campaign fellow, thought celebrating a win with a married state senator was harmless, especially since it was a day after the vote was called. She said he kept an expensive bottle of tequila in office, only for special occasions. The media reiterated the fact that Mendoza and each of the women were intoxicated at the time of these alleged assaults.

Each story is on Twitter, and she reads them in her bedroom. The three women

stand together in front of the state capital building; the gold dome towers above them like a floating crown. Shots of Parker supporters cheer them on, holding anti-Mendoza signs. She squints her eyes at the screen. The only other light in her room is five-year-old Christmas lights her father threw out. Yellow hums on the walls.

Alicia watches the video of Gabby, Lashinda, and Ariel recounting the worst nights of their lives. She gets chills up her back thinking about the smiling face she's used to seeing in the office hurting these women. They don't use the word "rape"; they say "taken advantage of." It makes no differ-



ence though. Sexual assault ends campaigns, or, at least, it should.

It should. Alicia has to keep reminding herself. If this is true, then he can't win. The women's tears convince her. They clutch each other's arms, not because they need support, but because they are a wall. But if Mendoza doesn't win, then Parker will. Everything Alicia cares about will be threatened—reproductive, queer, and immigration rights. Everything she believes will be ignored—the Black Lives Matter and March for Our Lives movements. Brent Parker has never returned her calls or answered her emails and letters. She supports Mendoza for more than their shared stories, and she's a poli-sci major because of him.

But if he's really this man flooding her social media feeds, then is he better than Parker, who showed up to a private costume party in 2017 wearing an obvious spray tan, a poncho, and a sombrero? When those photos surfaced, Alicia threw her phone against the wall and broke her case.

Why isn't she doing that now? Why isn't she so enraged at Mendoza that she needs to break something?

She lies on her bed with her legs pulled to her chest, and she measures her breaths by how often she blows her bangs out of her face. There's a prick in between her eyes and another on her sternum. This thing breaking is her.

Her dorm room feels smaller than usual. The walls have a "Mendoza for Change,

Mendoza for Senate" sign on them, as well as a Stonewall poster and a quote by Dolores Huerta in her roommate's cursive. A picture of her family sits on her desk. Her little mother smiles next to her tall, bearded father. They have that cheesy love kids hate but older teens appreciate. Josh towers over them all; his goofy grin proves that if you annoy your mother enough, she'll let you wear the Mexican football team's jersey in your family photo. Alicia stands in the middle in a colored shirt, her hair still long like her mother likes. A rainbow flag pin covers the shirt's logo. Old cellphones passed down from family members hide in their thrift store jeans. It's her favorite picture. Hours after it was taken, Mendoza announced his campaign for US Senate.

She gets texts from students in Young Democrats asking her what they do now. Some of them tell her they won't vote for him anymore. Some assure her the women's stories can't be proven. Blaire asks her if she's coming back tomorrow. One of her roommates asks to borrow some milk and, a few minutes later, if she can take the Mendoza sign out of their window. In Spanish, her mother asks if she's okay.

I don't know.

The world she imagined for herself—the one with Mendoza in the senate, with her kicking-ass as a human rights lawyer, ready to join his campaign for president—fractures. Where does she go now? Who does she follow if not Percy?

Alicia plugs in her phone. She finds the gold cross around her neck and rubs it in between her fingers. All she can think to do is recite the Lord's Prayer over and over again until she falls asleep.

Despite every feminist instinct in her body telling her no, Alicia skips her classes and walks in the campaign office the next morning. Blaire smiles and waves her over to their usual table in the middle of the hustle. The room feels empty but not because it isn't full of boxes and coffee pots and people on phone calls. The lights in the water-stained ceiling burns like Mendoza's bleached smile; the bright adrenaline she felt yesterday, that fix she loves, fizzles in her intestines.

Alicia doesn't get to work; she sits and waits. Mendoza is meant to give a press conference this morning in front of his childhood home, and a part of her wants to give him the chance to take everything back and fix it. If it were Parker in his place, she'd be protesting at the capital. If it weren't Parker he was running against, she'd walk away right now. Right?

It doesn't matter that they kicked the same soccer ball as kids or that they both shopped at Goodwill in high school. But that tingle of kinship—the electric tightrope that ties his future to hers—tugs at her anyways.

She believes those women, Gabby, Lashinda, and Ariel. They remind her of Christine Blasey Ford during the Kavanaugh hearings. Of a girl in high school who was raped at a football game. Their stories echo

those from centuries ago. They have to be true. She always believes survivors. But.

The first time she saw Percy Mendoza in person was at Atlanta Pride in 2015. He gave a speech on love. His wife stood behind him and held their toddler, who followed the movement of all the flags with a wave. Alicia had just come out to her parents. Her father clapped her on the back and said he didn't want her getting pregnant anyhow. Her mother took a few days but came into her room one day after Alicia had gotten out of the shower and brushed her daughter's wet hair. That was that. A few months later the Kendal-Rivera family took Alicia to Pride so she could meet other queer people and hear Mendoza. It was a great speech. She quoted it in her senior yearbook: "We can only take one step at a time, and sometimes that single step takes everything in us. But as long as it's forward, we're making progress, and if we take that step together, we get that much further."

The bell on the door dings, and several of the team leaders plow through the jumble of tables, chairs, and people. Mendoza's wife storms in with a scowl and clicking heels. The candidate follows with his campaign manager by his side. The dull glow from a cloud-blanketed morning shines through the windows. It hasn't been sunny in weeks.

"Can I have your attention everyone?" Mendoza signals a quieting down with his hands. "Thank you for your continued support. It humbles me to see all of you still behind me." The skin around his eyes crinkle as

No tie. Put together but still one of the people. Clever.

“I want you all to hear what I have to say before the press conference; I owe you that much.” He rocks from one foot to the other. Mendoza’s grayer than the last time she saw him, if that’s possible. He’s not as tan as his picture that’s printed on his pamphlets, and his eyes droop from fatigue. She hopes he’s tired from working his ass off for Georgians—for her. If he did those things to those women, he better be tired from repaying his debt through public service. He didn’t filibuster the state senate floor for reproductive rights just to get votes; he did it for those women. He repented. He’s sorry.

Blaire nudges Alicia, her hair braided like it’s summer. Like this is all a dream and she’ll wake up in Blaire’s bed the morning after a long day of canvassing. She pretends her friend didn’t know about the allegations and puts a hand on her thigh, feeling goosebumps.

Mendoza pulls notecards out of his pocket and clears his throat. “My Georgian family, I address you today because moments of my regrettable behavior from many years ago have resurfaced. I know I should have acted better. I know I should have made better choices. But I did not, and for that, I am sorry.”

It’s so rehearsed. He pauses when he should. He looks up every other word, makes eye-contact like he’s supposed to. “If we choose to drink, we must drink responsibly.

We must be accountable for our actions while intoxicated, even in instances of which both parties are under the influence.”

When he catches Alicia, he says, “What I thought were consensual relationships with these women deeply hurt them in ways I only know now. I want to apologize to them. I want them to know that that boy is not the man I am today, and I hope that it can somehow heal the hurt they feel.”

She’s paralyzed. He was a man when it happened—twenty, twenty-six, thirty-four. He admits to fucking them, to raping them. Right here. In front of her.

Images of Gabby’s streaking mascara and Lashinda’s black power salute and Ariel’s “#MeToo” shirt from yesterday’s Twitter scroll paste themselves to the back of her eyelids.

Mendoza apologizes to his wife, and Alicia wants to vomit all over the table. This man. This proud Latino, lawyer, state senator, son of an immigrant, child at the mercy of the generation before him. Who broke through it. Who showed Alicia she could too. He is not Percy Mendoza, the man she put in her yearbook. She’s not Alicia Kendal-Rivera, the girl in school-issued black velvet smiling above him.

“I want to apologize to the Georgia voters whom I have disappointed,” he says. “Unfortunately, every politician is imperfect—I am just as flawed as the next guy—but I will work to gain your trust back, Georgia. We can still improve our government together.”

She springs up. “Why should we re-

spect you, let alone vote for you?”

Blaire pulls at her hand, but she flicks it away. “I believed in you. I wanted to be just like you.”

Her eyes blur with tears, but the candidate takes a deep breath and maneuvers around chairs and people staring in silence to stand in front of her. Face to face. A table between them.

“You just want to hide this behind an apology and finish the race like those women aren’t suffering.” Alicia grabs her cross. Usually when she gets this upset, her mother sings a lullaby in Spanish, and her father brings her a glass of ice water.

Mendoza pulls a cross out of his shirt, and Alicia wants to rip it off his neck. They can’t be the same anymore. She doesn’t want to be.

“I have to finish this. I’m not going to win—maybe I shouldn’t.” They lock matching brown eyes. “But Brent Parker is a liar. He doesn’t hunt in Georgia like he says; he’s never stepped foot in Monroe. He called people like my father ‘gangsters’ and ‘drug dealers’ and yet dressed up in brown face three years ago like it was nothing. And he wants to repeal the only health insurance provider some of our most impoverished Georgians have access to. That’s why we’re here.”

“I know—but—” It’s all too much. Mendoza’s a liar too. He’s good. But he’s not. He’s what Georgia needs. But he’s not. Alicia wants to fight next to him. But she doesn’t.

Her chest aches like a weighted globe

lodged itself between her ribs. She stumbles into her chair as she leaves. She feels everyone’s eyes. She feels his. Blaire asks her to wait as she pushes through the door. The bell dings.

Light rain speckles the pavement, and Alicia swings her keys and stalks towards her car. A news van drives by, no doubt on its way to the foreclosed building Mendoza once called home. Blaire grabs her arm and pulls.

“Will you wait for a sec?”

“No! I don’t know what I’m doing here!”

The blonde crosses her arms. “We’re turning Georgia blue!”

“We’re not! Can’t you see that!” She steps forward, reaches out, feels the tail on one of the braids. It’s tied with a pink elastic, the same pink as her “Women for Mendoza” shirt.

“Let’s get out of here,” she whispers. “Let’s just go.” If Blaire could just get in her car and drive with her to wherever, listening to whatever music the blonde wanted, everything would be okay again.

“I have to stay; I have to see this through.” Blaire’s cheeks blush. She rubs her exposed legs with her hoodie sleeves to warm up. Where’s the goddamn sun?

“Why?” There’s a police siren in the distance. “Georgia deserves better. So do we.”

Blaire holds out her hand, the one with the bracelet they both have. Alicia takes it. “Yes, we do. We deserve you,” Blaire says.

“No.” She can’t be the one with the megaphone. She’s grateful Blaire isn’t dismiss-

ing how much she cares, but what could she do for Georgia without Mendoza?

“Yes,” Blaire says. “I know you loved him like I’ll never understand, but you are so much more than him.”

The wind sweeps over them; her hair whips in her face. All the things she did—canvassing, calling voters, leading the Young Democrats—she did for him. But it was her who wanted to go into one more neighborhood, call one more person, have one more meeting. Mendoza probably didn’t know about any of that.

The tip of her nose warms, and the heat travels through her veins to the rest of her body. Blaire squeezes her hand. Alicia could be more because she does care, because she believes Georgia could be safe space for everyone one day. She just has to try. To bulldoze and rebuild a world better than men like Mendoza could build. A world still imperfect but decorated with *papeles picados* and magnolias.

She drives over the weeds on her way out. The “Mendoza for Change, Mendoza for Senate” sign keeps the “Welcome to the City of Monroe” sign company in her review mirror. On the drive back to school, she thinks of Gabby and Lashinda and Ariel and of Parker with his twenty-four years’ experience fucking up the senate. She thinks of Percy Mendoza’s father and of Blaire’s braids. She thinks of the party her parents will throw when she graduates from UGA and when Josh graduates from high school.

What will Georgia look like then? What will she look like? Shorter hair? Fifteen pounds heavier? Law school grad? Fresh attorney at a civil rights firm? A political law firm? Activist? Politician? Fighter.

Alicia has to keep fighting.

One day the trees will sway in a blue sky instead of this white one. ■



Trompe L'oeil
Michelle Hartvigsen
First Place

3 Take Once a Day

Claire Atwood

Tuesday, three o'clock. The waiting room is dull, despite the cat posters and colorful printed quotes taped haphazardly around the room. The fish tank by the wall is due for a cleaning. I feel bad for the fish being in that cloudy place, always having something blurring your vision and there being no way to fix it. I look away, but the fish stare at me with their beady eyes, willing me to look back at them. The phone rings at the reception desk. Sometimes I wish I could hear the other end of a phone call without being near it. I feel like I could get a lot more useful information if I just knew what other people were saying out of my earshot. Not like I need to know what the receptionist's conversation is. But in general.

I am expecting my psychiatrist to come through the giant wooden door any second now. It's been two minutes past the time and she's never this late. I hope I didn't get the date of my appointment wrong. I'm a very forgetful person. I blink and my eyes tingle. I didn't realize I had been sitting here staring wide-eyed for that long. Embarrassing. Tears form and leak onto my waterline, but I blink rapidly to clear them. I don't want the receptionist to think I'm crying. When is she coming? I cross and uncross my legs. Maybe

there's a new policy I don't know about that I have to go back there on my own and she's waiting for me, thinking I'm late. That could be the case. I did have to miss my appointment last week and they could've changed the rules then, but I wouldn't know about it because I missed last week. I shouldn't have missed. I didn't even have that good of a reason. I just-

"Rosalyn?"

I jump a tiny bit in my chair but play it off by quickly walking toward the door. My psychiatrist, Dr. Young, smiles at me and starts walking down the hall. She's a recent graduate from some university in Minnesota so she's new to the wonderful world of psychiatry-ing. She's nice but I don't feel like there's much to work with for me. But I don't want her to feel bad, so I keep coming. I'm not a fan of the one-on-one interaction thing and every appointment there's an inescapable pressure in my chest. I release a breath to try to relieve it.

Dr. Young's office reminds me of a millionaire's Los Angeles house: very minimalist, very modern, very clean. It's refreshing sitting in such a calming area; it was probably designed like this on purpose. I could stare at the crisp, perfectly angled corners of the wall until I fall asleep as I sink into the black leather couch. Today, she has the little window next to her desk open, letting in cool autumn air. Comforting, maybe, but I can't help but notice it's letting in a different amount of light than usual and filling the office with a dis-

comforting energy that I can't explain. I'm having a hard time settling into the couch properly.

"Rosalyn?"

I take my eyes off the open window and look at Dr. Young. Did she say something?

"Sorry," I say.

"How've the last couple weeks been?"

Dr. Young reaches around to her desk for her notepad.

"Sorry, I'm having a hard time focusing."

"Why is that?"

"Frazzled, I guess? Too much going on. I'm not sure how else to describe it."

"What is going on? Is it about school?"

Someone's kid screams at the top of their little lungs in the parking lot. Probably pissed that they have to go in for a doctor's appointment. I don't blame them, but I'm not out there screaming about it. My muscles tense up as the noise pierces my ears. My jaw clenches.

"Can't you hear the noise on the street?"

For one thing, whoever's spawn that is, but the engines starting, revving, going constantly and footsteps on concrete and wheels on asphalt. Doesn't that bother you?"

"Would you like me to close the window?"

"Yeah."

She reaches open and pushes the glass slide over. It seems a little forceful and my heart jumps. She writes some things down on her notepad. As irritation subsides, guilt for

getting so heated sets in. I was hoping she'd agree with me or think the dramatism was funny. I must've offended her.

"It's mainly just distracting. Kind of irritating. You know?" I quickly add. Dr. Young continues to write. The early buds of perspiration form on my brow as my face grows in color.

"Can I see what you're writing?" I ask.

"Why?"

"Just curious."

"It's just some notes. Nothing to worry about." She scribbles more on the notepad.

The heat on my cheeks peak at an uncomfortable broil as an awkward silence emerges. I shouldn't have asked to see what she's writing. I probably seem like a paranoid psycho. This session already isn't going well. Should I say something else? Maybe that's what she expects me to do. My mind races for a proper response to redeem myself.

"Are you taking the medication every day?" She puts the pencil down. I exhale, careful to make it a troubled exhale rather than a sassy exhale.

"Yes."

"How has it been working for you?"

"Sometimes I can't tell if it's taking effect."

"Well it does take about two weeks for your body to accept it but keep at it. It'll be most effective with consistency."

But it's been a month, I think. I just nod. Dr. Young starts going into breathing exercises and my mind wanders. I didn't think I was

messed up enough for medication, much less needing to come to therapy. It wasn't even my idea. My pediatrician decided I should start going after a rousing week of tossing cookies before I started school. Yeah, moving into a new apartment all on my own with no one I know for a thousand miles was overwhelming, but that's being an adult. Mostly the sickness was majorly inconvenient but could be chalked up to a bug floating around. Sometimes I just feel like I'm loading up on pills for the hell of it. I guess I've always felt like this, but it's just normal. Nothing more than a personality quirk.

"Are you okay, Rosalyn?"

The tenseness lingers and no amount of couch-sinking relieves it. Beads of sweat form on my brow. The pressure in my chest is making it harder to breathe. I pick at my chipping nail polish. I exhale.

"Yeah," I say. "I'm alright."

Am I though?

I remember back two weeks ago, lying on my back on the floor, listening to the clashing of pots and plates as my roommates made dinner. The scent of chili powder and ginger were so strong, I could imagine tendrils of smell creeping under my door, like in the cartoons. I'm not a fan of ginger and I'm definitely not a fan of its thick smell filling the apartment. Their chatter and laughs were pitchy. It put me on edge. I exhaled and tried to relax my jaw. Sometimes I think I'll loosen a tooth one day with how often I find myself clenching. My stomach rumbled so I decided

to go out to the kitchen and not stay huddled up in the darkening room. The scent hit me right in the face when I opened the door and my nose wrinkled slightly at the potency. When I turned the corner from the hall into the kitchen, the chatter died down. They were all standing in the middle of our small kitchen, allowing little space for anyone else. My roommates looked at me and one of them offered a polite hello. One of them continued the conversation but the room still flooded with tension and awkwardness and every nerve in my body yelled at me to flee. My mind raced for an escape plan. *What are you in the kitchen for anyway?* I thought. *To talk? You didn't even plan before you came in here! Just grab a snack and get out!* I scooped past them, reached in my cabinet for the Cheez-Its, and immediately beelined back down the hall. My door muted the laughter from the kitchen. I sat down in the middle of my bedroom floor again as my stomach churned and heart pumped. I munched on a cracker. They were stale. I lay back down and stared at the kitchen light glowing through the darkness until my eyes burned with welling tears.

I woke up, still on my bedroom floor. My whole room was dark, the apartment quiet. My phone informed me of the time – two a.m. My back scolded me for the unpleasant sleeping position with jolts of pain as I peeled myself upright. Nausea rolled through my stomach, telling me I needed to eat something more substantial than stale Cheez-its. I sat at the kitchen counter without turning any

lights on, eating Froot Loops. I couldn't shake the emptiness even as I filled another bowl of cereal and stared at the loops, colors void in them.

I decided that my roommates and I just wouldn't be friends. It was fine. I'm naturally an introvert anyway. I continued my distinct schedule. It's a personality trait of mine, keeping the same schedule each day so I know exactly how that day will turn out—no surprises. I like it. Two days after the Awkward Kitchen Encounter, I was out in the kitchen, waiting by the toaster for my breakfast when one of my roommates entered. My stomach muscles tensed immediately but I tried to shove it down. *C'mon Rosalyn, don't let it be like this the rest of the year*, I thought.

I smile at her, but she's neck-deep in the fridge. *Great, you're a weirdo*. Just as she's emerging, my toast pops out, causing me to jump. She notices my spook and says, "You good?"

I force a little laugh but forget to answer the question. I try and stifle my breath to calm myself from the scare and I keep my face turned so she doesn't see the blood rushing to my cheeks. I stare at my too-crisp piece of bread poking itself out of the toaster for a little too long.

"Are you going to take your toast out?"

I left for class earlier and earlier after that, to avoid any other awkward encounters with those I live with.

That same day, I found myself walking into my first class out of breath from

the speed of my strides. But the room was dead silent, so I held back my need for deep breaths until my chest ached and the room rocked a bit. I didn't want to be huffing and puffing in a quiet room like I just finished a marathon. I sit down and mess around on my phone, trying to act more like a tired, bored college student than someone who probably ran to class and cares too much. Most days, I feel like it's getting harder and harder to play the part. I guess that's normal for anyone to fit in. Hide the feelings away; pretend like you're calm, cool and collected. That's how I've always been. Lately though, I wonder if I'm losing my mind.

Three days after the Awkward Kitchen Encounter, my pills were missing from my bedside table. I couldn't seem to remember where they were in the morning, and it kept slipping my mind. When I got back from class, I saw them on my desk behind a vacant picture frame. I figured I would just take them the next day since it was so late. I do feel guilty for not following the doctor's orders, but I don't feel any loss from not taking them. In fact, it's almost freeing. I hated taking those stupid pills anyway. There was no point, I'm perfectly capable without them. It felt like a fashion statement instead of a prescription, as so many people on the Internet portray it. I'm not that person; I don't want to *be* that person. I was so ashamed of those pills when I had to pick up the prescription from the grocery store. I could almost hear everyone's thoughts around me, *Oh look at her go with*

her pills. Everyone has problems, you aren't special. Just deal with it.

One day I grabbed the little orange bottle. The orange burned my eyes. I flushed them down the toilet and watch them go all the way down. My heart thumped and my muscles tensed. I exhaled.

I cancelled my psychiatry appointment last week because I didn't feel like bringing up my feelings again. Like I said, it wasn't a good reason, but I had a small inkling that I was only noticing my quirks because of the therapy and medication. Surely it couldn't be healthy! With therapy in the way, I'll never have a normal, stable mindset. Although, once I felt enough guilt, I decided I would go back and tell Dr. Young how I really felt. She needed to know so she could focus on patients with actual issues.

I think back to a bit ago in the waiting room, the receptionist seemed to be in a bad mood. I'm not sure if me being there so often annoys her, because she has to keep putting in my information every single time. I figured that would probably get annoying for anybody. Luckily she wouldn't have to deal with me much longer.

"Rosalyn?"

I look up and I notice a sensation on my cheek. It's wet. A tear? I had no idea I was crying. That's embarrassing. Why do I keep overwhelming myself with my own thoughts? It's annoying. I wipe it quickly and hurry to follow her.

"Tell me what's going on. It's good to

talk about these feelings."

I know I need to be honest, but I don't want to offend her. But maybe if I am, she'll understand. She deserves to know.

"I don't think I need to be in therapy. I'm not in any danger, I'm just living my life and being how I've always been. I'm in tune to people's emotions; I can read them easily even if they don't say anything. I can kind of tell how they're feeling towards me. Yeah, I'm a little sensitive, too, I guess, but who isn't? I get nervous about things but that's human. It's how we survive. I'm a little bit of a perfectionist and I care about things getting done right, I guess. This is just my personality. I stopped taking the medication a couple days ago too." I take a breath. "I just thought you should know what's really going on. I...don't want to waste your time."

Dr. Young doesn't respond right away. I can see her internalizing my words and processing an answer.

"I understand this feeling you have. I'd like to inquire about this a little more if I may. How is your relationship with your friends?"

"I don't really spend time with anyone. I'm an introvert. Plus, my roommates don't seem to like me very much. I don't really see them a bunch because of that," I say.

"Have you been following a regular sleep and eating pattern?"

"I wake up at night and eat when the kitchen is empty. I have a hard time falling asleep sometimes too. But there's no other reason for that other than a messed-up sleep

schedule.”

“Do you know why you started coming to therapy?”

“The doctor made me after I kept getting sick.”

“Right, and she said that it was related to anxiety. Do you believe you have some anxiety in your life?”

“I’m a little more conscious and aware of things, but that’s not bad. Like I said, that’s just how I am. That’s why I stopped taking the medication. I’m not bad enough to be on a pill.”

Broken Light
Amber Healey
Honorable Mention



“There’s nothing wrong with your brain needing a little extra help. From what you’ve shared with me today, I think things go a little deeper than that. There are behaviors in your life that are impairing you from being happy. There’s a constant worry in the back of your mind. That’s what an anxiety disorder is,” she says.

“I really don’t think it’s that bad.”

“Just having anxious thoughts and fears doesn’t constitute a disorder, you’re right. But you are displaying avoidance behaviors that get you out of stressful or anxiety-inducing situations. I can promise you these people you’ve mentioned do not hate you. Your brain is misfiring warnings to try and shield you when there’s no danger. But I also think you are so used to internalizing everyone’s emotions that you think you’re the problem. Have they told you that they hate you?”

“No. But they didn’t need to, actions speak-”

“Then you don’t know for sure. Let’s say worst case scenario, they do. You’ve given them no reason to, so it’s their problem. We just need to help you have more confidence and learn to manage this,” she explains.

“It’s not like that...” The words get stuck in my throat.

“Rosalyn, I feel like you know it is.”

I can feel hot tears welling up. My heart beats faster as I stifle a sniffle. The most embarrassing thing a person can do: cry in public.

“You aren’t alone in this. We’re going to

help you change your thoughts,” she says.

“I can’t help what I think. It’s not that easy.”

“I’ll admit it, it is hard. But there are so many people who care about you and want to see you succeed. I want you to succeed. I know you do too.”

I sniffle like a little kid who just had a tantrum. My psychiatrist hands me a tissue.

“I know you don’t like medication but there’s no shame in it. You are still a good person. Can we get you back on your prescription?”

“Will it help me?” I ask.

“If you let it help you, then it will help. If you take them and keep having visits with me, I promise you will be okay,” she says. I take a shaky breath and nod.

Back in my apartment, I am lying on my floor again. I’m more conscious of my tense shoulders and I let them droop onto the carpet. My roommates are in the kitchen laughing. I feel my heart give a few hard thumps, but I know I can’t dwell in it this time. Reach out, I think. Make an effort. It’s okay.

I exhale, trying to sink into the floor but it doesn’t accept. I stand up, open the door and walk into the kitchen.

“Hey Rosalyn!” ■



Dragon
Nikki Christensen
Second Place

Undergraduate Poetry

1 Justyn Hardy

Losing Virginity

Our feet dance over sandy tiles in your parents' kitchen while they visit Uncle Rubin in Rock Springs. I think I love your Uncle Rubin, and you push the cookie dough toward a mirrored backsplash while The Band Perry promises country love and I kiss you until it hurts, and we are sixteen and lost somewhere between stupid and lust. Your volleyball-toned legs, tight as a horse's bit, tease my mouth,

but eight miles south in Afton, my father's screams echo through taxidermy six-point bulls as he whips mother into numbness with a lance-laced tongue, because she cheats with Rick, and Matt, and Mike, and everyone else with a penis, because they wear two-piece suits, drive Hondas instead of rusted Fords, and they keep the stubble shaved. Mother doesn't need to tell me she's always been true,

but I hear different screams as you pull me deeper. My fingers tear a moose-patterned quilt, and everything sweats and slides and we tangle, awkward as sagebrush in barbed wire, while Buddy, your tabby, naps on the vanity by a framed picture of your family at the ranch in Cody, and I hope your dad can see us, all those times he bit his tongue when forced to shake my trailer-trash hand,

but instead I see my father promise he didn't mean it when he called mother a whore as he pours ice cubes into a Ziploc and presses it against her cheek, and I blink droplets of sweat, strain against your body, clench my calves and beg you, heaven, and god, for one more minute, one more thrust, but all your perfect nakedness cannot matter as I try to hide from mother's broken face.

Wyoming

My boots chip the alfalfa frosted
from autumn's early morn and my hands
stuffed in buckskin gloves grip the turn-valve
until three twists right lock the damming mechanism
and the whistle of pressurized irrigation pipe
softens like the amber glow of the waking sun warming
my chest under a sweatshirt torn by barbed wire
three months now since I skirted the east fence in
hopes of waving down Scott as he sped down
the borrow-pit, a whirlwind of dust in his four-wheeler's
wake, on his way to help Charlotte, the Andalusian,
deliver a moonlight foal that they named
Spirit and now she follows me past the boughless elm
in the middle of twenty acres as I move each
pipe section twenty yards south to ensure no alfalfa
blade dries under a cowboy horizon,
and with each linkage, twist of the rain-bird, cylindrical
shove, the line grows, stretches across mud,
dried horse manure, thistle, vole tunnels, gentle
rises in the earth, and accompanying depressions
until I link and latch the endcap and wait, there
near the fence line not so far from highway eighty-nine
where Duramax engines power three-quarter-ton
pickups to the next barn, or farm, or unpaved driveway
and their roar almost wipes clean the quiet of water
whispering through the iron, tightening the joints
of a long line, and as Spirit paws the thistle patch
beside my boots, the rain birds sputter, first a clumsy
drip and then, as if infused with hymnal power,
they bathe the alfalfa and I listen to Wyoming's
steady rhythm of half-second chinks.

My Thirty-Aught-Six

My father bought for my thirteenth birthday a thirty-aught-six with a custom stock—an engraved oak vignette of Jackson Lake under the Grand Teton.

A shale pit—a quarter mile south down Cottonwood Canyon, not far from where Mack, his friend, reloads .44 Magnum bullets in exchange for seared T-Bone's—whistles

as father cautions me to keep my finger far from the trigger until crosshairs lock on the nickel gong, a hundred yards off, and don't pull, squeeze, until the hammer knocks

another kindergartner in Sandy Hook, a six year old with Levi overalls, crimson shirt, and a hat next to a still head, no longer moving, the scream silenced by the ricochet of my aim

reverberating off the shale pit, and I think it is cool that my father spends the afternoon showing me how to be a man like him, who carries a concealed and brings home

four-point typical Whitetail, jerky for the rest of the year, a Boone and Crockett mount for the living room next to Dave Merrill's Elk Ridge and our family picture.

But those kindergartners, twenty in total
never climbed the steps of their yellow
school buses, never opened the patio
door and set their bookbags beside the piano.

My father took me to the shale pit five years
before Adam Lanza opened fire with his
Bushmaster XM15-E2S .223-caliber semiautomatic rifle,
before I knew a gun could destroy.

In a safe, in our basement father keeps eight
rifles, six handguns, and enough rounds to load
each firearm, and my thirty-aught-six remains
there, untouched since 2012.

When I visit Star Valley for Christmas each
semester's end, father asks me if I want
to shoot skeet up Cottonwood and I
pretend I can't because mother wants

to play Scrabble, and I never say no to him,
even though I want to shout a thousand
times louder than the bullet striking the
gong in an echo chamber of stone, NO!

because in 2007, my father bought my first
gun and loved me enough to share his
passion with his thirteen-year-old son—a passion
that left twenty-seven dead before I could squeeze the
trigger.



Window View
Michelle Hartvigsen
Honorable Mention

2 Jordan Forest

Grief

Grief is the dog with the wet nose,
pushing up against your leg,
staining your khakis
as he paws you to feel his matted hair.

He sits at your shoelaces,
waiting for that last bite of good on your plate,
a long silver line
running from his teeth to the floor.

When he sleeps,
his legs twitch beneath him,
running toward a bone seen
and never caught.

And in the night,
belly sagging,
he howls to the dark
and waits for a reply.

But grief is also the family of deer
walking across the road—
one mom, two babies,
legs so thin they could snap.

With each step they take,
they bow,
gentle like a question scared of the answer.
Amen, amen, amen.

A driver sounds her car horn,
and the deer lurch forward,
feet skittering across asphalt,
searching for anywhere else.

The dog with the wet nose watches
from the backyard— barks. The deer turn
to face him, and he sits still.
After they leave, he licks himself.

The Wicked Witch is Dead

I am melting,
my green skin moving beyond me
like the curves of the Green River
bend between Colorado and Utah.
Gnats fill the path,
as plentiful as munchkins,
each creature wondering where I am going
and how long I have been going there.

I camped with my father near the Green River
twenty-five years ago.
He pointed to a red rock in the shape of an eagle—
folded wings, head down.
I thought it looked like a chipped fingernail
long enough for dirt to stick underneath.
He laughed when I told him,
and I wish that I had seen the eagle instead—
strong head, long beak, talons balanced on the branch below.

Oracle Bones

Peeling the outside like a hardboiled egg,
the Chinese would strip the turtle of its shell to make oracles
until only exposed flesh remained.
They took the animal's offering
and scratched questions into its bone,
asking about the millet field
and the clouds above the Songshan Mountain
and the Yin daughter's ability to grow a healthy child in her belly.
Then they would light the shell on fire until it cracked,
interpreting the movements in the fissure as the sign
to harvest early, prepare for rain, marry the girl.

When I was a girl,
Mom and I started collecting
flying pigs— beaded pigs and stained-glass pigs
and iron-doorstop pigs—
because if pigs could fly
then the world could be lucky
and our life away from my father
favored.
And pigs did fly—
beneath my cotton drapes
and in front of the laundry room door
and on the keychain of my backpack.
But in that same house,
I hid money in books,
and my mother painted the walls purple to convince me to stay,
and I wonder why we never asked if our mythical world
was meant to be lucky.

The year my family split,
my father gave me a tortoise for my birthday.
I would watch as it ate
lettuce in triangle-shaped bites,
the neck stretching beyond where its shell home
could reach.
And I wonder now if Mom and I were
feeling for the future all wrong,
too eager to clamp our hands around things
that were never ours—
if maybe the things we needed to know warmed
in the tortoise,
growing its belly so that we too could ask
about the clouds above the mountains
and the girl who wanted to raise a child.

3 Jacob Taylor

Doctor

They suck away the blood that fills my veins,
Connect wires and tubes to see within my skin.
Bring pain to find the cause of all my pain.

My arms are painted red and purple, stained
From every time their needles bruise my skin.
They suck away the blood that fills my veins.

I roll on my back—the syringe goes in. They drain
My spine. I want to flinch, but it's deep in.
Bring pain to find the cause of all my pain.

They try to put an IV in. My vein
Rolls—rejects the catheter. They try again.
They suck away the blood that fills my veins.

They want my piss and shit. They've gone insane.
They cram me in an MRI machine.
Bring pain to find the cause of all my pain.

And you, my new doctor, more tests obtain.
Your needles break and come inside my skin.
You suck away the blood that fills my veins.
Bring pain to find the cause of all my pain.

All the Ones I Cannot Love

The girl who played violin in Chamber Orchestra.

Her best friend told me to ask her to Homecoming.

I did.

The girl from Skyridge High who left love notes for me.

Anonymous, save her number, in my locker.

I stalked her number online but never told her I knew who she was.

Last week, I passed her on my way to Physics 2010.

The girl I had two classes with my freshman year of college.

She's an activist on every front.

After we'd studied together for months, she confessed to me her love.

We held hands once.

The girl who switched from acting to technical theater because I was there.

She asked me on a date.

We roamed the outlet mall at Traverse Mountain after hours.

We never spoke again.

The girl who loved to read Stephanie Perkins as she walked through the halls of Skyridge High.

Karlie offered her five dollars to kiss me.

She never did.

The girls at Lagoon that my friends say are tens,

With short-shorts and tank tops

And glorious breasts.

The girl I've known since elementary school.

She's clumsy and blunt, incredibly sweet.

I convinced myself that I had a crush on her for two whole years.

We never went out, not even once.

The guy that I love

Who will never love me back.

This is Me

This is me:

I'm normal. I go to church on Sundays just like everyone else on my block. I have sisters and brothers and a mom and a dad, but I don't always like them. I play poker during lunch breaks with my friends. I stay up till one in the morning to finish my calculus. I binge-watch *Doctor Who* and *Fullmetal Alchemist* when I have time—and when I don't. I ask girls out on dates often enough that my sisters don't get on my case. I drive my mother's bulky 2000 Honda Odyssey to school, and for lunch I pack peanut-butter sandwiches and apples from the tree out back. See, I'm just like you.

This is me:

My door is shut and locked. When I look something up online—anything at all—I go Incognito. Words crawl up my throat, try to force themselves out, but I gulp them down. They sit there, swell in my chest until I finally banish them, a low mutter in the shower, my voice hidden beneath slaps of water against the tub's floor: *I'm gay, I'm gay . . .*

This is me:

I'm not like you, and the thought of you finding out terrifies me. I dress like you, down to the striped t-shirts and black jeans. I laugh at your jokes—even when they hurt. I hide all the *me* deep inside, but your eyes dig through my skin. I thrust my fingers deep into my chest and peel my skin away. My lungs burn from holding their breath. I tear them out. My liver is shriveled and black from filtering your words: I toss it aside. My heart aches from loving those you say I can't—I pluck it out, crush it under my foot.

This is me:

Where my lungs were, the air grows stale. Where my liver was, your words fester. Where my heart should be, there's only disgust. I'm full of holes, but you've filled them all up. I'm not even me anymore—I'm you



Reflection of a Field Worker
Amy Larsen
Honorable Mention

Undergraduate Nonfiction

1 Slant Etymology

Marie Skinner

Do you know what Phoenician purple looks like? It's also called Tyrian, Royal, or Imperial purple. It's a reddish-violet color and it comes from the Murex snail. You can tell from the names that this color has a storied past, but for most of us, it's just purple.

Purple like a tattoo stencil. Tattooists can make a stencil out of carbon paper like what secretaries and office assistants once used with typewriters or the kind of transfer paper artists use. The typewriter copy-paper is cheaper but a lot harder to find. The lines from such a stencil bleed after a little while, but the purple is hard to remove completely. I've tried dozens out on my skin, but I only have one tattoo that was ever needled into permanence. It's blue, not purple, and it's a bird. I could call it a bluebird of happiness, in remembrance of my father's parents.

Grandpa gave Grandma bluebirds. I loved the looks on their faces when he brought her another little glass bluebird, or a fridge magnet, or a pair of embroidered slippers. She cried every time and wiped tears away from her nose that she called a hatchet. To me, her profile looked like the lady carved on the cameo shell that I once found on her dresser, but I know she didn't agree. Sometimes she took off her dark glasses to wipe the

tears or to get a better look at the gift (she was only *mostly* blind), and I could see her eyes, which were bluer than mine and lighter than Grandpa's. He smiled like a shy, sweet boy giving his crush a trinket. I always expected them to hug or kiss, but they didn't—at least not in front of me. I waited in vain to hear what they might say to one another—I wanted to hear Grandma's soft, sleepy southern accent, which I only recognized for what it was long after the last time I heard her voice. Grandpa didn't have the accent, but they were both from the same town in Missouri before they eloped and ran away to California. But they didn't talk in those moments, which were perhaps too precious to spoil with words. With his gift delivered, Grandpa would go sit in his cracked vinyl armchair, and Grandma would put the bird away and get on with whatever she had been doing before he got home. When he didn't have gifts of bluebirds for her, Grandpa told her she was his bluebird of happiness. My tattoo isn't actually for them. I had a dream about the design, and that's that, even though it reminds me of them. The tattoo began as a purple stencil outline and slipped a little higher up the spectrum as it became permanent.

The Greek word for royal purple is porphyra (πορφύρα). The word, to me, is a reminder of a poem by Robert Browning. I've spent hours on *Porphyria's Lover*, and, of course, I've researched the etymology of that unusual name. Most sources note that porphyria is a word for purple (unadorned pur-

ple, not Tyrian, Phoenician, or Murex), and that it's a blood disease which causes the buildup of certain chemical compounds that discolors the skin and bodily fluids. The condition might contribute to mental illness, but what doesn't, really? There's also a mineral named porphyry which is beautiful and, for some reason, not that useful or desired. The mineral and the disease, as far as I can tell, are dead ends in the context of Browning's poem, and "purple" isn't enough to spark any connections. But *imperial* purple, painstakingly and expensively extracted from the Murex snail, is the key.

To someone with a classical education, like Browning himself, the entire plot of the poem is in the title, and only the details must be uncovered in verse. Porphyria is higher on the social ladder than her lover, and since her name is synonymous with Phoenician purple, the class difference may have been vast indeed. Unfortunately for her, the unnamed lover feels so ashamed and debased that she would visit him in the stormy night but never become his wife, that he strangles her with her own hair. Three times around her slender neck he wound the golden strands. When it was done—and done, he was certain, without causing her any pain—he tenderly opened her eyes and rested her "blushing" cheek on his shoulder. I take "blushing" to mean strangled purple—who could tell the difference between purple and red in a dim, fire-lit room? So she is Porphyria three times over, at least, and he is only notable because of his connec-

tion to her.

My hair was never quite that long—I could wrap it twice and a little more around my neck but never three times. I sold five years of hair growth to a man with a fetish for cutting women's hair. He had a wig shop in Ogden, and he paid me \$1300 for three feet of "virgin" hair, meaning that it had never been dyed, heat-styled, or blow-dried. Negotiations over the phone damaged the initial agreed-upon price—my buyer thought he could gouge me because I exposed that I needed the payment soon, and he used it against me. On the other hand, who sells their hair if they aren't in some kind of urgent need?

Negotiations through the websites dedicated to connecting sellers and buyers of human hair can take months. Most buyers want to cut the hair themselves, which introduces nightmarish logistics and precautions to the negotiations. The fact that beautiful women earn up to six times as much as overweight, flat-chested, or unattractive women, and that a man's hair is almost worthless regardless of the quality of the hair supports my supposition that most of the buyers aren't just making wigs, and that's intimidating and disturbing.

The buyer arrived in a dinged-up, white van with no windows and rusty fenders. His shining scalp and hopeless comb-over made his profession and his presumed sexual obsession into a punchline. I hadn't warned the buyer that I was six months pregnant,

and every photo I used to broker the deal was carefully composed to play up features that would increase my asking price. Disappointment and maybe a hint of anger when I answered the door robbed his greeting of sincerity, but, of course, he couldn't protest or argue about the agreed-upon price at that point, because he was there for *hair*. He was a *wigmaker*, not some fetishist. I'm sure he needed to believe that as much as he hoped I believed it.

I stepped aside and held the door open rather than directly inviting him in—it felt like the right thing to do. Money changed hands. The folded bills in my pocket were intended for our midwife so our daughter could be born at home, just like our oldest son. I watched from the living room as the buyer unpacked a tall stool with a low, ornate back and an outdated cinderblock of a VHS camcorder, complete with a beaten and crippled tripod. He also lugged in a scuffed briefcase, which held clippers and scissors. I agreed to let him tape the haircut if he didn't record my face, although judging by that camcorder, it might not have mattered—even in 2011, nobody had a VCR. My partner had planted himself conspicuously in the room adjacent to where the haircut would take place.

When I sat with my back to the camera, my hair fell past the seat. The buyer asked me to look over my shoulder, though he arranged a curtain of hair to hide my profile from the camera's glass eye. It makes my skin crawl, even now, so I try not to wonder too

much. That video added \$300 to the price he paid, which was both an argument for and against letting him have it.

He removed the weight from my scalp one rough handful at a time, moving toward the veil that blocked my face from the camera. What a showman. Despite the haphazard process, he carefully set the severed locks flat in a neat pile. For the sake of the prospective wig, I'm sure. A few times, he shivered my spine by combing his fingers through my hair after making a cut. Everything he did was a performance, and the implications repulse me. The lie about it all bothers me the most. He thought, or wanted to think, that he tricked me into it, and that makes his actions wrong.

At some point in the midst of the haircut, I discovered my partner's eyes locked on me, his face still and pale like it was a mask. I smiled and did my best to silently convey how much I did *not* want him to knock that creeper on his ass, no matter how satisfying it would have been. The silent message got through, which was a relief and a disappointment. When the final, trailing locks were shorn, the buyer turned off the camera and spent ten minutes fixing the ragged, uneven style. The back got buzzed to half an inch or less, and the front was left long enough to hang into my eyes. I loved the style, but I couldn't bring myself to thank the buyer as he swept and stored the short clippings that fell to the floor in the final haircut—I know not why, nor do I wish to—packed up, and left.

As soon as the door closed, my partner was at my side. He held me and ran his hand through my hair and didn't say anything. With the wigmaker gone, we let our son into the room. He gasped when he noticed my hair. The thick braid I always wore over one shoulder was dearer to him at naptime than the army of stuffed animals on his bed, and I felt more than a twinge of regret for his sake. More than a year later, he found a braid of dried grass and daisies in his aunt's closet. He brought it to me, serious and confused. "This yours braid, Mama?" he asked, holding the fragile relic of the past summer with reverence. Together, we compared the long, dry grass to my hair, which was short and dyed black, blue, and purple. Then we compared it to his hair, which was silky blond and grown long like his dad's. The braid crackled, smelled sweet and green, and was definitely the wrong color for either of us. Investigation complete, he declared that it was just old plants, even if it looked a lot like the braid he remembered. Then I told him the story about why I cut my hair, and the end made him grin. A braid for a baby sister. It was a fair trade, even to him, so I'm not sorry. Who else can say their mother sold her hair to pay the midwife? Since then, I've worn my hair short and dyed it, in part so I never again entertain a wigmaker for the sake of the money.

Aesop's *Borrowed Plumage* is the story that gave me the Greek word for imperial purple. Aesop isn't a person, so the words are recorded for us by Babrius. The man who

wrote down the fable tells it something like this: One day long ago, the jackdaw, who was the son of a crow, went to a mountain spring with clear, summer water where the birds had gathered to bathe and prepare for a contest to be judged by the gods of Olympus. The daw sneakily took feathers from each of the other birds, then tucked and wove them into his own plumage. Before the gods, the daw impressed Zeus, but just as he was to be named the winner of the contest, the other birds recognized their own feathers and swarmed the daw as a single mass, and the birds plucked the borrowed plumage away, revealing the daw for the son of a crow he really was. Babrius admonishes the reader to never pretend to be better looking than you are because your true appearance will always be revealed. But we don't really know what that "son of a crow" business means, so maybe it's not just a note about looks but rather heritage and class. Where do crows fall in the pecking order within the kingdom of birds? You could ask a classical scholar, a biologist, or a philosopher, and I doubt you'd find an answer.

When I was about six, I asked Santa for purple hair. I wasn't thinking of a wig, or hair dye, I was thinking of magic that could make my hair grow purple. My mother encouraged it, because she wasn't thinking like I was, and she had a plan, but it ended up disappointing both of us. On Christmas morning, I got a short wig that was once blond. My mother had painstakingly colored each strand with a purple Magic Marker (most, anyway, because

when the purple ink ran out, she colored some blue or even black—crow colors that I would choose for myself later in life but not at almost six). Magic Marker wasn't the magic I was hoping for. It smelled. The wig looked scruffy. I thought it was gross from the moment I pulled it out of the box. But my mother was so excited and pleased with herself. I had to put it on. I had to pose for pictures. I had to have it put back on my head a dozen times as I tried to go about my business and pretend the itchy monstrosity wasn't there. Fast forward. My daughter is seven and guess what's on top of her Christmas list this year? Purple hair. She's wiser than I was—she asked for a wig, not dye or magic, but I don't think she realizes how uncomfortable wigs are or how badly they stay in place when you have a full head of hair underneath. It's going to be a rough morning December 25th, but sometimes lessons have to be hard.

“Purple prose” refers to overly florid passages in an otherwise dull or unremarkable piece of writing. Purple prose is also called a “purple patch” because it's a metaphor referring to the act of sewing a purple swatch of cloth on drab clothing in order to make it seem finer than it is. Not just any purple, but Phoenician purple. Murex purple. Expensive, 70,000-snails-to-produce-a-few-grams-of-dye purple. The purple patches stand out, and purple clothing is, of course, desirable, so why is purple prose so terrible? Is it because it's not part of the design, or is it because the expense of sewing on a scrap of

fabric isn't the same as being able to afford an outfit tinged Tyrian? This is the folly against which *Borrowed Plumage* warns. Perhaps this is the root of the simmering rage that drove Porphyria's lover to drastic deeds. Whatever it is that makes purple prose so terrible, understanding the history of the term reveals the solution—don't patch the prose with embellishments because few things are more humiliating than the moment it becomes clear that nobody bought the lie you told.

I was born with a streak of silver-white hair—a witch lock, as my mother and grandmother called it—but it's usually hidden under the rest of my hair. It's a secret that always made me feel special when I was a child, just like being born on leap day or having parents from California even though I've spent most of my life in Utah and Idaho. I didn't want secretly interesting quirks, though. All through school, I dreamed of dying my hair. I wanted blue or maybe purple—those darkly iridescent magpie colors. Jackdaw colors. When my mother thought I was old enough, or when she got tired of fighting me over it—fifteen years old—I settled for burgundy red, which was in vogue at the time. Then, when that got old, I matched my brothers with auburn. But that was never what I wanted. It wasn't until I was nearly thirty that I dared to bleach out my hair and shift to the lowest colors of the spectrum visible to humans. And since then, I can't stand the sight of my natural color without a strand of something more deliberate. It makes me feel like I've given up on myself.

When I dye my hair, nobody believes I'm a natural indigo, as they might think I'm a natural blonde, or a natural redhead if I chose a shade to match my brothers' hair color. Nobody will think I'm more than what I am because of it—the opposite is far more likely.

The jackdaw swiped feathers in order to win a contest, but what am I doing? My compulsion to show some vibrancy is just as deliberate as the daw's thefts, but I think the effect is the opposite of what the jackdaw tried to accomplish. Maybe the color is a counterweight against my resting bitch face, my active “please stop talking so I don't have to listen to this bullshit” face, or any of the other things that people find intimidating or off-putting about me. Or maybe it's a warning. Animals in nature are brightly colored when they are vulnerable and dangerous. That seems to be the common wisdom about women with unnatural hair colors—but to be fair, shouldn't most humans come with a warning label? One way or another, my borrowed plumage isn't purple patch embellishment, even if Phoenician purple seems like an odd color choice for camouflage.

The experience of color is not shared among all humans. Yes, most of us see colors, and we probably see them more or less the same, since we have more or less the same hardware. But different cultures describe and attach emotional significance to hues, and they all do it uniquely. Some languages have no words for blue. Others don't distinguish between yellow and pale green.

In ancient Greek, *green* must sometimes be translated as *fresh*. *White* must be translated as *bright* in some contexts. Athena's eyes are described with a word that is also applied to spear heads. Does it mean flashing? Sharp? Piercing? Silver? Dangerous? It's probably all of those things. Purple also has a non-color definition. The ancient Greek awareness of light means that color gets mixed with other qualities that often accompany hue—murex purple was expensive, so only fine cloth was dyed with it. Fine, shimmering cloth. The sheen of silk on a moving body could be as dazzling as sunlight on the sea. Πορπυρω is a verb that means *I swirl*, and πορφυρα means purple. They're the same word at heart. Maybe the swirling associated with purple was the swirling structure of the murex shells, or the process of making the dye, or even the act of swirling cloth into the dye. Someone might know, but I don't, and I like to speculate.

Incorporating a sense of motion and intrinsic brightness into a color, which my culture tells me is still and static and entirely quantifiable, seems outrageous, but I think it's that spark of vitality that makes an unexpected pop of color so thrilling. If color can catch us off-guard, maybe it can get through our optic filters and make a wild connection to texture, temperature, even emotion. I want to stop perceiving colors only with my eyes and to start feeling them. I want to understand how purple swirls and shimmers and why my mind tells me it's an entirely appropriate shade for hair to be. I think we could reject judgments and labels

if we saw a full spectrum of qualities instead of only the most obvious. Instead of category and class, we could look for connection and similarity with the help of this deliberate synesthesia. ■



Walking on Water
Amy Larsen
Third place

2 The Best Shade of Brown

Amrutha Obulasetty

We called him Nick. He plopped down next to me every day in 2011 in Latin class taught by Mr. Brodd. As his name alluded, he appeared *very* broad. He dressed in a wrinkled, gray button-down shirt, tucked into black slacks with a coke in one hand and his glasses in the other. Each of his steps echoed in the auditorium. A class of 25 scrawny Indian students. Everyone resembled a different shade of brown. Some of us darker than others, burnt like charcoal from the Arizona heat beating down our backs. The others light as sand on California beaches. However, we differed by more than color. The lighter students sat on the fake rubbery grass, chomped their sandwiches, cackled with their mouth open and apologized for the food raining out of their mouths. Darker kids squished into one bench directly behind the pillar, blocking their wide eyes from the scorching rays. Though made for seating four, they managed to squeeze in eight, thighs rubbing against each other. Their nails gleamed, and their teeth sparkled like pearls. Last but not least, my friends and I, a mix of color, plopped ourselves on a table outside where the shade sliced through the middle, some of us squinting, strong, spicy food, wide smiles, and laughing like gaping seals. The lucky dark col-

ored ones sprawled in the shade, their arm-pits drier than ours but their laughs equally as loud.

At first, I tried to be Nick's friend. I greeted him with a smile and a wave every class period, but the hospitality quickly died out as my frustration to his lack of reciprocation skyrocketed. Sometime during the second semester of fifth grade, I stared at my empty paper as the room filled with shuffling tennis shoes, sweaty boys, and squeaky giggling. My fingers twirled my pencil idly, as I desperately wanted the class to start. The quicker class started, the quicker I could go home. He landed with a thud in his seat and tapped me on my left shoulder. I rolled my head towards him, still fiddling with my pencil. Irked, I raised my eyebrow. He leaned in. His breath smelled like stale mint gum as his chapped lips lightly grazed against my ear.

"Why are your arms so hairy?" He whispered.

I instinctively covered my arms. My eyes widened like saucers, and I shrunk back in my seat, far away from him like a slug rolling in salt. Making sure no one else heard him, my head whipped from side to side, each turn sending my braid whacking my back. I glanced at his arms, noticing his arm hair—not nearly as much as mine.

"Also, why are you so dark?"

No response. I wore a jacket to cover my hairy arms and dark skin every day no matter the temperature. I wondered how many others bottled the same questions but were too

cowardly to ask.

I dreaded AP biology in eighth grade. The workload I balanced fine with dance practice and violin class, but the subject itself embodied hell. Black posters on either side of the door displayed “Wear Black on Friday” in white italics to raise awareness for suicide prevention. I rolled my eyes at them, disappointed the posters were hung just this morning, and today was National Suicide Prevention Day. I wore black leggings and a T-shirt matching the three other girls in my class. We looked through microscopes for our lab, trying to identify different structures in plant and animal cells. My partners and I rotated on who looked into the microscope, one for each station. Ananyaa started. She shoved her pink rimmed glasses in my hand and peered into the microscope announcing her discovery of the Golgi body, rough endoplasmic reticulum, and the mitochondria. My turn came quicker than expected. People around us shuffled slowly to their respective stations. I noticed a group in the back of the class staring at me. I turned around ducking my head, trying to hide my face with a curtain of hair. Ananyaa leaned towards me and put her arms around my waist as if she was hugging me. She squeezed and stood on her tippy toes as I stood nearly four inches taller than her.

“I think I know what they’re calling you.” She nodded her head towards the kids in the back of our class. I looked at her through my hair seeing bits and pieces of her porce-

lain skin and scrunched eyebrows. Her brown eyes softened and glistened with pity.

“What?” I watched her lips move but heard no sound. I leaned in closer, so I could feel her warm breath fanning the side of my hair.

“Black Death.”

Tears pooled in my eyes, but I blinked them away before anyone noticed.

“Because I’m dark?”

“No, I’m- I’m sure it’s what you’re wearing.” But we both knew that wasn’t true.

I sat cross-legged in my dorm, my gray joggers, loose around my thighs, tightened and cinched around my ankles. A bowl of Maggie, Indian ramen, sat in my lap, and my phone lay propped up against my pillow. I giggled as my phone screen split into four different sections. The top left contained my sister also slurping a bowl of Maggie. It wasn’t a coincidence. We called each other earlier that day and agreed to eat the same dinner. The top right held a little rectangle with me, my hair in a bun and my fork dangling from my mouth. The bottom left consisted of my mom, her face too close to the camera. Her smile stretched so wide her lips looked like they hurt. She visited India for her in-laws, helping my grandma since she underwent hip surgery. She squinted behind her trying to look through the phone without prying. In the bottom right lay my dad. He sprawled on the sofa. His legs outstretched to his left, covered in a green fleece.

My mom spoke first.

“Why are you still so dark?” Her words left marks everywhere—they bounced off the walls.

Though taken aback, I kept a smile pasted on my face. I heard this question enough that I knew better than to answer or try to.

“Are you not wearing Ponds every day?” Her eyebrows raised, and my grandma scooted closer to the camera gaining sudden interest. Ponds is a company manufacturing a whitening cream and powder that I have applied every day since fifth grade. It is quite literally a “lightening cream,” designed to reduce melanin in the skin with each application.

“Yeah, I am.”

“Then, why are you still dark?”

I don’t have an answer, and I don’t think I ever will. I grew accustomed to wanting to be white, wanting to scrub my skin until it bled, wanting to scrub the dirt thinking that’s what made my skin brown, wanting to see my face grow a lighter shade in the cold winters of Utah, and wanting to be someone beautiful.

Because where I come from, brown isn’t beautiful. ■

Another Life
Michelle Hartvigsen
Honorable Mention



3 Conversion

Madison Silva

On October 6, 2013, the Thompson family gathered around the TV in their family room. The leadership of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints was addressing their members in their biannual televised General Conference. The men on screen wore black and gray church suits; they sat on a rich wooden stage looking over the congregation—both those gathered in the large conference center and in the members’ homes. Allie Thompson felt their eyes on her skin. Anxiety prickled her body. Her conservative, Idahoan parents ignored her squirms as the old men talked in aged voices. Her five brothers pretended that they didn’t know why their sister was uncomfortable, that they hadn’t heard their parents scream at Allie a few days before.

The current president of the church, Russell M. Nelson, was an apostle then, one of the highest-ranking positions for a man in the LDS church. He approached the podium and greeted the audience, his smile emphasized by his wrinkles. He might have reminded listeners of their husbands, fathers, grandfathers, or friends. Nelson’s spiritual council was usually accompanied by stories from his days as a cardiothoracic surgeon, but the end of that talk deviated. His blue eyes peered

into Allie, who still held onto the thought that he really cared about her. He had told her such in conferences past.

“Marriage between a man and a woman is God’s pattern for a fullness of life on earth and in heaven,” Nelson said. “God’s marriage pattern cannot be abused, misunderstood, or misconstrued.” Allie sunk into her seat, the prickle from before getting stronger until her stomach hurt. She couldn’t escape to her phone; her parents had taken it away when they read those messages. The old man went on. “Not if you want true joy.”

Allie wanted that true joy, but she felt it somewhere else, with someone else. Her light brown hair fell in her face, her only protection from what came next. “Regardless of what civil legislation may be enacted, the doctrine of the Lord regarding marriage and morality cannot be changed. Remember,” he paused, “sin, even if legalized by man, is still sin in the eyes of God!”

Allie was a sinner, a fourteen-year-old sinner.

But there was hope. A hope her Mormon parents believed in. A hope Allie was willing to try if it meant she’d be loved again, if it meant her father would talk to her and her mother wouldn’t look so disappointed all the time.

Earlier in the talk, Nelson had said, “We can change our behavior. Our very desires can change. How? There is only one way. True change—permanent change—can come only through the healing, cleansing, and

enabling power of the Atonement of Jesus Christ.”

That ache in her gut didn't go away as she thought about these words. A flash of holding hands and late-night texts might have been the thing holding her back, but the love of her family and her church and Russell M. Nelson buried happy memories and pushed her forward.

The school year in Shelley, Idaho comes to an end in May 2013. Allie had made a new friend, Mara, earlier this year, but something's different. Mara's dark brown hair falls to her butt, and her tan skin and homey brown eyes feel like sunshine. The two girls hug to say goodbye for the summer, and new species of butterflies fly around in Allie's belly. Over texts, they talk about how the embrace sparked new ideas, feeling that middle-school kind of young love for the first time. Allie and Mara giddily make plans for the summer so that moment would not be their last.

Ellen DeGeneres had been banned in Allie's house for being bad—gay was bad—so the young girl prayed every night that summer to understand her feelings. She asked God if that connection with Mara was okay. Personal revelation—promptings from God to the individual—was such an important concept in the LDS church, so God would take those feelings away or, at least, tell her what to do. Right? The answer never came; no small voice whispered “no.” So, Allie kept

texting her non-member girlfriend.

After her parents read the girls' text messages—*I love you. I'm so in love with you*—they sat Allie down on their bed and laid out new rules. No cellphone. No talking to Mara. They lived in the same neighborhood so no riding the bus. She had to ride with her older brother to school, watching the leaves in the trees change colors without Mara.

They took her journal. They found her private Instagram. Her parents instated weekly check-ins to make sure she knew they were watching. Everything in her life was invaded. Only depression filled up all of the empty space, seeding doubts of her worth in the sight of others and herself. She let everyone down, and Mara was the catalyst.

“She's corrupting you,” her parents told her. They never wanted to say Mara's name. “She doesn't really love you.”

“She's confusing you,” her father, arms crossed and gun on his hip, said. “She's making you act this way. It's not right.”

With her blonde hair and bittersweet eyes, Allie's mother was more worried about her salvation. “She's hurting you, Allie. She's keeping you from doing the right thing, from being on the right path. All for what? Momentary pleasure?”

Allie sat in that lonely room as tears dripped from her eyes. They were a lively green color, but every passing remark grayed them a little.

Her father stabbed her. “God doesn't love you this way.”

God never said it was wrong in Allie's prayers, but her parents and President Nelson told her she needed to change.

"We want you to start meeting with the bishop."

She sighed. "Okay." It would make her better.

Concern leaked through the bishop's pity smile. He was a middle-aged man, who led Allie's local Mormon congregation, so in any time of crisis, members sought his council, even though he had no therapist training at all. A desk separated the young girl from Bishop Kimball. The walls around them were decorated with pictures of the church presidency, men deemed prophets of God. It was their protocol the bishop would follow.

He asked her question after question in each weekly interview, and at first, Allie answered truthfully. She wanted to get better. She thought the little spot in the back of her brain given the label "same-sex attraction" could be eradicated. The questions from Bishop Kimball about when those feelings started and if she'd tried to pray them away were supposed to help get to the root of the problem. But answering honestly led to more sharp questions, slicing her. He asked Allie to give more parts of herself than she was comfortable with.

"Have you guys ever touched each other?" Bishop Kimball asked.

"Well—I mean—yeah. We've held hands a few times," the fourteen-year-old answered.

Her mind didn't go anywhere beyond that. Of course, they had touched. Mara probably rubbed her thumb across Allie's hand every time she told her she loved her in person.

The bishop cleared his throat. "Okay, but I mean have you touched each other in your private parts?" Maybe he thought if they had been messing around, then immorality could be easily rectified with repentance and abstinence.

Allie's skin started burning. "Uh...no," she said, mortified.

From that point on, she couldn't tell the truth. It made her insides wiggle answering those questions, so she said what she had to say to get out of there as quickly as possible. Allie didn't like how the truth was made to feel unwelcome in her own body.

She had been taught her whole life that this man, this authority he had, was supposed to be from God, and if that was true, this unsettling situation could only stop if she did what was asked. But the only way to do that was to lie until it became her new truth.

Allie, Mara, and another friend decide to have a sleepover at Mara's for Allie's fourteenth birthday in September 2013. They do birthday party things—watch movies, paint their nails, eat tons of junk food—but then the other friend falls asleep on the floor in Mara's room. With the lights off, Allie crawls under the covers with her girlfriend. The room's quiet, but outside the potato fields whisper. Mara and Allie scoot closer together until their

sweet innocence is met with hands touching hands and legs touching legs. They're so close; they're here together. The girls fall asleep to each other's faces, maybe sharing a pillow without realizing it. When Allie wakes up the next morning, she lays still, taking in the best feeling ever.

Shelley was a small town—approximately 4,400 people—so news travelled fast. If someone moved in and wasn't Mormon, everyone knew about it. When a girl stumbled across Allie's private Instagram in March 2014, which had several posts about struggling with her sexuality and mental health, everyone knew about it.

A neighborhood Allie called "Gossip City" housed the mothers of her friends. They spent each of their gatherings talking about town news, and after the Instagram discovery, they talked about Allie for weeks. The grown women probably sat in a circle, like a book club, and sipped caffeine-free Diet Cokes—tea was out of the question for respectable Mormon women. New gossip updates about Allie's meetings with the bishop filtered from the mothers to their children.

A friend—daughter to one of the women—gave Allie a weak hello in the school hallway. She told her she was sorry but they couldn't be friends anymore. Allie, in plain blue jeans and a t-shirt, had fallen from the path, and if this friend kept associating with her, she would fall too. One by one, over a few weeks, Allie's other friends said the same

thing. They knew about her depression and suicidal thoughts, but because they didn't understand, they didn't stay. Maybe it wasn't their responsibility to reach out, but a Book of Mormon scripture taught them to "comfort those that stand in need of comfort."

The church had such an impact on the town that teen scripture study classes called Seminary were offered on Shelley High School's property. Allie sat in the back of class one day and tried to ignore wandering looks, but it was the only contact her peers would give her. The Seminary teacher stood at the front of the class and taught a lesson on Christ, until he caught Allie's eyes and made a comment on the sin of homosexuality. Where was Christ when Allie needed him most?

There was a glimmer of hope when her principal pulled her out of class one day. They walked down the hall, which looked like any other American high school hallway. They got to his office, decorated with red and black Shelley High posters; he said, "Allie, we're concerned."

A shy smile crept across her face. Someone would be reaching out for real. She wouldn't have to be alone anymore. The school slogan—"Where Students Come First"—would really be true.

"The students aren't focusing because of all of this." He never outright said it, but from the rest of the conversation, Allie got the impression he was asking her to stop being gay. She couldn't figure out when she'd given anyone the impression that she wanted to stay

gay.

Her same-sex attraction was supposed to go away with all of the meetings with Bishop Kimball, and her weekly check-ins with her parents in their bedroom hadn't improved. Plus, none of her friends, family, and fellow church members noticed she was drowning.

Allie needed more help. She needed to stop. Nobody was there.

"Living a life like that," her mother had once said, "you'll turn eighteen. You'll be out of this house. And God won't love you. Your 'girlfriend' doesn't love you. You'll be nowhere."

Allie heard that enough times that she started to believe it: she was nowhere.

In the beginning of summer 2014, Allie's mother dropped her off in front of an office building. She walked inside, unsure of what this would be like. The bishop recommended it, said she needed someone who specialized in cases like Allie's. He had a friend who counselled through LDS Family Services, which meant he was a church-sponsored therapist. Allie felt like a problem maybe he could fix since the others couldn't.

An old man welcomed her into his office. It looked a lot like the bishop's. The same portraits of the prophets hung on the wall. One of Christ was on his desk. A painting print of the Salt Lake Temple, the castle that begs people to get married inside, was displayed prominently. Allie saw no book-

cases full of psychology texts and no degrees neatly framed on the walls. But there were two chairs with yet another desk in between them. The two sat.

They met every few weeks. The therapist, who might as well have been one of the men on the General Conference stage, added upon Bishop Kimball's advice. He promised Allie she could change. The first step was to pray and read her scriptures every day, and soon she'd forget about her same-sex attraction with the help from coping exercises. Then those desires would slowly fade away forever.

He never called it conversion therapy—the pseudoscientific practice of changing one's sexual orientation. He never used older methods of electroshock or vomit-inducing drugs. But it was still conversion therapy. They just talked, mostly. She and her family expected results. But at what cost?

The old man gave her a rubber band to flick herself with if she ever thought about girls. Allie started associating pain with her bad thoughts, but flick after flick, the thoughts didn't go away. She just had a red, itchy wrist. The spotlight on her hadn't disappeared; Mara hadn't left her mind.

So, they tried to find the root of her problem. The therapist asked her for a reason why she was gay. They would sit in silence until Allie said that it was because of the bad relationship with her father or because growing up with only brothers pushed her to be with girls. But on a different day, it was

because her mother travelled a lot for work, so Allie clung to girls to fill that void. Whatever the reason, the old man said God would heal the hurt, and she could move on.

He made her question everything she knew, even beyond her feelings for Mara. The talk therapy manipulated each memory into something negative. Her parents. Her brothers. Her friends. They all had been twisted,

and the color had been rung out so that the therapist could repaint the picture for her. In that picture, Allie stood in front of the painted Salt Lake Temple with a faceless boy, who wasn't anything like her father, who loved her more than her mother or any girl could. Slowly, Allie's belly grew in the picture, and baby after baby implied a regular sex life. It was an image that never left her, that continued to



Desert Snow
Nikki Christensen
Honorable Mention

plant weeds.

Each session, each new exercise, the therapist tore a piece of Allie away and put it in his pocket. The smiling prophets on the wall did nothing to stop it. Piece by piece. The thing was, he never seemed to tear the gay part away. But her self-worth was almost gone, probably taken home with him and hidden in the back of his medicine cabinet. To preserve what little she had left, Allie resorted to the trick she had learned from Bishop Kimball—lying.

The old man thought it was working, probably used it as a success story for the next scared queer kid who walked through his door. They most likely used Allie's tool though. Because the consequences of being honest were much greater than living a lie. They'd rather lie and have people love them than tell the truth and be shunned. That's what Allie chose.

February 28, 2014, at school, Allie tries to hold back her smile. Mara won't stop looking at her. In a few seconds, she drops her bags and pulls Allie into the nearby girls' bathroom. It's empty and definitely not romantic, but Mara kisses Allie anyways—the first kiss for the both of them. It's weird, but it's good. The meetings with Bishop Kimball lose all meaning. The girls laugh through their pressed lips as they try to figure this whole kissing thing out. It doesn't matter that they're in a bathroom. It doesn't matter that someone could walk in any minute. It doesn't even matter

that they're kissing. They just like exploring what it means to love and be loved.

Right before sophomore year started in August 2014, Mara and Allie got caught together again. Mara's mother, though not a Mormon, didn't approve of the girls' lying and how they both seemed to incite depression in each other, so she sent Mara to live with her father. He was only down the other side of their street, but it was far enough to put Mara in a different school district.

It was easier to pretend to be straight while Mara was gone. It was over without a goodbye, but it was for the best. Allie could be that girl she was in therapy, and everyone would be better off. And God would love her again if she became the Mormon saint she was meant to be. She wasn't going to be happy, but she was tired of feeling like a disappointment.

Something about hearing her mother say "I'm not going to stop you, but I'm really disappointed in you" hurt worse than any of the other mean things she had said before. Tears welled up as she looked at her mother, so Allie turned and ran into her closet. She slammed the door behind her and let the cries come out.

"Allie, please come out of the closet," her mother said through the door. It was a tender tone she only used when her husband wasn't around.

"Why?" Allie cried. "Seems like you all want me to stay in the closet."

The past year must have caught up to her mother and softened her enough to open the door and crouch down to her daughter. “I believe you love this girl,” she said. It was the first time anyone had ever validated her feelings. Allie let a little flame fill her chest.

“But if you keep doing these things, you won’t go to heaven.”

Allie sighed and wiped her eyes, letting the light die. She messaged Mara on Twitter and told her she wouldn’t see her again. Her mother probably smiled and hugged her, happy she made the right choice.

When she left the room, Allie used her phone as a mirror and rubbed the bruise-colored bags under her eyes. With a little make-up, a perfect Mormon girl could stare back at her. It wouldn’t fix anything, but at least she’d go to heaven.

When Allie graduated high school in 2017, the dichotomy of her internal and external selves came to a head. She didn’t *have* same-sex attraction; she *was* gay. But she still put out this persona of a believing Mormon, when in reality, that was fading away too.

She couldn’t marry a man. Allie could never picture the same thing her therapist had envisioned. If she wanted to stay in the church, she would have to be alone. She accepted that until she couldn’t anymore. Marriage and family were vital aspects in the LDS church; according to the church, it’s one of the reasons why we’re all here. And the only way to get to the highest glory of heaven was

to marry in the temple and raise your kids under that covenant. Allie couldn’t do that if she was alone, and she couldn’t do that if she had a wife either. So, what was the point of suffering?

She spent the summer in Thailand, travelling and volunteering around the country. Something about being in the thick jungle and visiting orphanages and animal sanctuaries brought Allie more peace than she’d ever had before. Thailand was a world away from Idaho, and she didn’t so much as see a Mormon missionary. She opened up to her volunteer team, and they didn’t care that she was gay. For the first time, no one cared. Even the one LDS girl in their group didn’t have any judgement; she understood like no one had before.

Allie finally said “I’m gay” out loud. It was a whisper at first, but by the end of the trip, she could yell it from the top of a cliff overlooking Thai waters. She didn’t know where to go from there, but just being able to say it made a difference. Once it’s said, it’s said. The prickle from General Conference years ago finally went away. Freedom tasted like humid air.

She prayed one more time. Something like: “Heavenly Father, I’m going live how I want. I’m going to be happy. Stop me now if it’s wrong, but I can’t see how it could be.” Again, she never got a “no.” Personal revelation prevailed. So, Allie breathed.

At college, Allie found a community closer to home with a group of people way

more diverse than could reside in Shelley. As long as she accepted herself, the prickle would never come back. She was out—of the closet and the church. She dated. She bloomed at last. Allie touched the sky with her fingers, dirt still under the nails though.

Her family didn't know. She was tired of lying, but she knew once she told them, everything would change. Allie couldn't keep it quiet any longer though. At school, she was *Herself*. Her heart finally sang, even if it was an anxious song.

After therapy sessions and parental lectures in July 2014, Allie sneaks out at three a.m. She walks up the road to Mara's place. Her girlfriend waits outside in her pajamas and smiles as soon as she sees Allie. They hold hands and lay on the grass looking at the stars, whose incandescence seems to be right there. Allie wants to reach out and touch it, but she's afraid. Mara is too. So, they just stare. And forget about God and church and parents. Happiness lights the air like fireflies. The grass, the sky, their eyes—everything sparkles. It's not sinful; it's so honest.

Allie told her mother at Christmas on a drive home from Target. "I still love you," she said. Allie expected that kind of response, but—and there was always a "but" when it came to her parents—her mother didn't stop there. "I just want you to respect our wishes and not be affectionate with your partner if you bring her home."

It took everything in Allie not to say anything. Her mother continued, "I mean, you know, we don't let your aunt drink in the house when she comes to visit." Allie wanted to scream at her mother for still likening her feelings to a sin in the LDS church. There were still conditions to her mother's love. To keep herself from crying, Allie left the car.

She waited as long as possible to tell her father. Her mother pushed her to do it before she left for Indonesia in the summer of 2018. But Allie was terrified. Her father's gun went everywhere but church, so a paranoid Allie constantly watched his hands when she was around him, as if one gay move and her father would draw.

The Sunday before she left, she went back to Shelley to say goodbye to her family. She put on a dress and went to church for the first time in months. Each blow of church air on her bare legs reminded her that in a few hours she'd be coming out to her father.

At home, she pulled him aside before he could change out of his suit and tie and put on his holster. They sat at a four-sided picnic table outside of their house—he across from her. The sun and the potato fields set for a perfect Idahoan backdrop.

"Dad," Allie said, her voice shaking, "I need to tell you that I am gay." She looked him in the eye. "I hope that you still love me because I want you to know that I love you."

Allie couldn't remember the last time she heard him say it back, so she waited. But instead, he said, "Well, that's sad."

She begged him with her eyes to take it back, say anything else, but he didn't. She found the strength to keep talking. "You're my father, and I don't want this to change anything. We both know I've always been gay. But I'm still your daughter. I'm still kind and loving. Nothing has changed about me; I'm just being who I am."

Through gritted teeth, he said, "You think you've always been gay?"

She nodded. And he disagreed. He repeated all of the little phrases President Nelson and Bishop Kimball and the therapist had tattooed in her brain. Allie transported back to that small office with the Salt Lake Temple painting. She was a scared fourteen-year-old girl being told that her feelings would go away, that something from her childhood caused them, that unless she changed, God wouldn't love her because of them. She had to get out. She couldn't go backwards. Not again. No more shame.

"I know God loves me," she told her father. He burned holes in the table with contradicting scripture. Allie turned to the trees and cut off her hearing. She couldn't be scared straight again. The wind could rescue her and blow her away if it wanted to.

"You were not born this way. People aren't born alcoholics or drug addicts. It's the choices they made that got them there," he spat. "Just like you."

All Allie wanted to do was love who she wanted. "I'm not harming anyone; I'm harming your belief system. Maybe it's not me

who's wrong." She looked across the table at her father and saw the anger in him. "How is love bad?"

He stayed silent for the longest five minutes of Allie's life. She couldn't say anything to change his mind.

"Is there anything else you want to say to me?" she asked.

He took a breath and, on the exhale, said, "We will not be financially supporting you anymore. You won't get any more money from us for college."

Allie's mother walked out the house with a smile on her face. "How's it going, you guys?" She took the seat next to her husband, and Allie realized no matter what, her parents were always going to be on one side and she'd be on the other.

Allie stood up to leave and extended one more olive branch. "Can I get a hug, Dad?"

He didn't move.

"Go on, hon, hug your daughter." He still didn't move.

She said a final goodbye to her parents and then to her brothers, only one of them noticing her anguish. He hugged her and told her he really loved her. There was no "still" in his affection. She got into her car and drove, screaming tears at the road back to the university. On one hand, Allie didn't imagine things going any better, but on the other hand, she had allowed herself to hope like all the times before. She'd never get to see her parents wave a rainbow flag with sunburned

cheeks hugging their smile lines.

But her parents knew. It wasn't a secret. She wasn't lying.

Allie was Allie for the first time.

Back from Indonesia and ready to start the fall 2018 semester, Allie writes about her restored self-worth in a new journal. She's not worried about anyone reading it—there's nothing to hide. At the bottom of the entry, Allie Thompson doodles "Love is Love" with rainbow pens.

Allie studies anthropology with a double minor in women and gender studies and sociology at Utah State University. She focuses on creating safe spaces for anyone who needs it, just like her college friends did for her. As of summer 2019, Allie works two jobs to put herself through school, and her father still hasn't met her girlfriend of eight months. Per her request, the names of the people in Allie's life have been left out or changed. ■



Forgotten Spring
Nikki Christensen
Honorable Mention



*Children of the World
Andrew Romriell
First Place*

Graduate Fiction

1 Brickland Redgreen

*Niyonta Nahia
Chowdhury-Magaña*

By my eleventh birthday, 1972, I have more possessions than the fingers on my hand- a dog, a friend, a bicycle, a mother, a father, a treehouse, and other smaller things. The friend lives in a wafer-coloured mud hut with a tin roof that lets in spotlights of sunshine from marble-sized holes. The way the dust drunkenly dances inside the cones of sunrays makes me think of lava lamps and the way the wax dances around inside the glass of liquid. I am very jealous of my friend. I want sunshine dance holes in my roof too, but our ceiling is too thick and Baba was very annoyed when he came into my room the other day and saw me on Kamrul Chacha's work stool, chipping at the ceiling with one of Maa's butter knives.

I was very happy that he came in when he did though, because otherwise I would have fallen straight to the cold marble floor instead of his panicked arms when the tower of books on the stool spilled out from under me and my feet kicked at all the air around them. It was Rabindranath Tagore who did it. He was at the top. But it was me my mother glared at for the rest of the day. It was also the first time my father raised his voice at me. It crashed on me like a monsoon thunder. The thunder made the fine ends of his moustache

quiver and I felt a little speck of spit land on my forehead, but I did not dare wipe it away while the thunder and my father were still roaring.

I had heard my father's thunder only once before this time and that time it hadn't been directed at me. We had given our flag to the laundry man to wash the day after we came back from India and my father had caught him washing it together with our dirty clothes and underwear. That was the only time. My father doesn't shout or yell. He is a gentleman. I think that is because we are zamindars, even though the government doesn't let you say it anymore. Zamindars are gentlemen who own a lot of land and are related to dead nawabs and maharajas and people like that. And I'm a zamindar er chele. A gentleman's son.

We were in India for all of last year and when we had gone, I hadn't known if we were ever coming back to Bangladesh. Of course, that's not what it was called back then. It was called East Pakistan. Coming back seemed as sudden as had been leaving. I remember my father sitting cross-legged in the grandfather chair that was not his grandfather's or my grandfather's but was still called grandfather chair for some reason never explained to me, and folding the newspaper on his lap with a loud rustle. Maybe it was Narayan Uncle's or his grandfather's. Narayan Uncle is the man who had helped us find a place in Kolkata. My father dipped his biscuit in his tea and said something about it being safe to go back now.

My mother's hand, holding the china bowl of puffed rice, chopped chillies and tomatoes marinated in mustard oil, stopped halfway as she was about to hand it to me. She looked up from the bowl and past my face as she evaluated the comment. She nodded, staring at some spot in the air between my head and the whitewashed wall behind me, and in less than a week we were back. What we had left had been called East Pakistan and when we came back to it, it was called Bangladesh. I thought everything inside of it would have new names too but our town of Gohontuli is still called Gohontuli. The only new thing about it is that it now has a long border of a red brick wall sealing off a part of the west side where my friend and her wafer huts are.

We live in East Gohontuli but the east and west aren't very far apart—separated by a small stretch of cornfield and thin sheet of lake. The stretch of cornfield and sheet of lake are my father's but I told my friend they are mine when I first met her because I wanted to sound interesting. I met her the first day Kamrul Chacha, my dog, and I went to the local bazaar. I was just a kid then, probably six or seven. My dog is a terrier. My father brought him with him from one of his business trips to Munich. Kamrul Chacha is Kamrul Chacha. He is the man who wears a blue checkered lungi and white panjabi, makes all the meals, and folds my shirts. He lives with us and even went to Kolkata with us. Kamrul Chacha buys me a basket of lychee every time we go to the bazaar even though I told him I

don't like them. The squishy grey balls make me think of shrimp eyes. But he says lychees are good for me.

It was when we were at the bazaar on a Sunday afternoon and Kamrul Chacha was about to buy half a kilo of the giant shrimp eyes with the hard pink skin that I met her. She came up to us in a tattered frock and with a welter of wild flowers in her hand. She gave me a toothy smile and thrust the withering plants in my face.

“Doshta shudhu dui taka, bhaia!” (Ten for two, brother!)

I remember noticing she had a lot of dirt and grit under her fingernails.

West Gohontuli has many huts of wafer, stacks of hay, broods of chicken, and stoves that look like fire crackling out of raised holes in the earth. The part that is sealed off has these things too. My mother says they're sealed off because they are Pakistani and we are not because we are Bangladeshi. She opened a book with a large map of Bangladesh, traced out the green splotch—that to me looks like an amoeba—with her long nail, bronze-orange with henna, and then pointed to Gohontuli in a southwestern nook of the country. She told me that Gohontuli is divided by the wall because a lot of rajakars live on the other side. She traced an imaginary line halfway through Gohontuli with her nail. I asked her what a rajakar is. Rajakars are villains who were on Pakistan's side during the war and helped their soldiers

kill us. I asked if these rajakar villains are Pakistani. They are. Some by language and heritage. Others by desire. And yet others for a bribe. She ran her fingers down the length of the map and closed the book. I couldn't tell if she stroked the map affectionately or if she was getting dust off the page. I sometimes feel the same uncertainty when she runs her fingers through my hair. I can't tell if she is stroking my hair because she loves me or if she is subtly combing it because she loves me. I wonder if my wafer friend is a rajakar too. I decide she's not.

It takes me half an hour if I walk and half of that if I ride my bike to get to the wafer huts and my friend. My dog never has trouble keeping up. He is also a friend, but I don't like admitting it because he never says it back. The three of us usually play by the strip of bank between the lake and the field. When it's too sunny and my dog's tongue keeps rolling out longer and longer like a pink Tootsie Roll we go over to my treehouse. My father had some men build it for me in the part of the field closest to our house. My friend carries my dog up the climb because she is good at it, while I concentrate on hoisting just myself up the rope ladder. It's not really a treehouse because there is no tree. It's a little wooden palafitte propped up on stilts of bamboo logs. But I like calling it a treehouse because that makes it sound like cool things happen in there. Once inside, we tell each other stories and eat peanuts until my dog cools down

and the sun meanders to another side of the world. I know he has cooled down when his tongue has gone back into his mouth and he's placed his head on his stretched out front legs, eyes blinking slowly with the peaceful resignation of a retired old man who has had a very fulfilling life: grandchildren all grown up and living successful lives in different parts of the country.

As my dog and I walk up to the red brick wall, I see my friend lying on her stomach on a little hummock by the edge of the wall, her elbows propping her up. She is braiding two blades of grass together and humming Geeta Dutt's *Nishi Raat Baka Chaad*. The shape of the braid reminds me of the edges of our country on the map and I ask her if she doesn't think it looks like an amoeba. She says she hasn't met an amoeba so she doesn't know. She thinks it looks like a star drawn by an old man's shaky hand in very cold winter. We wonder if it was Pagla Dada who drew it on all the atlases and flags.

Pagla Dada is the old man who sleeps in my treehouse the nights it gets cold and there is dew crowning the corn stalks in the field. Sometimes he just stays in there even after the sun has come up and sings bhatiyali songs to himself. Pagla Dada has no ektara and only a raspy voice that can be heard less often than the biri smoke coming out of his mouth can be seen but he calls himself a baul. He wears a saffron robe and a necklace of charcoal-colored tulsi stems, and he has

very long hair and a very long beard that coil into themselves. Pagla Dada is afraid of dogs.

After she is done braiding her grass, my friend and I walk over to my treehouse. Her shoes sound different on the turf from mine. I look down and I realize she's not wearing any.

We reach the treehouse and Pagla Dada is in there. He is still sleeping from the night before. We quietly climb up with my dog, and then climb back down leaving him there with Pagla Dada. At the sound of the first bark, Pagla Dada screams louder than he ever sings, foregoes the ladder to the treehouse and leaps out and then half runs and half hobbles his way across the field until he becomes a little dot.

This is not the first time. One time, on a particularly wide leap where his callused feet were so far apart my friend and I could swear we heard his dhuti rip, his necklace flew out from around his neck and the round beads of basil scattered everywhere. My friend picked them up later and put them in a corner of the treehouse for him.

Once Pagla Dada leaves, we climb up. My dog greets us with a disapproving grunt. I think he's starting to grow fond of Pagla Dada. My friend crawls to a corner, folds her legs under her and tugs her frock down over her knees. She snuffles and clears her throat, and I know I now need to pay her all my attention. This is her way of letting me know she's going to start telling me a story.

Today, it's about a *daini buri* (wicked

witch) she saw coming out from underneath the hummock she was lying on earlier. The *daini buri* tried to sneak up on her but my friend noticed her just in time and threw sand in her face and turned her into ash. As everyone knows, sand is all *daini buris'* kryptonite. My friend's hair falls in front of her wide, storytelling eyes and she bats them away with the back of her thumb. She looks like she is wiping sweat. She keeps doing this for the rest of the story, one time even sticking out her lips and blowing upwards at it to make it fly away.

When I go home I ask Kamrul Chacha to get some hair clips from the bazaar. He laughs and asks why, if I'm planning to grow out my hair like a girl. I feel my face give off heat like the slices of bread from the toaster when I take them out. I quickly say they are for my dog— a bad idea, because Kamrul Chacha now looks at me like he feels sorry for me.

It is too sunny again and we are in the treehouse. Today's story is about the *daini buri's* daughter. The daughter misses her mother and cries for her at night so my friend is thinking of turning the ashes back into the *daini buri*. But she'll do it under two conditions. One, the daughter has to do anything my friend says for a whole year, and two, the *daini buri* has to promise my friend that she will never bother her again.

She starts back-thumbng her hair. I take out a packet of clips from my pocket and

hold it out to her. Kamrul Chacha bought it this morning. I think he winked when he gave it to me, or there was something in his eye.

She stops talking and stares at the row of blue, red and yellow pinching a paper board under sheer and shiny plastic packaging. She looks puzzled and I don't know what to do. So I take out the red clip, the wrapper rustling loudly in my hands, lift a clump of hair from her forehead and clip it back. I think her face floods with pink, but I can't tell if she is blushing or if it is the crimson glow of the setting sun. Inside the treehouse it's all crimson-pink. I don't know what to do with my hand now. So I reach it out to my dog who starts licking it. It's getting dark and we need to go back home. Before we climb down I want to tell her she looks pretty in the clip but for some reason I can't. So I tell her the clip looks pretty on her. I think her face became pink again, but I can't be sure because by this time the sun has set and it is too dark to tell. She doesn't finish her story today.

It is barely dawn and I walk to the red bricks by myself. My dog was still sleeping and I didn't want to wake him up. I couldn't sleep and I wanted to see what the red bricks look like before the sun dresses them up with light. The weather is nice. There are thin, moist laces of silver mist around my ankles. When I reach the bricks I see that my friend is already up. She is squatting by a tap in a square, cement patch on the ground and washing a tin water jug. She is also wearing

what looks like a raggedy oversized salwar kameez with large rose prints, muddy red plastic slippers and on her head she is wearing my shiny red clip. I wonder if never took it off or if she's wearing it again. When she sees me she starts wearing a big smile as well. She doesn't seem to find it strange that I'm there so early. I ask her why she's wearing a kameez. She says her mother wants her to from now on. I ask her why her mother wants her to. She shrugs and says probably because she isn't a little girl anymore.

It isn't sunny, the sun isn't even really out yet, but we start walking towards the treehouse. Maybe it's because my dog isn't there to rush us or because of the way the sun is still wrapped in a linen of fog, but we walk slower than usual. She is always the one to climb first, but today I move in front of her, go up first like a champion and then look down at her as she is coming up. When her hand is on the last step of the ladder, I see my own hand—and it feels like a foreign appendage—stretch out and offer itself to her. She looks puzzled for a brief second, like she had been when I had taken out the packet of clips, but then she gives a very tiny smile and takes my hand. Pagla Dada isn't there today.

We start our stories. She tells me about the Hindu snake charmer who came to Gohontuli last night all the way from Mizoram. He had walked for three days and two nights. It is said that his melodies on the flute are so powerful that they not only hypnotize snakes but also humans. He lives only on what the

villagers offer him and his beard is so long it is said that it's home to fifty mice that scamper in and out of the nest when the snake is asleep. Sounds like he would get along well with Pagla Dada. Does he know this man has come to Gohontuli, I ask. No he doesn't, but we can tell Pagla Dada next time we see him in the treehouse, she tells me.

Outside, the fog has dissolved and the sun is slow roasting the purple sky to light blue ash. A drizzle starts up. She asks me if I know how sunshowers start. No I don't, I tell her. It happens when a jackal is getting married to a fox. The sun, who is the fox's uncle, is so happy at this union that he sheds tears of joy but then he quickly gathers himself and helps in the festivities by hanging streamers of rainbows. I ask her how she knows this. She bites off a hangnail and says the jackal told her. What do you have for me, she asks.

A lot. There was a flood in Hong Kong and a lot of people died. Sheikh Mujibur Rahman has been released from the Pakistani prison and is now back. That means no more rajakars in Bangladesh. We're all going to drive them out. A group of crows is called a murder, and a lot of murders is called massacre. Dogs don't really sweat. They don't have real sweat glands. They drool instead. So basically they sweat from their tongue. If you draw a line through the middle of a circle, it is related to the whole edge of the circle by some pie but not the kind you can eat. Why not, she wants to know. Because it doesn't taste good.

She asks me how I know all this. I tell her my tutors told me. She looks away. She shifts, folds her legs and gazes out of the treehouse. Sparrows have started pecking at some kernels by the foot of the stilts. Their twangy chirps waft up to the treehouse. I lied, I say. The crows told me. She looks back at me. She asks me to tell her one of my Rabindranath stories. I think about the last one I read. It was about a friendship between a merchant's little daughter and a wandering vendor who's far away from his beloved family. *Kabuliwala*. Just as I'm about to begin, the ajaan starts from the local mosque.

I don't pray but the sound of the ajaan makes me feel the kind of reverential fondness I feel when I hear the sound of my father walking into my room. I fold my legs and put my hands in my lap. I look up at my friend. She is taking off her dupatta from around her neck and wrapping it around her head. A strand of hair pokes out and she slides it back behind her right ear. She looks like a newly wedded wife, like the pictures of my mother from my parents' wedding album. I had never seen my friend cover her hair like this. This is a part of her inner world. It is about her private relationship with the ajaan. I wonder if she thinks of her father walking into her room too. I have never before been with her at a time when she does something so personal. I must be the only person. I must be the only person other than her parents. I bet no one else in that brick-walled world ever saw her hair covered like this. She folds her hands

in her lap too and looks at me.

She has a sprinkle of little light brown spots on her left cheek. Her eyes are bigger than mine are in my mirror. I see her lips are pursed tight, like a dark-pink nipple. Then she does something terrible and I think that's what makes it happen. She smiles. I try smiling back but I can't. The smallness of the treehouse and the thickness of the sky above us and the frenzy of the sparrows below us. My heart starts crashing against my bones. I want to jump out and run like Pagla Dada. But I can't move. I think of crossing my legs. But I'm scared she will look at what I'm doing and see. I'm scared she will look at my face and see. I'm scared she will look at the sparrows outside and see. I'm scared she will close her eyes and see.

And then she sees. Her gaze goes down and her smile fades. She looks back at me. A snail of a sweat bead crawls down the side of my cheek. With the rain now gone, her face is a yellow, sunny void. There is no expression on it. She stares for a couple or thousand more seconds. Then she crawls over and slides herself up beside me and whispers *it's okay*. My heart is crashing harder now. Her lips look like the inside of a red fruit, almost as red as the dupatta around her face. I part mine and put them on hers, and she takes my hand and holds it in her lap. The imam's voice singing the ajaan feels like the purring sound of shankh melting on my skin. Her hand feels like her hand, and her lips feel like her lips, and I feel like me and my breath feels like the

whole world's air. And then she does it. She lets go of my hand and gingerly puts hers on the reason I wanted to cross my legs. Now the treehouse is even smaller and the sky is even thicker and the sparrows are even louder and this time I do jump out. I run. I run and run and run like Pagla Dada. But I don't become a dot. I run home.

Today I am up early again. So is my dog. He is looking at my face and wagging his skinny little tail. I don't think he slept all night. He isn't going to let me sneak away without him again. We go to the breakfast parlor and my father is already there. He smiles and nods at me. This is his way of saying good morning. I say it back to him. He tells me not to leave the house today. If I want some fresh air I can go as far as the mango orchard but not beyond that. I say okay. I never say no to my father. It feels like saying no to the ajaan.

I decide to spend the day reading more Rabindranath stories. I want to have something interesting for her the next time we go to the treehouse. But I can't read a single line without thinking of her lips and the redness of her dupatta or her hand on me. I watch some television- a tall woman with fading maroon lipstick and a string of white jasmine flowers looped around a side knot is reciting Shamsur Rahman's *Biddhosto Neelima* in a high voice with her eyes closed and her eyebrows worked into a squiggle. I scratch my dog's belly while he thumps the carpet with his leg, I play ludo with Kamrul Chacha, and

I water the roses and bougainvillea in the portico with my mother. I take Rabindranath's collection of short stories with me to bed to read myself to sleep.

I wake up late. I wake up to my father knocking on the door. I sit up as he walks in, and he asks me if I'm not up yet. My eyes are half closed and my head a mini Bengal rain-forest. I shrug. He pats me on the back and tells me to get up and says he came in to tell me I need to stay in today as well. Maybe it's that I am still half asleep, or maybe it's that I can't wait any longer to see her— I have too many Rabindranath stories that need to be told—either way, I can't happily comply today. So I say, okay Baba. Then I ask him why.

It's not safe right now, the rajakars are being cleared out, he says. Oh, I'm happy. I want the villains out of my country. I ask him where the rajakars are being sent. Most of them are getting rounded up and sent to prison, some are being driven out of the border to India, he tells me. They will eventually end up back in Pakistan where they belong. Where were they being cleared from, I want to know. Everywhere, says my father. Of Gohontuli, most of the west.

I feel a very small rock forming in my chest. What parts of the west, I ask. My father looks at me with a worried frown and puts his large palm on my forehead. Are you okay? He wants to know. I realize my face had started sweating. What parts of the west, I ask again. The rock was getting bigger and heavier now.

The people on the other side of the wall mostly but also other parts, he tells me.

I get up from my bed and put my on slippers. A few warped images come to my mind: a green splotch that looks like an amoeba, a hennaed finger pokes it and twirls it around its nail. I slowly comb my hair in front of the mirror. A daini buri bursts into ash, a shower of red bricks. In the mirror, I can see my father watching me with some sort of look on his face. Maps, "Gohontuli is divided because rajakars live on the other side," an atlas burps. I pick up my shawl from the upholstery of the sofa and wrap it around me. Where are you going, my father asks me. I don't know how to answer him. So I don't. I walk out of my room, then out of the house. I hear my father call me once, and then call Kamrul Chacha. My dog is walking with me I just realize. He is looking up at me with the same concerned look as my father's.

I reach the red brick wall. I see a few people in white kurtas standing in a group talking to each other. I haven't seen any of them before. There is also an empty police van parked to the side. I go to the other side of the wall and to the wafer hut. It's empty. I go to the cemented tap ground where she washes things. I go to their chicken coup and their cow shed. The chicken and cows are still there. She is not. I come outside the wall and start walking towards our treehouse. As I'm climbing up my dog starts barking and I become aware that he's still with me. I look down at him. He wants to come up too. I have

never carried him up there. She does it. I'm not very good at climbing. I leave him down there and get inside. It's not empty.

Pagla Dada is sitting in there cross-legged with his hands on his knees. He is chewing cud. He stops chewing when he sees me and looks like he's about to jump out. He doesn't. Maybe it's because he realizes I'm not my dog. I fold my legs under me and join him. He resumes chewing. I keep looking at him. The tulsī beads from the broken necklace she had picked up for him are back around his neck. I count them. One, two, three four, five... I think there are twelve. The little rock in my chest that started growing in my room gets a little bigger and grazes against something inside, maybe my ribcage or the flesh of my chest, and makes me wince. The treehouse is getting small again, but in a different way. I recount the tulsī stems. One, two, three, four, five, six, seven... I think there are fourteen. "She is gone, baba," Pagla Dada speaks to me. This is the first time I ever heard him talk. I didn't know he could. I thought he could only sing. I jump out. And I run. I run and I run and I run but I never become a dot.

I reach home. I stand sweating and panting on the portico and I think my ankle is sprained. I can feel the spot so I press all of my weight down on it until the pain makes the rock in my chest explode. The splinters go flying everywhere and I can't see or hear for a while. When I can see and hear again, my dog looks panicked and he is barking very loudly

and pawing at my legs. There is a thin film of spots and specks and little dots of light dancing in front of his face. I shake my head to get rid of them. I had forgotten he was there. The look on his face disgusts me. I walk over to my mother's flowerbed and kneel down. As I thought he would, he follows me. I dig in with my nails and claw up a fat handful of dirt. I throw it at him. He yelps and jumps back but he shakes it off and comes back to me again, whimpering. I pick up another handful and throw it at him, harder. He flinches, whimpers, stays there. So I claw in with both hands and start pummeling him with a storm of dirt, pebbles, and torn flowers. He runs away. I want him to run faster. I want him to run like Pagla Dada and become a dot.

Once he's gone, I stand there for a few more seconds, minutes, or days, listening to my breathing. I wipe the sweat from my forehead with my palm and a clump of dirt falls onto my eyes making me flinch and look down. The flowers in front of me—some uprooted, some still in place—look dry. I fumble to unzip my pants then realize I am still in my pajamas, so I pull them down. I pee first on the roses, then on the bougainvillea. I hear someone at the door and turn back to see my mother come out. I'm standing naked waist down in a puddle of dirt now muddy, holding my penis, also muddy, out to her flowers. We stand where we are for a while, staring at each other. I want her to rush up to me, pull up my pajamas like she used to when I used to pull them down and giggle when I was

younger, and take me in her arms and rock me back and forth and tell me I'm all okay. But she is staring at me like she is trying to remember who I am. She walks down the steps and comes up to me. She slaps me with what I imagine was all the force she could bring to her hand which wasn't very much. I pull up my pajamas and hobble past her and into the house, then into my room. I call my dog. He's not in there. I leave the room and walk around the house calling him. I get no response. I go out again and scream his name and when I get nothing, I go back into my room and sit on my bed. I become aware that my left ankle is throbbing like a tumor.

I put my face in my hands and mumble his name to myself, and I hear a small whimper. I kneel down and look under my bed. He's there, staring back at me with his shoulders hunched into a terrified crouch. He whimpers again, and I kneel down and stretch out my arms to him. He doesn't move. I put my forehead on the cold floor in front of him and apologize. I tell him I'm sorry. I tell him I love him. I tell him I love him a lot and I'm sorry. My voice cracks and he comes out and puts his nose on my fingers. I pull him close to me and cradle him and tell him it's all okay. He whimpers and licks the tip of my nose. I take him to the bathroom and give both of us a shower and carry him to bed.

The lights are off but my room has a dark-blue glow because the curtains on the windows are pulled apart and the late evening is throwing skylight inside. The sun has

set. My father sent Kamrul Chacha to call me for dinner but I told him I'm not hungry. My mother now comes into the room and sits down on the bed. She runs her hand through my hair and says she wants to talk to me. Her voice is a humble whisper. I pretend to be asleep. She doesn't say anything for a while, then she asks me if I'm asleep. When I don't respond, she very quietly gets up and leaves the room. Once she's gone, I turn over and as I do, something hard jabs the side of my ribs. I put my hand under the covers and bring it out. It's Rabindranath's collection of short stories left in the bed from last night. I flip through the pages and read *Dena Paona* to my dog and myself, the family's youngest zamindars, until we both fall asleep. ■

2 An Easy, 10-Step Guide to Painting Addiction

Andrew Romriell

1. Anonymity is key. When you walk up to that door, you need to know that he will not recognize you. He will not be seen again in any other circumstance. He can't be a friend. Most times, he understands this. He knows what you are as much as you know what he is. A tool. A paintbrush. A way to create a blemish on a larger canvas. You can press him into the once clean space and disfigure what used to be there. Invert watercolor on art to create justification.

2. Talk as little as possible. Greet him coldly. Metallic. Harsh. Don't give him a piece of what's inside. He can have your body, do what he will with it. The first one did—pressed you into the mud, the earth; he forced you to be lower than him. Your first date with a man yielded this moment. He cast the first splotch of colored water. You are simply allowing others to follow.

3. Let him remove your clothes as he sees fit. He can cast your shirt away. Loosen your belt. Twist off your shoes, and if there's time, your socks. Let him slip your pants down till there's nothing left but you. If he wants, he can cast that away too. Suffer yourself to be bare. Naked. A sullied slate for him to tarnish. It's not your body anymore.

4. Wonder if he has a condom. If he has one, that's fine. If not, that's fine too. Maybe disease would be the punishment you deserve. The smite. The plague. AIDS was once believed to be the retribution of God on homosexuals. Doctors once were afraid to go near a case, as if homosexuality was a cold one could catch if you got too close.

5. Let him slide his paint across your skin and bone and blood. Let him cast the color, whip the brush, puncture the canvas. Let him do whatever he needs to get you a little closer to a point where you can finally be discarded.

6. Go home.

7. Clean your skin; it doesn't make a difference for what's inside.

8. Lock yourself in. Cry against the headboard of your bed. Feel the pulsing heartbeat of poison rushing through your veins. Push away the memory of the time you fought him back. It'll come up. It always does. The time you scratched and screamed and resisted. Only remember that you lost. That this pain is what you deserve. Only remember the paint.

9. Stop crying.

10. Repeat.■

3 The Processor

Tyler Hurst

Cobweb wires and bottlecap nodes covered the clean white canvas of Gideon's bald head. These were the marks of a processor, the burdens Gideon carried in order to survive. He absentmindedly fiddled and pulled at the steel hair, jolts of pain spidering down his neck and into his back. It didn't bother him. The pain meant he lived. It provided a thing he could hold onto when everything else died, eroding with each passing day. Gideon's wore faded clothing. He had a plain face and foggy, distant eyes that matched his pale, sallow skin. The only thing remarkable about him were his hands, lithe and slender like supple white worms, trained to gently caress a piano's keys after many years of practice. This skill did not benefit him anymore. His feet fell in cadence on the gray concrete overpass, drumming a pattern, a staccato rise and fall.

Abandoned vehicles, filthy syringes, tumbling sagebrush garbage, and a myriad of other objects littered the life-giving veins of Los Angeles. The city, once renowned for its bumper-to-bumper traffic and vibrant streets, now lay empty. Its lifeblood had been drawn from it and donated elsewhere or perhaps it had simply spilled out into the surrounding countryside to harden and scab over in

over in the harsh air. Gideon walked the Santa Ana Freeway in from East Los Angeles every day. He couldn't afford to live any closer to work. The area directly surrounding the Mainframe was reserved for the executives and the merchants who still had access to fresh produce rather than the manufactured nutritional supplements that had become so commonplace. Everything else—the suburbs and the neighborhoods filled with unoccupied homes— had been left to the cruel embrace of time, falling into subtle disrepair. LINCD wanted its workers close by, just in case any of them tried to escape on the short commute to work.

The Wilshire Grand Center didn't stand so tall anymore, a spine without a body bound to eventually collapse. The coastline swelled in either direction, grey churning water pressing dead fish and other detritus onto the beach. The Logic Interface Networking Cerebral Device, LINCD, had solved many problems, but it had also caused many more. LINCD pooled many minds into one functioning person. It came as no surprise to Gideon that the consequences of pooling intelligence in the hands of a few, rather than relying on the creativity of the masses, would spell disaster. LINCD had been established following the last and greatest economic collapse. Trade deals had disintegrated under the weight of debt. War had broken out as a result of the shift in power, the shift that had left America decrepit and bankrupt. It had all happened so fast and the power vacuum had

swallowed up every other country that hadn't been thoroughly nailed down. LINCD didn't pay him to think about that though, they didn't pay him to think at all, but instead he simply computed like a living piece of hardware, a human machine.

Everything fell apart in a few decades of oversight. Cars rusted with corruption and neglect. The dividing islands of the freeway succumbed to a tide of weeds. The city's thinning arterial walls now found themselves vacant of the traffic that had once driven here. Santa Ana, Pomona, Santa Monica and the Golden State Freeway all merged together at this juncture, forming a heart of sorts. Downtown L.A. hosted, at its center, a single, gleaming, chrome tower. It glinted in the first rays of sunlight, a purely corrupt bastion of progress in a city practically devoid of life. That bastion was the Mainframe. It had become a source of infection to the likes of which all sickness and societal decay could be traced.

Gideon walked down the next exit ramp and navigated the streets until he arrived at the chrome colossus. All around him others shuffled towards the building too. Most people had the same wires and nodes protruding from their bald heads though some still eked out a living selling odd bits and pieces or services. No one knew what they would compute for that day, what problems they might attempt to solve. They only knew that this was their life. Perhaps, somewhere out there, the dream of freedom still existed,

but agriculture remained a privileged field and the designated agricultural zones rested just beyond the reach of a processor stuck in Los Angeles. Gideon's dream to save up enough money to head north died years ago when sickness had taken the only thing left that mattered to him. Gideon sighed as he followed the pressing crowd through the polarized glass doors on the Mainframe.

The chrome interior of the Mainframe glittered falsely. Distorted mirror images of Gideon grimaced back at himself everywhere he looked. He stepped into one of the crowded elevators and stood silently as it descended. No one spoke. No one deigned to cast cursory glimpses or show interest in anything but their shoes. They expressed nothing but contempt and resignation.

Everyone seemed to hold their breath, a hostage to their own thoughts, fears and dreams. A processor had a tolerable life, but in the end, they were human cattle whose only worth rested within the cradle of steel wires upon their heads. Their thoughts grayed and their lives became defined by the confines of their frail existence. Everyone eventually waned into the same flavor of melancholy.

The elevator doors finally slid open, revealing the labyrinthine underbelly of the Mainframe. A vast chasm stretched before Gideon. Its stainless walls shone in the glow cast from the massive pillars that stretched from floor to ceiling. Nodes—technological redwoods—served as the processor's connec-

tion to the LINCD database. Gideon shuffled along with the crowd, heading down the main avenue that passed between the metallic nerves. Eventually he arrived at node 34C and made his way to his port.

He sat down and strapped himself in before waiting for an attendant to thread his steel hair into the node itself and to scan his indenturement barcode on the back of his neck to confirm his arrival. Each year it became harder for Gideon to remember what life had been like before LINCD. Ironically enough, he only felt alive here. It was only here that he could enjoy the cool embrace of memory. Perhaps that was why he stayed and never tried to run. No, the truth was that the outstanding debt he owed the hospital had been sold to LINCD, rather than have him thrown in a prison with the million other debtors that clogged the lungs of the country.

Finally, a woman in white scrubs approached him. She smiled and pulled the small hand scanner from her belt and scanned the back of his neck. “How are you doing today, Mister Gray?” she asked after reading his name on the scanner.

Gideon didn’t respond immediately, instead letting the strange sensation of his head being connected to the node overwhelm his senses. It felt like cold water being poured over a hot stone. “Fine, fine. I suppose I’m fine.”

“Well you know the procedure, so I won’t waste time explaining it to you.” She set two lavender capsules in his hand before

leaving momentarily and returning with a simple white cup of water.

The capsules rested gently there, a beautiful living color against the dull grey of technology and flesh. The pills had become the only way for him to remember anything, an unfortunate side effect of the memory inducing drug. Gideon slipped the pills into his mouth before taking a large gulp of water to swallow them. The woman smiled and left Gideon. The twin lumps slid down his reedy throat. What would it be today? Would he remember Ellie again, or Laylah? It was strange, considering that the only way he could remember anything he cared about was through superficial means. In a flash, the darkness wormed its way behind his eyes and into his brain.

Gideon’s fingers flew across the keys of the piano. His hands rose and fell in a symphony of motion and sound across the old Steinway. A smile flickered across his lips as his hands found the chords that comprised “Metamorphosis I,” a piece by Philip Glass. He leaned into the sound, letting the music sweep across his bare skin and feed his hands in their frenzy to consume the music that changed and grew with each stroke. Slowly, carefully, lovingly Gideon shifted into “Metamorphosis II.” The seat next to him creaked as his daughter sat down on the bench, breaking him from his reverie. The song stuttered to a stop and the shifting melody left his heart. He hadn’t even heard the door to the

melody left his heart. He hadn't even heard the door to the salon open.

Gideon turned and looked at six-year-old Ellie who peered curiously back up at him, wondering why the music had stopped. Gideon's surprise evaporated and he smiled, lifting her up onto his lap. "You know you shouldn't be in here while Daddy is working."

Ellie shifted in her father's lap. "But I like it when you play music." She extended one of her small hands and lightly tapped it across the keys. A, C, A#.

Gideon smiled as he watched her make up chords and notes too discordant to properly work together. He took her hands and placed them on top of his as he began to show her a simpler song, something she could learn and practice, an accomplishment.

Gideon sat on the piano bench, frowning as he tried to piece together a song. He hadn't tried to compose anything new since Laylah died and even now the notes escaped him. He lifted his fist and held it aloft, a hammer threatening to fall. Several moments passed in stiff silence before he lowered his hands. The piano meant too much to him. Gideon turned as the sound of the salon's door opening pulled his attention to it. Ellie stood there, sixteen years old and the mirror image of her mother.

Her brown hair fell loosely around her shoulders and vivid, emerald green eyes gently caught the light filtering through the window.

She waited, poised and perfectly balanced, like her mother, until Gideon beckoned her over to the bench next to him where she sat and looked at the marked-up sheet music on the piano's music desk. "Are you still having trouble finishing this one?"

Gideon grunted in frustration.

"I'll take that as a yes, then." She eyed the sheet speculatively, reading the notes and imagining their sounds in her head.

"Maybe I should just give up on this one."

Ellie glanced at him before turning back to the sheet music. "I don't think you should."

"And why's that?"

"I don't know. Maybe you've just spent too much time on it to give up now?" "Well, I do just fine playing everyone else's songs. People like to hear what they can recognize."

"If you keep playing the same song as everyone else then you'll never know if you could have written something that someone would want to hear." She said, clasping his slim hand between her own.

Gideon chuckled morosely. "Sometimes you sound just like your mother."

She smiled then and glanced up at the light filtering through the window. Beams of sunlight filled dancing dust particles that drifted lazily into the salon. A slight breeze ruffled the drapes, allowing light to reflect briefly off of the Steinway and onto Ellie's smile.

Gideon frowned and stood up from the

piano, pulling his hand free, before walking to the kitchen.

He rummaged through the cupboards and retrieved a box of crackers. He snacked on them absently as he considered how to fix the song. It wasn't that the notes were wrong or the song's tempo, something more than that plagued the piece. It missed a uniqueness or perhaps, emotion. Laylah had always been the producer of original pieces and her void couldn't be filled by willpower alone. Her music had drifted, light and powerful enough to ensnare the mind of any listener. Music glided from the salon, pulling him from his reverie. He quietly walked back to the salon doors and watched Ellie's hands flit across the piano like twin finches, darting from key to key and tapping them ever so gently, and yet with the force necessary to squeeze out their sound. She was right. He couldn't give up on this song, not with her showing him how to pursue a difficult thing. Gideon needed to dream a dream that the average man too easily gave up on. Creativity and originality would always remain difficult pursuits worth chasing.

Gideon blinked sticky exhaustion from his eyes. Break time already and it felt like he had only just arrived. The attendant unthreaded Gideon's steel hair from the node and gave him a reassuring look as he clumsily unbuckled himself.

"I hope that your memories were pleasant today, Mr. Gray."

Gideon gave her an absentminded nod, his thoughts grasping wildly at the fleeing vestiges of remembrance. It had been so long since he had remembered Ellie so clearly, since he had remembered the . . . no, no he would not remember that, anything but that. Usually the memories the drugs dredged up were filled with Laylah and music, but today he had been reminded of his greatest failure.

Gideon retrieved his meal card and made his way to the cafeteria. He could already feel the hunger bubbling up within him and yet it wasn't the thought that occupied his mind. Gideon stemmed the imminent flow of tears and focused on the line of people before him. The memories had always been his sanctuary, but today they had felt more like a prison.

The only color decorating the cafeteria's chrome box were the reflections of the various processors. The line moved sluggishly, slow and methodical like Gideon's own thoughts. The real world had ceased to be the moment the drugs took over. Scientists had designed them to induce desirable memories, placing the consumer in a coma-like state. However, they hadn't realized that forcibly inducing memory would cause an inability to remember anything without the drug. The researchers had called it Memory Recall Disorder. Processors called it the Forgetting. Gideon wouldn't have accepted the indenturement if he had known, remembering being the only thing that gave him comfort. Now, he had become shackled to this place, trying

to live outside of his memories had become a chore. Imagine, no hope for the future and no solace in the past. Perhaps the drug's effects hadn't been an accident.

Gideon jumped with a start as a hand slapped down on the tray he was carrying.

He had become so enthralled by his own thoughts he hadn't even realized he was at the head of the line. He glanced up at the gray woman behind the glass pane. Her other hand was extended, fingers curled into a beckoning gesture. He stared at it dumbly for a moment, unable to ascertain what she wanted.

"Card," she rasped.

Gideon hastily slid the silvery piece of plastic into her hand and she lazily waved him along. Beyond taking his meal card, the woman didn't seem to care about anything. Her eyes were filled with a frightening blankness, like a zombie whose purpose and intention were in question. Gideon's tray slid along the conveyor belt. The workers sloppily placed food on it at each station, if you could call it food. He ate slowly, taking bites of his bitter nutritional supplement brick and savoring the taste of mildly fresh fruit. The memories slipped away with each bite, returning to whatever forsaken reservoir they lounged in. Gradually, Gideon shifted back into his complacent self as memories faded into time. He finished his meal and took the tray to the wash station. After he deposited it there, he returned to the node and sat down before buckling himself in. The attendant threaded

his hair back into the node and he swallowed the lavender pills, the only things capable of awakening any semblance of life within him.

The first hazy light of morning filtered through the window, reflecting off of the stainless-steel refrigerator. The sink sat loaded with dirty unwashed dishes. Sultry, tired lines traversed Gideon's bloodshot eyes.

Gideon scowled as he looked at the bills and papers sprawled out before him. With the collapse of the economy, medical expenses had skyrocketed. He had never been a wealthy man, but he had always managed to eke out a living for himself and his daughter as a pianist. After his wife, Laylah, had passed away things had been exceptionally tight. Now, with Ellie in the hospital, it took every ounce of Gideon's will to not sink beneath the tide of debt that surrounded his mind. Recent events had left what few savings that he had barren and emptied. Ellie was only twenty though, life still only just barely experienced and with such talent to offer too. She was worth giving everything up for.

Gideon stood and grunted in derision as he opened the fridge to find something, anything to occupy his thoughts for the briefest of moments. Questionable milk, no. The last dregs of orange juice? No. Unopened bottle of sparkling cider, a grand luxury these days. . . no. He needed to save that, the last hope he clung to that Ellie would return home. The doctors had made it quite clear that there would be no more treatments if he

couldn't provide payment. So, what could he do?

The light momentarily blinded him as it arced off the glass paned doors of the salon. He approached and opened them, stepping into the well-lit room, light streaming through the cracks in the curtains that draped across the windows. The old Steinway piano reflected the light off of its sleek, black, wooden body, dispersing it in odd, abstract angles. Gideon sat and opened the cover. This was the last remaining thing he had from Laylah, and as his fingers brushed the piano's pure white keys, he let himself seamlessly slip away into the music. He could see the memories drifting by on gossamer threads of light. Chords of music filled the room and stitched up his heart. In the music, he could see Laylah's smile and feel the light touch of Ellie's hands, resting upon his own as he taught her a simple song.

The music ferried Gideon away, lilting and swaying with him as he struggled to find some conclusion, some ending to the musical thread he wove. As the song drifted to a close, Gideon blinked, surprised to find that he had been crying. He gently touched the piano's keys. He then stood and closed the piano cover like a book's final chapter. He knew what he had to do.

Gideon wept heavily as the casket sunk low into the earth. He had done everything he could to save Ellie. He had worked long hours, taken extra jobs, liquidated what

few assets he had, and even sold the piano. Now, he had nothing but an aching heart and a large outstanding debt with the hospital. The bleakness continued to stretch from his thoughts, seeming to spread to the landscape around him. Everyone left as quickly as they could, trying to make their way north to the agricultural zones.

Few had come to the funeral today, but Gideon didn't blame them. It had become an every-man-for-himself kind of world.

He stood there until the sun looked like nothing more than a yellow abscess on the horizon. He made his way home after that, walking the dark, abandoned streets, clutching desperately at the pages of sheet music in his hand. The last vestige of Ellie that he could hold onto. The song that she had helped him complete. The back of his neck stung where the barcode had been tattooed to his skin, finalizing his indenturement to LINCD. He would be drugged each day, plugged into a machine and fed memories to keep his mind awake. They would then harvest him for mental processing power. It would supposedly fix a lot of the world's problems to pool intelligence to the hands of a few, but Gideon didn't buy it. If anything, the chance to escape life's pain remained the most inviting part of the whole process.

Gideon's eyes opened as his day of processing came to an end. He tried to sit forward, his steel wires jerking painfully against the machine. This wasn't living. It was as Ellie

had said: composition was the true form of music. Here, at LINCD, Gideon wasn't composing so much as he was composting, dead space simply used as nourishment for those in control. He glanced about, taking in the blank stares of his fellow processors and felt a hot terror build in his heart. He could identify the veteran processors just by glancing at them. Their sallow expressions and vacancy were so evident that they could have been mannequins. In many respects, they were mannequins, propped up by the world and dressed as the solution to the world's problems. They were just people though, stripped of what made them individuals and blank as clear water.

Once Gideon's head had been freed from the machine, he rushed home, fixated on the memories that filled his mind. He hadn't seen so clearly in nearly a decade. His dream hadn't died, it had simply been placed on standby like so many other things in his life. He would go north. He would see the sun again and feel the wind as it brushed along his skin, as soft as the painter's brush stroke. Maybe he could even do some honest work plowing fields or planting seeds, if anyone would hire him. As he hurried back along the overpasses and through the dirty streets he could finally see past the grime and detritus. He didn't have to live this way if he didn't want to, in fact, he was ashamed that he had stayed here for so long. LINCD retrievers or not, Gideon wouldn't stay grounded here another day if he could avoid it.

The filthy apartment building that LINCD had relocated Gideon to rose up before him. He took the stairs two at a time as he ran to the third floor. He sprinted, fearing what might happen should the memories he had seen today slip through his tenuous grasp. Gideon sat down in front of a dirty mirror after retrieving a pair of wire cutters from beneath his bed. He began to clip the steel wires from his head one by one, leaving behind small barbs. He threw what few possessions he had into a backpack and took whatever foods he could carry with him. Finally, he walked to the wall and retrieved an arrangement of sheet music, a photo of his family, and a letter.

He walked out the door, wasting no time as he began his trek north. Hopefully, he wouldn't be missed too much at LINCD tomorrow. He needed all the time he could get if he didn't want to be caught by their retriever unit. He still had an outstanding debt to pay in his indenturement. As Gideon stepped outside, everything seemed brighter.

He noticed a thin smashed dandelion right before he stepped on it. He stopped, foot hovering. Even though the beautiful weed was smashed into the ground like a pulverized sun, it still tried to grow and stand again. Its stalk arched like a stooped back and the clustered yellow petals rose with a determination only just remembered to Gideon. The bits of nature that refused to be crushed and forgotten suddenly stood out in Gideon's mind and he smiled as he began walking,

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Winter Mists
Andrew Romriell
Honorable Mention

Graduate Poetry

Mastectomy

Men stopped sleeping with my grand-
Mother after the surgeon took
Her left breast: at thirty-three
She hid the puckered frown of bare

Chest beneath padded bras where once
My grandfather, my uncle, and
My father sucked. At night
I nurse my husband now,

Even as my grandmother closes
Her eyes, gives thanks to the knife.

January

In summer
and early fall I ran
this trail. Once
I raced home with
a berry in my fist
for you, a small
heart lolling
in my palm.
You taught me
the universe tastes
like raspberries.
Today there is
nothing blooming
over a backyard fence:
the world
sealed
in snow.
In the canal's belly
beneath the woolen
rosehips lives
a speechless splash
of green, watercress clustered
like sisters in the water.
I take
a picture, think
for a quote about hope
to send you
and interrupt your
metal indoor day,
the war on the radio
and in your brain.
I will turn the ashes into snowflakes
where I can.

Domesticated

Because the flavor of love is eggs, I let the dog lick my plate. Each morning he pads ahead expectantly, watches me slosh out of bed and close the door behind us so my husband can sleep. I fill the dog bowl before I heat the stove, break a couple eggs, slit each yellow breast with a wooden spatula. He'll gorge and then sit on my toes, eyes trained on each turn of my wrist. How bland it would be, wolfing and shitting the same brown mush twice a day. It's such a bloodless feeding—no sacrifice at all, no shattering on the pan's edge, milky flesh sizzling on low. After lapping my leftovers, the dog yips for water; the salt of it overwhelms his soft palate. If he ever tasted blood it was raw hamburger, loveless on the kitchen floor. He never killed anything. In a lifetime, the only bloody egg I've seen I threw away, made my husband start fresh while I left the room. He'll wake after I leave, reheat the coffee and plop in front of the TV. Once upon a time he cooked eggs every day, over-easy in bacon grease. The dog's chin matted with gold.

2

Niyonta Nahia Chowdhury-Magaña

Dinner Time: Kurigvram, 1971

Dinner has been served. Tin jug of water, basket of guns, glass of grenades, a
 bowl of rice, a fish scaled grey gutted pink; thick
 gravy dribbling from the black wooden spoon
 to the
 plates heavy with prayers, assembled on a dark brown rug, pale
 yellow once upon a time; motes of neglected
 dirt clinging on, unashamed. The
 wife serves the husband, the blind old mother-in-law, the dead baby soldier, the self.
 Knives daggers shivering meatless guerilla soldiers dance
 all around the hut while
 dead leaves of the banyan trees fly in the monsoon night singing, crying songs for the living.
 “No, Meena,” the husband sings.
 “Don’t serve Jamal Baba. Dead sons don’t eat.” She picks up the knotted jute hand-
 fan and fans the ghost boy with lards of love and a fluid wrist chink chink chink
 her red glass bangles glare-bark at the husband in warning.

Chink chink chink

The night sky which is black like the days and the hearts of the enemies while everyone is
 wide asleep they come riding on blue moon rays and spray the village red like the
 bangles art installment of flesh and bones red overtones a murder
 of crows black like the days and hearts of the enemies feasting, she remembers. Her face sag-
 ging with the weight of remembering, the frayed corners of her lips drooping
 down
 down
 down
 pulled down by invisible fish hooks, lips that smiled
 once upon a time; the blind old mother-in-law pinches her shawl tighter around her meatless
 bones, her feet, as cracked as the Earth under her
 and the heart inside her, rustle against the mat like the sun-
 dried wings of a dead cockroach.

She thanks her dead eyes.
 She wants to go to sleep.

Goodnight Sweetheart

1. Often speak of pink moons bursting on your lips and leaving powders of star dust on the creases of your noses above these mossy, creaking, leaking pipes. 2. Grab the icy sun by its beams of stalagmites and let the frost melt in your mouths just to see each other's eyelids quiver. 3. Soothe them down with mercury on your fingertips and water lilies growing out of your throats. 4. Take turns lathering each other's breasts with the handfuls of ellipses you picked up the day before. 5. Forget to speak of the fissures growing on the moon and cracking your lips.

[It will leave a welter of red pebbles scouring your chins. Under the pipes the throbbing matted, bloated tumors of your childhoods will snarl behind closed eyes. The sun will slip out of your fingers and froth in the rusted left corners of your hearts, while all the vines and horns of the water lilies will crush the tips of your tongues.] 6. Again, forget to speak and return to lathering breasts. But slower now and with handfuls of death.

How to Kill a Brown Mouse

White sheets of traps placed by Landlady Alvarez sit in carefully calculated angles of death in all odd corners of the old apartment in Inwood. Glued to the fiberboard on her side, scrambling and squirming against her sticky deathbed, the mouse prays to her Allah, whoever He is.

“Save me!”
squeals the little brown mouse when she sees you
in her mousy language of pain.

You squirm past the mouse.
You make a quick breakfast of scrambled eggs,
eggs that your landlady said you could have.
Eat it,
wash it down with a bit of orange juice
she didn't say you could have.
Your mother says orange juice is good for you.
You suck on a cigarette
to clear your head. You suck on a lozenge
to clear your throat. You squirm out the door.

A girl's gotta do what a girl's gotta do.

There is a long stretch of depression in the concrete earth from the last step of the building to the curly front gates. The pool of deadfall in the depression crunches under your boots reminding you that you've been meaning to buy cereal. Eggs milk cereal and orange juice four things your mother wants going into your body; you put them all in your body and other things too; a girl's gotta do what a girl's gotta do. You humor her without humor.

On your way back your breasts fill
with many sorrows
and you don't have enough fingers
to count them. You start lactating
with this fresh grief and that is when you think
of the little brown mouse and her pain.

You want to be her Heracles and you run like Pheidippides up the stairs and fling open the door.

Yes she is still there on the white patch wriggling slower now, her hollowed belly making more intricate sine waves than even Badia Masabni ever could have with hers. You remember the gloves the charming EMTs had handed you as a joke when they had taken your mother away to the in-patient unit nine months ago.

Purple plastic

You take one out of the tattered suitcase you keep under your bed, careful not to let your eyes stray over to the assortment of other memorabilia in there, fit it onto your right hand, kneel down by the quivering brown mouse.

“Squeak, squeak,” says the mouse now in English but it is a dialect unfamiliar to you.

You lift a stiff tail with a forefinger and tug
soft and light with the veteran delicacy of peeling
tapes off of wrapped birthday presents so that
things don't tear
you do not want blood on your hands
that is why you are not a cutter.

After five minutes of pulling and massaging tail base
gently rubbing sticky side of skinny belly
the little brown mouse comes off
the rectangular white land it was on so foreign and murderous.
You expect her to run away
to whatever dark dank hole she calls home
but as you place her
on the brown wooden floor she flips and she flops

oh
a
thump
so
quiet

none of them would have ever heard it.
She curls her little paws into her body and her body into herself.

Google search: how to save a dying brown mouse

Make her eat!
Make her drink!
Nourish her body!

So you place a crumb of biscuit in front of her face.
“Mouse, please eat,” you say.

She stares back at you with glass eyes that say
“Are you fucking kidding me?” and a mouth
that gapes, it opens with convulsions

Dehydration

You warm a bowl of milk
10 seconds
dip squeeze fill the pipette dropper
you always try to remember
how and why you have in the first place
every time you’re trying to feed
a dying animal.

You walk back to Mouse.

*Mouse looks thoroughly dead now limbs limp fur flat.
You take off your glove and pick her up with your bare hand.
Her fur is nice and soft against your fingers.
A little red clover mite rides up your wrist
and you flick it away, third parties not allowed,
it's gotta be just you and the little brown mouse now.*

Mouse rolls over in your palm
 heaves
 belly in
 jaw out
 belly out
 jaw in.

You stare immobilized nauseated fascinated in horror and in love and with love
comes responsibility so you wait for her to open her mouth again and when she does you
place the tip of the tapered glass squeeze the rubber bulb
and her mouth fills with white she can't swallow you watch her gag
and the white froth
at her mouth
and spill out of her.
Her brown furs shimmy
over her shuddering
broken
body
and her
black
eyes get darker
than black
and roll up.

Inna lillahi wa inna ilayhi raji'un

And you don't know if you're praying for her soul or what remains of yours.

3

Andrew Romriell

3 a.m. Considerations

His teeth left dents
in my wrist. *Overexcited,*
he claimed.
But in a dark room,
he sleeps,
and I? I'm awake,
peering at red
canyons collapsed against
the white
of my skin.

I haven't told him I'm leaving,
moving 6,000 miles away.
I don't know how to craft
the words. My tongue
curls after *I'm*
and
leaving
fractures into
in love with you.

I breathe in,
he breathes out,
his bare chest falling,
rising. He doesn't know
the way he holds my
waist, grips my hair,
kisses my neck is like
brisk wind
glazing my cheek,
like rainfall
on my fingers,
waterfalls
cascading
from
the tips.

His teeth left dents
marking my body,
and he doesn't know
as he sleeps
and I press in the crimson
that I hope they scar
much in the same way
I do.

I Like to Sweep

He asked me why
I hate myself
I don't I say *I don't*
But he had plucked
the question from the warm
air ringing with silence

I like to sweep I tell him
sweep these things through the cracks
of closet doors
I like to hide them there
so that the dismantling work we do
in therapy doesn't have to include
me

He asked me *Do you love yourself*
Of course Of course
Another pluck *Why*
And through warm silence I choke
on fragmented utterances of
Because I do Because I have to
say I do
He knew
that glass frames shatter so easily
that mere words can break them
And if my glasses tip from the
windowsill
I won't bother to puzzle
fragments back together

I would have told him I'm broken
and that my own shards pierce me daily
He would have already known
but silence is thick and warm air
holds us in place
Weeping
Transcending

When He Asks, “How are You?”

I

I stopped crying at some point,
I think. I think the wetness of my cheek
in the morning is a result of saliva
rather than tears. But I can't
be sure. I don't remember
my dreams
anymore.

The trees are thick, but I still stopped
crying at some point. You don't
like tearful Lost Boys. Call them
weak
unchaste
imperfect
unexemplary

I think I'm rambling.

II

I do believe I stopped crying. If my mom
was here, the water shouldn't still cling,
right?

Damn it.

I'm not supposed to talk about her.

III

Neverland is asleep, but the stars are awake. They burn in glass orbs above my eyes, and I wonder if they gleam like me too. I wonder if we have that in common. I wonder if their light is like my air--

a little too hard to come by.

Shit.

IV

I swear I stopped crying last night. This glisten of water is because I licked up the rain from the broken canopies. Their leaves cling to thought, you said. I just wanted to dream.

Don't cry.

I didn't. I swear I didn't.

V

Happy thoughts come easy if you try.

VI

Boys don't cry. If I cried,
it's because of me. I'll do better.

VII

I failed again, didn't I?

VIII

I didn't cry last night. Isn't that
a miracle or some other shitty word
attempting to prove a deity
exists? And isn't that a shitty way to talk
about the universe around me?

But if I don't grow old
did I really exist

in the first place?

IX

Dear Peter,

Fuck you.

X

I stopped crying.
I don't know what happens if the tears
open up again. I don't know
if gods hurt too, and if they do,

do they mistake it for saliva too?



Swift
Andrew Romriell
Honorable Mention

Graduate Nonfiction

1 A Re-established Poetic Dictionary of the Voiceless

Andrew Romriell

I would define the poetry of words as the rhythmical creation of beauty.- Edgar Allan Poe

Allegory

[**al-uh-gohr-ee**] *n.*

1. A symbol.
2. An extended metaphor or tale in which characters, places, and objects in a narrative carry figurative meaning.
 - a. “Many believe the tale of Christ is just history rather than an allegory.”
 - b. “Christian, Latter-Day Saint children were taught to find meaning in the written words of ancient prophets from the Bible. While some would believe the stories to be allegories, but the lessons would often be delivered like history.”

Ballad

[**bal-uh d**] *n.*

1. A popular narrative song passed down orally. (eg. the words of prophets rang from the Bible, but these LDS children would be taught to listen to the living prophets too—that they spoke for God.)
 - a. “One LDS boy asked his sunday school teacher if he could be a

prophet someday. The boy had hoped that if he worked hard enough, was righteous enough, he could do it. Then, he’d hear God’s voice like them. A ballad from a Heavenly Father. Real.”

- b. “The boy’s teacher cocked her head and smiled. She told him that as long as he held true to his faith, nothing was impossible. He found out later, however, that prophets weren’t chosen by highest spirituality, but rather seniority. It was an ancient ballad he must adhere to.”

Cacophony

[**kuh-kof-uh-nee**] *n.*

1. Harsh or discordant sounds.
2. Dissonance.
 - a. “In September 2012, when the boy was older, he prayed deep in the woods near his childhood home while a cacophony of sounds from nature surrounded him. He wanted to believe God could tell him it was okay to be gay instead of the punishment he believed it to be” (See Negative Capability).
 - b. “Three years later, in November 2015, the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints leadership announced a policy change to their handbook, labelling those in same-sex marriages apos-

tates. It meant being removed from God for eternity. To them, to God, the gay boy's being became dissonant, a cacophony of contradictions. He couldn't be both."

Dada

[**dah**-dah] *n.*

1. A movement in art and literature, started in Switzerland in 1916 at the Cabaret Voltaire. Picking up traction after WWI, this movement salvaged relief from the moral and cultural instability that followed after the war. They embraced everything and nothing, dissonance, contradiction, intentional irrationality, and the negation of binary artistic values.
2. A childish word for Father (see Allegory).
 - a. "Dada? Are you there?"

Elision

[ih-**lizh**-uh *n*] *n.*

1. The omission of unstressed syllables in order to fit a metrical pattern or scheme (e.g. "I don't know" could become "I dunno" and "I am never going to hear him" could become "I'm ne'er gonna 'ear 'im").
 - a. "Growing up in his faith, the boy was taught that God preferred proper diction. He was taught to pray without elisions and contractions, to say *thee*, *thou*, and *thy* instead of *you*, to tell

God what he was grateful for and what he needed help with, to start each prayer with 'Dear Heavenly Father,' and end with 'in the name of Jesus Christ, amen.' He believed that if he did these things, followed this pattern, God would be more willing to listen to his words."

- b. "At nineteen, before admitting to himself that he was gay, the boy thought he could elide the homosexual piece from his spirit. It would be easier to fit that way. He could shift into a scheme of honest spirituality. Maybe, then, he would hear God's voice."

Futurism

[**fyoo**-chuh-riz-uh *m*] *n.*

1. In 1909, this movement arose in Italy and Russia, calling for a rejection of past forms of expression. In his manifesto, F.T. Marinetti advocated for a language unbound by common syntax.
2. A point of view that finds meaning or fulfillment in the future, rather than the past or present.
 - a. "The boy wanted to believe in futurism outside of dissonance, that heaven was a place that could include him. But God hadn't spoken to the boy. He'd spoken to the prophet, and the prophet had named the boy an

apostate. The boy was to listen to the man or reject, to straighten or break, to conform or unbind. Accept the prophet as the voice for God or find himself in a space of silence.”

Ghazal

[guh-zehl] *n.*

1. Originally, in Arabic verse, the Ghazal dealt with themes of loss and romantic love. In Persian tradition, however, the form took an intricate rhyme scheme, meter, and length. The subject matter also turned toward erotic longing and religious belief.
 - a. “The boy convinced himself he may have an attraction to men, but he could never *love* a man. Therefore, he wasn’t gay. It was his way of separating love and eroticism. He believed, if he tried, he could push the physical attractions down. Then, God could still love him.”
 - b. “At 16, when the boy fell in love with his best friend, he asked his sunday school teacher what it meant when ideas contradicted each other, when the prophet said one thing and his soul said another. She told him to pray again with a more open heart. If the contradiction remained, stay silent. She explained that he wouldn’t want to be seen

as a false prophet, speaking in opposition to God’s word” (see Cacophony).

Hymn

[him] *n.*

1. A poem praising God or the divine, often sung (see Ballad).
 - a. “The boy didn’t write poetry growing up. He figured it wishy-washy, flowery. Over-emotional. He found it odd then that his first publication was a poem—a poem cursing God no less. It had been written in response to a friend’s death by suicide eighty-four days after the policy change on November 5, 2015. The friend, Jack, had been gay too. The boy called the anti-hymn “Funeral Prayer” and published it in a queer-celebrating journal in Provo, Utah.”
2. Something that resembles a song of praise.

Irony

[ahy-ruh-nee] *n.*

1. As a literary device, irony implies a distance between what is said and what is meant (see Cacophony) (see Genre).
 - a. “He might find it ironic to pray to God for answers when God spoke only to the prophet.”
 - b. “He might find it ironic that he was asked to proselyte his beliefs when he didn’t believe

- them himself.”
- c. “He might find it ironic that he’d been actively working to unify the LGBT community and the LDS Church when the November policy was released and framed him an apostate.”
 - d. “He might find it ironic that he wrote to find God and instead found himself.”

Juxtaposition

[juh-k-stuh-puh-**zish**-uh n] *n.*

1. The act of placing two or more things side by side in order to contrast or create an interesting effect (see Cacophony) (see Genre) (see Irony).
 - a. “Juxtapose the Dark and Light. Good and Bad. Belief and Denial. Truth and Lies. Eternal Life and Homosexuality. Sin and Natural Order. God and Universe. Broken and
less broken.”
 - b. “Do you love yourself yet?”

Kenning

[**ken**-ing] *n.*

1. A figurative compound that takes the place of an ordinary noun (e.g. in Beowulf, “ocean” becomes a “whale-road”).
 - a. “In 2012, at age 19, the boy stood in front of a mirror and finally accepted the truth that he was gay. The person peering at him through the glass was a stranger.

Someone he didn’t yet know. In a kenning, he named the broken boy “you’re-gay” and I became a little less shattered.”

Lament

[luh-**ment**] *n.*

1. Any poem expressing deep grief, usually at the death of a loved one or some other loss.
 - a. “What it meant to be shattered. What it felt like to put a piece back together. The lament I wrote to heal (see Hymn).”
 - b. “I received a Facebook message from my old seminary teacher a few days after proposing to my boyfriend. She lamented on how she had been heartbroken to hear how lost I’d become. She told me I could repent and still be saved. She claimed I didn’t have to be lost.”
 - c. I wrote that I’d finally been heard.

Metaphor

[**met**-uh-fawr] *n.*

1. A figure of speech in which a comparison is made between two objects without the use of “like” or “as.”
 - a. In my first poetry class, in the fall of 2015, we talked about metaphor, and the idea confounded me. That I could claim something is what it isn’t. That truth could be that malleable.

That a tree could be anything other than itself—beautiful, tall, graceful, life-giving. How could I say that the tree is the universe? That the bark is life, the leaves the stars, the trunk something unattainable, the waterfall beside it the voice of humanity slamming against the earth. Would they believe me?

- b. “By looking in a mirror, I became something I wasn’t, something I then was. By breaking, I moved past the like, the as. Maybe I am the universe now.”

Negative Capability

[**neg-uh-tiv key-puh-bil-i-tee**] *n.*

1. A theory first articulated by John Keats about the artists’ access to truth without pressure and framework of logic or science “Capable of being in uncertainties, mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact or reason.”
 - a. “When my first boyfriend broke up with me in 2012, he didn’t give me a reason why. I remember, afterward, driving through a Utah canyon back to where my parents lived. I called my sister on the drive. She told me it would be okay. She told me I would make it through this. She told me it didn’t matter *why* because I was good enough no matter what he believed. But I

wanted a reason. I demanded it. I couldn’t voice the demand at the moment, but I also couldn’t stand the mysteries attacking my mind through that mountainside. I couldn’t live in negative capability. I screamed in the car, wailed against the wind flowing in through my open windows, punched the steering wheel, and kicked the door. An answer may have whispered from the mountainside beside me as I drove. Maybe it fell from the dusty night. I didn’t hear anything existing out in the void of space. I couldn’t even hear myself.”

Onomatopoeia

[**on-uh-mah-tuh-pee-uh**] *n.*

1. A figure of speech in which the sound of a word imitates its sense (e.g. *hiss*, *buzz*, *pow*, *Dear Heavenly Father*, *sizzle*).
 - a. “The framework of prayer called out as I trudged through the forest that bright Sunday afternoon in 2012, only days after he’d broken up with me. I’d never been good at prayer. I could imitate the steps I’d been taught since birth, but I never heard any voice but my own. I wondered if maybe that’s just what prayer was. A one-sided conversation. But on that morning, I needed

to hear something. I needed to speak and believe I could be listened to, answered. That maybe if I stood out in the forest on a bright morning, just like the first LDS prophet, I'd see God too. Hear his voice. I yearned to know he still loved me. That his mouth existed at all."

2. "I wonder if this is all just an imitation."

Pastiche

[pa-**steesh**] *n.*

1. A patchwork of lines or passages from another writer intended as a kind of imitation.
2. An original composition that mimics the style of another author, usually in a spirit of respect rather than mockery or satire.
3. The words fractured against my teeth. I called out to the trees, the forest, the river, the waterfall crashing over pebbled rocks beside me. Enveloped in nature, I called to someone I believed could be greater. I sought a God. A Heavenly Father. For anyone to appear and answer *how* I could be gay. *How* I could have found happiness with another man. How that happiness could have been stripped away so easily with the words "I don't love you." I screamed *I hate you* to the heavens that day. I begged for retaliation. For guidance. For anything. But water broke beside

the trees, and the Universe was utterly awake.

Quatrain

[**kwo**-treyn] *n.*

1. The first week of my master's degree, I attended a masterclass at the university. The poet advised all of us listening to write more quatrains, 4-line rhyming stanzas. He claimed that learning to write short pieces could help with brevity; it could cut away the unnecessary. He said to break out of my comfort zone, to lose my voice. He said to never make myself comfortable.
2. In an act of defiance, I wrote three quatrains on how abandoning God and finding my voice in writing had been a heroic act of declaration—that his claim it didn't feel right..
3. Still, I wonder if, to him, losing voice could mean an act of kindling inspiration.
4. I wonder if, at the same time, finding mine could be an act of awakening.

Refrain

[ri-**freyn**] *n.*

1. A phrase, word, or line repeated within a poem, usually at the end of a stanza.
2. In 2011, when I returned home after only six months into my two-year proselyting mission in Switzerland for the LDS church, I was advised to go into therapy. I was immediately diagnosed with depression, anxiety, bipolarity, and ADD. When I told my psychiatrist

I'd been having suicidal thoughts, he told me that hearing my own voice mattered more than any other. He instructed me to write these words over and over again and to never stop believing in the truth they spoke:

I survived.

I survived.

I will always survive.

3. To stop oneself from doing something (see Hymn).

Sublime

[*suh-blahym*] *n.*

1. A term identified by poet Edmund Burke in 1757 as an experience of the infinite, something terrifying and thrilling because it threatens to overpower the perceived importance of human creation in the universe.
2. Many writers throughout history have believed that to experience something like the Sublime, one must traverse through the wild, mysterious expanses of the natural world.
3. I wanted this to be true. That when God slipped away and I listened to the Universe instead, I could find the answers. That maybe if I disappeared into the wild like them, I'd discover truth. I'd find a voice there in the confines of the earth.

Transcendentalism

[*tran-sen-den-tl-iz-uh m*] *n.*

1. A strain of Romanticism. As described by Ralph Waldo Emerson in his 1836

manifesto, *Nature*, the natural and material world exist together, and we use subjective experiences from these spaces to reveal universal meaning to a person's soul.

2. Five years after coming out as gay, two years after the policy change in 2015, two years after losing belief in the God I understood, I toured the Timpanogos Cave in Utah. In the deepest part of the cave, our tour guide turned off the lights. We were plunged into absolute darkness. And, where I believed fear would strike me in the shadows of the earth, I instead found peace. I found an anti-separation, a soulful place to reside. Somehow, in the place farthest from sky and light and everything else I believed to be the most spiritual, I rose.

Ubi Sunt

[*oo-bee soo nt*] *n.*

1. Used to begin a number of medieval European poetry, a Latin phrase meaning, "Where are they?"
2. The unbridled darkness in Timpanogos Cave held me. In silence, I stood. When everything else dropped away and there was only me, I could hear my heartbeat thudding against my chest, the muscles stretching as my hands contracted into fists. I breathed in. I breathed out. I might have been standing alone. I might have had a thousand people around me. And, perhaps for

the first time, it didn't matter. I found a voice inside; I heard myself living.

3. Where is God now? Where is Jack now? Where did Andrew go? What happened to that unbroken-boy? Perhaps he was never truly unbroken (see Sublime) (see Pastiche) (see Hymn) (hear him).

Volta

[**vohl**-tuh] *n.*

1. Italian for "turn."
2. In a sonnet, the volta is the turn of thought or argument.
3. I walked out of Timpanogos Cave, back into the light and air of the mountainside, the experience of darkness and nature drifting from me. Pulling my notebook from my bag, I sat on a bench by the cliffside and wrote every feeling, every memory, every breath. And, so unlike the years before when I walked into the woods screaming for god, and even unlike a search for an outside voice, I listened to the Universe, the Sublime, the Natural.

And I transcended them all.

Wyrd

[veerd] *n.*

1. An Anglo-Saxon term often translated as "fate" in Old-English poetry. But it is different from fate as I previously understood it. Fate implies an inevitability of the future. Wyrd implies an inevitability of the past, and therefore we are pushed into the construction of

our own future.

2. The possibility that my future doesn't have to be fixed. The past cannot be altered, but the present is pliant, the future soft. There's a belief that I can step from this cavern and remain static, or I can breathe myself in with the universe—something so vastly eternal—and craft my veins into the earth with ink.

Xinshi Pai

[**hsin**-shih **p'ai**] *n.*

1. A 19th Century poetic movement initiated by Huang Zunxian. Because I loved this form of "New Poetry," I ascended into Huang's words: "I cannot be bound by the ancients."
2. I cannot be bound by the ancients.
3. I cannot be bound by the ancients. I refuse to be bound.

You

[yoo] *n.*

Pronoun for second person, plural or singular.

In writing, using "you" causes the reader to become the central character within the writing. You becomes one with I. All become you. You become me.

In #46 of Walt Whitman's "Songs of Myself," he claims:

no one can travel that road for you.
You must travel it for yourself.
It is not far. It is within reach

And when I hold open my notebook at the top of Timpanogos Mountain, deep in the Utah canyons, I walk to the edge of the cliff and look down. The earth miles below: rocks, rivers, gravel, insects grass, trees. Up above, in the bulk of eternity, a sky with stars sleeping in sunlight. Within hours, they'll wake with the moon and construct their galaxies on the canvas of the universe. But it's just me here in this moment.

So I smile, and I scream. My voice rebounds in echoes across the mountainside, my spirit dancing in the zenith of cosmos and sound and being. I want to ask what road I'm travelling. I wonder if I'm moving toward the universe. Or god. Jack. I. You. Everything.

Or—perhaps—they're all inside me now.■



Into the Mountain
Andrew Romriell
Honorable Mention

2 Starved

Alyssa Witbeck Alexander

Steam fogged my glasses when I opened the oven. I squinted while pulling the dish full of hot chicken enchiladas out of the oven. My mother taught me how to make enchiladas, and she even sent me to college with a recipe book filled with preparation instructions for all my favorite dishes. I heard rumors of college students living on pre-packaged foods due to an inability to cook for themselves. I wanted college to feel like home, which meant that I needed to cook the foods I ate there. It was only my second day of my freshman year at Brigham Young University, a Mormon university two hours south of my Logan hometown, and today I attempted cooking for myself for the first time since moving out. Relieved that the enchiladas weren't burned, I scooped one onto my plate (admiring the toasted cheese that oozed from the center), tossed a quick salad, grabbed a handful of green grapes, and sat down to eat.

"Wow," my new roommate remarked. "Somebody's got a five-course meal over here!" She slurped a bite of her top ramen, and I blushed. So far, I disliked living with five other girls. I ran track in high school with the roommate I shared a bedroom with, but the other four were strangers.

"Are you really going to eat all that?"

another roommate piped in, jokingly. Unsure of what to say, I laughed to ease the tension and finished my meal.

Attempting to avoid a repeat of the enchilada embarrassment, the next few days I chopped up a cobb salad for dinner. I considered salad a simple dish, something without a smell strong enough to attract unwanted commentary and required little skill to create.

"Dang, looks like you're the health queen!" my roommate chuckled, and glanced at the salad after setting a timer for her microwave dinner. I chuckled too, but I set down my fork. I didn't understand the joke or know what I did wrong, but I decided to avoid eating around my roommates and instead snuck meals in moments that no one was home to see.

On the first Sunday of the school year, the leaders of my Mormon Church congregation held a "break the fast" dinner for all student congregation members. In Mormon theology, members fast monthly from two meals to show their dedication to God. Although I had fasted two meals once a month for my entire life, the church leaders scheduled this particular meal several hours after my family and I usually broke our fast. I often felt dizzy on fast Sunday, even when my family ate earlier in the day. Eating later meant more dizziness, but if the leader of my congregation wanted us to eat later, I trusted him. I imagined Heavenly Father thankful for my sacrifice and blessing me for it. Church

leaders taught me to fast *for* something—a friend in need or a sick family member—and God blessed them as a result. Perhaps fasting longer meant a heartier sacrifice that resulted in extra blessings. I hoped so, because college life already overwhelmed me, and I really needed heavenly help.

By the time the evening arrived, and it was time to break my fast, dizziness consumed me, and I struggled walking to the meal. The dinner was held in a large gathering area on the first floor of my apartment building; I grasped the railing to make it down the stairs. Gathered with other students, it took all of my willpower to not rush to the line of food the moment I stepped into the room. I knew that by waiting to eat, God saw how serious I was about my prayer.

“Hey, are you okay?” my roommate whispered when she noticed my swaying body. After the leader gave a blessing on the food, she grabbed my elbow and pushed through the crowd of people to the front of the line. “Scoot over, she needs food NOW,” she said to a few students while she shoved past them.

Swallowing a bite of sweet pork, I knew waiting to eat meant I exemplified self-discipline and strength. Postponing food satisfied me: a worthy sacrifice.

“Anybody want a creamie?” a leader asked, wandering around the room handing out packaged ice cream. Almost instinctively, I turned down the ice cream. I felt a rush of endorphins when the leader passed by me,

like I’d passed a pop quiz. Although I stared, salivating at the banana flavored ice cream that dripped down the stick my roommate held, I wondered if the thrill of turning down the treat satisfied me more than eating the ice cream. Perhaps the desire to eat was more wholesome than the food itself. Perhaps denial provided me with power.

The Banana Nut Crunch cereal flakes had grown soggy and small drops of milk rolled off the spoon like experienced divers. I lifted the spoon to my mouth, again, but lowered it before taking a bite. My fingers began shaking, small spasms that sent the soggiest flakes plummeting off the spoon with the rest of the milk. After dropping the spoon back into the full cereal bowl, I put my head in my hands, confused at my inability to eat one of my favorite foods. A moment later, I tried another bite, but when I tried to swallow, my saliva caught in my throat and I coughed instead. I spit the half-chewed cereal into the garbage. I stared at the plop of mush in the can and wondered if I’d suddenly contracted an allergy to the milk—or perhaps the cereal expired? My stomach ached from hunger, yet I knew that another bite of cereal would choke me. This pattern of trying to eat but finding myself unable to transformed into a horrible routine, but this bowl of cereal was the first time my body tried to reject food for me. I didn’t consider the reality that after only one month of systemically turning down foods, I had become unable to consume. Back

in the kitchen chair, I stared at my mostly full bowl, unsure of what to do. I analyzed my stomach as I watched it curl into the table. Through my shirt I saw the skin bulging, and I watched it grow, expanding and stretching while I realized the willpower I lost by even considering eating the cereal. What happened to the power I held when I fasted? Not even nine in the morning and I already considered giving that up? My stomach ballooned in front of my eyes. Nobody I met at school remembered my name, I was homesick, and I still hated biology. I lost those battles, but right now it was just me against this bowl of cereal. Me against hunger, me against “Are you going to eat all that?,” me against chubby cheeks. It was me against gluttony, me against succumbing to the natural man. I grabbed the cereal bowl and dumped the contents in their entirety down the drain. Running water to wash away the flakey remnants and to overshadow the sounds of my stomach grumbling, I was victorious.

“Your pants look like grandma pants,” a friend told me. He was right. It was October, and the olive-green skinny jeans I’d bought in August now hung loosely over my body. I let the blanket drop from my body just long enough to look at my jeans in the mirror. I assumed the ten pounds I’d lost left my butt first. Grabbing another blanket to wrap around myself (I never warmed even though no one else complained of the cold), I shrugged.

That evening, while I sat on my bed reading my biology textbook, wearing boots and wrapped in blankets, my stomach growled louder than usual. My hands shook, and my head spun, recent symptoms that resulted from hunger. However, I knew I *shouldn’t* be hungry. I ate enough that day that I assumed hunger was impossible. I’d eaten a pre-portioned cup of nonfat yogurt for breakfast, an apple for lunch, and a side salad for dinner—a quantity that I expected to keep me full until breakfast. Still, I struggled concentrating on mitosis when the dizziness made it difficult for me to read the words. I stared at the wall, contemplating if my dizziness was worth the gluttony of grabbing a snack. I postponed food for another hour, but the smell of fresh brownies wafting from the kitchen eventually lured me out of bed. I tiptoed in my boots, not wanting anyone to see me bingeing at 9:30 pm and title me anything but the “health queen.” I eyed the brownies, subconsciously licking my lips and nervously twisting my hair while I read the note that said, “Please eat! For everyone!” next to the pan. Checking first to make sure no one saw, I grabbed a bag of carrots from the fridge, counted out six, then put the rest of the bag back. I plopped on my bed, eating the carrots as slowly as possible to relish the taste, then running my tongue over the waxy remnants in my molars. Somehow, even after eating the vegetables, the pain in my stomach lingered. After all the time I spent contemplating whether or not to eat, and then deciding

to give in, I somehow wasn't satisfied. Food, I understood, couldn't help me. Giving into the snack wasn't worth it—the guilt for eating hurt worse than the stomach pain, worse than the dizziness, worse than the loss of energy. I hurried to the bathroom to brush my teeth, a way to get the taste of gluttony out of my mouth.

“You're so stupid,” I whispered to the bathroom mirror. “Never give in again. It proves how weak you are.” I committed to running further the next morning to compensate for the carrots. I ran three miles every morning—not skipping a day no matter the circumstances—though in time that mileage doubled, and I associated three miles with laziness. I snuck out of the bathroom and dove under the covers of my bed and pulled the blankets over my face to hide my tears from my roommate. Eventually I fell asleep to the sound of my boots tapping against each other under the sheets.

I cut out foods from my diet. Breads first, then snacks. I cut out all meat besides chicken, and then I cut out chicken. I cut out milk products. I cut out high calorie produce like bananas and avocados. I checked calorie labels on everything and memorized the caloric content in every food I came across. Counting calories became as natural and quick as reading billboards I drove past on the freeway. My family came to visit and took me out to dinner. My dad offered me a breadstick—150 calories—and I burst into tears. I

then pretended I hated breadsticks. My sister, Kendal, wanted to split a hot fudge ice cream sundae—850 calories—with M&Ms on top—10 calories each. I took three bites—about 75 calories—while I closed my eyes to get the food down my throat. Driving home alone, I thought about the 75 calories—75 calories that were probably really more like 100 calories because of the M&Ms and maybe I underestimated how big my bites were and it was more like 200. Two hundred calories, more than my meals, more than I allowed myself to eat. Two hundred calories of ice cream—200 extra calories that were really more like 300; I ate 300 calories instead of studying for biology; I ate 300 calories instead of going on another run; 300 calories because I was weak, because I gave into temptation just like Satan wanted me to; 300 calories because I didn't understand the value of sacrifice and delayed gratification; I ate 300 calories and I hated school, and I missed home, and I truly despised myself. I audibly screamed alone in my car, my vision blurred, and my hands shook. I swerved, almost slamming into other cars until I pulled into an empty Denny's parking lot, laid my head on the dashboard, and begged God to take away my pain.

“Something's wrong,” my parents said when I came home for winter break at the end of the semester. It wasn't a question. I'd lost twenty pounds since September, and as my frame had started relatively small, the missing twenty pounds scared my family.

“You said you were eating!” My mother yelled, wrapping her hand around my entire bicep.

“I am!” I promised, thinking of the ten pretzels I ate for lunch.

Alone in my high school bedroom, I sat on my floral comforter with crisscrossed legs and analyzed the dozens of pictures that hung on the wall. Many of the pictures were silly photos I’d taken with my Kendal on various family vacations, some pictures showed figure skating competitions, while others captured the high school friends I no longer kept contact with. Looking at the pictures, I started to cry. I didn’t realize that the pictures were of moments of safety and how, curled on my bed, I no longer felt safe. While I laid on my bed I imagined nothing more stressful than my A- final grade in biology and nothing more powerful than skimping on meals. I left the pictures when my mother called me to dinner. I turned down the dinner rolls.

I stopped menstruating in October, and by December I wondered if, perhaps, something was medically wrong. My hair stopped growing; my long, blonde hair that extended past my chest slowly broke, my already fine hair became finer. Although I was used to dry hands in the winter, that winter my hands cracked and bled, scabs or blood always covering the tops. The tips of my fingers turned a permanent shade of translucent blue, then my entire fingers, then the blueness spread onto the tops of my hands, coloring in the bright red cracks on my skin. Sitting down

hurt, as I’d lost all fat in my butt and whenever I sat, I felt my bones pressing into the seat.

“You’re losing too much weight, Sweet Pea,” my dad told me over winter break. “I understand wanting to be healthy, but this isn’t healthy. This is emaciated. Why don’t you just eat?” He’d hand me a granola bar, a string cheese, a single-serving milk carton. I’d protest, he’d insist, and I’d take the food and thank him for watching out for me. When he looked away, I dumped the milk down the sink, spit the granola bar into tissue and flushed it down the toilet, and hid the string cheese in my pocket to dispose of later.

At church, I learned the value of honesty. Leaders taught that sin needed to be confessed and never hidden, integrity meant being “honest in your dealings with your fellow men.” Throughout my childhood, I never stole, I never lied. Once, at four-years-old, I was mad at my mother and stuck my tongue out at her behind her back. Immediately, I confessed to her what I had done to avoid keeping secrets. When I developed my first crush on a boy in the sixth grade, I wrote my mother a letter explaining to her my feelings, telling her I couldn’t keep anything hidden from her.

“Please,” she said to me. “You’re scaring me. Dad and I decided that you need to gain ten pounds before Christmas break is over, or you can’t go back to BYU. We can’t let you go back there if this is what you’re going to do to yourself. We’ll need to pull you out of school. Please, no more running. Please

eat.” I hugged her, held her head in my chest, tried to comfort my mother while rubbing her back to promise that yes, I would take care of myself. Yes, I would gain weight and improve my health so that I could go back to BYU. Yes, everything would be okay. I learned how to twist the truth—to lie without blatancy. I felt guiltier for breaking my self-given food and exercise rules than for lying. Maintaining my food and exercise routines were worth the sacrifice of dishonesty. Instead of running, I practiced pushups in my room before bed, locking the door to keep anyone from catching me. Instead of running, I exercised on stairways—I hopped up and down the stairs on one leg, feeling the burn in my calf before switching legs. I took a sip of the drinks my parents gave me, maybe licked the food before throwing it out.

“Yes, I’m eating,” I told them, smiling. I loved feeling healthy. If I ate a bite too many or ran one block too few, I felt it deep in my body for days. With every blink, with every breath, I knew I had failed. I shook and cried and pounded my hands against the carpet until I fixed my mistake by running again or finding a way to eat less. It relieved me to cut out a few bites or to run a few miles more. It gave me peace of mind instantly—until, of course, I determined that I needed to eat even less.

Kendal caught me doing leg lifts against the kitchen table. My parents tried to guard her to some extent about my illness—they didn’t want her scared or worried at only

fifteen-years-old about her sister. They cried when she wasn’t around, pleaded with me in the confines of my bedroom while she slept. Still, she was perceptive. She ran to me and grabbed my arm, urging me to stop exercising.

“Hey!” she said. “You’re not supposed to do that!”

“It’s okay, Kendal,” I responded. “I promise everything is okay. Just don’t tell Mom and Dad what you saw, okay? Promise me.” Kendal stared at me, her giant blue eyes normally vibrant and innocent now scared and unsure. She nodded, and I hugged her.

“This scale is broken,” my father said when at the end of Christmas break, instead of gaining ten pounds, I’d lost two more. “This doesn’t make any sense!” He ran his hands through his dark hair. “The caliber must be broken. I’ve seen you eat!” I looked away. My parents bought another scale, which, when the number was still low, was also deemed broken despite every family member stepping on and seeing that their weight was not significantly less than usual. It took buying a third scale to realize that, perhaps, I lost weight.

Huddled near the fireplace, I typed, “Do I have an eating disorder?” into Google. Reading through the symptoms—intense fear of food, losing weight, cutting out foods, going long periods of time without eating, a stopped menstrual cycle, counting calories, compulsive exercise, fear of eating around

other people, cooking food for others but not eating it—I wondered, for the first time, if I had anorexia. I then Googled the weight percentiles for someone with my height. I was in the first weight percentile compared to other women of my age. After another search, I found that I weighed the average for short 11-year-old girls. It felt good to know that, according to Google, I wasn't overweight (though I was unsure whether I believed it). I also knew that I looked sickly. Although I once associated thinness with attractiveness, I knew that I lost all physical attractiveness months ago. I didn't bother doing my hair or my makeup when I went out in public, as I believed that strangers looked at me like something exotic and despicable when I went into grocery stores anyway. When I looked in the mirror, I saw blue skin, cracked hands, and breaking hair. I saw a bloated stomach, saggy skin dangling off my arms, and flimsy toenails. I saw pants I wore in middle school roll in loose folds over my knees, thighs that somehow still loomed too large in spite of a several inch gap, and bones sticking out of my chest like a skeleton.

"You disgusting creature," I whispered to the reflection in my phone's front-facing camera, my voice raspy while I listened to my parents argue about the accuracy of the scale.

On the last day of Christmas break, I begged my parents to let me go back to college, even though I lost weight instead of gaining what they wanted me to. I knew that

leaving BYU meant giving up. I hated college, I hated my major, and I desperately wanted to escape. But my parents pulling me out of school because they worried about my health was too easy. I needed to fight to go back to BYU after winter break, no matter what it took, even if I hated what I fought for.

"I'll eat!" I promised. "I'll restore my weight at school. I don't need to stay home! Home won't fix anything if I am just a loser without an education!" Unsure what to do, my parents whispered behind closed doors.

"You have to take pictures of everything you eat and send them to me," my mother said. "That way I can see that you're okay. And if I tell you that you need to eat more, you have to listen." I knew I won. I hugged them, but part of me, a small part I tried not to recognize, just wanted them to take me home.

Minutes before dropping me off at my apartment in Provo, I broke down, alone with my sister.

"I can't do this," I told her, sobbing. "I said I could, but there's no way. I hate school. I hate being here. Just driving into Provo made me want to throw up." I continued sobbing. "I'm sicker than they know. There's no way I can get better. But you can't tell them." Kendal stared at me, then immediately began crying too.

"Wait!" she squeaked. "You have to tell them! You don't have to do this! You can come home! Please! Tell them!" I shook my head. When my parents returned, they asked about my tear stains and I mumbled something

about the oncoming homesickness. Kendal stared straight ahead. My parents exchanged more glances before pulling into the parking lot of my apartment and dropping me off.

The next day, my mother called me while I walked across campus to class. I heard her crying on the other end of the line.

“I called the doctor,” she said. “We’re coming to get you.” I stopped walking.

“What are you talking about?” I almost laughed, hysterical and angry.

“I told him some of what’s been going on. He said it’s *bad*,” her voice cracked. “He said we need to have an intervention.” She cleared her throat, becoming more business-like. Authoritative. “Your dad and I are coming down tonight to pick you up and take you home.”

“No, you’re not,” I told her. “I have to go to class! I’m on my way to class right now. I won’t leave.” Although the night before I had questioned staying in school, when my mother called, I wanted to stay and fight. I was miserable, yes, but hurting remained a necessary sacrifice for health, for following a successful path.

“Don’t bother going to class,” she told me. “I called the registration office. I’ve already withdrawn you from your courses.”

“I’ve failed you,” my mother whispered a few days later when I got off the scale at home. I’d lost more weight. I tried to tell her no, that I failed, that I would fix it. But I knew

that wrapping my skinny arms around her, to hold her, didn’t provide the comfort I longed to give. When I hugged her, she felt the bones in my shoulders and ribs and cried harder.

An hour later my mother and I sat in a doctor’s office—the doctor my mother had called while I was at BYU. I shifted on the sanitary paper that stretched across the table. I was a patient now. My mother waited, back straight, in a velvet chair next to me.

“I don’t think you can recover on your own,” the doctor told us. “You need to get checked into Avalon Hills.” Avalon Hills was an eating disorder treatment center. They required a minimum check in of 60 days, and it cost \$1,000 a day. I shook my head, almost laughing at the suggestion. I recognized that perhaps I took my healthy lifestyle too far, but needing a clinic seemed extreme. “You need help,” he said.

My mother covered her mouth with her hand, and I watched her shoulders shake from her silent tears. I thought about her words, how she believed she failed me. Perhaps I failed myself. I’d tried so hard to be good, so hard to be healthy, so hard to be pure. Instead, I sat in an office, a patient on the brink of becoming a “clinic girl.” I clutched the side of the paper, crinkled it in my hands to try and force my mind to still, to try and keep myself from passing out.

“We’re going to lose her,” the doctor said to my mother. “We have to save her life.”

This was terminal.

I could *die*. I needed to eat, but I

couldn't. It was too hard. I knew I may never be able to create children. My bones were weak. My heart was shrinking. My body hurt. I might die.

After my mother and I got home, my father called Avalon Hills. They told him there were no available beds—that a space wouldn't open for another three weeks. If a bed became available, I would be checked into Avalon Hills immediately. Perhaps I could fix this by the time a bed opened up.

"This is your last chance, Sweet Pea," my father told me. "Most people at this point can't do it. All of the odds are against you. But you have more determination than anyone I know. Make it happen." He'd never begged like this before. "You have to really step it up. This is not a joke anymore. You have to push harder than you've ever pushed for anything before. It's your only chance. Make it happen. I want to read your survival book."

Despite the doctor, the fear, the threat of in-patient treatment, and the failing organs, I refused to eat. I wanted to, truly, but when I saw food, I left most of it on my plate. I lost myself. I cared little about hurting people, about dying, about hunger. My appointment with an eating disorder specialist was still several weeks out, and my parents seemed exhausted from the pressure they put on themselves to keep me alive before then. My mother had begged me to eat lunch for an hour, but I told her I wanted nothing. Finally, I watched her break. She stormed through

the kitchen with bloodshot eyes due to lack of sleep. She pressed a slice of bread into the toaster, then pulled the peanut butter from the cupboard.

"No," I said, backing up. I suspected her plan. She wanted me to eat peanut butter toast, a food I knew would destroy me. Her hands tremored while she smeared what I considered a giant—enormous—ungodly—glob of peanut butter on the toast. The peanut butter slid over the side of the toast, menacing and disgusting.

"Eat it!" my mother yelled, holding out the toast on a paper towel before me, an offering. I backed into the counter, and when I realized I had no more room to escape, lowered myself onto the floor. I shook my head. "Eat it!" she pleaded again. When I still refused, she shrieked her demand one more time, her voice loud and almost manic, then threw the toast at me. It landed on my leg, splattering peanut butter over my pants and onto the floor. Sobbing, she ran from the room while I sat in a puddle of uneaten peanut butter.

A few weeks later my mother and I met with a psychiatrist, who made an outpatient plan for me. We scheduled an EKG, dietician appointments, therapist appointments, psychiatrist appointments, along with appointments with an eating disorder specialist who quickly diagnosed me with anorexia nervosa and malnutrition. When I went in to get the EKG, the nurse mumbled that my heart rate of 29 beats per minute was "shocking," and

shuffled out of the room. She came back with a wheelchair and wheeled me over to the emergency room. My nervous mother followed behind while the nurse told us that pacemakers are given to people whose heart rates consistently hover at 40 beats per minute.

I met with a doctor who worried that because my heart rate was so low, I would have a seizure in the night or that my heart would stop in my sleep. I was admitted overnight and pumped up with fluids while my family sat and stared at my small body in the hospital bed. Through the night, nurses frequently brought more blankets to wrap around me. They saw how my body shivered and worried that shivering caused me to burn more calories. When my heart rate lowered to 24 beats per minute, the doctor checked me in for a second night.

“Is she going to die?” Kendal asked my mother. She and my father came to visit me during the day, while my mother stayed with me during the entire hospital stay. My mother hugged Kendal and said that I would be okay. But my mother’s voice cracked when she said it, and I doubt Kendal felt comforted. Kendal turned sixteen the day before. Instead of holding a birthday party like she’d planned, she’d canceled the event and sat in the hospital with me. My parents wanted to protect her from the pain, from the ugly. In moments like this, my father shuffled Kendal out of the room, out of the conversation, out of the fear. But Kendal didn’t escape.

The next day I watched my parents speak with the doctors, but I felt so dizzy and unwell that I remember little of my time in the hospital apart from the incessant beeping that indicated my heart rate sinking. I listened to hushed conversations about potentially life flighting me to a treatment center in Colorado, since Avalon Hills was still booked out. Eventually, the doctor told my parents that my situation was critical, but if my heart rate rose, there would be no immediate danger keeping in the hospital any longer—or to require a life flight. He confirmed that I would be safe at home as long as my heart rate stayed above 30 beats per minute. He concluded that if I drank 64 ounces of Powerade a day, that should give my body the electrolytes I needed to keep my heart beating. I told my mother that I would only drink Powerade Zero—the kind with zero calories.

For the next several months, I ate the bare minimum to stay out of a treatment center and out of the hospital. I ate less because I wanted recovery and more because I was terrified of a treatment center, but still, I ate. With time, I began to see recovery as a life I might want. Each night my mother slept in my bed with me, waking every two hours to take my heart rate. For weeks it stayed around 33 beats per minute—just high enough to stay home. I watched my parents whisper about what to do. Could I recover at home? Was I doing okay? Should they act differently as parents? I took another swig of Powerade.

“I wish I wasn’t bound by anorexia,” I wrote in my journal. “I wish I was free.”

At home, my mother sat by me through every meal and snack. My dietician gave me a strict meal plan—things I must eat to stay away from Avalon. I cried every time I put anything in my mouth. But my mother sat with me, on the carpeted floor on top of a heating vent. We wrapped ourselves in blankets and “picnicked” there every time I ate. Several years later, when my parents moved out of my childhood home, it hurt more to say goodbye to that heating vent than anything else in the house. My mother consistently brought my Powerade Zero while I sat on the blanket, and she surprised me with the color (pink, purple, red, green, or blue) to make the drink seem like more of a treat and less of a requirement to save my life.

“You’re doing great,” my mother told me. “I am so proud of you.” She hugged me throughout every meal and didn’t let me leave the blanket unless I consumed a somewhat appropriate amount. Recovery became my full-time job. Instead of school or work, I met with a dietician and a therapist weekly. I had labs done twice a week. I visited a doctor or a psychiatrist or a specialist several times a month who prescribed me with anxiety medication. My doctors and I tried to work through why I fell so deeply in love with the eating disorder, but it seemed that the more we tried to dig out, the more I realized the entrenchment and addiction was deeper than originally thought.

“It’s just so hard,” I said. Each meal took several hours for me to finish. Then I took another bite of cereal, and my mother rubbed my back.

Every day, I made lists of why I wanted to recover from anorexia. I wrote about how I wanted to go to school and go out for ice cream with friends. I wrote about how I wanted to sit on chairs without pain and walk more than a block without worrying that my heart would give out. I wrote about how I wanted my body to function well enough that I could have the choice one day to house a baby in my womb. Sometimes I dumped entire meals in the garbage and determined that I never wanted to recover. But then I sighed, read my lists, and made my meal again.

In May, I spotted a drop of red blood in my underwear. Doctors had told me I may have destroyed my body past the point of reconciliation—that I may never menstruate again. I stared at the splotch of crimson. And then I cried in joy. Many of my body’s functions were far from normal, but the blood told me that my body was capable of healing. The blood told me that I deserved nourishment and survival. To celebrate, I poured myself a bowl of breakfast cereal and ate the whole thing.■

3 Rites of Passage

Kelsie Peterson

Passage (noun):

- 1) (*pasij*) a progress, a movement from one place to another.
- 2) (*pa'säZH*) an advanced movement performed in dressage in which the horse exhibits a slow elevated trot with moments of perfectly balanced suspension that is reminiscent of dancing.

The horse towered over me. His 15.3 hands, or five foot three inches high to his back, overshadowed my small six-year-old frame. He was almost all white, but for a copper spot on his head and a big one on his belly, of which my short vantage point gave me the perfect view. The brown in his tail was covered in a curtain of white. His forelock was still baby fuzz even though he was close to five years old. It was something he never grew out of. We'd just finished grooming, and he gleamed. I looked at him with pride, too little to realize his shine was not solely the result of my school-age efforts.

I grabbed the bridle from where it hung on the hitching post. This was one of the hardest parts, putting on the bridle. Ear shy, Gambler hated having his ears touched. For whatever reason, he gave the least fuss to me, so it soon became the task the short six-

year-old was saddled with, and I didn't mind. I couldn't lift the heavy western saddle onto his back, but I was more than happy to bridle him, and it made me feel special that he tolerated it better when I bridled him. Bridle on and tack checked, it was time to mount up. I climbed onto the mounting block, placed my foot in the stirrup, and swung my leg across his back.

I loved everything about going to my riding lessons. From grooming, to riding, to mucking out the stalls and all the other manual labor that came with caring for horses, I did it all, loved it all.

At that time, Gambler was stabled at the Cache County Fairgrounds in Logan, Utah. The barns consisted of two hunter green buildings that ran north to south and housed sixty horses in small ten by ten stalls. Behind the barns, to the south, was a round pen and a hotwalker, or a large contraption with four arms outstretched in a plus sign to which you tied your horse as it turned, walking them in circles. To the front were the hitching posts, tack barn, and a creek that separated the equestrian facilities from the road. To the west lay an arena, and just beyond that was the spur of the racetrack that encircled the rest of the outdoor equestrian grounds. The track looped through the big outdoor arena, curved around behind the zoo, came back towards the barns along the main road, and then curved back into the main arena on the north side. In the center of the oval lay a pond, various livestock holding areas for

the rodeo, and the remnants of a cross country course.

I have many fond memories of these places: splashing in the creek water after a ride on a particularly hot day, galloping on the track, riding in the local 4-H riding club shows in the big arena, and jumping the cross-country course (my favorite was always the bank behind the pond). I didn't know it then, but Gambler would become my life. The act of placing my foot in that stirrup and clambering onto his back would begin a passage I could never disembark from. He would be my first love, and the first to break my heart.

From the very beginning, Gambler and I shared a bond. Horses are ultimately a prey animal; humans a predator. A balanced and harmonious relationship between horse and rider is an unnatural one. But with a foundation built on trust, the relationship between a horse and rider can defy nature and be like no other. Once after having my appendix out at seventeen, my mother came into the house flustered. She'd gone out to feed Gambler, and he had gotten out of the pasture. For the past fifteen minutes, my mother said she and the neighbor's daughter, a girl about my age who also had horses, had been chasing him around the properties, trying to catch him. They'd tried everything, even luring him with hay and grain. It was day one post-op, and I was under instructions not to do anything too rigorous, but I got up off the couch and

went outside. There he was, prancing around with his tail in the air, spooking every time someone got close. Luckily, he was staying in the yards and not finding his way to the street where he could have the run of the neighborhood, and, if he got far enough, the highway. I slowly made my way down the deck steps, out the gate of our yard, and into the neighbors. Gambler stopped trotting and looked at me. I walked up to him, grabbed his mane, and led him back into the pasture. No halter, no lead rope; barefoot.

This was not an isolated incident. Gambler shifted his weight when I lost my balance during my lessons so that I didn't fall. My mother still recounts one time when I was leading him, a loose dog came out of nowhere and charged us. Prior to taking off, he looked over his shoulder, assessing where I was before running in the opposite direction and breaking the reins as he bucked and kicked at the dog, now far from me. Another time, he spooked and reared during a 4-H group ride. At the top of the rear, he lost his balance and fell backward. Multiple people who witnessed the fall later recounted watching in amazement as he twisted midair to land in a tangle of livestock panels rather than on top of me.

Gambler's owner, AmberLeigh, the one who gave me my first riding lessons, noticed the bond we had was exceptional from the very beginning. The man who had sold Gambler to her had said the horse was untrainable, but there he was, a young colt barely trained himself, carefully taking care of the

tiny girl on his back. When I was old enough to join 4-H, a local riding club, the fact I needed a horse of my own was no deterrent in her mind. Christmas of 2002, I received the gift I dreamed of, a horse of my own.

It was evening, and we'd just finished dinner with AmberLeigh and her husband, Reid. My parents called me back upstairs from the basement where my sister and I were watching a movie. I sat at the table and looked at the space-themed folder that AmberLeigh placed on the table before me. At 12 years old, I was thoroughly confused. What would I want with a folder? Upon my mother's request, I opened it.

Inside was a piece of paper. Affixed to it was a picture of Gambler as a foal along with the names of his dam and sire, and his own registered name, Gambled and Lost.

"Do you know what those are?" My mother asked.

"His papers," I replied. I couldn't understand why I should be excited over seeing Gambler's registration papers for the American Paint Horse Association, the registration entity for his breed. Every registered horse had papers that registered them with their breeds association.

"Do you know what that means?"

I shook my head, no.

My mother pulled out his papers and pointed to the bottom.

I looked closer. The bottom, no longer hidden by the sleeve of the folder, now showed a list of owners. The first few names

I didn't recognize, but then I saw the names of AmberLeigh and Reid, his current owners. My heart sang as I realized underneath there was another name: mine.

It was through 4-H that I first found my love of dressage, a specialization of the English style of riding with roots in the cavalry. Gambler, due to spending so much time confined in the small stall at the Fairgrounds prior to my owning him, had arthritis in his joints that made it impossible for me to keep jumping him. At the time, we were clearing fences up to 3 feet, higher than most of the riders in 4-H, and our inability to continue jumping devastated me. To me, nothing compared with the feeling I got as I flew over a fence more than half my height in perfect balance. It was exhilarating. As one of the most advanced riders in our 4-H group, my ability made us popular, revered. But the injections in Gambler's joints were no longer working, and not only was it not safe for him to continue jumping, but jumping was also causing him pain.

Dressage, in the simplest of terms, means training. In fact, ask any dressage aficionado and they will tell you that the word dressage (pronounced dreh-sazh) is derived from a French word for training. Dressage's origins in the cavalry required the utmost precision in movement and control over your horse. Every movement in dressage is one the horse performs in the wild. Naturally, horses move with unmatched grace and beauty.

However, with a rider upon their back, this natural balance is thrown askew. The goal of dressage is to restore balance and perfect these natural movements in perfect harmony, as if they were steps to a highly choreographed dance.

The loss I felt in no longer being able to jump was short-lived as I soon found that dressage was a realm of its own. What I had once seen as the tedious groundwork that was a precursor to jumping soon became my passion. The glimpses of feeling I got when Gambler was perfectly balanced underneath me as we worked together in perfect harmony far surpassed the exhilaration of clearing a fence. I sat atop and held in my hands a feeling I'd never known before. One thousand pounds of horsepower ready at the lightest touch to halt, to canter, to move sideways, to go back. We floated on air. His balance was so perfect, his hooves barely made a sound as they hit the hardened pasture ground. As quickly as the moments came, they were gone. But I was hooked. Each ride, bareback or saddled, became the pursuit of that feeling of harmony and balance.

The levels in dressage competitions are tiered. They range from introductory and training levels, where the most advanced movements are to walk, trot, and canter, to the level of the Olympics, the Grand Prix. At this level you will find the piaffe (a movement in the trot where the horses stride is so short, and steps so elevated, that they give the impression of trotting in place), the tem-

pi-changes (a movement in the canter, when the horse changes leads while all four legs are off the ground and can be done every stride which gives the impression the horse is skipping), the pirouette (also performed at the canter, the horse pivots in a circle so tight the back leg moves no farther throughout the turn than the size of a dinner plate), and the passage (a slow, collected trot where the steps are elevated with moments of suspension giving the impression of marching or dancing). Of these, my favorite (and the one I most aspire to achieve) is the passage.

I can only imagine the feeling of working perfect harmony and balance to music, as done in the Musical Kür, or Musical Freestyle. How incredible that feeling of pure power must be as the horse underneath me marches to the tempo of the music.

Most of my teenage years revolved around horses. I worked on a farm cleaning up after chickens, goats, horses, and cows to support my horse habit. I became vice president of our English 4-H group and began teaching lessons. I read every horse book I could get my hands on from *The Saddle Club*, to *Heartland*, to *Pine Hollow*. On the weekends, I went to horse clinics and horse expos. I saddled up and rode across the highway in 20-degree weather to the indoor arena to ride. I groomed Gambler until he gleamed as white as snow, cleaned tack, and mucked his stall. I wore riding tights and muck boots and always smelled like the barn.

During my last two years of high school and into college, I began to suffer chronic and debilitating pain in my lower back. I couldn't sit or stand without it hurting. After seeing specialist after specialist and receiving no answers, the pain was diagnosed as psychosomatic—in my head. Between the pain and the mild depression it caused, I slowly became less and less active with horses. Eventually, my move to Salt Lake City for college, and then to Alaska for work upon completion of my nursing degree, rendered the logistics of keeping a horse impossible. And, truth be told, I soon found my life would be much easier sans my money eating, pasture ornament equine. However, in my heart, I could never sell Gambler. He simply meant too much to me. I began to look into options of leasing him out to a 4-H'er in need of a horse. A family my parents knew ended up leasing him, and with that arrangement in place, I saw my ties to the horse world weakening.

But it didn't last.

Before I knew it, I was looking at ways to get involved with horses in Alaska. My searches led me to a summer of volunteering with an Equine Assisted Therapy Program, leading horses as children with disabilities worked with therapists to increase their mobility, communication skills, and hand-eye coordination. Then, after seeing a post on the classifieds at work, I began to lease a horse named Teddy. I would muck his stall on my days each week, feed, and trail ride in the 30-acre park across the street from where he was

stabled. While I found ample opportunity to be with horses, I never found harmony. It was never the same as it had been with Gambler.

I was living in Alaska when Gambler passed away. To this day, I am grateful I was not there to witness the process. Even though it was in 2015, I still tear up every time I hear my mother talk about it. I often try to hide the tears, as if the loss of my first love, a best friend, is something shameful. My brother and sister were visiting me over Spring Break. It was a snowy morning at the end of March, and we were getting ready to drive down to Seward to visit the aquarium and go whale watching. I knew something was wrong the moment I heard my mother's voice on the other end of the line.

"Gambler fell in the pasture. He broke his leg." She paused, and I struggled to process the information she relayed. "Kelsie, we have to put him down."

A broken leg for a horse, even a multi-million-dollar horse like Barbero, or more recently Mongolian Groom, is often a death sentence. Their sheer size and the logistics of keeping them off one leg makes a recovery next to impossible. Not to mention their circulation doesn't work correctly without weight on the hooves. In Gambler's case, he'd broken his tibia, which, when compared to human anatomy, would be the thigh bone on his hind leg. There was no chance for recovery.

I looked at my reflection in the closet

door mirrors, trying to process my mother's words. When I did, a sob escaped my lips, and I sank down onto my bed. My sister heard and came into my room, trying to figure out what had upset me. On the phone, my mother, through tears of her own, attempted to console me. I was too upset to acknowledge either. Finally, my sister took the phone from me and spoke with my mother. I buried my face in my hands and wept, equilibrium shattered.

My heart broke that morning. Sadness, as I had never known before, overcame me. In the end, it was my sister and brother who got me through the day, past the texts working out how to get funds for the vet bills to my parents and figuring out how to dispose of his remains. We went to the aquarium and went on a whale watching cruise. I wore sunglasses all day, hiding the tears that never quite left my eyes.

After the loss of Gambler, even though I'd hardly been around him for the last five years, I wasn't sure I ever wanted to open my heart back to horses. But, again, I found myself unable to stay away, I felt I had to restore my sense of equilibrium. I found myself watching any cheesy horse movie I could find, binge-watching horse-related TV shows, and subscribing to horse magazines even though I no longer had a horse of my own.

When nursing took me to Oregon, there was one thing I knew I wanted to do: ride. Specifically, ride on the beach. Not

those pony rides where the horses plod along bored out of their minds but really ride. To canter through the waves, a sea breeze in my face, completely free. I joined Facebook groups as I searched for places to ride or horses to lease. I even inquired with the local farm stores for leads: barns in the area, people they knew needed help with their horse, individuals offering lessons. I found nothing. Then, one night, a co-worker asked me what hobbies I had and when I mentioned riding, I soon found that several of my co-workers had horses. One, an ICU nurse named Rebekah, was willing to take me out on beach rides with her. I eagerly leaped at the opportunity.

Rebekah had two horses, Vahala and Amore. Both were Arabians, a rather petite breed of horse that originated in the Middle East. Amore, the horse I rode, stood at 14.2 hands (a hand is the measurement of the horse's height from the ground to the top of their wither—where the neck meets the back—each hand is four inches). At first, we rode around the barn property so that I could get used to Amore and get back into the swing of things. Each horse is unique and responds to riders in different ways. On the next ride, we rode down to the beach as we did on all of our subsequent rides. The rides filled me with rapture: the sound of the waves crashing, the salt in the air, the wind on my face, the rhythm and familiar movement of the paces.

Each ride was the highlight of my week. We went for miles. Sometimes down the beach to the south, through the bird con-

servation area, to the everchanging estuary across which I could see the beach a block from my house. Other times we took the shore north, almost reaching the Air Force base before turning back home. Often, we would ride out with others, barn mates of Rebekah's, and come back a sweaty, tired trio.

One time, as we were tacking up for a ride, we discussed the recent call within the horse world to require helmets in competition. Having had several falls and near misses where I was thankful for my helmet, I never mount up without one. No matter how good of a rider you are, no matter how trained or old the horse, no matter what you are doing, accidents still happen.

It was the end of our ride. We'd gone south and were almost back to the dune we rode up to return to the barn. One of the other riders had wanted to splash around in the water. And so, Rebekah and I had hung back with her. I remember the sound of the hooves hitting the wet sand. We were cantering, the horses' hooves sending droplets of seawater flying through the air, and then there was nothing at all.

"Kelsie. Kelsie. Wake up."

I opened my eyes.

"Don't move." I was lying on my back with Rebekah squatting over me.

My mind struggled to process what was happening. It felt like I was in a dream, for all I knew, it was a dream.

"Don't move. You fell. You need to lie

still." Rebekah kept her hands on my shoulders.

I was cold. So cold.

"Do you remember what happened?"

"I fell," I said, repeating her words.

I remembered then, a piece of a dream, not so far off. A frame by frame vision of me cantering Amore on the beach. A realization something was wrong. A flashing thought that I should do an emergency dismount. The impact as Amore's face hit the sand. The sensation of me falling over her shoulder.

I opened my eyes.

A new person was looking down at me now. Several. One was continuing Rebekah's plea, "Don't move," as he gently placed a C-Spine collar, or immobilization device, on my neck. The other asked me questions.

"What's your name?"

"Kelsie."

"Sorry to meet you like this, Kelsie. When's your birthday?"

"February 5, 1990."

"How old are you?"

I paused. Thinking. Even in my befuddled state, I knew that not knowing was scary. The knowledge was there, I knew it was, but it was just out of reach. How old was I? My expression must have betrayed my confusion.

He smiled. "That's ok, how about, what year is it?"

In the background, I could hear Rebekah giving a nurse's report to the EMT's. "LOC for about thirty seconds..."

LOC. Loss of consciousness. What year was it?

“2016.”

“Ok,” he said, “can you tell me what day it is?”

Again, I paused. More EMTs came and helped to log roll me onto a backboard. I marveled at the fact I knew that they were placing a C-Spine collar, what LOC was, and that they were log rolling me onto a backboard, but I couldn’t tell them the date; I knew the year but couldn’t tell them my age.

Had I not been wearing a helmet, I would have died that day. The damage I sustained—a C-spine, three IV pokes, the loss of my favorite breeches (cut off in the ambulance, thankfully I was with it enough to stop them from cutting off my riding boots), an ambulance ride, a CT scan, a headache, and soreness. The damage to my helmet? A six-inch crack that went through the interior foam. It still hangs in my trailer, a reminder of what could have been.

You know that saying, “get back up on the horse?” I’ve fallen off more times than I can count, had a horse rear and fall on me, been kicked in the stomach, and fallen off the giant green dinosaur that is outside every Sinclair gas station (we don’t talk about it); each time, I got back on the horse (or dinosaur). This time, I got back up (once I was medically cleared to ride again) and, one year later, bought a giant of a horse who stands a full foot taller than Amore’s 14.2 hands.

Our fall placed Amore into retirement, a life full of no riding and getting fat in her new occupation as a lawnmower. The fall, I learned later, wasn’t her tripping or spooking nor any fault of mine; she simply went down, face first in the sand as if her legs were pulled out from under her. Following her retirement, I rode Satin, a friend of Rebekah’s horse, until she too, a few months later, was retired to live in a lush green pasture. Then, there was Cooper, an off the track thoroughbred I had for two weeks until he mysteriously went lame—so lame he was unable to walk. ShyLow, I took care of for about a month after his owner had knee surgery. Shy was one of those dangerous pasture pet horses, one that had ill enforced training and was given no, or ill set, boundaries. I would work with him, and he would rear, kick, and threaten me. I had no patience for it, and, after my fall, no desire to place myself in danger for someone else’s horse. In all honesty, while I’d found myself compelled to search out horses, wherever I was, I never had been able to connect with one of them. Not Teddy, not Amore, not Satin, not Cooper, not ShyLow.

Part of me began to wonder if I was genuinely horse-crazy. After all, you hear these people talk who are excited to get on a horse, any horse, spend any amount of time with them. You know the ones who eat, breathe, and speak horses. There’s nothing wrong with that, but I was finding that just wasn’t me. Not that I didn’t enjoy my rides, but the spark wasn’t there, that moment of

perfect harmony I'd felt so long ago.

Maybe I just had terrible luck with horses. Maybe horses just weren't my thing anymore. Maybe my heart wasn't ready. Maybe it never would be. Maybe, I just hadn't found the right horse.

At the time, I wasn't planning on buying a horse; the timing wasn't right. There was work needing to be done on my house, student loans to be paid off, and so many things that I wanted to do with my life—like travel—that the responsibility and commitment a horse required would hinder. I first saw the Facebook post backstage during tech week (a week of nightly rehearsals leading up to opening night) of my theatrical debut in *Clue: The Musical*. While buying a horse wasn't in my plans, it never hurt and was always fun to look. The few Facebook groups that I'd joined when looking for a horse to lease also had posts of horses for sale. Every once in a while, something interesting would show up on my feed, but I'd never felt the need to go see any of the horses.

The post was wildly popular. It had several hundred reactions. It wasn't hard to see why. In the photos, Indy was drop-dead gorgeous. His deep copper coat gleamed with rich darker circles, or dapples, that covered his body, a stark contrast to the white spots that covered his withers, hindquarters, and legs. His flaxen mane and tail were full and long. His build was stocky, not like a tank, but strong and refined. His conformation, or bone structure, was perfect. My favorite thing

about him though was his face. His white blaze was spotted with freckles—something I had never seen before. He was everything that I was looking for in a horse. Draft or draft cross (think Budweiser Clydesdales)? Check. Aptitude for dressage? Check. Within my price range? Check. The only problem? I wasn't looking.

My mother is my enabler when it comes to horses. I sent her a screenshot of the sale post, and she confirmed my insane idea of driving two hours to go see him. I contacted the seller and set a date to meet him.

Before that day, I thought love at first sight didn't exist. But from the moment I saw him, I felt a connection I hadn't felt in years. He was more than I could have ever hoped for. As he ran in the arena, he moved with such magnificent power and grace that I found I couldn't look away.

That day he showed every bit of the gentle giant he was advertised to be. Standing at a full 17.2 hands, I could barely see over his back even on tiptoes. And yet, he paid no mind to the toddler running around the barn with little supervision. When I rode, I could feel the raw, untapped potential with every movement. He responded to the lightest touch, and for his behemoth size, he certainly could turn on a dime.

I knew, without a doubt, when I left that he was the horse for me. The seller gave me a day to think over my answer, promising to not entertain any other offers for that time. They had noticed the same type of bond

AmberLeigh had seen between Gambler and I so many years prior, repeatedly telling me how we were meant for each other. I called my mother sobbing on the way home because just as every fiber of my being told me he was perfect, every fiber of my mind screamed now is not the time.

A horse is an insanely big commitment. One that should never be made on a whim. I knew what my answer had to be. The initial cost of buying a horse is the cheapest. Horses' demands on both money and time are exponential. I wrote the owner a Facebook message the next day that stated, while I loved Indy, a horse was just not in the cards at that time. Immediately after hitting send, I regretted it. For several days a tug of war raged inside my brain. My mind could think of a thousand reasons to not buy Indy. My heart could think of a thousand reasons to bring him home. I thought of all the things we could do, all the dreams realized were balance restored. Shortly before I'd moved to Oregon, I'd made a promise to myself to live my life with no regrets. It's what took me to the Pacific Northwest, a place I'd always vowed I'd live. It's what made me try out for theater and the reason for my debut in *Clue: The Musical*. Finally, my heart won over my head, and I reached out to see if he was still for sale.

Three weeks later, I bought a horse.

As we were signing the paperwork, I looked at his papers for the first time. His registered name was Curtain Call.

I would love to say that everything was rainbows and unicorns after buying Indy, but life with horses never goes as you expect it. Only a couple days after bringing Indy home, he kicked another horse in the shoulder in a freak accident and broke it. The injured horse, Gauge, had to be put down on the spot—only two weeks before he was supposed to compete with his teenage rider in the county fair. This tragic incident brought me crashing back down to earth from where my happiness had elevated me, a heavy dose of realism in a rose-colored world. Thankfully, the owner was very understanding and didn't blame Indy or me in any way.

That was in 2017. In the time since then, life has brought many changes—I moved back to Utah to attend graduate school to pursue writing, rather than nursing as a career, my chronic back pain has resurfaced, worse than before, and I've struggled with anxiety, panic attacks, and depression. Through it all, Indy has been a constant. He soothes my soul and restores my balance, just as Gambler did so long ago. I've left the barn in tears, and I've left grinning from ear to ear. Through all the harmonious moments where we've achieved transcendence, to the terrible moments like the loss of Gauge, I do not regret my decision.

In the wild, a horse passages in moments of extreme excitement. Under saddle, the movement is the mark of perfect balance and impulsion. The passage is trained by starting with a very forward trot. Through a

specific set of aids, or signals, to the horse, the rider then shortens the horse's stride while keeping the forward movement and energy—control, balance, and impulsion working in harmony. Every day, every ride, continues to be a pursuit of that perfect balance in which a passage is possible.■



Spiraling
Andrew Romriell
Honorable Mention

