



Scribendi

UTAH STATE UNIVERSITY

CREATIVE WRITING CONTEST

2013

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Thank You

Scribendi publishes winning entries from the Utah State University Creative Writing Contest, which is open to all USU undergraduate and graduate students from all departments and disciplines. This year, the contest received 149 entries from students in 22 different areas of study spanning six colleges. With so many excellent entries, the judges' task wasn't easy. While we congratulate the students whose work emerged at the top, we also thank all the entrants for raising the level of the competition with their fine work. We urge all the writers and artists in our USU community to continue cultivating their sense of craft, their appreciation for good language and aesthetics, and their spirit of artistic camaraderie.

The online version of Scribendi is available on campus at USU's English Department website or at www.scribendi.usu.edu. Off-campus access can be found at the same addresses through the VPN.

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Many thanks for the generosity and discriminating taste of our contest judges:

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Thanks also goes to Lori Hyde, Rebecca Sanders, and Robin Wheelwright from the English Department administrative staff, whose assistance in running the contest, documenting and filing entries, and producing the magazine have been invaluable.

From powerful, unflinching explorations of the human heart in its relations to the world, to poetic evocations of the natural world and our place within with, to imagined worlds inhabited by unforgettable characters, this year's issue of Scribendi once again demonstrates the tremendous talent of USU's graduate and undergraduate creative writers. As faculty advisor to the contest, I offer a deep bow to our contest judges and Scribendi interns. Brian Cook, Caitlin Erickson, Esther Allen, and Bryan Johnson, Scribendi interns, provided comradeship and tireless work in bringing the contest and this publication to fruition. Readers, enjoy! May your heart be deepened by the words on these pages.

—Michael Sowder, 2012-2013 faculty advisor to Scribendi

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“Cabin Porch” by Tiffany Smith
First Place Graduate Art

FIRST PLACE UNDERGRADUATE FICTION

Payback *by Kary Bird*

Although it was the middle of the night, it was still hot as hell. In Texas, nighttime didn't mean it was any cooler, and Suzanne was dripping sweat. Suzanne propped her armful on her hip—she didn't want to ruffle its fur or get scratched by one of its claws—and pulled an old, blue bandana from the back pocket of her jeans. The life-like mammal she had on her hip only weighed a few pounds, but since she'd been carrying it through the woods these last 20 minutes or so, it seemed to have gotten heavier.

Suzanne crammed the bandana back into her pocket and sat her cargo down with a small crunch on the long, dry grass. As she did, she noticed that small burrs had grabbed onto her shoelaces. She knew it was useless to try to pick them off until she returned home; she would only pick up more hitchhikers on the way back.

It was probably 90 degrees outside, and traipsing through dead grass

and dense brush was not easy. Suzanne needed to stop for a moment. Breathing heavily, she put her hands on the small of her back and arched backward, looking at the night sky peeking through the cedar trees above. As her hazel eyes surveyed the cloudless navy sky, she picked out the shapes of Cassiopeia and Scorpius. The moonlight cast Suzanne's shadow and those of the swaying branches on the dead grass.

Suzanne's sleeveless Def Leppard shirt would have shown her blooming patches of sweat had it been daylight out. This little excursion would get her a good case of chiggers. No doubt she'd be scratching for days, but it would all be worth it in the end. If only she could be there to see that Yankee's face when he saw what had happened to his precious!

With a sigh, she picked up her neighbor's surprise and set off again. She was nearly there. She could see the rusted barbed wire fence, meant more for marking territory than for keeping things in or out. She pulled the wires apart and sat his present on the other side, then she stepped through. As she did so, one of the barbs caught her jeans and ripped a small hole, barely missing her thigh. She briefly tried to inspect the damage, but the low light made that nearly impossible, so she continued on.

She tried to be silent as she crept behind his garage, but the sound of her feet on the dead grass everywhere was making her nervous. She could hear her heart beating loudly in her ears as she peered out from the corner of the garage; there was no movement. Suzanne could see her neighbor's familiar Toyota Prius, obscured by his shabby, run down mobile home. The trailer had brown rust stains reaching out from the rivets in the siding, and the paint was peeling away from the window frames. Suzanne saw a tiny red light flashing on the dash of his car, but none of the lights were on inside his home—that was good. It was probably 3 a.m. by now, and all was quiet. She took one more quick look around the property and snuck over to her neighbor's porch, which was really just three weathered wooden stairs leading up to his mobile home's door.

On the second step she left his gift right where he would find it in the morning, along with a note that said, “This is what happens when you mess with a Texas girl.”

A week earlier, Suzanne was out in her garden on her 22 acre plot of Texas pasture and woodlands and it was another scorching day; the news said

the high was going to be 109 degrees. Suzanne was creating what she hoped would be a successful series of A-frame trellises for her future crop of tomatoes. There was supposed to be an A-frame at two ends and a beam along the top to connect them. Theoretically, the tomatoes would climb up strings which went from the bottom to the beam on top. That is, if the sun didn't burn them up first. This year there was a serious drought. With luck and a little borrowed water these tomatoes would make it.

She was holding the first A-frame up and wondering how she would connect it to the other end when a silver Toyota Prius came barreling down her white driveway, kicking up a thick, snake-like trail of dust behind it. After shading her eyes with her hand, Suzanne recognized it as belonging to her new neighbor, Max.

Great, she thought. That Yankee bastard is just what I need. She was a little annoyed at this interruption, but grateful, too; her A-frame was getting heavy, and she needed a break from the sun. Grasshoppers flapped to safety when she let the frame fall to the ground, their sunbathing disturbed. She had to shake her leg fast to remove one that landed on the side of her calf.

She walked over to the open door of her garage, little more than some two-by-fours with tin sheets covering them. She opened an old, white fridge in the garage and got out a pitcher of fresh sweet tea, the ice cubes tinkling. Suzanne picked up a cup on a sawhorse nearby. She blew out a few chunks of debris and, satisfied, poured herself a glass. She put the pitcher back in the fridge and swung the door shut with her hip.

Suzanne took a seat on an old lawn chair inside her garage, just in time to see Max getting out of his Prius. He approached Suzanne, his round face flushed.

"Howdy, Max! Want a glass of tea?"

He ignored her friendly greeting and said, "Don't offer me a glass of tea! You should be ashamed of yourself!"

She wiped a bead of sweat that had gathered on her nose while she sat back on her chair. "Well, Max," she said, "I'm afraid I don't have the slightest idea what you're talkin' about."

"If I find out that you're the one siphoning water out of my pond, I'll get the authorities involved." Max walked a few steps over to the garden, crunching with each footstep on the dry, dead grass. Suzanne watched as his beady brown

eyes surveyed her garden, searching for any small sign of moisture. She smiled when all he saw were the dry garden beds, already brimming with young tomato plants, and the uncompleted parts of her A-frames. He waved at a gnat buzzing around his face as he walked back to the tin garage.

Suzanne said, "I don't know where you get off accusing me of something like that, but if you come down my driveway like that again, I'll be well within my rights to shoot you."

Max gaped at her, and, failing to come up with a retort, he stomped off toward his fuel efficient car, his back decorated with a triangle of sweat. It took him a mighty heave to get his bulk into the car; it visibly shifted under his weight. Max gave Suzanne a final glare, to which she responded with a smile and a wave as he roared off in a cloud of dust back up her driveway, his New York license plate getting smaller and smaller.

Suzanne ran her cold glass of tea around her red face while she looked for something to fan herself with. Just as she spotted the ripped up side of a Coke box, she faintly heard the phone ring in the house. She sat her tea down and jumped from the chair. Suzanne's house and garage were not connected, so she had to act fast if she was going to answer the phone. Her young, muscular legs carried her quickly down the three steps, across the dead lawn, and past the herb garden. One final leap and her bare, pink toenails glimmered as she landed on the red front porch. Suzanne ripped open the screen door just as the phone was ringing again.

She ran into the kitchen and picked up the blue receiver. "Hello?"

"Hey, Sue, how's it going?"

"Oh, hi, Mike! You'll never believe what just happened to me!"

"What's that?"

"You know that Yankee that moved in next to me? He came busting ass down my driveway today, saying I been siphoning water outta his tank! Said he'd call the cops on me or somethin' if he found out it was me." She pulled out a chair from her kitchen table, sat down, and propped her leg up on the corner of the table.

She could faintly hear Rush Limbaugh behind Mike's voice and smiled. Her dad always used to have Rush on the radio at the taxidermy shop. Suzanne inherited the taxidermy shop after her father passed away a few weeks back; she thought the boys would have music playing, but it sounded like they just

couldn't let go of Rush.

Mike said, "That's unreal! You want me to go over there and say something to him?"

Suzanne pinched her shirt and began puffing it in and out to make a breeze. "Nah, don't worry about it. He was over here last week, too, complaining about something being wrong with the fence and how it was my responsibility to fix it! I've had nothin' but trouble from that guy ever since he moved in. Anyway, what'd you call for?" She noticed her smokes sitting on the table beside the napkins. She pulled the ashtray toward her, grabbed a cigarette from the pack, and looked around for a lighter.

"Oh, right." He paused for a moment; she heard someone in the background. "Hold on, I'm on my lunch break -- Sorry, Sue. Yeah, right. Me and a couple buddies were gonna go fishing tomorrow, and I just wanted to see if you wanted to go."

Her search for the lighter produced nothing, so she slipped the cigarette back in the pack. "Hmm. Yeah, I guess I can. I gotta finish these trellises I'm making for my tomatoes, but, yeah, I'll be done by tomorrow. You can take a look at 'em tomorrow and tell me whatcha think."

"Okay, cool! How does nine sound?" She could hear the excitement in his voice. He had been trying to make them an item for a while now, but Suzanne was still too broken up about her dad to bother with that.

She rolled her eyes and smiled. "Yeah, that'll be good. Bye." She hung up the receiver and slowly walked back out to the garden to finish the construction.

That night, Suzanne took a cool shower, careful not to scrape her sunburned, red skin. She had used sunscreen, but apparently she hadn't used enough. She draped an oversized nightshirt over her arm and walked across the warm Mexican tiles in her bedroom to an aloe vera plant near the door. Suzanne snapped off a piece and ripped it open, rubbing its cool flesh all over her burned arms and shoulders. When she was done, she tossed the spent aloe segment, put on the nightshirt and peeled back the covers of her bed. After thoroughly checking between the sheets for crickets – they liked to hide in there sometimes – Suzanne got in bed and switched the TV to Perry Mason.

She was so tired, and her sunburn seemed to make her more fatigued. She set the sleep timer, and the quiet sounds of Perry interrogating a witness on the stand put her right to sleep.

Suzanne awoke to the sound of a woman-like scream. She sat straight up in bed and listened intently. There was hissing and growling coming from her open door that led right out to the back porch. A big, orange Tom cat had been creeping around almost every night, pestering her 13 year old cat, and she recognized the now-familiar sounds of their disagreement. She heard a scuffling noise; it sounded like her cat, Sissy, was trying to make it up the huge oak tree right next to the porch.

Suzanne thought, *I'll teach you to mess with my cat!* She got out of bed slowly and, without turning on the bedside lamp, crept over to the corner, where she kept a loaded .22 just for this very occasion. The cats were still going at it outside. Suzanne made up her mind a few nights ago that she was going to shoot that thing if she got the chance. She could hear the low growls of poor Sissy, trying to scare off the intruder.

Suzanne walked over to the sliding screen door and could easily make out the orange blob in the light of the stars. A small breeze shifted the dead oak leaves that landed on the deck, augmenting the hisses coming from the cats. At that moment, Suzanne pushed the screen door open just a few inches and took aim at the offender. She let out a deep breath and squeezed the trigger.

Pop! She fired the .22 and saw the orange Tom drop. *I did it! I got that bastard,* she thought. Smiling triumphantly, she propped the rifle up in the corner and flicked on the porch light next to the door. Opening the screen door wider, she stepped out to have a look at her kill.

She walked over to the cat, her bare feet crunching on the dead leaves and acorns dropped by the ancient tree. As she crouched down to look at the crumpled cat, she heard Sissy making her way clumsily down the oak tree, clinging onto the thick bark with what strength she had left in her old age. With a small thud, she landed on the deck and took her time getting to Suzanne and the body of the Tom. Sissy gingerly sniffed at the furry body, then rubbed up against Suzanne's leg and purred.

Suzanne pulled her still wet hair around to one side, holding it so it wouldn't touch the dead cat. She turned the cat over with her free hand; he was definitely dead. "Hm," she said to Sissy, "that's the end of that." Suzanne picked the orange cat up by the back legs and descended the stairs of the deck. Sissy hopped up onto her picnic table and watched Suzanne go.

Suzanne walked behind the house to the garage, barely noticing the

chirping crickets in the grass and the cicadas in the trees; the racket they made would have been deafening to anyone unused to it, but she was a country girl, through and through. Born and raised in the Texas Hill Country, she had grown used to the night sounds at a very young age. Almost every night of her life was spent with the windows open, letting the bug noises and small animal sounds lull her to sleep.

As she climbed the three stone steps up to her driveway, she could just barely make out the outline of her completed trellises straight ahead in the garden. Suzanne felt a small surge of pride knowing that she had made those by hand—maybe with just an old Sawzall and the wrong kind of screws, but she made them nonetheless. So what if she borrowed a few gallons from Max's tank? He didn't need it. She turned right, wincing as small, sharp rocks from the driveway jabbed into the bottoms of her feet. She walked to a patch of grass and wiped her feet on it, clearing them of the smallest stones before dropping the dead cat outside the garage. His body hit the ground with a muffled note of finality.

Suzanne walked into the garage, rummaged around in a drawer, and pulled a black trash bag from the end of a roll. She struggled for a minute, trying to find which end opened, found it, then shook the bag out. She walked outside where the corpse lay on the ground, picked up the cat, and put it in the bag. She tied the bag and then carried it into the garage, where her giant freezer sat humming, laboring in the hot summer night. Suzanne sat the bag down, opened the freezer and shifted some of her deer meat from last hunting season over to one side. She stopped for a minute.

I guess this is kinda gross, she thought. But it'll start stinkin' if I don't. If she didn't put the body in her freezer, the country dogs would come around looking for it. She shrugged and placed the body bag into the empty spot.

"What's wrong with you?" Mike asked the next day.

They were driving out to one of the last remaining fishing holes they knew of; the drought had claimed most of them, and fishing was getting scarce. Mike's black '75 Chevy Silverado hummed along the gravel road, leaving a thin cloud of white dust behind them. Suzanne sat in the passenger seat, her head leaned against the headrest, bouncing with every pothole they hit. It was only nine thirty in the morning, but it was already hot and sticky. The cedar trees blanketing the hill country were covered with a translucent film of white pow-

der—proof that there had been no rain for a long time. The open windows of the truck created a warm breeze, dislodging a long strand of Suzanne's hair. Small rocks and gravel from the dirt road flew up and hit the truck, making small *tink!* sounds.

She rubbed her tired eyes with her fingers as they drove past a dried up pond, huge cracks separating dried clumps of dirt. "Oh, you know that big ol' Tomcat that's been messing with my cat for the last couple of months? Well, last night I got my chance, and I popped a cap in his ass."

Mike burst out laughing. His dark hair fell forward as he leaned toward the steering wheel as he tried to regain his composure. "No way! What'd you do with him?"

"Ah, I had to put him in my freezer till trash day comes. Didn't want him to start stinking up the place. Last thing I want is a bunch of dogs to come sniffin' around, lookin' for a treat." Suzanne leaned forward and pushed in the lighter.

"Yeah, that makes sense. Hey, when are you comin' back to work?"

Suzanne gazed at the dusty landscape through the window. "I'll get there. I just need a little more time. Besides, Jason's a good manager."

Mike just nodded. Suzanne opened the glove box, grabbed a pack of Camels, and pulled one out of the pack. The lighter popped out just as she slammed the glove box shut. She touched it to the tip of her cigarette and drew a long drag. She exhaled, watching the smoke hover in the cab for a moment, then drift out the open window to be mixed and lost with the dust of the road.

Maybe I'll get back to work soon, Suzanne thought.

They arrived at the fishing hole and met up with their other friends. They only caught a few catfish, but they would make for a nice, deep fried meal one night. When Suzanne got home, she cleaned her catfish, put them in Ziploc bags and put them in the freezer, next to the rock hard body of the dead cat.

A few days later the county sheriff, Buster, came to visit. She looked out her living room door and watched him drive down the driveway. She pulled on some ripped jeans, her big toe catching on one of the holes. As he stepped out of his car, Suzanne tied her long hair back into a ponytail and walked out onto her front porch to meet him.

"Hey there, Miss Suzanne. How are you doing today?" he hollered on his way down to the house.

"I'm pretty good, Buster. It's kind of funny that you would show up, cos I need to ask you somethin'. You know that Yankee that moved in over there a couple months ago?" She pointed past her garage. "Well, he's been accusing me of the craziest stuff and two days ago, he came chargin' down my driveway, demanding to know if I been stealing the water out of his pond! Is there anything I can do about him?"

Buster put his hand on his meaty hip and shifted his weight. "Yes, ma'am, you could file harassment charges with him and take him to court. But that's what I'm here to talk to you about. That fella called the station yesterday, rantin' and ravin' about somebody stealin' his water. Now, I don't know what *he* needs that water for, but he doesn't seem like he wants to share it."

"Mm hm." Suzanne sat down on the front porch steps and looked up at Buster.

"He named a few people he thought it could be. Since I promised your daddy I'd look after ya, I wanted to let you know that Yankee said if he finds out it's you been takin' it, he's gonna 'fry your ass in court' —his words. So, Miss Suzanne, if you have been takin' it or if you ain't, I don't want to know. I'm just givin' you a heads up and doin' my duty to your pa."

"Thanks, Buster. I got a feeling that Yankee's gonna make my life a livin' hell."

Buster said, "I think all his neighbors got that feelin'." He looked at his watch. "I gotta get back to the station; we need to have a bar-b-que one of these days, you hear?"

"Yes, sir. We'll do that. Tell everyone I said hello." Just then, her phone started ringing. Suzanne waved to Buster and made her way in the house. She picked up the receiver and said, "Yes?"

It was her good neighbor, Anna, from across the street. "I was just wondering if you had seen that Yankee's cat. Max came up my driveway this morning really worried lookin' and all huffy askin' after his cat."

Suzanne asked, "What color is this cat?"

"It's orange, he said. Real big, like a big ol' Tom cat. Said it was a gift from his daughter," Anna said, brightly.

Suzanne's mouth dropped open. She slapped a hand over it, then said, "Ummm. No, I haven't seen it, but I'll keep a look out."

"Okay, hey – did you hear? Old man Alba's house burned down and

the fire marshal says –"

"Oh, you'll have to tell me about it later. I gotta run!" Suzanne said hastily and hung up the phone. She ran out to the garage and opened the freezer. There it was, all wrapped up in a black trash bag: the Yankee's cat. She thought, *What am I gonna do?* Then she had a moment of inspiration.

The next day, Suzanne went back to work. All the boys at Austin Taxidermy welcomed her back as she walked through the musty smelling shop. The desk had disorganized piles of paper all over it and she noticed some of the mounts on the walls were home to thin layers of dust. Through the lattice wall behind the desk, Suzanne could hear that Rush was on the radio again, a hint too loud. She walked past the wall, with its fading pictures, years-old notes and political cartoons attached, to see Jason, sitting behind his table, airbrushing the final touches on a fierce-looking bobcat. His filthy blue jeans were streaked with lines of pink and black paint. He straightened up when he saw Suzanne.

"Hey there, Sue," he said. "Good to see you back here."

"It's good to be back, Jason," she said, looking around. "Hey! Mike!"

Mike's face lit up when he saw Suzanne. "It sure is good to see your face around here. We've really missed you, Sue. What's that you got there?"

"I was wonderin' if you would do me a favor, Mike." Suzanne grabbed his hand and led him to his table near the back. With a clunk, she hefted the solid black trash bag on top of the scarred, pitted table and said, "You know that cat I shot? It's that Yankee's cat!" She pointed at the black trash bag.

Mike took off his dirty Dale Earnhardt hat and scratched his head.

"Huh."

Suzanne play-punched his arm. "That's all you're gonna say?"

"Well, what do you want me to do about it?"

"I'm gonna give this Tom back to that Yankee, but first, I want you to mount this sucker for me."

Suzanne could see Mike's gears turning while he thought it over.

"Okay," he said. "I'll mount it for ya. On one condition."

Suzanne put her hand on her hip. "Okay, what?"

Mike bent down and kissed Suzanne. "You have to let me take you on a date."



"Flies Up" by Grace Ryser
Honorable Mention Undergraduate Art

SECOND PLACE UNDERGRADUATE FICTION

Where It's Been by Lorelle Frank

A gentle tapping sounded at the door of the small, brightly-lit shop.

A gray-haired, old man in a white apron looked up from sweeping an empty, still-sticky ice cream cup off of the yellow, white, and blue checkered tile. A few circular red tables stood empty around the shop, reflecting the inviting, warm glow of the lights off their polished surfaces. A woman in her late twenties stood behind the door, barely visible in the contrastingly pitch-black night, the glare from the lights throwing warped rectangles on the glass door. She wore a blue "Hello-my-name-is" nametag that read "Mrs. Winget, 7th grade English" on her blazer.

She seemed nervous, eyes flicking from his big, gnarled, olive-tree-branch hands to his gruff, leathery face as he opened the door, which gave a quiet *ding*. As he was aware, he looked more like the kind of old man who

would yell, "Get off my lawn, damn kids!" than the kind who owned a quaint little ice cream shop.

"I'm sorry—I can see you're closing up and I don't mean to bother you, but I saw the lights on. This place is on my way, and I didn't want to have to backtrack...but, could you break a fifty for me?" the woman asked, looking away to shuffle through the contents of her purse to remove her wallet. "Parent-teacher conferences ran late and I forgot that I have to pay the babysitter."

"It's almost midnight," he said, glancing at the bright turquoise clock hanging between vintage paintings of sundaes and ice-cream sodas.

She glanced at her watch. "The school's not in LA. It's a bit of a drive."

The old man leaned on the broom handle. "Only if you'll take some ice cream," he said, his expression serious.

"Huh?"

"I'll break your fifty if you take some ice cream."

"Oh—okay. Can I get it in some tens and fives? Thanks," she said, stroking the smooth fifty between her index and middle finger impatiently. "How much for a small—" She glanced without much thought at the list of flavors. "—a small fudge brownie?"

The man leaned the broom against the wall and crossed behind the counter, first reopening one of the containers of ice cream and scooping out a few fist-sized dollops into a medium cup. She opened her mouth as though to correct him, but closed it again with resignation and handed him the fifty-dollar bill as he set the ice cream on the counter. He proceeded to take a key off of his belt and turn it in the cash box, removing three tens and four fives.

"For you, free," he said with a wink, smoothing out the particularly crumpled five-dollar-bill on top. "And don't you go sharing it with anyone."

The woman smiled, and took his advice. Streetlights raced overhead until she turned onto her own residential street, pausing far too long at the final stop sign to finish the sweet, thick dessert in the car. At length, she pulled into her driveway, switched off the ignition, and hurried up the paved walkway to the frosted glass door.

"Sorry that took so much longer than I told you," the woman said, slightly out of breath as she entered her earth-tone-decorated living room. "I completely forgot until right as I was leaving parent-teachers that my husband told me he wouldn't be back until late tonight either." She deposited her purse

on the counter, took off her blazer, flung it over the back of the tan leather couch, then picked up her purse again and rifled through it for her wallet.

The babysitter shrugged her shoulders. "Oh, that's fine."

"How was the little terror?"

"Oh, he was no trouble," the babysitter said, and the woman knew the girl was lying as she set Trouble Incarnate gently on the shaggy, green carpet so that his dirty, three-year-old hands could molest her impeccably straightened hair no more.

Fumbling, the woman dropped a bill from the wallet, which the child promptly shoved into his mouth. "Oh, no, no, no, sweetheart," the woman said wearily, prying the crumpled five-dollar bill from the maw of her fussy, adorable, slobbery, freckle-faced twerp and tearing the corner in the process. "You don't know where that's been."

The child looked up with big, betrayed blue eyes as he lost his plaything, but not nearly as betrayed as the babysitter did to receive it in her expectant hand, along with a contrastingly crisp ten. This had something to do with the glistening polka dots of toddler spit, but stemmed primarily from the fact that, although she was barely passing calculus, she knew enough math to deduce that fifteen dollars pay for over four hours of work amounted to less than minimum wage. She wouldn't have blinked at the injustice at age fourteen when she started babysitting the cute little terror, but now, at nearly seventeen, she had wised up, not to mention developed new expenses.

Saying nothing, however, the babysitter tucked the cash into the pocket of her skinny jeans. As soon as she was out of the door, she cast an indignant scowl at the sizeable house and black BMW sedan, and she wore it long after she pulled away in her ancient, iron-blue Chrysler LeBaron. Although Mrs. Winget was just a teacher, her husband was a successful entrepreneur, and the family had no shortage of cash that she could see. Blasting the *Glee* version of "Don't Stop Believin'," which had been stuck in her head and which she had been singing all day, she sputtered home at five miles over the speed limit, parked on the curb alongside her house, and dragged herself inside and to her bed, too worn out to even care about a shower.

Ping! said the gas light the next afternoon as the babysitter pulled her car away from the curb. She groaned, yanked out her cell phone, and hit redial before tucking the cell between her ear and shoulder.

It went straight to the message machine: "Hey, I'm not here right now. You know what to do!"

The babysitter sighed. "Hey, babe, you probably won't get this...but I'm going to be late to your game again," she said, her head pressed to her shoulder as though she had a major spine deformity as she sped toward the closest gas station. "I promise I have a good reason. I'll see you there."

She looked into her side-view mirrors several times, craning and trying to remember which side her gas tank was on, then pulled into the first convenient spot and found that she'd made a lucky guess.

The girl stepped out onto the dirty, stained asphalt. She didn't have much money left on her debit card, so she felt her jeans pocket and withdrew the fifteen dollars from last night. Although she knew she had another twenty in her purse, she felt awkward about going inside to pay with cash, as though the worker would judge her: *Seriously? You're that old-fashioned?* She stuck the money in her purse and took out her plastic, light blue Visa.

The pungent scent of the gasoline burned the inside of her nose and promised light-headedness as she shoved the nozzle into the clunky old vehicle and filled up as much as she could afford.

As she slipped her debit card back into her purse and turned toward her LeBaron, she saw a tall, dark-haired stranger standing in front of her door, a young man who was probably five or six years older than herself.

"Hey," he said with a disarming smile. "This is random, but could you tell me where the nearest grocery store is?"

"Oh," she said, self-consciously tucking her long, straight hair behind her ear, boyfriend and soccer game forgotten. "Yeah—there's a Walmart just a few blocks down the road."

There was something bizarre but flattering about talking to Adonis about Walmart at a gas station. She imagined the feeling similar to seeing a famous politician in a movie theater, or running into a rockstar in a public bathroom. She desperately wished that she had decided to shower last night after all.

"Just there?" he asked, pointing.

"Yeah. Just a few blocks down the road," she said, with a mental self-kick since she'd already said that. She felt sweaty despite the mild, comfortable weather. "Where are you from?" she asked quickly.

"Michigan," he answered, tucking his hands in his pockets.

“That’s a long way,” she commented, and gave herself another mental kick. No duh.

The stranger nodded. “I’m in Los Angeles visiting my sister. She just had her first baby.”

“Oh, nice,” the girl said. She could feel a biological on-switch triggered at the mention of babies. “Will you be here for long?”

He never answered, because at that moment, with a violent yank, somebody from behind her ripped her purse away from her fidgety hand.

“Hey!” she cried, more bewildered than frightened.

“Wait here,” said the stranger valiantly, and bolted off after the assailant.

She probably should have been suspicious that the scene could have been pulled out of a bad chick flick even without the robbery, but she was too busy watching this perfect stranger turned knight-in-shining-freakin’-armor disappear around the corner as she imitated the fearful, dazzled, damsel-in-distress-face—the one she’d learned from those bad chick flicks.

The thief glanced over his shoulder as the dark-haired young man caught up to him, at which point he slowed until they were walking in stride with one another. They continued side-by-side in silence for a moment, until the thief glanced at the other man and grinned a grin that looked almost exactly like the good-looking stranger’s. Indeed, if he hadn’t been a few years younger than the stranger and if his hair hadn’t been a few shades lighter, the two could have been twins.

“Hell,” the thief said, “it’s been too long since we’ve done that.”

They both laughed.

Later, the thief counted the cash as he ate a hotdog without a bun, and accidentally dripped ketchup onto the bill on top, the crinkled five-dollar slip with the small rip in the corner, landing a dob of processed tomato right in the middle of Abe Lincoln’s forehead.

“There’s only like thirty-five bucks and a debit in here,” he told his dark-haired brother and partner in crime as he wiped the ketchup off the money with the side of his hand.

“You can keep it.” The dark-haired man shrugged, sitting down across from the thief at the gray table in his small, paint-chipped apartment. “I’m a working man now.”

The thief nodded slowly, tucking the cash into the pocket of his jacket, tapping his heel on the linoleum floor as he thought.

This lasted several seconds. “What are you really doing here, man?” the dark-haired older brother asked.

The thief sighed, gaze fixed on the dirty window, where he could see only a view of the blank gray wall of the next building. He had wanted to bring up the subject delicately and by degrees, but he knew his brother wasn’t stupid enough to believe that he would make the drive to L.A. from the middle of Nevada just to relive old times.

“How much do you owe?” his older brother said.

The thief put his elbows on the table and ran his hands through his hair. “Five grand.”

He kept his eyes turned down, but he heard his brother’s frustrated sigh. “Hookers? Still rolling the dice? Or was it for a fix this time?”

“D: all of the above,” the thief said without looking up. “Five grand total.”

“Damn it, I can’t keep doing this,” his brother said. He stood up, pushing his chair away with a low scrape.

“I’m sorry, okay? It won’t happen again,” the thief said, looking up. “Just help me out this one more time. Just give me a start.”

His older brother looked at his sincere, pleading face for a moment, then groaned, gesturing to the purse they had stolen. “Well, there’s a start,” he said harshly. “That should get you home. I can transfer a few hundred to your account this month and maybe a few more next, but you can’t expect me to get you out of these things every time, all right?”

The thief also stood up. “Thank you—” he started, but his brother cut him off.

“Go home,” he said.

He didn’t go home.

Less than twenty minutes later, the thief sat in a dark room smelling of cigarette smoke, alcohol, and cheap perfume. Deep blue LED lights—the kind that made his eyes feel like they were being turned inside out—flashed in sync with the electronic music and backlit the scantily-clad figures upon which the majority of the patrons turned their attention. A red neon sign announcing *Hustler Train* hung on the back wall. The raised platform on which the dancers

stood was painted black, but nicks and chips on the corners revealed lighter wood beneath the surface. The darkness, however, hid most of these imperfections.

The thief waited, fingering the rough, fibrous surface of the stolen five-dollar bill until a particularly desirable pair of fishnets and strappy heels came into reach, then leaned forward and tucked the five into her glitter-smothered, black and red garter. He was aiming for her G-string, but he couldn't quite reach from where he sat below the stage; he thought that the tip might solve that problem, but although he was awarded a wink and a situationally apropos stripper scoop, she pushed his hand away when it drifted up again. "Look, don't touch," she said, the sexy lilt in her voice in disappointing incongruence with the words. "Personal dancers are in the other room," she added, and jerked her head so that her tousled hair flipped across her face, catching in her unrealistically long, dark eyelashes, before she made her way back to the center of the stage.

She kept the tip.

"Bitch," she heard him mutter as he pushed away from the edge of the platform.

The dancer didn't appear as curvy the next afternoon in her loose, v-neck, white t-shirt, courtesy of the boys' section, but she looked pretty even without the dramatic, smoky eye shadow and without the darkness to hide the faded acne scars on her forehead. The white floor specked with gray tapped under her blue, ballet-flat shoes as she wheeled her noisy shopping cart up to the front of the Walmart, humming quietly to the blues music echoing from the intercom under the chatter of other shoppers.

She waited in the shortest of several long lines. Ahead of her, a middle-aged man in a polo shirt rang up what looked like every box of energy drinks in the store before she could heft her spoils for the day onto the rubbery, black conveyer belt.

The guy at the checkout looked a bit how she pictured Jesus, except his longish hair was blonde. He offered her a tired but friendly greeting and he never looked below her face as he scanned the shampoo, disposable razors, boxes of pasta shells, cans of soup, a small head of lettuce, a gallon of milk, a small bottle of ranch dressing, and a discount-value loaf of white bread.

"Waitress?" he guessed with a smile when she paid entirely in creased one and five-dollar bills.

She fixed him with a level stare, tempted to say, "Sure, if human flesh counts as a menu item," but she refrained. It would have sounded random and cannibalistically morbid if he didn't understand, and if he did get it, she would sound cynical and complaining. Plus, she felt extra uncomfortable about revealing that she was an exotic dancer to him, probably because he still looked like Jesus to her. Instead, she laughed. "Something like that," she said.

The line behind her stretched a long way, so the checker didn't bother to smooth the crumpled five-dollar bill before he tucked it into the cash register and slid it closed. "Have a good day," he said, and the young woman disappeared from sight.

Behind the young woman, a man in a Dodger's baseball cap had been egging on the little boy of about three sitting in his shopping cart to make a lot of indistinguishable noise, which he continued to do as the checker scanned and bagged a hearty assortment of groceries. A smile quirked on the checker's mouth as he figured out what the little blue-eyed, freckle-faced boy's discordant "Done top, be weedin'" was supposed to mean and realized that the babbling toddler was trying to sing Journey.

"I have no idea where he picked that up," the father said, shaking his head and grinning as he paid with a fifty and a twenty.

"Five-sixteen is your change," the checker replied with a laugh as the register went *ding* and he whipped out the required dime, nickel, penny, and the rumpled five-dollar bill.

The man thanked him and wheeled his goods and his son toward the exit.

"P'art!"

The father in the Dodgers cap, not nearly as adept at translating his kid's gibberish as his wife, followed his son's pointing finger to a vending machine crunched between that impossible game with the claw and the stuffed animals and a soda machine near the exit of the store.

"Pop-Tart?" the father said, tapping on the glass.

"P'art!" the boy agreed. He waited expectantly.

The man reflected briefly on the absurdity of selling single sheaths of the cheap pastries in a vending machine when anyone could walk back into the grocery store and buy a whole package for nearly the same price, but then he glanced at the cart full of neatly bagged items and back at the lengthy lines to

Fiction

the checkout, shrugged, and pulled out his wallet.

The vending machine rejected the five-dollar bill the first time, and the father wondered if it was because of the small tear in the corner, but it looked in bad shape all around. Lincoln's face appeared abnormally wrinkled and worn with the fine creases in the textured paper, and a faint reddish stain on his forehead looked like a battle wound. The man brushed a few specks of red glitter off of the surface, gripped both ends of the bill to rub it briskly against the corner of the machine, smoothing it, and successfully fed it to the humming mechanism.

The Pop-Tart banged along the inside of the vending machine until the man retrieved it from the heavy slot and extracted his coin change from the annoyingly small square provided for the purpose. He pushed the cart with one hand as he walked, adopting a conspiratorial smile and saying, "Don't tell Mommy, mm'kay, buddy?" through the blue, crackling wrapper, which he tore with his teeth as he held the pair of Pop-Tart in one hand.

The child giggled as the pair crossed the hard parking lot, leaving the worn bill inside the machine atop other slips of money. In the darkness, the bills pressed against one another with various levels of creasing and imperfection, but they seemed somehow crisper when they lay stacked neatly together.



"What If" by Payden Carlson
Third Place Undergraduate Art

THIRD PLACE UNDERGRADUATE FICTION

Soft Hearts

by Alina E. Brewster

In the hours before my birth, God and I got into a rather heated discussion.

"I don't want a soft heart," I grumbled. "Can't you make it harder?"

God laughed like I was telling a good joke. "Are you the one in charge of this world now?"

I grimaced. "No, and thank my lucky stars for that. I don't know how you do it. People running around and forgetting about you, calling you stupid and dumb, claiming you don't even exist..."

I stopped as the clouds started to darken around us. "But seriously, soft hearts are not strengths in this world anymore. I'll just get taken advantage of."

"Come on, we're a business. We're supposed to share the money equally," my friend said. She had the money tin and was counting out the money we had earned at the fair into three equal piles.

"But I made all of the toys myself. You only made a sign. Sarah didn't do anything but bring Christmas lights."

She didn't look up. "Look. Life isn't fair. That's just how it goes. We're friends, right?"

My thirty-dollar haul quickly dwindled to ten and I walked home with humiliating tears streaming down my face. I handed my mom my entire profit. "Here." I sniffled. "That's how much you said I owed you for buying all the stuff." She hugged me, and I cried the entire story into her shoulder.

"You need to learn to stand up for yourself," she scolded mildly, stroking my back. "Don't let people take advantage of you."

"A soft heart is not the advantage that it used to be. People will make stupid choices, and I will be powerless to stop them."

God rolled his eyes. "That is their choice, and they will be accountable for it."

"And don't get me wrong, that's all well and good," I said. "But how does that help me now? I'm just going to be miserable for my entire lifespan."

"What do you know? You're not an expert. We're going to do things my way because I've done this before."

I turned and walked off, trying to keep my anger inside. We were going to blow this entire presentation because one girl was too stupid to listen to me.

"Doesn't being strong sound better than being weak and pathetic?"

God shrugged. "Who said that was weak and pathetic?"

"Everyone," I said.

"Like who?"

I thought for a minute. "Abel."

"Really." He still sounded amused. "And he told you this?"

"Well...sort of." I squirmed, remembering that I couldn't lie to God. "But I heard from Gabriel that he thinks Abel could have done a lot more good if he had been able to stay alive longer."

God scratched his chin, appearing to think. "Yes, I suppose he could have."

"And Cain wouldn't be in such hot water right now either," I needed. God just kept scratching at his chin. "Really, would it be all that bad if we all were a little more plucky?"

God's face was a study. "You really think that?"

I thought long and hard before forming my answer. "I'm just furthering a friendly debate," I hedged. "If I had a hard heart, I wouldn't need my brother to defend me or my mother to fight my battles for me. I would be the one helping others."

Fiction

“Mortals are supposed to have soft hearts.” He dismissed my argument like a fly that had buzzed into heaven. “What is the point of creating you if you are never grateful for being created? Going down there hardens most of you for some reason. You should consider yourself lucky that your heart will stay soft. It makes coming back through the fire and brimstone a little easier.”

I didn’t want to meet his eyes. “Not to critique your grand plan or anything, but I think the soft design makes me rather pathetic. I don’t even have height on my side.”

“I don’t think you will need any more height than what you have,” He said gratingly. “And quite honestly, I don’t see the bad in what you are referring to. “What becomes of your soft heart?”

“I’m never going to leave you.” The man with the milk-chocolate eyes stroked my back while I leaned into his chest. “You need someone to stand up for you.”

I looked up at him. “It’s not that I can’t stand up for myself. It’s just that I can’t stand to see anyone get hurt.”

He chuckled. “You’re too nice. That’s why I like you.”

I stomped my foot at God’s underhanded tactic. “That’s not fair! You can’t guarantee that will happen. And what about everyone else that will hurt me?”

“Enough!” God thundered, the clouds behind him rumbling his echoes. “What you lack in hardness will be more than made up for in sheer stubbornness! Now go before I change my mind, and so I can have a moment of peace while you are not bending my ear!”

I flinched but turned toward the tunnel forming from the clouds behind me. “Fine, but when I get back we are going to have a talk about this whole stubborn trait. Personally, I think it should be a little more appreciated.”

God gave an exasperated sigh before turning to his next supplicant, my sister, who intended to complain her ears were clearly the wrong size for the

dainty head she had been assigned. I fell...

“Your heart is too soft,” my boyfriend grumbled as he walked me to his car. “You’re letting them walk all over you.”

I stopped and shook my head. Where had I heard that before?

Essay

FIRST PLACE GRADUATE ESSAY

Belly Up

by Kevin Larsen

The morning sun is hot, the lake water cool, the breeze crisp. Moms and dads sit on towels and blankets that dot the beach and the grass, while their children run from the water to the sand to the rough strip of lawn between the lake and the black asphalt parking lot, then back to the water again. The lake people eat sandwiches. Fend of geese and ducks. Rub on sunscreen and lotion and oil. Drink water and Kool-Aid and Pepsi and Mountain Dew. Play in the sand on the beach with flimsy buckets and plastic shovels.

Mothers watch their children with careful gazes, worry when they wander too far, or go too deep, paying attention to the knot of feeling in their stomach, not to the happy sounds that their children make. Laughs and squeals and chatter all splashing in the water.

I am young, and I am fascinated by the horde of carp swarming beneath the dock. I tear pieces off a slice of bread that my mom gave me, drop them into the water, and watch as dozens of lumpy gray fish thrash toward the bread with mouths open, fat fish lips spread wide. They writhe, a mass of scales and fins and fish eyes and white fish bellies that eat anything, that eat everything that drops in the water, though not my toe. When I stick my toe beneath the surface of the lake, the fish scatter. If I fall in, they won't eat me.

My older brothers march toward me on the dock from the shore. Their shoulders are hunched, necks strained. Their hands grasp rocks and small boulders. They make a small pile near my feet. My oldest brother shoves me a little and says "Don't feed em."

"Why not?" I ask.

He ignores me and selects a rock. It is as big as my head. He lifts it high, with both hands, and waits. The carp swim inches below the surface. One swims up, mouth open, and makes slurping motions. Its lips break the surface of the water, like it's trying to suck in the air. My brother jerks, slams the rock at

the water surface, at the open mouthed carp, the one making sucking motions. A splash. My other brothers whoop. The carp scatter when the rock hits the water, but start to trickle back once the surface calms.

"What are you doing?" I ask.

"Killing carp," my brothers say.

"Why?"

They respond in chorus. "Carp suck." "Yeah, they suck." "Their They're ugly." "Yeah, ugly." "Ugly suckers." "Bottom feeders." "Stupid fish."

They take turns killing carp with rocks above their heads, looking like cave men, like wild men. Like boys, wild boys throwing rocks at the water.

I walk away. My stomach feels funny. I think I am hungry, so I eat the dry leftover bread in my hand. Eating the bread doesn't make me feel better. It makes it worse. Makes my stomach feel more funny. Squirmy. Squeamish. Like a fish swimming inside my belly.

"You're not supposed to go out on the boat," Charity says to me. "But you're the only one here, so it's got to be you." She tosses me an orange life preserver, the dorky- looking kind that frames your neck in thick buoyant foam. I nod and tuck the awkward thing under my arm. She does the same after buckling on her bulky belt. She checks her pistol and holster, taser, handcuffs, flashlight, walkie talkie. We walk out of the office together, headed for the dock.

The sky is a dark brown, as if there were a fire somewhere, belching flame and smoke into the air. But there is no fire, no smoke. Only a massive haze of cloud blocking out the sun. The wind pushes against us, and as we near the shore I feel the spray of water, a thin wetness that is being skimmed off the lake by the wind.

At the dock, Charity sifts through a tangle of keys. She keeps tucking her hair behind her ear, the few strands that aren't secured into a tight bun. She finds the right key and unlocks the chain link fence gate that separates the public docks from the government ones. We walk to the end. The wood beneath us creaks and sways from our feet and from the wind and from the waves. The boats rock in their slips, tied tight to the cleats with rubber buoys between boat and dock. Aside from the wind and the threatening sky, the dock seems peaceful,

Essay

resting inside the small bay created by a pier of concrete and rock and gravel. Outside it, the waves are three, four, five feet high. Inside, there are only ripples and a misty spray of water carried by the wind.

We climb on board the state patrol boat. Charity starts the engines. I untie the ropes and shove us away from the dock. The wind immediately starts to push us toward the shore, but Charity throttles the engine, and the boat surges forward.

Once we clear the manmade pier, we hit the waves. We slam into wave after wave, each one a tremor that will send me sprawling if I'm not careful. Water splashes over the bow. I am drenched within a minute. Charity tells me to get the ropes ready, and I start to coil them, winding the scratchy cord around elbow and palm. I stand with my feet wide apart, braced against the waves.

Charity scans the violent horizon, looking for a stranded boat, looking for a boat that ran out of gas, or that flooded its engine, or that drained its battery, looking for the trace of someone who called 911 and said that they couldn't get back to the harbor and that the storm and waves were picking up around them.

We find the boat upside down. Capsized. There are four people bobbing in the water around it. A mother. A father. A teenage boy. A small girl. As we pull forward, the mother stupidly tries to hold out her smallest child, the little girl. The mother tries to push her daughter up and out of the water, tries to push her to us, to the boat, even though we are still a dozen yards away. She gets water in her mouth as she yells "Help! Please!" More water in her mouth. Water in her eyes. She is only pushing herself underwater, the force of her thin arms pushing against the buoyancy of her life jacket.

I throw a life preserver trailing a rope out behind it like a kite ribbon. The round preserver lands past their heads. The rope splashes near their faces. The mother, again stupidly, tries to fit the circle over her little girl's head and around her shoulders. It doesn't fit, but she keeps trying. "Just grab it!" I yell. "Just have her grab it!" She doesn't hear me until I yell again. "Don't put it over her! Stop it! Just grab it!"

She nods, and then pushes her daughter forward. I reel the little girl in like a fish. I grab her life jacket and lift her into the boat with one arm. She lies on the floor quivering with blue lips and tears.

I throw the preserver and rope three more times. I reel in three more

humans. A mom, a son, a dad. They huddle together beneath wet blankets and towels as we head back to the harbor.

I am seven when my leg gets caught in a rope, and I am dragged behind the boat that my father is driving. My life jacket is torn up over my head, past my shoulders, past my arms. It floats in lazy circles behind me. My leg hurts. The rope tightens around my thigh, my knee, my calf muscle, my ankle. There is a pain in my hip as the boat drags me by the leg. I try to lift my head above the surface, but I can't. My eyes are open, and I don't know if I'm looking at the sky or the bottom of the lake. In the blur I think I see my mom telling my dad to stop, stop the boat. I think I see my brother dive off the back, into the water, and swim toward me with strong, even strokes. I think I see the bottom of the lake, but maybe it is just the darkness of deep water, the place down there where sunlight can't shine through to. I think I am staring down into blackness when water goes up my nose and down my throat. I cough. I inhale water. I cough again. I inhale more water. I look down at the black. I look up at the black. I look at everything black around me. My stomach sinks. It feels heavy, inside my stomach. Something in there. Something heavy. Something weighty. Pulling me down, down, down, down...

I am stuck in the drive-through at Wendy's with my boss, Bob. Periodically, he turns his head and spits a trailing globule of tobacco juice out the truck window. Our progress in the line of cars is marked by a trail of small splatters on the pavement.

"You hear about that kid?" he asks, his voice hoarse. He coughs when he talks. Short barking coughs that punctuate his sentences. He raises an eyebrow and looks at me sideways.

I know who he is talking about, and he probably knows that I know. But he wants me to say "what kid?" so I do, and he continues.

"You know, the one that drowned? What was it? Last week? Yeah. Last week. Saturday, I think. Was it Saturday?"

"I think it was Saturday," I say.

Essay

"Yeah, Saturday." Another stream of brown spit out the window. He eases off the brakes, and the truck rumbles forward a few feet. "Fuckin crazy, yeah?" Again that barking cough. "You wanna know the weird shit about it though?"

He doesn't wait for me to answer, just spits and continues.

"The kid just jumped into the water and disappeared," cough. "Just off the back of the boat," another cough. "They're all just sittin there. Doing nothing, and he jumps in and..." cough. "Gone. Just like that. Doesn't come back up."

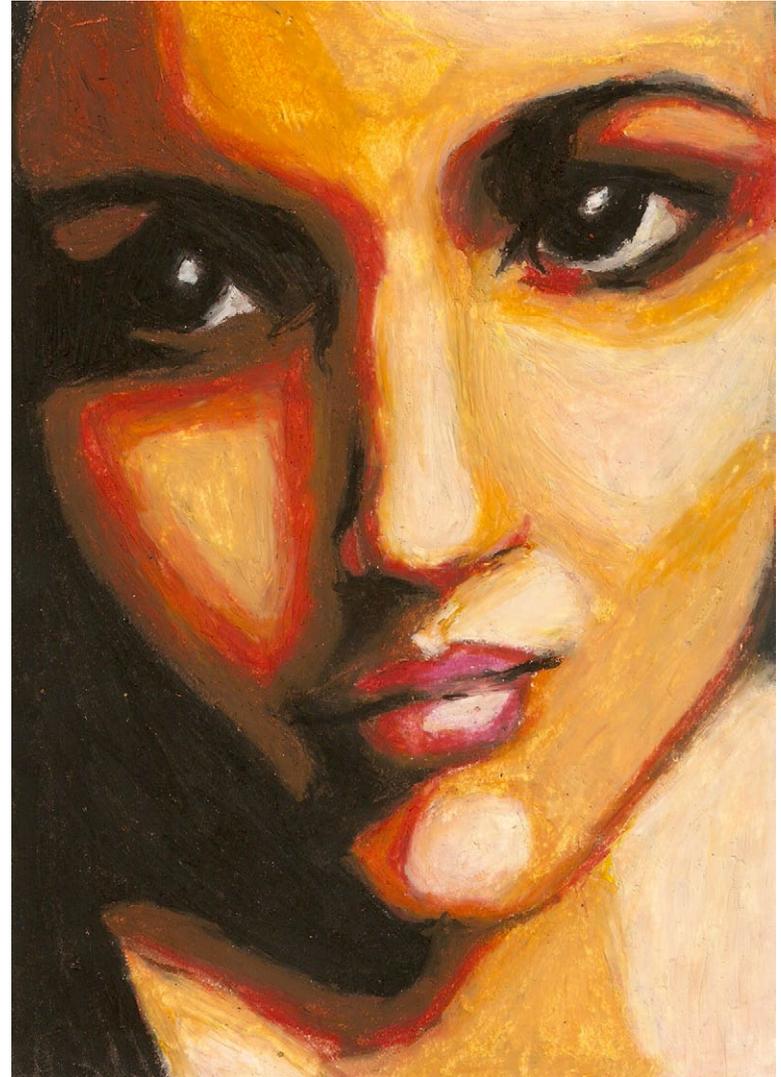
"Are they still looking for his body?" I ask.

The truck rolls forward. Through the open window I hear the person in front of us order a burger, a coke, a kid's meal with root beer. Bob spits again. Drags his arm across his mouth, wiping brown saliva from his lips and his teeth. "Fuck, I don't know. I doubt it. It'll show up soon though," he says. "They always do."

Eventually, we order. Bob gets a salad and a massive diet coke. I get a cheeseburger and fries. We pay. We get our food. We head back to work at the lake.

On the drive home while I munch on fries and hamburger, I think about that kid, how he was with his family and how he jumped into the water and how he never came back up and how no one could find him or see him because the lake water is too damn murky with too much silt floating in it and too much algae growing in it. I think about the family on that boat and how they tried to call 911 but couldn't get reception and how they had to decide to leave the spot where their son jumped in and disappeared to be able to call 911 so that search and rescue could come and look and look and look until it was too dark to see anything but dark waves and dark shadows.

Bill smells like cigarettes and fish. We talk at the dry dock where he keeps his boats during the winter season. "About seventy- five percent of the fish in this lake are carp," he says. "That's about seven and a half million fish, about six pounds apiece." He stands next to one of his boats, a blue, angular thing, flat and long, then fingers the loops of a net that is nearly the size of three football fields. "The DNR boys pay me twenty cents a pound, and usually we



"Cold Tangerines" by Sarah Timmerman
Honorable Mention Undergraduate Art

Essay

bring in over three thousand carp a day.” I try to do the math in my head, but he beats me to it. “It’s anywhere from three to four thousand dollars a day, split between me and two others.”

He removes a pack of cigarettes from his shirt pocket and looks at me. “Mind if I smoke?” he asks.

I shake my head no. “What do they do with all the fish you catch?”

“I’m not exactly sure.” His hands are tucked deep in his pockets to keep warm, so he balances the cigarette between his lips as he talks. It makes him growl a bit more. “They used to sell everything to the mink farms, to use for food. But now I think it goes to fertilizer and compost, shit like that. Hell, they’re probably making it into fish food.” He chuckles for a bit. “But really, I don’t know.”

We talk some more, and Bill shows me a few pictures of a particularly large haul. Ten thousand fish all piled on top of each other. Scales and fish skin and dull round eyes heaped together to bake in the sun. Later, I will think that the fish don’t look dead, that they don’t look alive either, but that they look like they are in some kind of stasis, a purgatorial existence between life and death. In one of the pictures, Bill stands in front of the mound twice his height, dwarfed by the dead fish behind him. He is smiling, a cigarette in his hand, his arms out wide. His body, his smile, the way he stands, all seem to say, “Yes, I killed all these fucking fish.”

Two capsized boats float in the harbor, belly up, their round fiberglass undersides baking in the sun. Search and rescue towed them in earlier, capsized and half sunk, and now the owners are deciding what to do with them. There are two options. One option is a flatbed and a tow truck—both are parked, waiting to be used or not used. The other option is to try and flip the boats in the water and then put them on their trailers properly. One owner—I think the one who’s whose wife or maybe it is his sister is in the hospital, recovering from hypothermia—one owner says, “Fuck it. Just take it out. I don’t need to deal with this shit right now. Do what you have to, but just get rid of it.” He waves his hand, dismissing the boat, the lake, everyone around him.

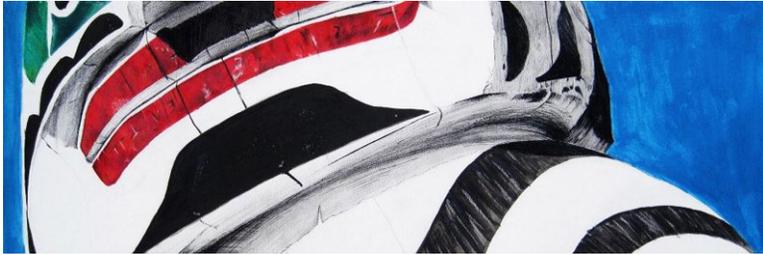
They attach a tow cable to the upside down boat, using a steal grommet near the prow. The tow truck starts, shifts into gear. The tires slip, searching for grip, and then in a massive screeching heave, fifteen feet of fiberglass and wood are hauled up the concrete ramp, dripping wet and leaving bits of rotten, water logged debris behind. It is dragged away, out of sight.

The other owner decides he wants to try and flip his boat. My boss tells me that I need to dive into the harbor and attach ropes to the frame. It is early June, and though the sun is warm, the air is cool and the water cold. I strip down and pile my clothes on a rock on the shore next to the ramp. There are several corpses of fish, white bellies floating in the shallow water. They are bloated and dead and decomposing.

I ignore the dead fish and begin to wade in. The ramp is slick with algae. The cold is like a thin film that covers my feet, my legs, my knees, my thighs. When I am waist deep, I take a deep breath and pause. I worry about going deeper, about diving in. I don’t know why. I only know that my stomach is churning, that I feel sick, that I want to leave the lake and the dead fish and the dead bodies and the dark murky waters behind me.

Later, when I am older, when I no longer work at the lake anymore, when I haven’t been back to it for a few years, I’ll think about that moment when I stood halfway in the water, the cold seeping up through my groin and into my stomach. I’ll remember that I only wanted to leave, to leave all that shit behind, to leave all the people, not just a person, but people, multiple people who jump in that damn lake and don’t come back up, or if they do come back up, it’s belly up and they’re dead and bloated just like the fish and the carp that are dredged from the lake and churned into fertilizer or chicken food or pig food or whatever the hell it is they do with ten million pounds of dead fish. I’ll remember that I just wanted to leave it all alone, but I’ll also know that it isn’t something that I can leave alone. All the bodies, all the fourteen names on a tacky plaque that begins “In Memory of...,” the handful of body bags I saw carried off the boats, black plastic bags that hid their pale faces and bellies.

And I’ll remember that even when I wanted to leave, when I wanted to give over to the worry writhing in my stomach, I’ll remember that I took a deep breath and dove in.



"Tiki Post" by Grace Ryser
Honorable Mention Undergraduate Art

SECOND PLACE GRADUATE ESSAY

New Girl

by MaryAnn Widerburg

"So how do you like all the new girl's piercings?" Bill obviously wants me to validate his phobia of all things different from what his "normal," quiet Mormon town produces. I glance over at Ashley, who is on the phones for the first time. She does look scary. I fully expect anyone with two lip rings, a tongue bar, three eyebrow piercings, and ear gauges to beat me up on the spot. The dark, heavy eyeliner doesn't help either. "She's on your sales team," Bill prods. "I'd hate to be you."

It's getting uncomfortably close to five years since I was the new girl in a different call center, but I still remember the feeling. I remember because of Bailey. I'd been on the phones for only a few days when she rudely made me aware of her existence:

"I leave for a couple of days, and when I come back, that is sitting in my chair?" She was talking to a supervisor, not me. I was that.

"I'm sorry. I'll move," I mumbled as I gathered my things and found a seat in the farthest corner. I spent the next year in that corner.

Ashley is sitting in the corner again. She hasn't moved closer as the rest

of the newbies did when they finished training. Her jet-black lined eyes flash with suspicion every time I come by to see how she's doing on the phones.

"Why don't you come join us by the manager desks? We're having a Christmas coloring contest," I smile, hoping it looks inviting and encouraging.

"No thanks. I like the quiet." It's the longest sentence she's said yet. I walk back to my desk, frustrated. I will never get through to this new girl.

I'm not sure how management noticed me in my corner. They certainly never asked me to leave until they needed a new editor. I was thrilled with this chance to finally leave my corner. Then I found out who the other new editor was—Bailey.

The first time I worked with her, I tried to be friendly. She didn't reciprocate. "You were homeschooled, weren't you?" Her tone was snide.

"Yeah, how did you know?"

"I could tell."

"Amber told you, didn't she?"

"Yeah. I would have been able to tell anyway. You're so socially inept."

It was the wrong thing to say to an insecure nineteen-year-old. I became mute when Bailey was around, even if I was talking to someone else when she walked into the room.

I'm not looking forward to this conversation. I'm supposed to give Ashley a written warning because her performance has dropped significantly since she first started.

"Maybe she won't say much," Bill encourages. That's what I'm afraid of.

I hug my binder tightly to my waist as Ashley follows me into the manager office. I want to talk to her before she sees the paper on top. It feels like it's burning through my blouse. "How are you feeling about the job so far?" I fake a smile.

Silence.

Okay. "How's life in general?" I glance down at the accusing paper. When I look up, it's obvious that Ashley's eyeliner isn't waterproof.

"I'm sorry," she sputters, "It's just that I know this job isn't going well, but home isn't going well either." I listen for the next half hour as she tells me about her two beautiful little girls. She tells me that her husband is unemployed,

Essay

that she needs this job to take of her girls, that she wants to be home with them instead, that she's afraid her husband isn't taking care of them while she's gone, that she has been arguing with him almost every night, that she still has to clean her house because he doesn't do it while she's gone.

"I'm so sorry. I didn't realize you were going through so much," my words sound hollow, I'm certain.

"Thanks for listening. What was it you wanted to talk to me about?"

"I just wanted to see how you were doing." The written warning is scorching. After Ashley leaves, I run it through the shredder.

Bailey was shredding unclaimed direct deposit slips when I arrived at work a couple of months after we'd been promoted. I logged on to my computer without acknowledging her. I'd already fixed six comma splices before she came up with her daily dig: "Why do you always have to dress up? You are so freakin' pretentious. Can't you just wear pajamas to work like everyone else?" Everyone else meant her.

"I'm sorry. I'll wear jeans to the party tomorrow tonight," I gave her my usual five-second apology for existing. She went back to shredding, satisfied that she'd done enough emotional damage for the day.

It's going better with Ashley. Her performance is climbing, and she tells me things are okay at home now. She left her corner last week, and she actually talks to people now. When I see her at the break room table as I heat my panini, she pats the seat across from her. We start talking about great movies we've seen in the past few weeks.

"This might be childish, but I loved *Hugo*," I laugh.

"*Season of the Witch* was good. The only thing I didn't like about it was how it portrayed Pagans because...I'm Pagan."

"That's so interesting. You don't hear something like that much in Rexburg, Idaho."

"I don't tell many people. They usually start telling me I'm a devil worshipper, and then they never talk to me again."

"That's so sad—for them. What is being Pagan like? I learned a little bit about Paganism in medieval literature, but that was a few centuries ago." Ashley laughs at my stupid jokes, but she tells me about how her religion focuses on

the earth and being close to nature. It's surprising how many of her beliefs actually coincide with mine. This new girl is finally getting through to me.

I didn't want to go to Bailey's going away party even if her going away warranted a celebration. I went anyway, and she was actually pleasant for most of the evening. Then we played badminton. I was doing okay for my klutzy self until I made a perfect return, and threw out my shoulder in the process. I bit my tongue until it bled, so I wouldn't end up screaming as the sharp pains shot up my shoulder and into my clavicle. Guiding it back in made me nauseous, and I didn't notice Bailey laughing at me until I'd taken a few deep breaths.

"You are such an idiot. Why would you dislocate your shoulder playing badminton? Oh, you are such a klutz." No one disagreed with her.

It's time for another goodbye. Ashley's husband found a job, and she's going back home to her girls. "Working with you has been a great experience. We'll all miss you," I'm faking a smile again.

"I hope this won't be the last time we ever see each other," and tough Ashley is hugging me. I almost start crying. This new girl is leaving me already. I think back to the first day I met her.

"So how do you like all the new girl's piercings," Bill had wanted me to agree. I wasn't sure what I thought. "She's on your sales team," he'd prodded. "I'd hate to be you."

"I don't judge."

For the first time in my life, I silently thank Bailey.

THIRD PLACE GRADUATE ESSAY

Crying Rape

by Heidi Williams

Researchers now estimate that anywhere from 24 to 50 percent of women in this country have been or will be sexually victimized during the course of their lifetimes (Gilmartin-Zena, 279). Of those sexual assault cases four to six percent are based on false accusation (RVA).

There are myths that follow rape: “the girl says it is rape because she feels guilty for having sex” or “she’s just looking for attention” or “many women claim that they have been sexually assaulted because they want revenge upon the man they accuse” (RVA). “Crying rape” makes proving actual rape allegations virtually impossible for many rape survivors. A sexual assault case becomes “he said, she said” and may never reach court unless there is an “overwhelming preponderance of evidence.” “Overwhelming evidence” is hard to come by because not all cases will have any physical evidence. The only evidence is the victim’s testimony of what happened.

The testimonial can literally be everything in the majority of cases. Because most sexual abuse situations have no black eyes or gun wounds, only the victim’s allegations stand against the accused. That’s the way my case appeared. I sat in the detective’s chair without bruises or broken bones. I was virtually unharmed on the outside, but on the inside I had been slashed and slaughtered. The pictures taken of me for my rape kit showed this swollen eyed girl shaking in fear and collapsing in torment. Just because a rape victim has no marks on the outside does not mean she’s lying.

It would be wrong if I said everybody truly thought I was lying about what had happened. But I sure did feel as if the lawyers and detectives didn’t believe me. My case never went to court; my university refused to question the graduate assistant/rapist; and my detective didn’t bring Him into questioning for well over a month after He raped me. My story was brushed aside. Nothing was ever concluded.

Therefore as a rape victim advocate, I taught people how important it is to trust the survivor, to believe their story, and not to question for a second that they are “making it up.” Those first moments, of coming forward, are cru-

cial; a victim’s emotions are overwhelming, and what survivor’s going through is terrifying. I spoke at domestic violence community awareness events about believing the victim and doing all you could do to put the rapist where s/he belongs: in jail.

But what if ... the “victim” really was making it up?

Two or so months after I was raped, I received a text message from a friend. “Guess what I just found out?”

“?”

“My mom just told me that my dad molested me as a child.”

Hmm... really? The emotional hell already suffocating me was about to get very complex. I didn’t believe her.

My gut, despite my love for her, told me that she was making a false accusation. For the last few years, this friend’s life had changed drastically for the worse. Her mother experienced a midlife crisis, tried to commit suicide, left her father, and took all seven kids with her to Hawaii. She wanted to pursue a relationship with her scuba instructor there. So for the last few years, Kirja’s mom had tried extremely hard to get full custody of her kids.

Kirja’s entire world had been torn apart. She went from being a little Mormon girl who didn’t watch PG-13 movies to a young adult who’d send me pictures of herself smoking a bong the size of a small child. Everything she once believed in had been shattered into a million confusing pieces. She sent me angry heartbreaking poems she’d written, vividly painting her hatred towards her dad. She loathed him for marrying another woman, blamed him for their leaving, accused him of not loving her anymore, and despised everything he believed in. Kirja’s anger was evident, and frankly I didn’t blame her for being bitter towards life. But I refused to accept her claim about her dad’s abuse. There were real victims out there, and the situation unfolding within my phone made me feel betrayed and disgusted.

I babysat Kirja and her siblings through all my junior high and high school years. I literally saw her grow up along with her younger six brothers and sisters. James and Belinda, her mother and father, would call me to stay at their house while they went on dates or to therapy. My number one job as a sitter was to listen to Kirja’s worries about her parents. Even when she grew old enough to watch her younger brothers and sisters, she would talk to me regularly. She confided in me. She trusted me. And I loved her as if she was my little sister.

Essay

So there I was, sitting in Spanish class, staring at her text message “My mom told me that my dad molested me as a child.” What did she want from me? I had just been raped. Thrown on my stomach and raped by a man I barely knew. And despite my eager effort to go forward with the case, the district attorney told me the jury would take one look at my case and throw it out because it “just didn’t look good.” Society believed the myths like “she was asking for it” or “she’s just looking for attention;” because of false accusations they assumed “crying rape” was the norm. Therefore, my testimony didn’t mean anything to the jury. It wasn’t fair.

I had panic attacks, nightmares, flashbacks, legal post traumatic stress syndrome, dropped classes, my first failed test, and all I could think was: *How dare you. How dare you come into my world and make it harder for my friends to get legal justice. It is because of people like you, people like you who make it so hard for people like me to make it to court. And because your mom has your dad’s money, you’ll make it there—all because a lie, a lie to get full custody.*

But wait, if a survivor confides in you, you’re supposed to believe them. You’re supposed to trust the victim’s testimony and not question his/her experience. I taught people this. I told people to always trust the survivor; yet, I did not. I called myself a feminist, someone who fought for women’s rights and vindicated women’s struggles while instantaneously denying a young woman’s story.

The desire to accept her words as truth killed me. I knew what it was like to have people not believe me as a sexual assault victim. I wanted to accept her allegation. I longed to lend my support as her friend. But it didn’t matter. I simply could not believe her.

It was far too convenient. Her mom was trying to stay in Hawaii and nothing was falling in her favor—then all the sudden Kirja was molested as a child? *Are you fucking kidding me? It truly is situations like this that make it so hard for victims of sexual abuse or domestic violence of any kind to have justice in the courtroom or even society.*

I went against what I taught as a survivor of rape and refused to believe her testimony. In fact, I felt so strongly about speaking against cases like this, I testified in court against her claim. I refused to stand by and witness a false accusation of sexual assault. Fighting for victims’ rights meant fighting for truth and justice. Being a feminist meant searching for the holistic perspective instead

of just jumping to defend any sob story at the drop of a tear.

It might not be my place to judge, but I felt like I knew too much on both sides of the spectrum. I had met countless survivors whose experiences deserved true justice. It would have been disgraceful to their stories and my own if I didn’t follow my gut instinct to speak against this false accusation. All in all, however, I still felt disgusted for not trusting my friend.

I just didn’t want Kirja to go around thinking that her father sexually abused her if it was merely a ploy to make him suffer. I know her feelings of hate and abandonment were real. Her father hurt her. Her life wasn’t the same. So much had happened, and she blamed her dad for everything. But does that mean he sexually abused her? If he did (and only God really knows), shame on me, but it sure did come out during a very convenient time.

I responded with a text saying, “I don’t know what it’s like to be molested, but two months ago I was raped. I’ve been dealing with detectives, lawyers, and therapists on a daily basis. It’s been awful. I’m sorry to hear that about your dad—I can’t even fathom.”

Her texting voice changed entirely. She didn’t want to talk about what she “just found out” anymore. Whether it happened or not, she stopped mentioning it.

Yea, it’s real. People do get sexually abused, and it’s not ok to “cry rape.”

Am I wrong to stand up for something I believe, even though it goes against something else I believe? I feel contradictory. But I think I did what’s right; I hope I did what’s right, at least. It’s scary having that on your conscience. Am I a true activist because I spoke out against a false accusation? Or am I just a hypocrite?

I may never know.

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"Rust and Glass" by Tiffany Smith
Third Place Graduate Art

FIRST PLACE UNDERGRADUATE ESSAY

Beyond Logic *by Sarah Thomas*

A syllogism is a logical argument composed of three pieces: major premise, minor premise and conclusion. The argument flows, smooth as honey-moon silk over a bare thigh, from one premise to the next: major premise flirts with minor premise and a conclusion is conceived by moonlight in some quiet, faraway room.

Syllogisms operate on inference, the process of deriving the conclusion from a set of supposed premises. Inference is vulnerable. To infer something is to show up in a chapel with a filmy veil pulled over your eyes. Not all the light streams in through the fine loops of lace. An inference is an act of trust, a marriage of premises at best assumed to be true.

For example: growing up I assumed that my mother and father loved each other based on the premises that they were married in St. Peter's Episcopal

Church in Atlanta; that they made two children together, my brother Michael and myself; and that some nights, my father would briefly touch his lips to my mother's forehead before going to sleep in his own room.

The language of the syllogism revolves around the consonants M, S and P. These variables can be plugged into statements that are universal or particular. Universal syllogisms seek big, ambitious truths like: All S are P or No S are P. Example: All bodies are desirous. No body is free. Particular syllogisms are smaller and more honest: Some S are P some S are not P. Example: Some lives are hungry. Some hungers are not satiated.

I like that syllogisms operate on the interaction of empty letters, variables that can be filled with anything. You can hold them up to your ear, rattle them even, hoping to hear the waves of something true.

Sometimes, I wonder if this kind of logic could be applied to love to make it safer. When approached with reason, could the beating heart be diffused and made harmless? I need to know what happens when love—precious symbol, slippery variable L—is inserted into the syllogism's confines.

All S are P, Universal 1

All humans (S) are lovers (P).

My mother spits in my dad's face. He grabs her by the ankles and drags her across the living room carpet. Their first intimacy in months blooms on their skins: rug burn and a sprained wrist. Out of eyesight, they vanish down the hall. I wonder where my dad is taking her.

My brother and I, still with lunchboxes and grade cards, sit paralyzed on the couch. Then my dad reappears, shoulders hunched, arms swinging low. A giant gorilla. My mother scrambles after him on all fours, too mad to stand up. A rabid dog. He leaves through the front door, she through the back.

I know, now, that he let her ankles fall just a few heavy footsteps down the hall. He was always a gentle person. But I still wonder—when his fuse was melting—where he actually wanted to take her. What fantasy place does a husband imagine dragging his wife off to so that he can get a little quiet? Stuff her in a cave? Throw her in a lake? The coat closet?

At twelve, I loved it when they both left. Quiet fell on the house as thick and paralyzing as snow. For ten or twenty minutes, I would float on the couch like Ophelia drowning. When the feeling crept back into my fingers and toes, I

would roll up and tiptoe to my mother's bookcase.

I coveted a small white book of hers that sat hidden behind larger books of Monet and Degas prints. I thought it was another art book, though I didn't know what the charcoal drawings of men and women wrapped tightly around each other meant. Feathery, the artist's touch consisted of a single brush stroke per page: one long, sweeping line unrolling leg, buttock, waist, waist, buttock, leg: a seated, facing couple.

Cross-legged in front of the bookcase, I sat and absorbed pictures of woman wrapping her legs around man's waist, sitting on his lap; of supine woman, legs like butterfly wings, man hovering above; of woman with one leg out straight and the other lifted, heel resting on man's forehead. I took pleasure in the lines, traced them with my finger, rubbed them with my whole palm.

The pictures made my body hum and thwack; looking felt like being hit by the orange-winged grasshoppers in the back yard. I felt a tiny heartbeat between my legs. In real life, I'd never seen people join their bodies through touch. In my family, bodies fulfilled utilitarian purposes: feeding, cleaning, working, fighting.

This new feeling thrilled me so much that I started wishing my parents would slap and spit. I hid my mom's car keys to set her off. She ricocheted into my Dad. Sputtering, they both left and I would sit in front of the bookcase feeling giddy for a while. Taking the illustrations into my body as Eucharist, I came to believe that people touching, really touching, signified the presence of love.

I spent my adolescence with a Kama Sutra book, sitting in the ashy piles of my parent's roman candles. Like a moth, I butted into the hard afterglow of their displays of desperation and frustration, so attracted to the lingering brightness, wishing they would come back and do it again: *Bang, bang, bang!* [*You worthless piece of shit. Shut up, just shut—*]

Their marriage terrifies me because I'm still so enthralled by its atomic quality. I wonder if the same weird fuse is embedded me, and I palpitate the flesh of my belly feeling for it. Maybe a lover could get deep enough inside to tell me what's there.

No S are P, Universal 2

No lovers (S) are perfect (P).

She met the guy in Park City, told me about how she picked at her salad in the hotel restaurant and then went up to his room.

"Jesus. I don't want to hear about this Mom."

"But, you have to understa—"

"Stop it! I swear to God, I'm gonna tell Dad if you say one more word."

Gasping, she cried until her green eye shadow dripped down her cheeks.

"It wasn't good," she hissed. "He didn't even come."

Then she turned on me and retreated into her room.

What I never tell her is that, somewhere, deep in my body, I sympathize with her. I know that my dad never lays a hand on her; that they haven't made love since my brother was born. My body is young, but it empathizes with old animal suffering, with the absence of touch and sex.

And so, months later, when my mother asks me to find a pair of shoes in her closet, I know exactly what I've stumbled upon when I find an opened package of lingerie hidden under a pair of heels. Not pretty lingerie, nothing delicate or lacy. Instead, the kind sold in shrink-wrapped plastic with a picture on the front of a hungry woman modeling how it should be worn: bent low over four-inch heels, licking fat lips. I open the package and pull out a bodysuit: a piece of black transparent spandex with gaping cutouts, so flimsy I can ball it up in my fist and make it disappear.

At eighteen, the spandex taunts me. Though I've seen things like it in the dirty magazines in the shed, "black spandex cat-suit" still lives in the realm of the abstract, like a theorem: a statement proven true on the basis of a previously established statement. The kind of women I know don't wear things like this. I've never worn anything like it, never even had a lover. How can my mother have this in her closet? She's a fifty year old woman. I grind my teeth looking at the dark, deflated suit.

And then I take it. I hide the thing under my shirt and wait for my mother to go walking. I sneak into her mirrored bathroom, lock the door and undress. I tug the suit up over my thighs, adjust the cutouts over my breasts. What does it feel like to wear something like this? Exhilarating? Dangerous? A theorem pieced together from late-night television and Cosmo magazines tells me that the sheer black fabric symbolizes desire, the ravenous kind that I don't know about yet—because the boy friends I've had stop the trail of kisses at my collarbone—but that excites me, making me fly open, my thighs like a grasshopper when I'm in my room alone at night.

Essay

I can smell her perfume, *Charlotte*, in the fabric, on my skin. One of her dark hairs is curling out of the collar, tickling my neck. I take a deep breath, getting ready to look in the mirror. I expect to see a grown woman.

Instead, I look just like my mother: a little lost, a little desperate, and suddenly, I am her. In seconds, I age forty years, spiraling into a dark little place inside a fist where I've been driven by hunger. I imagine how she must have felt standing in this cheap fabric with someone waiting on the other side of the door.

Then I imagine her sitting at the computer late at night scrolling through the pages of an online novelty shop, looking at an endless image-stream of lingerie on bodies that would never be hers again. She clicks on the picture with the most provocative, promising description.

There is sadness in that mouse click, but also hope: the most innocent hope that I've ever felt. All she wanted was to be cradled. And I know her confusion, too, because it is the same as my burgeoning own: how to get love? What shimmering lures, what gaping reveals can secure it? How can one be worthy of it, pretty enough for it? It hurts, sharing this lineage of hunger with my mother.

I peel the suit off and bring it up to my face to wipe the small, quiet water off my cheeks. I stretch the fabric between my fingers, peer through it. Everything looks gray and fuzzy, like it's been raining for days. Maybe this is how my mother sees my father's face; maybe this is how she sees her own face.

Some S are P, Particular 1

Some imperfect (S) are broken (P).

I tell my lover I want to be his hothouse in January.

I tell you, lover, hoping you'll understand that what I really mean is [I broke a long time ago watching my parents, and I'll probably never be able to love you right]. But now, with dinner on the table, my bare foot between your two rough feet, half a bottle of red wine in my head, I want to try to communicate. The hothouse is a symbol I've generated in an attempt to describe to you what I believe love is: namely, something insular. Love survives inside bubbles of prescribed temperature and light.

My parents' love survived for a little while, a year maybe. Sometimes, when I'm in the truck alone with my dad, he tells stories of what my mother was like, what they were like together. Their first breakfast, she served him pancakes with lingonberry jam. He never forgot the deep red lingonberry jam. She would

call her big tabby cat in at night with lark song: "Come kittle come, kittle-lum, kittle-lum."

I've seen the pictures from when they first met. I know she was beautiful: dark, wavy hair and deep green eyes. I know she deserved love, and I know that he gave it to her: at the cabin he built by hand in the woods of South Carolina, in bouquets of yellow jessamine and southern magnolia.

But something happened after they married. My mom got rid of the first baby they conceived. My dad didn't make enough money. They had to move from Atlanta to Las Vegas. I got juvenile diabetes. My brother's head grew faster than his body. There was always something, and my mother brought the stress into her body. The fragile strands of their communication disintegrated. They began speaking in different tongues.

Lover, that's why I want to be the bubble itself, to preserve our love interminably from outside forces. So I tell you that I would like to be a glass-paned structure with three feet of snow pressed against my dripping windows. I would like to keep your flowers alive through the cold months with the raw heat of my limbs.

You have steamed two trout which you caught from a lake twelve miles away where the exposed roots of Cottonwood trees are piled high on the shore and pieces of crashed Chevy Bel Airs litter the trail to the water. You peel the gelatinous silver skin back with a fork while I tell you about the inside of the hothouse: the steam clouds, scaffolding, brilliant grow lights, humming fans. Inside, unreal flowers, painfully-saturated reds and pinks; mutant lemon trees, rippled globes of fruit as big as my mother's blown-out heart; parrot-beaked stalks and palm fronds and serrated aloe vera leaves like holy lizard tails; South American creeping trees more beautiful than any woman with spreading ferns for heads.

You offer me a piece of white flesh from between your two fingers. I can taste the rusted flakes of the Chevy's aquamarine paint, the dry Cottonwood leaves. I whisper my fantasy into your ear, knowing full well that you do not speak my language. Knowing, but still ending the clause with your ear lobe between my teeth, because somehow, the hothouse has seduced me. You throw me over your right shoulder and carry me down the hall.

I say: please take off my black dress [black, the combination of all colors; the little dress that ate the whole damn box of crayons]. Please understand

Essay

my hunger [great like an ant's nest] and what this act means to me. That when I have you inside me [I think of ways to trap you there, so that I can rise, suspended from my worry about the world outside the hothouse].

[Outside, cold and blazing, where falling leaves look like familiar faces. Outside, where the snow grows gray around the corners of the hothouse. Outside, where leaves are turning brown and the dry piles are migrating across the land].

Please hear what I'm actually saying:

"I'm cutting myself on the glass."

"Huh?" you ask, sweat dripping from your brows. My legs rest on your shoulders; you're kneeling, panting. I can't feel you, because I'm barely tethered to my body anymore, floating far away in all these unspoken things.

"Nothing" I stammer.

"No. You just said something. I heard you."

I look away.

"You did. What's with you? You haven't been here all night!"

I push you off my body, "No I didn't!" and throw on a shirt.

"You didn't what?"

Stalking into the kitchen, I'm drawn to the sink full of dirty dishes. You never clean up after yourself. There's always a fucking chaos of fish bones and knives and egg shells and grape fruit peel in the sink.

"Why don't you ever do your own damn dishes?" I spit down the hall.

You pad in to the kitchen, stand a few feet away and look at me.

"Jesus Christ, you sound just like your—"

"Shut up!" I snatch a dish out of the gray water and raise it.

You turn back to the bedroom. I can hear you putting on your clothes as I slam ceramic pieces together in the murk. You walk past me. The front door opens and shuts quickly.

And I have a conversation with you long after you have left.

[I hate it when you say I'm acting like my mother. She's a part of me! I feel her inside, in times of stress: her animal nature always digging, scratching, panicking. I feel her too, in times of serious questioning. Every time I've looked in a mirror and wondered whether I deserved to be here I've seen her face be-

hind mine].

"Baby, where are you?" I call down the hall. "I have something important to say."

[I want to hover my hands over my body, hunting for the places where she made burrows. With the hands of a psychic surgeon, I want to dip inside, swim through flesh and blood with my fingers and pull her out].

"Can you hear me?"

[I reach into my throat: passage of sound so easily clogged with unexpressed wishes. I reach in and grab it: a green lump the same color as her eye shadow. It quivers, smelling faintly of rose water. I take her and hurl her at the hot house I've constructed— "Can you hear it?!" —around love. The fragile glass shatters thunderously. Satisfyingly.]

I can not physically believe in the hothouse anymore. Love either survives or it doesn't, just like a flower.

With my nails, I scratch the sticky fish skin off your plate. Suds. Hot water rinse. I wonder what words you will speak when you return and start a pot of coffee brewing for the conversation.

Some S are not P, Particular 2

Some broken (S) are not unwhole (P).

At twenty-two, I have developed the habit of eating the women around me. I look at them from the corner of my eye and absorb them. I memorize their clothing, bodies, smells. I look at the way a sheet of hair falls, at the texture of cloth enveloping a limb, at the luminosity of skin, at the sandaled feet in the adjacent restroom stall. I look until I absorb something of the essence.

Then, I imagine the women I eat lying in bed with my own lover. I imagine what he would find inside and outside them: on their skins, in the parts of their hair, along the lengths of their spines. Would he find better things than what I have to offer? Or the absence of things: women without self-effacing fuses?

I mull this over on the long drive home, from the northern tip of Utah to its southwest corner. It's Thanksgiving and my mom wants to see me. I chuckle into my coffee thermos and then feel a pang of guilt. She can't open her eyes right now. She just had an eye lift, and my brother's been sending me pictures

Essay

of her unraveled across the sofa, eyes like two swollen plums.

I look out the window, at the country finally beginning to turn red: sandstone canyons and crumbling hills with a raven in every other pinyon tree. Some birds sit still, and others open one long wing at a time to preen, combing through the black feathers with their beaks. Everything reminds me of my mother today: the frost-wedged rocks and the preening birds. For an entire decade, I watched my mother gloss her feathers.

I used to be fascinated by the way she applied her makeup. It seemed like religion: an ordered, solemn coating of paint. She filled in wrinkles, masked age spots and then swooped jade green eye shadow high across her lids for effect. She dashed perfume behind her ears and along her collarbones, slipped pearl earrings into her long lobes and placed golden bracelets around her right wrist. Always in this same order. At the very end, she blushed her cheeks vigorously with a jumbo brush, then bent down, fluffed her hair and flipped back up.

Then, and only then, would she actually meet her eyes in the glass. She would smile a small, tentative smile that always turned kind of sorrowful after only a few seconds, and then she'd start picking herself apart: pushing up the apples of her cheeks with her fingertips, lifting her eyebrows to stretch the skin of her eyelids taut, fingering the soft folds and valleys hanging below her chin, practicing hiding them away with her hand to create a new jaw line. Without mercy, she manipulated herself: plucked out all her invisible chin hairs on the couch at night while the rest of us watched TV, complained endlessly about her weight and twisted spine.

I couldn't make her feel any better. I could only live in the space behind her. I mimicked her every move when she stood at the mirror. We played Simon Says. When she touched her chin, I touched my chin. When she sucked in her stomach, I sucked in mine.

I wish I had stopped watching, sharing, hating. I wish I had been a better daughter. She didn't deserve my coldness. Even when she took me to the stores in the mall that blared indie music, so that I could dress in ripped blue jeans and transparent tee shirts like the popular girls, I only looked at her from the corners of my eyes and spoke thin words from between pursed lips.

I pull into a service station and give the girl at the counter a twenty for gas at pump number 2. She's bored and pretty, with a nose ring, a blue streak in her hair and scars on the inside of her right forearm: a different kind of adornment from the gold my mother wears. I place my lover with her, imagine him rubbing his thumb over her raised bracelets of purple flesh. Constantly, I place him with librarians, coffee shop girls, grocery baggers, bank tellers.

It feels like an eating disorder, absorbing all these women, taking a part of each one inside me and imagining her fully. Every one of them has something that I don't have; some little thing that might make me more complete. Sometimes, I am resplendent and glowing, many-faced like Krishna, reflecting every possible female reality. Other times, I am bursting-full, but still starving. If it's true, what my mother, and her mother, and her mother's mother tell me in my blood—that the good woman completes the man—then I want to be every woman. I want to complete every man. The wholeness I desire is cosmic.

And so, I walk on the earth wearing my women like a headdress of feathers, each tip burning with the features of a different face. Multiplicity. I am a large space; there is room for many existences inside me. I will be everything He needs. I will not break and be swept in pieces under the rug. But the weight of these feathers is dragging my head down to my chest.

I pull into the driveway as the light stretches into a thin, winter-pink line over the Pine Valley Mountains. I have books for my mother on meditation and self-love, my latest hobby. Through the door, I hear the voice of Larry King on the TV. Inside, she's lying on the couch beneath a white afghan. I say, "Hey mom, I made it safe."

"How do I look?" she replies.

I come closer. Her cut-and-stitched eyes look like pulpy fruit. "You look pretty shitty," I say, setting the books on the coffee table beside her tea. "I don't get it. Why'd you do this?"

Two little green slits appears in the mauve tissue as she tries to look at me. "It's none of your damn business," she says. "I'm going to the rug show in a month."

"You're going back to that guy again, that fake-Indian, washed-up actor who's always begging you for money? Are you kidding me?"

"Don't talk to me like that. I'm your mother! Bring me the ibuprofen."

Essay

I shake the shelves in the medicine cabinet lined with super-cleanse bottles, multi-vitamins, green tea capsules, diet pills, belly-fat pills, anti-cortisone pills, metabolism super-chargers, youth tonics and toxin-flushers. This is my mother's forest: the place she goes searching for peace and quiet. It's just like my hothouse, with its crazy growth of luscious flowers, and like my meals of women. It is the theorem, the syllogism we've been writing together.

Searching for the pain killer, I run my fingers over twenty or thirty bottles. They shake and rattle, like there were bones inside. Her bones. For the first time, I hear the rattle of her life, jangling and shattering. A rattle she doesn't hold in her own hands. It belongs to her dead father, maybe, or to the doctor who fused her spine, or to the man before my dad. I don't know where the dissatisfaction started.

When I find the right bottle, I don't want to throw it at her anymore. I pour a glass of water.

"I'm sorry mom." I hand her two oblong white pills, and she washes them down. "I brought you some books I thought you might like," I say, gesturing toward the coffee table.

"I'm pretty busy, you know."

"Okay, okay, I hear you." I turn to go to my old bedroom. "Hey though," I pause, looking back at the bright green stones in her ears, "Your earrings are beautiful. They're the same color as your eyes."

"Thank you."

In the middle of the night, I tiptoe quietly to the old bookcase, but the Kama Sutra book isn't there anymore. Instead, I take out the box of old pictures from under my bed and dump them onto the quilt. My faces, her faces, flutter like birds loosed from a cage. I find every picture of my green-eyed mother and line them up in chronological order along the length of the mattress. Her face starts off like a perfect full moon, and I see it wane and wax through all the lunar phases: picking up a wrinkle here, leaving behind a toothy smile there.

In my hand, I cradle a picture from our trip to Jackson Hole: the two of us standing beneath an arch of elk antlers in a park. My mother had dragged me up and down every boutique street of that town looking for Harrison Ford, who was rumored to summer in Jackson. She believed that if we found Mr. Ford, she could convince him to take me under his wing as a child actress.

It was a hunt, and every night, we dined at Alpenrose, his favorite restaurant. With bright eyes, she would scan the room for him, while I marveled at the fancy place settings. I remember ordering cedar plank salmon. After I wolfed it down, I tried to stuff the pretty-smelling plank into my purse, and my mother kicked me in the shin, horrified. We never found Harrison, but I loved the feeling that she believed in me that much.

That night, I finally absorbed my mother. I ate her life, digested it, and felt tired but full. And I continue to absorb women because I have hope. I want to be a whole woman, the first one I've ever known. But I've been doing it in an illogical manner, convincing myself that there is a rational way of understanding love, lover, mother and self. I've created syllogisms that lead me so deep into the trees, I can barely see. Syllogisms that link me—the subject, S—to my parents' cavernous middle, M, with the broken predicate, P, hanging above us like a lantern wrapped up in some cheap black lingerie, trying to shine light through the netting.

Syllogisms like:

My parents' love (M) broke (P).

I (S) am the product of my parents (P),

So I (S) will break (P) love too.

No syllogism can prove that there is an inherent beauty in brokenness, but this is what I believe and feel, like warmth, spreading in my body. Brokenness equals an invitation. My mother's face shows this. The evening I saw her purple eyes and fished through her cabinet for ibuprofen, I dreamed of swallowing all the pills to show her what they mean: a break in self. A break which welcomes light in. Tenderness—the ability to feel and to touch—lives in the space between broken pieces. In the space between pieces, anything is possible. Someday, my mother could take too many ephedra pills, break open on the floor, and let her heart finally run free. I could bury my lover in broken dishes, or in broken flowers; grind the syllogism shards into dust and paint them on my face for a funeral, or for a birthday; throw the Krishna mask on the ground and watch the conglomeration of my selves flow out to join a greater body of water. I could build my pieces into anything at all: a hothouse, a temple or a woman.

Essay

I absorb my mother.
Thank you, mother.
And my father, too.
Thank you, father.
And my lover.
Thank you, lover.
You are the community within me not governed by logic.



“Elephantidae” by Grace Ryser
First Place Undergraduate Art

SECOND PLACE UNDERGRADUATE ESSAY

Depth

by Jessica McDermott

“What makes the desert beautiful is that somewhere it hides a well.”

-Antoine de Saint-Exupery

I ran the only liquor store on North Lake. It sat inside the lower gift shop, which was also connected to the boat shop. I spent most of my time reading and stocking bottles of liquor inside the dusty closet next to my register. I moved to Lake Powell for the summer to work before returning to Northern Utah to finish my last year of college. I had never been so far east in Southern Utah; never seen such immense space that wasn't a crop or prairie grass with a fence and wilting pioneer house within its grasp. The earth was more like Mars — all red and empty of human contact. The drive in on I-70 West was nearly haunting. Nothing but switchback roads surrounded by sand and rock formations that were round and alien like, especially the rocks near Goblin Valley. Once I reached this area, I began to take photos of the mushroom like rocks while I drove. Still miles away, I suddenly saw what I thought was a mirage, an immense pool of blue water. This was where my friend, who picked up the Turkish workers in Green River, said they fell silent. Seeing America for what was most likely the first time, they must have wondered why they flew over the Atlantic to end up at what appears to be an abandoned lake in the middle of the desert. But when you get closer the water captivates. It begs for you to touch it, to try and understand its vast depth.

Essay

I was sitting on an empty Patron box with a step stool on top of it when two park rangers came into my store. It was Tuesday, August ninth, and I sat like stone, staring blankly forward. My mind stuck on last night. How the Turkish workers rode around in the bed of Tucker's red truck asking if anyone had seen Merve or Betul, while I passed another Bullfrog night in quietness. Once darkness loomed, Steph and I would stay locked up in our room until the restaurant on the hill closed around ten and our friends returned. Then, with no light except stars, we would gather on our stoop under our brown dorm and pass around bottles of Jack or Gin. We would sprawl on the cement walk and steps and chat for hours. Although nowhere near cool, the night air without sun woke the desert. To the rabbits, lizards, spiders, bats, and the unseen creatures, darkness was life. And in the morning, I would get up before six and run before the desert boiled with heat.

That morning, I felt unusually nervous. As I splashed across red sand onto the road I glanced back and forth to check for others, but I was alone. I headed east towards the rising sun, the sky blush pink, on the only road that led in and out of Bullfrog. At the lone health clinic, I noticed a black helicopter that had never been there before. When I reached Bullfrog's school that held only seven students, my usual destination, I turned around. At the curve right after the clinic, there was a metal railing that kept cars from nose-diving into sand stone. A raven perched itself on the edge. It looked directly at me as I ran by. It swooped down, then back up – eyes on me, again down then back up – eyes on me, and one last time. I ran to the center of the road, afraid of the two coal black eyes that were intently locked with mine. Black pits whispering words I couldn't understand.

My phone went off when I entered my room. It was a text from a friend who worked early on the docks. Merve and Betul had drowned last night, and a black helicopter and dive team were still looking for Betul's body. My sweaty clothes still on, I sank onto my bottom bunk. Steph came out of the shower, a striped towel on her head.

"Merve and Betul are dead. They drowned at Crappie last night." I said.

The two park rangers approached me. They were our only police and protectors, but none of us trusted them. They took advantage of their power. Often they would show up at the dorms to bust underage drinkers without warning, or tailgate cars all the way back to their dorm from the park's entrance

miles back.

"Are you the only girl who works over here with dark hair and eyes?" The wider one asked. They looked ridiculous wearing long-sleeved shirts, long pants, and thick green vests in the desert.

"Yes, I am."

"Has anyone talked to you?"

"No."

They whispered among themselves, before looking back at me. "Well ok. Thanks." And they left.

News traveled fast in Bullfrog. You lived and worked with the same people; the only people there besides the tourists. Without the lake, no one would exist in that quiet desert. Besides the dorms where I lived called Brown Town there were only two other residential areas, and all three areas were within a mile and a half of each other.

After park service left, a co-worker from the boat shop came to tell me the deaths were deemed homicides until further notice. I slipped into the liquor closet and called my twin brother. I leaned against the shelved wall and shook as I explained the deaths to Josh.

"Get out of there. It doesn't sound safe." he said.

"I can't." I managed to spit out.

Now, I don't remember exactly what else I said. Something about the duty I felt to help my other co-workers and fill in for the Corner Store's loss of Merve. The Corner Store was right next to mine, and it also functioned as the only gas station. Besides two small stores on the docks, it was the only place to buy food. It never had much to choose from; only specific companies will drive out this far to deliver your product of choice. Usually one type of Hotpocket, one or two types of Lunchables, and gas station essentials like doughnuts and coffee. As the summer went on, I began to miss fresh fruit and the luxury of having a fridge that wasn't stuffed in the corner of a one-room employee lounge and shared with over ninety other workers.

"You're an idiot if you stay."

I hung up the phone in time to help a customer and then sat back down. I think the real reason I stayed was because I felt like I couldn't leave. Home was a different world, and I wanted answers only that desert could tell.

Essay

I spent the rest of the day picturing Merve. Her long dark wavy hair and red painted lips, her and Betul in their long sleeves and pants unlike the rest of us in shorts and tank tops. How they were quiet and soft, not like many of the other workers. The last words Merve said to me just two days before she disappeared in the employee kitchen, "Your skirt is lovely," and offered me food I didn't accept. Now though, I pictured her body limp and lifeless, bobbing with her hair a matted cape around her head. The look on the houseboat passengers' faces when, at three in the afternoon, they noticed a girl my exact age, my hair color, floating face down in Crappie's water.

Crappie Beach was the quietest main-shore beach and the first piece of Lake Powell's water I ever touched. It was only reachable by foot or boat, and few visitors ever swam there. We would park in a lot just west of our employee dorms, then splash down a hill of hot sand and descend slick red sand stone to reach its water. It sat like a peninsula, and at the end, water rested on bleached rock and across the way you could see another canyon wall. If you were brave though, you wouldn't slide into the lake, you would jump from one of the high points, spots closer to the beginning of the hike.

I remember the first time I jumped from its ledge. I was the last one to get in. I stood with my toes nearly curled over the edge and flipped sand into the water. It swirled down like flecks of gold then disappeared into a dark blue. When the three guys I was with walked to the end and no one was looking, I flung myself loose. I met the surface in a gasp; the early May water hadn't had time to warm up yet. I wondered how deep of a canyon I now floated in and what types of fish or water dwellers fed on its bottom. I began to count my breaths. For a minute or two I felt stiff and scared. It was the type of short-lived panic attack I have every time I swim in an ocean, or places too deep and murky to see below.

Essay

“We will move over the water / with such speed we will forget / even
what we have never known.”

– Richard Shelton, poem about Glen Canyon.

Lake Powell is 126 miles long and has over two thousand miles of shoreline. The lake itself was made by filling Glen Canyon with water. Construction of the Glen Canyon dam, which sits in the Colorado River near Page, Arizona, began in 1956, and it took nearly ten years to fill the reservoir. It had two original purposes: store water and make money. What it turned into was Glen Canyon National Recreation Area. Hundreds of miles of desert streams and life were drowned. Most fish that were native to the Colorado River did not survive the passage into the new reservoir. To those who knew it before the water, before over three million yearly visitors, before the sewage, or the alcohol bottles, and the houseboats, it was deemed paradise. Glen Canyon was to some, “The most beautiful place on earth, some say- and the centerpiece of the most rugged, remote country in the Lower Forty-Eight.” The lake has been called the same though, and I’ve said it myself. On nights spent standing against railing on the lodge deck, when the desert glows purple and the water reflects red walls like a deep mouth, and you feel like you’re floating because nothing appears more endless or natural than that immense space settled inside a carved canyon, no other word fits. I have never seen Glen Canyon dry though, and maybe it is its death, this eternal loss, that makes the dam that covered the deep terrain so evil.

Every red rock face in Glen Canyon National Recreation Area has white rings wrapped around its body – calcium-carbonate from ages ago when the entire desert was under water.

“I’m drowning! Save me!” Steph screamed, her body bobbing up and down, arms flailing into wide Vs.

“Stop it!” I yelled back, but she began again. She had left Crappie’s ledge with ease, leaving me alone. I knew she was joking; we were the best swimmers of anyone I had met. We had both been lifeguards before and would often swim off alone while others just jumped then returned to the safety of the shore. She was my roommate. A nineteen-year-old from Pennsylvania. Her major in school was Supply Chain Management, and she was doing an internship with the company that ran North Lake. She became one of my best friends. We were always together. I found myself in pairs often, but mostly with Steph. Steph was tall and thin, with dark hair and eyes like me. When we lay in our bunk bed at night, me on the bottom, her on top, we would talk for hours. Her job on the lake became revamping the outdated ordering system. She often had ideas about how to make things more efficient. This was my favorite thing about her. One night, she described how she would fix the movement of airplane luggage so men didn’t have to lift them onto planes. Another, how to make it so iPods held their headphones inside themselves.

I inhaled deep and jumped. When I landed beside her, she began to swim away.

Dusk was growing, and by the time we reached the middle canyon wall, I was tired. It was two days before Merve and Betul’s death, and the water was finally warm. I pushed the stone with my feet and did a back float into the middle channel. Steph screamed.

I flipped around. “What’s wrong?”

“Something just rubbed against my belly.”

“Eww... it’s probably carp.” I began to thrash in the water, not wanting to be touched. Carp were the suckerfish of the lake. They would eat anything, even baby ducklings if they got a chance. Sometimes when I walked on the docks I would spit into the water just to see them swim up from below and swallow it with their whiskered faces.

Not ten feet from the wall, I saw an object flying towards me. It was coming fast with no hint of slowing down. As it flew closer to my face, I noticed

Essay

how the light glowed behind its skinned wings. I plunged myself under the water. No sounds, no breath, just silence as the water filled my ears and made my hair rise. I felt the cool brush of something against my foot and surfaced.

“That was a bat, Steph.” I said. I looked behind us, and then to the left, more were coming.

We began to panic.

“Watch from the right, I got left.” Steph said. She was terrified of bats. When we would walk from our room in dorm 1 to the employee lounge at night, she would often ask if I saw any and duck as they hovered under the lamp-posts. Now in the water, with no way to climb out but back at the start, I knew she must have been terrified.

We kicked into steady sidestrokes and splashed water at any approaching bats. They followed us all the way to our climbing out spot. I had never seen bats swarm like this on the lake before. A man fishing with his dog blocked our access out; we had to climb onto the rock on the other side of the water to avoid his line. His dog paced around his chair, barking at the bats and us. We weaved around his line and climbed out on the other side. The bats didn’t stop. I slapped my hands in midair at them and screamed. We ran further up the rock and counted down from three then jumped back into the water. By the time we reached the other side and pulled ourselves up onto the ledge, the water was littered with bats.

“A snake touch ya?” The man asked. His dog ran up to us and rubbed our legs, sniffing us in concern.

“Just bats.” We told him. On our hike out I counted over twenty-seven bats circling the water.

“This place is cursed.” I said.

The only reason we didn’t swim at Crappie on August 8, 2012 was because Steph and I were afraid the bats would return. Instead, we swam at the most popular beach, Hobie Cat.

At 6:30 p.m. on August ninth, a day after Merve is found, scuba divers discover Betul’s body thirty feet under water.

Essay

The same time Betul's body was being pulled from the bottom of Crappie, I went into the Corner Store to get gas after work. ML, the manager from Virginia, was in her usual Levi skirt, with her dyed blonde hair back in a bun. At times, her accent made her nearly impossible to understand, but I always liked her.

"Would ya mind helpin' me close?" she rang up my gas on their ruby system.

"Sure." While I closed the machine Merve was supposed to, ML talked.

"Ya know NPS came by here, and they say there's trauma on those bodies. It just don't feel right."

"I agree." I said, "Something doesn't seem normal."

"I'm sure glad yer in here. I don't want to be alone."

Rain chimed against the roof while I cut, taped, and made copies of receipts to send down lake to Page. It was the same system they used in the 1960s and it was long and tedious. The back room was musty. Food was stacked on various shelves with no order, and the floor was cement, stained black with dirt and oil. You had to pass through the only car mechanic garage in Bullfrog to reach the Corner Store's computer and copy machine. I jumped at the slightest sound. Even the rain's music, which should have been pleasant in the dry heat, wasn't welcome. The day before at my work, a man had told me that Lake Powell was like Disney Land, "nothing was supposed to go wrong." Today that seemed distant. I matched his comment up with Merve and Betul, with the 1960s system, with the blonde Merve, who had her dirty underwear and computer stolen. The only trace left behind was a smile in red lipstick left on her dorm mirror. None of the tourists with their tank tops, their beer Koozies in hand, their leather skin, understood life around the lake. They came to forget reality. All of their time was spent on the water, in houseboats worth thousands of dollars and hundreds of dollars on liquor. They came and went like ghosts. Some days, usually weekends, the two parking lots at the docks were full of cars, but my store was usually quiet; it wasn't on the water. Most people came in to get liquor, usually a fifth of Smirnoff or Captain Morgan, but in a few days they all disappeared. Back to a world where a full-size grocery store was closer than three hours away. And cereal that cost less than \$9.75 a box and you didn't have to leave your room to get cell phone service.

When we finished closing the sky was cloudy, but later I noticed a double rainbow shining through. When I filled in at the Corner Store again two days later, a local Navajo would lean in on the counter and tell me the two rainbows represented hope. But I never felt closure for the loss of two girls who were left as hollow as soft whispers so customers couldn't hear. As empty as a promised autopsy report that never came. Never told us whether their bodies blossomed with bruises or were left untouched.

That night, instead of sleeping alone, Steph and I put our mattresses together on the floor and slept side by side. They took up the entire space of the small square room and blocked the door from being able to open.

Essay

I left Lake Powell on August 18th. After Merve and Betul drowned, I stopped running in the morning, and I didn't swim again until my last two days in Bullfrog. When I did get in the water at the busy Hobie Cat beach, it wasn't the same. It felt like I was touching something I shouldn't, that maybe the water became theirs, not mine. I only dunked my head, and I didn't swim. I noticed the lake floor like I hadn't before: the slimy mud that released air pockets in small bubbles when feet pressed down, the brush of rooted weeds against my legs, its odd warmth in one area then complete coldness in the next. I never went back to Crappie.

When I ran the register at the Corner Store, I rang up overpriced coffee and stacked blocks of ice in the back freezer. I kicked and punched ice blocks with the heel of my hand to separate them for sale. One of the Turkish workers came in around eleven and bought two loaves of bread. I'm sure it was to feed his friends. The Turkish workers stuck together. We all had our little groups, but I never passed the Turks without saying hello. They were usually friendly and loud. There were twelve of them, and seven had come together as friends. Merve and Betul were part of this smaller group, but after they drowned, all of the twelve Turks quit their jobs and traveled in one large group.

They had to wait ten days until their visas allowed them to leave. I don't think they slept well, they all looked pale and gaunt. I wanted to hug each one of them. Hold them long enough to whisper the only two things we can when something has been ruined: *I'm sorry*, and *It will all be okay*. But I only hugged two of them. It was the morning after, when I drove back to my room between work. The blonde Merve and her dark haired friend were standing in my hallway. Without speaking, I pulled each one in separately for a hug. They felt so frail in my arms. Their eyes were puffy, red, and doe like. I managed a whispered, *I'm sorry*. A copout term I know all too well doesn't replace what has been lost.

Essay

Corrections to be made to every news article I've read:

First, Merve and Betul didn't say they were going swimming, they said they were going on a short hike at three in the afternoon.

Second, neither girl ever swam, they were afraid of water.

Third, no one knows why their belongings were missing from the beach if they were swimming.

Fourth, I can't see them getting into the lake at this spot. Crappie is for experienced swimmers. It is full of pits, deep holes where the canyon's center begins, and it's impossible to touch the bottom.

Fifth, no article mentions what I hold to be true. They were not wearing swimming suits.

Sixth, no journalist heard their friends wailing, or felt the anger in their voices when a "healing session" was called in the back room of Human Resources. I went up to get change from the cash cage, but the desks were empty. When I realized what was happening, I sat in a chair and listened. I heard the blonde Merve, their best friend, screaming. I imagine she wanted answers, truth of some kind, but there are still no answers. No article ever confirmed the bodies' autopsies and whether their deaths were an accident.

One time, Merve came in to buy wine from me. She always had a soft voice. She asked me in heavily accented English which wine was the best, and acted shy when I told her my little knowledge. I imagine it was one of the first times she drank. She reminded me of myself. Her dark hair and eyes, her being raised in a strict religion, her want to travel to Paris, her youth, her want of newness and adventure. I imagine that like me, she was attempting to dive deeper into herself out in that desert. Searching to discover who she was when she was so far away from anything she knew.

Back at Utah State, when I rush along the long sidewalk that leads to the English building, I sometimes see a girl who I think is Merve. I always slow down and stare when we pass. It clearly isn't. She is too young and too thin, only the eyes match, but I have seen Merve and Betul in other spaces. Like my last glimpse of sunset in Bullfrog's desert. How when the sand caked land glowed purple, the distant mountains became one dimensional, black outlines like a popup book. A flat surface that appeared cunningly smooth to the touch – its true texture only felt when I ventured to its face and attempted to cut through layers too deep to hold.

Notes

"Lake Powell is 126 miles long... remote country in the Lower- Forty Eight." Glen Canyon Dammed by Jared Farmer, The University of Arizona Press, 1999, XII-XIII, 158.



"Charmed by Texture" by Angela Turnbow
Honorable Mention Graduate Art

THIRD PLACE UNDERGRADUATE ESSAY

6 Down

by Kimberly Christensen

A state of complete emptiness or destruction...

Grandpa doesn't wear his legs anymore. Mom says it's because of infections. I wonder if he is just tired of trying to fill the ____s.

Four letter word, meaning: emotion of a strong affection and personal attachment

The kitchen has always had a rosy quality to it. The rosiness was due mostly to the pink (with flecks of brown) counter tops. The golden wood gleams with brass handles. The overall effect is a golden-pink glow when the sun is setting and light coming through the window.

Grandpa sits on one of the bar stools surrounding the jutting counter

top that separates the kitchen from the family room. He looks misplaced, he doesn't belong here. His skin is browned, dried leather that is stretched over certain parts of his body and clumped up over other parts. Even as an old man, he has a look of muscle and power in his beefy arms and torso. His baseball cap and overalls were once blue but now are stained black with grease. His glasses perch on the end of his nose, seeming undecided whether they should fall from his face or stay put. His eyes are intent on the black-and-white newspaper on the counter; the pen in his right hand is relaxed for the moment. His legs are stiff and lifeless under him. I am sitting with my legs dangling, kicking them back and forth trying to hit the cupboards beneath the counter. I am possibly five or maybe six.

His kind eyes turn to mine. "My beautiful granddaughter, what is a three letter word for suffering?" My chest swells that he would ask me for help. I must know the answer.

"Sad."

"Hmmm...I don't think that is going to fit, love."

A space where there is nothing at all, there may have been something there once...

On March 1, 2010, Grandma is diagnosed with liver cancer. No one notices Grandpa's tears on the page of his crossword puzzle. He never finishes that puzzle.

A word puzzle that normally takes the form of a square or a rectangular grid of white and shaded squares

I am sitting on one of Grandma's stools in the rosy kitchen. Mom's stools. Mom and Dad moved in with Grandpa since he can't live by himself anymore. I have sat in this kitchen a thousand times with Grandpa while he did crossword puzzles. Mom is nervously fluttering about the kitchen, cleaning already-clean countertops and cupboards.

"How is Grandpa doing?" I ask this question every time we talk.

"He is all right. He sleeps a lot, but the doctors said he would just continue to sleep more and more until he falls into a coma." I chew on the potato chip, using it as an excuse to not have to say anything. Mom continues to flutter and clean as if she could clean away all the hurt and pain from the house. Soak it

up in a towel, like spilled milk. “I got him a new crossword book for his birthday. He finished the last one.” She goes over to a stack of mail and newspapers that has been pushed next to the wall and forgotten. After digging through the stack, she holds up a paperback crossword book. The front cover is hot pink and mint green, and it’s full of the gray newspaper-like pages, the kind that crosswords seem to always be printed on. “The puzzles keep him busy, and doing them keeps his mind sharp. He needs them.” Silence hangs between us. Those _____s in a crossword are the only _____s that he can fill in.

The lack of knowledge or understanding

“Mom, how did Grandpa lose his legs?” My eyes watch her face as she stares at me for a couple of seconds. This time I won’t back down and let her change the subject. She must have seen the determination in my eyes.

“It happened before you were born. Grandpa was delivering a load of large, steel pipe with Uncle Glenn in California. Almost all of the workers at the place he was delivering at had gone home for the night. Only one teenage boy was there to unload Grandpa’s trailer. The boy was not fully trained to operate the forklift, and he was in a hurry because he had a date that night.

“With steel pipes, the forklift operator needs to unload from the same side. The pipes are stacked so that if you unload from the wrong side, they will start leaning and then fall.” Mom demonstrates the idea to me by using her hands, one as the trailer with pipes and the other as the forklift.

“Grandpa was sitting on one side of the trailer, waiting while the kid finished the job. Instead of going to the right side, the kid picked up the second stack of pipes from the other side, probably because it was closer to where he needed to stack it in the yard. In doing so, the pipes started leaning and then eventually fell off the trailer. Grandpa didn’t have time to get away; the first pipe hit him in the head, and then all of the other pipes landed on his legs. When they took an X-ray of his leg, the bone looked like oatmeal. After she got there, Grandma didn’t leave the hospital until Grandpa did.”

Makes light of otherwise solemn subject matter

Grandpa used to say to anyone who would listen that he had two feet in the ground instead of just one. He would laugh after he said that.

Greek god of death

In the bedroom, everything felt new. The new paint smell stung any nose in the room and the carpet squished under any shoes. Even the old furniture seemed new in this setting. The only thing out of place was the old hospital bed, borrowed from where, I do not know. Its paint was faded white like the face of the dead at a viewing; the former color gone and replaced by the artificial; rust in the joints of the legs kept it from being able to move easily. Home Health is taking the bed away now to another dying person, maybe for someone else’s Grandmother.

Elongated, legless, carnivorous organism

Mom calls me. She is upset, as usual. I feel dead inside, and my optimism toward her is false. She doesn’t notice. Kind words are all she needs, not empathy or feeling. Grandpa told her that he wanted to die today. He tried to refuse the oxygen. Eventually he became so weak that he didn’t fight Mom when she put the tubes in his nose. I understand him. What else is there for him? He is shackled to that rosy house by a plastic hose filled with oxygen, and he is so weak now that he cannot break it. Every day he wakes up in the same bed he always has with a _____ next to him where Grandma used to be. Disease and _____s have bled him of everything.

Removal of a body part by trauma, prolonged constriction, or surgery

Once when I was very young, maybe six, I was playing with a friend. I think her name was Tiffany. My mom had to go to my grandparent’s house, so she took us with her. The day was sunny and bright, without a cloud in the sky. Grandma and Grandpa’s house looked cheerful, with a tidy row of flowers next to the lawn waved hello in the breeze.

Grandma let us into the house because Grandpa was taking a nap. He was sprawled out on the family room floor, on top of a foam pad covered in brown fabric and spotted with black ooze. Grandma wouldn’t let him nap in their bed because he was usually greasy from working on diesel trucks in the metal shop next to their house.

Grandma turned on a John Wayne movie for us to watch while she and my mom talked. I leaned my back against Grandpa’s chest, which hadn’t seemed to disturb him. Partway through the movie, Grandpa woke up.

Essay

“Ach, these damn legs are killing me.”

“Ronald, don’t you dare speak that vay in front of thesese chillins.” Grandma’s German accent always came out more when she was angry. Grandpa mumbled something in response to Grandma. She ignored him.

Grandpa turned to me. Smiled softly, he said, “Sweetheart, will you help me get my legs off?”

“Uh-huh.” I moved down to where his stiff legs were jumbled in a position that would have been even more uncomfortable if his calves and feet had had nerves in them. Grandpa sat up and pushed the top part of his prosthetic leg off of the stump of what was left of his right leg, then pushed the prosthetic off his left. After Grandpa got the leg off so it was easy to pull, I pulled it the rest of the way off and placed it on the edge of the rug. Grandpa then pulled off the gel padding and white “socks” that he wore under the leg to keep his stumps from getting sore.

His right stump was about 4 inches below his knee, ended smooth and round. Mom told me years later that the right side had been done right, like it was supposed to have been done. His left stump extended only 3 inches below his knee, a deep valley in his flesh an inch above the stump, where the doctor had started amputating the leg and then had decided not to cut there. Thick, brown skin like sandpaper or my heels covered both of the stumps. Grandpa massaged his stumps. He noticed me watching him. “To get the blood flowing.” He yawned, open-mouthed and wide, and then laid back down on his side.

Tiffany watched in silence, wide-eyed. After Grandpa had lain back down, she stood up and ran into the living room. I didn’t know what was going on, so I followed her. She was sitting in the corner of the room. She was crying. When I tried to ask her what was wrong, all she would say is, “I want to go home. I don’t like it here.” I went and talked to my mom about it, and she went in to talk to Tiffany. I sat in front of the TV, leaning against Grandpa as he snored softly, and watched the movie.

Mom came back in. “If you want to stay at Grandma and Grandpa’s house, you can, Kim, but I’m going to take Tiffany back home.”

Group of various diseases, all involving unregulated cell growth

The sky gleams bright blue. The grass is still withered and yellow, not quite having recovered from the winter. Tall pine trees and a chain-link fence

border the cemetery.

Grandpa sits in the car with his oxygen hose connected to his face, too weak to get out. Mom and I stand only about a yard-and-a-half away, in front of the headstone. One side says “Gerlinda Helfrisch Leavitt; born September 11, 1936; died March 12, 2010.” The other side says, “Ronald Wayne Leavitt; born December 11, 1936; died ____.” Grandpa is looking only at Grandma’s side of the headstone. He has put on his legs today so he can make the trip with us to the cemetery. His brown, wrinkly skin hangs on his frame like a coat on a skeleton. He still wears his blue overalls, but now that he has so little body fat he is wearing a sweater instead of a t-shirt, even though the day is warm. He has another baseball cap on. His blue eyes see without seeing.

“He looks so tired,” I whisper to Mom.

“He just wants all the pain and heartache to stop. He told me the other day that he doesn’t want to get treatment for his cancer.” Neither Mom or I say anything for a long time. I stare at that ____ space, knowing that when it is filled then all that will be left is a ____ in my life where he has been.



“A Troubled Past” by Paden Carlson
Honorable Mention Undergraduate Art

Poetry

FIRST PLACE GRADUATE POETRY

Aftermath

8:27 PM

by Caitlin Erickson

Sweet chai frothed
from the top of the cup as I leapt
from the rickety barstool
and fled the jungle painted coffeeshop.

It dribbled down my hand,
hot, sliming my keys and the sticky
wood slats of the outside porch.
I didn't feel the heat. I didn't feel anything
until I slammed my car door shut and screamed
to the ink black interior. I screamed
until I lost my breath.

Then I called. Twenty-five
times I called, tracks stamped
on my cheeks, huffing and sobbing.
Twenty-five times
I heard your voice, the jingle
of your syllables announcing
your absence, and twenty-five
times I begged you to stay
asked you why
you had to do it this way.

Sixty-three months since we locked eyes
and you asked how you knew me. Seven weeks
until aisles and vows and a three tiered cake with frosting
shaped like hydrangeas. Twenty-five calls
until the ringer stopped and shot straight
to the jar of your recorded voice.

I clicked the phone shut
and stared at the road in front of me.
Traffic signals reflected scattered rubies
onto the asphalt. When they turned
to emeralds, I traced the route home,
let the gems stay shattered,
embedded in tar kernels.



“Writing on the Wall” by Tiffany Smith

Second Place Graduate Art

Delilah

by Caitlin Erickson

The hair is the first thing to go.

Two days after his departure,
the stylist tightens a black cape
across my clavicle, ties strings
in a neat bow at the nape of my neck.
She assembles her arsenal,
scissors and razors that gleam white
in the bright salon lights lining the walls.

In the mirror, her reflected eyes meet mine.
What do you want?
Shoulder length. Eight
inches lopped. Anything
but this.

She begins cutting carefully,
carving small talk out of spring air.

In my ear, the crisp of shears is the same
as my scissors cutting cardstock for our invitations.
Each snip sends wisps of gold to the floor,
falling in a spiral like the propeller shaped pods
that cluttered Cedar City sidewalks every springtime.

He would scoop them in handfuls,
twist the stems like tops, and send them flying—
tiny helicopters.
When I laughed, he would send
a battalion of pods
to ambush the ants congesting
the sidewalk cracks near my apartment.

Where do you wear your part?
Her voice brings me back.
I study the line creeping across my scalp.
I don't remember. I guess the right,
and she begins the layers.
I imagine her cutting strands
like flower stems, at an angle,
to best soak up water
in a vase.

A month ago he gave me roses, pink,
fat blooms with ruffled petals.
I snipped the stems
at an angle, and dunked them in a vase
I found above the sink.

Soon the bouquet hung bulbous,
stems curved
like shepherd's hooks.
Mom tied the bunch with string
and hung it in our living room
to wither in winter sunlight.
When she cut it a week later, petals, dry
as fall leaves, slipped from the choke
and crumbled.

I grew my hair for the wedding,
pictured soft fairy curls
garlanded with cabbage roses.
Pearly eyes, floral organza dress,
even songbirds.
For a day, I would be Rapunzel.

Poetry

But he fled.
Sixteen hours on a motorcycle,
cruising past mountain meadows
and cracked ground deserts.
Five years obliterated
with the click of a mouse and the rev
of a Rebel engine.

My hair, once heavy with tangles
and knots, now skims
the curve of my shoulders.

Hair litters the floor like grass cuttings.

I feel biblical.

Lilith

by Caitlin Erickson

You cast me out of your garden
like a gnat whose body you pinched
and flicked
off your skin. You sip nectar
from hollowed wood goblets and laugh,
your belly full of nuts and seeds,
but no fruit. No fruit,
not yet.

But you forget, my dear—
our bones formed
from the same churned dust.
My heart is your heart,
my skin your skin,
my ribs your ribs—
but you've
plucked one from your body
like a wishbone, burrowed it
inside another,
left a space.
Take heed, my darling—
You have one less left to protect
that blood-wrapped fist
some will come to call your heart.

SECOND PLACE GRADUATE POETRY

The Back Pasture Hill

by Jeffrey Howard

1.

In summer, we climbed it often,
My sister Ju-Ju and I, carrying
carrot sticks and peanut butter
in Tupperware Mom collected
from yard sales.

We ate between black locusts
with their thorny bark,
played tag among Canadian thistle,
cow-pies dotted our playground
like green landmines.

Tired with our play
we paused by a clover patch.
I pressed grass blades between
my thumbs and mimicked
those mallards and drakes
in Stinsons' pond.

Ju-Ju picked a piece of grass
but couldn't echo my song;
she scowled, tossed the blade,
then swatted mine away.

2.

When September snap replaced August sun,
fall-air forced us indoors. Winter
brought snow crust muffling
pasture-grass pitches.

Our elbows placed on window sills
we gawked at icicles dangling
low from leaf-packed gutters,
counted water-drips streaking
porch-boards like layered candlewax.

Once a minute we glanced
at the white rise beyond our calf sheds;
we'd climb it again in March,
sink among the chest-high rye stems,
finger each tiller, each pliant node—
never minding the cow-pies—
and I'd teach her my grass-blade tune.

Poetry

Stone Throw by Jeffrey Howard

(Dedicated to a crazy lady's rooster)

Comb cocked, rafter-perched,
preening under a white wing,
waiting for me.

I carried milk bottles for the calves.
Set them down. Breathed.
Not ready to face claw and beak.

Finger tapped my shoulder. I turned
to see my twin, her blonde curls framed
with a navy hood. Rocks in each hand.

On Tuesday it had chased her
up the drive, pecking her boots. She'd screamed.
She slipped me a granite-lump, set

a finger to her lips. We tiptoed in.
A yell. Screech. Wings wide. Launch.
We struck it square. Fluttering.

Crimson-speckled. Oozing viscera.
She stood over it, crying. Killing is hard
for beginners, but I knew what to do.

I shoved blood and broken feathers
beneath my coat. We sneaked to the manure pit,
watched our sin sink beneath greenish bilge.

Paradelle for Maren by Jeffrey Howard

She curls up by the pebble-chipped pane; she watches as the bluegrass leans.
She curls up by the pebble-chipped pane; she watches as the bluegrass leans.
Drumming her fingers on the sill to the tune of "The Ants Go Marching."
Drumming her fingers on the sill to the tune of "The Ants Go Marching."
As she leans upon the sill, the bluegrass ants go drumming by the pane.
She watches the pebble-chipped curls of her fingers marching to the tune.

She wishes blackbirds wouldn't cloud the air with their noisy wings.
She wishes blackbirds wouldn't cloud the air with their noisy wings.
Gazing at the April-spun windmill across the dipping pond.
Gazing at the April-spun windmill across the dipping pond.
She wouldn't cloud the gazing pond with April wishes
spun across the air at the noisy blackbirds, their windmill wings dipping.

She sips the water glass, wipes her chubby face.
She sips the water glass, wipes her chubby face.
Grinning through crooked teeth, she grasps a yellow crayon and draws her
window world.
Grinning through crooked teeth, she grasps a yellow crayon and draws her
window world.
Her face grinning, chubby, crooked, she draws water, sips through her teeth.
She grasps a yellow crayon world and wipes the window glass.

She watches the chubby pebble ants dipping their crooked wings
to the April tune, the bluegrass blackbirds drumming the pond. She leans
her face upon the pane, grinning through crayon teeth, her curls spun
of yellow glass. A noisy windmill sips chipped water as the air wipes the window.
She grasps at the cloud, and she withdraws her gazing fingers across the sill.
She wishes the marching world wouldn't go by.

THIRD PLACE GRADUATE POETRY

The Center *by Esther Allen*

So you think a poet can't think when he's holding an onion, eh?
—Il Postino

Vowels thrill unlike fish-stinking sea,
syllable nets I cast and cast.
I have caught no silverfish
or my father's nod.
But I want the scale-sheen
of your smile.

I stop gutting words,
pull a hundred visions in,
peel away your strata; my eyes weep
against your full-lipped smirk, your rawness.
My voice, savoring the simplest line,
says all, says nothing.

The sea screams, hushes in my center,
leaking pindrops from my eyes.
You and I and all the other talkers
fuse into one echo of breeze-torn bush and sea.
Starlight.

What I Mean *by Esther Allen*

Mother often looked away—
at bubbling gravy, across the street
at four apple trees, at my sister Mary.
When I spoke, my brother chortled.
Words piled up in my frontal cortex,
grammar splitting to fragments,
language shattering against indifference.
“Shit,” I screamed. It meant, *Hear me out.*

I invented games. I toyed with theories,
feared myself pale, raged myself red.
“You're so cute,” my siblings said.
I pled for someone to finger
the word-pearls that coiled
in my brain. I said, “Just once,
I'd like people to care
about what I mean.”

My uncles flossed their ears with my prose
and told me the wise little monkey
listened. He asked no questions—
no, not ever, but he knew it all.
“Please? Could you keep quiet
for five minutes?”

I began writing messages
in window fog. I composed
nonsense like “water arcing
over quiet September fields.”
And when my mother faced
a stack of bills, I turned her head.
“No. Listen, Mother. Listen,
just to me.”



“Horses, Antelope Island” by Tiffany Smith
Honorable Mention Graduate Art

I Console a Mother by Esther Allen

Ninety-eight pants, red, white ringing
navy irises, square teeth bared,
sides pumping like an Iron Lung. Behind her,
my brother contemplates, plunges his hand
past her tail, past the calf’s jet-black knee.
She shifts, pupils drifting to eyelids.

“Whisper,” Clint says. “Tell her anything.”
I do. She’s the barnyard’s best-dressed heifer.
Even the manure clots on her tail
say, “Call me.” Against her ear I mutter,
“Soon you’ll be a mother.”
The word “mother”

reminds me of my own. When doctors
turned me, I still rode breech.
Were Mom’s eyes shooting agony
while I wanted only
to stay in her warm carriage,
her fluid and blood? Clint lifts a red hand.

“You can do it, gorgeous,” I say.
I’ll whisper anything. Bright fingers go in.
Ninety-eight sighs long, shifts hooves,
shuffles. Her blood-touched eyes could fit
the world. “Got it,” Clint says.
And he pulls. My mother’s eyes must have

widened as I left her too, as I
slid beneath the white sheet.
No searing cries. I flailed
against her thighs and could not breathe.
She spoke for me.

Ninety-eight's sides settle. Her nostrils ease.
Behind her, a black calf splays, all knees.
"I knew he'd be dead," my brother said.
I couldn't speak.

In the squelching barnyard,
no word would make that dead calf breathe.
I couldn't console
a blood-smeared mother.

FIRST PLACE UNDERGRADUATE POETRY

Black Dress Elegy

by Sarah Thomas

I wore the peasant-girl dress today,
long black skirt blooming
with tiny red and yellow flowers
that last brushed pollen over my skin
the morning I watched your graduation.

After the ceremony,
your mother drove a rental car
up the limestone canyon east of town,
past clumps of sage and fallen oak buried in snow.
The whole earth shook like a white tambourine
as she parked beside a frozen lake.
Your parents had never seen snow before,
so we taught them how to fall like angels,
swim like fishes through the crystals.

I wore that old dress today
and sat on the cold porch, reading tragic Jewish poems.
Celan helped me remember loving you
like poppy and recollection,
the dark milk of morning that followed.
Through the black fabric,
I felt your hand on my thigh,
lifted the hem,
and prayed through my teeth for rain.

The snow made us wild.
We scooped and flung it with our paws,
rubbed it in each other's faces
until our skins turned red.
My dress soaked through
and my body lit fire,
but I could not tell you.
Walking back to the car,
you combed the snow for fallen cigarettes
while I squatted over your long dark hairs,
stirring them over the glittering ground with a stick,
trying to divine a pattern.

I wore that old black dress today
and watched the trees undress.
I listened to the autumn static
warming up like a gramophone,
the scratch and pop of falling leaves
spinning beneath the needle.
I turned the dial up high,
and the leaves grew loud
and crashed like stones into the earth.

Returning by Sarah Thomas

Limes, syrup, cheap Old Crow
and hard lemons. The veins in my lover's hand dance
like lightning as he squeezes juice into the pitcher.
We clink jelly jars and rock together on the counter,
my legs around his hips, a boat wrapped around its mast,
the ocean spitting up maraschino cherries.
We fish for them at the bottom of our glasses and then slide
sticky fingers into each other's mouths as presents.
I feel like a gift box with a sea inside singing his name,
but when he slips off my ribbon, I crash into the presence
of real thirst, the kind I can't suspend in the waves of my body.
He starts telling fishing stories in a quiet chant,
pulling fire straight from the bottle, a sip for every Mempache
and Ala'ihi he has chased through the Moloka'i surf.
The big night falls in shards around his face,
the sugar in my fingertips turns to salt,
and the tiger shark smells blood,
the dark-red longing to go home.

Summoning memories from the belly of the bottle,
he leans into me, but I am only a pillar of foam breaking
into one thousand pale-blue roses, trying to be the moon
that could bring the tides to him.

Poetry

Song for Annabelle, Unborn

by Sarah Thomas

We made you wrong, Annabelle,
your father too wild and I
a leaf just waking up.

One year later, I hear your tiny cry
when I am alone in the kitchen
testing the water for yeast bread
on the inside of my wrist.

I fold your name into the dough
and sit with your story as it rises:
You sprouted from a soft-green rock in the sea
where little gray birds wore red caps
and the Auntie next door
pressed papayas into my chest,
winking down at my belly
before I ever knew.

No fruit, no sea, no leaves to cover my shame
the day I vomited you out
with coarse salt and tequila
into a metal waste bin,
the day I took a pill and bled your fragments
rhythmically
for hours.

But I did not throw away your name,
Annabelle.

It reminds me of Jersey milk cows
with long eyelashes and tinkling bells,
of sitting on an alfalfa bale
and playing guitar for the dust born
swirling in a shaft of sunlight,

Every minute, it reminds me of how I would have loved you,
proud and frantic
like a girl growing up so fast
her bones ache.

I would have wrapped you in the soft plaid shirts
my father gave me,
the green and blue blocks
like a map on your almond-cake skin.
We would have taken long walks
at twilight,
escaping.

I would have stolen money
from my friends and teachers
to buy coconut milk and fresh ginger.
I would have stuck you in a shoebox on the counter
while I cooked you pale-green curry
and complained.

Poetry

Even on the bad nights,

I would have curled you up beside me
like a silk ribbon
for the early morning rain,

I would have cried over you

every Sunday for religion,
scrubbed the brown sink clean
for your baths,
baked you fields of bread,

brought you up

sharp and blushing
like a wild rose,
blue and thoughtful

like a wave
that never was.



"Crane" by Grace Ryser

Second Place Undergraduate Art

SECOND PLACE UNDERGRADUATE POETRY

Strings

by Anna Bullock Brown

When the goat died by the laurel bush,
her ears still moving in the breeze, we
pressed together and wept and sang—
which was our fashion—then gutted her
with the dolphin bone knife and cut her gut

into long strips. We twined them and
dried them till they turned white and
opaque: strands that became, in their
spider silk strength, harp strings.

They entranced our guests with the
cadence of ceremony, and gave to us,
on the dullest days, the sensation of
touching the taught tendons of a horse.

In time we added more strings.
We twined them and
dried them till they turned white and
opaque: strands that became, in their
spider silk strength, harp strings,

each bringing music from a song less
body. We took the harp with us as we grew,
our fingers calloused from the resilient gut,
and from the strings we plucked our song.

Poetry

We twined them and
dried them till they turned white and
opaque: strands that became, in their
spider silk strength, harp strings.

With our bleats and groans, we would remember
the first grey body and how we sang our sorrow,
and how from her core we took our opaque
strands to turn death into a song.

The Butterflies

by Anna Bullock Brown

Across the old and broken brown grass,
she followed her father, arms stretched like wings,
gliding behind him over the yard frozen
with February, and watched at the window
of the woodshop where he flipped the switch on the lathe,
a whirling dervish, a sideways potter's wheel that threw
to the bandsaw and planks
flurrying figures of dust. The shavings left the lathe

in quick soft flocked clouds and left behind shaped
wood curving, smoothing, like liquid or clay,
the chisel drew back and forth
dipping in and out as the post spun

faster than sight. She longed to take the chisel
from her father's hands and shape the spinning
wood into wings, the dust blowing from the lathe
the sort that would make her fly. She would twirl
and spin, moved and shaped by the wind, close
enough to the sky

to smell the stars shimmering and fluttering above
her, weightless and fragile. She would taste the stars
on her tongue, run their cold yellow custard
across her teeth, and her smile would sparkle
like star dust.

Poetry

But her father only allowed her to watch.

You will be in my way,
he said.

You could trip and fall,
he insisted.

You will get hurt,
he feared.

and

when flaws caused chunks to ricochet, the dust
would pelt, dive at his eyes, grow to the size of small
stones and be, it seemed, not sawdust at all, but shooting
stars, weightless and otherworldly mahogany brown,
trailing rusty redwood dust. And before she cried out,

startled as her father drew back,
hoisting chisel away from the wooden maelstrom,
she watched how the dust fluttered,
collecting on her father's coat and goatee,
making a man of dust and slivers.

At lunch he stopped, the churning whirl of the lathe
hushed. She would flush through the door, finally
allowed in, and her father told her
of myths, about the butterflies.

How if you caught one and whispered your wish,
the butterfly, silent, would keep your secret and fly
to the gods, who would grant your wish.

How could the butterflies reach the gods? How could they fly
so high and not get hurt or fall? She asked, scarcely daring to breathe.

As they fly, their wings catch something that makes it so they do not fall—
the star dust.

It's Obvious

by Anna Bullock Brown

To my 19 year-old self

It's obvious
you think
beauty is
an evening gown.
A long ember number
slit high up the thigh
of Kayla, Miss State
something or other,
smile confident, shoulders
back, curls
permanent,
chosen
by judges
based on
thirty minutes
of polished piano
performance and
stylized stance.
Of course,
to you,
beauty could not include
the zits on her back
she asked you
to pop
(you tried
not to gag).
You couldn't
see it
when her
and her boyfriend's

Poetry

lips
made moist
smacking noises
from the couch
that
curled into
your ears,
making it hard
to hear
the poor boy
who stood
in the doorway
of your college
apartment,
his face red
as their kissing
continued
through your
halting
conversation.
You yelled
at her later,
and never really
said sorry.
Did you even see
it when she
taught you
how to curl
your hair?
She'd just
come back
from swimming—
had no makeup
thick glasses
and that

gray cap
that made her
look butch.
So look.
Look while you can
at her blotchy
back
her thick lenses
and her
swimming cap,
and you'll see.
It's obvious.



“Spirit” by Grace Ryser
Honorable Mention Undergraduate Art

THIRD PLACE UNDERGRADUATE POETRY

Poplars and Aspens *by Jessica McDermott*

For Jay Anderson

Yesterday, I swallowed the moon.
Swallowed its deep white – pale as the poplars and aspens
gone ghost in snow.
Their black branches mummified.

Past two a.m., you're wrapped up in a blue afghan – more
cocoon, on my living room floor.
Your blue eyes closed, you retrace the path of past lovers
With your voice. How your love swelled then crashed.

Two days later, I leave a dozen eggs in my car overnight. They
expand with freeze and crack. Half of them broken in one
solid line, I study their pale shells like a map. It leads me to you,
and the realization that you and I will end with the same frail beauty
in which we began.

We meditate for hours. Sit cross leg-ed in silence
until our legs run numb. We end holding hands, and my mind
forgets touch, forgets which fingers are mine. We feed each other
poetry
and you strum your abalone ringed guitar. You tell
me that one day you decided to be happy.

I slow step across ice glazed snow to my car, the
earth packed tight beneath. I slip inside, watch
the glow from your front window flip off and

remind myself that sunlight tastes best after a long winter.

House Recital in Logan, Utah *by Jessica McDermott*

That room must still exist, behind a white door,
a wood floored parlor with French doors that open
into a piano room.

In the corner, three bottles of opened Merlot, a plate with
sliced carrots and broccoli next to a saucer of hummus
and a pot of warm cider.

On your cheek, a flicker of candlelight.. Me on your lap,
my fingers tracing up and down your arm.

The hum of Debussy's *L'isle Joyeuse*. The other guests
mere outlines and ghosts.

That 1870s house with the golden etched wallpaper and lazy
crystal chandeliers. It hasn't dissolved back into reality. Back
into nothing.

The rustle of programs floating onto laps and the clap of hands.
The young performer's bow – he would be past thirty by now.

A black scarf looped loose around your neck, dark rushes of curly
hair down to your shoulders.

The smell of fire, white paned window heavy with fallen snow.

Moonlight

by Jessica McDermott

Debussy,
I never saw you touch the lawyer or the
baker's wife. Never saw you look at them
with eyes that pet and plead. But five days
before your anniversary,

when Lilly's hands sunk a bullet into her spine
that stuck until the day she died, did you feel
it too? The lead like bleeding ink in a constant
pinch down to her feet. The twist

of something lodged so deep in bone and flesh
that it grows invisible to all but you. Because you still
feel it breathe. You've tasted its smoothness on sleepless

nights with lovers that coo and touch but never give
birth to something that lasts. But leave. Like

sunlight on your face. A moment of warmth that
escapes. The holy moment when skin meets skin
and you, the feeler, feels what it means to ache for
someone else. To grasp onto a climax that can't be
spoken, only sensed in the space of a blink.

When the moonlight disappears into sun and you
alone lock your door up tight. So no one can squeeze
between the spaces, and you don't speak or leave just
sit and stare. I can feel your loneliness. The self-inflicting
shots of lead meant to leave holes through chests and weight
onto backs that doesn't end but stays.
And lasts.



"Where Lovers Meet" by Angela Turnbow
Honorable Mention Graduate Art

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