

# Scribendi

STUDENT WRITINGS

2008

*Scribendi: meaning a compulsion to write.*

*Scribendi: meaning a compulsion to write.*

*Scribendi: meaning a compulsion to write.*

*Scribendi: meaning a compulsion to write.*  
*Scribendi: meaning a compulsion to write.*

*Scribendi: meaning a compulsion to write.*

**Scribendi: meaning a compulsion to write.**

*Scribendi: meaning a compulsion to write.*

# Thank You

---

## SPONSORS

Thanks to the following sponsors of the USU Creative Writing Contest:

Associated Students of Utah State University  
Student Involvement and Leadership Center  
USU Honors Program  
USU English Department

## JUDGES

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

Julie Robertson	Chadd VanZanten	Star Coulbrooke
Paul Crumbley	Brock Dethier	Samantha Robinson
Christine Cooper-Rompato	Roberta Stearman	Paige Smitten

Thanks also to Jim Sinclair for judging the artwork submissions.

And thanks to Crumb Brothers Artisan Bread at 291 S. 300 W., Logan, Utah, for gift certificates for the judges.

USU's annual creative writing contest drew a large number of superb entries. In fact, judging was so close in a number of cases that winners tied. The happy result of this was that it enabled us to give more awards. We did not, however, receive funding this year to publish *Scribendi 2008* in hard copy form. We hope, one day, to find a funding source for the resumption of printing and binding.

This year's online version is designed by Natalie Young, who undertook the project as part of her MFA work at Lesley University. Natalie has designed *Scribendi* to be printable in a number of different ways, in part or whole, in black and white or color. We thank Natalie for her hours of work. We also thank Bria Jones, who has served as this year's intern. Melissa Hislop and Kristin Clove of the English Department staff also deserve thanks for finding time amidst their busy schedules to work on the contest. Finally, we thank all who entered the contest and urge them to keep writing—for love of the word and the craft.

The title *Scribendi*, meaning a compulsion to write, was selected by Marina Hall, who directed the contest from 1999–2004.

—ANNE SHIFRER, Contest Director

# Table of Contents

---

## FICTION

### Graduate

First Place: “Bliss” by Chelsi Sutton-Linderman	1
Second Place: “States of Being” by Jacqueline Harris	5
Third Place: “Beneath the Bleachers” by Robert Watkins	9

### Undergraduate

First Place: “Superior” by Jeffrey Carr	12
Second Place: “In Heaven” by Annie Daines	16
Third Place: “Doing Something” by Torrie Fedor	19

## ESSAY

### Graduate

First Place: “Scars” by Jacoba Mendelkow	23
Second Place: “Wood Work” by Russell Winn	28
Third Place: “Saving Smudgy” by Diane Bush	32
Third Place: “Walking Home” by Jacqueline Harris	36

### Undergraduate

First Place: “Depth of Field” by Ashley Anderson	40
Second Place: “Home Again” by Gina Ricks	45
Third Place: “Closer to Home” by Marinda Burningham	49

# Table of Contents

---

## POETRY

### Graduate

First Place: “When Cancer Dropped by For Dinner” by Chelsi Sutton-Linderman	53
Second Place: “The Torturer’s Wife” by Daniel Nyikos	54
Third Place: “In Memory of Me” by Lyra Hilliard	55

### Undergraduate

First Place: “In the Kitchen at Fifteen on a Saturday Afternoon” and “Electric Plant Pantuom” by Ellen Reimschuessel	56 57
Second Place: “Becoming Lilith” by Cori Ashcroft	58
Second Place: “Hankou Hair Salon” by Nicole Warenski	59
Third Place: “His Cats” by Amanda E. Burnett	60
Third Place: “Mother” by Laura Hatch and “Day Six” by Laura Hatch	61

## ART

### Graduate

First Place: “Black Chandelier” by Sarah Sisson	54
Second Place: “abiding time” by Jacqueline Harris	1
Third Place: “Passing Logan Canyon” by Darren Edwards	12

### Undergraduate

First Place: “On the River Walk” by Ashley Andersen	32
Second Place: “See a Different Side” by Melanie Woodford	9
Third Place: “Forgotten Fairytale” by Simone Suddreth	16

# Table of Contents

## ART (CONT.)

### Honorable Mention

#### Graduate

“Strawberry Ranch” by Darren Edwards	19
“Hideaway” by Darren Edwards	62
“procession” by Jacqueline Harris	36
“counts the time in quarter-times” by Jacqueline Harris	40

#### Undergraduate

“GBHART” by StaceyAnn Allen	5
“Afternoon in Logan” by Ashley Andersen	23
“The Back Road, North Logan” by Ashley Andersen	27
“Welcome Darkness” by Rachel Hammond	49
“The Face of Nature” by Elise Hintz	57
“Split” by Justin Potter	61
“Sea against Sky” by Simone Suddreth	45
“Open Window” by Simone Suddreth	59
“Bleed Carbonation” by Melanie Woodford	56

## THAD AND JENNY BOX CREATIVE WRITING AWARDS

The Thad and Jenny Box Creative Writing Award is bestowed on the “best of the best.” One graduate and one undergraduate winner are selected in a second round of judging based on first place winners from all categories.

### Graduate: Chelsi Sutton-Linderman

“Bliss” First Place Graduate Fiction	1
“When Cancer Dropped by for Dinner” First Place Graduate Poetry	53

### Undergraduate: Ellen Reimschuessel

“In the Kitchen at Fifteen on a Saturday Afternoon” and	56
“Electric Plant Pantoum” First Place Undergraduate Poetry	57

# Fiction

## 1ST PLACE GRADUATE FICTION

### Bliss

by Chelsi Sutton-Linderman, Thad and Jenny Box Creative Writing Award Recipient

I work at the local sex shop. That's right, for a measly \$7.00 an hour I point customers towards and then ring up the commodities to facilitate their various carnal desires. Sometimes though, I can't help but wonder if, for \$7.00 an hour, for the past year I have been slowly losing my soul.



"abiding time" by Jacqueline Harris  
Second Place Graduate Art

Sounds cliché right? Besides we all work those jobs at some point—the office temp, the clerk at the liquor store, the grave shift at Bob's Kwik Self-Serve Station. Crap careers are the stuff our high school and college memories are made of. We bow our heads, serve our fries, and mumble beneath our breath, "It is just so I can pay for school." So, perhaps

it is an overstatement to blame the loss of my soul on "Bliss"—that's the name of the store see, Bliss, which strikes me as very ironic about 83.7% of the time.

And I am working here just so I can pay for school, which is a fact that should be understood right off the bat. This is not my career. However, simply claiming that I am working here only to pay for school still does not render it an entirely respectable occupation. Sometimes to make myself feel better, I pretend that I work as a cashier at the Bliss Shoppe, spelled the cute, sophisticated way, amazing that an extra "pe" can make the whole establishment seem less seedy. Pretending I am a sales associate at the Bliss Boutique is even better, more French, more chic, more mod. On occasion, especially when meeting people I will never see again on a bus or in the grocery line, I claim that I am a relationship therapist. But the bottom line is that Monday, Wednesday, Thursday, Friday, and Saturday from 3 pm to 9 pm I am a clerk at Bliss. I live for Tuesdays and Sundays.

I realized I was losing my soul last Wednesday, "Hump Day" as the zany calendar behind the register claims in bold, blue letters. A certain segment of customers think this old turn-of-phrase is particularly funny given the items that stock our shelves, and every Wednesday at least one idiot will chuckle and gargle the words, "Hump Day" under his breath, as he digs for the correct change to purchase his condoms, or personal lubricant, or body chocolate.

Which isn't bad, by the way, the body chocolate, I mean. Sometimes when Bliss is completely dead and I have another three hours left on a shift, I crack open a box of those little chocolate jars and suck Cherry Delight and Caramel Bonbon from the slick plastic spoon I carry in my purse. I mark the box down on an inventory sheet in the back as "damaged during shipment" so no one will notice or ask me any questions.

Though being questioned by the management or my co-workers isn't much of a concern, they offer just the basic inquiries, "Can you take an extra shift?", "Do you know where we are back-stocking the bullwhips now?" It is the customers who ask the scary questions: "Is it OK to insert \_\_\_\_\_ into your body?" (Fill in the blank with anything you want—I've heard it all) "Is this edible as well?", "Is Icy-Hot safe?"

Sometimes their petitions are more philosophical in nature. My favorites come from tight-lipped devotees of various strict religions who would die on the spot if their pastor were to catch them in the shop, "Is this OK with God?"

How am I supposed to answer that? Because employees are offered monthly commission, bonuses I try to look clerical and reply somberly, "Yes. Yes it is." On such occasions I think about adding "Spiritual Counselor" to my list of positions at Bliss.

Wednesday's are usually quiet here; especially when the snow floats and flurries outside and the temperature falls. Bliss is located right along Main Street in this sleepy,

## Fiction

conservative town. It neighbors an engagement ring shop and a bridal boutique—all three of which have been open for twenty years or more. Sometimes we joke that you can take care of a courtship’s entire climax in one afternoon, grab an engagement ring, walk next door, find a gown, and finish your one stop shopping with something lacy and white for your wedding night. I am trying to talk the manager into writing some cute little ditty about it and running an ad. It is a real, gritty local business and even Bliss retains the colloquial charm absent in Wal-Mart, Target, or other big box stores. The other shops along the street close up around five or six, but I am always stuck here until nine. I had been watching the snow outside for approximately one hour. Sometimes I bring a book, but last week I just stared at the flakes turning hot pink in the reflection of Bliss’s neon Lingerie window sign.

The snow was coming down hard in heavy, fat flakes full of water that plummet to the pavement rather than gently float, the way snowflakes do in all of the cheesy Christmas specials Lifetime runs each December. My wrist-watch claimed it was just after eight-o-clock and I figured there was only about a 30% chance someone was going to walk through Bliss’s door before I could flip off the lights, lock up and head home. I failed my college statistics class (along with every other class), but the only people who know that are the Registrar secretaries at the local U, so I spend a lot of my time making up statistics for things on the spot. I think this makes me sound studious and offers evidence to the fact that I am only working at Bliss to save money for school. I was in mid-yawn when I heard the jangle of the bells tied on the door clang. I looked over to see a man step into the shop, apparently the odds that someone was going to come in before closing had just gone up significantly.

I could tell the man was a 1-J’er right away. In Anywhere, USA, where small little towns are strung along by peeling paved roads each touting their own name it is easier to just learn the surrounding county areas. This way when you meet some back-woods boy you can get by with a simple, “You’re from Lake county?” instead of going through the whole hoo-hah and dance about which little town he claims as his own and what other little towns it is located between that might give clues to its nearly nonexistent location. When I was bored last year I memorized the counties listed in the local phone book in alphabetical order, Jefferson County is the first J. 1-J’ers’ make up roughly 43% of Bliss’s business. Most of them are unassuming middle-aged men and women. They are the sort of middle class America that you expect to see out waving a cheap little flag in a grain field on the Fourth of July. They are usually polite, simple, and if it weren’t for their cell-phones, mini-vans, and the sexual perversions they come in to buy, they could easily be confused with the Amish.

This man was no different. He wore cowboy boots, not the crisp trendy type that the car-salesmen in town try to pull off, but the real-worked-in-lined-with-dirt leather kind, the sort he would have pulled on and off again for years and years as he came and went from the farm. Cracked crow’s feet and other thick creases in his face matched those in the leather of his boots. In some ways he reminded me of my own farming father, far away in another town who would just be stoking the little stove-heater in our old house about this time of night, the father who didn’t know his oldest daughter pandered sex-toys to pay her rent and hadn’t been to school in months, but thought instead that she worked in some quaint little bookshop. He was always meaning to drive up and visit one day—even though we both know there is a zip, zilch, zero percent chance of that ever happening.

“Ma’Am,” the man tipped his head towards the counter in my direction. His hands were jammed forcefully into the pockets of his flannel pull-over, so much so that it almost looked as if they might rip through and escape from the torn seams, startling the rest of the body they were attached to. His eyes flicked nervously across my face. The odds that it was his first time in the store would have been triple to nothing in Vegas.

You learn how to read people working in a shop like Bliss. Those who come in and refuse to make eye contact with you are usually first-timers. Those who come in and blabber on and on about how they’ve “never been in a shop like this before” and “really don’t know what they’re doing here” are full of it—they have likely hit every sex shop in the state and know exactly what they are looking for. The regulars are quiet and unobtrusive, and most could care less about what the employees think of them, so long as we don’t over-charge for their selections. I usually let first-timers wander around a bit before I accost them with my perky shop-girl conversation. If I time it just right, I can catch customers when they are slyly trying to consider the most risqué and controversial displays in the joint without anyone noticing. Walking up behind the man while he was studying a wall with pegs dangling erotic bondage supplies I boomed, “Hi—anything I can help you find over here?”

He nearly jumped out of his skin, “Oh...ahh...no. I’m just gandering here.” He smiled self-consciously.

I tipped my head to one side, “Well, if you need any help just go ahead and holler.” I left him fumbling for a reply and walked over to a rack of sale lingerie, where I pretended to reorganize the slight bits of silk and lace over and over again, lining them up first by color, then by size, then sorting them by style. All I was really doing was working to keep an eye on the old farmer gaping at the opposite wall.

The burglary rate at Bliss is unusually high for this town. Bliss’s owner, Steve, who

## Fiction

never actually works at the shop, but drops by several times a day to check the cash in the till and try to catch the employees goofing off, opens every staff meeting in the same way. Pacing before us frenetically with his arms sleeved in tattoos, his ears gauged to the size of quarters, and a spiked piercing proceeding just below his bottom lip, Steve looks more like a paranoid-addict than a professional businessman as he rattles off numbers and percentages about how much inventory was jacked over the last month. He suggests ways in which we might stop such thieves. A bulging coat pocket could likely be a concealed blow-up doll, a woman who leaves the dressing room and walks straight out the store likely has lingerie on beneath her clothes, and anyone with any sort of distinguishing gait has probably shoved a can of whipped body topping down their pants. What Steve does not mention is that his inventory-control system is seriously lacking and that the employees steal 80% of the edible products and then mark them up as “damaged during shipment.”

The man now stands staring down an aisle of body stockings, fish-net hosiery and what I call ‘hooker-heels’ tall slick-plastic platform shoes in various unnatural hues that are as likely to break your ankle as turn a lover on. It was nearly 8:30 now and had I left the man to stare and wander on his own, he probably would have just ended up leaving with some stupid massage lotion or glow-in-the-dark condoms right at nine-o’clock, but I was hoping to close up a little early. Besides, he seemed so helpless and out of place amongst the in-your-face-sex-products, 70% of whose labels had full color pictures of completely naked men and women on them. And he reminded me a bit of my father with unkempt, graying hair spilling from under the beat-up ball cap and calloused hands that were wringing each other with concern.

I stuck my head around the opposite end of the aisle and called out again, “Are you looking for anything in particular?”

He shifted his weight uneasily, “Oh, I don’t know.”

Stepping down the aisle I tucked a lock of hair behind my ear, “Well, are you looking for something for yourself? Or are you looking for a gift?” Sometimes all folks need is a little direction.

“Myself,” he answered quickly, seeming relieved to finally have an absolute answer.

I noted the plain gold band that circled the fourth finger of his left hand, “Something for yourself or your wife?”

Slightly caught off guard he too looked down at the band on his hand, twirling it with his fingers, “Um. My wife.” He looked up, continuing on in a rush, “Our youngest just went off to college and its pretty quiet around our place now. My wife goes up to Adams County to visit her sister on the weekends.”

Rarely do customers actually reveal useful personal information to salespeople. Most of the time at Bliss I would rather customers did not tell me anything about their personal lives, experiences, or escapades. If I had a nickel for every time I offered a hopeless customer an explanation about whatever product is in their hands and their face lights up as they launch into some story that begins with, “This one time...” I could have quit working at Bliss months ago and put myself through Harvard. Sometimes I consider posting a sign up at the cash register that reads, CLERK IS DEAF. But I’m pretty sure that would piss Steve off.

“Are you thinking about something for her to wear? Or are you looking for a type of bedroom game to spice things up? Are you interested in lotions or lubricants?”

The man twirled his ring for a moment and then pointed to a red body stocking hanging in front of him. “Hell. Something to wear I guess. What do you think about these?”

I slipped easily into my spiel about the benefits of body stockings. Steve makes sure we rehearse and rehearse different sales pitches for each of the products he stocks. “Body stockings are some of the most sensual pieces in bedroom wardrobe,” I droned. “The slick, sleek feeling is pleasant against your lover’s skin, and the tight material also contracts against your own skin, providing a warm, but comfortable feeling.” I finish by adding my testimonial, “I just love mine. They look fabulous on and your wife will be stunning in it. There are few classier pieces of hosiery.” The truth is that I don’t own a body stocking—certainly not one shaded Sinful Scarlett. I hate nylons and could never imagine gaining any sexual advantage by covering my entire body in lycra and spandex.

“Okay,” the man said pushing out his lower lip and nodding. “What about size?”

“What size is your wife?”

“Oh, probably as big as you are.”

“These are actually a one-size fits all. Nylon is so stretchy it works for anybody.” He looked so relieved by this comment that I almost didn’t feel the need to add but one size does not look great on all silently inside my head.

The man reached out and took a packaged Sinful Scarlett stocking from the shelf, “I think I’ll look around a little more.”

I shrugged and made my way back toward the front of the store. Give him ten more minutes, I thought to myself, he’ll be outta here and on his way back to Jefferson County to surprise a wife, who will probably make him sleep on the couch for thinking she’d wear such a tacky thing.

Behind the front counter I began going through all the motions of closing down the shop for the night, Windexing the glass cases, sorting the credit card and debit card

## Fiction

receipts into neat, little white stacks, respectively. By 8:50 I was surprised that the old farmer hadn't made his way to the front of the shop again yet. Rounding the counter, I began to walk to the back of the store. For a moment my pulse quickened. As a young girl working nights at the local sex-shop you sort of learn to be on your guard. Though the thought of some sex-crazed pervert dragging me off into his car is as equally alarming as a kindly old man having a heart attack on my shift, due to some shocking product he came across.

The aisles of the store were empty. I wandered up and down through body stockings, leather collars and cuffs, and naughty nurse outfits, but there was no sign of the man. The only thing out of place was a hooker-heel shoe display missing a set of feathery bedroom stilettos that looked more like a pet than footwear. Then, spinning in a circle slowly with one hand on my hip, I noticed one of the dressing room curtains was closed.

The dressing rooms at Bliss are really nothing more than a couple of gaudy clearance sheets that Steve found at some bargain-basement store and strung up on hooks screwed into the crumbling plaster ceiling. At my insistence Steve added several yards of flowing gold chiffon, draped loosely over the sheets for an increased classy feel. The overall effect is a Cleopatra-type canopy that can easily be pulled down and folded up, should we need the space for additional displays. When not in use, one panel of the material is pulled over and hooked against the wall with a small brass nail. One dressing room remained open, but the other was closed.

Creeping quietly across the shop I strained to hear any sort of noise coming from the cloth cubicle before me. Nothing. With one hand I pulled the curtain slightly. After working in a sex shop for a year and half there are few things that surprise you. You grow accustomed to strange requests and questions. You shake your head at the latest and greatest shipment that comes in, but without any real shock at what companies like Escalante and Fantasy come up with. You come to believe that there is a dark, secret, intimate side to every human being around you, and even though it makes queasy chills crawl down your back like slick sweat sometimes, for the most part, you come to believe it is healthy and good that we are sexual beings. At the very least, you find yourself believing that anything is possible.

But I was shocked to see him standing there. The tired muscles, that must have once glinted under sun and splashes of irrigation water when he worked the fields as a young man were still hard, but in a different, petrified way now—solid with work they would have likely quit doing years ago had the option been given. His stomach was soft, settling the way that stomachs do, perhaps heavy with blueberry pies and apple turnovers that his wife made before going to visit her sister up in Adams County. His knees and elbows were scarred from years of fighting with machines and, liver spots bloomed on his

back in places where the sun had shone too long. All of it was covered in a sleek, glistening scarlet stocking, balanced on two feathered stilettos, where half his heels hung off the back edge.

He must have heard the curtains ruffle, and when our eyes met I fell back in complete surprise, crashing into a metal display of feather boas at my side. As it smashed over with a clang, I called out calmly, searching for my composure, "Just to let you know, we'll be closing in five minutes." The dressing room was still. Leaving the boas like a pile of snakes on the floor I quickly walked to the front and sat on the stool behind the register, hands folded in my lap.

I didn't look up when he approached to pay, setting the Sinful Scarlett down with the furry shoes. "Do you need a larger size in these?" I pointed to the shoes without meeting his eyes, unsure who I was more ashamed for me or him.

"No," his voice was soft, "these will do just fine."

I wanted to tell him that I didn't judge him, tell him that I supported free expression, tell him I was open to alternate lifestyles, tell him I would march by him on the street, or that I would keep his secret, whatever he wanted. But all I could tell him was, "It'll be \$34.60."

He pulled out his wallet and rifled through some bills, "I appreciate your help tonight. It's hard sometimes you know, to live a lie of sorts. You get mixed up; don't know whether your secret is the lie you are trying to keep out of your life or whether your life is the lie that makes you keep secret." He paused, "You must see a lot of things working here."

Before I could catch myself I heard the words leave my mouth, "I'm just working here so I can pay for school."

He nodded thoughtfully, "That is good. Bet you see plenty of sad, old men like me here, huh?"

I smiled softly, tried to shrug casually and said, "About 27% of our customers are very much like you." I don't know why I said it. I don't know why I choose such a small percentage; I don't know why it made relief wash over his face.

"27% huh? That's not so bad. Maybe we're all more alike than we know."

I bagged his purchase and showed him to the door. I didn't lock up right away. Instead I sat behind the counter with the lights off and a jar of Carmel Delight. I sat there for a long time in the dark, stared out the window into the pink snowflakes falling, and never felt so lonely in my life. —

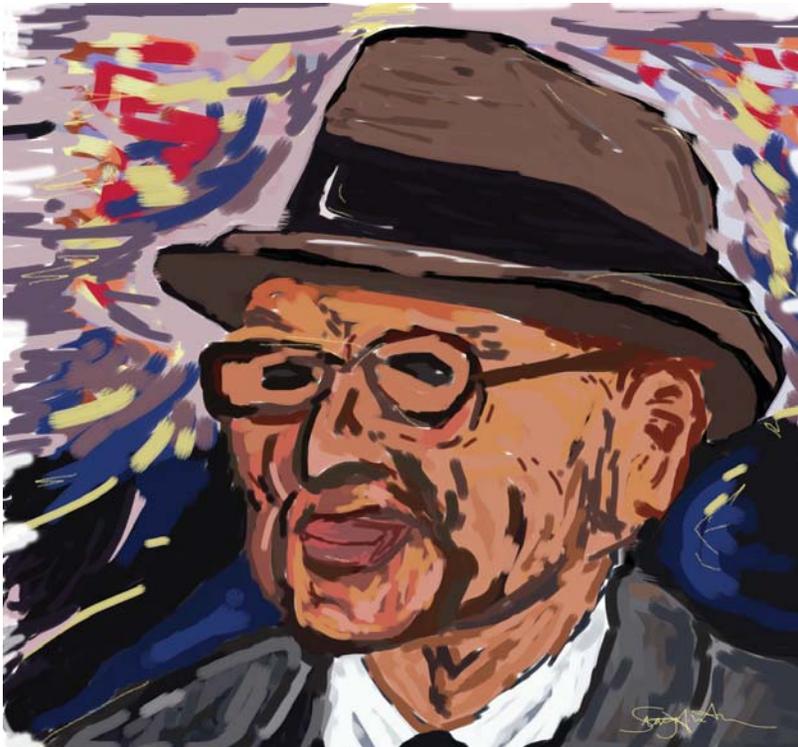
# Fiction

## SECOND PLACE GRADUATE FICTION

### States of Being

by Jacqueline Harris

I fall to my knees on the hot asphalt and swallow a gasp. The loose rock cuts into my skin, but when I try to prop myself back up, my slight body is shoved from behind and my two twin braids fling forward over my shoulders. A boy on the basketball court lets his ball dribble onto the grass. He shouts, "Ooh, fight! Come on!" Squeaking sneakers and bunny-eared shoelaces race towards me until clammy bodies cast mismatched shadows



"GBHART" by StaceyAnn Allen  
Honorable Mention Undergraduate Art

over me. I try to peer up to see who shoved me, but the noon sun blinds me and after my head is pushed back down, all I can see are inky blots dancing.

\*

Shading my eyes from the sun, I look out over the green ocean. The beach of another smaller island sleeps only a mile away from this one. If I were a better swimmer I could lie on that beach instead, my fiancé and I deserted. To the north rises Puerto Rico and our resort, El Conquistador, built up the 300-foot cliffs. Craig and I spend most of our daylight together on the resort's private Palomino Island, but he thinks he's getting too much sun and wants to spend the night in the casino. He forgets I hate gambling. Later tonight he'll go off to the blackjack tables and I'll sift through postcards at the gift shops down the hill. Craig tells me he'll go rent some snorkeling gear. I walk into the ocean.

The water is waist deep and tickles my lower stomach when I turn to face the shore. I plant my feet and stand still. Each wave pushes my body slightly forward and my toes grip the sand as it swirls, sways and then subsides under my feet. I sink a little deeper, the silt settles temporarily, and the water level rises higher on my abdomen. The water is intimately cool and pleasant between waves. Calm. A breeze grazes my neck.

\*

The dim air tastes warm and recycled from the crowd gathered around me. I should be jumping rope, playing hopscotch, or pumping my legs higher and higher on the swing set. Someone coughs.

In a bowl in front of me on the blacktop is a grasshopper. He, I assume it's a he, has glassy brown eyes, a rigid body, and prickly legs. His antennae grapple with the bowl's lip and I notice his small and thin membranous wings, like the layers of Elmer's glue I peel off my palms during art class. He crouches, as if he doesn't know if he should hold still and pretend to be invisible, or jump away. I'm surprised that he doesn't jump, but just breathes softly and waits for some signal.

"Eat it!" a girl behind me demands. She shoves me again and holds my head just inches above the bowl.

\*

The tourists on the beach mingle their accents and foreign tongues. My fiancé walks away from the turquoise rental shack and stops to talk to a woman in a red bikini who has dropped her wet fins on the sand. He picks them up for her and I watch them start talking. Her boobs look fake. A wave prods me forward and I can't hear what he has said to make her laugh. I shift my weight as my feet resettle deeper in the ocean floor. The sand is colder further down.

\*

# Fiction

“You’re too old to have a baby,” my much older neighbor informs me as I return from the doctor’s office. “How old are you, now?” she says jabbing her makeshift wooden cane towards my swelling belly.

“Forty-six,” I answer, getting out my keys and jingling them together as loudly as they’ll clang. I notice sunspots on my hand but don’t tell her I’m well aware of my age. I thought about this myself as I’d watched the doctor remove his gloves, drop them in the wastebasket, and proceed to tell me one more time all the complications I could face.

“Women your age shouldn’t even tinker with the idea of getting pregnant,” she tells me before I step inside my beige apartment and close the door. She says the word “tinker” like I’m a toy maker, thrilled about my latest creation.

\*

“I said eat it!” she yells, her fingers gripping my skull. My face is only inches away from the grasshopper and my moist breath and tears beat down on him in a small thunderstorm. A boy sniggers and I try to turn my head and see who it is. I recognize the plaid dress of my best friend Silvia amid the legs beside me. My eyes and nose drip and I think about the handkerchief Silvia always keeps in her pocket.

“Do it,” she yells for the last time. I look back at the grasshopper and slowly move my hand towards him. He’ll taste dry and crunchy, like unsweetened Cracker Jacks. The boy laughs again and a school bell rings. No one moves but me.

\*

It only takes one time sleeping with your boss to get knocked up, although we’d been having sex on and off for months. It all started when we’d been working late reconciling the year-end budgets. He’d told me a joke about an accountant and a hooker. I started laughing when he acted out the punch line and pushed my hand against his thigh. We hadn’t been very careful since I assumed I was borderline menopausal. I ignored the signs for weeks and it wasn’t until eight weeks later that I finally told him I was pregnant. He always appreciated a good joke, but instead he just nodded and reached for his wallet.

\*

A second breeze tickles the wet spray on my shoulder blades and a shiver runs down my spine into the sand below. They say your spine shivers after a ghost whispers a warning into your ear. I brush away the warning along with some loosened hairs that curve up under my ears and onto my cheek.

The woman with the fake boobs and fins laughs again and touches my fiancé’s forearm. Her teeth look shockingly white against her tanned skin. “He’s not that funny,” I think as another wave swells up and around my frame.

The sand starts to weigh heavier and more uncomfortable on the tops of my feet as

the waves sink me deeper. I try not to let the scene ashore worry me, remembering the 275 invitations he told me he’d finally posted just last week. This trip was our celebration. I forcibly laugh at Fin-Girl flirting with an engaged man and try to shout to catch his attention, but another wave splashes up my back and arms, and the ocean swallows my scream. It’s growing louder out here and I can’t hear anything over the waves.

\*

She pulls her slippered feet under the metal folding chair.

“She’s non-responsive,” someone says on the telephone.

Her mouth is dry and the folded hands across her lap are scratchy and get caught in the pink crocheted blanket. She hasn’t had a drink of water in two days. She stopped eating food last week. It’s just a matter of time.

“I don’t want anything,” she said at the hospital when they tried to plant a saline IV. “Please take me home. I’m just not thirsty anymore.”

\*

Whoever she is steps closer behind me and I can feel her weight press up against my back. My hand is right above the grasshopper’s body.

“Get away,” I urge him in my mind. “Leave. Go!” For a moment the grasshopper doesn’t move but then his wings flutter slightly and fold resolutely across his body.

A whistle blows and a lunch aide calls us in from recess. I hesitate and picture Silvia’s plaid dress and handkerchief that she’ll only offer to me later when no one else can see. My fingers extend and then grab him, his legs scratching my palm, his body tense. No one laughs. I don’t want to eat him, but if I let him go they’ll catch us both again tomorrow.

“I’m sorry,” I whisper before I crush his body, crack it in my palm, and squeeze harder and harder until his life oozes out wet between my fingers.

\*

Water beads off the tip of my short ponytail and trickles onto my spine. My fiancé waves farewell to Fin-Girl and I feel myself exhale a deep breath I’d been holding. I raise my hand and try to catch his eye like a schoolgirl.

“I’m in the water, waiting for you,” I try to tell him as I watch him return to our towels. I wave again. His shoulders and arms are starting to look pink from too much sun and I tell myself to remind him to put on more sunscreen before he gets burned.

Fin-Girl readjusts her breasts in her bikini top and arranges her ample cleavage, definitely fake. She calls to him from the outdoor showers and I see him smile before he jogs back to meet her.

\*

## Fiction

They release her from the hospital the following day and bring hospice in to make her comfortable.

"I'm fine, just leave me alone," she tells the women who shift in and out of her house every eight hours. They whisper to each other in the hallway before exchanging places.

"Still won't eat?"

"No. Won't even sip water."

"That's so strange."

She likes the nurse on the afternoon shift the best because she's going through a divorce and sits on the couch watching daytime soap operas when she's supposed to be grabbing another blanket or washing her hands. She can tell she's getting divorced by the way she plays with her wedding finger in the thin pocket of her scrubs, slipping the ring on and then off again.

\*

Months later I lay sweating on a delivery table like a Thanksgiving turkey, body parts portioned out to whoever in the room is assigned to bend, hold, or invade them. A broad-shouldered nurse sits to my right and keeps patting my hand a little too viciously, "You're doing just great, hon." She squeezes my fingers every time I moan my way through a contraction and says things like, "Ooh, that one was a doozy" or "Now that wasn't too bad." I want to punch her and every one else in the room, but she's the only one there who looks me in the eyes.

\*

He was so angry when I told him I'd made the check out for \$329.82 for a new wardrobe of maternity clothes.

"What the hell do you think you're doing?" He grabbed my arm and pulled me into his office. I struggled to free myself from his grip and shove his arm back towards him.

"I'm doing what I want to do, and that's going through with this pregnancy."

"You don't dare. You can't raise a kid alone."

I turned and walked out of his office, shaking. "I won't have to," I whisper.

\*

"What can I get you, hon?" she asks me again and again, shaking her head and frowning. "More ice chips?"

I squeeze her hand till it shakes and pant, "Epidural."

"Ooh, sorry honey," she says reaching for a damp washcloth. Every time she blots my forehead it feels like she's taking a sledgehammer to my temples. "You're too far along, too dilated. Nothing to do now but have this baby," she smiles.

I push her hand away from my head and scream out of frustration. The other nurses in the room freeze and turn their backs from me. They think I can't hear them talking about me.

"We're just gonna have to do this the natural way, hon." The nurse smiles at me again as she resumes slapping my hand with more vigor.

\*

He reaches her at the showers and I see him move his hand to touch her waist and then slowly raise up her ribs to graze her damn fake implants. She giggles and grabs his hand but before I can see what is happening, another wave smacks at the nape of my neck and saltwater sprays in my eyes. By the time I've rubbed them clear, all I can see is the sun glinting off the water and familiar dancing inky spots. I rub them again and try to blink the saltwater away, but I can't see. My eyes are wet and everything is blurry. I choke on the water that splashes into my open mouth and try to pull my buried legs free from the weight of the sand before I sink completely.

\*

She hears the television in the living room cut to commercial and the afternoon hospice nurse reenters the dim bedroom carrying a juice glass filled with tap water. Dust particles flicker through the streams of sunlight that warm the room.

"I brought you a drink if you want to give it a try," the nurse says proffering the glass.

The old woman in the chair shakes her head and closes her eyes.

"Well, is there anyone you'd like to see? Someone we could call to come and see you before..." the nurse trails off.

"Before what?" the old woman asks, opening her eyes. The nurse can hear the dryness in her voice and stammers to think of something to say in response, when she sees the old woman smile.

"Don't worry, hon," she says and smiles. "I'm not sad. But let me tell you a story."

\*

"Can't I have some water," I beg, wiping my chin on my left hand. The sound of my episiotomy and the shearing pain made me cough up brown bile.

"Sorry, honey. But here's an ice chip," the nurse says shoving another piece into my mouth with her oversized hands. I suspect she just wants to keep me quiet.

\*

They'd taken him away while I delivered the afterbirth. I hear someone at the nurses' station across the hallway say, "Isn't she a little old to be giving a child up for adoption?" I laugh when I hear my big nurse call her a cow.

Every fifteen minutes my broad-shouldered nurse Anna, I'd finally asked her name,

## Fiction

---

comes back into the room and shoves her large hands down on my abdomen to squeeze out more blood clots. I feel like a used rag, crumpled and rubbed raw against a washing board, now spread out to dry. I feel wet and ornamental, propped up on countless thick pads.

Anna reenters the room carrying a huge hospital water bottle tinkling with ice. I grab the bottle and drink as much as I can. She sits beside me and pats my hand. Her touch is much more gentle than before.

“Kate, they wanna know if you’d be willing to breastfeed the child. You know, share the colostrum with him. It’ll help your uterus contract back to normal size.”

I shake my head and begin to cry. I don’t want to see him or breastfeed him. I don’t want to feel close to him, I just want him to melt into his new family. I hadn’t even looked at him when they’d placed him floundering on my stomach. Anna had made them take him away.

“It’s alright dear,” she said stoking my hair. “It’s alright.” She touches my chin and turns my face gently towards her. “I understand.”

\*

The hospice nurse wipes her eye. “You must have been scared,” she says pulling closer to me.

“I was,” I say and try to lick my lips with my dried tongue. —

## THIRD PLACE GRADUATE FICTION

### Beneath the Bleachers

by Robert Watkins

I had a dream the other night that somebody gave me new boots. They were brown. I laced up each latch, relishing in the taut shoelaces between my chapped fingers. I pulled them tighter and tighter until they were snug. Then I began to walk, no, stroll.

Each step I made elongated. I floated fifteen feet between each pace. I laughed and eased down to my classmates. I showed them my new boots as I bounced off walls. Most of them were delighted; maybe one or two were jealous.



“See a Different Side” by Melanie Woodford  
Second Place Undergraduate Art

Later, I showed my best friend. Her eyes sparkled. She was happy for me, I could tell. And then her face melted, the skin bubbling and cascading down her skull.

Hi, my name is Adriane. You probably don't notice me. Most people don't. Sometimes under the bright lights, you might see me wandering along, but it's not likely. My best friend is Lane, she's a year younger than me. We live beneath the bleachers.

Most of the time we wander, our toes pushing dirt and moving bits of trash. There's trash treasures under our stadium. At first, we collected familiar wrappers, they reminded us of home, after a while we grew tired of that. I catch Lane putting Snickers wrappers in her pocket sometimes, she tries to sneak it, but I see her do it.

I see all kinds of garbage. I've learned that most candy may contain peanuts. I'm not sure why they just don't come out and say whether they do or not. I've learned that phenylketoneurics should avoid most gum. I've learned that smoking may cause lung cancer. I've learned that when applied properly, condoms may prevent STDs. I've learned that I don't know what STDs are.

Sometimes we find weird things, like one time we found a paintball gun. Lane noticed it first. We brushed off the dirt like archeologists, and found a working paintball gun. Just no paintballs. We find a lot of mundane things too that wind up in our burial grounds. Things like socks, shoes, t-shirts, and pencils. Lots of pencils.

This is the life we've grown accustomed to. It's not bad really, I mean it's not fun either, but there could be worse. Sometimes, it's even nice. Especially during fall.

Not a lot of leaves make their way in our home, but when we they do we are happy. Lane makes necklaces of the golden and red corpses. She strings them with what we find in the dirt. One September afternoon the wind picked up. The wind blew memories of upcoming winters into everyone's hearts, but for me and Lane it blew piles of leaves. We threw them over our heads and gathered them into a pile. It wasn't that bad of a size either.

“There was this once,” Lane told me, “that Daddy and I built the biggest pile of leaves. He raked and raked and even let me help. We put them into a pile and Daddy threw me in. He laughed so hard. They were golden like summer, and red like blood.” Her smile faded then. We abandoned the leaves and went back to looking for garbage. Sometimes it's too hard to remember, so we try not to.

But aside from the leaves, fall means football. This is the happiest time of the year for Lane and me. Lane's dad played football in high school, so she has lots of memories of him taking her to this very stadium, where we now live. My dad might have played football too; I pretend that he did. Mom didn't talk about him much. Mom did take me here once. She bought me a hot dog and a soda pop. I always liked orange best, but they didn't have orange, so I got root beer. I think Mom got Diet Coke. She snuggled with me under a blanket while we watched the kickoff.

“Why does a helmet and pads have no ears?” I asked her.

“Why?” she smiled back.

“Cause it doesn't want to hear the foot ball,” I told her. I started to laugh and so did she. Mom thinks I am pretty funny. She squeezed me under the blanket and I bit off

## Fiction

a chunk of hot dog. I think I miss hot dogs the most.

Football comes, but we miss the smells. Sounds silly really, but have you ever realized how good it smells? The crispness of the air, sometimes chilly sometimes nostalgically warm. The sweat of the football players and the slightly older boys playing catch on the sidelines, dreaming of someday playing for the team. The hot dogs, like 7-11, only without the stale coffee and Clorox smell. When Lane fingers Snickers wrappers, she tells me she wishes she could smell one.

The lights cutting the night are delightful. They seem so warm. They beckon us in a way. The only time Lane and I come out is after a game. Swarms of high schoolers flirting on the tracks, while we stroll along, gazing into the light. Maybe you've seen us there, but probably not.

We like watching people's feet, visible through the spaces of metal on the bleachers. The worn Hush Puppies jumping up at the sight of an interception. The Velcroed, light-up shoes that pass between a mom and dad. Lots of kids come down here with us during the games. They get bored I guess. I would do anything to spend the football game with mom again. To sit next to her, feel her warm legs touching my ribs. Her crooked smile assuring me, while her stringy hair gets tugged by fall's breezes. She felt uncomfortable about her teeth, said they were ugly. I thought they were beautiful, smoking stains and all. She tried to quit all the time. I wonder if she finally did.

The kids come and play hide and seek amongst the steel pillars. They run past us. One time one of them saw me. Our eyes locked and I smiled. He smiled back. He said hello. I tried to answer. One thing you need to understand is it's not easy for Lane and me to talk down here. He walked away and I watched him leave. I wish I could have said something. Mom says "damn" a lot. Like, "I need to stop smoking these damn things." I felt like that word when I couldn't talk to that boy. It's not like he was way cute or anything. I just miss things.

One time Lane saw her dad. She yelled at me, "I think I see Daddy."

"Really?"

"Yeah, he's—yeah it's him! Daddy!" He couldn't hear her though; it's like I said. She showed him to me though. He was very handsome. I wished he were my dad too. I imagine my dad to be like him: tall, handsome, well-groomed beard. Sometimes Lane wonders if he is my dad, but I always remind her that I'm too pale. I don't look like my mom, that's for sure, but I'm not black. Lane remembers this, but then forgets again. Lane forgets a lot.

After that game, her dad came down under the bleachers for a minute. We watched him. He crept up a bit, Snickers bar in hand, and then walked off. Lane tried to

get his attention, but you know how it is. I guess he and Lane played under here after every game. It's probably pretty hard for him too, us living down here.

Mom's never shown up though. But, then, the football games were never that important to us, it was just that once. And that was the last time I ever saw her. I saw the kids playing underneath, and asked if I could join them. She told me I could. I ripped off the blanket and ran down as fast as I could. I never saw her again. I wish I hadn't come down here.

The only bad thing about football is that he comes around sometimes. The allure of the smells brings him back. When he comes Lane and I hide. Mom says not to hate anyone, but I think I might hate him. I said this to Lane once and she just looked at me.

"Well, donchu hate him too?" I asked.

"He makes me sad," she replied.

"Yeah, but I see how you shake when he comes down here."

"You can be sad about things you're afraid of, right?"

I didn't know, and still don't. But I hate that man. Lane is probably a better person than me, but she also lost consciousness faster. He wears mittens, those one-size-fits-all, stretchy kind. His hair is greasy and rests nauseously on his zitty forehead. He pulls the jacket around his ribs, smiling at the kids playing. Smiling at us, 'cept I don't think he sees us. He rests in the dirt and watches the cheerleaders and the football.

So does Lane. She says she wants to be a cheerleader. I'd rather play basketball. I'm pretty good too. Lane is very pretty, I think she would make a fine cheerleader. Don't tell her I said this, but I think cheerleaders are kind of annoying.

Spring isn't bad either. He never comes around in the spring, so that's nice; but we miss the people. Some come for track meets and things, but not nearly as many as for football. The bright sun shining on the track and blinding bystanders by the bleacher reflection is always nice. I remember spring sun: not too hot, but feels warmer than it really is after winter. A few dandelions emerge through the dirt under here. Lane picks them and keeps them in a batch. Not much else grows down here except moss. We don't. Lane still looks the same, and I think I do too. We've been down here for four or five football seasons now. Mom says I grow like a weed, but that's not true, because they at least grow under here sometimes.

Summer is nice because there's plenty of noise. Lane watches the groundskeeper sweat as he mows and mows and mows. I remember cut grass. That was always my favorite smell. You know how apples taste? Can you believe I never tried one? I always meant to, but had to convince mom I didn't like fruit. I'd do anything to try one now. Lane puts her fingers through the chain link fence and rests her chin on her forearms.

## Fiction

"I'm bored."

"Me too."

"What do you want to do?"

But there's no answer. We just sit here, beneath the bleachers, wishing somebody would find us. They don't. He was just too thorough. Lane thinks she might know where she is. I have no idea, I just can't remember. She pointed it out once to me. Seemed as good of a place as any.

"That's where he put me," she said, "I remember. If only daddy'd find me here, maybe I could go home."

"Who would I play with?" I asked.

"I don't know. You'd get pretty lonely?"

"I already am."

"Maybe Daddy could find us both."

Winter is the worst. It's not that it's cold, although I do remember how frigid I'd feel, walking home from school. It's just that there's nobody around. Just Lane and me. We try to guess when it's Christmas. The only time we ever knew was last year. That was when Lane's dad showed up again.

His boots trudged up blotches of snow as his gloved hand held his balance against one of the pillars. He had a doll in his hand. He held it there for a bit, holding it next to his chest. Then he put it on the snow. Lane and I watched. I think she started to cry, but she tried to hide it.

"Hey honey," he said, "I know you're not here. Probably I should be in the cemetery anyway, but that doesn't feel right, y'know? You're not there either."

I watched Lane.

"It's just that, I don't know, I miss you honey. I really do. I was sitting at home, Christmas morning, and I missed your laugh. You're probably too old for this doll anyhow, but...I don't know sweetheart. I'm sorry. I am." His voice cracked a little. "I never should have let you come down here by yourself." He smudged his cheek with his glove.

"Anyway, I'm seeing somebody. We met while trying to find you. I think you'd really like her. She lost her daughter too, lost her here. She's coming over for dinner. I don't know, this is silly."

He started to back up, bracing himself on the pillar. He walked away and towards the fence, towards his car. Lane followed him. He still had the same car. He turned around by the gate and whispered, "I love you sweetheart. Merry Christmas."

So we knew that was Christmas, which was nice. We get so disoriented here. Nobody much else comes during the winter. We pass the time remembering, but sometimes

that hurts too much. I doze a lot and have a lot of dreams. Lane doesn't remember hers, but I remember a lot of mine. I dreamt once that my mom brought me hot chocolate. She showed up holding the birthday mug she gave me on my last birthday, brimming over with hot cocoa.

"Drink up, Adriane."

"Mom?"

"Yes, sweetie?"

"Mom?" I started to cry. "I miss you Mommy, I want to come home."

"I know you do sweetheart." She wrapped that same blanket around me and held me close. I hugged her with all my force. There was no violence in that dream. I think that was probably my favorite dream.

Lane thinks her daddy's girlfriend is my mom.

"It makes sense, Adriane. Think about it."

"I just don't think so."

"Yes it does. He met her looking for me. She lost her daughter beneath the bleachers. It has to be."

I wanted it to be. I would love Lane as a sister; I told her so. She smiled and gave me a hug. I think she wouldn't mind either.

Sometimes in the spring, the high school boys come and run around the track naked at midnight. It's pretty funny, but it's really gross. Lane dared me to look once. I did. I couldn't see anything though, just hear them laughing as they ran, the sound of bare hands slapping buttocks echoing off the bleachers. We laughed. I'll close my eyes if they come back. Lane hopes they do.

But now it's winter. The wind is blowing snowdrifts around us. We watch them, trying to imagine what shape they're making. But our hearts aren't in it. We just want to go home. We just want football season again. We just want it to at least be spring. We'd even settle for the naked high school boys again. It's just lonely down here beneath the bleachers. Maybe you've seen us walking under the floodlights after a Homecoming game, wandering on the track. But probably not. —

## FIRST PLACE UNDERGRADUATE FICTION

### Superior

by Jeffrey Carr

I hate this place. I can't believe I got myself into a situation where I have to come back here—to Richards. I've been here before, but avoiding it has been pretty easy for me lately. And I certainly wasn't planning on coming here today, either. Sigh. But when a cute girl is sitting close to you on the couch with her hands separated on her lap, and the one nearest you is blatantly upturned on her thigh, what are you supposed to do? She knows darn well you can see it. You'd have to be blind not to. So yes, of course I grabbed it. My



“Passing—Logan Canyon” by Darren Edwards  
Third Place Graduate Art

friends would have made fun of me all night if I didn't. She had something different about her, also, that I haven't seen much of. It was good, though. Anyway, she said I looked fun. And then, of course, she wanted my number afterward so she could call me up and we could get together and do it all over again. That's when I found out she lives here. Man. Curse my innate sense of commitment. What would my friends say about this?

Our house is over in Tempe, not far from the law school. It's not that great. I had a friend who lived near here before they built the Richards development with the golf course and all. We used to catch lizards out in the field until his family had to move to make way for the 9th green. When I was 15, I got a job with my cousin as a groundskeeper for the new country club after school, but I never saw any more lizards. People from the brand new neighborhood would come in all the time, and I would scowl at them behind their backs. I've never played golf, but I've watched it a lot, and I definitely know to replace my divots and to never ever carry my bag onto the green.

So now I'm on the brink of a relationship I don't want to be in, with a girl from the Landing, of all places. Richards Landing is the gated community on the east end of the course. It's the epitome of my greatest resentments, but here I am pulling up to the sentry as if I come here all the time. No doubt this girl's shallow. We just barely met that one night, and I barely even know her, but I can guess. I know Richards. RICHARDS. It's the ultimate stereotypical perfect mega-upper class development, where everyone has a pool and a tan and nice Hollister clothes assembled by poor starving children like me. I make it a point to lock my 1990 Nissan Stanza, even though it's the only car more than three-years-old within sight, and I have absolutely nothing of value inside.

I don't know what I'm going to say to get out of this little dilemma. I definitely don't need to hurt anyone's feelings, but I do need to let her down somehow. Make it quick and easy. On her end, she's going to expect something. There she is, waiting near the front door. That's a bad sign. She could at least pretend like she's busy with something. Well, now it's awkward. Honestly, she is pretty, though, I guess—if you're into that sort of thing. In my mind, Jon Bon Jovi gives me a hearty pat on the back and a thumbs-up for scoring that, at least. I'm sure he's better at this sort of thing. I force a calm, but excited “Hey!” and walk straight into her arms. She offers an almost imperceptible squeeze, followed by a genuine smile.

“Hi!” She sure is happy to see me. It's not like she did anything wrong, per se, in holding my hand. I mean, it's not like I blame her. She just doesn't know how much I loathe her kind.

As she finishes up with the quick house tour, my ok-with-everything face must look more convincing than it feels. I draw attention away from my true convoluted feelings with feigned excited conversation about trivial things—like how I wholeheartedly support the recent proliferation of re-sealable bags for things like cookies and cheese. “I've been waiting years for that,” I say. I'm surprised nobody can tell it's all an act... Her siblings seem nice. They're definitely clean. There are two slightly younger ones, a girl and a boy—twins, probably—and an even smaller girl. She's cute. The twins drag her away after slipping out themselves, in order to give us our privacy and make it easier for me to blow it

## Fiction

again. I will not kiss her, I tell myself, and strangely, I don't even want to. That's too much. Even my carnal self can tell it wouldn't lead to anything good. Then I'd just have to keep coming back.

This place looks more like the Richards clubhouse than any house on my street. It even smells fake. I tell her it's nice, trying half-heartedly to conceal my disgust, or jealousy, or whatever. While she hops to the TV and puts in a movie, I strategically position myself on the white leather couch close enough to her seat so that when she returns, I don't send the wrong impression right off, but not so close as to make excessive contact inevitable. Man! I should be really happy about this. I dream about situations like this all the time—just me and a girl and a semi-decent movie to curl up to together under the blanket. I haven't been with a girl in months, and I've come dangerously close to lowering my physical standards on a couple of occasions, but the honest truth is that I never had an opportunity as golden as this one, even if it is with a stuck-up rich girl.

Her name is Betsy, which fact I've intentionally failed to mention, because—come on, she's like 18. The only other people I know with that name are probably old enough to know who Richards is, or was. Betsy seems to have overcome the geriatric nature of her name pretty well, though. A single glance at her perfectly smooth, toned, country club arms reveals nary an ounce of fat. She's quite shapely. A good portion of her long, streaked hair rests in a ponytail, and that coupled with the casual air about her proclaim immediately that she's an athlete. Actually, to be exact, if I recall, she's a lacrosse player. Heh-heh. Lacrosse.

Wait! No! No thinking! The more I think about her, watching her out of the corner of my eye, the more I realize that she is a pretty good catch—at least physically. But the last thing I need is to get attached. Better do something. Twenty minutes into the movie, I suddenly bring my knee up and around and spin out away from Betsy, facing her on the couch. A playful smile starts across her face as she hangs waiting for my next move, and it takes everything in me not to notice. I could pounce right now, and she'd be down for it. I restrain and refocus my efforts, realizing that she's still waiting for something. I have nothing to say, but before I have a chance to stop it, something comes out anyway. "Let's go for a drive!" Hmm. A chance to talk, not progress further, and above all, leave this wretched place. Turns out, that's actually a pretty good idea. I wish for a second that I would have thought of that myself, and then realize I did.

"You mean after the movie?" asks the rich girl.

"No, I'm falling asleep." I lie, although too much longer in front of Weekend at Bernie's would have indeed yielded that result. This is perfect proof that being wealthy doesn't necessarily correlate with being cultured after all. "Let's go now... maybe you can teach me how to play lacrosse."

Minutes later we're outside the city winding through the Arizona desert at well over the speed limit. Betsy is cradling her lacrosse stick, and is passing the end with the head back and forth between her hands, the other end pivoting on the mat between her flip-flopped feet. There's another, cheaper stick for me, along with a ball, in the back seat. "Where are we going?" she asks. I tell her it's a surprise, which is true. I'm interested to find out myself. All I know is that I need to be in a friendlier environment. The car finishes a drawn-out deep breath, exhaling as the road straightens out, causing our speed to rise fluidly and naturally until we're going 90. The mountains ahead in the distance don't seem to be getting any closer, though. The wide expanse of nothing is mesmerizing. I've always loved the desert. Such a feeling of liberty exists. Freedom from expectations. Sky goes on forever unassuming, and red plateaus rise up that have probably never even been completely walked by man. It reminds you of why you tolerate the heat. It gets up to 120 degrees in the daytime sometimes, but still it's all worth it if you chance to be outside late at night to taste the desert breeze. At this point in the evening, the dry heat still pounds pretty hard. Hopefully I'll be alone by the time the breeze comes, so I can fully enjoy it. Fleeting sinister thoughts tempt me to leave her out here somewhere, alone. Would she even survive?

Betsy hasn't lived in Phoenix very long, so I'm sure she doesn't know the local highways too well. In the beige summer night, she probably has no idea we're heading east on Highway 60 to New Mexico. I realize that it's a good thing this girl likes me, or so it seems, because she doesn't seem too concerned about the fact that we're now thirty miles from home and still going. I really thought she'd be more worried by now. I would be. I guess she gets whisked out into the desert by strange men all the time... hmm... I try not to carry that thought any further. I still don't know where we're going—or really even why, for that matter. We drive a few more miles in silence. Soon, Betsy removes her thin, gray cotton jacket and drapes it over her bare knees, then finds the lever and eases the seat back, all the while watching the portion of the expanse of stars available through the closed sunroof. If she's bothered by the heat at all, this is the extent of her reaction. It's starting to get to me more and more. The racket of driving with an open sunroof or windows would wreck the serenity of the desert, though, and the air conditioning just wastes gas. I'm starting to sweat. She seems just fine, though, interestingly enough, which kind of bothers me. Her display of confidence all evening long has had a draining effect on mine. I open my mouth in an attempt to regain control, though again, with nothing in particular to say. The words come from the girl's mouth instead.

"What's on your mind?" The question catches me off guard.

"What?"

I stutter around for a second, and Betsy continues. "You seem nervous tonight."

## Fiction

What's going on? I promise I won't leave you out here in the desert alone." That's ironic. How can she be so confident? She thinks she's in charge of this whole operation. She must have seen me sweat. What nerve. I want to tell her off, but decide it best not to make a scene right now. I don't know where I would even begin, anyway.

"There's a park out here I really like with a good view of the city. I thought we could toss the ball around there," I lie for at least the second time tonight, then quickly change the subject, launching into a whimsical story of a recent experience my friend had with a girl who was stalking him at work. We trade a couple more similar anecdotes, and I feel a little more at ease after laughing some. She runs through the basics of lacrosse with me: all the positions on the field, elementary strategy, and some other things, and I'm not really listening. Girls aren't even allowed to hit each other with their sticks, evidently, which she says makes the game prettier than men's lacrosse. Doesn't make much sense to me, though. I like to see a good hammering.

For the first time tonight, I make a conscious effort to push money to the back of my mind, but only until I notice the fuel gauge. Unbelievable. We've driven a lot longer than I thought. Now miles from anything, we're about to run out of gas. I sure didn't take any of this into account when I left home tonight.

Green highway signs pass by with greater meaning now. Sixteen miles to Superior. That's not too bad. Surely there's gas there. I tell Betsy we need to be stopping off, without mentioning how low we actually are. She says that's fine, she needs something to eat anyway. My hands grip the wheel tighter as I will my little Nissan along. What a disaster it would be to putter to a stop on the side of the road at this point—the middle of the night in the middle of the desert. We've even got the dashing young protagonist and token blonde girl. Sounds like a horror movie. One of us would have to die.

As it turns out, the horror is wasted on anticipation, and we make the sixteen miles just fine. Not only is there gas, but a decent-sized Chevron truck stop right there off the exit, even before the town itself. I pull up to the pump, step out, and bend backward at the waist, letting out a barbaric groan as my muscles ease back to their rightful functions. I've had a lot building up inside me. Betsy's already inside as I proudly select my regular unleaded and insert the pump. She's back in the pastry section itching her stomach, brooding over what to get. "Are you hungry?" she calls over the midjet aisles as the bell signifies my entry. I sure am, but I'm barely going to have enough to pay for gas as it is. I tell her I don't think I should, and she offers to buy a box of jelly donuts, for she must eat.

There's no way I'm going to let her pay for anything. This is a date! I tell her I'll take care of it, that I don't need money, and she shrugs, thanks me, and sets the box on the counter. "This and fuel?" asks one of the greasiest cashiers I have ever seen. He's got a

short-sleeved black shirt that I think has every single condiment from the hot dog counter impressed somewhere between the threads. I'd rather touch that than his slicked-back hair, though. Something tells me it's not gel. I nod in affirmation at his question and try my hardest not to look surprised when he mumbles the total—\$45.35. My entire mechanism comes to a halt. The cashier stares ahead into space unabashed as I shift my weight to the left to free up my favorite pocket. How I hate him so. I reach for my wallet as slowly as ever, knowing full well that there's not nearly enough cash in there, regardless of the absence or presence of donuts. Still half in shock with the most perfect possible shame ready to burst out of me, I fumble in my wallet and stall. Peripherally, I see Betsy fluidly reach into her handbag, produce a credit card, and pass it to the cashier. She's careful not to touch his hand, just in case. "No!" I blurt out desperately, louder than expected. "Don't even think about it."

"Well, what are you going to do, then?" she pleads. For the first time since I've known her, a lilt manifests itself in her voice. "You already pumped the gas!" Completely defeated, I lower my head, nod, and return the tattered wallet to my shorts. Without a word, we walk separately out of the gas station and toward the car. I plop back down into the driver's seat and figure that at this point, the night can't get any worse. Before my better judgment gets the best of me, the speech I'd been subconsciously preparing for years comes out all at once.

"So, now you know what it feels like to date a poor guy, I guess. Congratulations..." I hesitate, but not to think. "You know, it's not like that's the last of my money or anything. I just didn't plan on needing so much tonight. So now I guess you can go back to Richards and tell all of your really hot, perfect friends by the pool, while... while I'm working my butt off, how you were so generous to this guy. You saved his life." I stop short when my voice starts to tremble. It didn't come out like I thought it would. Betsy had previously begun to slide her thumb under the flap of the donut box to open it, but now it's sitting still on her lap.

Just then, it came to me what it was that I saw in her the other day, and liked. It was innocence. Staring dead ahead, I reach up and force my key into the ignition. The two other keys on the ring slap in turn against my pocketknife, which dull clank resonates through the car, the only sound to be heard.

"Wait... Is that what's bothering you? Ben!!!" She pleads. She didn't deserve that at all. "First of all, I won't be lying by the pool with anyone but my family anytime soon. I don't have that many friends in Richards. Some people there are pretty cool, but it's not like we all just hang out with each other all the time and bash on the rest of the world! Besides, I don't have time for that, because I work all mornings and afternoons at Sugar Bowl. I work a lot, Ben." She's a lot calmer about her speech than I was about mine, but

## Fiction

she still needs a pause to summon up the words. “People treat me differently sometimes, but I’ve never done anything to deserve it. It’s like they expect me to be arrogant. I envy you if you don’t have to worry about that. You can be normal.”

“Well, you sure didn’t seem to want to touch that cashier more than necessary.” At this point, even I don’t agree with what I’m saying, but it’s my last-ditch effort to save face.

“Did you see him?” Her voice rises more than before. “You’re not in the same category as him, Ben, that’s not how it works... besides, his issue had nothing to do with money. He was disgusting... shampoo’s not that expensive. I think I saw some in back by the Tums.”

I’m not really in the mood for humor right now. I’m still just trying to process what’s going on. I turn the key, pleased that I’m not disgusting, but more embarrassed than anything, and we pull out of the parking lot. In attempt to defray the awkwardness of the situation, I continue on eastward toward Superior. Betsy rolls down her window, takes a jelly donut from the box and flings it out into the desert with frustration and remarkable accuracy, assuming she was aiming for mile marker #223. Reddish-purple gelatin obscures the last digit as we pass. “There’s no park or anything out here, is there?” she asks.

“Not that I know of.”

“All right. I’ve got an idea,” she starts, a second later, a gleam in her eye, “Let’s go back to the city.” At the first opportunity, I obediently point the car down the highway in the opposite direction, and we’re on our way.

Well, this night is over. Or it would be, if there wasn’t an awkward hour and a half between us and home. That’s even worse. Neither of us really knows what to say, I think, so I turn on the radio and start to sing along to R.E.M. under my breath. That’s me in the corner. That’s me in the spotlight, losing my religion. “You have a nice voice,” she offers. My body spasms as she suddenly joins me in song. She will receive no such compliments. Twenty minutes and five songs later, we’re screeching loudly to the music, our mouths full of jelly donut. Music. Of course. As it turns out, we both have a particular soft spot for 90’s rock. Just outside of Globe, my heart jumps with excitement as I register the inner realization that she hasn’t been aware of my internal thoughts all evening long. There was only that one childish outburst. Other than that, I’ve tried to keep my snide comments to a minimum, and thank goodness for that. I marvel that I might actually be able to salvage my dignity after all, and then that Aerosmith song from “Armageddon” comes on and I promptly forfeit that hope at the top of my lungs.

We have more in common than I previously thought. I find out that her parents moved to the desert from Colorado a couple years ago when her dad landed a huge job with America West. He works hard too. She earned a scholarship to play lacrosse for

ASU, and she’s planning on signing up for fall classes. I should go to college. More than anything, she wants to be an elementary school principal. I haven’t decided what I want to do with my life. I tell her I just want to be rich, and we share a nervous laugh. Betsy wriggles down in her seat belt, flicks off her flip-flops, and places her feet up on the far right corner of the dash. I’m not speeding anymore, but we make it back to the city in what seems like half the time it took to drive out to Superior. It’s a sad realization.

“Where to, ma’am?” I ask, approaching the city, withholding my disappointment when she suggests heading back to Richards. We eventually exit the freeway and wind wordlessly and slowly through the suburbs until we reach the famed neighborhood’s front gate. Being already after 1:00am, the guard has left, and Betsy tells me the code to lift the arm, allowing us in. We take simultaneous deep breaths, notice each other, and laugh.

With a nod, I reach up and open the sunroof as she strains for her lacrosse stick in the back seat. She unbuckles her seatbelt, and I steal a glance at her tanned legs on the seat beside me, her top half now above and outside the vehicle. We pass house after huge house and lawn after perfectly trimmed lawn and reach the back of the neighborhood along the golf course. Richards looks so peaceful at this time of night, with everyone snug in their huge down comforters on their therapeutic mattresses. These people have had it coming for a long time. Suckers. Now there’s not a sound to be heard in any direction, except for the slow procession of the Nissan and the satisfying splat as soft jelly donut meets stucco at 40 miles an hour. She looks so serene up there. The ease of motion with which she snaps her stick makes her appear as a beautiful weapon designed especially for this. When all is said and done, it’s a perfect eight donuts for eight houses, including Betsy’s own, so as to avoid suspicion.

“Are you tired?” she asks me, her entire body now returned to the passenger seat. The girl brushes the excess glaze from her fingers and licks the rest.

“After that? No.” I answer, truthfully and confidently. “Not the slightest bit, actually... uh, do you want to go back to my place? It’s not much, you know. I mean, we do have food, though—that is, if you’re still hungry...”

“Sure. I could go for something. Let’s get out of here.”

We exit Richards a little more quickly than we entered, and toss the empty donut box into the stucco-encased dumpster on the way out. Betsy’s buckled up now as if nothing happened, but the sunroof is still open, and the nighttime desert breeze pitches her hair back as it floods in.

# Fiction

## SECOND PLACE UNDERGRADUATE FICTION

### In Heaven

by Annie Daines

We were lying on his bed next to each other. Usually Mark was careful to keep his physical distance, but I guess we were both tired that night. He was talking about his job and our friends at the coffee shop. I thought about how everything he said seemed to have a special meaning because he was dying.

“Everyone is dying, Mia.”

I just smiled and wondered how he always knew what I was thinking. I stared at the ceiling. There were these swirls that seemed to bump into each other. I imagined that they were twirling balls of light and that God couldn’t keep them from bumping into each other because there were too many of them. “Do you believe in him?”

“In who?”

“In God.”

“I don’t think it matters.”

“But where will you be when you . . .”

“Not here. I won’t be here. God is the thing you can’t control or know. He’s the thing you wish for when you don’t know what it is you want.”

“I know what I want.”

“Or when you can’t have what you want.”

“Mark, if you didn’t have AIDS, we’d be in love wouldn’t we?”

He didn’t smile. He got that look, where his eyes have loss in them. I am always amazed at how he faced his losses head on, not flinching. Neither of us said anything for awhile. “I guess we are in love, Mia.” He said it so quietly I almost thought I had imagined it. I turned toward him. “I love you, Mark.”

“I love you too.”

That night I wished Mark would kiss me. He didn’t though. We never touched, except to brush our hands against each other by accident.

She loves me. I thought it over and over, lying so close to her that I could feel the mattress move when she breathed. Am I supposed to laugh or cry? I wanted to yell at God. It had been hard finding out that I had AIDS, but it didn’t come close to finding out that Mia loved me. If I was a stronger person I would have left months ago, when I met her, but that would have meant starting all over again in a new place, and I needed to have friends



“Forgotten Fairytale” by Simone Suddreth  
Third Place Undergraduate Art

## Fiction

around me. So there I was, lying on the bed with her, talking . . . and laughing . . . and living, damn it. I had never felt as alive as I did in those moments.

We didn't notice how much time was passing until she had already missed the bus. She fell asleep there next to me. I don't think I slept at all, I just stared at her long, dark curls and her hand cupped over her elbow. She was so peaceful.

What can I tell you about that night? I tried to think of a way to keep her from getting hurt, but mostly I just felt. I had gained so much, a peace that she had just shattered, an ability to live a terminal life, an appreciation for life that only a dying person can have, and Mia's love. The truth is, I was powerless. There was nothing I could do. She loved me. She would get hurt. She'd have to learn to live without me whether I left her now, or if she had to bury me. What could I give her that would be worth that pain? Why didn't she turn from me the way that my mother and my friends at home had?

\*

There were other nights. We were hungry for time together. We barely noticed the rest of the world changing from summer to fall. There wasn't time. We walked everywhere, moving fast across the ground until we remembered that he . . .

Then we would walk so slow we barely moved at all, and we'd stare at everything, the couples and families, the leaves on trees, the moss growing slowly over bricks. I wanted the world so much more, now that I loved him.

One time the clerk at a grocery store asked me if my husband would mind helping her lift some boxes. There was an awkward moment. I'm sure she'll never understand the look on my face. It must have been pain mixed with horror mixed with some kind of happiness, because Mark was mine. We belonged together and everyone could see it. No one could see the AIDS.

\*

Mia and I were so happy. I would like to say that at times we almost forgot that I was dying, but we didn't. Somehow we learned to live around it. It was a secret thing between us, a lover's secret. Our friends that didn't know expected us to get married. Our friends that did know tried to pretend that Mia was just another friend.

\*

I was the one who kissed Mark. We were standing in the back of the coffee shop and it was phenomenal. I had heard people say that when they kissed they felt sparks of electricity. I had always thought that the electricity came from physical attraction, from lust, and maybe it did, but love isn't always just a feeling. Our kiss was forbidden, and that heightened our senses. When I kissed Mark, I felt a surge of electricity spin into my lips, down into my stomach and up my back. I thought he would be mad. I thought he would fight

me or turn away, but he seemed to understand. He kissed me back, and he put his hand on the small of my back, right where I had felt that electric shock a moment before.

\*

Kissing Mia was so natural, it was like breathing. I guess when you feel so strongly about someone it is only natural to express it with your body. We had been lovers for a long time without touching each other, but we both knew what we were. I had an acidic taste in my mouth afterwards. It must have been the guilt.

I had to leave.

Once, long before I met Mia, I went to an AIDS support group. One of the long-time members said something I've never forgotten. She took me aside and said, "I know what kind you are. You look around you and see that you are dying, so you live. Don't you turn away from life just because it ain't fair. You'll only lose the thing you have." I had tried so hard to live. In every day there is a beauty that fills even the cheapest sort of existence. I could live with that, and enjoy it, and appreciate that I was still alive to appreciate it. But Mia wasn't the cheap kind of existence. She was velvet and sunsets. She was all the layers of flavor in the best kind of wine. How could I not turn away from her? There was so much more at stake with Mia.

And her lips were so smooth. They had the texture of warmth. She moved in response to me. Our kiss was both of us mixing up who we were together. But I was AIDS.

She kissed me and I had AIDS. She could die from kissing me. I let her choose to love me. I let her risk her life.

So I had to turn away. I had to leave.

\*

In every other relationship I have had there has been a kind of fear of what might happen. I was always worried about getting hurt. I gave up my love slowly, piece by piece, carefully watching the boy's hand as he held a piece of me, to see if he would hurt me. With Mark it was different. It was like I never had to worry about what he would do to me. I just trusted him and handed over everything I was.

Then I found out he had AIDS.

\*

The day I told her I had AIDS, it was raining. We had accidentally met at the bar on Queen's street the night before. But I knew it wasn't an accident. I was a regular at the bar and I had never seen her there before, and the bar was mostly for gay men. I went to it because my friend, Lyle, was the bar tender, and because I didn't have to worry about women that I couldn't take home. Lyle was the one that had convinced me to move to Seattle originally, and he was the only person that I knew in the city when I moved here. I

## Fiction

felt comfortable with Lyle's friends I had met here over the last year. It seemed to me that I didn't need to tell them that I had AIDS, because it wasn't a sin to have this disease among them.

After Mia left, Lyle sat at my table. He had a serious air that wasn't like him. "She's falling for you man, you're gonna have to tell her." So the next day I asked her to take a walk with me. She smiled and the corners of her eyes crinkled, "In the rain? I'd love to."

We walked down to a bridge I had found with a bench hidden under it. Not even the bums noticed it because there was grass growing so tall that you couldn't see the bench, and the water leaked through the rest of the bridge so it didn't really protect you from the rain unless you sat in exactly the right spot. I remember her laugh as I showed her the bench. She had told me before that she loved secret places.

\*

He didn't laugh or even smile. He looked so serious as he took my arm and motioned for me to sit down. The rain had settled into a slow drizzle. It was like a thin layer of dirty glass and it bent the light so that everything but us seemed blurred.

"I have something I have to tell you. I feel like I might have led you on and if I have, I am so sorry. I never meant to hurt you."

It sounded like the usual speech at first, but then he said it.

\*

Just three words. They were so hard to say though. "I have AIDS." I had said it to the mirror that morning, but the mirror didn't look like I had punched it in the stomach.

\*

I don't remember the rest of that day. I only remember the feeling of rain sliding off my cheeks. "I didn't tell you before because, well, I haven't told anyone and I don't want them to know. I don't want to be the AIDS boy."

I could have decided right then and there not to love him, I suppose. It never occurred to me though. I loved him because that was who I was. By telling me he had AIDS all it did was make things real. Instead of having that giddy, carefree, happy feeling that comes when you first notice that you are in love and that he loves you back, we skipped right through to the knowing.

I cherished him.

\*

The next day I saw her at the bookshop. She didn't know that I was working that day. I watched her from between the classics and the cooking aisle, so she couldn't see me. She seemed light, as if she was floating and her hair made a sort of loose halo around her face. As she ran her fingers along the binding of the books, it was as if she barely even

touched them.

She was like that for a long time after I told her. It was as if she wasn't in the world anymore. I was painfully aware of the world though.

When I found out I had AIDS I felt cheated. I went skydiving because that is what I was supposed to do. I thought about taking all my savings and going to Europe. But I didn't. In the end I realized that I had borrowed someone else's dream for awhile so that I wouldn't have to face losing mine. All I had ever really wanted out of life was to get a steady job and have a family.

My doctor told me that it was probably best if I just tried to live my life as if everything were normal until I actually started getting sick. So I moved to Seattle, where no one knew I was sick, and got a job at This Little Bookshop, which is where I met Mia and it felt like I was losing everything that I had ever wanted all over again.

When I held a cup of coffee in my hand that day, I wished it would burn me. It hurt to touch the covers of the books as I put them on the shelves. It hurt to watch a mother with her little boy, shopping for bedtime stories. The gentle sound of the rain sliding off the windows of the store hurt my ears. The sunshine breaking through the clouds burned. Everything around me that I had built up, to help me appreciate the life I did have, seemed worthless, and it hurt me to associate with it.

\*

Loving Mark was easier for me than it was from him. Moments were all we had. I loved him freely because the end of the story was already written and it didn't matter what happened.

\*

It happened on another late night. She was cuddled up next to me in my bed.

"Don't you understand that I can't live without you? I don't want to. I won't."

"I know and I'm so sorry for taking that from you. I'm so sorry."

"No." The sting of her slap was gentle compared to how hurt she was. I hated myself then.

"I won't lay here and listen to you apologize for this. I chose you. You have taught me to live. I'd never have that without you."

"But you'll die if you love me like this."

"I'll die anyway."

"No. You won't. You'll live a long life. You'll remember me and you'll live. Maybe you'll be able to forget me after awhile."

A sob escaped her lips and she shook her head, "No no no no no. . ."

"You'll live a long life and when you cry it will be deeper and when you laugh it will

# Fiction

be deeper, you'll find him, whoever I stole you from, and you'll have children, and you'll go to college, and you'll write your books, and do everything that you planned on doing before you met me."

"I didn't know who I was before I met you. I wasn't going to write books. I was scared of writing."

"But now you will. I love you, Mia, this how I love you, this is the only thing I can do for you."

"But it isn't about me. It's about us. I need it to be about us. I need you to be more than a memory for me, Mark. I can't live with only memories. I can't touch them. They don't make me laugh, or think. You need me too. This is who we are. You can't run from it any more than you can run from God." —



"Strawberry Ranch" by Darren Edwards  
Honorable Mention Graduate Art

## THIRD PLACE UNDERGRADUATE FICTION

### Doing Something

by Torrie Fedor

Kaylee Olsen  
How-To Paper

#### How To Break A Heart

1. Ask the shy-looking curly-haired brunette in the turquoise dress with puffy sleeves to dance with you at senior prom. Leave your own date eating cheesecake at the corner table.
2. Kiss puffy-sleeve girl outside under the moonlight, hugging her so tight you crush her corsage and make a trail of petals like Hansel & Gretel out to the back parking lot.
3. Decide to get married a year out of high school, when she accidentally (on purpose) gets pregnant with a too-serious, dark-eyed baby.
4. Make and have babies #2 and 3.
5. Start working later hours, coming home only to fight about car payments, your differing parenting styles, and why you never say anything pleasant when you come home after a long day of fixing overflowing toilets and dripping faucets.
6. Come home smelling like beer and someone else's perfume, and argue about your dying sex life on your oldest daughter's birthday, while she hides in her bedroom closet and tries to drown out the yells amid the cotton shirts on hangers.
7. Have the 24-year-old bank teller from down the street (with the permanently-broken dishwasher) emerge from your bedroom, her ponytail falling down over her eyes, as your family is just getting home from your son's soccer game.
8. Have a quiet talk the next morning with your wife and make her cry.
9. Pack the ugly green 1970s suitcases full of your books, suits, and sci-fi movies, stacking them all by the front door in a neat pyramid.
10. Give each of your kids a kiss, and lie about coming back.

# Fiction

Mrs. Brown removed her gold-framed glasses when she had finished reading aloud, and looked at my mother with curious eyes. “Well, it’s not quite what I expected when I told the students to write a how-to paper. But as you can see, Kaylee has an extraordinary linguistic talent for a 12-year-old.”

My mother simply said “Yes,” not looking at Mrs. Brown or me, but instead at the loud black and white clock with large numbers that hung high up on the wall above the bulletin board displaying our latest poetry project. I could see my poem about a burning Christmas tree right in the center, a “Brilliantly done!” adorning the top.

“Mrs. Olsen?” Mrs. Brown said, “I think Kaylee...”

“It’s Miss Riley, actually,” my mother interrupted, calm.

Mrs. Brown started shuffling papers on the desk, the corner of her lips puckering up, like a rag doll’s. Silence reigned for another moment, as Mrs. Brown polished a spot from her reading glasses with the corner of her grey sweater. She glanced around at the empty rows of desks, as if mentally straightening them. Then she said, “I was wondering if I could speak to you alone, Miss Riley.”

My mother focused her eyes on me, then flicked them over to the door. I took the hint and walked out to the hall, my chin down, shutting the classroom door behind me. I walked down to the drinking fountain at the other end of the hall, listening to my sandals thump against the stained carpet, tempted to run away and hide at the nearest Chevron until all this had blown over. I knew what they were saying in there about me—I could imagine their voices in grown-up whispers discussing my psycho-ness. I bet myself a whole pizza that the teacher would bring up therapy. As if a shrink could tell me anything I didn’t already know. As if I could be cured with a fake-calm voice. I would know—my mother’s been trying to use that tactic for months.

I took my time at the drinking fountain, bobbing my head up and down like a bird as I took short gulps of the water that tasted like it had come from a bathroom sink. I looked out the doors at the deserted playground outside, the rusted swings hitting against each other with the wind.

The classroom door opened at the other end of the hall and my mother emerged, clutching her purse to her chest with one hand and holding my essay and grade report with the other. Her eyes stared straight ahead, and we didn’t speak the rest of the way home. I cursed myself for writing that stupid essay in the first place and wondered why I hadn’t written about something expected—“How To Make Orange Juice,” “How To Make a Bed.” But seeing my mother unlock our front door, her mouth stretched tight like a rubber band, I knew there was no turning back.

\*

*Kaylee Olsen*

*Notes for Dr. Whitaker for Session 2*

*Things That Make Me Sad:*

- When snow covers the emerging green spikes of the crocuses*
- Throwing away grapes just because they’re tiny or wrinkly*
- My brother killing the grasshoppers in our front garden*
- The girl in my class who walks like she’s broken*
- Christmas*
- When the only cracker left in the package is in pieces*
- Ice cream in the winter*
- The Easter lilies on our fireplace*
- A pencil that’s so sharp that it breaks when you push down on it*

Dr. Whitaker’s eyes scanned the torn-out sheet of paper, mumbling under his breath and occasionally popping out a wheezy “Hmph.” He had the smallest ears I’d ever seen, shown off to their greatest advantage by his three-strand comb-over. I consciously relaxed my jaw, making sure the corners of my lips were turned up into a smile as he looked up at me, his straight yellow teeth bared into a grin. “Why don’t you tell me a little bit more about the things on your list, Kaylee?” he said.

“Well, you told me to make a list of some things that make me sad. So I wrote down the first things that came to mind,” I said, the smile never leaving my face. I knew exactly what he wanted to hear so that he could shove me into some crazy group therapy session for disturbed teens (okay, disturbed almost-teens), but I wasn’t about to give it to him.

“Let’s talk about this first one here, uh, snow covering the crocuses. Why does that make you sad?”

I can go with the real reason. That won’t reveal too much. Except I’ll feel really dumb saying it. “Well, I just think it’s hardly fair that as soon as the crocuses get enough sun and heat to grow, the stupid snow just comes in again and covers them all up.”

“Ah, I see. And what do you think you could do to help yourself feel better about this?”

I blushed. “Well, I just stop and brush off all the snow every time I pass them. You know, make it a little bit easier.”

His eyes seemed to laugh for a moment. “That’s a good idea. You also said here that Christmas makes you sad, as well as snow in the spring and ice cream in the winter. Tell me now, do you often feel more sad in the winter than you do in the summer?”

Doesn’t everyone? I had no idea where he was going with this. This was probably

# Fiction

some trick to try and get me to admit that the reason I hated Christmas was because my mom cried when she thought all of us were asleep, because my dad had forgotten to send a Christmas present for the second year in a row. Or at least that was what happened last Christmas. The year before that we hadn't even bothered to put up a tree. My brother and sister had asked why, but my mom just shook her head and mumbled something about not having enough money. They stopped asking when she would clench her teeth and order us to do our chores whenever we mentioned anything to do with the holiday. No, I couldn't talk about that. Then he would tell my mother and she would sigh and get quiet and then try to get me to talk about it and then later she'd cry in bed while she thought I was asleep. "Sure, I guess. We don't have school in the summer and all." That sounded like a normal answer, didn't it?

"Why don't you tell me a little bit more about why you don't like Christmas?" he said, scratching the tuft of hair just above those small ears. I imagined his fingers covered in old-people dandruff, and the smile went off my face.

Ha! I knew it. How am I going to answer this one? I don't want to have to come to these stupid sessions anymore in this stupid room and sit on this stupid armchair smelling the stupid wet-snow-boot smell in here. In church, I remembered the minister always telling us about how we should think of the poor people around Christmas. It always made me think of the old men I saw hanging around parks at night and what they would probably do to me if I tried to give them a blanket or a bag of canned food. Kidnap me, maybe? Hold me for ransom? Dr. Whitaker sniffed and pulled out a dirty looking Kleenex from his pocket. I diverted my attention from his sniffing and concentrated on the shelves in the corner, wondering why he had so many unlabeled VHS tapes. Was I being recorded? "Well, Christmas makes me sad because I think of all the poor people outside in the cold with no blankets or food. I know that I hate snow, and so I guess I think it would be hard to be stuck outside with no choice," I said finally.

He looked at me in disbelief, then forced those yellow teeth back into a smile. "I feel sad about that too," he said, scribbling down some notes. "Now tell me this, do you feel more tired when it's snowing or cloudy outside than when it's sunny outside? Do you not want to play as much or do your homework?" he asked, tapping his pen against his chin as he studied me.

Why is he asking me this? This doesn't have anything to do with mom or dad or why I hate Christmas or school. "Well, um, sure, I guess," I finally said when the silence started to feel awkward. To draw his eyes away from me, I pointed to the framed photograph of two dorky-looking boys on his desk and asked if that was his family. My heart slowed down and I could finally think of other things as I half-listened to him tell me that he had a son my age who went to a different school and maybe someday I would meet him and blah blah blah.

He talked for 20 more minutes, almost to the end of the session, then said, "Kaylee, I think you might have a special condition that makes you more sad in the winter than in the summer. I'm going to call your mother in here and talk to her privately for a minute. This week I want you to get outside more and play more with friends. You're a bright girl, and I think a little play and exercise would make you feel happier." The way he said it reminded me of my mother when she explained things to my 6-year-old sister. I mumbled a goodbye as I pulled on my black mittens and walked out to the lobby. I had obviously answered the questions wrong.

\*

George Whitaker, M.D.  
Child & Teen Counseling Services  
Springfield, MO

Name: Kaylie Olsen Age: 12 Date: 10 Oct

**Rx**

light box 10,000 lux  
2x/day for 30 minutes (60 mins total)

Refill: N/A George Whitaker

The lights burned bright in my eyes and my neck had a kink in it, but I had promised my mom I wouldn't move. Our couch still smelled like the peach-colored vomit that had erupted unexpectedly from my brother last night after he put his plate of spaghetti and glass of milk in the blender while mom was talking on the phone and then taken a sip. I started to feel a little sick myself. Every time I blinked, burning dots swarmed in front of my eyes and my head started pounding. I couldn't think of anything to think about. I had no way to pass the time. My mouth started to feel dry. My ears itched.

I wanted to pull out the note in my pocket. The note I had secretly not passed on to Teresa, one of the three girls in my class who already wore makeup and tight tank tops. The Bratz, as I called them. Like the snotty dolls they sell at Wal-Mart for \$19.88. Teresa had leaned over me last week and let her gum fall into my hair, then pretended to act all sorry when I stood up to go ask the teacher for the hall pass. I stood in the bathroom staring into the mirror and lifting up the back pieces of my hair, trying to see how bad it was.

## Fiction

I had forgotten to bring scissors with me. I started to yank as much of the gum out as I could, eventually slowing down to break off each strand one by one. My arms started to hurt from being held up so long. The gum felt greasy on my fingers, and after I had gotten it out as best as I could and wiped it against the side of the garbage can liner, I washed my hands over and over again, ignoring the sting in my throat, the burning feelings in my chest and behind my eyes.

I didn't need to pull out the note anyway; I had memorized the careless boy-handwriting down to every misspelled word.

The timer on the kitchen table buzzed, and I sat up so fast my head swam. I reached over to turn off the glaring box, but the buzz of it still rang in my ears. My mom was calling me from down the hall, wanting me to come talk to her while she cleaned up the freshly-deposited "accident" of my 4-year-old sister. I slumped against the wall, following it with my shoulder as I trudged down the hall towards the stench. I leaned against the door and folded my arms, tapping my head against the door frame, just like my dad used to when he wanted to announce his presence in the room.

My mom looked up from her mopping, and seemed to stare at the spot where my head had tapped the wood. "Dr. Whitaker said that it might take a few days before you notice any difference in the way you feel. Did everything go okay with the light? I hope I set it up right..." her voice trailed off, and she started scrubbing the floor again.

"Yeah, sure. Everything's fine."

"You know, if you need to talk about anything Kaylee, you know you can come to me. I know Dad's leaving must have been hard on you, and you haven't said much about it," she said, focusing on the cracks underneath the cabinets.

The familiar burning sensation boiled up behind my eyes and in my throat, but I swallowed hard and said, "I know I can. I'm fine. I'm dealing with it."

She looked up at me, her eyes searching, guessing. Then she sighed, her lower lip trembling slightly. She leaned the mop against the wall, hesitated for a moment, then opened her arms. I walked into her waiting embrace, tears finally dripping down my cheeks. "Someday I'll tell you everything," she whispered. "Maybe someday you'll understand."

I pulled away from her embrace and reached into my pocket, looking for a kleenex, and found the note. I pulled it from my pocket for the billionth time that day and unfolded it, smoothing it out with my fingers.

*Teresa hey whats up is like this the most boring day or what? So I was thinking we should go out. I think your cute. And maybe we could do something after school today. Are you going to Joeys boy girl party on Friday? You should wait for me to get done with detenshon then we could go to smoot park and do something bye Brad*

I sniffed the crumpled piece of notebook paper, but it didn't smell like anything but pencil shavings and dirt. I folded the note back up into fourths and put it back in my pocket. Why was I keeping it? It wasn't for me. But maybe someday. I turned away from my mother's hunched form, her words still echoing in my head. Maybe someday.

Maybe someday I too would get a love note from the cutest boy in the class, and we would "do something" in the park and "do something" after a dance and then we'd get married and argue all the time about not-doing-something, and then he'd leave forever, suitcases in his hands and bitterness in his eyes. Maybe someday.

I threw the note in the trash can on my way out of the bathroom, wiping my tears with my sleeve, and headed into my room to write.

## 1ST PLACE GRADUATE ESSAY

### Scarred

by Jacoba Mendelkow

1.

On my face there are scars: one on my left eyebrow, a chickenpox crater on my forehead. On the bone that connects arm to hand there is a scar, perfectly round from layers of peeled skin rubbed raw by concrete. The inside of my right ankle is demarcated with a scar within itself, a three-inch line inside a larger, jagged one raised above the surface. My stomach is stretched from pregnancy and scarred from a botched gall-bladder surgery that couldn't quite be completed laparoscopically. My breasts and hips, thighs and ass are lumped and shiny, rivers of connected marks, from pounds added and lost too quickly in my teens and early twenties. A turkey scratched my wrist when I picked him up as a child from the coop where he lived, where we were raising him for meat. The scar isn't deep but pronounced and obvious on the pale transparent skin that covers a blue artery.

2.

The campus doctor asks why I have come in today and I tell him it is my hands, they are red and cracked, the skin is bubbled up at the base of my palms and the lesions there are green and full of pus. He looks at them, touches them, flips them over and examines the skin on the tops and clicks his tongue. The skin on the top is normal, a little red from all the scratching but there are not bumps, no pus, no cracks layers deep. He flips them over again and removes his glasses. Are you exposed to chemicals? Have you used a new soap lately? Do you wash your hands a lot? Do you use a moisturizer? I answer his questions, the same questions he asked me four months ago when I was in his office, after my skin had gotten especially bad. No, I tell him. It is always the same: I use unscented soaps, I don't wash my hands compulsively, I wear gloves to do dishes and to hand-wash my laundry. I sleep with lotion and socks on my hands. I am not exposed to chemicals.

I tell him that it is worse at certain times of the year when I am especially stressed: weeks at the beginnings and ends of the school semester. I tell him that this time the itching and the broken skin is keeping me from sleeping, that the scratching wakes me up at night. He tells me that I have dermatitis; stress has nothing to do with it. I need to keep my hands away from chemicals. I must be doing something wrong.

He decides to drain the boils on the base of my hand. They are large and painful, the raised, green infection surrounded by circles of red. I've marked my arm with the ink from a black permanent marker because a red line has traveled toward my elbow and I'm



"Afternoon in Logan" by Ashley Andersen  
Honorable Mention Undergraduate Art

## Essay

worried about blood poisoning. I'm worried about the infection that causes my hands to swell to almost double their size; I'm worried that it will never go away. The doctor takes a large needle with an open tip and pushes it through a bubble on my left hand. I wince because it isn't numb and the doctor isn't gentle and when he squeezes it to push out the infection, nothing comes from the hole he has made.

He wraps my hands in gauze and then in an ace bandage and writes me a prescription I've used before. The redness never went away but the doctor doesn't listen and sends me to wait in the lobby for the pharmacist.

Four months later I will return. The weather has changed and is warming and the doctor asks me questions: Have you changed soaps? Are you exposed to chemicals? And when I tell him that we've done this before, he removes the glasses from his face, picks up my hands, looks at the tops and then at the palms and clicks his tongue. I have dermatitis. I must be doing something wrong.

### 3.

I wrecked my bike the summer before first grade. Some friends called and asked if I could play. Their house was bigger; they lived with fewer brothers and their treats weren't stale and broken Pepperidge Farm cookies that my mother bought at a discount in a clear plastic bag and brought home after working the graveyard shift. Their mother sometimes babysat me and my brothers when our mother was away and our father was at work lifting fifty-pound bags of cow feed onto his shoulders and piling them into the backs of pickup trucks for \$6 an hour.

My clothes that day were used and ripped playthings given to me in black garbage bags from the neighbors next door or down the street. I wore my play hand-me-downs more than the nice ones I kept in a cardboard box under my bed that my father made from two-by-fours and a crib mattress that just barely fit in the washer-dryer closet in the long hall of our trailer. The shirt was one from a family reunion, a cousin-something of my grandfather's, in Colorado. It was navy with white letters that proclaimed my lineage as a Lyness-Bower and V-necked with three white bands on each sleeve. My skirt was ruffled denim, a favorite of mine that I wasn't allowed to wear in public and especially forbidden from wearing to church because of the rips and stains covering the front. My mother asked me to change my clothes when my richer, cleaner friends called. She demanded, but soon she gave up after I wouldn't budge.

My brother and I rode our bikes to meet our friends. Neither of us wore a helmet. Regular kids didn't wear helmets then, only kids with overbearing worry-wart mothers and strange fathers who jogged daily in banana-yellow sweat suits. Kids who wore helmets were targets and sissies. They didn't have freedom or dignity and so we teased them and

made them cry. We wore stained and dirty clothes and rode our bikes down the block-long driveway and into the road, past two houses, a crick, the mud-hole full of spring runoff that hadn't dried in the summer sun, putrid and thick. The road twisted beneath us, curved three times and then a sharp turn lead us down a long hill.

Residents of Richmond, Utah, call the hill "Forsgren's Hill" because for as long as many can remember, the Forsgren's have always lived there farming and raising cows for milk that they sold to my parents in plastic jugs when it was raw, untreated and tested, full of cream floating at the top. Recently, the older Forsgren died and the farm was sold but the name remains the same to those who have history there, like I do. This hill is also called "Kid Killer Hill"—a somewhat obnoxious name well earned by the hill for nearly killing and sometimes disfiguring many of us who were lucky enough to live above it. Even Kevin Forsgren, the son of the older Forsgren who recently died, found himself maimed and bruised after a serious accident when he descended too quickly down the hill on a bike or a skateboard.

Midway down the hill ran an irrigation canal, full of parasites and Giardia, rusted barbed wire and penny-skipper bugs. When I am older, I will float down the canal on a truck tire inner tube and swim in the pond at the very end, ignoring the bugs and filth that skip about on the surface of the water. I will board up the concrete waterfall at the end and swim naked in the mud and filth. In my underwear, when I am thirteen, I will kiss my best friend's cousin next to the pond, on the top of a small cement reservoir. He will tell me that I am beautiful, that he loves me, that I am the girl he wants, and I will see him grow hard inside his boxer shorts. Later, I will cut my ankle on a rusted piece of barbed wire and let the skin scab together. I will pick the scab, piece by deep-ripping piece and watch the blood bubble and then run down my ankle onto my heel. I will pick and pick despite the warnings I hear about infection and the ugliness of scars, and the scab will not grow back after being picked and picked, and the skin will heal raised and scarred.

On this day, my brother and I ride: him on a second-hand bike from the town thrift store and me on my purple Huffy with a banana seat and a unicorn and a name stenciled on the curved bar that was something like "Fantasia." Our friends are at the base and because the hill is steep we can see them from the top. I remember seeing them. I think I remember that I waved and they waved back though this would have been impossible because the distance was too far. Probably a mile away, they must have been small and unrecognizable. I remember my brother riding in front of me. I remember wanting to catch him, peddling faster because I didn't want him to beat me to the bottom. Then, I remember my wheels feeling loose; I remember a tightness in my chest—the way I felt when

## Essay

strangers stopped on the road and asked to take my picture; the way I felt when the police man asked me questions about the car they were driving, the things that they said to me, if they made me do anything that made me feel strange or weird in my tummy; the way I felt when I walked home from the neighbor's after dark and knew that somebody followed me through the field of tall grass that separated our houses. I remember feeling afraid and moving my feet and legs backward, pushing hard on the pedals to move brake pad onto tire to slow the Huffy and me from moving this fast. I slammed on my brakes. I pushed too hard. That is all I remember.

The rest is a compilation of stories I've been told by others. My brother rode faster and had reached our friends at the bottom and together they watched me crash. They say that my bike began to S down the hill, swooping from side to side, side to side. Then the bike stopped and I toppled over curved, purple handlebars and slid, face first, down rocky, oiled pavement. My mother tells me that Mr. Mitchell was working at the house at the base of the hill and they ran to him, who, my mother tells me, "saved my life." Perhaps he pulled me from the road—enough of something that my mother always sent me to him whenever our paths would cross to thank him for what he did to help me. Meanwhile, my neighbor through the tall grass, a mother of eight, who drove a yellow Subaru, was flagged down as she drove upwards toward home and my six-year-old crushed and crumpled body was put somewhere on her back seat. She drove me to my mother.

The rest of the story is this: my mother didn't recognize me. She tells me that with my bruised and swollen lips, my blue and black cheeks, my closed-up purple eye, the large split on my left eyebrow, the pink-red and worn off spots on my arms, forehead and knees, she didn't know who I was. I wasn't her child. I wasn't her only daughter. Later she will tell people, neighbors who attend our church, my grandparents in Nebraska who send get well cards with teddy bears holding balloons on the outside and dollar bills straight and ironed on the inside, that I looked like the "elephant man"—a movie I remember watching and crying for the ugly man who dies because he refuses to sleep with stacks of pillows.

And after that, after my mother is given a child she does not recognize because she is no longer her daughter, I remember again. I wake up in a bed in the emergency room. The gauzy curtains hang to the floor, bright florescent lights shine into my eyes, my t-shirt and denim skirt torn and covered in my own blood. My mouth tastes like metal, my four permanent front teeth loose and aching. In that room, surrounded by flimsy curtains and bright lights, nurses come and check my pulse and good eye; a doctor stitches shut the gash in my left eyebrow. They bring me popsicles to suck on, grape flavored or cherry, cold and wet on my aching teeth and my swollen lips. I want to remember my mother

next to me in that hospital room. But twenty years later I don't remember where she was.

I do remember that through the curtain a woman was sobbing because her daughter was dead. I would hear later about a girl from my town only a few years older than me, shot by a boy from my town in the head with a .22—on accident—and died in the hospital in the room made of curtains next to mine. Something sticks with me that makes me think of this girl, the way she died playing with her friend, the way I became unrecognizable the day I went to play with mine. I'm sure her mother thought she was safe when she sent her off that day to play with that boy—I'm sure her father told her about guns and perhaps threatened to kick her ass if she ever touched one of many leaning up against the wall behind the laundry room door. But in that curtained off room next to mine that girl a few years older than me died and everyone blamed her friend, whispering under their breaths at church about the tragedy of it all, a poor little girl, a bullet in her head.

That night, home from the hospital, my mother dresses the beige floral velvet couch in a My Little Pony sheet and stands me next to it in my bloodied clothes to take a picture. I don't remember feeling that this was strange, so much of what I remember is changed and shifted from what it was or is and my mother taking a picture of me that day covered in my own blood wasn't anything to fight her over. But it is something because on a day when so much of what I remember is what people tell me to believe, I remember my mother, young and so pretty, holding whatever cheap plastic camera we happened to have for the year and telling me to stand still. In the picture I am not smiling because my mouth can't move and my lips are pulled too tight from the swelling to curl them up or down. My eye is swollen shut and purple, a ball of skin and flesh protruding from my face, circular bruises, like those from fingers poked into my flesh, dot the skin of my neck. After the photo in my denim skirt and my navy Lyness-Bower V-necked t-shirt torn on my shoulders, my mother tells me about the girl who died so close to me on a day my mother didn't know me. She tells me this story about the little girl with the bullet in her brain, my mother's mouth moving slow, tears in the corners of her eyes and she cuts my clothes from my broken body, tucking me into bed on the couch where no one is allowed to sleep.

5.

The skin on my palms is thick from years of scratching through rough and raised pink skin. My fingers are habitually curled inward, making the resting position of my hands nearly that of a closed fist. If I stretch my hands past the comfortable fist where my fingers rest, the skin on my palms, where the elasticity is gone, cracks in the corners, and in the joint where pinky meets palm. My hands bleed when I have scratched off layers and layers of skin. Itching and cracking, I sometimes cannot resist the driving, almost unconscious

## Essay

desire to pull skin from muscle, muscle from bone, to dig into the soft flesh in the center of my hands and rip from that gaping, pink hole whatever has entered my body and made the itching. In high school I used a hair brush to scratch my arms because my nails couldn't—my nails pink and sharp, bitten down to the quick. My arms itched in my sleep then and sometimes my legs too, but I displayed no other symptoms—no scales, redness, or strange blotches that looked like the ringworm on my arms I got from playing in the dirt every summer when I was small—small, red discolorations raised above the skin like cigarette burns.

I worry about my hands only because people ask questions. My mother has scars on her arms that she tells people are from being abused as a child, burned with cigarettes, flesh smoking and melting. She wasn't this girl; the scars are because she picks raised and rough, pink, swollen shafts of hair. She picks them and picks them: a nervous habit, a way to calm herself. I understand the need to pick, digging through flesh, peeling off scales of hardened double-layer skin. I like touching new skin when the leather has been picked away: skin barely exposed, red and clammy before the scales begin to grow and my palms no longer feel like they belong to my body. I call the redness, the raised and raw skin my stigmata, a leprosy.

I take steroids to stop the itching and slow the skin that grows five times too fast. The steroids make me sweat, make me shiver and ache, my legs sore and twitching when I lie down at night, my heart racing and thumping. The steroids make me anxious, angry, short. They alter my hours of sleep, my mood, my ability to taste. I wash my face and body in tar shampoo—recently removed from the shelves in California because of its connections to cancer. Twice a week I lay in a plastic coffin under UV lights and don't wear goggles to protect my eyes because it started growing there too—on my lids, under my right eye—swelling them until my eyes could not open. The treatment is sometimes worse than the scratching, though the scratching is habit, the picking is something I do to pass minutes into hours and into days. The picking is something I do to myself.

I read about my diagnosis, a disease I have had for years that only now makes sense. Doctors tell me now what I've known for years: it is worse when I am stressed, when my stomach pits and sinks to the floor, when depression consumes my limbs and my brain, when I have injured my skin. There are lists of possible triggers: injury, alcohol, sunburn, stress.

6.

I worry about the stress you are under. Stress creates toxins and toxins can poison you. I am afraid you could get cancer. Cancer from stress, not from smoking, not from too much sun, not from artificial UV lights in a plastic tanning bed twice a week. Cancer.

She drove me to the hospital when I had a real cancer removed. The procedure was simple: an electrically charged loop would remove the front part of my cervix, scrape along edges, and remove the stage-four cancerous cells before they became full-blown making a hysterectomy my only option. A loop electrosurgical excision procedure: a LEEP. A procedure this new gynecologist performed everyday. My mother sat in the waiting area full of pink and blue and green geometric fabrics on a padded rigid chair. Redbook and Good Housekeeping, maybe a Parenting, sat on the table in front of her. Reading none of these, I'm sure she picked up the book she brought with her, probably the latest biography of Abraham Lincoln or a new literature anthology to teach her high school kids when they returned in the fall. I believe she sat there reading, her pencil perched in her hand, marking in the margins, she could do it anywhere, even in a waiting room of a gynecologist attached to the raucous waiting room of a pediatrician.

In the sterile tiled room the doctor removed more than he originally thought he would have to. A nice man, cute-ish, apologized when I winced as he cut off parts of me that weren't quite numb. His eyes above his mask looked kind and I remember furrowed, concerned eyebrows. After the pre-cancer was removed, he left the room so I could dress and entered again when I cracked the door, showing my willingness to discuss what had just happened between us. He told me he had to cut more than originally planned, the biopsy hadn't been taken from the edges and the sickened cells went up into my uterus but he didn't know how deeply. He assured me that I would probably recover but I may need a second procedure, something more extreme because the cancerous cells could return. Prevention: I needed pap smears every four months for two years, I may need a hysterectomy. Hopefully we caught it in time. I could be one of the lucky ones.

Dazed, I left the room, walking slowly because pain was shooting between my legs and down to my flip-flopped feet. My mother looked up as I entered the room through the glass and wooden door that separated us and stumbling, carrying my self and my corduroy purse, told her we could go now. I wore a pad, an after-baby-having, large, almost-diaper to prevent any of the un-cauterized fluid from leaking out and ruining my denim skirt. I wanted to go home, lie on my couch and rub my cramping stomach. I had put myself here: years of unprotected sex with multiple partners had given me a virus that evolves and morphs, twisting and attacking healthy cells before it becomes cancer. I didn't tell my mother that this was my fault. I didn't cry; I wanted to feel remorse but instead only felt twinges when I moved too quickly.

I assured my mother that I was okay, my wincing and carefully thought out moves only a side-effect for what I really felt. I felt fine, I told her. Happy now that this thing was behind me, one less thing to worry about. I told her to tell myself: I was going to be okay.

## Essay

I was going to be fine. My best friend had this cancer years ago, right before she was pregnant with her second baby. They couldn't get rid of hers, fearing that she would lose the baby, and so for nine months she waited and the cancer grew. When she went to a doctor to have her cervix cut apart and the cancerous cells vaporized, they told her it was severe. They told her she may be one of the lucky ones; they may have caught it in time.

I fainted in the shower after giving birth to my daughter and on my way home that day from the hospital, felt the same swirling blackness I knew from before. My mother was there both times and both times she helped me stand, bracing me after I fell.

7.

There are scars on my palms the color and shape of burns that heal and flare up every day. The psoriasis sleeps and then returns when I've had too much wine or too little water. The scratching keeps me up at night, Velcro scratching Velcro palms, flakes of skin falling onto black shirts, falling onto the floor. On my insides I am damaged and I've done it to myself. But on the outside, where skin is stapled to skin and new layers grow five times too fast, rising to the surface and forming scales and plaques of leather, it helps to imagine that I am healing, that perhaps I am getting better.

Tonight I will rub a salve on my skin and cover my hands in soft, cotton gloves. I sometimes sleep at night, but often lie restless in my bed and listen to hours click by, because I am too afraid to dream and remember the stories I've been told by others after it fades to black and I wake up, broken and sore. Sometimes I wonder about peeling back layers and layers of skin. I wonder what I would find. Underneath my layers of skin and scars some things are broken that have never healed. Like a bone not properly set, joints rub together, the bone shifted and crooked—always slightly off-center, always almost out of place. In these places, the ones that are under my skin, where my history is lodged, new skin begins to grow, moving toward the surface, moving up layer by layer and forming a scale when escaping to the surface.

A sliver from a hay stack trampled through in bare feet always works a way out; through scars, through skin. Some things aren't forgotten.



“The Back Road, North Logan” by Ashley Andersen  
Honorable Mention Undergraduate Art

## SECOND PLACE GRADUATE ESSAY

### Woodwork

by Russell Winn

Branches rake John's arms with inch-long thorns, leaving fine thin rivulets of blood as he leans in with the chainsaw. The tree he's working on shudders from the cuts and gives way slowly. It's a Russian Olive, thirty feet of thorns and hard wood, and it doesn't give up. I'm standing in a patch of wild oats, away from the area of collapse, looking up at the top of the tree. Its lanceolate silver leaves fall in waves that descend slowly, steadily, then disappear upon meeting the waist-high grass that surrounds us. John is almost hidden from view by the grass that reaches the drooping limbs. I catch glimpses of his white Grateful Dead t-shirt and curly gray hair as he strains to finish off the resistant tree. Finally the split crack sound of the trunk vibrates the earth with relief, and the tree leans to the side, beginning a descent that will take us hours to clean up. John shuts off the saw.

It's a summer dawn in the Bear River valley and we're just starting out for the day. Strictly speaking, the Bear River is natural country. The bottoms are filled with cheat grass, Russian Olive, Houndstongue, and barley. Pheasants, sharptails, chukkers, horse flies, sparrows, crows, water snakes, rattlesnakes, blowsnakes. Cattle and wild dogs.

The light hits the riverside with the straight pure intent of a Saturday morning. It doesn't come in beams; it is as thick as the marsh mist it hangs in. In pre-daylight, everything feels surreal: liquid and alive like a Burchfield painting. Spreads of Russian Olives push their colors to the surface with light from the new sun: silvery green over rough, wet browns. Winged insects pulsate in spaces between branches and leaves, vibrating the air with comfortable engine hums that echo the now dormant drawl of the saw. The surrounding hills are thinly verdant, dotted with sagebrush. And of course, Olive trees. They were first cultivated in Germany, and introduced into the U.S. in the late 1800's as an ornamental plant that slowly worked its way into the wild.

It is hard work. Russian Olives do not cut easily. Olive wood is dense and makes sawing difficult, and it produces a thick, greasy smoke that discourages burning. Idaho has classified them as an invasive species, and the dominance of their growth patterns in the river bottoms of my hometown prove it. They are everywhere. The soft-gray color their leaves reflect on quiet afternoons, lines almost every road I traveled in my childhood. There are few trees around.

\*

Sagwitch pushed aside the weathered flaps of the tent and was embraced by a cold Janu-

ary dawn. The valley was quiet. The crusted snow must have sucked up sound greedily, leaving a quiet melancholy as payment for the blanketing. He would have looked around at the valley, stretched slowly and let the thick, woolen coat he had probably bought from a settler and his long, gray hair wreathed in beads take the brunt of the still weather. The wind did not come into this place until afternoon, and when it came it would cut the warmth from beneath clothes and out from under campfires in a brisk manner. But until then, the air would hang in the valley and play host to drifting mists from the river and passing geese. The Shoshone would do most of their work during this time.

In this place the horizon was much closer than it was in the rest of the Valley of Willows. The waters of the Bia Ogoi had cut a swath into the earth, and left ravines and canyons in its wake. White settlers called the place Bear River. From here it was easy to see the icy tops of sage-dotted plateaus sitting in meandering rows, drifting in and out of view like icebergs. Sagwitch would have admired the hills for a time. The lines of the horizon wouldn't leave a man alone until he took in the view. But before he returned to his tent, his eyes caught the writhings of a dark, slim line atop the northern hills. White soldiers.

He said to his son, "Looks like there is something up on the ridge, there. Looks like a cloud."

Soldiers. Sagwitch ran through the camp shouting. Around him, people emerged from their sleeps to his words: white men were coming. They knew this might happen. The settlers had told them of cavalry units to the south, but they didn't have time to feel shock or disbelief. They gathered weapons and took up defensive positions. They ushered women and children into huts and prepared to defend the ravine. And they listened to Sagwitch, one of their chiefs, when he told them to let the white men shoot first.

\*

My father spoke of lightning on his deathbed. He had an infection from a fractured leg bone, and the doctors were having trouble locating all of the breaks and containing the spread. We took him 75 miles to the McKay-Dee hospital in Ogden, Utah, for treatment.

In his weakness his age began showing: his accent got thick, to the point that no one but Mother and I could understand him, and he would fall into his native Navajo speech mid-sentence. He asked us if we were taking care of his cows and told us half-remembered stories from his youth. When he was in good health we didn't speak much: to a Navajo silence is a mark of respect. I understood this, but friends of the family mistook this quietude as an awkward stillness. Now he spoke to me often and what would seem normal to many, to me seemed frantic and nervous. He knew where things were headed.

## Essay

The doctor was very anxious around us. He took great pains to explain the measures they were taking and the frustration stemming from their inability to stifle the infection. It evaded them like a ghost. They focused their efforts on one area for days, then realized that if there was anything there it was gone and he wasn't getting better. The doctor was at a loss. Yet he also seemed full of resolve and hovered constantly near the room like a protective parent.

When we were alone, my dad would tell me of his dreams. He said that his father appeared to him, dressed in a plaid shirt and animal skins, with bone beads clacking together like biting teeth woven into his dark hair. He told him that the spirits of the Arizona reservation wondered where he had gone, and that the summer would be hot and arid. That lightning would rake across the ground and leave furrows of fire, and the bodies of his cattle would be planted like seeds in an ashen garden.

I didn't know what to make of his dreams. They were always rambling and seemed nonsensical to me, but he insisted that there were elements of past and future in them. Dad told me he knew the family would be all right. He said that as long as I knew how much he loved me then things would work out. But I could tell the dreams worried him. He said the summer would be too hot and the fields too dry to hold much life, and he worried about the other farmers in the valley. He said that hard times were coming, and he wanted to know what was happening. He worried about ghost sickness, a disorder that many Native Americans get. It starts with a preoccupation with death and is usually associated with Navajo witchcraft. It brings about bad dreams, weakness, and feelings of danger. He had all these.

\*

Our work proceeds very slowly. My boss, John, cuts the trees into moveable sections and I load them onto the old, white flatbed truck that follows us. Pretty much every movement involving these plants causes pain. They are riddled with thorns that are cartoonish in size, easily an inch or longer. These thorns come to an impossibly sharp point at the end, and if you look closely at them you'll see the coarse wood grain that runs vertically along their edges. When they stick in you they rip their way back out, making any wound given by one much worse. Even a grazing scratch that you don't notice immediately will ache later. The worst is when a loose branch falls above you and drives into the top of your skull like a nail. It shunts pain down your body, which mixes with the day's heat and leaves irrational anger in your stomach. The only thing you can do is grit your teeth and work harder.

We haul between eight and ten loads each day, leaving the collected trees in large mounds in the south field, to be burned next year after the thaw. When we finish for the

day our arms are criss-crossed with swollen, red scratches and painful puncture welts. It makes me think of beaten hamburger. The next shower I will take is a baptism in fire.

\*

"As we started the ride to the Indian camp we was told by the Captain that we would kill them Indians and be back in a couple of days. He said that Col. Conner had it all planned out." John S. Lee was a cavalryman who fought in the Battle at Bear River in 1863. He served under Colonel P. E. Conner during the campaign that saw 220 riders follow 80 infantrymen and two howitzer cannons come into conflict with the local Shoshone during one of the coldest Utah winters on record.

In his account, recorded by Newell Hart in his book *The Bear River Massacre* and given just before he died many years later, Lee speaks of a hard journey among friends and young men craving battle. He describes where he went, what he did, and what people said, evoking the brittle scene of a battle, the whine of icy musket balls through the frost fell, and a strange dark-skinned whooping cry—the typical American description of an Indian.

"We rested easy till we got to the river, then I got kinda scared. Boy, that was a bad looking river, half frozen over and swift. The horses did not want to go in it. Two old boys got thrown by their horses. After we got across and saw what them Indians had set up for us we all knew it wouldn't be easy. I never saw so many Indians in my life, looked like every Indian in the Territory had come in for the fight. They was screaming, dancing, yelling. Reminded me of a hornet's nest."

\*

The Navajo believe that when a person dies, a ghost—called a chindi—can be released with the last dying breath. This chindi is an evil force that returns to avenge some offense. Contact with a chindi is very dangerous and causes sickness or misfortune. The Navajo are quite fearful of and take every precaution to avoid things that may harbor one. The spirits are seen only after dark and appear in different forms as apparitions of the coyote, owl, mouse, a spot of fire, or a whirlwind. Or they may be sensed as sound: noises of movement, hushed voices, whistling after dark.

Often my dad would hear sounds like an owl in the trees, a dead branch falling, the wood hissing in our old fireplace, or someone moving in dry leaves, and take it as evidence of a chindi. Consciously after I learned of them, I dreaded seeing them, not only in trees or wind, in any number of shadows under my mother's kitchen table, on the roof peering into the nooks of the house, in the back lot between the houndstongue and tumbleweed, in the attic bedroom where no one slept. But I never saw one.

\*

## Essay

We're in the south fields, unloading the branches to be burned after they've dried out in the Spring. The mounds we make are huge, dark fifteen-foot half-spheres of jagged branches and spikes over carpets of slivers and leaves. The trees we pull off the flatbed don't come easily, often dragging their brothers in the truck with them, leaving you balancing an awkward mess of raining twigs and seeds by the end, hoping your strength will give it enough momentum to fall where you want it. When it does, the branches mesh together with a dry hissing sound, muffling the cracks of the bottom pieces reacting to new strain.

John and I talk about the trees. He tells me that the Olives we cut will grow back quickly unless the stumps are sprayed with poisons and growth-inhibiting chemicals. They can easily get 18 inches of growth in their strong season. When they grow back they become bush-like, because several new twigs grow independent of each other and compete for trunk status. But none of them win and the tree grows into a tangled mass of vine-like branches with no real trunk for support. Initially the branches will vie for height superiority, and the tree will start to resemble an upside-down broom. But as they get older, the branches bow out on all sides and make approaching the base of the tree impossible. Up-rooting these trees is difficult.

\*

I remember something my dad told me when I was young. It happened when he and his friend were digging an artesian well for the cattle in the valley, my dad in a plaid shirt and John Deere hat wielding a shovel and his buddy, Devon, in gray train conductor overalls at the helm of an old yellow backhoe. Behind them a lady with a wide-brimmed hat and a blue flower-print blouse picked carefully through mounds of clay with an old garden trowel. Every so often she'd stop and deposit an arrowhead in a wicker basket.

I was twelve. The wind was barely blowing, but the leaves scratched each other with a loudness that defied their movement. Dad wouldn't let me go near the lady. She was digging up the past, he said, looking for artifacts from the massacre.

"Leave her alone. The spirits of this place don't like you taking. You can dig and grow and raise things, that's okay. But too much has been taken from here already."

\*

Husks of reeds, the deep snow banks, and the thick tiles of ice disguised the true boundaries of the river. It split the valley into serrated halves of a singular scratch in the earth. Getting the howitzers across was impossible. Never mind the dark of the pre-dawn and the frostbite sucking the heat out of the soldier's limbs for the last sixty miles. The river's swift current and seeping cold solidified the bones and contracted the muscles of those who crossed it and left the wet soldiers with no campfire or refuge after the attempt.

Only the sterile bite of dry air and the sting of Shoshone muskets waited on the other side.

The Indians had advance warning from the settlers, even if they were initially skeptical. They had taken guns from earlier skirmishes and traded with the fur trappers in the region. There were defenses in place: woven willow branches for gun screens and foxholes along the northern side of the river.

Battles like the one at Bia Ogoi move in pulses. Surges of action and hostility from a pointed front, followed by labored fogs of wheezing breath and panicked echoes from either side. It is a jagged series of furtive strikes and retreats, slowly punctuated by the crack of a black-powder rifle.

Colonel Connor started with a direct frontal attack that was immediately overwhelmed. Subsequent attempts saw several flanking maneuvers by cavalry and attacks from multiple fronts. Two hours later, the Shoshone had run out of ammo and the battle turned.

The Indians' increasing fear must have dictated their actions. A box canyon on a dead winter morning, the sweat freezing them, they began running out of options. They used what they had left: tomahawks and archery. They lopped limbs and cut gashes into wool coats. They struggled and swore and tore at one another. The blood, heat and contact of close combat robbed men of their ideals. But rage wasn't enough. Muskets and sheer numbers won the battle for the cavalry. After the soldiers killed most of the Shoshone men, they shot children at close range, raped women, held infants by the heel, beat them against the earth. On that cold day in January, families disappeared.

\*

John and I sit in an old tin shed while a thunderstorm licks it clean of dust. Storms in the Bear River Valley sit on the horizon for hours, and then come on hard and fast. The branching nature of the Olive's roots act as a natural lightning rod, spiking up from the ground. They have hollow water-filled cells that run along the wood in the trunk. Sap and moisture are poor conductors, and when lightning hits a tree, which happens often, it superheats the wetness into steam and blows the bark off with concussive force. The lightning doesn't bring any force, just heat. Heat applied from multiple angles and sections, grasping the tree instead of hitting it. The tree does the rest. Strike frequency is alarming when you have nothing to do but sit and count the booms. In the worst storms, it feels like a river of static is running through the valley.

The rain hits the metal roof without rhythm. It's a torrent. It comes in a steady stream and is accompanied by thunder that hits too close. I think about my dad. I think about how nice the funeral was, about how many people were there, about all of his old friends that came and told stories about herding cattle with him and how they called him

## Essay

“Chief” and he just smiled and showed them how the Navajo did things differently. How they would sterilize wounds with plants and herd sheep alone on plains for weeks.

\*

The afternoon wind picks up speed as part of the daily ritual of the valley. In the winter it cuts through clothes and sweeps away any vestiges of heat like a fine dust. The wind after the battle would have been equally stern.

Colonel Connor and his men retreated back to their encampment. The survivors, the dying, and those who had hid in the thick brushes to avoid the battle, must have been freezing. Snowdrifts only make good blankets for the dead. The jagged rivulets of blood in the snow would have congealed to strange shapes and imagined horrors within them. Help would come. The Indians who had escaped would return to give aid to the survivors and bury the dead before leaving the valley forever. But the wait for them, in the cold wind, would have been worse than the death that preceded it. After awhile they would go numb from it. After awhile I imagine they shook in pain or panic or the force of the mind’s eye, and they shivered and silently awaited the sunset.

\*

In the end, it was a stroke that killed my father. The strain on his body was too great, and things began shutting down. It paralyzed him, and the doctors only gave him a few more days to live. Mother and I spent those days at his side in tears, speaking to him about how much we loved him and how we would miss him. He spent those days trying to form words of comfort, and clawing at the air and our arms with his one good hand. Every time I went to see him I found myself running errands and talking to people I didn’t know just so I could stay out of the room. Interesting thing, death. It scares most those who are farthest from it.

\*

It’s evening here in the fields, and John and I stand among jagged, ghostly mounds of dead wood, watching a thirty-foot high pillar of flame grind the remains of last year’s cuttings into ash. I think about the valley, the cows that were sold off, and the eight-foot stone monument labeled “THE BATTLE OF BEAR RIVER.” I had never read the whole thing until Dad died. I’d always been too busy for it.

They put it in a good place. Not half a mile from where John and I stand, past a copse of young trees, markers of leaves and bark mulched with grasses and weeds and remnants of living things, and then mostly past another copse, which holds a sparrow nest built in the spring. It is a simple mound of river stones and mortar, contained by a sharp black wrought-iron fence. It reads “Col. Douglas, leading 300 California volunteers against Bannock and Shoshone Indians guilty of hostile attacks on emigrants and settlers,

engaged about 500 Indians of whom 300 were killed, including about 90 combatant women and children. 14 soldiers were killed, 4 officers and 49 men wounded. Chiefs Bear Hunter, Sagwitch, and Lehi were reportedly killed, 175 horses and much stolen property were recovered, 70 lodges were burned.”

I’d never read it because I didn’t understand it. Because I didn’t know what understanding meant. But now, some of what understanding means to me is realizing the conflict between what they say today and what I say tomorrow. Maybe history doesn’t get any clearer than this, or any more vague, and what we know is what we’re willing to tell: human lives as they were lived.

The fire began as an oily smoke. The wood hissed and popped in protest for ten minutes before it let out a sigh of resignation and flared up like a windblown bed sheet. It knows it belongs in the valley. In trying to bring the olives into conformity with nature, I begin to wonder if it would be easier to let nature simply conform to them. And if that would be the right thing to do.

Now we have a massive blaze jutting up from the field: a booming, cleansing thing. An urgently rustling signal that slows cars on the distant highway and ignites remote porch lights on the horizon. It’s something that can’t escape notice, can’t be forgotten until it forgets itself and fades out. The chindi here will be glad of the attention they’re getting. Perhaps they will close their eyes, force a smile, and let go. —

## THIRD PLACE GRADUATE ESSAY

### Saving Smudgy by Diane Bush

The day before Smudgy died the last of the purple plums hung heavy on the dark branches. Sparrows and finches rushed the feeder, chasing the dappled shade under the maple tree. A warm breeze ruffled the glossy green leaves, soon to fall. In the fields, the last cutting of alfalfa lay in neat curving rows and golden tomato suns filled the garden.

She sprawls on a pillow asleep, the end of her tail flicking randomly. Although it looks like any other sunny afternoon catnap, the low angle of her head hides the feeding tube in her neck, held in place by an elastic dark green dressing.

Instead of crunchy kibble, I feed her vanilla nutrition shakes blended with canned cat food four times a day. The brown liquid looks like already digested meals, the raw materials of hearts, bones, and brains. I add a chemical stew of ground up pills and liquids to the gruel and pipe it into the feeding tube with a large plastic syringe.

When it's time to feed her, I usually find her tucked in a corner of my bedroom closet behind a row of shoes. Always a small cat, she blends into the matching pairs of sturdy oxfords and sandals. She startles when I move the shoes aside and place a picnic spread of cups, towels, and syringes beside her. I sit cross-legged on the floor, jamming my body between the vacuum cleaner and boxes of photo albums. I lean over to remove the rubber stopper from the feeding tube. She tries to shake her head and get away but is weak and anemic and can't escape my hands laden with so much medicine and hope.

For half an hour, I stroke the fur on her back while slowly depressing the plunger on the syringe, a distraction that soothes her but doesn't stop the nausea that comes the moment the warm liquid moves into her body. The dark part of her coat, mahogany not black, shines like a ripe buckeye.

\*

I am standing next to the toilet in the tiny bathroom emptying Dennis's bed bag. The yellow liquid sloshes into the bowl with a satisfying finality. My thoughts drift to the kitchen and I mentally gather the ingredients for the dinner I will soon prepare: the chicken breasts thawing on the countertop, the snap peas ripening in the garden, the crescent rolls wrapped in their cardboard cocoon in the refrigerator, the bottle of pinot noir in the cupboard. My life has been reduced to a shopping list of specific items and tasks with no room at all for side trips.

It has been two years since they found the tumor deep in Dennis's brain, just above



"On the River Walk" by Ashley Andersen  
First Place Undergraduate Art

## Essay

his left ear. Two years of hospitals, surgeries, doctors, pills, and driving up and down the northern California coast looking for a cure.

But there is no cure. No hope for anything beyond the daily routine of anti-seizure meds, sponge baths, and bowel programs. At the end of the day, I collapse into bed alone and lie awake for hours, listening to Dennis snore softly in the living room.

It is only a matter of time before the tumor kills him. Cancer is snatching him bit by bit, like a kitten unraveling a ball of yarn. First, he lost his speech, then his coordination and balance. Soon his mind will become a mass of knots, too messy to untangle.

This is not how I imagined my life at twenty-six. How could I know that the funny, red-haired man I fell in love with would become a burden. That I would be forced to feed, dress, and nurse him the way my aunt took care of my mother after her first stroke. I feel the sting of his unfulfilled promise when I see couples walking arm in arm at the Saturday flea market. I watch them from my silent post behind Dennis's wheelchair, and as he glides over the pitted asphalt, I imagine a flock of crows circling.

\*

My husband, Dan, and I called Smudgy "the cat that came with the house" and adopted her nine years ago when we moved to Cache Valley. A white blaze marked her forehead, nose, and cheeks as well as her chest and the front of her thin legs. The rest of her body was a rich dark brown, and with a dark spot next to her nose, she looked just how a cat named Smudgy would look.

The previous owners left her behind because she lived outside and was comfortable in the big yard surrounded by lush lilacs and tall evergreens. She preferred to be alone and caught mice and birds and found cozy places to sleep in the barn and avoided the skunks and raccoons when they'd swagger through the yard looking for food. She ate tuna voraciously and whatever dry food we left in the white bowl on top of the outside cellar. She never ate much and was always small and lithe. There was a spring in her step as if she was prancing. Her days were long and golden, and she lived as she pleased, beholden to no one but herself.

Then one day Dan gently rubbed the top of her head when he found her dozing near the cherry tree. He spoke to her as the rain would, a soft murmur punctuated by her name—Smudgy. She didn't have much patience for the attention but put up with it because she was too sleepy to move. He started carrying her into the house for short periods of time, and she learned to fall asleep while stretched out on his chest. By the time the snow flew, she was ready to be an indoor cat. She'd sit by the window looking for birds, her nose pressed so close to the glass that it left tiny impressions. When the wood stove roared with heat in the middle of winter, she was always beside it. But once the weather

warmed up, she was back outdoors. She loved nothing more than climbing the gnarled lilac branches to the top of the shed next door. She could hide there all day, sleeping like a stone on the cool metal amidst broken branches and leaves. She was right in the middle of her world and didn't hear us when we called her to come in when it rained or when packs of dogs ran loose. She was completely hidden from us, and we didn't find out about her secret sleeping spot until the week she died.

\*

When I was twelve, I saw a solar eclipse. I punched a hole in a cardboard box, rested the box on my head, and stood with my back to the ebbing disk. The light shone through the hole and I could watch the earth's shadow swallow the sun without hurting my eyes. When I took the box off my head, it was starting to get dark, but the sun was right where it belonged. I wondered if my father could see the eclipse from the hospital where he went for some tests. He was a navigator during World War II and knew all about planets and stars. Our nighttime stargazing sessions sparked my grade-school dream of being an astronomer, a goal I had to abandon once I learned I had to be good at math. Dad would know what caused the eclipse, and I couldn't wait to ask him about it. Later that day, my friend Carolyn and I played Barbies in my room. I was digging in my double doll case looking for the pink shoe with the buckle. Barbie couldn't go out with Stacy with only one shoe. The drawers in the case were stuffed with tiny plastic purses, hats, socks, boots, and gloves in a multitude of colors. The shoe was nowhere to be found, and I was about to give up and change her outfit when Aunt Fan burst into my bedroom crying, Diane, your daddy's gone. She threw her arms around me sobbing loudly. I was stunned. I held the one pink shoe, stared in front of me, and my brain whirled. Where did he go? Did he go to Hawaii without Mom? Is he in Detroit on business? Carolyn was ushered from the room and I was alone. My parents never told me he was sick. They never told me he was dying.

\*

To speak the word cancer is to summon a nightmare that consumes both waking and dreaming. It is as if a python suddenly inhabits your brain. You can feel the imprint of its glossy scales on the back of your skull, slowly uncoiling and filling your head with sludge. Or else it's a hive of angry bees, buzzing and frantic. Your heart is a delicate pane of glass or a hummingbird's wing, beating wildly. Like the bees, your thoughts are desperate to get out and fly away.

Dan and I stare at the x-ray of Smudgy's torso. Her organs shine with a sinister glow. Dr. Hillegass points to the fuzzy blobs and describes their pathology: enlarged lymph nodes, extended and bloated liver, and thickened pancreas. What's causing these changes

## Essay

is unclear. It's likely lymphoma but could be heart disease (which is treatable), an undisclosed tumor, or a massive infection. She tells us that Smudgy's red blood cell count continues to fall. Her anemia is now life-threatening because her body isn't repairing itself even with all the medicines and the added nutrition of the tube feedings.

We drive home in silence, our ears ringing with the thickness of the vet's final words about Smudgy's quality of life. We can keep her comfortable and nourished, but her blood is becoming thinner, more diluted.

What should we do?

All she wants to do is hide in the closet and sleep.

She can't even walk without falling over.

I hate to see her suffer.

But what if we can reverse the anemia? The vet says...

Can we talk about this later? My brain hurts.

When you weigh the decision to euthanize a pet, how do you know what to do? I glance at Smudgy lying quietly in the back seat. She wants to live! I think. But what is that life if she can't lie among the lilac blossoms and listen to the chickadees?

\*

Growing up, I never had big pets like dogs or cats. My parakeet Budgie was the first pet I owned with a personality. He had a mirror in his cage and he'd peck at his reflection and talk for hours. Pretty bird. Pretty bird. Budgie. Budgie. Budgie. Hello baby, want a kiss? Then he'd do some wolf whistles (my dad taught him that). It's not like we had much of a relationship, Budgie and me, but his constant chatter was comforting, like listening to your favorite record over and over until you know all the words by heart.

\*

I bake bread for a living, hefting heavy bags of flour, loading hundreds of lumps of raw dough into the 12-door oven, watching the crusts turn golden brown, and removing the loaves when the air becomes fragrant with the scents of toasted seeds and wheat. I peer through the smudged glass doors at the rising shapes springing to life before my eyes.

I am the final step in the process that starts with a tiny seed and ends with racks of beautiful bread. I know that a few short minutes can ruin a loaf, that each one is dependent on my constant vigilance and care.

On good days, I dance around the loader, blasting the Violent Femmes, my hands a blur as I deftly load the softly sagging batards and boules on the long strip of canvas. Other nights I stand immobile, burying my eyes into the sleeve of my shirt so my tears don't fall on the bread because I can't stop until the oven is fully loaded. When the oven is empty after baking, I start all over again.

At the end of a long bake, I am tired but wide awake. In the dark hours before dawn, I drive the back roads home—the only car on the road—feeling raw and exposed. Although it's nearly 3:00 a.m. when I get home, I drink whiskey and water, not because it tastes good or comforts me, but because it makes me forget. When I finally do relax, I am scared by how big the emptiness feels inside me, like being inside an expanding star that's about to explode.

I am useless, unable to save a small, thin cat.

\*

I am standing next to the garage as twilight falls. The hour before sunset is my favorite time of day because the sky turns into a kaleidoscope. There are blues and violets and pinks and yellows shot with gold, all shifting and glowing and pulsing like galaxies. An ambulance slowly backs down our driveway taking my mother to the hospital. What happened this time? Another stroke? Did she choke on a chicken bone or a piece of meat? I am afraid to ask any questions. All I want is a mother that makes waffles for me on school mornings, sews me sundresses and skirts with big pleats, and teaches me how to sleep on curlers. I face the wall, press my palms to the sides of my head and collapse into a ball, hoping that my family and the neighbors, now gathering in small clots across the street, won't see me hiding there. My mother's illness marks me like a favorite shirt with an ugly stain, one that I can't clean or throw away.

\*

At the mouth of the canyon, my car punches through a grey envelope of clouds, now pouring rain with a fierce intensity. The sky roils yellow and black, like an angry bruise. All around me, taillights wink insistently as rush hour traffic speeds up and slows down with a rhythm I can't seem to follow.

Smudgy lies on a striped blanket on the back seat, meowing softly, acutely aware of the hum of tires, the rush of water spraying the car, the noise that fills the air and doesn't stop. We're returning home after a trip to a Salt Lake City veterinary clinic for an ultrasound appointment. I grasp at hope the way my tires strain to grip the slippery pavement. If I just knew what was making her sick, maybe I could save her.

But the expensive ultrasound brings me no closer to an answer, and soon my foot is pressing toward the floor and I'm weaving through traffic.

Fucking jerks! Two cars roar past me, pelting both sides of the windshield with buckets of icy rain.

Asshole! A teenager swerves into my lane and the car fishtails, tires spinning wildly.

I curse and scream at the world, the cars, and the sleet until my hands shake and my throat burns. Now I know why people want to shoot strangers. Don't you know that

## Essay

only a split second separates you from serious injury? Don't you know that bad things happen to even the most defensive drivers? Don't you know that your gleaming hunk of metal, so sleek and aerodynamic, can crush your bones and scramble your brains?

I know. My boyfriend fell asleep on a dark freeway one night, hit a storm drain, and crashed through the windshield while his green Fiat flipped through the air like a carnival ride. His beautiful body shattered the back windshield and he crumpled on the dewy grass, his back broken. He was a paraplegic and died from an inoperable brain tumor a few years later.

What am I doing?

The sky unzips and I glimpse a line of clouds over the lake poised like the echo of a heartbeat. Layers of grey press up against layers of platinum. The storm pauses and the rain stops, a breath held deep and slowly released. I too am tired of fighting. I take my foot off the gas to slow down while reaching back to touch the top of Smudgy's head. It's OK, Smudge Smudge. We'll be home soon. I'm sorry I can't make you feel better. She lies there so still and quiet. My feeling of powerlessness melts away, replaced by a gentleness toward the woman who was so familiar with death that she was afraid to live. As I stroke the body of my dying cat, I realize that the only way to save her is to let her go. Just as ancient astronomers used the constellations to bring order to the night sky, when I stopped fighting for Smudgy's life, I discovered a way to make sense of my own.

\*

As Indian Summer deepens, I become obsessed with food preservation. In the coming weeks, I will can thirty quarts of salsa, eight pints of applesauce, six pints of peaches, freeze five batches of pesto, and dry countless numbers of sliced tomatoes.

Maybe in saving the fruits of summer, I can alter my memories so that when I open a jar of sliced peaches, I'll remember the way the evening light slanted across the blushing fruit and not Smudgy's ragged breaths or the way she staggered to and from her water bowl.

One sunny afternoon, she cries at the back door to go outside, and I follow her. She carefully steps on a garden path where dried catnip stems lean precariously. The sun warms her fur, and I imagine that she wants nothing more than to climb the lilac to the top of the shed. But I'm afraid she'll fall or pull out the feeding tube, so I shadow her every move, pausing every time she pauses, not leaving her side. She makes her way to a concrete slab in front of the lilac and sits down. The phone rings and I rush inside to answer it. I come back outside a half hour later and find her curled up on top of the shed. I have to use a stepladder to reach her. She doesn't squirm when I carry her back inside.

The next day, I dig a grave between the plum trees. The vet is coming tomorrow.

Dan won't help me, so I put on my work gloves and pull the shovel out of the barn. As the blade bites into the dirt, I talk to Ruby, buried nearby. Ruby's sweet nature changed Dan's mind about cats. It's strange to think I knew her longer than my dad. I miss you, Boo Boo. I miss you every day. Soon you'll have Smudgy to keep you company.

In the barn are several dozen daffodil bulbs, egg yolk yellow with bright orange centers. After I bury Smudgy, I will plant the bulbs. Next spring when I look at the bobbing orange and yellow blossoms, I will remember how the crisp breeze would roll off the lake of my childhood and spin the revolving clothesline like a carousel. The chenille bedspreads and cotton blankets and down quilts would toss their manes and snort like excited mares. The world turned in lazy circles under a sky as blue as sapphires.

Unlike tulips—bold one day, like skeletons the next—the ruffled cups and saucers recall the resilient spirit and brave heart of a young girl who stands at the lip of the driveway with her father. His right hand rests lightly on her shoulder while his left arcs high over her head like a comet. He speaks of the stars by name: Castor, Pollux, Regulus, Arcturus. She is too little to understand the vastness of space but as her eyes sweep skyward, the heavens open up and she feels the stars her own.

\*

Late at night, just as the crickets start singing, I am aware of something moving under the plum trees. I see her stretch with liquid grace. Silently she calls the moon then steps across the cool stone path. The fat plums ripen and fall to earth like meteors, littering the ground like petals.

THIRD PLACE GRADUATE ESSAY

Walking Home

by Jacqueline Harris

Walking home from the theater that night, Anna and I were on a high. I had just seen *Phantom of the Opera* for the first time while Anna had seen *Don Carlos*, and we'd both snuck around to the back door actors' exit of the Gielgud Theatre to meet Derek Jacobi and get his autograph. He'd signed the back of Anna's ticket and responded to my dazed



"procession" by Jacqueline Harris  
Honorable Mention Graduate Art

smile and giggling by saying, "You're sweet." I admit his devilish stage make-up and geometric facial hair was a bit frightening in person, but his blue eyes twinkled as he waved goodbye and stepped into his waiting limo, nestling a miniature white poodle in the crook of his arm.

We jogged away from the Gielgud down Shaftesbury Avenue and laughed as Anna safely tucked the autographed ticket into her clutch and imagined her mother's reaction.

We made fun of each other for being so star-struck; it happened to us every time we saw someone famous (I about peed when I saw Richard Gere) and admitted that no one back at the flat would even be impressed—you had to be something of a Shakespearean nerd to even recognize his name. With each celebrity encounter, Anna and I would add another name onto our running list that included Leonardo DiCaprio and Queen Elizabeth, and incite further jealousy amongst our flatmates.

Opting to walk home instead of taking the Tube, we wound our way to Bayswater and the Notting Hill Station which was just blocks from our home. It was near midnight and the air was frosty cold on our flushed faces. The streets were emptying and the only sounds were of the nearby traffic and the intermittent syncopated beats from the all-night pubs and nightclubs. A girl who also appeared to be in her early twenties walked about 20 or 30 yards ahead of us on the sidewalk and pulled her hood up for warmth. I noticed her because the fur trim on her gray jacket reminded me of my friend Shannon's coat, one she had bought at Topshop for only £7.

\*

I lived in tight quarters with thirty-five other girls interested in art and literature while on Study Abroad in London. Located just a block away from Kensington Palace and Garden, and just another block away from "Millionaire's Avenue" (more appropriately "Billionaire's"), we were spoiled to live so close to the center of art and history in the city that most of us had read about in novels for years.

In my small bedroom packed with bunk beds to accommodate fourteen, I should have guessed an informal book club would start up. The group began with Megan's copy of Alice Sebold's *The Lovely Bones*. She read it in one evening after purchasing it at Waterstones and wanted to talk about it, but first passed it to Alyson, then me, and then Anna. The story is chilling. Susie is only fourteen-years-old when a pedophile rapes and dismembers her body in his underground lair. The rest of the novel is told from her perspective looking down from heaven, watching her friends, family, and rapist, live on without her.

I finished the book in a day and couldn't stop thinking about it for weeks. The honest narrative voice disturbed me; I wasn't sure how I felt, I just knew that I felt different after reading it. Then a month or so later Megan bought a copy of *Lucky*, Alice Sebold's memoir of her rape during her freshman year of college and the ensuing trial and period of struggling through to some kind of recovery and survival.

*Lucky* was much more difficult to read, obviously because reading a real-life, detailed account of rape is emotionally and mentally brutal. Maybe more so because Alice wasn't murdered as her fictional character Susie was, but her memoir left her dealing with the emotional, physical, and mental scars that rape had seared within her.

## Essay

Sebold's books gave me full-body chills down my spine, the kind a girl in elementary school told me happen when the ghost of a child tries to whisper something into your ear. We talked about Alice in our bedroom a lot. How during her rape time had slowed down. All the graphic details. Were they too intense? Why shouldn't she be honest about what happened to her? Describe her rape? Admit being raped? Say the word "rape" out loud instead of tiptoeing around the subject? I kept rereading one passage over and over again. It was these words that I couldn't stop thinking about:

Those who say they would rather fight to the death than be raped are fools. I would rather be raped a thousand times. You do what you have to.

I didn't want to believe this. I didn't want to believe that anyone could ever think rape was a better option than death.

\*

A man in his mid-twenties rushed passed Anna and me on the sidewalk, jogging ahead of us until he was just feet behind the hooded girl. I remember he was wearing jeans and a thin, black windbreaker. He walked close behind her, matching her steps with his. Even though I must have been fifty or sixty feet behind them, I seem to remember hearing the scuffing of their shoes as they treaded over the pavement. He kept up with her increasing pace. They didn't appear to exchange words. I tried to mind my own business and stop staring, tried to reinstate some type of small talk with Anna, but my heart stilled when she made a quick left turn and he broke into a jog to follow her.

Anna and I started walking faster. I don't remember looking at her or speeding up without her, in my memory we thought the same thoughts and walked faster in unison. We reached the street she had turned onto and saw the man just within feet of her heels. I'm surprised he didn't hit them with his own feet, like when you're in junior high and trying to pull off a friend's shoes or make him stumble from behind. At some point we must have stopped walking. Maybe it was when we faced the turn they had just taken. Maybe it was before. I do remember standing still and staring after them.

Should we follow her? Anna said it first. I was scared. There are only a few reasons why at midnight in a big city you would break from your own path and follow someone else home. It wasn't normal for a guy to follow a girl like this. It wouldn't be normal for us to follow them from a distance, eavesdropping on their scene, except that we were the only ones who could.

Yeah. Let's go.

\*

Two of my close friends were date-raped while they were in college. When they confided in me, within a year of each other, I was sickened to think the violence of rape had

touched my world so closely. The first account was relayed in graphic details that left my stomach hollow, hollow like her eyes as she told me she still couldn't tell her mother, how she'd gone right to the hospital, refused the rape kit (though she now questioned that hasty decision), and ordered the nurse to make sure again and again that she wasn't pregnant. She felt she was to blame. She thought she should have known better. She should have done...something, but she didn't know what.

I went home and threw up again and again.

About a year later, the second account spewed from another friend's lips, the story came from nowhere, as if she too had needed to purge. We sat together in a crowded hallway with students chatting and laughing as they walked by and stepped over my outstretched legs.

I just wanted to tell you.

I said OK and changed the subject.

After the second friend told me I went home that night and lay in bed reeling. Why was this happening? Sometime before sleep came, it felt like something broke open in my mind. Something I must have tried to forget, sealed and dated inside a glass Mason jar up on a high shelf. But now I remembered.

When I was in junior high in Pennsylvania, I was anything but cool. The sole Mormon, I played the violin poorly, was overweight, and had no self-confidence. At lunchtime I sat at the discard table, a table for people who did not fit any of the standard cliques that run in junior high settings: kids who were not jocks, not rich, not skaters, and so on. At the table I can see myself sitting, shoulders hunched down trying to hide. Not being noticed was essential. At the table with me I see Lynn, another discard, Kelly, a pro at skipping class, and Susan, Shara and Maya, funny and clever girls who didn't belong with the discards. Looking back now, I can imagine it was actually because they were the only black girls in our school sea of white.

One day I remember Susan saying she wouldn't be at school the next day and we had asked her why. I have to testify in court. We asked why again. I have to testify against my stepfather, because he raped me.

I had forgotten Susan's story. If it was hard for me to listen to a friend telling me she was raped when I was in college, I can only picture the fear on my face as an awkward teenager. I had actually blocked her telling me. I had blocked her. I couldn't remember what happened to Susan. I couldn't remember what I said to her when she came back to school, if I had said anything at all, but I did remember that moment, and I had tried to choose not to remember it, to not have it replay in my mind, denying its existence.

\*

## Essay

We hurried down the sidewalk to shorten the distance between us. I don't remember any of the street names because I no longer knew where we were. I could guess we were maybe on Pembridge Road or Garden, maybe veering toward Portobello, streets I would have recognized in the daylight, but I was out of place here.

My stomach started churning and I fought the urge to pee.

What do we do?

Catch up? You know, let him know there's other people on the street. Talk. Make noise.

We started jogging to catch up. They'd moved far ahead with the girl's increased pace.

Laugh, I ordered Anna.

She attempted to make some loud guffaw or chortle but failed to make any noise. Then I tried too.

Anna and I never said the word "rape," but somehow I knew it was what we both feared.

\*

Stoeckl can recount, without skipping a beat, that someone is sexually assaulted in America every two and a half minutes.

Jacoba sleeps with the lights on when she's home alone.

Elizabeth checks every room in the house when she gets home. She changes her route if she recognizes the person walking behind her on the path home.

I walk to my car with keys in my hand. I never walk alone at night. I don't walk in the stairwells in the Ray West Building when I'm there late printing lesson plans. I own Mace. I park under streetlights. I tacked up beach towels over my window blinds after we had a peeping tom and had to call the police. I've never felt safe in my home since we came home from a trip to Seattle to find our front door wide open. I shower in the dark so that my silhouette won't appear through our bathroom window that faces the street.

Emily owns a 9-millimeter handgun.

\*

We kept jogging until we were close enough behind to be a tangible presence. Anna and I had stopped at McDonald's during our walk home and when we didn't know what to say, we started talking loudly about her fries and ketchup. Fries and ketchup. It sounds so pathetic now, but it was our only ammunition aside from our deliberately loud steps.

Wanna fry? Anna yelled at me.

Sure! I tried to casually yell back.

We proceeded to have an unusually loud debate about the quality of McDonald's

fries versus Wendy's, Anna having worked a summer at McDonald's in Kentucky. I let her do most of the talking as fear clutched both my stomach and the stitch in my side.

The hooded girl zagged across the street. The man removed his hands from his coat pockets and began running after her.

\*

The summer I was thirteen, I attended a week-long girls' camp with my LDS church group. We spent the week at Ockanickon Boy Scout Reservation in the forests of southeastern Pennsylvania singing camp songs, swimming, hiking, and making Fruit Loop necklaces. I shared a two-man platform tent with my best friend Ashlea, whom I'd known since I was seven.

I'd broken my left leg just weeks before camp and spent most of my time hobbling around on my crutches watching everyone else zipline and prance around in their swimsuits. I got so many bug bites on my legs I couldn't help but scratch them open in my sleep until they all wept clear yellowish fluid down into my plaster cast. Because I couldn't run and have fun like the other girls, I started to separate myself from the group and from my friends.

About midweek I sat at a wooden picnic table picking at my wounds when Sister Sheffey asked me if I wouldn't mind walking around the campsite with her, calling all the girls to come gather for evening prayer. The sun had already set and most of the campers had already gathered around the crackling campfire to make s'mores.

Sister Sheffey held the lantern above us to brighten our path as I slowly stumbled over tree roots and rocks towards each two-man tent. She'd throw up one of the triangular flaps and I'd poke my head in to see if anyone was there—most every one was empty. We circled the perimeter of the field until we reached my own tent.

No one will be in there, that's mine and Ashlea's tent.

Sister Sheffey thought we should still check, just in case Ashlea had already gone to bed. I lurched towards the flaps on my own, bracing my crutches on any even spot of dirt I could find. From behind me, Sister Sheffey shone the light as I threw up the flap and called, Ashl—

From the shadows inside my tent I saw a man bending over my sleeping bag. He looked up at me and when Sister Sheffey began screaming, he tore out the back and off into the woods, to be joined by another dark figure exiting another tent. Sister Sheffey immediately scampered off with the lantern, screaming warnings to everyone within earshot as she ran.

For about five seconds I just stood there, frozen and terrified, my heart racing. After I realized I should hop away, I couldn't because Sister Sheffey had left me behind in com-

## Essay

plete darkness on crutches.

Can somebody help me?

No one seemed to be able to hear me as everyone gathered around the campfire and started panicking. I could hear girls asking what had happened, and then start to cry. I tried taking a few steps on my own but stumbled on some loose rocks and nearly fell.

Why was no one coming to help me? I called again and again. When no one came I began the awkward stumbling back towards the campfire. As I finally came back into the lantern light I saw girls all around me crying. Some had heard the screaming while they slept. Everyone wanted to know whose tent it was, and seemed relieved when they heard it was mine. Some even started singing church songs. I found Ashlea sitting at the picnic table I'd left earlier. I sat down next to her because it was the only seat left and didn't say anything.

We sat together for about five minutes before some other church leaders came running towards us, asking if everyone was accounted for and asking me the same questions over and over again. There was someone in your tent? Yes. What did he look like? I don't know. Where did he run? In the woods. Did you see his face? No. Do you know who it was? No. Did you scream? No. Why not? I don't know.

\*

We crossed the street looking for cars or anyone else on the sidewalks, but no one was there. I don't know if I actually said a cohesive prayer or plea in my head, or if it was just more of a feeling, I urged on, begging that we were wrong about what we might be seeing, witnessing. I kept scanning the residential streets for some sight of another person, but no one else was there. If it was true, if this was real, then she only had us, and that was why we kept jogging.

Much time had passed and I had no idea how far from Bayswater we'd traveled; far enough that there were no traffic sounds to be heard, only the padding of our feet against the cement. I didn't know how you were supposed to locate the bobby police in London. I fought the urge to pee and forced myself to keep moving. Was the hooded girl trying to lose him or was she racing home? Could she hear Anna and me obnoxiously debating fry-sauce versus ketchup? Did she know why we were there, that we were trying to help someone who reminded us of ourselves? Someone who was our age, dressed like my friend Shannon, alone as we were in the nighttime London city streets.

She turned again.

He turned.

We followed.

I remember this road had more streetlights, enough light for me to see that once

again they'd gotten ahead. The girl could speed-walk far faster than I could jog without breaking into an all-out run.

She reached a white apartment complex, ran up the marble steps and I saw her jerk her whole body around to face him as she gripped the doorknob behind her back. The man stopped. She yelled something, something like, Hey!

We froze. I was impressed that she seemed to be staring him right in the eyes. By this point, my labored breath made it difficult to hear what he said back. And then she answered him. And then they both laughed. Laughed?

He bounded up the steps, she opened the door to the building and he followed her inside.

They lived in the same building.

They knew each other.

She wasn't scared of him anymore.

They were friends.

He was trying to be funny.

I had to pee.

Anna and I stood silent for a minute. I was completely confused at what had just happened. And then I was angry. I was mad that this jerk thought he was just playing a joke. I was angry that this happened at a time when my mind was already charged with fear, fear for my friends who had been hurt and fear that it was happening again. Fear that I knew this would not be the last time I dealt with this.

We turned together and silently started tracing our steps back home. I chucked the McDonald's bag into the nearest street bin and unwound the pale fingers that had been clenching it so hard for so long. I began shaking and fought the tears I wouldn't let out until I was alone in the bathroom a half-hour later. I walked closer to Anna, our bodies brushing arm-to-arm as we tried to find our way back to Bayswater and tried to appear strong.

# Essay

## FIRST PLACE UNDERGRADUATE ESSAY

### Depth of Field

by Ashley Andersen

I have moved out. In my new apartment, I am unsure of how or what I should be. Wrapped in blankets in my bed, I feel like a burrito safely sunk into the mattress, cooling in fall-chilled air through the window. I am muted in the dim light of my desk lamp, careful of any noise I make. A week ago, I bought new bedding and cleaned everything from



“counts the time in quarter-times” by Jacqueline Harris  
Honorable Mention Graduate Art

the baseboards to the mirror-covered sliding closet doors. A few days ago, I moved my furniture into the blank bedroom. In the closet is a grocery list of my possessions: eleven pairs of shoes; clothes spaced evenly on their rods, organized by color and length; empty laundry baskets, stacked one inside the other; two single lens reflex cameras—one digital, one manual; a hairdryer. Everything is exactly where I put it; I’ve never before been so conscious of my own space, my possessions or myself.

At 19 years old, I have never before lived away from home. But I’m living away now, 30-or-so blocks away. I am inhibited, in awe of my surroundings. I sleep in my new foreign room, in my different, old bed with scratchy sheets. I read until the middle of the night; my roommates sleep. I am here, a quiet stranger, and my life belongs only to me.

\*

My dog had a stupid name: Patches. To be fair, however, it was a literal name—as a puppy, the patches on her fur were stark, like an overexposed black and white photograph. As she grew older, the difference between white and black grew together, and her fur became mostly gray with black patches. She was a terrier poodle mix that my family got for free at the gate of the county fair when I was six. On the way home from the fair, we passed my dad as he came home from work; “We got a puppy,” we said through the window, and he drove to the store to buy things for our new dog. Every detail was significant: the tender, black pads of her puppy feet, the bright white of her feathery fur, her bunny-hop through deep snow that first winter. Her pungent puppy smell still lingers; how beautiful she was.

\*

I fell for Elliott Erwit’s photographic spontaneity the first time I ever saw his classic, black and white photography. One of Erwit’s first photos I ever saw was of a man and young boy riding a bicycle together down a tree-lined lane with a fresh baguette strapped to their bag. I loved the romantic image—two people riding through the French countryside with only bread, the open world and their bike. As I learned more, I was crestfallen to learn his method, that everything had a plan. Erwit had set a stone on the road in the distance and set the focus and aperture according to the stone. When the bikers came upon that point, he snapped what became a world-famous photo. Once he told of its existence, the stone is painfully apparent; even greatness has its boundaries.

\*

I stood at the shore of Walden Pond, which was full with large shards of ice that traced the edge. In awe of Thoreau’s tranquil place, I framed each photo I took carefully, changing the exposure on each, and hoped one would turn out perfectly. I watched while a young girl and her grandmother played with a toy truck in the sand, and I breathed in Walden Pond’s thick and silent air. I was visiting my oldest brother, Aaron, while he went to graduate school at Harvard. That day, we stopped in small towns my brother had spotted on weekend outings he’d taken before. I liked drives like these, talking to my brother and finding pieces of myself and my life mirrored in unfamiliar places. He had gone to the gift shop while I had a moment with Walden Pond by myself. Though I was unfamiliar with Thoreau’s writing, I felt it was important that I visited there. That it meant something, even if I didn’t know what it meant. Afterward, I got a card from the gift shop

## Essay

across the street with a pen and ink drawing of a man with his arms outstretched, face to the sun. On it was a quote from Thoreau: “Live in each season as it passes; breathe the air, drink the drink, taste the fruit, and resign yourself to the influences of each.” I relished each word in my mouth.

\*

Every morning, I wake and wait for the shower I share with my roommate to be available. I don’t ask when I can use it; I simply wait. I eat breakfast alone at the table in the kitchen, and think to myself in the morning’s golden sun. I go to classes, go to work, come home, go to bed. Lather, rinse, repeat. I am clockwork. I am alone, and I have never before felt such bliss at silence.

\*

I loved Patches too much. One Friday night, I asked my dad to let Patches sleep in my room. She was still a puppy, barely taken from her mother. He agreed, but left her in her box. She whined endlessly and I listened, restless in the dark gray of night. She tried to jump out of the box’s steep sides, unsuccessful with every attempt, but I didn’t say a word because I wanted her with me, no matter if I wouldn’t sleep at all. After what seemed like hours, my dad came in and took her to the laundry room—perhaps I pretended I was asleep. Either way, I fell asleep shortly after.

She became bigger, her spine about the length of my thigh. She was my best friend: I made a bed out of blankets on the end of my bed for her, fed her when my mom didn’t ask me, let her lay in my dirty laundry. I’d come home from school and carry her in my arms to my bedroom, where we both took a nap and she snored, wheezy, like she had a stuffy nose. She became part of my identity; introducing myself to others, I felt I should let them know I was a dog person. More specifically, a Patches-sort-of-person. To know me, you’d have to know my dog. And I was okay with that.

\*

Downtown Boston grabbed me from the minute my brother and I exited the T into the rain-covered city. It felt as though we walked the length of Boston in one day: we went to Little Italy, Boston Harbor, Boston Commons, Beacon Hill. It rained the entire day, and I shot photos freely, exposing my sometimes-excessive need to remember every detail of my life, every memory solidified on film, while my brother held an umbrella over my head to keep my lens clean. The chaos there was something I had experienced before—I’ve been to New York City in midday August, full of heat, humidity and sweaty tourists—but in Boston, it was beautiful. The city looked like polished silver; everything loud and fast.

Even when we arrived back at my brother’s apartment, we were packed tight with people all around us in their own apartments. My senses were hyperactive with city life—

everything was delightful and I couldn’t get enough. I had never before felt such unity with humanity; maybe that’s why people live in cities—for the assurance that there’s a place for them in a world of strangers.

\*

The window in my bedroom is bigger than it was at home; my desk here faces the window, and when I’m doing homework, my eyes inevitably wander to several things: first, the street and the cars that drive past; second, the willow tree half a block away; third, the neighboring townhouses; or fourth, the mountains that surround Cache Valley, Utah. When my mom remarried, my bedroom at home changed from upstairs to the back corner of the basement. I had two windows then, both buried in plants and both small—the only view I could get then was of grass that surrounded the window wells, the sky or my neighbor’s maple tree. Sometimes here, at night, I pull out my camera, set up my tripod and shoot long-exposure photos out the window. I watch as cars blur past, their lights bright exclamations against the gravel of the street. The shutter closes, and the photo shows on my camera’s LCD screen: long strings of lights that are erratic red and white, according to bumps in the road. Chaos framed in silence.

\*

Many of Erwit’s photographs depict dogs in numerous settings—dogs at the beach, in the city, on walks with their owners. Occasionally, he shoots humorous photos of a dog’s legs versus its owners; many times, it takes a second glance to notice that both pairs of legs aren’t human. “Everyone says that the dogs in my pictures are people. I think that even the dogs who are not in my pictures are people,” Erwit writes.

\*

I’ve brought my dog to sleep over at my apartment. She sits nervously on my bed, and looks for approval or something familiar, so she can see home in something. I look at her, and I see myself, day one, in this same room. In the morning, I forget to put her out. Cardinal rule of dog-ownership: Remember to put your dog out in the morning. She has two separate accidents indoors, one in my bedroom, the other on the way out the front door. She has pissed on my new and separate life, and I don’t know how to handle it. I’m here, on my own, and she wants nothing to do with it.

\*

Before going to Boston, I struggled to decide how many cameras to take. There were so many options: medium format, with larger and more detailed film, but more difficult to shoot with and maintain; 35 millimeter, standard size, with black and white film; and my 35 millimeter digital SLR, which I could use to shoot anything with and get good results. I decided on the latter two. Before I left, I was in the middle of a technical photography

## Essay

class, where I learned the zone system of black and white photography made famous by Ansel Adams. I shot 14 rolls of film which contained only exposures of a towel to learn the development times my film would require after I shot with my camera. All of it was boring to me; I felt every day I was losing myself in the technical processes. Erwitt says, “I keep technical things to a minimum... They bore me. I am used to my camera and work without thinking about its personal problems. I think about pictures, not mechanics.” Every week I turned in a photograph I knew I didn’t care about, and I didn’t know how to start caring again; after all, how easy is it to find yourself in something when you don’t know you’re lost?

\*

When I first began to love photography, I took Patches into the backyard to shoot her photo in various places: in the garden, on her favorite spot on the porch, under the shade of our Quaking Aspen trees. I remember one black and white photo in particular. I set her in a flower garden with tiny, delicate flowers surrounding her, her fur pushed out of her eyes so I could see them instead of fur-bangs. She looked off in the distance, serene in spring’s cool weather. Whenever I’d let anyone see these sorts of photographs, they’d react weirdly, as though I treated her too humanly. Yet my dog was a person to me. Timid but friendly if you knew her, she was a child without the attitude of adolescence. She grew to become a great companion for me as she mellowed with age, a friend who listened, was always around, and I loved her for all she was to me—a best friend, a sister, my dog.

\*

There aren’t words to describe living on your own after you realize life can go the way you want it to go. Thoreau wrote about living on a farm, that “the owner does not know it for many years when a poet has put his farm in rhyme...has fairly impounded it, milked it, skimmed it, and got all the cream, and left the farmer only the skimmed milk.”

I’ve returned to my room after a photo field trip in downtown Logan, raised the blinds and opened the window wide. I sit on my bed, try to study Chaucer, and instead, stare out the window at the still-chilly spring day. I lie down, pull a polka-dotted sheet over me, stare at the ceiling. I’ve lived here long enough to know that I’ve milked it, skimmed it, and gotten all the cream. In two months, I will move home, I will live in my old room, and I’ll be back where I started. But I won’t be the same. I have no idea how it will work out.

\*

Gloucester, Massachusetts. Aaron parked the car, and we hurried across a road and stopped at the top of the rocky shore that led to a spot of open ocean. There was nothing between us and the ocean, and I felt open, bare in the face of such a huge element. I’ve al-

ways loved the ocean, and I can’t explain why—it’s just a bunch of water that surrounds every continent on earth and often causes many disasters. Even so, I stood in awe at the magnitude of blue in front of me. I looked through my camera and fiddled with the settings for the shot—I saw the world, full of blue, the sky lighter as it stretched to reach the horizon, and wind-wrinkled, sapphire-blue waves gently crawled toward the rocky shore. I took a vertical photo of the scene and felt the breeze in my hair, cutting through my jacket. We returned to the car, my cheeks cold with the ocean’s breeze, turned around and began back on the path that led us so far out.

\*

My parents are good people, but they weren’t good together. The constant fighting proved that. One night, early evening, I stood in the front hall of our house next to the stairs, the night strangely gray. I listened to my parents scream at each other in the next room, not knowing how to escape or stop it; I stood, afraid of my crumbling family and world, of what would happen after. My two sisters and two brothers in various places upstairs were glassy-eyed, vacant. My middle brother, Adam, hid in the bathroom, trying to climb out the window to escape. On days like that, Patches walked with her tail between her legs as soon as somebody’s voice would raise; we often found her afterward, hiding under my nightstand. We coaxed her out, spoke softly, and gave her reassurance that everything would be all right. Every time, she’d come out, unsure. Yet soon after, she’d wag her tail, happy again after nights like those.

\*

The last weeks have flown—a whirlwind of all-nighters for school, drinking in spring like water from the window, relishing every moment left in this room I’ve come to know as home. But I can’t afford to live away anymore, so I’ve stacked my books in the back of my car, taken my bed apart, emptied the drawers. I stand, my back to the window, the room empty as it was before I came. An old roommate interrupts the moment as she walks in; I gather the last cans of uneaten beans in the kitchen and walk to my car. I drive the stretch of road like it’s mine for the last time—because the next time I come to the apartment, it won’t be mine anymore. It will be filled with someone else’s life; my life is moving on, like an escalator walkway under my feet.

\*

Back in Cambridge, I organized my bag’s contents after driving all over Massachusetts. I had made a mess, and I tried to make sense of all I brought. I set my camera on top of my suitcase, a wobbly resting place about a foot and a half above hardwood flooring. I turned, and as I did, my leg bumped the suitcase; then, the inevitable thud and crunch. I turned around again slowly. I looked at my camera that sat lens-down on the floor, I sank to the

## Essay

inflatable mattress I slept on and crumbled. The lens had cracked across the front; it looked to be shattered in spots. My photography professor had previously told me not to switch lenses—the fourteen rolls of towel tests had been specific for the lens I was using, and another lens would throw off the tests I had already done. I brushed chips of glass off the front, my cheeks slick with tears. My hard work wasted and an entire semester of tedious testing—setting up lights, hanging the towel, metering every shot, developing the film, then checking the film’s density—gone. I sat, helpless. Bad luck seems to strike where you’re most vulnerable. This was my most vulnerable place: photography I couldn’t find myself in anymore; photography that lost me when it got technical.

Yet, I remembered something—I had switched filters at an earlier point, and I took a filter off to make one less sheet of glass on the lens in the way for clarity. I tried screwing off the top layer of glass that cracked. Like an optical illusion, the cracked glass came off—it was a filter. Though I was relieved, the feeling loomed—another photography professor once said that dropping a camera can internally alter its settings, which can make for a completely different camera, maybe an unworkable one. I was shaken like I hadn’t been before, and I couldn’t pull myself together, even the day after. When my camera goes, I’ve thought, maybe a little dramatically, that’s when I’ll go, too. I’ll be good for nothing; I don’t know what I am without my camera.

I moved home. I’ve spent my time with my dog, feeling bad for moving when my mom tells me Patches used to look for me occasionally, missing me in my usual spots. Even worse: she’s not the same. There’s something wrong with her: her hind legs keep giving out and she looks at me, trying to explain, I imagine, her newfound clumsiness. But there’s nothing. And my mom won’t listen to me, that Patches is different, until I’ve said it probably twenty times. Tomorrow I’ll take Patches to the veterinarian. I’ve researched what it could be—an inner ear infection? A tumor? I grasp for anything that could mean my dog will live longer. I’m not ready to face anything but life right now. But in the back of my mind, I know I’m facing death. I’ve never before realized that animals have to die, too, until now. And so what? What now?

Aaron and I returned to the T to take my camera downtown to shoot photos there. I tested out my camera after the lens-dropping—it still appeared to work, and that was all I could hope. We waited next to the tracks, hushed in the stillness of afternoon-stranger-quiet you only find in the subway in Boston at Harvard Square. I listened as a man played a mandolin and sang in French; I turned to see an older black man, homeless, gruffly sing buttery words I couldn’t understand. Though I couldn’t understand exactly what he sang,

I felt that I knew anyway. I smiled to myself in the underground breeze.

I took Patches to the vet. It’s cancer, he said. Almost said. He doesn’t actually know, but in a cruel way, he implied that all signs point to yes. Yes, it’s cancer. I went by myself, drove my mom’s car, and put Patches in the kennel we only use when she’s in the car. I waited until I was in the driver’s seat and she was in her kennel before I cried. I took back roads, my eyelashes stuck together with wetness; I listened to Patches slide backward in the extra space in her kennel every time I’d brake. Every time, I’d apologize. “I’m so sorry, Patches,” I’d say through my runny nose. Sorry for what, I wondered. Everything? For braking quickly, for losing her, for moving out when I should have stayed. For not knowing how to make her better. For everything. My dog, my childhood is dying; where does that put me?

There’s a photo Erwit shot in Wyoming in 1954 of a young boy and his dog. In the background, two cowboys smoke; yet, the photo’s focus is on the boy. He stands in his denim jacket, jeans and cowboy hat as his dog stands on her hind legs. The boy holds the dog’s wrists, and they look at each other. In their private moment, the boy and his dog share something with each other, maybe quiet understanding. The boy’s expression is serene and thoughtful. Maybe he thinks nobody is watching. He’s not anyone but himself, because what care would a dog have for someone playing a part? His expression confirms it: he has found his truest self in this moment with his dog.

Photography was slipping through my fingers. I spent all-nighters in the photo lab, holding on to the last moments I’d probably ever spend in a darkroom. I printed photos from Boston, most just for myself—I had few I intended to turn in with my final portfolio—along with others for my class portfolio. I matted each photo until the early morning before our final critique, putting together each part of my portfolio, spending precious last minutes on my photos printed in the darkroom I’d grown to know so well. The critique went well, but when all was said and done, I earned an average grade. I fell apart; my efforts were, I thought, deeply unappreciated. But I knew in that moment, photography changed for me forever. Photography would be a friend when I needed it, not a defining quality anymore. Maybe I’d choose something else for my life. Maybe it would change back. But at that point, that’s what I needed.

We put Patches to sleep on a Tuesday morning in May. Her health declined quickly; she came down with a probable kidney infection and within the time of seeing the vet the

## Essay

Wednesday before, she couldn't eat, could hardly move, couldn't do anything except maintain life at bare minimum; I had to help her stand outside so she could take care of business without her legs collapsing. I called my sisters, one asking with a tiny, stiff voice if there was a chance we could keep her alive until the end of summer, until she could see her again. But she was too sick; we couldn't justify keeping her any longer.

That morning, my mom drove to the vet as I held Patches in my arms; I felt numb, dead. The vet ushered us directly into a private room, one I'd been in before, but never for this purpose. He asked if we'd like to have one last moment with her, but I'd already had mine the night before, where I had photographed her obsessively and thought of the photos I'd never take of her again. Where I had sobbed as she was nearly lifeless at the end of my bed. An assistant held her in his arms; he encircled her right arm tight with his fingers and held off the vein. My mom stroked her head as I held her left paw. The vet shaved a landing strip on her right arm, pulled out a long needle, and injected her with an overdose of anesthetic, which, they told us, would creep through her veins as fast as blood flows. The vet assistant released his fingers, she went limp, and they laid her on the table. My mom's tears dripped down her face as I stood, stone cold. I looked at my dead dog. Her ear flopped open—she was on her side—and her inner pink ear, the part she always hated exposed, showed. I flopped her ear shut; it flopped open again. The vet showed us out the back door. The day was splendid, much like a few days earlier when Patches was in the backyard, tall grass waving in the breeze; she was there such a short time ago, barely walking, hardly standing, barely breathing. And then mom and I were in the car, going home. I saw a small patch of downy, gray fur on my jacket. I rolled the window down, let it fly from my fingers.

\*

I've spent many twilights in my backyard. Tonight is no different; my feet are on the table of our forest-green patio furniture, my head rests on my hand. The night grows dimmer, collapses on me, and I sit here. It's a warm night, and canyon breezes flow through the air, like patches of cool woven through hot air: an invisible, plaid air-blanket. On nights like this, music comes from my neighbor's house as he plays piano. Everything unfolds, becomes something else. The night grows darker; I am tired of sitting in one place. I stand up, push my chair under the table, its thick plastic legs scratch the cement patio. I walk up the stairs, open the sliding door, and go inside. —

SECOND PLACE UNDERGRADUATE ESSAY

**Home Again**  
by Gina Ricks

*“Guatemalan Worry Dolls: According to legend, Guatemalan children tell a worry to each doll when they go to bed at night and place the dolls under their pillow. In the morning the dolls have taken their worries away.”*

It’s June seventh and the brilliant green of upright grass and the burning purple of our plum tree leaves are losing color beneath a skiff of wet snow, falling from a mute gray sky. My close friend Holly pulls her maroon Maxima wildly into the driveway, windshield wipers waving and squeaking across the wet glass. I can imagine her big-cheeked smile behind the blur of snow, behind the flash of the wipers, and the incense she has stuck into the crack in the heater vent, the musty smell filling the car in fluid smoke swirls. I can almost hear Ben Folds’ “Gracie” throbbing from backseat speakers.

The morning inside my house is a typical one: my two younger brothers are wrestling and loud, junk mail covers the kitchen counter in Pisa-like towers. My step-mom, who I call Mom, is in her pajamas, pouring white pancakes into perfect circles on the griddle. When Holly comes to the door I proudly announce that I’m all packed—in the loosest sense of the word. Really I’m depending on the doors of Holly’s car to contain my junk. To hold my lamp with three glowing cones—blue, green, red—the green wire garbage can, dusty and fragile paper lanterns, my miniature garden gnome, stacks of clothes sliding off hangers, and books, so many books.

Holly talks easily to my mom while I say a dramatic goodbye (from my end) to my little brothers, who don’t seem to care that I’m leaving. We don’t hug very often, but I cry when I hug my mom, and hurry out of the goodbye, wiping my eyes with flurried fingers while Holly stares, bewildered. Ever since we applied for the job as housekeepers in “Beautiful Jackson Hole” and got it the same day, I’ve questioned my urgency to leave home, to discover the “other.” But we’ve just graduated from high school, and there is a gap between now and college in the fall. And the pro and con list said that going to Jackson was the better option; better than staying jobless in Logan, Utah, where I was born and had lived all my life, up to this point.

As we drive out of Utah, past the lunging skier billboard, and into Idaho, where littering is suddenly a greater crime, the snow fades to rain, and the hillsides come alive with a deep greenness under the rain. Bergendi said it’s not that bad, but that the boss is



“Sea Against Sky” by Simone Suddreth  
Honorable Mention Undergraduate Art

## Essay

scary. She says the other roommates are nice. One of them is from Oregon, Holly says. I'm relieved our good friend Bergendi has already been in Jackson for a few days; glad that something familiar is waiting for us. Silence fills the car then, and we both wander off into our own thoughts. We don't exactly know the way to Wyoming. We don't know what the basement apartment looks like, that we'll be sharing with four other girls, or what the job title "housekeeper" entails, but we're on the road. We're going.

\*

I don't know where my mother found the tiny Guatemalan worry dolls with their square faces and bright, multicolored cloth dresses—yellow, blue, red—or if she knew they would stay in my life longer than she would. As a child no older than four, she gave me the worry dolls in a thin, oval container made of flexible wood, and painted yellow with swirls and spots of red and green. For weeks the barking of our neighbor's dog had been shredding the night, terrifying me so that sleep was impossible. After too many sleepless nights for the both of us, my mother presented me with the small box containing six worry dolls with this promise: If you tell your worries about the barking dog to one of the dolls, and put it under your pillow, the doll will take your worry away. Trusting in the legend, and my own brilliant mother, I whispered my worry about the barking dog to one of the dolls, tucked it into the fragile case, and buried the box under my pillow. That night, the dog didn't bark.

\*

I was maybe six or seven on this visit to see my grandparents in Delta, Utah. The tiny town in Millard County has always been a prime vacation spot, because both my mother's and dad's parents live there. This is the small town where my parents fell in love in the fifth grade...well, for my dad it was the fifth grade; for my mom it was a bit later. My siblings and I liked aspects of both of our grandparents' houses. My dad's parents, the Bladens, offered the luxury of countless cousins, mini exercise trampolines, and a whole storage room of expired or expiring Shaklee vitamins. We enjoyed our time at the Bladens, but my brothers and sisters and I loved the perks of the Crane farm and household, the place where my mother grew up.

The Cranes lived on a lonely road, like most roads in Delta are, surrounded my sprawling alfalfa fields. The fields offered a sense of perpetual freedom and the ideal space for tractor rides with our soft-spoken Grandpa. The Cranes also offered four-wheeler and horse rides, a barnyard full of old car parts and trailers, a herd of complacent cows, and skyscraper haystacks for tag, and hide and seek. Grandma Crane made porcelain dolls, and you could find one staring at you with unblinking, marble-like eyes from almost anywhere in the house. And Grandma Crane somehow made oatmeal edible, even

delicious! We called her concoction "mush," and dipped our generously buttered toast into the mush she mixed with non-dairy creamer, brown sugar, and honey. The Crane's also had a Nintendo, and Grandma could kick anyone's butt at Dr. Mario.

This particular visit to the Crane's was my first without my parents. It was just me, my cousin, and one brother, staying until my aunt picked us up after her Hawaiian vacation. It didn't take long for me to realize that something was wrong. I was terribly homesick, and unable to appreciate any of the things I usually loved about Delta. I locked myself in the bathroom and cried into the mirror, watching my red, wrinkled face with a strange fascination. My Grandma Crane had a tough exterior, and seemed disgusted with me and my deluge of tears. I'll call your parents to come and get you, she threatened or offered, but I knew they'd never make the four-hour drive. I hadn't meant to offend her. I had always considered Delta a home away from home, but somehow on this visit it wasn't home enough. Why did everything seem so helpless? Why the overwhelming desperation to be home that made my stomach twist?

Years later we would joke about the incident, and I would offer an unnecessary apology, and my Grandma would say, "You missed your mother." I hadn't recognized at the time that it wasn't just my dad and step-mom and home that I was missing. She understood that even though I'd only been four when she died, that I might always be homesick for my mother.

\*

On the drive to Jackson Hole we pass through a year's worth of weather, as the Maxima is alternately wrapped in wind, glowing sunshine, streaking rain, and fluffy snow like a dandelion at seed. Holly isn't leery at all about leaving home, even though her mom is the cookie-baking, tell-me-everything-about-your-life type. This is the beginning of her "outdoorsy" phase that still hasn't ended. She is equipped with Chacos, hiking boots, a Columbia jacket, and a stickered Nalgene water bottle. And she knows that in a few weeks she's taking off to Nova Scotia with her mom, just the two of them. No wonder.

We find the town under a slant of rain, and even the grocery stores are in mostly-wooden buildings. We curve onto Pearl Street and pass the 49er Inn where we'll be scrubbing toilets all summer. When we pull up in front of the Berger House, our home for the summer, one word comes to mind. Oh. The house seems to be shrugging under its own weight, gray bricks crumbling, orange awning tipping. The driveway is a series of uneven cracks crammed with rust-bitten cars. We knock on the front door and wait in silence. A girl with thick, blonde hair answers. I hope her answer will be no, when we ask if this is the Berger House. You're in the right place, she says, polishing off her words with a smile.

## Essay

The basement entrance is on the right side of house, and we stumble down a set of narrow stairs into cool shadows and dimness to a white door. Even though this is my house now, I feel like I should knock. The first room has forest-green carpet and two ratty couches, half covered with blankets and beach wraps, as if someone is trying to hide the holes where batting leaks out. The room has one tiny window choked by prickly-stemmed weeds, and a fireplace that is an empty, black-stained hole in the wall.

The kitchen is green and yellow and doubles as a storage closet for the pipes and the furnace. I don't think we'll want to be caught bare foot in here, we joke, forcing laughter that dies off too quickly. The sticky floor sucks at the soles of my gym shoes when I try to pick them up and back out of the kitchen. Down the hall we find a bathroom and three small bedrooms. Of course the smallest one is still empty, and we know it is ours. The room is mostly filled by a wooden bunk bed, and has another tiny window, covered with musty fabric. Heaven forbid any light should creep past the barricade of smothering weeds and reach the cave of our bedroom.

Holly calls the bottom bunk. Her first instinct is to decorate. Come on, she says, let's make this place look like home. Strings of paper lantern lights, bright green beach wrap with pink dragon flies, the three-headed lamp. I'm more anxious to leave the dark basement, but the rain is still drumming, and I don't have my own car to escape in. We pin a lime-green shirt to the wall that says, "Happiness is Lake Erie." Happiness is anywhere but here.

\*

Ever since my father had a gas heater installed in the wall of our basement, and my Grandma Crane disapproved, chastising him with the inevitability that our house was going to burn down, I've been afraid of fire. As a child I passed the gas-heater warily, its blue-orange flames forced into neat holes, dotting the four glowing sections of the heater. The thin wire cage over the flames had spaces wide enough for my fingers to slip in, and in my child's mind, plenty of room for the fire to leap out.

The fire safety instruction I received in elementary school only served to heighten my paranoia. The fireman in his rubbery yellow suit, with accompanying Darth Vader mask was as terrifying as the flames. One teacher lectured about the importance of a fire safety plan, that every family should have one, I was furious at my parents. Why didn't we have a plan? Where was the map telling me and my siblings where we should exit? And where was the collapsible ladder that should have been on my window sill?

When I brought my concerns to my parents they humored me by putting me in charge of organizing a fire escape plan. After exiting the house, everyone was to cross the street, and stay there. The fireman who visited our school said no one should re-enter the

house for any reason, but I think I secretly hoped someone would, if I was still inside. Having this plan didn't put me at ease as my parents hoped it would. What about the two bedrooms added on in our basement, without windows? This horrendous disregard for fire safety laws disgusted me further. At least my room had a window. My brothers didn't stand a chance. Each night I watched the red numbers on my alarm clock climb, worry burning through my mind, and each night I doubted I'd live to see morning.

All of this worrying left me exhausted, and I was sick of the time I spent staring around the blackness of my bedroom, listening to my sister's restful breathing. One day, by chance I remembered the worry dolls my mother had given me when I was younger, and felt the first glimmer of relief. Luckily I found the small dolls resting patiently in their case. I'm worried that my house is going to burn down in the night while I'm sleeping, and I'll die, and my whole family will die, I told one doll, then tucked it under my pillow, and promptly fell asleep. I never stayed awake worrying about fire again.

\*

When we meet our new roommates I realize I haven't had to make a new friend since the second grade. All my friends had been easily assimilated into my life, including Bergendi in second grade and Holly in third. Then there were girls and boys from my church, girls from the soccer team, classmates. But suddenly I am in "the real world," if Wyoming can be called as much, and I haven't a clue what to say after, Hi. The shyness I thought I'd conquered in elementary school overtakes me the first few days in Jackson, and I hide on my top bunk, becoming well acquainted with the bumpy white ceiling. When I am introduced to an attractive guy sitting at my kitchen table, who I will eventually marry, I say only a few nervous words before retreating to my bunk bed.

I don't have a cell phone, or computer, and have to bike to the Teton County Library to make any sort of contact with my family and friends back home, or borrow Holly's cell phone after seven, when minutes are free. I haven't been able to eat since arriving, and can't fall asleep and wake up too early. I've always been overly skilled at both eating and sleeping.

Two quotes keep running through my mind. The first is from Spinal Tap: "And I think to myself, how much more black could this be? And the answer is none. None more black." The second, considerably more hopeful, is from Ralph Waldo Emerson: "This time, like all times, is a very good one, if we but know what to do with it." I write them both in my journal, next to a series of whiny, desperate thoughts. I finally admit to myself and to my friends that I am hopelessly homesick. I despise that word has already spread back home that I'm the girl, "taking it really hard." I look up homesickness in the Thesaurus: regretfulness, reminiscence, sentimentality, yearning. So it does exist. It's a

## Essay

real condition, right? I am quickly developing my own definitions for homesickness: debilitating, embarrassing, hopeless.

Work is almost a relief because it means I don't have to talk to anyone, don't have to pretend to be perky and happy and loving this new adventure. I'm usually paired with Glori who only speaks Spanish, and we take turns ripping the sheets from the beds, vacuuming the dark carpet, sponging down the tub, replacing towels in delicately folded patterns. But it's impossible to feel completely at ease at work because of Kathleen. The head of housekeeping, Kathleen, is a woman akin to Roald Dahl's Miss Trunchbull. Her hair is a perm on its way out and her eyes are surrounded by puffy wrinkles of pale, bleached skin. She is tall and wears shorts that reveal thick legs, swarming with bulky blue veins. Luckily, work ends at three. On the short walk home from work I pass a furniture store called "Home Again." In my current state I think it has been placed on my new street to torment me, and lower my eyes to avoid the bold black words.

One day after work Holly and Berg enter the bedroom determined to make me snap out of this funk. Let's go do something! You've got to get out of here. We're going shopping, come. Or do you want to go for a hike? We could go for a hike, they say with worried eyes. I'm worried too. I can't even pin down exactly what it is that I miss about home. My bedroom with the walls painted cucumber green and the blue-green Rockies behind my house that signal Cache Valley. Other good friends from high school, and the smell of my house, like clean carpet and pancakes. And the family that I never made time to hang out with.

Holly and Berg finally give up, leaving me submerged in the flowery quilt my Grandma Crane made. I lie there existing, letting time stumble past, waiting to feel better, but not believing I ever will. My new roommate Adrienne, whom I hardly know, comes into my bedroom then. Her blue eyes are shining and her hair is scattered around her face in wisps, partially tamed by a cloth head band. Hey Gina, she says in a playful voice, I brought you these. She hands me a small oval case, yellow with swirls of red and green. I found these at a store and thought they might help you. They're Guatemalan Worry dolls, and if you tell them your worries, they'll take them away.

\*

For the first time the dolls don't work instantaneously, but the irony of their arrival and the passing of time soon helps me snap out of my longing for home, and realize that I can still be myself in a new environment; that change is something to be sought after, not evaded. I become comfortable with new roommates and co-workers, and start appreciating the new landscape surrounding me. The massive mountain behind our house is called Snow King, and one night we will hike it under a lustrous moon, holding hands in

a line of ten or more people, following one narrow flashlight beam. We will escape to Teton National Park and hike around Jenny Lake through dense forest, textured and smelling of pine, along switch-backed trails to Hidden Falls. I will float on my back in String Lake, gazing at the jagged Tetons upside down, feeling acutely aware of my smallness. We will watch a deep-blue sunset burn across Jackson Lake, and slice String Lake with canoes under a cloudy midnight sky. And I will be so glad that I didn't go home.

## THIRD PLACE UNDERGRADUATE ESSAY

### Closer to Home

by Marinda Burningham

“Hi, sweetheart.” My mom’s voice lacks its usual solidity as I listen to the message she left on my voicemail. Maybe I should have answered my phone when it woke me up two minutes ago, despite the fact that I know I make no sense in the morning when I first gain consciousness. It takes effort to open my eyes and glance at my alarm clock. Without my glasses I can’t read the numbers, but I see the neon green dot that indicates my alarm hasn’t gone off yet, so it must be early.

The line goes silent after Mom says my name, and I grow worried. I know she is trying to find the right words and when she can’t she gives up and tells me anyway.

“I thought I should let you know that I took your Dad to the hospital last night. He’ll be fine, but they’re going to admit him...,” she goes on to say something about “medicine” and “side effects” and “doctors” and “going to be okay” but I stopped listening after the word “hospital.” Eventually she asks me to call her back and ends the message.

I am still groggy, but my eyes are open now. As I stare at the Sunday morning sunshine seeping in through the window above my bed all I can think about is the colonoscopy paper lying on the counter when I stopped by my parent’s house two weeks ago, his name printed in the red ink scribble of a twenty-something office assistant. I’m still not sure what exactly a colonoscopy is or why he needed one, but my mind filled with remembered television and radio commercials full of middle-aged people saying, “I didn’t think it would happen to me, but it did,” and Paul Harvey declaring that colon cancer is the third leading cause for cancer-related deaths each year. I remember panicking while reading the medical jargon on the paper and stewing over my father’s eventual death all weekend. I had made a mental note of the date on the paper and called my mom that afternoon.

“It’s nothing,” she’d said, in the same tone of voice that she used when I asked why sugar-free grape juice and Dreyer’s Light Vanilla Bean ice cream (No Sugar Added!) had suddenly shown up in the refrigerator, replacing my Dad’s favorite Jagged Ice flavored Powerade and Western Family Goo Goo Clusters. She avoided the questions for two months, finally admitting that Dad had diabetes after I noticed a replica of my grandpa’s blood sugar testing machine parked on my dad’s dresser and said something about it.

That was two years ago. I suppose I should feel lucky; my older brother Ben still doesn’t know about the diabetes and he came home five months ago from two years of religious service in South America. I learned young that if I wanted to know anything, I had to do the asking.

Last spring, for instance, I knew I had to find out what was going on after I’d overheard some disturbing comments about my mother’s youngest brother. I found Mom hurry-



“Welcome Darkness” by Rachel Hammond  
Honorable Mention Undergraduate Art

## Essay

ing to finish typing up the family's weekly calendar before taking me back to the dorms at Utah State University in Logan, a twenty-five minute drive south of our home in Richmond.

I stood in the doorway and blurted out the question. I knew the minute the keyboard stopped clacking that I'd upset some unknown delicate balance of our happy valley, religion-centered Mormon lifestyle.

"Yes," she said.

"I thought so," I said, turning to leave.

"Wait," she looked at me, hands folded in her lap and foot jiggling like it does during the last ten seconds of a basketball game when the score is tied and the other team has the ball.

"Close the door." Her strong, determined voice contained a hint of sadness. For the next hour we talked about what David Jack's alternative lifestyle would do to my grandparents if they knew their son was gay. For the first time since she'd discovered the family secret, she had someone to talk to about it, so she did. Before letting me leave the room, she made sure I understood why she didn't want my brothers and sister to know. Other than her brothers and sisters, she tells me, I'm the only one who knows and she wants to keep it that way.

"I just don't want any of you having to think about it. It takes your mind places that it shouldn't have to go," she says, knowing that in the last hour I have lost some innocence. For as long as I can remember, my family has lived by a very strict moral code that most outside our faith do not understand: no coffee, tea or alcohol, no premarital sex, no smoking, no shopping on Sundays, no immodest clothing. Even as my mom is speaking, my faith is searching for a steady foundation to land on; I've never been confronted with this subject so blatantly before. I don't know where I'm standing, even as words from our prophets run through my head: "marriage is ordained between a man and a woman" and "wherefore, men are free according to the flesh...."

That was almost a year ago now, and I'm still the one who protects the secret from my siblings, even Ben, who has lived in third world countries where sewers run freely down the dirt streets.

As I sort through these images while lying in my bed after setting my phone on my nightstand, I remember something she'd said on the phone two weeks ago after I'd asked about the colonoscopy, words that came after "It's nothing" and before "Love you, bye." Something about Dad having colitis for the rest of his life. Something I'd shrugged off because her tone of voice said it was nothing to worry about.

I realize I still don't know what colitis is.

\*

I can't shrug off the hospital news, even though I try to. I roll over and sleep for another hour before I call Mom back, knowing that once I call her back I have to face the reality of it.

I half listen to her telling me the details, saying "yeah" and "oh, okay" and asking questions at the appropriate intervals. I am listening to what she isn't saying.

I'm trying to stay strong and calm, but I'm so stressed. I'm so worried about him. I don't know if I can handle this. They say he'll be okay; I'm trying to believe it. I don't know how to tell your brother and sister, how to keep Grandma calm, how to tell your aunt that I don't want the whole neighborhood to know and that all I really need are some clean bathrooms and wiped off countertops and somebody to make sure your brother and sister don't kill each other while I'm at the hospital with your Dad.

"Ronda is taking the kids to church," she says, referring to my thirty-something single aunt who lives two blocks away from our house, "and Uncle Gary is bringing Grandma Burningham to the hospital. Grandma and Grandpa Browning are on their way down from Idaho, so they'll be here later today..."

Before I have a chance to make a mental checklist in my mind of everything I need to do for school this week, I hear myself saying, "I can come home."

"You don't have to do that," she pretends.

I was counting on her saying that.

\*

Later that afternoon, I'm sitting at Ronda's house with my mother's parents and my twelve-year-old brother, Nathaniel, and sixteen-year-old sister, Elizabeth, who don't seem all that dazed by Dad's illness. I forget that they see him sick on a daily basis and keep watching them play Need for Speed on Ronda's Playstation, making sure that the trauma of this past weekend hasn't scarred them too badly. They're blowing themselves up on purpose, and I'm not sure what that means. I wonder now if I should have taken a psychology class last year.

Next to me, my grandparents are talking about their hospital visit. Grandpa is recounting how he kicked my dad's three brothers, two sisters, and their spouses out of the hospital room, talking about how "ridicklus" it was that they were there anyway. I heard the whole story on the drive to Richmond after they picked me up at my apartment in Logan. I listened to Grandpa joke, his deep voice and tendency to swear making me smile as I looked out the window, watching memorized farms and red-brick houses pass, the farms becoming more frequent and the subdivisions less crowded as we got closer to home.

Grandpa's story is funnier the second time he tells it. I have a sick sense of humor, I think, as I picture my paternal Grandma on the phone with each of Dad's brothers and sisters, even my aunt Rebecca in Australia, telling them their brother is dying of pancreatic failure brought on by the medicine he was taking for the colitis, when she should have been telling them that the pancreas was badly inflamed and the doctors were confident that they could get it under control soon. All of the siblings living in Utah booked it up to Logan to be there for my father's last breath. I look at Ronda, wondering if she realized that their mistake was largely her responsibility. She started it all when she went over there to check on Grandma for my mom and told my hard-of-hearing grandmother that her son "wasn't doing

## Essay

very well.”

Nathaniel and Elizabeth have switched games and my grandparents have changed conversation topics. I shove more barbecued chicken in my mouth and remain silent as my grandma starts rehashing my date the day before. I know the whole family is disappointed at my lack of love life, especially since they had such high hopes for the future doctor I’d gone on six dates with and exchanged emails with for more than three years. Now he was a few months away from leaving the country to serve a religious mission for our church, and he still hadn’t even tried to hold my hand.

“Some boys just don’t have hormones,” Grandma says to comfort me as I dish up more macaroni salad, something I haven’t eaten since I moved back to college three months ago. “David Jack, for example...”

She goes on to talk about my uncle and how disappointing it is that he still isn’t married at twenty nine. Ronda and I avoid looking at each other. I’m staring at the red, white, and blue tablecloth and choking quietly on my salad as I try not to laugh. I’m glad I can laugh about this now, I think to myself as my grandparents finish eating and leave. Before Ronda takes us home, she makes sure I know that it’s important that I let people from the neighborhood help us.

“Don’t deny them the opportunity to serve or the blessings,” she says. “I know your mom says you don’t need anything, but you do. Make a list.” It comes out as more of a threat than a request. I’m still confused by the way she acts when I come back from school. I don’t know what I’ve done to offend her. Maybe it’s the college degree I’m working toward or the opportunity to forget about my family for a little while. She’s taken over driving Nathaniel to soccer practice and picking Elizabeth up from the orthodontist. I know my mom is grateful for her help, but sometimes I wish she weren’t taking over my role as Mom’s right hand.

I’m beginning to understand how Elizabeth feels when I come home and become my mother reincarnated, getting on her case about cleaning the rust marks left by bobby pins in the shower or picking up her piano music in Mom’s living room, the only room in the house that has a chance of staying clean. She gives me an evil look each time I come home, and usually only says one thing to me.

“When are you going home?”

“I am home,” I say if my parents are in the room. If not, I roll my eyes at her and say, “As soon as possible.” I don’t want to leave, but I don’t feel at home in my parent’s house anymore. Before I left at the end of the summer I packed up everything I possibly could without Mom noticing. I took the floral sheets and comforter off my bed and didn’t replace them; I just left the worn blue mattress with the dent in the middle, where I slept without moving, lying conspicuously empty on my pink canopy bed, the yellow walls of my room highlighting the dust that covers the souvenirs of my adolescence. When I come back for the weekend, I sleep in the guest room or Nathaniel’s extra bunk bed. I feel like an imposter

each time I enter my house. Suddenly it’s my fault that I’m home to clean the house, cook food, do laundry and take care of Elizabeth and Nathaniel. And Mom.

For the rest of the afternoon, I play secretary and answer the phone. He’s not dying, we’re fine. We have food and transportation. My mother will be home later. I’ll tell her you called. You can pray for us. My parents are great people, aren’t they? Yes, they help out every chance they get. It is too bad he’s so sick. We don’t need your help.

I’m home.

\*

Elizabeth and Nathaniel are tired of me by seven that night. To demonstrate their frustration on my insistence that they finish their homework, they call Ben, who is in Virginia playing football for a Division III university. They don’t say it, but I know they’re thinking, “Why can’t you be across the country like Ben? Why do you have to come home and boss us around? Why can’t you stay in Logan?”

Nathaniel puts Ben on speaker phone, and the three of them start to joke around. I’m not really included, but I’m listening. Ben doesn’t ask them one word about Dad, just about school and Elizabeth’s imaginary boyfriend and Nathaniel’s basketball skills. After fifteen minutes of the lighthearted banter that the three of them crave when Ben is so far away, Ben says he has to go but asks to speak to me. Nathaniel takes it off speakerphone and hands the cordless to me, leaving fast so I won’t tell him to go back to his math assignment.

Ben doesn’t wait for me to say hi, he just starts in with the real reason he’s stayed on the line this long. “What’s going on? Have you heard anything about Dad?”

“He’s fine,” I say. “He had a reaction to the medicine that they gave him for the colitis and that’s made his pancreas start acting up, which is made worse by the diabetes.” I’ve given the spiel enough times now that I now have it memorized.

“How long has Dad been sick? I mean, when I got home from my mission Mom said he had to watch his sugar intake and I thought, duh, diabetes.”

You had no idea, I want to say.

I tell him about the history of Dad’s health; how he’s lost so much weight he doesn’t even look the same anymore. We talk about Dad for a while; I tell him about Grandma’s mistake and how everyone thought he was dying. We both chuckle at that. Our laughter is nervous and forced.

After a while, I’m satisfied that Ben feels like he’s clued in without making him freak out. There isn’t anything he can do about us from across the country, and I know he feels bad about that. I’ve spent most of the last two years being jealous because my parents supported him in his decision to go to school in Virginia when I got told that Southern Virginia University was “too small and too far away” for me and why didn’t I think about Utah State instead, but now I realize that there is a reason that I’m in Logan and he’s on the East Coast. When our family went to visit him and watch him play football a month ago, I saw

## Essay

the campus and realized that, as usual, my mom was right. His entire campus could have fit on the Quad at USU. It made me claustrophobic. Imagining being stuck in such a tiny place with no car and no bus system to take me back to Richmond within a half an hour made me sick to my stomach. Although our visit to Virginia helped me to realize that the “too small” campus would have driven me crazy, it isn’t until today that the words “too far away” start to apply.

I pity Ben for not being able to be here at a time like this, when our family needs each other more than ever. What if Dad actually was dying and I was in Virginia with Ben? The thought causes me to catch my breath and grip the phone a little tighter. I picture him fidgeting in his tiny dorm room surrounded by sweaty socks and thick textbooks, wrappers of protein bars spilling out of the garbage can.

I don’t want Ben to worry. I know it’s my job to keep everybody calm.

“Well, I have to go,” he says. “Just make sure Nathaniel’s okay. This isn’t a big deal, and he doesn’t need to worry.” I know this is Ben’s way of reassuring himself. Although he cares about Nathaniel, I think he just needs someone to tell him that it isn’t a big deal and he doesn’t need to worry.

“We’re fine,” I say. “Call me if you need help with your English paper.”

\*

I’m doing the dishes when Mom gets home. Elizabeth disappeared to the basement two hours ago, where her tropical bedroom is the furthest place from the kitchen and me that she can possibly get. I heard the strains of calming church music floating up the stairs until an hour ago, when she must have gone to sleep after attempting to pacify her nerves.

Nathaniel’s been full of nervous energy all night. It took us an hour and a half to finish the nine problems left on his math assignment. He can’t concentrate. He doesn’t say anything about Dad, except to ask when Mom is coming home. I walk him through finding the greatest common denominator repeatedly before hounding him about eating dinner. He teases me mercilessly all night about coming home, my failed date, and my big nose. I tease him about his gigantic pointy ears and tickle him until he has to admit that he loves me.

I can tell he’s upset about Dad because he gives in when I ask for a good night kiss. He gives me one on the cheek and an Elf kiss, our version of Eskimo kisses, brushing ears together instead of noses. He even says, “I love you, too,” tonight, even though it’s unacceptable to admit that according to twelve-year-old boy rules.

I’m just leaving his room when I hear the garage door opening. I look back at him and put my finger to my lips and he nods, closing his eyes and placing his head angelically on his football-covered pillow. He knows we’ll both be in trouble if Mom finds out he’s still awake at 10:00 P.M. Running into the kitchen, I have the dishwasher open and three syrup-covered plates loaded by the time Mom opens the door and takes off her worn out black Wal-Mart shoes. Her shoulders are sagging and the big circles under her eyes are visible from across the room. She walks in like nothing is wrong and plugs her cell phone into the

charger.

I keep loading the dishwasher and reassure her that everybody’s in bed with homework done and teeth brushed, praying that Elizabeth actually did her homework. Mom nods and checks the caller ID on the phone as I recite the list of people who have called. Sitting on the couch in the family room adjoining the kitchen, she dials Rah and fills her in on everything. I listen carefully so I know what’s going on. That way I won’t have to ask about it later.

I’m filling the dishwasher’s soap dispenser with Cascade as she ends the conversation.

After she hangs up, she sits motionless on the couch, staring at the phone. It’s the first minute she’s had all day just to think. I remember all the times in high school that I’d sat on my bed just like that, holding back the tears and trying not to think about the fight I’d just been in with a friend or about the boy who had broken my heart or how lonely I felt each time another dance rolled around and I stayed home.

I walk quietly around the counter and sit down next to her just like she did for me all those times before. She looks at me, and I can see that her make up is smudged and her hair is flat.

“He’s going to be okay,” she says, more to herself than to me.

I nod to reassure her, and then I put my arms around her. “We’ll be fine,” I say, rubbing her back. She starts to cry and I feel a few of my own tears escape.

We sit there for ten minutes, mother and daughter, crying. I feel her sobbing on my shoulder and realize that all day I’ve been more worried about her than Dad. After all, he had doctors and neighbors and siblings to worry about his health. Who was going to worry about her?

I’m not old enough to be taking care of my parents, I think.

I understand now why my mom insisted I stay in Logan instead of joining my older brother at Southern Virginia University. I begin to realize that her plea for me to stay close to home was more than just because she knew I wouldn’t be happy at such a small school on the other side of the country, more than money and scholarships, more than the Aggie blood in me. Some days, for us, even Logan was too far away. I needed to be there, and she needed me here. She wasn’t ready to let go yet; she still needed me to hold her together. My move away from home was a big test of independence for the two of us.

Maybe it’s been me taking care of her all along.

Tonight I hold her for as long as she needs me to. She pulls back first, wipes away the tears, and we stand up together.

# Poetry

## 1ST PLACE GRADUATE POETRY

### When Cancer Dropped by For Dinner

by Chelsi Sutton-Linderman, Thad and Jenny Box Creative Writing Award Recipient

we set a plate  
just for him,  
a spoonful of mashed potatoes  
and three yellowing  
green beans—sensitive  
to his perpetual nauseas.

But he overstayed his welcome  
lounging around in russet-orange  
velour suits, gulping milk  
straight from our jug, insisting  
we all spend Friday night  
curled on the couch, fetal position  
in a dark living room, where we lay  
like tumors with no light or sound  
to stave off headaches.

He took up his own shelf  
in our medicine cabinet  
for panacea and elixirs:  
Temedor, Dexamethasone  
and stomach-settling herbs  
that smelled like week-old laundry.  
He even climbs into our bed  
between us, complaining  
*too hot, too cold,*  
pulling the comforter up only to pitch  
it off again, so we spend nights shivering,  
his knobby elbows bruising our ribs.

Over morning coffee he leers at us,  
his flickering gaze wolfish,

and if he notices our red-rimmed eyes,  
our sharp sighs, he grins and says,

*Come on, you know me*

*I grew up with you*

*you've carried me piggyback*

*all these years,*

*long before you knew it.*

So we have no one to blame  
for his sunken-hollowed cheeks,  
the waning-moon chest,  
surgical scars, tufts  
of thinning hair he leaves around our loft.

Sometimes I collapse at his feet,  
cry and demand to know  
when he will leave.

But he smiles, shrugs,  
pats my head, and coughs up bile.

I am an ungracious hostess.  
My husband is the gentleman,  
he never leaves Cancer's side,  
attends to his every need—a glass  
of Sprite at 2 AM, seven hours  
at the hospital, whatever he demands,  
never mentioning the hell he's made our lives,  
at least not out loud.

And while I curse Cancer's  
name in our hallways,  
scream, and throw the butter dish  
against the kitchen wall,  
the two of them  
sit side by side, weighing down  
the corner of the bed,  
and sometimes, I swear, I see my betrayal  
in both their eyes.

# Poetry

## SECOND PLACE GRADUATE POETRY

### The Torturer's Wife

by Daniel Nyikos

walks to market in high heels drowned  
in mud by the high street.  
So the heels will not break, she stabs  
up and down with every step.  
An old woman buying pears  
roots in the crate with her hands,  
knuckles like walnuts, and whispers  
about her, the newcomer—  
“She does the shopping now.”  
I look at pears,  
not those coal eyes, that taut body.  
Long black hair slides across her face;  
the silver pin at her temple is cracked.  
She grinds it with a scarlet nail  
to secure it, and looks to see  
that we didn't.  
When she tests the watermelon,  
she thumps it, and the gypsy vendor warns  
“You will bruise it like that,  
and the juice will be too sweet,”  
and won't let her touch the tomatoes.  
She pays slowly with coins.  
The little square window of my apartment,  
where I tapped at pamphlets as the moon sank,  
stares across the narrow alley over the cement walls  
where her husband used to lay aside his tools and beat  
men with his fists  
to listen to the wet  
of flesh on flesh.  
In the prison where he drew confessions  
with German steel he sharpened personally,

he is prisoner now:  
we toppled the statues in uniforms  
like what he used to wear.  
He paces the cell where he once took  
a man's eyes with his thumb.  
At the market,  
the torturer's wife buys grapes.



“Black Chandelier” by Sarah Sisson  
First Place Graduate Art

# Poetry

## THIRD PLACE GRADUATE POETRY

### In Memory of Me

by Lyra Hilliard

Last night I

slinking out of my long down coat  
slithered into the skin of the serpent  
discarding bones with feathers  
keeping only my single, supple spine.

Last night you

imagined summer's disrobing while I  
burrowed into snow  
buried myself from the light

I think of you, cocooned in your bed of blankets

eyes closed, my image clutched  
in the clasp of your palm

While I lie here in wait

to be taken down to the underworld  
for this half of the year.

You stirred in your sheets

recalling last summer

You felt my skirts sink into your thighs

your breath quickened  
where would I take you?

I've dismissed you,

darling.

I lie here

hidden from the world

Prone, patient, preserved—

yet it's not for you.

I am devoted to another

until summer,

to that other

down South

with the fire in the night.

For before I unrobed

flexed my muscles one last time

before I lengthened my spine by

arching it back

before I slithered into my snowbound tomb

I knelt southwest at the sliver of the moon

found my reflection in a mirror framed with ice

and smiled

at the blood

of the pomegranate

that flecked my face.

This is the oath that I will not break.

I am ready for this long winter.

Stay snug in your bed, darling—

Be careful with your memories of me.

Mind that neither the serpent nor the temptress

eclipse the raw woman

with the sensitive skin and

human heart, the woman who still warms to

your touch.

# Poetry

## FIRST PLACE UNDERGRADUATE POETRY

### In the Kitchen at Fifteen on a Saturday Afternoon

by Ellen Reimschuessel, Thad and Jenny Box Creative Writing Award Recipient

I spoon casserole onto a plastic plate.  
The radio announces the story of two gay men.  
My mother melts bakers chocolate,  
and whisks white into the brown.

The radio tells the story of two gay men  
and the child they have adopted.  
Mother whisks white into the brown.  
At the table I eat yesterday's casserole.

The child they have adopted  
says he want his dads to get married.  
At the table I eat yesterday's casserole,  
and hear for the first time

that someone wants two dads to get married.  
My mother's whisk scrapes the pan,  
and I hear for the first time  
sounds other than my mother's cooking.

My mother's whisk scrapes the pan,  
and I realize she is speaking  
sounds other than her cooking,  
with a scrunched disapproval on her face.

And I realize she is speaking,  
Hell and Damnation on gays,  
with a scrunched disapproval on her face,  
and the poor children they would adopt.

Hell and Damnation on gays  
is something I always hear,  
but the children I could adopt  
is new to my ears.

Cooking is something I always hear,  
but that I could do the cooking  
is new to my ears.  
I spoon casserole onto a plastic plate.



"Bleed Carbonation" by Melanie Woodford  
Honorable Mention Undergraduate Art

# Poetry

## 1ST PLACE UNDERGRADUATE POETRY

### Electric Plant Pantuom

by Ellen Reimschuessel, Thad and Jenny Box Creative Writing Award Recipient

I asked her to marry me once.  
She laughed a puff of hot air,  
and looked through the windshield  
at the electric plant in night.

She laughed a puff of hot air  
and said isn't it beautiful  
the electric plant at night,  
the steaming tangle of pipes.

And isn't it beautiful,  
the orange light pulsing  
from the steaming tangle of pipes,  
like an ocean liner swimming through fog.

The orange light pulsing  
and calling out in the dark,  
an ocean liner swimming through fog,  
searching for shore.

The light calling out in the dark  
had drawn us like gulls  
searching for shore,  
from the other side of the freeway.

Drawn like gulls  
from the suburban hills  
from the other side of the freeway,  
to the billows of steam melting the snow.

From suburban hills  
we had driven to park in the orange light,

in the steam melting the snow.  
and the belly-growl of turbines.

Parked in the orange light,  
Her hair suspended in static energy,  
in the belly-growl of turbines,  
I asked her.

Her hair suspended in static energy,  
she gave a one-note laugh  
when I asked her  
drowned in the orange light.  
She gave only a one-note laugh,  
then looked through the windshield  
drowned in the orange light.  
I asked her to marry me once.



"The Face of Nature" by Elise Hintz  
Honorable Mention Undergraduate Art

# Poetry

## SECOND PLACE UNDERGRADUATE POETRY

### Becoming Lilith

by Cori Ashcroft

she's always swollen  
with fat and pride  
unfocused  
smelling like cinders  
slashing and laughing  
fucking on cathedral floors

a succubus  
she howls through concrete  
and glass  
wind on the wings  
of a screeching owl

sharply caressing  
soldiers of misfortune  
sucking strength and seed  
she's hollow eyed  
eternally hungry

and she wonders why  
there's so much blood  
so many dead children  
mouths open  
silent with shock

first man secretly wanted  
his first woman to come back  
the wild fights  
the violent nights  
still aroused him

eve, second wife  
sad and timid  
cried for her own misery  
longed for the company  
of the woman she replaced  
more than the man  
who bruised her arms  
bloodied her lips

they both hoped she'd come back

but she stayed underground  
sleeping on her belly  
praying to no one  
and singing her songs of Revolution

# Poetry

## SECOND PLACE UNDERGRADUATE POETRY

### Hankou Hair Salon

by Nicole Warenski

I know I'm not thinned down to my bones  
like the Chinese girls you're used to

but my last good kiss  
was months ago,

and as I look at our bodies  
reflecting in the vanity mirror

and feel your fingers pull  
through my hair

I wish I knew the words to say  
this chair is sturdy enough for two.



"Open Window" by Simone Suddreth  
Honorable Mention Undergraduate Art

# Poetry

## THIRD PLACE UNDERGRADUATE POETRY

### His cats.

by Amanda E. Burnett

Will  
sit in your rocking chair.  
Your lover's gone

Ashtray-empty. Oily pillows molded by his  
head, untouched. A smudged note of apology on  
the bed-table sprinkled  
with kitty-litter, like bread crumbs.

You cling to his obsessions with exhausted fingertips.  
Nurse, as you ache, a chipped  
nail, infected eyebrow, and pus in your cheek,  
curing lovesickness with  
those cuddled cats intent  
on tearing out the couch springs.

Once a cherished mantle, tufts of fur encrust  
the shaggy cushions.

Their bloody frenzy  
sniffs out an overdue  
vaccination appointment, rusted spoon,  
fecal-coated dime. Claws  
lacerate tissue  
paper from the first Christmas you  
spent alone.

You xerox lost whiskers with hands  
trembling-the people at Kinkos eyeing  
bite marks and wondering-should they be worried?-yet you  
can't lose these memories

now mash Ritalin in their tuna

drug away their heartache, their claws digging to find  
their owner's hands. Pacify their lust  
to dig through you.

These once beautiful tortoise-shells, playful and glossy-eyed  
would purr in your lap

Your lover's lovers smirk

you kick one who growls at your slipper  
lock your bedroom door after checking with a broomstick  
under the bed. They're only staying for the food.

yet you cradle them

The bed creaks to your weight, coughing dust as you reach  
to pet the missing cat  
that always slept in the middle.

# Poetry

## THIRD PLACE UNDERGRADUATE POETRY

### Mother

by Laura Hatch

I wanted to be a sweet potato,  
supple flesh soft in your hand.

I wanted to tell you with my hair swirled  
in your lap how my ears rang for days and  
my skin dried and cracked like forgotten  
bread dough.

I wanted to press my face into your hands  
because you have known what it's like to feel  
less than a woman, to be empty and  
trembling like the open shell of an egg.

I wanted to evaporate into the steam rising  
and swirling above the stove as you cupped  
your fingers to your nose, breathing the sweet  
odor of lonely.

I wanted to curl in your spoon as you dipped and  
tasted, slip down into your belly to be pressed near  
your pockets on the inside of empty.



“Split” by Justin Potter  
Honorable Mention Undergraduate Art

# Poetry

## THIRD PLACE UNDERGRADUATE POETRY

### Day Six

by Laura Hatch

Days build big inside me  
organs plump and tender.  
I wait by our kitchens, our  
closets, our closings, waiting  
to be opened like a great  
dripping melon, ripe and  
overripe with letters and  
lovers, secrets to be spilled  
and devoured, discarded as  
seeds, till we meet in the  
flesh of the center, flush  
in our mouths, dribbling  
nectar between our fingers  
and down our forearms, sticking  
to the walls, the carpets,  
our coverings, our  
selves.



“Hideaway” by Darren Edwards  
Honorable Mention Graduate Art

*Scribendi*: meaning a compulsion to write.

---