

Scribendi

STUDENT WRITINGS

2009

Scribendi: meaning a compulsion to write.

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This magazine is a publication of writings by students, undergraduate and graduate, who win Utah State University's Annual Creative Writing Contest. This contest is open to all USU students whatever their field of study. The contest receives hundreds of entries. Judging is often competitive and close, so we want to thank and congratulate all of the students who entered the contest. We urge them to cultivate their talent and keep on writing -- for love of the word and the craft.

The online version of *Scribendi* (originally designed by Natalie Young) is printable in part or whole, in black and white, or color. The magazine is available at the website of USU's English Department.

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

—ANNE SHIFRER, Contest Director

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"Long Sunset, Mexico" by Natalie Watkins
Honorable Mention Undergraduate Art

FIRST PLACE GRADUATE FICTION (TIE)

Cave Diving *by Cami Pack*

Nick drops anchor near the peninsula and rocks in the heavy fog. The outline of the shore is backlit now with orange glow. He overestimated the distance, but doesn't restart the boat. Better to be too far

away than too close, he thinks, even if it takes more air.

The neoprene pulls against his skin, and he jerks the wet suit up his waist, impulsively wishing for company. The feeling fades when he remembers the options: Macy, Jason, some random person from his open water class. Not really options and they wouldn't come anyway, so the anger returns.

Nick puts on his weight jacket, wipes his face, and checks the air in his tank: 3,000psi, about an hour's worth. Holding the mask and regulator, he rolls backward into the bluish-green water. It ripples out around him, disappearing in the fog.

After emptying his lungs, to go further below the surface, Nick lets the air out of the buoyancy compensator. It's eerily blue. Respiration replaces all sound, whooshing in and out slowly, like some giant machine erasing thought. Every five feet until thirty, he stops, holds his nose through the flexi-plastic and blows, equalizing the mounting pressure in his ears, startling some fish.

The peninsula's underside stands out, rising questionably: jagged volcanic rock, braids of lava tubes, other eruption leftovers. His thoughts return to Macy. Maybe it is none of his business, like she said. Maybe he should just butt out of her life. But she's fifteen—what does she know about life? Fat disjointed bubbles trail out behind him, and the water's colors drip into their darkly hued counterparts.

Below the rock like a ram's head, Nick grabs a shelf and hurls himself through the black hole he found two weeks ago. As far as he

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knows, nobody else has found this place; they're all busy on the other side of the lake, exploring those tunnels. Cool cave water hits his face, his chest, sweeps back his hair like wind. If his mouth weren't filled with plastic, he would grin at the heady rush. Diverlight bounces around the tube drowning the sunlight, and he turns left wondering if Macy would feel the same claustrophobia that bites at the edges of his mind but still sucks him in.

When Macy was little, she used to spread their parents' big burgundy blanket on the floor, lay on one corner, and he would roll her up tight like a burrito. Cheap thrills until she couldn't breathe; then she'd scream, pathetically airless and he'd stop sitting on her so she could unroll. But sometimes he stayed, or stuffed her under the coffee table, pretending not to hear until she went over the edge: pushing, kicking, crying. Something about her terror thrilled him. It made him powerful. Why did she like it? Keep asking? Macy rolled him once—he panicked, couldn't get out fast enough: didn't go in for that kind of torture. Anyway, he told her, he was too old for stupid children's games.

Following the white nylon guideline he anchored on the last dive, Nick ignores alternate tunnels—some are windows, others passages. He tries to remember the last several times he saw Macy with Jason. Their talking seemed so innocent at the time. He wished he'd paid better attention. Light ricochets down the tunnel, blue on its edges, shadowy in its recesses. The floor is ropy, bulbous, dirty. Under an arching ceiling, twisted hair-like structures hang mysteriously. Every

kick billows sediment behind him, indefinitely suspended, hiding the distance back and concealing the entrance.

Maybe the pictures he found in the truck weren't even Jason's. It didn't make sense, for a man that age. He had reached for Diving World, in front of the gear-shift, and found himself picking up a few photos instead. Snooping wasn't his style, but it was funny until he noticed their ages. He had almost called out to Jason, to say something snide or dirty about his whore collection. But at the same time he saw realized they were children, he noticed the hand, and that stopped him. In every photo it reached in to caress the girl, covering some part, owning it—a developing breast, a mouth, a neck. Was it Jason's? He put the pictures back and fumbled to grab Diving World before Jason got there—now he isn't sure. It left him with a strange sensation, as though he'd done something bad himself: participated.

It takes almost fifteen minutes of wobbling turns through the tunnel to reach the cavern. All the years he played at Celia's he never dreamed this wound under his feet, masked, complex, beautiful. His diverlight barely breaks the cavern's edges. And it takes almost a full minute to cross to the other side, swim up the remnants of a hardened thirty foot lava fall, the claustrophobia leaves. Great lumps of congealed and darkened rock stick to the ceiling and lay broken on the floor. He turns to survey the room like he did last time. Even though he's ready for it, his arms prickle.

Layers of dust and mud and silt cling to grotesquely distended rock; they look like bones: a foot, a femur, a swollen face without

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eyes: interment sculptures cut from the water's relentless flow. Nick revels in this, in being the first one here, in owning it. In only three dives he's charted two caverns and an alternate exit on his writing slate. The darkness fascinates him. With his back turned, the grim facsimiles are almost company, almost breathing in the blackness, flesh-like, a taste of the edge between excitement and panic.

Nick's light catches a structure, and he returns gently to the pounded out pool at the foot of the falls, the last part of the floor to solidify. Gray lava roses boil in cadences around each other, crumpled like membranes, thick and swelling from heat-induced elephantitis. It was a mistake to stick his finger in the dust, to run it up the crease of the fat petal thinking of the space between Kristy's legs. Clouds of silt well up and the roses disappear. Kristy would call it a sign; he thinks wryly, noting their location on his writing slate; she'd use it as an excuse to push him off at the last minute, tease him with pious claims. There's something reverent about trapped lava, he'll reply; she should let him reverence her.

Contraction cracks, blades pierce through the west corner. It looks like an old in-feeding conduit now sealed from three, maybe four lava flows. The vents are still active at the bottom of the lake, creating gentle currents even in these tunnels. Sometimes he thinks there is a glint of movement at the edge of his periphery, though when he turns: no fish, no life, not even moss. Chimeric. Things only live in the lake. Here there is nothing: a hallucination-inducing wasteland.

Glancing at his pressure, Nick finds it halfway gone: 1,500psi. He snaps back to the rope and kicks up the falls into the passage as planned. Nitrogen is no worry at this depth, but there's one other cavern, just past the end of the guideline, leading to an alternate exit at 60 feet, an incredible find. Wait until he shares this with the diving community. Depending on how much time he spends there, he may need a safety stop on the way to the surface: decompress.

The tunnel is narrow and pressing, like a snake skin graveyard. It's too much rock, too much water. His chest rises and falls faster like it did last time, and he shuts his eyes: it won't collapse, he tells himself; it's been stable thousands of years. But he understands how a buddy could be useful, someone to help him keep his wits, preserve his sanity. Because the passage is smaller, silt forms light-reflecting clouds: blinding him, making the air heavier. He holds his right arm in front of his face, over his head to protect it. Like last time, he considers turning back, but the cave draws him in further, an irrational compulsion.

Jason mentioned a kick. Nick moves his legs awkwardly, frog-like, sending the force of the water behind him, instead of down into the silt and mud. It's slower, but helps the passage clear. The walls are smooth and dimpled. Except where diverging tunnels bend off. There's a spring on the peninsula above him, bubbling up from the ground—he's sure there's a vertical tube down here that leads to it; he saw one in the small cavern before, but didn't have time to follow. Nobody needed a caving course if they could stick to their line, he

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thought, proud of himself. It was just one more way to make money off divers. Silt fogs the tunnel and Nick passes beneath three windows, watching the rope curve out a body length ahead, disappearing.

Time contracts, warps, molts in deep water, and the tunnel stretches. Nick checks his pressure and taps the gage to make sure: 900psi. Sensing company he glances back, wondering if there's a fish or something trailing him, then chides himself for his paranoia, debating still if he should return. The tank is a little low, he spent too much time in the lava fall cavern, but it would take longer to go back than forward, and it isn't far to the smaller cavern. Nick shakes his head to clear his thoughts, kicks a little more urgently.

When the guideline turns up, leads through the window, he shakes his fist in triumph. Or is it relief? At last! When he laid this guideline, it didn't seem to take nearly so long, but then, he didn't sleep much after he took Kristy home and maybe that's impaired his judgment. Silt wraps around his fins, moves up his legs, and engulfs his head while he holds the window opening. Of course memory distorts under pressure, but the opening looks much smaller, even hard to fit through. Ridiculous. Nick breathes a little heavier and looks back the way he came, at the wall of solid particles. The idea of swimming back through a silt-out isn't attractive. He'd have to turn off his divelight. That thought nearly makes him panic. Get out fast, he decides, the small cavern is closer. Trust the guideline. Squeezing through the window, clouding it, he follows the guideline away from the dust, noticing that the tunnel also seems smaller. But of course

that's not true.

Around the third corner, the line ends, anchored neatly to the wall. Did he tie it off here? It doesn't feel right. Nick puts his face next to the wall, the anchored end, and shuts his eyes, trying to concentrate, then focuses on the rope. It's exactly like he left it, in a square knot, and he distinctly remembers tying a square knot. This reassures him momentarily. He's diving tired; it's messing with his mind. In a few minutes he'll feel the spacious water in the second cavern and follow the sunlight out, even take a safety stop.

But he's not sure, so he returns to the window he came through: a pointless activity; he can't see into the room below. Nick fingers his gage then follows the line back to the anchor and past it, in the direction of the cavern. It's better not to change plans mid-dive. Jason always warned of that. In the clouds of dust that follow him—bubbles hover, lodge, and pop on the ceiling.

With his empty left hand Nick traces the wall and tries to breathe more slowly, less like Frankenstein. Last time he was in this tunnel the silt was almost transparent, thin enough to see through, but he must be kicking too hard, or maybe the silt dislodged a few days ago never settled. He can sense the darkness wanting him, running its hands over his heart, squeezing. He keeps forgetting the frog kick, probably the real reason there's too much silt—he keeps rushing, thinking it shouldn't be so narrow. Even with the frog kick, there's too much silt, and he's got to stop looking behind him. It's only making him paranoid--there's nothing there. But Nick throws a glance behind his

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shoulder again, and his hand, which had been traveling along the wall, brushes nothing.

One hard thud from his heart. He reaches for it again, but it's not there, points his dive light where the wall should be: silt-out, nothing. He turns around, but everything is identical, blurry, formless. Reaches for it again, kicking. Nothing. Kicks. Nothing. Kicks. Nick hits a wall on the right. His breathing is way too fast. It's getting to him. Calm down, he thinks, but he repeats it, over and over, not at all calmly: calm down, calm down, and it's hard to stay under control. Breathe. What happened? He's not in the cavern; there would be light from the exit into the lake. He also wouldn't be drowning in silt, not in a cavern. Under his glove the wall is smooth and concave. He follows it . . . steady: one hand over his head, just in case, kicking slowly: he hits another blockade.

Trapped, his mind yells—panicked. No, not trapped the ceiling has caved-out. It must have caved out last week. It's the only thing that makes sense. But this thought only alarms him further. What if it collapses again? Comes smashing down? Nick wheezes air desperately. Dribbles of sweat gather inside his mask. He could take the mask off, clear it, but what if he made it worse? He tries to look around. What about the guideline?

Turn back? What an idiot. What has he done? His pressure reads 500psi. Impossible: taps it—no movement. He grabs his hair and pulls his head down: it's too much air; he's breathing way too fast, killing himself. Idiot! How did he let it get so low? Didn't Jason warn

about this? He's got to focus. Be smart.

Nick turns, keeps his hand planted on the wall, swims, not too fast, but his fingertips graze heavily. Find the guideline—it's just a white nylon cord. He keeps his right hand above his head. He's got to get somewhere he can see, but he hits another wall, a cave-out. It looks the same. It must be the same. He turned in a circle. Must have gone around the ceiling. Stop.

His fingers glow in the divelight, crowded by bright particles that blur with the black rock. With his hand back on the wall, he turns, a half turn and moves forward. It's all right. Nothing is in front of him. Nothing changes. Nothing wrong, except blindness. He's not on the ceiling anymore. The guideline will appear any second; any second. He scans for a glint of white and counts to keep his mind sane, to fill up the space: 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6.

In the forest they used to play hide-and-go-seek. Nick would sometimes call it hide-and-go-leak, to piss her off: 21, 22, 23, 24. Don't drain the lizard in my game grodo, Macy said once when she found him in the middle of a leak before stalking off, but he did anyway, 38, 39, 40, 41, 42, even waiting until after 100 to heighten the suspense. His mother didn't want him turning into a hillbilly—if Macy told it was guaranteed grounding. So stupid. And she'd love nothing more than to get him in trouble, 69, 70, 71. She only caught him that once, and he felt exhilarated each time it ran down the trees into the ferns and mossy pads, like he was getting away with something, though he wasn't sure what.

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582, 583, 584. Macy would have found him by now, unless he'd doubled back, followed her while she looked for him. 760, 761, 762. A blast: jumping out at her while she looked for him. 1294, 1295. Gotcha. Stop crying, cry baby, cry baby.

Nick watches the floor of the tunnel curve down now, 1600, 1601, 1602, widening. The silt has cleared. It's now obvious that he's not going toward the guideline; he missed it. Missed it a long time ago, but the floor articulates that reality. His stomach heaves into his diaphragm, panicked until he remembers the floor sloped like this before the small cavern. His heart thuds: still on track? It looks right, maybe. He scans ahead to convince himself, checks his pressure: 400psi. How in the hell?

Nick abandons the frog kick, kicks straight, and hurtles downward, veering. Around the next turn, it's still not there. His depth is 65 feet now, increasing. Did the tunnel go down this far before turning up? No. Maybe. Definitely, maybe. It gets wider. There is no outside connection, glimmer of sunlight, familiarity: just dislocation.

Benches develop on the sides, marking the edge of a second lava flow through the tunnel. He ignores them. After a few minutes the passageway forks into two tunnels. "Shit," he breathes adrenaline into his exhale. It's the wrong tunnel: 350psi. Nausea wells in his stomach, garners up his throat like lava; he pushes at it, clenching his mouthpiece, trying to stop his thoughts. He's ten feet below the other exit—even if he could get to the guideline, he doesn't have enough air to go back. He's got to find the cavern. Nick stalls in his kick for

one second, so close to choosing the left fork, then jerks to the right, toward where he thinks the cavern should be.

His kicking disrupts centuries of silt, making it billow again, filling the blackness with effervescent refraction. Sweat runs around, burns his eyes: there's a good size puddle in his mask now, running back and forth when he turns his head. The tunnel levels off at 70 feet: flat, widening more. He passes above a window, but can't go deeper. This isn't right. His divelight is alive, sweeping the walls, glancing off cracks, surging forward, forcing the next turn, looking. It's too deep, he keeps thinking, as though the depth were his problem: too deep, too deep.

Nick drags against the wall, slows down, uses it to pull himself around. His arms flail, plowing the water while he flees through the suspended particle trail. At the fork, he turns into the tunnel he should have taken minutes ago. The water clears again. He can see a darker hole. His mind processes too fast. He starts hyperventilating. Don't, he tells himself. It will work. But his legs quiver and spasm as he kicks.

Entering the hole, light-headed, he curves to the left, descends straight down to a collapsed wall: 85 feet. He's going to need a safety stop when he gets out of here. He's still pretending he'll get out. But there's no time. He'll get the bends for sure. The bends are okay. Someone can take him to a decompression chamber, fly him to one. Only needs to make it to the surface. His mechanical breathing is so loud and heavy it scares him. The reverberations hemorrhage through

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his ears. He turns back, swims up, re-enters the last tunnel, it's okay, it's okay, following curve after curve, it's okay. He'll make it. The tunnel narrows worm-like, contracts, descends, rises, turns another twenty minutes around to disjointed images of his fight with Macy. Serious accusations. He's using you, he yelled. But now he's too tired to stay ahead of the silt. 150psi: his kicking slows, it's okay.

Nick turns over to look at the ceiling, at the rock—he forgets its foggy and overcast outside, above the peninsula, instead imagines blue sky piercing so lovely, so bright. His lips are numb from hyperventilating; his breathing pulses, eyes burn. The last dregs. Never thought it would happen to him, doesn't even check his pressure. Instead, he brings his slate in front of his face. Stares at it. What is he looking for? A message. His hand jerks while he writes slowly across the slate: “lost. I'm sorry. love you mom.” Nick's eyes go wild, bulging. Out of time. Used up. Breathing is so difficult, so tight. One more rush of adrenaline pours: he rams himself into the ceiling, claws the rocks. Silt rains. But he kicks hard, ripping his gloves, digging for the sky.



FIRST PLACE GRADUATE FICTION (TIE)

Two Types of Angels

by Steve Watts

He had been watching the apartment window for hours, but the waiting was almost over. In a stroke of brazen luck, they had been right. A previously unconfirmed report had stated that the target would go to a particular apartment that night, and he had just re-

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ceived word that the report was no longer unconfirmed—it was a fact. The target was on his way. Tens of thousands of man hours now came down to the next few moments.

Not that he minded the wait. He had time, and patience to spare. One thing his job had taught him over and over again was that patience was more than a virtue, it was the thin line between success and disaster. And in this case, he was not inclined to fail. He could have used a drink of water right about then, but he wasn't complaining. An apartment rooftop was downright comfortable compared to some of the nooks and crannies he'd been wedged into before. Still, he was grateful for the buzz in his earpiece a few minutes later; it provided a welcome distraction to the growing numbness in his legs. "Hawk one, this is Falconer, over."

"Hawk one here, over."

"Hawk one, do you have visual?"

"Negative. Still no visual contact with target, over."

"Maintain position, over and out."

And so he was left with more time. They knew the arrival was coming, they just didn't know when. He'd been afraid the target would show up at twilight, when the human eye is at its weakest, but it was dark now. Darkness surrounded him, enfolded him; he was a dark splotch in the middle of an even darker void, a cold shadow on a rooftop. He leaned against the base of his rifle; the cold press of metal against his face was a good reminder that he was still in reality, and not merely floating around in shadows. It was a quiet night. A

few lamps glowing on the street below provided the only ambient light. Every once in a while he would catch the echo of people walking on the cobblestone below, the sound of a mini-bus or two winding its way through the narrow streets.

His was an odd sort of job, admittedly. Most of the time he didn't have to do anything—if other people did their jobs. He was more of a psychological weapon than anything else. If his presence helped steel the minds of his team members, then so much the better. I'm not much of a guardian angel, but it's better than nothing. Angel. Guardian. Sort of an ironic description, he thought, for a person who did what he did, but in some ways applicable. I'm the one that's supposed to keep things from getting out of hand—or finish the job if no one else can. Guardian, or Avenging Angel, it's all the same. It was never pleasant having to finish the job by himself. It was what he'd been trained for, prepared for, but it didn't make it any easier. He'd done it before, and he'd have to do it again, but it wasn't something you wrote about in your journal the next day. The human mind simply cannot "deal with" it. Conscience rebels against it, doesn't want to accept it; it's anathema to everything nature is about. But an imperfect world often makes demands that human nature is forced to deal with.

If "resolving a situation" involves a few nightmares and visits to a shrink, so be it.

That wasn't a train of thought he wanted to follow much further, so he left it alone. It was amazing where the mind could take a man

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at times like this. He'd think about work, his job, home, the wife. He often wondered what she thought while he was away. His team members would often talk about sports, or politics, but his line of work lent itself to thoughts of a deeper nature. He was taught not to question his orders, but sometimes he did. Governments and militaries were no more perfect than the people who ran them, but order had to come from somewhere. The government hadn't spent years of training and millions of dollars on equipment for him to be a philosopher.

He wondered sometimes if the implements of war hadn't been meant to be used for something else entirely. Take Kevlar, for instance, the magical, harder-than-steel plastic used in bullet-proof vests. Kevlar was probably the brain child of some mad scientist somewhere, a revolutionary way to get rich. Probably invented to use in cars, or airplanes, or maybe kitchen appliances. Sell lots of stuff, make millions, that was probably the goal. He wondered if the inventor ever realized that his product would be the material of choice for stopping bullets.

He didn't wear a Kevlar vest himself. Unlike his team, his vest was padded heavily, its sole purpose to stop vibration. Vibration, movement, anything that would make his job harder. One small vibration on the base of a gun stock, and it's no good. One minor tremor of a heartbeat, and his objective failed. He wondered if kickers on football teams ever knew pressure like that. Sure, that goal post is 40 yards away, but you've got 40 feet to work with. I've got

less than three millimeters, or the check doesn't cash.

The numbness in his legs was getting worse. He needed to move a little bit to keep limber, for muscle tension absolutely destroys aim. He had barely shifted into a more comfortable position when his ear buzzed again.

"Hawk one, this is Falconer. Target has been spotted, heading for you. Repeat, we have a confirmed report target is heading for you. Prepare for resolution, over."

"Roger that, Falconer, target inbound. Hawk one out."

Prepare for resolution. The thought surged adrenaline through his system, but almost immediately he forced himself to remain calm. Adrenaline might come in handy if you were about to knock a door in, but not for him. Adrenaline creates energy, energy creates tension, and tension creates motion. Forcing his breathing to remain calm and regular, he silently clicked on the sight. It took a second for the green-tinged blur to make sense, but suddenly it was clear. The window was still there, framed directly in front of him. No light filtered out the window, which was a good thing; external light sources could wreak havoc with the eyes at this time of night. He surveyed the situation. The small entry window sat a few feet to the left of a larger window. The top floor apartment was still quiet, no movement, unchanged. That would all end momentarily, assuming the intelligence people had done their jobs.

He didn't know where this particular target came from; but that wasn't unusual. They came from all over, for all different reasons,

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most of them bad. The few cases where he actually had intel on the target made it all the more satisfying; knowing that when the team was finished they had made the world a safer place for everyone.

Thoughts like that made it easier to go home some nights. His wife knew what he did, and why, but there were some nights even he didn't want to sleep next to her for fear that something he had done might rub off. Knowing the target made it easier. He could come home, look at her sleeping face in all its serenity and say, I do this for you. I do this for you, and everyone like you. I do this so you can sleep at night, and hopefully prevent bad things from happening to as many people as I can.

He didn't have that luxury tonight, though. This target didn't even have a name. People like that don't want names. Give out a name, and it's that much easier to be recognized, to be betrayed. A few of them worked in small groups, rarely larger than 10 or 15 people, but a lot of them were loners. Loners, outcasts, ideologues. Bureau and Agency shrinks had all sorts of names for them; some of the more famous ones had huge profiles, detailing everything from their childhood to which tree in the backyard their dogs did their business on. But luckily he had seen firsthand how justice worked. Everything he had been taught told him that given enough time, they'd be caught. Caught, or eliminated. Guardian, or Avenger.

Yes, sooner or later they'd be caught. The leaders were the most important; cronies far less so. Cronies could be dangerous, certainly, but in the overall scheme removing the leader always made

mop-up duty quite a bit easier. Divide and conquer wasn't a military cliché for nothing; it also happened to be a highly effective strategy. Clichés. He wondered how they came to be termed that way, because every cliché he'd ever heard had been rooted in truth. Divide and conquer—safety in numbers—look before you leap—an ounce of prevention saves a pound of cure . . .

His leg was just starting to go numb again when he heard the approaching echo of footsteps coming down the cobblestones. A slow, leisurely pace, stopping for brief moments at a time, then continuing, inexorably in his direction. He was unsure of its meaning until he heard the latch of a door open, and shut below him. Someone had entered the apartment across from his dark, Gothic perch.

Now the adrenaline was a very real factor. He forced himself to breathe; he spent nearly half a minute clearing his mind, preparing for what would come next. He let his thoughts go out, searching for something, anything to latch on to, take his mind away from what he was about to do. . .

The flaring light in the gun sight whirled him back to reality. Damn! He still had the night vision sensor turned on, and the backlit window suddenly became a green blur. He switched it off, and prayed that his eyes would readjust to the change in light in time. The window came back into focus, a burning torch in a dark corridor. No movement. Movement was the key. The human eye can glimpse even small hints of movement, and react accordingly.

Movement—there! A figure walked down the hallway, slowly,

Fiction

haphazardly. Now was the time. He had only a brief moment to click his radio on for a brief message.

“Falconer, this is Hawk one. I have visual contact, repeat, visual contact, over.”

“Roger, Hawk one. Proceed with objectives. Over and out.”

He now began his final preparations. The rifle was now firmly pressed against his face, his eye looking through the sight at the window below. He could hear the throbbing of blood rushing through his temples, sensing the beat of the heart beneath his vest . . . he needed to stop that. Too wound up, too much tension. Ironic, that he needed to stop his heart to have a better chance at stopping someone else’s.

He was now firmly focused on the crosshair, centered six feet high, just below the glowing light bulb. He elevated it just slightly, to compensate for the loss of velocity as the bullet would travel through the window.

Another light clicked on in the second window. It was a bedroom, he could see now, with a tall lamp glowing in the corner. A dresser and a mirror sat just to the side of the window. The figure walked into the room, and stood right in front of the window. He carefully took aim, the crosshair nearly coming to stop over the target’s head . . .

And suddenly the world stopped. In a rush of synapses his mind cleared. The light filtered through the sight, the crosshair appeared before him. His crosshair, a pinpoint, an X, hovering in space

in front of his eye, marked the spot. His senses were awash with vibration. He was suddenly aware, aware of sounds, a car on the street, a fountain, a pigeon, the smell of tar and pitch from the rooftop. And then, last of all, he saw the light in the window. The light intensified—and then was suddenly blackened. There was a shape, dark, round, pulsating, covering the light in front of the hollow X. The X—his crosshairs, marking the spot, positioned and holding. There was no movement, for just a split second. No movement at all. The dark shape centered on the X, a shape in front of him . . . A shape, nothing more.

For an infinite millisecond his emotions recoiled. The shape was no longer a shape, it was a profile, a human head. This was not just a shape, it was a person—human, living, breathing. It was a silhouette, but he couldn’t see the face—he didn’t want to see it, didn’t want to know.

A silent, barely audible click, the sound of glass breaking 50 yards away, and the acrid smell of sulphur wafted into his nostrils. He slumped to the roof beneath him. He was nothing, a small, insignificant patch of darkness, nothing but darkness. He lay there, his face turned skyward, the dim surroundings punctured by the twinkle of stars. He drifted away, lying on the rooftop, dreaming, seeing the beautiful countenance of his wife half a world away.

Fiction

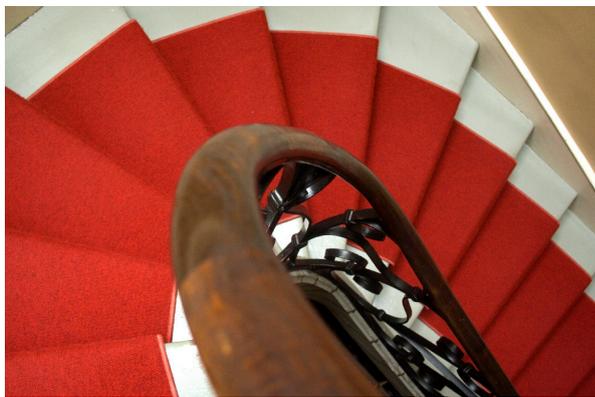
SECOND PLACE GRADUATE FICTION

Analytical Engines

By Daniel Nyikos

00000001

The question was simple. How had the world changed? Telephones were smaller than rodents, cars ran quietly on electricity and gasoline, and wars were fought by machines. When we weren't paying attention, the world became science fiction. But how to capture it, the minute day-to-day beauty of the way of things vanishing like receding taillights?



"Downward Spiral" by Sarah Jane Webb
Honorable Mention Undergraduate Art

The question was, after all, not so simple. And thus, Anita's dilemma, and her reason for drinking cold coffee and avoiding looking at her system tray clock.

First, she needed to finish her newest poem.

404

by Anita Howard

This paean to Alfred, a calico mutt,
his grinning muzzle flanked by spinning pink flowers,
"I'LL MISS YOU Alfred" in big black block letters,
was last visited two years ago.
I am here now; am Visitor 00072.
This will all be gone tomorrow.

Zach misses Jenna so much it hurts;
he thought it was real but it was all a lie.
How can he ever love again,
after they held hands and ate York Peppermint Patties
at Godzilla starring Ferris Bueller.
He's listening to KMFDM and his mood is sad.
Or was, in 1998, when he had no more words.
This will all be gone tomorrow.

A man in a Fred's Garage shirt with yellow armpits

Fiction

lurches across a wrathful brown river
to a Toyota with the windows down,
drags a shivering girl in a green Sunday dress to the bank,
where the guy with the camera drops it to help pull him up.
It was brought to you live by Chopper Four.
This will all be gone tomorrow.

In the time you read this,
new dogs, lovers, heroes appear,
tomorrow, the database updates,
But this,
this is not new.
This will still be here tomorrow.

Anita tapped Ctrl-F4 and squinted at the display box. “Do you want to save changes to ‘gonetomorrow.doc?’” She read it aloud, then groaned. It shouldn’t have been a hard question. She pressed Enter and the word processor disappeared, replaced by her web browser.

You are logged in as Anita99. It is 02:38 (EST), March 21, 2008.
Thread: Building Our Own Analytical Engine! Started by: irongundam.
Last post, June 17, 2006 by irongundam.
we just got a new part of the mill. im hoping well have it installed
by next week. ill try to get you new pics. its looking awesome, but im
starting to think its too big for my garage. does anyone know how to
run a steam engine safely?

New post:

Hi, irongundam. Are you still working on the engine? I’m writing a paper about the history of computers, and I think it would be great if I could include some pictures and some of what you’ve learned by trying to build it.

Anita sat back from her computer and stared at the screen, tapping her finger on the silver plastic of her mouse, just lightly enough to keep from clicking the left button. She had seen that irongundam, one of the moderators of the Netwatch Forum, had been online. She was hoping he would respond quickly. In the past, she had mostly ignored irongundam’s typo-laden posts about anime and his overheating X Box 360 which kept him from properly “schooling newbz.” It was her last year as a graduate student, and Anita had one last obstacle before the school would bequeath her a degree and regurgitate her into the real world. She found herself facing a poetry thesis that had seemed to impress her committee when she wrote her proposal, but was now spread around her tiny studio apartment on single sheets of 8 ½ by 11 printout, lurking in scattered folders on her laptop, and Scotch taped to the edges of her posters. If she could get some idea how the Analytical Engine worked, or even what it looked like, she believed she would finally have the key to the natural first poem of the chapbook, and the mess would, like the toys in Mary Poppins, organize itself, turn itself into a thesis. The only pictures she had been able to find were black and white concept sketches or science fiction paintings, neither of which helped her picture what the

Fiction

machine would have looked like in real life.

She checked the thread. Nothing from irongundam, just another moderator, doctor_heretic, chiding her for “resurrecting a dead thread pointlessly” and directing her to the forum FAQ.

Her instant messenger flashed orange from the taskbar: someone wanted to add her as a friend. She didn’t know anyone who would choose to go by “leftnutz,” but then she saw that leftnutz’s email was irongundam@freemail.com. The thought of someone called leftnutz seeing whenever she was online troubled her, but she accepted his offer.

A new window popped up. To the right of the text display, her own familiar icon, a fragment of a painting by Christopher Shy of a woman with sunglasses reflecting a virtual city, hung below a picture of a cartoon boy holding up the devil horns.

leftnutz says: hi its irongundam.

Annie says: I figured. What’s up?

leftnutz says: we stopped making the engine a while ago turns out my garage is ventilated even with the door open. the other guys wussed out i probly have some pieces of it around if u want some pics

Annie says: That would be great! How far did you get?

leftnutz says: not that far. i dont think theres a working version of it anywhere. they built the difference engine a wile back though and it worked. here i have a link

Anita clicked the blue URL that appeared in the messenger

window. She scrolled past an ad inviting her to throw snowballs at the geek for a free PS 3 to read:

In the middle of the nineteenth century, Victorian mathematician Charles Babbage designed and built the first mechanical calculator, the difference engine. It could perform complicated mathematical operations accurately and relatively quickly. Babbage designed a much larger, steam-powered machine that, by utilizing punch cards and a printing apparatus, could execute customized functions. This device, which he called the analytical engine, is considered by some to be the first computer ever designed. Ada Lovelace, daughter of the poet Lord Byron, designed several functions for the theoretical machine, earning her in some modern circles the title of first computer programmer. The project was denied funding by the British government.

leftnutz says: crap sorry taht doesnt say anything about the difrence engine. i googled it

Annie says: Where did you get the plans?

leftnutz says: a guy in sweden snet it to me. i met him on a cyberpunk newsgroup

Annie says: Do you still have his email?

leftnutz says: probly not. whys this thing so important

Annie says: It would be something to see the first computer. Can you imagine how the world would have changed if the Victorians would have built a working computer?

leftnutz says: if i give you pics of the engine will you send me pics of

Fiction

ur boobs

Anita groaned and turned her computer off.

The next morning, an email was waiting for her when Anita turned her computer on.

Anita99,

I saw your post in the forum. I've been a lurker for a while, I'm too shy to post anything. I thought I'd email you, because I've enjoyed the poetry you've written. Thanks to a friend of mine in the British Museum, I was able to get my hands on a prototype of Babbage's Analytical Engine. They were going to make a full-sized replica for their Millennial Celebration, but they stopped halfway. You'd be surprised what kinds of things they throw away! If you're interested, I have it in storage now, but I'd be willing to let you have it for ten thousand dollars cash.

I know this might sound too good to be true, but I don't have the resources to display it, and it's just gathering dust in my storage unit. If you're interested, let me know.

Marcus Cole

Anita clicked Reply and wrote back,

Hi, Marcus,

Thank you for offering. I don't have ten thousand dollars, but I would offer you a little compensation for assembling the engine and letting me take some pictures. If that's agreeable, please give me your address and let me know when I could come visit.

Thanks,
Anita

With startling quickness, the Preston, Idaho address came back, with the short message: Stop by any time you want; the sooner, the better! Looking forward to it! Mark.

00000010

Anita blinked sleepily out the window of the bus, only half-listening to the loud one-sided conversation three seats behind her that the curly-haired young man wearing a black leather coat was having with his phone. Then she heard the phrases "Cowboy Bebop" and "World of Warcraft" used in succession, and her attention was torn from the brownish plains.

"Yeah, man, he's probably full of crap. I took him up on it anyway. Dude, I'm in Idaho! Wild, huh? Anyway, you'll have to let me know how the new Ninja Warrior goes, since there's no cable at my hotel. Why is watching Japanese people falling off of things so

Fiction

funny?”

Anita took her cell phone out of her purse and tapped the keys, launching the instant messenger and opening a message to leftnutz’s mobile device. “ur behind me arnt u”

“Hang on,” the man sitting behind her said. “I’m getting an IM.” She heard the phone click shut and, before she could turn, he settled into a slouch beside her, knees apart.

“Hey, I’m Greg.” He didn’t put out his hand to shake, so neither did Anita.

“I’m Anita. My friends call me Annie.”

“You live around here?”

“No,” said Anita. “I’m from Pennsylvania. I got an e-mail from a guy who said he has an Analytical Engine.”

“That’s cool.”

Greg fished his phone out and started playing PacMan. He didn’t smell as bad as she imagined he would, but he was wearing a coat. He elbowed her whenever a ghost cornered him.

“Hey, Greg.” She poked him back. “Check that out.” She pointed out the window to a ghost town, or possibly just an abandoned farm “Hey, Greg, look,” she said, tugging on his coat’s sleeve. She hoped he would realize that she was still there and move to a different seat. “where u from,” she typed into her cell phone. Several seconds later, his phone chimed.

“Nevada,” he said aloud, closing out of her message and returning to his game.

“What do you do?” she said. After he didn’t answer, she started typing.

“All right!” he said, cutting her off before she could send the message. He closed his phone and put it back in his coat pocket. “I work at a local computer place.”

She sat for a minute, debating whether to attempt to resuscitate the conversation or just let it die with some dignity. “I took a screenshot of the guy’s address from Google Earth. Want to see?” Anita pulled her laptop out of its black bag when he nodded.

“Holy crap,” said Greg. “We’ve officially located the ass-end of Planet Earth. I think that’s a woolly mammoth.” He pointed to the screen. The quick showed under his short nails.

Anita pointed, her own unpainted nail just short of touching the liquid crystal display. “I think that’s his house. That must be the road there.”

“So, you think your guy’s going to go all Deliverance on you?”

“Well, I figure most people have better things to do than to try to con grad students out of their fortunes.” Anita shrugged.

Greg started unbuttoning his coat. Anita squirmed closer to the window. “I got an e-mail from a guy calling himself Marcus Cole saying he wanted to sell his real-life analytical engine to me. The same dude emailed me two years ago calling himself Wally Stevens. I’m thinking he must have figured if a Nigerian can do it, so can some dude from Hickstown, USA.”

“But you came anyway?” said Anita.

Fiction

Greg, eyes wide with Duke Nukem bravado, showed her the butt of a black pistol shoved into the crotch of his pants. "I figured it would be better for me to check it out than for him to sucker someone like you. No offense."

Anita blinked. "But what if he's for real?"

"I guess we'll figure that out." Greg shrugged. "So, what's your name?"

"Annie. Like I said. Annie Howard. What's yours?"

"Greg. Samsa," he added after a second.

Anita snorted and smiled. "I guess Greg is short for Gregor? That's really your name?"

Greg grinned. "As far as you know, it is. So, you're a poet, huh? How's that pay?"

"It doesn't. And I'm just a student. How's the computer business?"

"It would be great, if it wasn't for the customers. I have this theory that ninety percent of the people who have computers shouldn't. Or they should at least stick to Spider Solitaire. Most of my calls are for what they call 'ID 10 T' errors. One of the first questions I ask these days is, 'Did you turn on the TV and the box? Is it making noise?' Anyway, what are you going to do after you graduate? Gonna move to Paris, drink coffee, wear a beret?"

"No. I'm probably going to wind up teaching somewhere. What about you? What makes you so interested in the Analytical Engine?"

Greg shrugged and started buttoning his coat back up. "It's like

the spawn point of everything in the last hundred years. Plus, it's awesome to think about guys walking around in top hats saying, 'I say, old boy, have you installed the latest version of Her Majesty's Windows?' 'Not yet, old boy. I need to have a new steam-boiler installed so my engine can run it.' 'Yes, it is rather cumbersome, but I hear it can calculate equations with up to a thousand digits in under a minute!' 'By Jove! That's astounding!'"

Anita couldn't help but laugh as she shut her computer and shifted so her shoulder wasn't pressed against the cold window any more, closer to Greg.

0000011

Anita threw open the door and launched herself out, hoping the car wasn't yet going fast enough for her to be seriously hurt. She tried not to think about the silver revolver the man she knew as Marcus had waved into her face as he told her to get in the back.

Greg hit the ground hard a few seconds after she did, executing a commando roll that ended with him unceremoniously ass-up in the ditch.

Anita rubbed small stones and mud from her elbows as she pushed herself up with her bruised hands. She looked over the rim of the ditch at the yellow Honda with flaking paint fishtailing less than a hundred feet down the road. Her phone had fallen into a patch of weeds, and she picked it up and flipped it open.

Fiction

“Is there a signal?” Greg fumbled furiously at the buttons of his coat.

“Yeah, hold on, I’m getting through. Hello? Look out! I think he’s turning around!”

“Son of a bitch!”

Anita dropped the phone and put her hands over her ears, but the sound of the gun firing was no louder than fireworks, sharp pops in quick succession. She couldn’t tell if the bullets hit or not; there were no flashes of light like in the movies; but then the right tail-light popped. She picked her phone out of the roadside ditch, brushing mud from it with shaking fingers. The car roared down the road, away from them.

“Hello? Ma’am? Are you in danger?” it squawked.

“No, not for the moment. He’s gone. Greg, are you all right?”

“Yeah,” said Greg, yanking at his pistol’s slide. “Freaking thing’s jammed. Did you see if he got off any shots?”

“No. I think it was just a toy.” Anita sighed and closed the phone. “Signal’s faded.”

They breathed in silence

She managed a smile. “You were right. At least all he took was our money.”

“He took my EB Games gift cards! That prick!” Greg protested. Anita started waving her phone around, watching the single bar come and go. She got out a little chuckle. “I can’t get a signal. We might as well start walking.”

Greg put the pistol into his pocket. “We can always tell the cops to look for a car with a broken tail-light.”

“You’d think with all that time playing Halo, you would have hit more than a light.”

Greg laughed. “If I would have had a controller instead of a real gun, I would have pawned him. I would be tea-bagging that douchebag right now.”

“Looks like the Analytical Engine was never meant to be,” Anita said.

After a pause, they both started walking back the way the man’s car had brought them.

Greg said, “I guess you have a good ending for your thesis.”
“No joke.”

As they passed the scattering of broken red glass on the road, Greg unexpectedly exclaimed, “You should have warned me before you up and dived out like that. That was ninja style! You should have seen his face. Man, I was so excited, I’m just glad I didn’t blow my dick off.”

“Thank God for miracles,” Anita said.

Although the original, partially-completed Difference Engine no longer survives, the London Science Museum built both an improved Difference Engine and a printer designed to be used with it for the 200th anniversary of the birth of Charles Babbage. Both functioned perfectly, and continue to work to this day. Some flaws were found

Fiction

in Babbage's original plans, so some scientists claim Babbage lacked the technical skill to build the even more complex Analytical Engine. However, some believe that Babbage introduced the flaws into his plans purposefully, as he intended to personally oversee the construction of his magnum opus machine.

There has never been a full model of the Analytical Engine produced.



"Cotswolds" by Whitney Olsen
First Place Graduate Art

FIRST PLACE UNDERGRADUATE FICTION

The Man Who Drives the Tractor

by John Gilmore

Two cats sit beneath a tractor in the dark. Their eyes reflect the headlights of a car pulling slowly toward them on a long asphalt driveway. Two dogs run to the closest spot the fence will allow, barking. They are Great Pyrenees, herd dogs, and they are white and playful in the daytime. Now, after midnight and under the remnant-clouds of a tropical storm, they are growling shadows. Goats spotlighted by the headlights move away from the fence, back toward the cover of trees.

A man and woman step out. The humidity is high, even for Florida, even for August. They pull a suitcase each from the trunk. They are young, more boy and girl than man and woman. Their voices are low, indistinguishable over the dogs. The horn chirps and the car headlights flash and dim as they drag their luggage along a garden path toward the back porch. A woman is visible in the lighted kitchen window. She glances up at them once, briefly.

"There's my Lewie," says the girl as a shadow bolts across the grass from beneath the tractor. "Mr. Lewie," she calls quietly. The cat disappears at the far end of the yard. "I think he's still angry at me for leaving."

The boy looks out into the ten-acre yard. The tractor looms like

Fiction

the skeleton of a giant grazing animal and the remaining pair of cat eyes stare from beneath it. "That's him? I'm sure he doesn't recognize you from here."

"That's Tuffy. Lew ran away."

"How can you tell in the dark?"

"Because he hissed. Lewie's not a forgiving cat. More like a person." She laughs a little.

The door to the screened-in lanai porch slams on its broken spring behind them. The boy trips over an old dog in the dark and swears quietly. The girl wonders aloud why the dog isn't dead yet. She combs through her purse for a house key she hasn't needed in months. Before she finds it the door opens from inside.

"Well hello," says the woman. She moves back to the sink and washes out a milk jar.

"Hey." The girl drags her suitcase forward, lets it tip into the wall, and sits in a table chair.

"Hi Susan," says the boy, his voice warm, if crafted.

"Where's Dad?" asks the girl.

"He should be here any minute. He's working at the tracks."

"Oh. He's doing that again."

"Yes, Melissa, he's doing that. Well, I'm glad you're here safe. How long did it take?"

"'Bout an hour and a half," says the girl, Melissa.

"And have you replaced your tires yet?" the woman noses.

"Well, if we had money..."

The boy yawns loudly. "Susan, how are the baby goats?" He walks to the cupboard. "And remind me where the glasses are."

"Well," she opens a cupboard for the boy, "they are all doing very well, although one of the little boys still doesn't have a name—poor guy. I got six this summer. Oliver got Annie pregnant—that was a surprise, thought she was too young—Mocha and Latte had two girls each, and," she stares into space, "oh, the boy. He's Lucy's. I was going to call him Thunder, since he was born in a storm. But one of Miss Judy's friends is going to buy him so I figured I won't get attached."

"Who's Miss Judy's friend? Miss Charlotte?" asks Melissa.

"No, you don't know her. She's been here several times now. Can't think of her name. She's a very nice lady—biracial—but very classy, very beautiful."

"Wow." Melissa smiles at the boy. "The biracial woman was classy?" She looks over her shoulder at her mother.

Susan glares back. "That's not what I meant, honey."

"So six new goats, huh?" the boy asks.

The lanai door slams outside. A large man in a full blue police uniform opens the kitchen door and steps in. He attempts an enthusiastic hello as he closes the door behind him, but his voice is hoarse. Melissa stays in her chair so he leans down and hugs her from the side. She is small, near one-hundred pounds. The man dwarfs her.

The boy walks across the kitchen and the two embrace tightly, almost sincerely. "How are you, Jack?" the man in uniform asks. A

Fiction

coiled cord stretches from the radio on his belt to his shoulder-mic, and as they hug it digs into the boy's arm.

"Good, Reuben. You're working at the dog-track again?"

"Yeah. You know, with Verizon buying us out I'm getting less hours at Alltel—in the transition. But the sheriff's office can always use me. Late nights I'm watching the poker tables." Reuben rubs his eye. "Everything OK driving over?"

"Fine," says the boy, Jack.

"They still haven't replaced their tires," Susan says to her husband.

"The tires have been fine," says Jack, his voice overtly bright.

"I'm sure they are fine," says Reuben. "But you don't want to take the chance. It's best to replace them every twenty thousand miles or so to be safe. Next time come for the whole weekend and I'll take it to my mechanic. I'd take it tomorrow but he's closed Sundays."

"We'll definitely try," Jack lies.

"So Mr. Rodriguez got fired?" Melissa asks, her first words of the night for her father.

"No, no. He didn't get fired," Reuben corrects, "Verizon is moving him up to Georgia."

"So he basically got fired," Melissa presses. "And they cut your hours."

"No, Missy," her mother stammers, "Mr. Rodriguez just isn't working under your father anymore."

"Which is too bad," Reuben adds. He removes the night stick

from his belt and places it in a drawer.

"And your father's working less hours but he's still getting paid the same."

"For now," Reuben adds cynically.

"So why work at the track?" Melissa asks. "Why not just work at Alltel? You're working like seventy hours a week now?"

"No reason to sit around," He says with a shrug. "And the sheriff's office pays me extra, being a retiree." He looks over at Jack, as if he'd asked the question, and says "It's dull for police work, but I make twice as much guarding at the tracks as I ever did chasing people around the city ten years ago."

"Honey, Missy," Susan cuts in, "I know you don't understand this yet," she looks over at Jack and rolls her eyes, as if referencing her daughters naiveté, "but in the real world we do what we need to make ends meet. And times are tough." Jack takes a big drink of water, hoping Melissa doesn't say what he knows she's thinking: You've never worked a day in your life, Mother.

Instead she says, "It's wrong that Verizon split up your department after promising they wouldn't. They shouldn't be able to send your best guy to Georgia just because they want to hire some twenty-five year old they can pay less."

"Well, none of this matters." Reuben's voice is subtly more intense than the conversation justifies, Jack notices. Overdone. Every discussion with him ends up feeling that way, like a heavy flashlight tapping your car window, red and blue lights in your mirrors. He

Fiction

opens a medicine cabinet and removes a bottle of pills. "The Lord saw fit to let me keep my job, although not my team. But you know what? When the Lord closes one door he opens others."

"Oh," says Jack suddenly, "happy birthday, Reuben." The clock shows 1:15 A.M.

"Thank you." Reuben swallows two pills with water.

"We didn't get you anything," says Melissa.

He shrugs. "Just happy to have my daughter here. And tomorrow after church I'll take you to Walmart to get a cart of groceries."

"That's OK, Dad, we don't need anything," she says dully.

"Hey. It's my birthday. All I want is to spend some time alone with my daughter and spoil her a little." He pokes her in the side with his fist, and her body curves away from him. "Is that too much to ask?" his voice rises in pitch, feigning devastation. Jack laughs because he's afraid she won't.

"OK," she says, half smiling, her eyes on the ceiling.

The congregation at Fair Valley Christian church is singing. It was on a Monday, somebody touched me! Must have been the hand of the Lord! Seven verses run through each day of the week. There are maybe fifty, sixty people in the church and it's packed. Each person stands on the day he or she got saved and keeps standing throughout. Jack sings and Melissa does not. Not at church, not anywhere. She stands though—halfway through the Wednesday verse after looking at him and cussing under her breath. She got saved at age four, seventeen years ago.

On verse eight—I don't know what day it was but somebody touched me!—Melissa pulls on Jack's shirt. He smiles, still sitting on the wooden pew, and continues to sing. She glares and pulls harder. "You are the only one left. It is not worth it with these people. I promise it's not."

He stands. Must have been the hand of the LORD!

The living room television screen is divided in two, and on each half is a head shouting at the other. Culture Warriors versus Secular Progressives. Pinheads versus Patriots. After three years of visiting this home Jack has grown accustomed to the most watched cable news show. More than that: it's his guilty pleasure. Even if he did want to change the channel, he knows he'll still hear Bill O'Reilly shouting from the TV Susan continuously blasts in the kitchen.

The east wall in the living room is a sliding-glass door. Thirty yards beyond the glass is the wire fence Reuben built; beyond that Susan's goats graze in the sun. Reuben has been in the yard since getting home from church. Jack is surprised when he realizes that while watching TV he's unwittingly staying alert of Reuben's location—an old habit. He'd watched him secure fence posts loosened by the recent storm, tapping them back into place with a sledgehammer. Now Reuben hitches a large grass-clipper to the orange tractor to mow the lawn. He climbs into the seat. A low rumble grows as the tractor heads straight for the house till Reuben turns and drives it around the corner toward the front and out of sight. Seeing him disappear makes Jack slightly uneasy. He smiles at his mind's conditioning.

Fiction

Melissa didn't tell him much about her father, of course, when they first met. No eighteen-year-old girl would have that conversation with a potential boyfriend. She had said, "My parents are conservative, kind of old-fashioned, really." This was over the phone, their conversation running till Jack's apartment windows became light with morning. "I'm from Utah," he'd told her. "Everyone's conservative." He wasn't worried. He'd win her parents over. This was before he knew she was lying to them—before he knew she had to lie—about where she was going on a Friday night, where she'd been on a Wednesday afternoon.

Suddenly the roaring tractor drowns out the TV, startling Jack. The sliding-glass door shakes as the orange machine rolls slowly past on its black wheels, hugging the foundation. Reuben's neck is craned over his shoulder and he steers to keep the grass-clipper within inches of the home. A vent low on the tractor blows loose grass and debris up the glass door.

Jack leaves the living room and goes upstairs to the loft. The walls are plastered with Tampa Bay Buccaneer posters and fan flags from their 2003 Super Bowl win. In the center of the loft is an old blue couch facing a large TV. Melissa is asleep under a blanket. The tractor's roar is distant, but constant from up there, as Reuben continues to circle out away from the home. Jack crawls onto the couch with the sleeping girl.

He thinks of three years ago—when they were eighteen and nineteen—his first time at her home, having been invited over im-

mediately following Reuben's discovery that they were dating. After dinner Susan had suggested the two watch a movie in the loft. Sitting pressed together on that couch was still exciting as they'd met only a few weeks before. Then there was a creaking on the stairs and Melissa stiffened. Suddenly Reuben was behind them. "Move over!" He'd grabbed her by the shoulder and pushed her away from Jack, hard, to the edge of the couch. It was so absolutely absurd that Jack thought the man had to be joking, but the laugh never came and Reuben stomped down the stairs. Soon after that Melissa started talking.

As Jack attempts to squeeze onto the couch with his wife, she wakes. "Four-hundred pound man," she whines, a reference to her often stated claim that Jack's two-hundred pounds on top of her feels like a four-hundred pound man would on top of him. From the couch he can see the sky, clear and hot today, through the windows in the loft. He hears the tractor still mowing.

"If you took naps in a bed I could join without having to actually touch you," he says. Her old bedroom is ten feet away next to a bathroom and two guest rooms, neither of which Jack has ever been invited to sleep in. Before they were married he slept downstairs on a hard futon Susan laid on the floor of the office. He had half expected that once married he would be relegated (alone) to a guest room.

After a while the sound of the tractor stops. Jack rolls off the couch and walks to the loft window. "Ready for Walmart?" he asks Melissa, who rolls over. He goes downstairs to the living room and

Fiction

sits again on the couch in front of the TV. Through the sliding-glass door Reuben can be seen approaching, the tractor at rest behind him in the yard. His shirt is sweat-soaked in a ring down to his chest. He joins Susan in the kitchen and Jack wonders what they talk about, unable to distinguish words over the two TVs.

Reuben walks through the living room to his bedroom to change, his dark features sharpened by sweat. From the kitchen, Susan yells up to Melissa. Jack hears the bathroom door shut upstairs, and it's several minutes before Melissa comes down.

"Have you seen my other shoe?" She asks with one in her hand. Her chin-length brown hair is matted from sleep. Jack shakes his head without taking his eyes off the TV. She sits on the couch next to him and pulls her shoe on. "You're coming, right?"

He knew this would happen. He sets the remote on the coffee table and lays his head back against the wall. He's silent for a few seconds, then speaks quietly. "You know I'm not invited."

"I'm inviting you." She ties her shoelace in a double knot.

"Melissa, I...," he groans, looking at the ceiling. "He wants to take you."

"Jack, please. I can't. Just come."

He sighs. He knew from the moment Reuben first mentioned it that he'd be accompanying them—whether Reuben liked it or not.

The three of them walk through the garden in silence. Jack keeps his eyes down. He tries to look dragged along. He tries to look oblivious, but understands Reuben too well to be. Melissa climbs into the

back seat of the four-door truck, leaving Jack to sit in front, and Reuben is quiet as he backs out the long driveway. Jack realizes he's not upset; he's not quiet when he's upset. He's embarrassed perhaps—like he knew his daughter begged her husband to come along.

Reuben grabs a cart in the Walmart parking lot. Jack wants to walk behind the two of them, but Melissa grabs his hand and they walk into the store behind her father, who tries not to look over his shoulder too often. Melissa says the employees are poorly paid, and in foreign countries young people are working too long. Jack wishes she'd not talk about it now, just not today, for Reuben's birthday.

Reuben points at things as they walk the wide aisles, but they are the wrong things, and Jack cringes. He wishes he could guide the man's hand. Melissa grabs risotto, not penne, like Jack knew she would. Butter, not margarine. Whole milk—always. Reuben grabs one more of everything Melissa puts in the cart. Jack watches the fluorescent lights reflect off the smooth concrete floor. He tries to listen to the cart rolling around, that sound like sand in the wheel bearings. Reuben points to Coke and tomatoes and coffee beans. Melissa shakes her head, makes faces. Jack looks up, "Yes, let's get the coffee." Melissa makes another face. "Gross." Reuben grabs the coffee beans and smiles at Jack, like they are teaming up. Disappearing briefly, Jack returns with a two-liter of Coke they had passed up. "Get more if you like," says Reuben, excited. "This is just right," says Jack.

The road back to the house is dirt, bumpy. Jack got the back seat. Reuben tells them to find a Bible believing church in Orlando. He

Fiction

says he doesn't care what kind of church it is as long as both of them are "under the Word." Jack meets his eyes again and again in the rear view mirror. He looks at his wife in the front seat, who looks out the side window. It's that tone in Reuben's voice and seeing Melissa stare off at nothing that causes Jack to remember. It's easy to forget, he thinks.

Then Melissa reaches her hand back to Jack, squeezing her arm between her door and seat. He grabs her fingers, secretly, like three years ago when they were eighteen and nineteen, that night Susan had "offered" to drive him home and Melissa sat in the front seat in dead silence—the night Jack learned Melissa wasn't supposed to be alone in a car with him, a few days before aunts and uncles started calling to talk about her being "unequally yoked with a nonbeliever."

He looks at his wife and her father in front. She stares out the window while Reuben talks about how they will be unhappy without God. It's surprisingly easy, Jack realizes, to forget, to create imaginary histories, to misplace sympathy. He squeezes her fingers, like saying I'm sorry for stealing the back seat. I shouldn't have.

They pull to the gate in front of the house. Reuben punches the code and the slow arm swings. They roll down the driveway, white dogs barking. The tractor is ahead of them, bright orange in the setting sun. In only a few hours, as the young couple drives away in the dark, their rearview mirror will find it shadowed, frightening. The truck approaches the end of the asphalt driveway, and Lewie, the cat, bolts to the trees.

Easy for me, impossible for Melissa—and for Lewie, he realizes. But Lewie can't remember particular instances, specific scenes, Jack reasons. Lewie has no recollection of hitting the bedroom wall and dropping with a thud to the ground after biting so deep, drawing blood, an attempt to protect Melissa on one of the worst nights. A general, pervasive fear of the man who drives the tractor, perhaps, but no nightmares to remind him of why. No memory of that dizzying, only-human terror that exists at the foot of a father who doesn't even have alcohol as an excuse. Lewie fell to the carpet and scrambled out of her bedroom, made an early exit that night. Much harder for her to forget than for Lewie, Jack knows. Yet, seven years later the cat still bolts to the cover of trees.

"Lewie was on the porch this morning," Melissa says, upon seeing the cat run. "He let me hold him, and he apologized for hissing at us last night." The three climb out of the car.

"He won't come in for anybody but you," says her father. "Haven't seen him since you left."

Impossible for Reuben as well, Jack knows, as he watches him carry bags of groceries into the house, where he will place them in a cooler with ice for Jack and Melissa's drive home to Orlando. Jack carries in his single bag containing two liters of Coke he will never drink and coffee beans for which he has no grinder.

Fiction

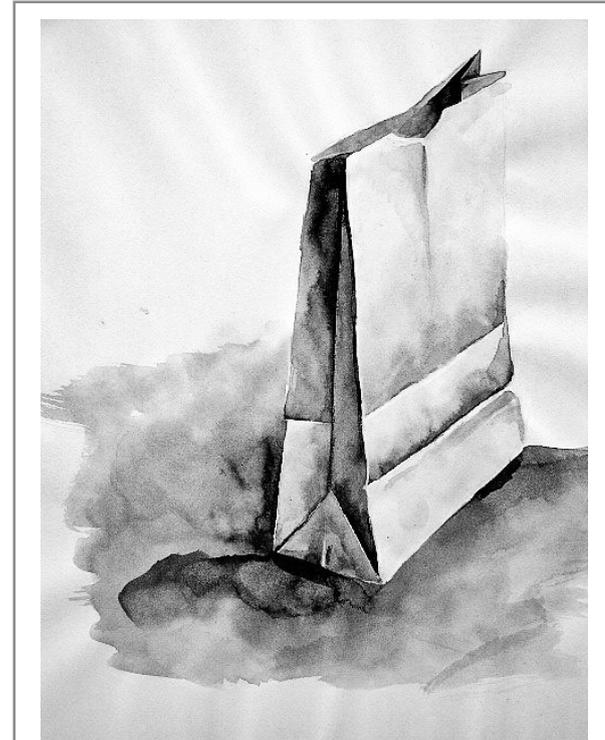
SECOND PLACE UNDERGRADUATE FICTION

On Our Way to Starting Over

by *Gina Ricks*

“You’ll love New Haven, Lucy.” I try very hard to think of times my mom has lied to me. “You’re athletic like your dad.” “You’re definitely ready for those training wheels to come off.” “He won’t bite.” Just a few well-intentioned lies in my twelve years of life. Not bad. I decide to believe her. Well, I decide not to disbelieve her just yet.

The last time we made the cross-country voyage to New Haven, Pennsylvania was three years ago. We came for my Grandpa Cooper’s funeral. “Now we’ve both lost our daddies,” mom said when she hung up with her mother, after hearing the news. I crawled into her lap and formed a necklace with my arms around her neck. At nine I’d never been the one in charge of comforting, and took my new role seriously. I patted my mom’s back and ran my fingers down her brown hair like she’d done to me so many times. I did this until her hair became too static between my fingers. After an hour of crying, and me thinking more about how salty tears are than about how damp my shirt was becoming, mom scooped me off her lap and began wiping mascara carefully from beneath her eyelids with a tissue. Of course I didn’t say it, but she looked like a raccoon. A very sad raccoon. “I’ve got to call the bank,” she said, “tell them I need the week off.”



“Paper Bag” by Michelle Larson
Honorable Mention Undergraduate Art

Fiction

I once asked mom why we didn't attend my Grandpa Belmont's funeral when I was five. She said, "We were too poor to make the trip," and assured me that Grandpa Belmont was the most forgiving man alive, and would understand that we couldn't be there. But sometimes I feel guilty for missing it anyway.

"When does the drive get interesting?" I ask. Mom laughs and her silver hoop earrings wiggle.

"Give it a few states." Fleeing the west coast, we've already passed through Nevada, Utah, and Wyoming. The dryness of Nevada made me thirsty and the canyons of Utah induced carsickness. Wyoming made me feel lonely. We had stayed in California just long enough for me to fill my sixth grade year book with glittery gel pen signatures.

"Instead of writing 'have a good summer' in people's yearbooks, I wrote 'have a good life,'" I tell mom. I think she'll find this funny, but she smiles in a way that is sad. Somehow she looks sadder than if she hadn't been trying to smile.

The night the bank laid her off, mom came home with a carton of double fudge brownie ice cream. She changed from a pinstripe business suit into gray sweats and a 49ers t-shirt and said to put my homework away, we were going to watch a movie. I didn't ask questions. I snuggled next to her on the couch and we finished the carton of ice cream before we finished the movie. It was the five hour version of *Pride and Prejudice*.

"Lucy, what do you think about moving?" mom asked as the

credits rolled at 1 am. She had a way of making me feel included, although I never knew just how much my opinion actually affected her decisions.

"I guess it could be okay." California had been home my whole life. I'd never known anything more glorious than a summer at the beach. But for the look of relief on my mom's face at that moment, I would've moved to Istanbul.

"Summer," mom says, taking a deep breath as we cross into Nebraska. "What a perfect season to start over." That's how we came to live in California in the first place. After my dad died, mom knew she'd come face to face with the biggest starting over she'd ever do. The day after the funeral she buckled me into my car seat and headed west, driving until she couldn't drive anymore, because of course she'd reached the Pacific. California. She said we both cried most of the way.

And now we're headed back to the town mom fled eleven years ago; I guess now she's ready to face her demon: the past. "There's a good job at a bank there," mom said when she announced we were moving back to her hometown of New Haven, Pennsylvania.

"Are you sure they have banks there?" I asked. Mom rolled her blue eyes.

"Lucy, I know it's a small town, but it's not that small. And you've never lived by your grandparents. I'm already stuck with the guilt that both your grandpas died without seeing more of you. You'll have the chance to spend time with your grandmas while I'm

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working. Maybe my mother will finally forgive me for taking you so far away.”

My first memory is of sunshine. I’m sitting on a fuzzy towel, bringing fistfuls of sand to my puckered lips. My swim suit is red and white polka dots, and my skin is warm all over, warm from a yellow sun baking in a blue sky. Short hair hot on my cheeks, I wiggle my gritty, sand-filled toes. “Oh baby girl,” mom says laughing, wiping the sand from my face and hands. Then she fills her palms with oily white sunscreen and smears it across my skin.

On our last night in California we roasted marshmallows on the beach. Mom got some of the gooey mallow in her hair and when she leaned over to rinse it out in the tide I tipped her, fully-clothed, into the water. She screamed and sputtered, then chased me half a mile up the beach where I finally gave up and ran into the ocean myself, feeling the salty water cling to my jeans, gurgle around my calves, sting the corners of my eyes. It took us ten minutes to stop laughing.

“Let’s say a proper good bye,” mom said when the ocean swallowed the orange sun, and light began to trickle from the sky. She carved a ‘G’ in the damp sand with her big toe, bright with red toe-nail polish. I had just finished the ‘E’ on my cursive goodbye when the tide came snaking towards us, wiping away our carefully formed letters. Were we to be forgotten so soon?

“It’s too bad you’re not old enough to help drive,” mom says

halfway through Nebraska. We are both tired of corn fields and a sky so big it threatens to swallow us. Mom flips through radio stations with the same impatience she does TV channels. When a tornado warning rumbles from the speakers mom stops, her hand tense on the dial.

“If you’re just joining us, there is a tornado warning for Dalton County, issued until eight thirty PM. It seems to be headed southeast towards Mill Creek.” Mom digs silently around in the back seat and throws the map towards me. My eyes zip across the Nebraska on my lap, and land on Mill Creek before mom can say anything.

“It’s okay,” I tell her. “It’s quite a bit below us.” Although it seems only inches away, the tornado is probably at least thirty miles south, racing us to the east. Mom’s lips tighten and she glances back and forth between the map and the road. The radio man garbles on as the sky grows darker. She changes the station and we drive into a silver downpour that makes it difficult to hear Deep Blue Something singing “Breakfast at Tiffany’s.”

I’ve never seen golf-ball sized hail before, but it makes me feel as if I’m being punished. It punches the hood of our car and zings towards the windshield. The wipers flash chaotically, squeaking and shuddering across the glass. They part to reveal lightning crinkle on the horizon, lightning like angry snakes. I imagine the blood that would be draining from my hand if mom held it as tightly as she gripped the steering wheel. Wind knocks at my side of the car, trying to push us into the other lane, and make our tires stutter. The hail

Fiction

melts into rain that glosses the road, makes it shine when lightning sheds a fleeting purple glow.

When the sky finally settles it is black with night and blinking with stars. We pull into the parking lot of a Days Inn in Lincoln, Nebraska and sit in a wet silence after mom kills the ignition. After a moment she says, “We’re going to start going to church.”

The next morning we take full advantage of the continental breakfast, filling mom’s purse with apples and oranges. We eat dry, crumbly blueberry muffins and smear slimy jelly on plain bagels, washing it all down with apple juice so sweet it makes the corners of my mouth wrinkle.

We’re about to climb into the Honda when a man in greasy overalls and eyes squinting behind big glasses, emerges from the hotel.

“Which way you folks headed?” he asks, then rushes to say, “Not that I want a ride or anything. I just don’t want you to miss some stuff along the way.”

“East,” mom says, “to Pennsylvania.” Her hand rests on the door handle.

“Oh, well if you were headed to Denver, Colorado, I wanted to make sure you didn’t miss the fourth biggest wild game collection in the world!” Some of his words are lost in a scraggly brown beard. Mom raises an eyebrow in my direction.

“Oh, wow.”

“Oh yeah, and it’s in a bar!” It’s as if the man has found heaven on earth and can’t resist sharing the good news. “Right when you

walk in the door there’s a huge polar bear, reared up on its hind legs,” the man mimics how the polar bear must have looked, even grits his teeth a little.

“Well thanks,” mom says, and tugs on the door handle.

“Oh, and there’s a burger joint across the street,” the man continues, “with burgers an inch thick, cooked all the way through— and they’re still juicy. And they make their own fries—cut up the potatoes right in front of ya. Let’s just say, you won’t eat at McDonalds again.” Mom thanks the man and we climb into the car.

“Well, what do you think? Should we turn around and head for Denver?” mom asks, and for a second I think she might be serious.

Iowa and Illinois are the shade of green I’m accustomed to. The fierce green of palm fronds, lime peels, and of my eyes. Farms crawl across the hills, brown rows freshly tilled, not fazed by the twists and turns of a rolling landscape. Old red and white barns dot the farms, paint peeling; some of their doors gape open in eternal yawns. The road is surrounded by fields of meandering black cows with solemn eyes, mouths overflowing with wet grass.

When we stop for gas in Illinois we see a bicycle gang. “Look for your grandmother, Lucy,” mom sends me a wink so quick I almost don’t catch it.

“Is your mom really that crazy?”

In the bathroom an old lady dressed completely in black leather smiles and calls me hon. Her jacket is studded with silver and she’s

Fiction

dangling a helmet in one hand. I can't help but wonder where she's coming from and where she's going.

I take a long nap through eastern Illinois and awaken to mom belting, "Gary Indiana, Gary Indiana, Gary Indiana!" She loves the Music Man and is still mad at me for not trying out for the musical last year.

"Why don't you take advantage of your super power," mom says as I pull my pillow tight against my ears to suppress her singing. She is referring to my ability to read in the car without getting sick. No, I think, sleep. But in a few minutes guilt drives me to crack a book of Roald Dahl short stories. Mom laughs as I read "The Wonderful Story of Henry Sugar" and I think she forgets about the road for a while. Forgets about where we are going, and why we are going there.

Ohio. Ohio. It seems as if Ohio should be spelled the same backwards as it is forwards. But it's not. It's just a standard greeting wedged between two circles. oHIo. oHello. oGoodbye.

"You are one strange kid," mom says when I tell her all this. I was hoping she might say brilliant.

"Are you excited to see your grandmas?"

"Yeah. It's been a long time."

"I guess when you're twelve three years does seem like a long time."

"Are you making fun of my age? It's not my fault you didn't

have me until you were twenty three."

"Yeah, well your grandma thought even that was much too soon. You're a lot like both of them." I am used to hearing how much I am like my dad, but mom has never told me I'm like my grandmas. What can I possibly have in common with two women in their seventies? "You're sweet like Grandma June and witty like Grandma Hazel." Mom is reading my mind again. I am getting tired of this conversation so I take out the harmonica I stashed in the glove box.

"Lucy June Belmont, did I say you could play that harmonica in the car?" mom asks. I answer her with a spirited version of "You Are My Sunshine." It's the only song I know, and maybe that's why mom has such an aversion to harmonicas.

"That was lovely," mom says sarcastically. "Now put that harmonica away."

"It's called a mouth organ," I say, just to annoy her. But I do put it away, and when silence fills the car I wonder if mom is regretting her demand.

"You'll like New Haven," mom says, filling the stuffy silence. This time I'm not sure if she's trying to convince me or herself.

Pennsylvania is in full bloom. So much green. Lush trees dripping leaves, vines, branches. Trees as far as I can see; the tops of them pop up along the interstate, crowded and clamoring for sun and air. I watch their trunks zip past and feel dizzy; they look like bar codes. The speedometer charges towards ninety.

Fiction

“Almost there,” mom says. Her voice is steady; her eyes don’t leave the road. I barely have time to read the sign, “New Haven 15.” We almost miss the exit. We cross a solid white line to squeak onto the exit ramp, and a black car gives a long, menacing honk. Mom’s hand flutters an apology. It’s been a long time since I’ve seen her nervous.

“I guess fifteen miles doesn’t seem like much when you’ve driven four thousand,” I say.

“It’s so weird to be back here.” Mom glances at her reflection in the rear view, glares. “Give yourself a break, Anna. You’ve been in the car for five days,” she mumbles. Mumbling, another sign of nervousness. I begin to mirror mom’s mood like a baby does, and feel like a school of fish is racing through my stomach.

“I just wish we already had an apartment, so we didn’t have to stay with my mom. I love her, she’s just a lot to handle after a long drive. And a job loss. It’d just be nice if we had our own place.”

“I know.”

“We will. Soon.” I have no trouble believing mom about this. Independence is her trademark.

“You went to high school there?” The building we’re driving past is smaller than my middle school. Then it occurs to me that I’m going to go to high school there. For a moment my mouth tastes bitter, and I resent this starting over business. My chest tightens when I think of sunny west coast beaches and flip flops and strawberry slush puppies. It’s okay, I tell myself, you can still wear flip flops in

Pennsylvania.

“I really did go to high school there. I used to think it was big.” The tour of the town doesn’t last long. New Haven is perhaps the last town in the United States without a McDonalds. “It hasn’t changed much in three years, has it.” It’s strange that at the same time I am leaving home mom is coming home. Will I have a daughter someday and yank her away to the west coast? I think that I might, and the thought makes me feel better for a moment. Makes me feel in control.

Mom doesn’t say, “Well, here we are,” when she pulls into the crumbling driveway of her childhood home. It’s obvious. Here we are. We were going here, now we are here. The house is small, one floor, and so brightly blue it blends into the cloudless sky. The paint is chipping off in some places, like a snake sloughing its skin. Black shingles peel back like old Band-Aids, and thick eggshell colored curtains dangle stiffly in the windows.

Grandma Hazel is on the small porch, rocking on a bright red swing, her hand wrapped around a can of Dr. Pepper. Somehow I notice all of this before I notice that her short, spiky hair is...purple. A deep purple, like overripe plums. She doesn’t stand up when we get out of the car and walk towards her. She does, however, state the obvious.

“You’re here.”

“We’re here,” mom echoes. I walk a little behind mom until she

Fiction

pulls me up next to her, squeezing me against the sharpness of her hip. When we are a few feet away Hazel stands up slowly, but her legs don't straighten completely. The three of us mash together in an uncomfortable hug that Hazel leans back from in a hurry, like she's frantic for air. She smells like soda and jalapenos and hairspray.

"I won't say 'look how big you are' Lucy, because I always thought that was rather rude," Hazel says, drowning her words with a laugh/cough like a rickety wagon.

"That's okay. I am tall."

"It's no crime to be tall. I was tall before I started shrinking!" Again the laugh/cough; the sound makes mom wince. "She doesn't get her height from you, does she Anna," Hazel says. Mom shakes her head. For a moment I remember that mom is someone's child; she hasn't always been the one in charge. I find that very hard to swallow.

"How was the drive?" Hazel asks, sitting back down on the swing that creaks under her weight and sheds rust from swaying chains.

"Long," mom says. I nod.

"I guess that's what happens when you move across the country." I almost expect that rickety laugh but the air is silent. I slap at a mosquito on my neck. Mom's hand tightens around my arm.

"I guess so," mom says, and smiles in a way that looks like she's sucking on a lemon.

"Well, I'm glad you're here," Hazel says, and standing up she

disappears inside the house. Mom and I look at each other for a moment, then follow her in.

After a dinner of fish sticks and potato salad, where the silverware made more noise than we did, mom begins yawning.

"You can just say you're tired. No need to sit here yawning and making a big show of it," Hazel says, and winks at me. I have no idea what the wink means. I hadn't remembered my grandma as absolutely terrifying.

"Mom, I'm tired," mom says pointedly, and walks out to the car. I'm hoping she's going out to get our bags, and not to run away. Unless of course the running away involved me and being back in California. Mom doesn't slam the screen door, but doesn't keep it from slamming, either. When she returns I follow her to her old bedroom that we'll be sharing.

Everything in mom's childhood room is pink. The wallpaper is the fierce shade of Pepto-Bismol and the shaggy carpet is deep burgundy. Roses in full bloom parade across the bedspread. There's an oak dresser with a mirror arching across the top, speckled yellow around the edges.

While mom brushes her teeth, I change into my pajamas, trying to avoid eye contact with myself in the mirror. Finally I give up. I am tall. My head almost pokes above the mirror. My hair, the color of black licorice, lays limp across my shoulders, and I have the beginning of light brown freckles surfacing on my cheekbones; freckles that come and go with summer. How can I get rid of the lost look in my

Fiction

eyes before mom comes back? The pupils are huge, leaving only a thin ring of green.

“You are beautiful!” mom says, coming back in the room. I hate being caught looking in the mirror. “But then you are my daughter.” I want to ask how a twelve year old girl who is freckled and tall and doesn’t even shave her legs yet is supposed to feel beautiful. I feel like a plant yanked from soil, roots shriveling, petals wilting. Instead I shout: “I’m not the pink-aholic!” Knowing it’s an immature insult that I’ve just flung across the room.

“It’s true. And the real reason I wanted to return to New Haven is because of the Pink Anonymous group that meets every Thursday night.” Mom laughs, I scowl.

“You didn’t tell me grandma dyed her hair purple,” I whisper once we’ve turned off the lights.

“You think I would’ve kept that from you? I had no idea.”

The night is full of squeaking mattress springs, hollow moonlight, and the rustle of trains lumbering down nearby tracks. What it’s lacking is sleep. At two a.m. mom rolls over on the twin bed and leans down to where I lay face up on the trundle.

“I used to sneak out this window,” she whispers and then giggles in a way that makes her seem worryless and too young to be my mother. I want to ask her who she used to sneak down and meet—but don’t.

Instead I say: “I’m glad we’re here.”

This is the first lie I’ve told my mom in a very long time.

THIRD PLACE UNDERGRADUATE FICTION

Weight

by Ellen Reimhussel

Roman kept adding blankets to the bed. He started in the winter when she was always cold, always huddled under something, sipping tea or standing by the stove, slowly turning her hands above the glowing red burner. Their house was a fixer-upper they never really fixed up and impossible to heat. The wind blew straight through it. She suspected the walls held nothing but cavernous space, no insulation, just long, thin boxes of emptiness framed by drywall, studs and wood shingles. She rapped her knuckles against the gap between the couch and Goya print hanging above. “It sounds hollow to me.” Sitting at the table, he looked up from his laptop and said, “Sabine, honey, insulation sounds just like that.” He went back to typing reports and added, “Besides, what do you want to do? Tear the walls down?” But she kept on tapping until it became a habit, so that when she sat reading or watching a movie, her fingers danced the same rhythm, making the hollowness sing out.

The blankets stayed into mid-March. In fact, it seemed he added more all the time. He never did it while she was in the room, but she assumed he added them just before going to sleep. They rarely went to bed at the same time. She was a night owl and he caught the 6:50 train to work. The blankets stacked so high, she couldn’t see the door when she lay under them, only a wall of multi-colored stripes.

Fiction

It looked like tree rings, growing out from her, the different widths and textures indicating the abundance of the year.

The one time she asked him about the blankets, he just shrugged while brushing his teeth, spat into the bathroom sink and said, “I got used to sleeping under all that weight. I like it now.” She leaned her long, thin frame against the door and watched him rinse his brush. Maybe he liked the weight because he couldn’t stand not being under pressure, even when he slept? Maybe he worried that without it, he’d float off somewhere? Or maybe she would?

She spent her days proofreading romance novels. She sat on the bed with a laptop and added commas to sentences like, “as she caught his masculine aroma, she inhaled a new, inborn wisdom.” The writing was so bad the editors wouldn’t touch it until some poor stooge went over every sentence. She knew her position was basically ceremonial; the readers didn’t care about dangling participles, only how high the bosoms heaved. When asked about her job, she put up her palms and said, “That’s what I get for majoring in art history.”

She had finished the previous manuscript early, and the editors were slow emailing a new one. Usually when this happened, she just sat around the house in her slippers and bathrobe and played games online or watched a movie, but she didn’t feel like it today. She couldn’t remember the last time she went into the city, the last time she went anywhere further than the grocery store. She dug her purse out from the back corner of the coat closet, under Roman’s running shoes. In one of the pockets she found a Metro card with a few

bucks on it. She pulled on a faded University of Maryland hoodie and walked outside.

Things had really warmed up. She barely needed the hoodie and the grass showed a few green patches. At the end of her block, a cherry tree exploded in pink blossoms. She pulled her purse strap up her to shoulder. She wanted to spend the day at the mall, like she used to back in college, wanted to wander the Hirshhorn and the National Gallery for hours. She knew the best things usually lived in the basement. In the Hirshhorn, Man Ray’s bizarre “Blue Baguette” and the Giacometti sculptures, pale blue women and men stretched so thin, the slightest pressure and they’d snap. But it was the basement of the old wing of the National Gallery she loved most, the light filtering through the high dusty windows into halls of silent marble figures, all frozen in some sort of action: fleeing, embracing, dancing, weeping, or dying.

Roman liked her there when he got home, but he would almost certainly work late. If he called the house phone, she could always say she was in the shower or getting the mail. Maybe she’d find a place to get pho. She and her roommate, Holly, used to go out for the Vietnamese soup after every paper, test or breakup. There was something in the broth and the ritual, the tearing of basil and sprinkling of bean sprouts into a steaming bowl big enough to drown in. Something in the dimly lit restaurant full of tables straight from a high school cafeteria with the menus taped to the top and the sauces in ketchup bottles. They used to joke the stuff had opium in it; that’s

Fiction

how good it made you feel. After pho, she always walked across the street to a kosher grocery store and bought matzo for latkes. She and Holly used to throw latke parties, invite everyone they knew and tell them to bring anyone they wanted. She went through a whole bag of potatoes, but still, as soon as she pulled one from the oil and dropped it on a paper towel it disappeared. The windows of their student apartment fogged against the cold. People leaned against walls, smashed onto the only couch or sat cross legged in the center of the floor, holding grease-spotted paper plates supporting two or three honey-colored cakes. They smeared them with sour cream and apple sauce and talked with their mouths full.

She followed the descending sidewalk underground, out of the sun and into the station. The air hung damp and smelled of piss and cigarettes. A middle-aged woman with a huge bag held the hand of a boy wearing a “Brownsville T-ball” shirt. The woman kept pressing a button on the huge gray box that occupied a corner of the station. Stupid tourists. Sabine walked up to gates and reached into her purse for the pass. She dug under the cell phone, car keys, Kleenexes and random receipts, but she couldn’t find it. Kneeling on the ground, she dumped her purse on the cement, but it wasn’t there. Pens and tampons, gum and a wallet, but no pass. She scooped everything back in, except the wallet and headed towards the woman, still hopelessly punching buttons. As she approached, the woman turned and said, “I don’t think it’s working.”

“Hmm, let me try.” She smiled and stepped forward. The

display didn’t say anything, no gray block letters scrolling across. She punched the “add value” button, but still nothing. She hit “combine tickets” and “cancel.” Nothing. The mucus colored rectangle refused to light up. She pulled out a five and fed one edge into the slot, but the bill just hung limply before floating down to the floor. Already crouched, poking at the concrete floor, the woman’s son grabbed it and held it up to his mother, who handed it to Sabine. She shoved it back into her purse and put a hand on her hip and slowly pivoted on her heel. The attendant’s booth was empty.

The woman looked in that direction also. “Maybe we’ll just wait until he gets back.” She glanced down at her son who sagged against the wall.

“Yeah, that’s probably the best hope.” Sabine leaned against the wall.

A girl descended into the station, her heels clicking loudly and echoing through the empty space. She wore jeans, a low-cut white sweater and long, thin brown hair that half covered the cell phone pressed to her ear. Sabine caught the end of her conversation. “Well I wouldn’t have if you hadn’t ditched me last night.” The girl stopped and turned back towards the entrance. “Yeah, well look, since you’re not going to drive out here, I’m taking the train back, so I gotta go. I’ll talk to you later.” She snapped the phone closed and dropped it into her bag, turned and stomped towards them. The little boy wrapped his arm around his mom’s knee. The girl looked at Sabine. She raised her arms and threw them to her side.

Fiction

“Don’t tell me, the machine’s not working?” Sabine smiled and nodded. Never taking her gaze off Sabine, the girl stopped a few feet from the little bunch and said, “This is just my luck, ya know. Now I’m going to be late for class. Like it isn’t bad enough spending the night on some girl’s couch because your stupid ride hooked up with some asshole. Who picks up guys at a concert anyway?” She still looked only at Sabine.

“I didn’t know there were any concerts out here.” Sabine’s voice sounded tiny compared to the girl’s.

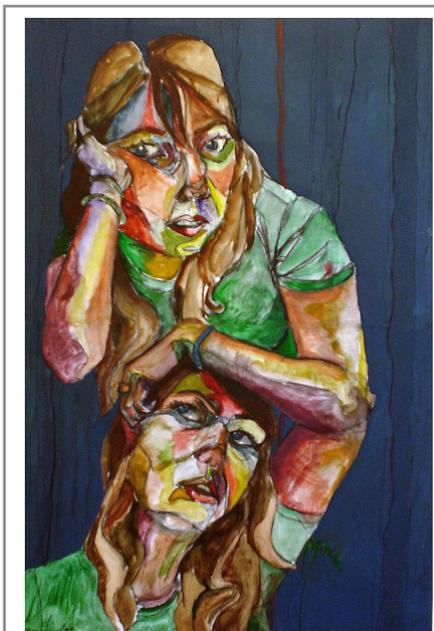
“Oh, ya know, just a little thing thrown at a house. One of the kids in the band is in my econ class.” She glanced down at Sabine’s hoodie. “Hey, you a Terp?”

“Oh, yeah. Well I guess I used to be. I graduated almost ten years ago.” The little boy still clung to his mom’s leg.

“Yeah? Did you catch the game on Friday?” Her phone rang loudly in her bag, and she dug her long, fake nails in after it. “Hey, Jess. What’s up?” She turned her back to Sabine. “Dude, you won’t believe the night I’ve had.” The woman stood in the corner, turning her head from side to side, as though help might be coming in any direction. Sabine half-smiled at her and mouthed, “I’m going to go.” Still on her phone, the girl paced back and forth in the center of the station, her heels clicking.

Sabine shuffled back up to the street. A wind blew and seemed to rattle straight through her thin frame. She shoved her fists into the pocket on the front of her hoodie. A plastic card hit her knuckles.

When she got home, she pulled off her shoes and climbed into bed and started counting the tree rings. All those years surrounding her, encasing her. Maybe she liked the weight.



“Rest My Little Head” by Michelle Larson
Honorable Mention Undergraduate Art

Essay

FIRST PLACE GRADUATE ESSAY

Sage

by Jacoba Mendelkow

My nephew is buried two hours away from my home. In April 2008, he just died. Stenosis of the Colon, the doctors said after months of saying it was nothing: that it is acid reflux, that the vomiting was normal. And when he told his mommy that his belly hurt, she laid down to comfort him and he died. Just like that. He was twenty-months old.

Hung-over and sleepy-eyed, I was surprised to hear my phone ringing next to me on my make-shift bedside table, 6:32 a.m. Honey, my mother said, it's Weston. He died. And I gasped loudly enough to wake my husband sleeping next to me. I'd been prepared for such a phone call in early hours to tell of death two years ago when my brother was fighting a losing war in Iraq. I'd begun to prepare myself for my own parents' passing—my father already outlived his own father. I know I will lose him to a heart-attack. My youngest brother was serving a Mormon mission in Miami—he sometimes wrote of gunshots and murders—it could have been him. Instead, Weston just died before the sun decided to rise.

I wait by the phone, hoping to be called again to meet my family and grieve. I want to feel arms around my waist as I shudder through my sobs. I keep my daughter home from school; I wake her to tell her in the same way my own mother told me. Honey, I say, it's Weston.



“Cathedral on the Heath” by Whitney Olsen
Honorable Mention Graduate Art

Essay

He died and she cries like I did—shocked at first and lonely next and we cry together. I spend the day in bed, though I am dressed; I am prepared to meet and discuss arrangements. I am prepared to juggle the tears of his parents. My mother calls in the afternoon. You may want to come up. We're all here. And I leave the isolation of my home, drive to the other side of town and park my Oldsmobile on the curb. My mother walks in a hunch. My step-father has blood on his shirt. He begins to weep when I ask without thinking what he has spilled there.

When they buried Weston they chose the cemetery in the valley where he'd spent most of his small life and today I drive to see him. In April, when he died, I didn't follow the lines of cars through the lush green hills to place his body into the already fertile earth. I'd been teaching poetry to third graders (my own daughter's age) and his funeral and interment was the day of our final parent performance. There simply wasn't enough time. I chose them, and my commitment to their art and voice, instead of my commitment to my family—the children would miss me if I wasn't there. I needed to be with them—I needed their hope, I needed to see their eyes glisten. I needed to feel their spirits and not think of the child we'd lost. Standing before me with shaking notebook in hand, reciting for proud mothers and fathers the poetry I had helped them write, I believed my decision was justified.

In April, in Arbon Valley, the earth begins to thaw after months

of hard winter snow and drifts sometimes 10 feet tall. The men talk of moisture and hope for the months that will come, the crops they will plant, the price of seed and fuel. I imagine the line of cars, and my weeping family within them, climbing Highway 38 through hills surrounded by plowed fields and natural meadows—Bureau of Land Management lands used for grazing livestock. I imagine the sniffing as the drive continues, conversation moving from the death of a boy to the life that surrounds them, the earth becomes ready as they drive onward.

I drive today, nearly six months later, with my daughter and husband to plant flowers around his grave and bring life to this lonely place. A cemetery as old as the homesteaders' farms; many of the graves are unmarked and collapsed over the returning-to-dust remains of settlers. Surrounded by farmland, fences prevent unnecessary disturbance by tractors turning earth. Raw wooden fence-posts lean from rotten bottoms and ceaseless wind. It's been a hot summer; stalks of green winter wheat pop out of thick soil in straight rows. This is the only green I see.

I am here to plant flowers, purple and white crocus plants to bloom in early spring. I want to remember him. I want others to remember him. My intentions are also wicked: I use this excuse to visit my mother. As we drive I prepare myself for the things she will say about my child, my job, my degree, my new husband, my failure. I warn and remind my daughter of the words she should not say

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and the jokes her grandmother will not understand. I remind her of rules: don't open the refrigerator without asking, the computer is not a child's toy, Sundays are days of rest, television is full of evil and worldly pressures for sex and money. I prepare us all for her sharp words during the two hour drive. I plan to plant these flowers without my mother: I am prepared with shovel and water to say hello, and goodbye, to this boy.

But instead, we pass the cemetery and continue to my family's farm. I am worried about being late for lunch, arriving too late to help with its preparations and feeling the weight of my imposition on their Sunday. I have brought a salad, some rolls. I will feed them and visit my nephew on my trip home. Perhaps on this day I have prepared myself for failure. I am convinced that a fight will erupt soon after my arrival. I often find myself slipping into defense. Around my mother I become reactionary, impulsive. This irritates her. It infuriates me. Thus, I am prepared to tip-toe and am armed with homemade pesto dressing to grease her gears of happiness.

I've wondered for years about the true relationship I have with my mother, about the way I feel about her and the way she feels about me. And despite all my wondering and thinking and trying to understand the relationship we have, I never feel any more secure than I did so many years ago. I'm grown, I've not lived at home in a decade, I am respected in my job. My teenage mother students look up to me, my teaching evaluations are respectable, I buy organic milk, I donate money to charity. I do these things because they make me

feel like a better person. I search for this acceptance in her—to be acknowledged as smart or kind, to have her ignore the tone of my voice and instead see me in the way I've tried to see myself. But this isn't to be and I wonder if she feels the same way about herself that she feels about me. Perhaps this is why I feel rejected, perhaps she feels ambivalent toward herself like she feels ambivalent toward her children. It isn't a stretch to think so, I feel it too: toward my child, toward myself, toward her. But it isn't as simple as this: yes, perhaps we both feel this way. There is more to it than that, she must feel something for me more than ambivalence. But I'm not sure that she does, and perhaps this is sometimes how my own daughter feels. How can so much resentment be born from love?

Today she is different from what I expect: happy to see me, hugs all the way around. I begin to prepare a supper and she is in the kitchen, telling me stories and jokes. Her voice is cheerful, lilting up and down—the way I sometimes remember it like long ago. I think you've lost weight, she says to my husband and balls her fist and taps his stomach lightly. You always make a nice salad she says to me I just don't ever think about eating the way you do. I am uncomfortable in the kitchen next to the stove she's installed herself, she tells me of the hole she cut in the wall to make it fit and points to exposed floorboards from the carpet she'd ripped out while my step-father plowed his 2200 acres. Be a dentist, not a dental assistant, she'd always said to me as a child—she'd taught me to be better than those women happy to clean teeth and be less than men, she'd not understood limits, she

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knew how to help herself. She'd not had a choice after my father left her to care for all those children. A roof leaked? You caulk it yourself. Trees difficult to mow around? She'd cut them down with a chainsaw.

I worry that I may ruin this visit and so I smile too much and say too little. She asks me to cut potatoes and heat roast beef for sandwiches, and she does not offer to help. Her arms are folded across her chest, and she stands in a corner. My hair in my face, I bend over the marbled linoleum counter. She watches me use the knife she has suggested I use. I feel that perhaps I am doing this wrong and grow anxious. My daughter is outside swinging in the trees, and I see her through the kitchen window facing east. My mother asks me about school. She'd gone to the same college years ago, her GPA better than mine, she asks me because she is smarter than me and wants to remind me. She tells me that writing is a simple thing though her own manuscripts pile high in her office—stories rejected once and twice, she never sends them out anymore. It is simple, she says.

They are getting divorced, she tells me. The judge has ordered therapy for my brother and his wife. They've gone through a lot this year, said the judge. They need help. My step-father nods; he went to counseling when he divorced his wife. My mother took pills when my father left her. I had a prescription for Paxil the year of my divorce. When I left, I took my daughter with me. My brother cannot do the same—his son is buried in the dry Arbon soil.

And it is dry today. No rain in the valley for some weeks, and my step-father talks about the wind and the danger of fires. Everyone

here is afraid of fires. Last year a family lost 90% of their crop right before harvest. Today, with dryness all around us, we climb into my air conditioned car and drive through dirt and wind to Church Road, and up, east, to the cemetery. My mother has come along to plant crocus bulbs in the earth and I am glad. We will do this together in a moment of silence. I want to reach her, place my hand on her hand, wrap my arm around my daughter. I want to feel her veins rippled through the skin of her hands and touch the softness of her arms. I want to comfort her and allow her to comfort me. Yet, I do nothing and watch my step-father bow his head as we drive through the wooden gates: "Arbon Valley Cemetery" barely legible on the carved wooden sign.

Many of the graves in this place hold the remains of children. One family, friends of my mother, have buried three here in the past year: one gone to cancer, one lost in a car accident, another, they say, died from stress—I'm unsure what this means but cannot ask the question. I do not want the answer; I'm uncomfortable in the place. Weston is buried in a plot purchased by my parents and they show me where they will rest someday to the north of the smallest one. My roots are somewhere else and Weston rests alone. But he is buried near others in this newest part of the cemetery and this comforts my parents—the oldest graves follow the crooked fence—Weston rests in the center. He is with other children. This isn't what they really mean: as Mormons, my parents believe in eternal life and eternal families. They believe Weston will live eternally with Christ forever in

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Paradise. To be taken so young is sometimes a blessing. Weston isn't here, in this cemetery, but in Heaven where he waits for his parents.

I used to believe in eternal families until my father left. Imagining my mother alone in heaven, without a husband there as she was here, surrounded by five children who tortured her, was unfair and unthinkable. He left her, he left for someone else, he took her eternal future and walked out—and he didn't care. That is what I believed then: if he would have loved us, and loved us forever, then he would have stayed and not gone to live with his secretary. Sunday school teachers would tell me that it wasn't for me to understand, that it was all part of God's plan and that he knew what would happen before we did. His puppets (they did not say this word. I say it now). But I believe in fairness and getting what you deserve; I believe that if this were true then God would have worked it out for my mother before my father took off and she'd not have been punished eternally for his sin.

My step-father walks the dirt paths with me, nearly too small for a car to pass. These were the roads of wagons and buggies. These paths are history. Lives and deaths are imprinted into the soil, marking time in packed earth. He is this kind of man, good and hard working, of the soil and the earth. He believes in God and, I believe, he has given my mother hope again. Here, he says, this is Bitter Brush. And he points to a yellow flower on a green-brown leafless stalk. Its roots dig deep and it survives here in this cemetery. These are the plants that can live in a place like this, roots pushing

through soil, digging deep and surviving long, windy winters. It is the determination of the plant that allows it to continue to grow (even inches a decade) in this sort of place. My mother is like that: digging in, picking up, moving on. She's always been like that and I think of her here and I'm glad she's come with me to plant these flowers for the baby Weston.

Wild plants are everywhere. Even the domestic, an evergreen shrub, a lilac tree, are overgrown and sprawl wildly outward reaching out of this place. Giant Sagebrush, he says. Its roots are twenty feet deep. He points to a bare patch on the mountain. You see that, my step-father says, that dirt patch. It'll be planted to wheat soon; it's new land—my brother has pulled the roots of sagebrush from the earth. I told him to work hard, he says. It will help him heal. My step-father believes this. He's had to heal before when his wife up and left him. He understands the way someone else can rip your heart from your chest; he understands my mother and the way she gets when the winter has been too long.

Rabbit Brush, my step-father says, pointing to heavy stems coming from the dirt. And because this is my second time in this place I ask why the cemetery is wild. Why is there no grass? There is cultivated, planted, planned order all around in the fields of wheat keeping order away from wild and chaos. And he answers, Up here, there isn't any water. The dead don't need to drink; the desert a suitable enough burial. My mother joins us, pointing upward, east, into a field now plowed under. There is a body out there, a man who killed

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a woman. She was homesteading. They wouldn't let him in here—it's consecrated ground. I imagine the loneliness of living in this place, wildness and brush and murder. A baby, a woman, a family of three, dead.

My mother holds large kitchen spoons in her back pocket of her dark blue jeans. These serving spoons, the kind I used to plant flowers around our home as a child, are to dig holes two or four inches deep to plant each bulb, pointed side up around the grave that holds my nephew's body. I have a shovel. My mother holds her spoons in folded hands and rests them on her chest useless because the ground is hardened from the dry summer. My husband shovels, cutting into the edges of a tomb. I kneel next to the grave and drop the small bulb into place, pushing then patting dirt over the small hole. My step-father waters the bulb; my daughter wanders through the graves looking at names and dates. My mother watches us and stands back away from our group. Many of the headstones have a single date that serves purposes of birth and death—here, Weston is surrounded by children.

Doctors sometimes cannot diagnose colonic stenosis—it looks like other things, perhaps like acid reflux. Often not detected until a child begins to eat solid foods when the child's belly grows painfully full of waste and Weston's belly consumed him, his midsection full of poison. Doctors sometimes label these children: failing to thrive—arms and legs gangly and thin. My mother complained of his smell as

a newborn covered in spit-up of nearly all the food he'd swallowed, rancid splayed on bib, on blanket, on her t-shirt. Even milk caused pain. In one of every 20,000 children born with a severe case of stenosis, the colon is nearly completely blocked. Weston is one of 20,000. Colonic stenosis was first diagnosed in 1673. These children always died. Now children like Weston who undergo surgery have a 90% survival rate. Weston may have survived if we'd have known. But the doctor said it was acid reflux and his young mother believed the doctor. Perhaps she did not know about seeking another opinion and I imagine her crushing guilt. It is sometimes hard to believe that life could have been otherwise. I am afraid to wonder of such things myself and my guilt as a mother dwarfs as I think of Weston's mother—my child is alive and in the cemetery with me, her's remains alone and buried in this dusty ground.

Mormon Crickets eat this land, laying their eggs in sagebrush, hibernating in brush, sleeping through the heat within its shade—they consume loneliness. They eat each other and themselves.

One year my mother sent a cricket home with my daughter who'd been to stay with her during the summer. A jelly jar and a Mormon Cricket, this insect of folklore and destruction with robotic face, alien legs and body. Both prehistoric and futuristic grasshopper, it gave me the willies. I remember a story about pioneers who moved from the East to the Midwest and after banishment and terror, moved finally to Utah. They planted grain in the desert, they irrigated

Essay

the land, they cleared sagebrush and jack rabbits. One day the crickets appeared and turned the sky black. The crickets consumed work and hope of homesteaders in Utah's Salt Lake Valley, and the people prayed with arms folded across their chests and bowed heads begging God to remove this plague. Please, Heavenly Father, save us and He did. This is what they say: the sky grew black again and the gulls came, swarms and swarms and dropped down to eat the crickets. The people were saved.

This story isn't true. Mormon Crickets do not fly. They could not have turned the sky black because they move on the ground. They hop, like grasshoppers, and they crawl. They can move 50 miles a day and consume everything within their paths, but they do not fly. Perhaps this is the story that should be told: when it is warm enough, 80 degrees or so like the crickets prefer, they awake from hibernation in the belly of a sagebrush to scuttle out and feast on growing grain. And every year, the story should be told, they do this again. According to the "Mormon Cricket Fact Sheet" published by the University of Wyoming and the Wyoming Geographic Information Science Center, these crickets (that aren't crickets at all) can completely destroy cultivated fields and consume hundreds of thousands of dollars of crops each year. States like Wyoming, Idaho and Utah have suppression plans in place to eliminate the crickets by using pesticides and insecticides. These poisons are sprayed on the plants the crickets consume, saving the consumption for humans, poison and all. Poison and wheat, crickets and sagebrush, a little boy buried in a box

with a toy John Deere tractor near his tombstone. The loneliness is in my mouth, in my hands. The dust turns my stomach and I am suddenly exhausted. I call my daughter to me; she is entranced by the finality of bodies placed in earth and together we walk toward my car passing sagebrush, bitter brush, rabbit brush, rotting fence posts, a dwarfed lilac. My husband carries the shovel, my step-father his now empty jug of water. My mother carries her spoons.

We drive home through the dust.

The crickets are gone now, passing through this place two months before; their bodies making roadways slick as oil as car tires crush and expose insect organs. Their eggs laid in the branches of the sage have already begun to hatch. Winter they hibernate, spring they grow, and summer comes and the crickets move—out of the sage and over Weston's grave, perhaps snacking on the remains of the crocus flowers, moving outward to the fields of wheat and alfalfa. The people begin to pray and soon the crickets disappear. And like the flowers planted around this baby's grave, they hibernate through the winter and find light again in the spring.

Essay

SECOND PLACE GRADUATE ESSAY

Secret of Water

by Russell Winn

When I swim I often think of the dead. Those who lost control in the waves and drowned. This preoccupation was given to me by my mother. As a young only child I listened when she spoke. She would sit in the living room in our Idaho farmhouse with a rumple of yarn and crochet hooks and talk about people she knew who had drowned. There was a great grandfather who disappeared while in the Bear River, a vast winding beast of a waterway that moves through the area. It carves the land about a half-mile from where we lived, in the straw colored flat middle of Cache Valley. Mom said that in the nineteen twenties he had a hand trolley hooked to a cable that he used to ferry people across. He fell in one day and didn't make it out. They found his body three weeks later. Some boys fell in and got caught in a current. Only some of them were recovered.

After PacifiCorp/Utah Power put a dam in the Oneida narrows around 1916, according to county records, the river swelled suddenly whenever the company increased the flow. A barber from Preston City drowned in the 50s while swimming in an upsurge. A police officer drowned. A farmer. A neighbor's cousin and half a herd of cows. For years I heard these tales retold, and the closest I got to any real depth of water was going over it on the old concrete bridge that led out of town. We crossed its darkness often, and through the



"Nature's Wishing Well" by Jacie Fasselin
Honorable Mention Undergraduate Art

Essay

cracked dirty windows of an old blue Chevy pickup I watched the slow movements of the water.

Mother had a lot of respect for the river. She liked to stand in the shallows and stare out at the flow. We threw rocks at carp and laughed. She took me to Riverdale Resort, a small clump of buildings hot tubs and pools, and paid for swimming lessons. She never learned how to swim herself. When I asked about it she said it was just a “thing she had” and told me she didn’t want to drown.

The first time I touched any substantial body of water was on a choir trip to California. I’d been in swimming pools and bathtubs but never anything larger than that. That day was my first sight of the ocean. Two dull yellow buses full of high school students had rubbed tires for 16 hours across Nevada and through the Sierras all the way to Corona Del Mar Beach, near Encinitas, California.

Nearing the coast, we followed an old black asphalt road that became narrower and narrower, and I began to think that we would never emerge anywhere, never be able to turn the bus around again. And then suddenly there were buildings and cars and the ocean was right there in front of us. Expansive and real. We stretched out in a rainy parking lot and slogged through sand to the expanse of roiling dark blue framed in storm clouds, the edges of the ocean unraveling on the rocks and beach. I couldn’t stop staring at it. After a few minutes one of my friends shoved me and we ran laughing into the tide. I wasn’t prepared for the draw.

The ocean had me prone quickly, soaking my jeans and dun colored sweater with a quick pulling motion. I remember falling and a view of dark clouds spinning down my line of sight, then blue-black and cold and froth. It swept me several feet through mud and rock and depth into a deeper more concrete fear. I couldn’t see anything.

The shock of the cold outweighed any sense of panic I may have been feeling, and the tide’s movement was so quick and unyielding that before I knew it I was off the ground, struggling for breath.

I had friends near, of course, and strength enough to get back to shore with help. After a few minutes of jokes and gasping, I shivered my way back to the parking lot. Making sure to avoid the group of bus drivers and teachers smoking behind the vehicles, I climbed back on the bus and began wringing out the wetness and tremblings. I wondered why none of the faculty noticed me. Outside, brooding and thunderous rain clouds wrestled above the wild Pacific. I kept still and listened to myself breathe.

Bear Lake, on the border of Utah and Idaho, a glacial lake spread across a high valley in a smear of sky blue set among the hard Rocky Mountains and rolling spreads of farming communities. Its depths play host to the chromatic forms of angular whitefish, broad, bulbous sculpin, speckled cutthroat, and olive cisco. These fish are endemic: they evolved in the isolation of the mountains. They were drawn here from a larger body of water, and grow in their own way in this remoteness.

Essay

According to the Utah Division of Wildlife Services it's one of the largest freshwater lakes in the West. An equator sea color, steady dreamed out turquoise-blue, is the result of the reflection of limestone clouds suspended in the water. It's dotted with boats and swimmers, and it has the closest thing to a beach for hundreds of miles.

After high school I spent weekends swimming in the shallows. They run out to about eighty feet in most places, dropping slowly, before the shelf of the lake hits and plunges off into deep. It is supposed that Bear Lake was formed a hundred and fifty thousand years ago in a deep gash in the range, a cut that the US Geological Survey attributes to a fault subsidence which continues today, slowly deepening the lake along the eastern side. A sinking valley alone, filled with melted ice and rain.

One such weekend, In chest high water, I paddled awkwardly with black plastic flippers found at a grocery store in Garden City, where tourists converge. I practiced breathing slowly, trying not to panic, and enjoying the way the tide swayed me with the pulse of the water. I look through clear plastic goggles at the sand below. It is light, uniform. I dig for tiny mollusk shells, carefully scooping mounds of earth with clawed fingers and placing them to the sides. If I work to quickly the sand clouds into the water and obscures my vision. I'm determined to see what I'm doing.

Weekends spent here were the soul of my summers. Never far from land on the water, the water always meeting the land, in flux.

If I lost balance or wandered too far I could stand up and walk back to the flat of the beach. Sometimes I swam to the edge of the shelf and stared into the deeper parts of the lake. My vision never went beyond a few feet, and I like to imagine what I could see there if the water were glass. A song from somewhere below.

One clear afternoon I moved through the water slowly, listening to the muffled sounds of my breathing and the tinny hum of a beach party happening on the shore. The water was clear here. I moved past an old tire with a rusted chain reaching up to the surface, the buoy at the top was a marker for boaters. I followed the line to open air, and broke within inches of a bloated animal.

It was a cat. Pallid brown with wet spikes of hair. Earless and eyeless, it brushed up near me and filled my lungs with a thick waft of its rot. I heaved and tripped against the chain, plunging back into the water. I gasped, and lungs that reached for clean air were filled with liquid. My gag reflex shot the water and whatever was in my stomach back into the lake in a cloud. The tears in my eyes were excretion, just more water to fill my lungs.

I righted myself and stood in the water choking for what seemed like hours. When I finally looked around the cat had moved on, pulled either to the shore or farther down the beach. I can't remember. And it took me months to find any willingness to go back to the lake.

I met Josh Wright in a class I taught at Utah State University.

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He'd moved north from Saint George to get a bachelor's and start a career in Natural Resources. I liked Josh because he was honest and he worked hard. And because his presentations in class were some of the most interesting and informed I'd ever witnessed. They were enhanced by my own fears and fascinations. For the last eight years he had served in southern Utah as a recovery diver.

Most search and recovery dive teams are voluntary. In the West, some public safety divers are paid through grants and work in law enforcement jobs or as EMT's because it is hard to make a career out of something so sporadic. Josh is a member of Washington County Search and Rescue, which covers eighteen of the larger bodies of water in the southern part of the state. Recovery divers handle cases of missing persons in bodies of water, as well as search for concealed items in lakes and various flood difficulties. When a person is lost in a body of water, his team gets called in.

Divers refer to the people they're looking for as "targets". The term removes some of the association with the person, so that if the unfortunate happens there is less emotional impact. Divers have about an hour at the beginning of the situation in which a person may be found alive and resuscitated. These "golden hours" – Josh's term – are the most crucial, and stressful, of a diver's job.

During the golden hour the team gathers equipment, travels to the site, communicates with local law enforcement, scouts the site, and sets up a search plan. With little time to spare and much energy spent in gearing up for the search, most divers are exhausted when

they hit the water. The intense stresses on the body and the mind have cause dive teams to start taking blood pressure measurements prior to entering the water. Many divers have suffered heart attacks because of changes in pressure and temperature coupled with stress in the first hour.

When a diver hits the water he usually has about a foot of full color and vision as he begins his descent. In another twelve inches the particulate matter in the water will have filtered out all but the dominant color of light. Josh describes planes of deep red in sandy reservoirs, coffee brown in mudded areas, dark greens in heavily vegetated waters, all of which eventually lead to black.

Divers spend hours in public swimming pools training with masks whose visors have been spray-painted black. When you enter water with intent, your mind usually has a few details to go along with it. Targets have visual descriptions and often pictures that fill diver's heads before entering the site.

In the dark of a lake or river, eyes naturally look for light to draw in. When there is no light, a person's mind tries to make up for the lack. An image that has been in a diver's mind throughout the day starts to take the place of actual light. If a diver is looking for a specific thing and sees only a shade, the mind fills in details.

Divers are trained to close their eyes and search by feel. Hooked to a tether and in radio contact with someone on the surface, a boat drags the diver slowly in a windshield-wiper motion along the search area while the diver moves his arms rhythmically back and forth in

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a swimming motion. He listens to the bubbles from his mask and focuses on his breathing, hoping to bump into something.

My step dad died of complications resulting from a stroke. His lungs filled with fluid and he drowned peacefully in his sleep. I had spent my entire life with him, having never met my real father. My stepdad was my real father. I had received the call about his passing before dawn, and had driven for forty minutes through rain and morning commute to be with mom.

I sat in the parking lot outside the hospital as the sun rose behind rain clouds. All I could think of was a TV show I had watched the night before. It was a Science Channel something or other on how the Earth had been formed. Billions of years ago, before life and death and breaths of air, it was raining. The atmosphere was still forming. The Earth's surface was originally molten, and as it cooled the volcanoes belched out massive amounts of carbon dioxide, steam, ammonia, and methane. The steam condensed to form water, which then produced shallow seas. But the complete depths of these seas took a long time to fill. It literally rained for millions of years on this planet before life could fully form. An epoch of cleaning, of baptism. It reminded me of an old Porcupine Tree song I used to love. I locked myself inside the capsule. And watched the planet slowly turning blue.

I sat in the car for two hours watching the rain splash on the windshield of my white Chevy, ignoring the buzz of my cell phone

and the quick looks of people walking along the sidewalk. I thought about the earth forming and how much rain must have flowed into Lake Bonneville, a pluvial lake that covered this valley millions of years ago. Pluvial means "formed through rain". I had learned in grade school that Bonneville covered most of the North Great Basin region, including most of Utah and Idaho. Sixteen thousand years ago a quake near Red Rock Pass, now a beautiful valley with sharp rock and fresh grass in central Idaho, released most of the lake. Climate change then dried it up. Most of the lakes in the area are remnants of a larger past.

Josh told me a story about one of his recoveries. In a beautiful reservoir in Southern Utah, framed by red sands and midday heat, a group of friends swam out to an island. When one of the friends started struggling, his friends thought he was joking. They moved on and he didn't. Josh and his team were called in.

The first hour was all about focus. They arrived and prepped the gear. They cordoned off the area. They ran a rope from the silver pontoon boat into the water, and tethered divers every five feet on the rope. Nothing. They did another pass. An hour later, fifteen feet down, in the red space of the silt filled lake, Josh ran into the target.

He hit the foot first. The first thought that entered his mind was that the kid was hunched on the bottom pretending to be hurt. But after a few moments of alarm, the training set in. The first thing a diver does with a body is find an attachment point, a stable

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point on a target that a line can be fastened to. If more than an hour has passed, the diver reports to the surface and checks with local authorities to determine if the scene will allow the body to be moved immediately. Positions of family, media, and the nature of the crime scene all have to be considered. Often boats are moved to block line of sight out of consideration for the target and the family. Divers are prevented from contact with civilians so that no information is communicated until the search is complete. And recovery preparations are made.

In the water decomposition happens quickly. When circulation stops, decay starts. Fish and other animals treat bodies as food, starting with loose skin and working their way up. A target is basically a large hunk of bait for anything that happens to be swimming by. Josh told me a story of a group of fishermen who fished near a sunken pickup truck all day with great fortune, then called the police when they were done. They didn't think to check inside the cab. Because of the increased rate of decay, body parts are not suitable attachment points. Josh rotated the body to locate the swim trunks. He set the line in the laces of the trunks, and pulled his own tether to notify those above that he had the target. And he saw the boy's face. Eyes with the lids eaten away framed in a tangle of black curly hair. All Josh could do was close his eyes and listen to the sounds in his mask. He went to the surface.

In Dad's hospital room, mother was looking out the window

at the rain. The lights were off and a sheet covered Dad. I lifted it briefly and was met with a sunken, peaceful look that I was glad for. I took a seat in the dark brown cushioned chair opposite her and waited for her to speak.

When she did it seemed almost a relief. She told me the story of how she met my real father, and the secrets that she kept about him for twenty-four years. I had brothers and sisters that I knew very little about, and she told me that one was an accountant and lived in Boise, how others smoked pot and drifted, and how some were married with children of their own. She told me the story of her first meeting with my real dad, and how much she loved him. She told me how much it hurt when he went back to his wife, and what she said the last time she spoke with him.

I listened to these secrets with a strange detachment. It was difficult to care about people I'd never met. Though there was a curiosity and interest there, it was more about the honesty my mother was showing. She was clearing out things she had kept from me for what I can only assume she thought was my own good. Telling me I should search through them.

I didn't. I kissed her and Dad, and left to prepare for a week of arranging and enduring a funeral. Back in the car, I drove along the benches back to my house, and played with the radio. The planet slowly turning blue. To me, Lake Bonneville means that my life has been spent on the bottom of an ancient lake bed. A bed that was massively deep and home to creatures I'll never understand. A bed

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that kept its secrets of life for thousands of years. Secrets that would be revealed to us in the rock and the patterns we've learned to study. Later I would learn from the U.S. Geological Survey of the area that the lake may not have been a singular entity. There is evidence that suggests that it could have evaporated and reformed as many as twenty eight times in the last three million years. Our existence in such a place then becomes a simple gap in the reality of a much larger thing. When the earth shifts on its spatial cradle and the lake reforms hundreds of thousands of years from now, our buildings and monuments and me in my car with my thoughts will be the secrets it keeps.

THIRD PLACE GRADUATE ESSAY

Collapse

By Elizabeth Benson

When winter strips maples bare in nearby Higher Ups Park and tourists stay home in front of natural gas heaters, Dave Walter re-timbers the Pioneer Tunnel Coal Mine in Ashland, Pennsylvania. He rips out rotting logs and replaces them with oak timbers—collars and legs, they're called—to brace the slate roof and walls from collapsing onto the heads of visitors and eastern seaboard schoolchildren.

Today, as we stand inside the mine next to the Mammoth coal vein (one of the thickest seams of anthracite in the world), Dave's callused hands are clean. Blonde hair curls out from under his black miner's helmet, his tour guide jacket embroidered in white over his heart. The maples outside and across the street are gold and red, their leaves falling in sheets. Next week Pioneer Tunnel will close for the season and Dave, along with other tour guides will recommence their winter chores. I picture Dave alone in the mine, his breath clouding around his head, red ochre from the dripping sandstone wall splashing onto his jeans and work boots like blood. I wonder if he folds his embroidered canvas jacket into a locker in the main office

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before donning shabbier outerwear suitable for rotting wood, mudslides and coal dust.

As we walk beneath the wooden collar overhead in the gangway, my eyes shift to the timber legs on either side of us along the walls. We use oak in here. It's strong, Dave tells me. Timber provides miners with a safety net, a natural harbinger of collapse or "squeeze." Soft conifers, such as pine, fir, or spruce, are strong enough to resist minimal pressure from the rock walls, but will bend before breaking. I think that Mahanoy Mountain—rippled with coal, slate and sandstone 400 feet above our head—is stronger. I listen hard for creaking, snapping.

Rockslides and cave-ins were common in the early days of Pennsylvania coal mining. The Fort Worth Star-Telegram reported a miner "entombed" for five days in September 1913 in the Continental Mine in Centralia, a town bordering Ashland. On the fifth day of his entombment, rescuers bored a hole into the wall of coal blocking his escape. Into the hole, rescuers inserted a food tube. In July 8, 1898, The Philadelphia Inquirer printed a story of a miner rescued from beneath "hundreds of tons of coal and rock." After seven hours, he "was found with his right foot pressed against his face while the sole of his left foot was twisted about so that it rested on the small of

his back." While reading these accounts on my couch back in Utah, I am breathless with fear. I co-mingle bodily pain with panic, the clawing hands of entrapment, of dwindling oxygen. Squeeze is a failing euphemism.

I don't know why I have flown to Ashland, Pennsylvania in the middle of a busy fall semester, why I have come to visit the Pioneer Tunnel mine today. Maybe it's something to do with control. Aversion therapy. Walking with Dave under the crushing weight of Mahanoy Mountain above should terrify me. But when can I tell that my fear is rational? What is the real danger?

Dave and I pause next to an iron ladder sunk into the rock. The ladder climbs up the rock wall before tipping into an angled chute that leads up to an opening at the top of Mahanoy Mountain. The thin rungs look rusty and remind me of cheap playground equipment. Conquering that incline would make my thighs ache. Tom Colihan, another mine guide, leads a group of fifty third-graders past Dave and me. He points to the escape chute and ladder above our heads. In case of a cave-in, he says.

About 300 million years before its discovery by Philip Ginter in Jim Thorpe, Pennsylvania, anthracite—the impetus for America's Industrial Revolution—began as rotting piles of refuse. Dead ferns and tree bark pocked like pineapple skins

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pooled into the swamplands that characterized ancient Pennsylvania landscapes. Drowned in thick swamp waters, plant remains decayed slowly, compressing under layers of sand, rock and sediment. Beneath the surface, bacteria crawled, slowly changing the chemical nature of plants into beds of peat. In a slow million year crawl, the flat plain of Central Pennsylvania bucked and heaved upward into mountains—a great period of pressure and compression. The violence of the Appalachian Revolution squeezed oxygen and hydrogen from the peat, converting it into anthracite. Grinding fault lines, crushing forces and rotting plants birthed rich veins of coal.

To supply anthracite to burgeoning industrial markets in Philadelphia and New York during the 1840s, new railroads snaked across the region. Lines such as the Reading, Lehigh Valley, and New Jersey Central began transporting tons of coal from breakers (a structure built next to the mine for sorting picked coal) to buyers. By 1874, after railroad tycoons earned fortunes by providing the only transportation option for coal, many railroads owned or controlled Pennsylvania mines.

Patch towns sprung up around the mines—knots of unpainted shacks with no plumbing or heating for the miners who lived there with their families. These “company houses” lodged English, Irish, Scottish and Welsh immigrants driven

into the mines where injuries were common. If wounded, miners were dropped from the payroll. If left standing after a dangerous day’s work, miners often used their pay to buy food and clothing at the company store for inflated prices. Enslaved by their poverty, men and boys entered the mines daily. During the shortest days of winter, miners abandoned hopes of seeing the sun.

Dave and I have walked farther down the gangway, what miners call the main passageway through the mine. The slate roof drips steadily on our heads as water snakes down from the top of the mountain through open chutes picked clean of coal. More ladders here. Dave points out two laddered walkways cut up into the rock, separated in the middle by a 30-foot pillar of coal. At the base of the coal pillar, just above us, a wooden gate holds back the mined coal until the chute is emptied into waiting coal cars for removal.

They blasted the coal in there and took out about 6 feet a day, Dave says.

They blasted in there?

The walkways would fit one man—Dave, about 200 hundred pounds, 6 feet tall, would fill the space easily. Perched on a slippery ladder, miners drilled holes into the coalface to place their dynamite.

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Where would they hide? I ask. During the explosions?

Dave points to small cut outs carved into the rock at right angles from the walkways. These crawl spaces sit a couple of feet below the miner's workspace, just a few rungs up from where we stand in the gangway.

They'd light the fuse, then run back down the ladder and crawl into these monkey ways.

Dave says they run down they ladder; I know they slip. I picture miners placing their work boots along the slick edges of the ladder and sliding down it before balling up into the monkeyway. What does a dynamite explosion sound like in a four-foot space? How thick was the coal and rock dust spilling down into the crevices, coating miners, dousing lights?

Suddenly, the overhead bulbs flick off. I feel the darkness in my chest, around my head, a weight suddenly compounded by hundreds of feet (how many tons?) of shale, coal and sandstone above us. The battery-powered light on Dave's miner's hat remains off, and in this complete, thick dark, my senses shift. I see nothing, but I feel the heat coming from Dave's body. Time stretches out, its concrete edges disintegrating into black, minutes losing their authority. Why are the lights out? What is wrong? I hear my heart pounding in my ears and a steady dripping as the roof leaks and pools around our feet.

Just fifteen minutes ago, when we clacked through the yellow entrance doors on the battery powered mine locomotive (a simple engine with three passenger cars attached) I scribbled notes on my Steno pad, water droplets splashing onto the page. Two third-grade boys, here with their class on a field trip, sat next to me, their bodies frail and squirming.

Did your teachers tell you about the mine? I asked them as we waited to begin the tour.

No, the blonde one says, slightly shifting his body away from mine.

They just brought you here, and you don't know why?
Yup.

Over the deafening rattle of the cars, all fifty third-graders cheered as we picked up speed.

The locomotive pulled us farther into the mountain, until Tom stopped next to a short gangway revealing the Orchard Vein, 4 feet of coal exposed in a wall of sandstone.

Why is the ceiling green? A kid had shouted to Tom.

Above our heads a piece of bright green fiberglass covered the slate roof. Tom explained that it kept water from dripping on tourists when they stopped here.

This would be a cool water ride, the blonde boy said to his neighbor.

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I wondered if this boy had been to the Museum of Anthracite Mining, like I had been the day before. If he saw the placard for mine disasters, floods. Collapse of strata under a river, overflowing streams, or by miners tapping an unsuspected body of water. The walls suddenly seemed brittle, like the bird bones of the little boys at my side.

Six years ago, a wall of the Quecreek Coal Mine in Somerset, Pennsylvania, burst. Drenched by 50-60 million gallons of water after drilling into the adjacent abandoned Saxon Mine, nine miners floated 240 feet underground for three days before rescue.

I envision water roaring through this tunnel, tearing out oak timbers, tossing passenger cars like toys. Can I trust these porous layers of sandstone, chipping slate and empty coal seams to protect me?

From 1925-1926, anthracite miners in Central Pennsylvania went on strike to protest dangerous working conditions and poor wages. During the hiatus, coal stores were depleted and in the absence of freshly mined coal, buyers turned elsewhere for their fuel needs. Competitive fuels, such as natural gas and petroleum, hijacked the industry. After the strike ended, miners earned better wages but worked fewer hours and mines dropped production to one or two days per week. Between la-

bor disputes and alternative fuel options, coal demand declined sharply by the 1950s. Boomtowns that had sprung up throughout the region collapsed in an industrial vacuum. For the past sixty years, state and local chambers of commerce have scrambled to draw new industries into coal towns to boost the economy but have remained largely unsuccessful.

Now, in the dark, Dave chatters on about monkeyways. He speaks steadily, and although my terror erases the words he says through the pitch, I am comforted by his calm. If he were to falter, to register any shock that the lights are off in this cave, I would disintegrate into panic. His composure reminds me of flight attendants—if they carry on with their normal duties, nothing can be amiss. Nothing is wrong in the mine. I hear his heavy jacket rustle as he shifts, and even in the dark, I somehow feel the solid edges of his presence. I match my breathing to his. The lights come back on.

In 1962, the same year that Emil Ermert reopened the Pioneer Tunnel Coal Mine as a tourist attraction to boost the local economy and “make Ashland known far and wide as a unique place,” the Big Buck coal vein in nearby Centralia caught on fire. Between January and May of that year, load after load of Centralia garbage had been piled on top of the exposed coal vein, an ill-chosen dumpsite. Some versions of the story claim

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the garbage was intentionally burned for waste management, some say spontaneous combustion ignited the trash. Regardless of its cause, the Centralia fire—due to insufficient fire fighting, lazy contractors hired to dig out the fire, and failed fly ash and clay seals—was never contained. For decades flames ate through the underground coal seam unchecked, a hidden fire except for occasional belches of smoke at the surface, a collapsed lawn, or a patch of cracked asphalt.

In 1980, the government estimated it would take \$660 million to dig out the fire with no guarantees for success. Instead of chancing one more failure, Centralia residents accepted a \$43 million buyout from the government and left town to begin again elsewhere.

When I was young, my parents and I traveled along Route 61 through Centralia, on our way somewhere else. By then the fire had affected 4,000 surface acres. I remember dried out trees twisting naked limbs toward the sky, dead maples collapsing into each other like dominoes. We sped through a barren forest, columns of smoke pouring from fissures in the soil.

The Pennsylvania Environmental Protection Agency has advised, “walking and/or driving in the immediate area could result in serious injury or death. There are dangerous gases present, and the ground is prone to sudden and unexpected

collapse.”

Yesterday, I drove back to Centralia to rebuild my memory. The coal region, with Centralia nestled in its heart, is dirty, crumbling. An eyesore. I have never wanted to return. I say I went back to Centralia yesterday to rebuild memory, but perhaps I drove there to commune with something broken: a collapsing town, a fractured self.

I followed route 61 two miles north of Ashland toward the center of the burning town. Turn right at Mae’s Drive-In, the woman at the Ashland borough office told me. You can’t miss it.

I anticipated boarded up row-homes, buckling pavement, the crumbling skeleton of a ghost town. Only Red Maples, Norway Maples, telephone poles, a fire hydrant. The two-lane route was barren, nothing flaming, nothing standing. Where was Centralia? I kept driving north, red and gold leaves washing over the windshield as I strained for a Main Street.

In a few minutes, I was over the hill in Aristes, its streets lined with row-homes, pale aluminum siding polished by the late afternoon sun. American flags hung from porches, geraniums nodded in the breeze. I turned the car around and headed south, rolling down the window to sniff for smoke. Back on route 61, I turned at each crossroad between Aristes and Ash-

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land. I wound along empty streets, dried leaves popping under the tires. The roads were overgrown, each dead-ending into forest. Remnants of life—broken glass, shredded paper, a passenger seat ripped from a car—littered streets that circled back on themselves. The air smelled sweet with decomposing leaves. There was nothing there.

How do I get to Centralia? I ask Dave as we stand in the mine. I tried to find it yesterday.

It's gone, he says, leaning against the cool slate wall.

Long before Dave and I talk about a town's collapse, regional newspapers detailed the constant terror of the mines. Cave-ins, minor flooding, and other singular mishaps in Pennsylvania coal mines were referred to as "accidents." While euphemizing fatal events in title, reporters highlighted the gruesomeness of mining accidents in the body of their articles, abandoning tasteful descriptions of lost life and limb in favor of "blown out eye[s]" and "horribly mangled" victims. Accounts of miners falling to their deaths down open mine shafts litter newspapers in the late 1800s, like one in *The Courier* based in Connellsville, Pennsylvania, that reported fallen miners were "a bleeding mass of crushed flesh and bones when they were hoisted to the top of the shaft." After the turn of the century, reports are less sensationalized, their descriptions

more spare. Did less colorful reporting arise after decades of mining disasters, when reports of injuries and death lost their horrible novelty? Without these gruesome accounts, each miner is a typed line on a page. A statistic in a ledger.

A friend of mine got caught in an explosion, Dave tells me as we're leaving the mine. He was in the hospital for a while, but he got out. He got hit in the face and neck with pieces of coal; you can still see them under his skin. Blue spots.

With a few strokes of my pencil, I refer to Dave's nameless friend as The Blue Speckled Man in my Steno notebook. Over the next few weeks, I will tell my family, friends, colleagues, and uninterested freshman English students this story. I want them to know about Dave, about how he hauls logs into the ground every winter to support dripping walls of coal. I want them to know about his friend, flecks of coal studding his face like acne. I remind myself how they both keep entering the mines.

In his 19th century ballad "The Hard Working Miner," Patrick O'Neil sings: "I work in the mines where the sun never shines/ nor daylight does ever appear/ with me lamp blazing red on top of me head/ and in danger I never know fear." I wonder about the bravado of this last stanza. Do miners never know fear, or do they simply befriend it? Call it by name, and wear it like a coat down into the pit?

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Yesterday, I stood on top of Hummie Hill, looking out over the demolished remains of Centralia. After driving back and forth between the burnt out Centralia and Aristes for thirty minutes, I had finally seen the dead oak tree on the east side of Locust Avenue on my way back toward Ashland. A white, hand-painted sign was nailed to the tree stump. Fire, it read. An arrow pointed west onto Wood Street. I followed the patched pavement up toward the top of Hummie Hill, dead trees lying in piles to my left. I parked the car and picked my way carefully through green glass shards and carpet-like moss. Standing in an open field of trash, gravel and dried grasses, I caught a strange scent on the breeze. I saw no signs of fire, but the odor of smoke bombs, thick and sulfuric, burned my nostrils.

I stood on top of a burning hill, a disappeared town stretched before me slowly collapsing into subterranean flames. Grief, not fear, permeated my experience on this hill two miles north of the mine. In the mine, I feared for myself. At the edge of this overgrown wasteland, I see the loss of thousands, their homes demolished by an insidious, unseen threat. How can a town disappear? I ask myself again and again. And if an entire town—baseball fields, front porches, foundations—can vanish without a cry, why should I escape?

Yet, Centralia is still on the map. Its serpentine roads,

belching smoke, patch together a town, of sorts. The maples are turning red and gold on the hillside; I can hear crickets whispering in the tall grasses. Dandelions tangle through broken foundations. Although devoured by vegetation, broken and unrecognizable, Centralia remains.

Ferns grow out of rain-slicked rock crevices down in the mine. This is not a working mine; our footsteps are the only sounds in the gangway. Dave lengthens our private tour, taking me back to the Orchard Vein, showing me how the sandstone sandwiches the coal. He runs a finger along the anthracite seam, a glittering surface that shames the dull slate beneath.

How did you come to work here? I ask.

My whole family worked in the mines and I didn't want my life to be like that. I ended up here.

Dave readjusts his hard hat. Does he hesitate when confessing his dread of coal mining, his rejection of a family legacy? He doesn't romanticize working in the coal mines; he acknowledges the choking isolation, the backbreaking demands. He fled family expectations to work in the Pioneer Tunnel Coal Mine: a tourist attraction, a dangerous space producing nothing. But in a few weeks, Dave will start tearing out rotten logs, hauling in newer, stronger supports. He accepts the hollow silence of this public mine. Perhaps he likes the sound

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of his work boots on the dirt floor, the sound of his pick ax against abandoned rock. Dave also comes into the mine so he can speak, relating accounts both sensational and simple. This empty mine, turned inside out for tourists, lets Dave talk about the caves he loves, about what remains.

I fill my notebook, then snap photographs to supplement my memory, my illegible scribbles. In these dark tunnels, we do the only thing we can. Long after Tom and the third-graders leave, Dave and I linger in rock halls, filling the cavern with stories, staving off collapse.



“Walled” by Whitney Olsen
Honorable Mention Graduate Art

FIRST PLACE UNDERGRADUATE ESSAY

Smoke

by Zach Maughan

1) With a hand full of coffee, there is no way to properly pack a box of Camels. Tapping them against the top of the coffee mug causes a spray of coffee to splash onto the cool concrete; luckily my slacks are spared the stains. It is cold this morning as October moves into its later half. The first snows of the season fell last night as I drove home from a night of greeting guests at the front desk of the motel where I work. The last couple was Chinese. Dropped off by the Airport Shuttle, they huddled around their baggage outside the office door. They were kind when entering the office and I wondered if all Chinese were like them. Stephanie and I had talked about going to China after we finished school. She wanted to learn Mandarin and I wanted to teach English. After giving them their keys, I stacked their luggage in the back of my car and drove the wife and her child to their room while the husband walked in the snow. As they stood before their room in the headlights, I unloaded their suitcases and they gave timid thank yous and closed the door.

The mountains are dusted white with thick snow hanging from the boughs of pines. My breath vaporizes in the cold air. I am self conscious as I walk across campus. I haven't felt like

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this since I left for Germany last September. Smoking never bothered me overseas. Everyone smokes. I've smoked for ten years. But in Utah I'm thankful for the cold air; it disguises my habit.

2) Class is out and the coffee has been refilled. A group of four, we huddle in a circle around one of the black iron tables on the patio of the university's student center.

"How was the essay?"

"Fuck, I ran out of time."

"This snow is going to fuck me. I still have to find mushrooms..."

"Hey man, how's it going?"

"It's fuckin' cold."

"I hate this university, I can't get into the classes I need."

Small talk streams out of pursed lips. I don't speak what's on my mind; it's scuttled in lies and harbored in between the silence of breath.

Inside the café Mary was wearing her blue hoodie. It was the one she wore the afternoon I brought her soup and a sandwich. That was a year and a half ago. We had sat outside in her backyard and I watched her eat. She would chew slow as she raised and lowered her hand to her mouth. She had been

sick that day, and after finishing the soup she sat on my lap and I wrapped my arm around her.

In line for coffee she did not make eye contact. We did not speak. I wanted to say, "I'm sorry, I'm sorry about Europe, I shouldn't have had you come. Not after what happened," but sadness had my tongue. After paying for a refill, we passed one another and looked in opposite directions. Now I breathe carcinogens, the smoke rolls, the dialogue drifts and I think I will get cancer one day. The tumors will grow slowly in the heart of my lungs and I'll cough blood.

3) On the steps outside the west doors of the Sun Burst lounge, it's lonely. Across the square, snow holds to the west-facing aspects of maple leaves. Water drips from the eastern leaves and stains the concrete dark and morose. It's after 11am, which means it's past six in Edinburgh.

I stare at the concrete and flick my cigarette. The ash hits the ground and is blown away by the breeze. I turn up my collar and watch the smoke curl and hover and fade from its ember.

4) My fingers are cold, but my breath fades in the sunshine drifting in and out of clouds. I can hear frost melting and

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dropping from the roof onto gravel lining the building. My lips are greedy for smoke and caffeine. I wait for words. I wait for a sign. I wait for the sun to reach the western sky and melt the snow from cold leaves.

The wells of my eyes swell. Notes mingle with voice in my headphones. No pen to paper, I watch the stragglers moving slowly to and from class. They slide and move out of sight.

Mind blanks.

Low and fast, the clouds move and the sunshine flickers. The air is calm except for the smoke dancing and weaving from my cigarette tip. I snub it out next to number three and cough. They lie in a pile of modern art and wait for the trash.

5) A third cup of coffee cools in my hands. The Logan Canyon Blend, a light roast, subtle and smooth.

I've just read a New York Times article about a man behind a smear campaign. He believes that Obama is a Muslim, or that's what he's spun around the media. The man is anti-Semitic according to the article.

I talked briefly before history class with her. She was cooking dinner for her flatmates. We used to cook together and eat waffles in the afternoon. At the kitchen table in apartment one-twenty-three of Kleeburger Weg student housing, we would

spread Nutella thickly across heart-shaped waffles and, as the chocolate melted and settled into their textured surface, carve the hearts with our greedy knives and forks. After eating I would stand behind her as she washed plates and kiss her neck below the hair line.

The blue haze of smoke drifts in puffs across the patio of the university's student center. I am interrupted by a voice calling out: "shut the fuck up" followed by mumbling, followed by, "that is the saddest story." The tone is false. Turning, I see two young men climb a set of stairs. They laugh at one another and move out of sight.

In Trier during the evenings we used to walk along the calm waters of the Mosel. With slow waters drifting quietly past, we would sit on a bench and talk. Later in the night we would smoke dope and listen as water lapped at the dock and freighters passed. In the dark waters, the light of houses across the river would hang in the river's reflection, and as the ships would pass we would watch as the lights fractured into shivering and pulsing lines of lights; like rows of Christmas lights undulating and vibrating in the wind; like a pulse measured on the machines in hospitals. All was new, and rubbing her back I would tell her everything.

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6) I see memories heading towards the trash bin of my mind. The bin is much like any other bin, where if it is not picked up the day after tomorrow and you throw away something important, you can still retrieve it before the trucks come. Only I can't remember if it's garbage day.

I told her about the images moving towards the bin last night as I smoked and drank Cabaret. As they move towards the bin, they lacerate my heart and weaken my mind. I did well until I recalled falling in love. I remember the moment suspended in time. We were in Sulzbach, her "Dorf" as she called it, outside of Karlsruhe. I remember staring out from her window across the green and tan plains towards France. I remember the settling of my conscience as the sun would slowly bury itself into the West and night would fall and we would lie in soft lamp light, on her bed, telling stories and undressing each other.

Tears were involuntary as I sat, my back pressed against a window pane, and listened to the words transcribe the moments. Her eyes were open and drank me in. After the conversation, I wondered how she remembered our time. Was it only through thoughts and the way they become the residual scapegoats of our lives? Now there is no solace of such a place, only a memory moving towards a void in space. My coffee is cool-

ing faster than I can drink it, and my feet are cold and sweaty.

7) Number seven is from another pack. When I began smoking, I would take the first cigarette from the pack, flip it upside down, and place it back into the pack. This smoke was always "lucky" and saved for last. Number seven was flipped upside down; it was the "lucky" cigarette. There is no real reason behind this tradition, and I seldom do it now. After ten years of this shit, superstition is out the fucking window. I flick the lighter and touch tip to flame.

8) In the parking lot of the climbing gym, I'm left with loneliness and a dull, pulsing ache running up left arm. My hands are raw and sweat. They put up new problems in the boulder room. The holds were rough and clean of chalk; they cut and scrape calluses away from fingers. The tips of my fingers sweat in the cold. I hold the cigarette just behind the middle knuckles of my fingers. My hands are white with chalk, and I'm careful not to let them touch my mouth. I focus on my breath, the rise and fall of my chest and the white puffs of air. While climbing I hold my breath, or at least I think that after a climb.

Earlier, there was no time to focus on breathing while ten feet above the ground with sweaty hands and no rope.

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The harder I tried to grasp at the plastic holds, the more they rubbed my hands raw and loosened my grip. Slowly the friction between the plastic and my hands weakened, and then POP! and the ground. Sitting up on a black pad, my breath came back, or at least I noticed it as my own. Then came the dull movement of pain in my left arm. I tell myself that this is from climbing. This is not from my heart.

I take a deep drag from my cigarette and toss it to the dark pavement. Its sparks spread and then fade. I step on the last glowing ember and climb into the car and turn the key.

9) I let my sister's dog, Lady, out in the evening as I smoke on the patio of my house. My left fingers are stiff and sting in the air. My right hand holds onto the warmth of a cold beer. The air is quiet, the neighborhood sleeps, and smoke rolls across the moon.

I still don't know what to do about Christmas and Germany. Five-thousand miles. My mother says it all sounds familiar. I'm unsure. I couldn't even bring myself to say hello in line for coffee today.

She still wants me to come. She says she misses me. She wants to make sure I'm not getting skinny. Her mother asks if I'm still coming.

The night closes around in silence, and I'm alone in the backyard. Soon leaves will carpet the valley floor. The crickets have gone quiet. I wait a moment beside the garbage bin before I toss the butt.

It's going to be a long, cold winter.

10) With hot coffee and a clouded mind, I watch a pile of dog shit steam in the yard. My breath evaporates; my coffee vaporizes; my mind clouds; my cigarette burns; the shit steams. This is the first steaming shit I've seen in ages. Lady runs the yard. The shit is ten feet away. I think I can smell it. The sunlight comes through the leaves of an elm, lighting sharply on frosted grass. The shit steams in this light and its vapors sway in the morning's cold air. I suppose this is some sort of daily horoscope. Damn.

11) "So have you thought about Germany?"

I can hear the traffic in the background. There are cars, buses, children yelling and laughing, and an occasional Scots man talking to some indefinite object.

"I'm still not sure; I'm going to take some time on this."

There is more traffic. I wonder what she looks like sitting outside the Beehive bar. Where in Edinburgh is it? Did we ever

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walk past it as we strolled casually through the streets? Is it near the university?

12) “Is that okay?” I say.

“Yes.”

“Things don’t change over night, you know?”

I wonder if there is an umbrella over her head or sunshine.

“I’m going to go have a coffee inside. My shift starts soon.”

“Okay, have fun.”

“I love you.”

“And I love you.”

There is melting frost dripping from the black garbage bin. The sun is over the elm and shines in my eyes. I sit on the hood of my car in the driveway, flick my cigarette, and hang up the phone.

13) Return Address: Flat 3F1, 22 East Preston St.
Edinburgh Eh89QB
United Kingdom

14) “You can have one if you want” I say to my sister as she walks down the back porch stairs.

“I want a cup of coffee. Shit, I shoulda stopped and got one.”

“You can brew some, we have some beans inside.”

“My French press is here isn’t it?”

“Unless you took it yesterday.”

My sister walks inside and returns shortly with a mug cupped between her short fingers.

My sister takes a smoke from the box.

“I’ve really wanted a cigarette lately. Don’t tell Barney, please.”

My sister smoked for about 5 years before she quit.

“What’s going on with you and your girlfriend? You know you have to talk about it. You don’t want to do you?” she says and then inhales. The cigarette’s tip glows.

“She didn’t do that, did she?”

I nod.

“Well, you know what they say...”

“No, don’t say that.”

“Oh, yeah.” She pauses. “So, you talked to Mary lately?” We are quiet and drink our coffees.

15) Vent.

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16) Finishing the letter, I take a deep drag and hold the smoke. It begins to singe and burn. I exhale slowly allowing half the smoke to escape from my nose and the other half through my lips. How do we lie to each other so seamlessly? How do we lie to ourselves? How do we pretend it doesn't hurt?

My hands are shaking and I've drank three cups of coffee. I stare at an indefinite space beyond my hand and its smoke veil. Inside the house, I can hear a fly circling the room. Through the window I see its frantic movements; it runs itself into the reflection of a mirror. I want to tell it there is no escape beyond the mirrored finish. I hold my tongue. I know it cannot listen or understand.

17) Across the valley the sun dips low and buries its head into the Wellsville Mountains. I sit on the front porch huddled among the yellowing ivy. The ground is dark and trunks of trees reach their crooked branches towards the sky painted in bright yellows and oranges. The colors hover and change between silhouettes and half bare branches and midnight blue darkness descends.

"Did you get the post?" She says.

"Yes."

"So how was it?"

"Well, I didn't get it until I got home from school. I've been so busy with school. It seems I can't find time to do much besides climb when I'm not there or at work."

"I'm sorry."

"So how was university today?"

"It was good."

"So class went well?"

18) The moon is near full, as I sit in the backyard on a dilapidated wooden bench. The vast mares of the moon, its dead seas formed as lava broke forth from its crust and cooled on its lifeless surface, shimmer and swirl as smoke crosses their surface and fades. In ancient times, the Greeks told a story about the moon. Apollo, the sun God had a twin sister named Artemis. Artemis had fallen in love with the great hunter Orion. One day Orion left to go hunting for the day. Artemis in her loneliness went down to the sea to watch the sun set in the evening. Her lover had not returned. Feeling somber, she wished to watch the waves crash and wash against rocks and sand. As the sun came closer and closer to the ocean, Artemis was visited by Apollo.

Seeing a black speck upon the golden glimmer of waves rising and falling, Apollo turned to his sister and said, "Sister, I will

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bet you the stars in the sky, that you cannot hit that shape with a single arrow.”

Artemis, wanting to prove herself, accepted the bet, and nocking arrow to quiver, she raised her bow and let fly an arrow straight and true.

“Well,” Apollo said, “you will have your prize soon enough.”

The next morning upon waking, Artemis walked down to the waves and the roar of the mighty ocean to see what the day might bring. There lying in the ebbing tide, she found Orion washed ashore with a single arrow protruding from his back. Grief stricken, Artemis fell quickly to her love’s side. Realizing what she had done, she turned cold and grey only to die soon after. Feeling sorrow for what he had caused, Apollo placed his sister in the sky as the moon and shone light upon her, as she no longer shone like the twin she once was. Orion was placed in the sky as well, and both exist up to this day. In October, as the full moon sets in the west in the early hours of the morning, Orion rises in the east. With summer past, the distance between them has grown, and their light has dimmed. But still they remember each other from opposite sides of the sky.

19) Two years ago, on my birthday, I had some friends over. We drank red wine until three am. At some point, I realized that my friend Kara was gone. Concerned that she had driven away drunk, I went outside to see if her car was gone. I found her on the front porch leaning against an ornamental iron rail with no shoes. She was half conscious. A friend and I lifted her to her feet and pulled her inside the house. She was freezing. Her feet were wet from melted snow, so I got her my best pair of socks, took off her cold wet socks and placed the new ones on her feet. Later, she would puke up the wine she had drunk, and I would hold her blond hair. I didn’t want it to be stained red; it was such lovely hair. When she was finished and I had given her plenty of water to drink, I put her into a bed, tucked in the covers and watched as she passed off into sleep.

I had forgotten this birthday story and she told me it right before I came outside to smoke. I wonder now as I sit upon a cold bench and the moon hangs over my head, what happened to that person? I wonder if I would still act the same as I did that night. Or am I different? Have I traded my compassion towards friends, for a desire to leave, for a trip across the Atlantic, for a new life, for a love, or for pain?

20) In the October morning, the air has cooled and settled in

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the valley. Its moisture formed a thin sheet of frost upon the windshield of my car in the drive. Not expecting the frost, I have to start the car and turn up the heat. I wait outside and smoke beside the garage door. A reflection of myself is caught in the windows and gloss paint of the driver's side door. My hair is ruffled and blows in the gentle breeze. The lines of my face have deepened and furrow upon my brow. A black jacket hangs loose around my torso and my grey slacks fold gently as they reach my brown tattered shoes. Smoke and breath exit in puffs of air and distort the image of a man in his mid-twenties. What are you doing? There is sadness in the man's eyes and tension in the thin lines cutting into his cheeks. I believe the sadness in my eyes. In their depths of brown and black, consciousness floats and ebbs in the tides of memories. There are no definite answers to the questions we ask ourselves; there are only open ended answers floating in the infinite wells of our emotion. I would like to tell myself that life should be taken lightly. Laugh you bastard, smile, fucking breathe. Let your mind settle. You know all this from before.

It seems with issues of the heart, there is no closure, only sutures. There is only a patchwork of images and memories sewn together with words and breath, and a hope that tomorrow thoughts will give warmth to an inner part of our being,

and that inner part of our being will be able to continue its growth.

21) I would like to think that after ten years, I will someday quit smoking; that I will quit staring into a mirror to find lines deepening and friends fading. One question no one ever seems to ask though is "why do you smoke?" Well, it's personal. I guess it's like so many other things we consider as vice or virtue; it causes one to stand outside for a moment and listen to silence transition gusts of air and gusts of breath. I listen for one brief moment and realize that we are both living and dying; living and yet killing ourselves. Cigarettes are the particular. They are the nails in the coffin. They are an affirmation that we are temporary; they are a reminder that one day we will die. And as the ash and smoke mingle with the air and soil of our lives and give birth to something new, something pure, something that will never die, death cannot help but produce life. So why do I smoke? Well, it's a relationship, it takes its toll on your health, but reaffirms that the moment is beautiful, that change is necessary, and that one day we will all burn out and become the death we so much fear.

Sometimes I wish I could quit.

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SECOND PLACE UNDERGRADUATE ESSAY

The Cave

by Jeffrey Carr

The helicopter settled on the dirt like an old man into a recliner, and the weed scraps that had been tossed into the air fluttered back to earth. The villagers had seen us coming from miles away over the flat savannah, and many gathered around to discover what prominent figures would emerge. It could have been the president of Mozambique and his entourage, and they wouldn't have known. They didn't even know they lived in Mozambique. It wasn't the president, anyway. It was my uncle Ken and me—two distinctly unimportant American travelers. He, a robust, blonde college professor working in the country, and I, a wiry student writer sent to report on his project. This particular jaunt into the bush, however, was strictly for pleasure. We brought with us a translator, Domingos, and Tatu, one of the kitchen boys at the Chitengo café. We never would have thought to invite him, but he had mentioned at breakfast that he was born and raised in this very village, so we figured he could take the afternoon off and ride along. I sure didn't mind. All I wanted was to see the cave.

Tatu was the first one out of the helicopter, and I think that's really what surprised them the most. He left this home

village of Nhaminga ten years before and had never returned, let alone with shoes, a cell phone, and from the sky. Nhaminga was alone in the tall, yellow-green grass, only twenty kilometers from the Chitengo camp at the edge of Gorongosa National Park. Only twenty kilometers, but in all those years, Tatu hadn't been home even once. It dawned on me that he must have had no way of getting there, save by foot, and that's assuming he somehow knew the way, using trees or rivers as landmarks. Heaven knows there were plenty of trees and rivers to go around. Even from only a couple hundred feet up, the landscape looked like a thick, rolling bed of moss. I reached down in my mind and squeezed a clump of it, then brushed off my hands in the helicopter. Nhaminga was at the edge of the moss, in a vast flatland that was just as much golden as green. The river, like most in Africa, was brown.

An ecstatic man in his early twenties, who turned out to be Tatu's cousin and childhood friend, received us as we emerged, and a bevy of wide-eyed children rounded out the greeting party. The cousin had on a bright blue Hawaiian shirt with a fist-sized gash taken out of the back, but it was still nicer than most of the children's clothes. He explained to the local youths who this rich stranger was, and they lined up to shake his hand, then ours. Ken and I exchanged humble smiles.

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When I arrived in the capital a few days before to gather information for my article, I noticed right away how friendly everybody was. My uncle said, “If you think they’re nice, wait ‘til you meet the people out in the bush.” I had to admit I was intrigued at the thought. The city was exotic in its own way, but honestly, it was nothing too out of the ordinary—just a lot of potholes and street vendors selling quasi-authentic trinkets, little voodoo masks and the like. Standard third-world fare. Now we were really in the middle of nowhere. The Chitengo camp was the only habitation of any kind within 30 kilometers of Nhaminga, and thick cornstalk-like growth made the prospect of a shoeless trip to anywhere all the more menacing. A couple of other young men and some young mothers with babies joined the group congregating around the helicopter. One mother in her early twenties sported a pink bandana over her head, along with a faded royal blue World Cup shirt with different national flags around the collar. She carried one small child and tethered at least one other in the dirt nearby. Another mother weaned her own toddler unabashedly in front of us on a breast roughly the size and shape of a plastic baby bottle. Everything here was so real. At one point in my awkward glancing about, she gathered it back into her shirt, at which point the child immediately thrust down his searching hand to reclaim it.

“So they’re taking us to the cave?” I asked the translator, Domingos, the only one I could really converse with. He explained that they were taking us into Nhaminga first, where we’d have to ask formal permission from the regulo. He didn’t know how to translate that. Apparently, the cave held a special significance to the villagers, and they wanted to ensure we wouldn’t screw around in there. Fair enough. We had landed only about a hundred yards away from the village, but I couldn’t see it at all through the grass. And then, only when we were right on top of it, it appeared—a circular clearing, no bigger than the third floor of my apartment building, dotted with burnt yellow structures spaced out on the dirt floor. There were twelve of these structures in their village. I counted them. Among them, about eight or nine had walls of dried golden mud from the river, or horizontally woven sticks, and the rest were open on all sides. Ken and I poked our heads into one of the stick-walled ones and found it completely empty—nothing more than pale shelter. The huts weren’t anything pretty, but I supposed they kept out the sub-Saharan sun, which was beginning to assert its authority on the back of my neck. Also, the thick, bright blanket of endless sky made up for anything lacking in aesthetics. And the huts had a sort of understated majesty. They were just as I had imagined them, lying in bed on

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the third floor. Just like on the Discovery Channel. They were ideal.

How simple this bush life, and how untainted by impure motives, I thought, as the villagers led us toward the center of the clearing. The quest to understand people at their innermost selves is what drove me to be an English major in the first place. It is a quest I had become somewhat obsessed with. I knew that in our modern world, any attempt to discover the core of humanity was liable to be lost in a fog of interpretation at the hands of business, politics, and media. Opinions rarely stood independent of ulterior motives. Such it was in civilization. Such, they said, wouldn't be the case here. "Simplify, simplify, simplify," shouted Thoreau, and his words resonated through my skull. My literature classes had strangely prepared me for this meeting with the regulo in the exact same manner that years of TV had. Every single source agreed that from uncorrupted noble savages like these, I would gain actual perspective on life. I knew it was true. According to everything I had learned, this village, this salt-of-the-earth people had the potential to embody the pure, elemental goodness of human nature more so than any people I had ever met.

One slightly larger communal structure stood in the middle of the scatter of huts, with a thatched roof, like the rest, and

about twenty knotty wood poles to hold it up. As we approached it, some of the children rushed ahead to set up a circle of chairs and benches in the shade of the only tree nearby, while the remaining adults sauntered out of their huts. The log benches were rudimentary, but the chairs came from a lighter wood, and had square corners- a sign that they had likely been fashioned by someone with more sophisticated tools than were available in Nhaminga. My uncle said that priests visited these isolated villages sometimes, and probably brought them the "nice" furniture. I wondered what else they brought, noting that the huts wouldn't successfully conceal much.

So this cave was supposed to be pretty good. "Oh, you have to see the cave," gushed the employees at the national park. "I've heard it's really something." I had never been a particularly devoted spelunker, but the anticipation was starting to get to me. Ken was excited too. After a month in Maputo teaching an MBA course and attempting to negotiate an exchange program with the university and the national park, he had earned a scenic detour.

Two of the legs of my chair had steady contact with the ground, and I rocked indecisive about the third as I tried to catch words from the conversation among the men of the village, which was in Sena, the local language, but which also had

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words from Portuguese. I didn't know much Portuguese either, but my chances were considerably better than with Sena. Domingos translated as the regulo, who appeared to be the only elderly person in the entire village, welcomed us to Nhaminga and chattered away happily about it. He had an old, light brown button-up shirt that was too big for him. He was even thinner than the others, and was missing most of the teeth that should have been in his shriveled little avocado head. Poor guy. As he talked, one younger, stronger man ambled out of his hut a few minutes later with bloodshot eyes, squinting against the brightness of the sun, and holding a pink hand towel loosely against the left side of his head. He had malaria, one whispered to Domingos, who whispered to us. He joined the circle, but kept his head down most of the time. My own time in the circle was spent both worrying about the poor malarious man, and watching the long benchful of restless boys across from me poking each other and whispering secrets. I yearned to know what they could possibly be talking about. What would you whisper about if your entire life was twelve huts, tall grass, and a river? Surely, the hunt would make for good stories. I knew for a fact that there were lions, hippos, and all sorts of predators who viewed these humans as no more than another link in the chain.

My focus returned to the adult conversation, both ends of which Domingos was handling with seemingly limited success. I picked up a word here or there, but nothing substantial. Domingos told the villagers that we wanted to see the cave. We were not the first with such a request. He also translated our message to them, which was that we would be able to bring in a nurse from the park from time to time to heal their ailments. The adults each nodded, some more heavily than others. The regulo agreed to show us the way to the cave, and even offered us a live chicken in return for our kindness. We told them thank you. We couldn't take it in the helicopter, we said, but we'd eat it together with them the next time we came. Thank you very much.

Satisfied with our dealings to that point, the regulo conferred with a couple of other men in Sena, and then rose and informed us that a sort of ceremony would be required before outsiders could see the cave. How appropriate, I thought. How perfect! I had realized earlier in the morning that it was Easter, at least in the Christian world. Certainly, this particular cave-access ceremony would not be akin to Easter services I'd attended since childhood, I imagined, but it would be some sort of unique spiritual experience, nonetheless.

The men of Nhaminga eyed down their white American

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visitors. Trying my best to show respect and not patronize our hosts, I attempted to capture a couple of non-invasive, candid shots of the council with my digital camera, which I held upright on my left knee. Ken held his hands together on his lap and gauged their faces. He had hardly said a word upon arriving in the village. The council was discussing something in Sena in a tone far different from the gentle greetings that had been occurring thus far, but I couldn't pin down what it was exactly. Finally, Domingos rose from his chair near the little boy bench. He nervously related to us that the villagers would be requiring beer, bread, and cigarettes to properly perform the ceremony. Ken and I turned to each other in alarm.

"What? No one told us about this!" Ken pleaded with Domingos.

"What about that cooler you brought?" Domingos inquired. It was nothing but a few small dinner roll sandwiches and sodas and bottled water for the four of us. Our translator took a liberty and offered the group as much of the cooler's contents as they'd need for the ceremony, but that that's all we had. The adult men conferred with one another yet again and agreed that that would have to do. It was decided that the ceremony would be performed there, at the mouth of the cave itself, and so off we went, in single file through the tall grass.

The mile-long "path" to the cave was visible for only ten or fifteen feet ahead at any given time. The golden, cornstalk-like grass weaved itself across the dirt from both sides, rising up over my head like a bridal arch as I plodded ahead into the unknown. I walked at the distant helm of our little non-native contingency, preferring the guise of solitude in the wilderness to Ken and Domingos's louder-than-necessary joking—western voices which obscured the grass, the crickets, the birds, the bellow of frogs. I wanted to hear Africa. The pack of villagers up ahead darted and glided through the curves with great ease. They knew exactly what they were doing. Even the man with malaria passed us up and took off through the grass. I picked up my pace. I wanted to learn Africa, and I wanted the villagers of Nhaminga to teach me.

And then, just off the path, a gaping hole in the rock. Many of the villagers already sat at the mouth of the cave, watching as the regulo spread a thin, white cloth on the ground and knelt in front of it. The crowd reverently followed suit, kneeling or sitting in place on the rocks all around. About twenty different people came to the ceremony with us, though most would not be proceeding down into the cave, and many, again, were children. The regulo spoke slowly and resolutely as he sprinkled flour—the one ingredient the village provided—

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onto the center of the cloth in a perfect little mound. He then took one of the squat 300mL glass bottles of Coke, which one of the others had opened for him with his teeth. That was hard to watch. The regulo poured a dollop's worth into a mangled plastic cup on the cloth, a little more onto the ground between his knees and the cloth, and then propped the remainder in its bottle up against the rock. He then did a similar thing with one of the Fantas, only more hastily. He didn't use much of the soda at all, and none of the bread. There would be plenty left for lunch after the cave, and I was beginning to feel hungry already. A thin scar of light pushed through the trees onto the surface and reached the sacramental cloth as the skinny old man pleaded with his ancestors first for permission to enter the cave, and safety once inside. Such Domingos explained, anyway. The light smiled down upon the little ceremony for an instant, then moved off the cloth and onto a nearby rock. I waited reverently for the tokens to be passed around, or consumed by the regulo, or something, but they remained, and the ceremony ended. The old man's face rose slowly from the dirt and twisted as he gazed directly into Ken's eyes, then mine. He spoke to us in his native tongue: "Next time, don't forget the beer."

Eight of the men and older boys of Nhaminga accompa-

nied Ken and me down a guano-sloshed ladder into the deep. At last, this was it. The ground was springy with untold inches of deposit, and thousands of bats lined columns rising up toward, but not reaching the sky. Ken and I waved our feeble flashlights around and searched out possible pathways to each other, anticipating what was surely to come. The ceiling was high, the rooms spacious, and the spongy walls swallowed up the beams of light so that visual detail was hard to come by. Developing patterns suggested that there was nothing to see but bat excrement, anyhow. That's certainly all there was to smell. Still, I didn't care. I thought back on the sterilized offices at university advancement, where the publisher of the alumni magazine called me in and asked if I wanted to spend a week in Africa during my 18-credit semester. I said yes. It was an easy question.

Ten minutes more of slowly traversing loose rocks and wading through chest-high freezing water, and we were there. The corridor opened into a hollow where actual sunlight poured in and reflected off the wet rocks. It was an underground lagoon. Roots and vines from trees on the surface hung down dozens of feet and looped around a tree somehow growing out of a rock in the middle of the chamber. Other vines hung down and pleaded to be swung on. The whole room was

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like a Vegas menagerie, only more perfect than man could have hoped to create on his own. Water from an underground river cascaded down levels of weathered rock, surrounded the crag with the tree, collected in a series of pools, and flowed out the other end of the room and out of sight.

A shout echoed down from the sunlight, and the man with malaria, standing on the surface, waved to his friends. Ten minutes later, he was with us. Ken said matter-of-factly that he didn't think the man actually had malaria. I had to admit that he sure was bouncing around a lot for being deathly ill. In fact, he seemed to be getting better as the day went on. No longer waiting for our guides, Ken and I climbed ahead and explored the lagoon. After five minutes, though, we had scoured the whole of it and returned to where the villagers squatted on some rocks near the water's edge. Pretty as it was, the room wasn't huge. "Where to next?" I asked, anxious to see what else the cave had in store. Domingos relayed the question to Tatu's cousin on my behalf. I received the short response on my own. This was it. "They told us there was three hours' worth of cave!" I started. "The helicopter won't be back until 4:30. There has something else we can see, somewhere else to go." A villager pointed out what appeared to be a room up high on the rock wall, and sent one of the more silent natives to guide

me there. I exercised my merit badge skills and climbed up, having to take my shoes off halfway there for better traction. "Anything up there?" Ken inquired. There wasn't. From my perch, however, I could see that down on a rock in the lagoon, the younger village boys had found an injured bat, and were jabbing it with sticks and fingers. The men sat nearby and watched. Ken urged Domingos to tell the boys about a disease worse than malaria, but they didn't seem too concerned. The little bat screeched in pain with each prod. Ken and I started back toward the surface on our own.

We didn't make it far before the natives started following us. It dawned on me that most of them didn't have any way of generating light down there in the abyss. We ascended the guano-soaked ladder and returned to the site of the ceremony, where the empty cooler sat open. Our lunch was gone. Released from the cave and standing on my own in the sunlight, I knew that what I had been seeing my entire life were nothing more than shadows on the wall. These people were tainted, and so was I. Ken took up the cooler, and we made the silent trek back to where the helicopter would pick us up over two hours later.

My uncle dropped the empty box onto the dirt, sat upon it, and began watching two ant colonies down between his knees.

Essay

Domingos found a sharp ramp of dead tree branch, and offered it to me for a chair. I thanked him, not sure where on it I was supposed to sit. I improvised, and the villagers followed and squatted in the dirt nearby, talking amongst themselves. Domingos joined them and began asking questions and taking notes about their history for the park records, or so I gathered. I wondered how much of it was real.

I tried to doze off on the log, knowing full well that my slowly-simmering neck and arms would continue to burn if unchecked. I didn't care, though. More than anything, I just wanted to take off my sopping wet shoes and socks, but I knew it would have been a bad idea, what with all the ants.

I slept for a little while sitting there, I think. The next thing I remember, Ken had a short stick, and was passing the time by attempting to transplant ants from one colony into the other, unsuccessfully. He sensed my movement and asked if I was hungry. When I answered in the affirmative, he told me he still had some of that weird South African jerky from the plane. The unidentifiable burgundy and gray meat he pulled from his back pocket wasn't appealing in any way, but this wasn't a time to be picky. We two stood up and turned our backs to the villagers of Nhaminga as Ken worked the vacuum-packed meat free as discreetly as possible, transferring exactly one half of it from his closed hand to mine. That was our ceremony.



"Lit" by Whitney Olsen
First Place Graduate Art

THIRD PLACE UNDERGRADUATE ESSAY

The Ghost of Missouri
by Mikey Stephenson

I knew he had died before I was told. My intuition acted almost like a second voice inside my head. You got it from me, he once said, a gift passed down through a long line of French-

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gypsies. So when I was given the phone that cold morning, I was not surprised to hear my sister tell me that my grandfather had died in his sleep. I was in Kamas, Utah, spending the Memorial Day weekend with my fiancé's family camping at their property. My back was sore from sleeping in a tent and my bladder was aching to release the pee I had held in all night. I was pacing up and down the dirt road that leads to the main road mostly to keep my mind off the pain and also to keep a signal on my cell phone.

"I can't go, I have work."

"Fine, Johnny but you will have to tell her that, I'll have her call you."

"Wait..."

The call with my sister ended and soon after my phone rang again; this time an old woman's voice. I could imagine her in my mind sitting in her little chair by the phone, hands shaking uncontrollably, her eyes staring fixedly at the worn out recliner in which he always sat.

"John...I need help planning the funeral and I want you to sing at it. You know how much grandpa loved your voice. You're coming aren't you?"

Hesitantly I answered, knowing I wouldn't be telling her I was going to stay in Utah. No I would be heading southeast

toward the land of green fields, tall trees and ghosts.

At the end of summer in 1994 my mother had reached her ultimate low in life and was unable to care for her children properly. I was sent along with my sister and little brother to live with my grandparents in Mountain View, Missouri. I was not unfamiliar with the town. I had been born a few miles south and had actually gone to grade school there. Now I was fourteen and had been away from that small town for many years. Faces had changed and so had the friendships that I once had. I was a city kid now, no longer bred to raise chickens and cattle. I had adapted to the street life of Salt Lake. We lived a block from Trolley Square, a place that on February 12, 2007 would claim national attention as five unaware people would be gunned down by a madman with a gun. It was in the city that others taught me how to lie and cheat. I wasn't a bad kid but I had seen a lot of bad things.

After school started in Missouri, I found the lessons I learned in the city did not help. The other students did not like my voice (my accent had changed), they did not like my clothes, they did not like my hair cut, and they especially did not like my religion. Did you know he has four wives? Did you know that he sacrifices chickens to the devil? He is gay, all

Essay

Mormons are gay. He got Kimmie Hanks pregnant by looking at her. My first mistake at freeing myself from all the rumors and teasing was to defend myself. That only served to increase the bullying. My second mistake was going to the school's counselor. She just blew me off saying that most of the kids that I claimed were part of the teasing went to church with her and they would never display such unchristian like behavior. After my meeting with her, I felt as though the whole school had turned against me. Even the teachers looked at me differently and didn't do anything when the teasing occurred; they pretended not to hear. I had no one to turn to. I was alone. Further isolation would come to me as my best friend and sister, Stephanie, returned to Salt Lake City to find a job and secure a home for us there. My only companion left was my younger brother who had adapted well with the country folk and learned it was easier to deny one's faith than confront the consequence of others. It was then that I started faking sick. I tried and tried to get my grandfather to let me stay home, but it didn't work. When I purposely missed the bus one day I got pelted with his belt and told to man up.

The flight attendant was saying something about the no smoking sign and gesturing at a card that was in the pocket of

the seat in front of me, but I wasn't paying attention. I was thinking about my grandfather's farm and how I had let my conscience talk me into going on this trip. In my mind I didn't want to go to Missouri and I didn't really want to think of it. Too many bad memories were hidden there. There were too many recollections of school kids teasing me and no one there to help me through it. Missouri made me think of being alone. I reflected of the last time that I was in the woods that surrounded my grandparent's farm and a chill ran down my back. I had thought to myself then that once I left Missouri I would never be back.

I looked next to me and saw my mother sitting nervously with a book on her lap. She kept glancing from the flight attendants to the other people around her. I could almost hear her in my head telling everyone to pipe it down so she could pay attention. Next to mom my sister, Stephanie sat with her six-month-old baby. They were happily looking at a foam picture book oblivious to the woman next to them battling with her flight phobia. Inwardly I laughed. Our broken family had come a long way since Missouri and going there only served to bring back the ghosts of the past.

Nervously, I stood waiting. It had been twenty minutes

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since the phone call and I knew that his unwashed, white pick-up would soon be before me. I knew he would be angry; he had sounded that way on the phone. He hated coming into town. I imagined that he would be rehearsing things to say to me during the twenty-five minutes it would take him to get here. I imagined he would have already smoked two cigarettes and the cab of the truck would be fogged with the residue of nicotine and bad breath. My heart was beating so hard I could feel the blood knock against my neck. I waited two minutes longer. I asked myself why I had called in the first place. After all he had warned me. He had told me that he wasn't going to come and get me if I changed my mind. But I didn't change my mind; it was all a cruel joke. Of course if I tried to explain that to him, he wouldn't listen. He never listened to me. I was a child, to him anyway. In reality I was fourteen, almost fifteen and had stopped acting like a child the moment my mom plopped me on his front doorstep.

I shouldn't have called. I should have just walked the twenty miles and somehow found my way along the dirt roads that all looked the same. Maybe I shouldn't have waited so long. After all, the joke was played on me before it even got dark and now only the street lights and a few fireflies lit the sky. I waited and saw a car pass. They drove slowly so I was able to

see in the passenger seat, one of the guys from school that had been in on it. He looked at me and I almost sensed that he felt sorry for what had happened, although he never said anything about that later on. A few more cars passed and then I saw it. I knew instantly that it was him because one of the lights on the front of the pick-up glowed yellow and the other white. I wanted to run. I wanted to take back the phone call and the angry voice I heard on the other end.

He pulled off the highway and the truck stood waiting, waiting for me to get inside. I knew that if I took too long he would just get more upset, yet I was a child. A child that didn't want to face him, an angry adult who had warned me not to do something that I did anyway. I got in the truck and looked at my grandfather. He looked back but didn't say a word. I was right about the smoke and I saw a shrunken cigarette in his left hand. I closed the door and he flipped the truck around to head back into the woods. I stared out the front window watching as the headlights carefully formed each turn and straightaway in the road. I wondered briefly how he knew when the turns were coming, we were going so fast. Then I stared at the radio. It wasn't on but the green lights from it flickered every time the truck hit a bump. Cautiously I stole a glance at my grandfather. He was looking straight back at me.

Essay

I braced myself.

“Damn it John, I told you,” he began. There followed the same speech he gave me the night before. This time, however, the words stung and sliced at my heart. The words, so carefully crafted it was as if the night before was a mere dress rehearsal, brought embarrassing tears to my eyes. You’re so stupid for even trying. You will learn a lesson from this. I told you. I told you. I tried to speak, but my voice was caught on something. All I could do was listen, listen to him tell me over and over how stupid I was. I knew I was stupid; he didn’t have to tell me that. I knew that I had nowhere else to go and that he was doing this as a favor to my mom. I knew it, I knew it, I knew it.

“My kids would never have acted this way!”

“I’m not your kid.” Suddenly, I was in a rage. Forgotten was the fear of the man, forgotten was the fear of his hand and belt. I would talk back and he would listen. He had no idea what I had been through. I had been tortured, mocked and humiliated. I didn’t need to get it now.

“I didn’t ask to come here. I didn’t want to come here. I hate this place. Why are you being so mean I didn’t do anything wrong. The only thing I wanted was to make some friends. You have no idea what happened to me today, you are

just so stubborn you never want to listen.”

I don’t remember the rest of that conversation, I do, however, remember the spanking I got when we finally got home. I remember the tightening in my stomach as I arched over, my hands on my ankles, as the leather struck again and again. He never wore the belt he used to discipline; no it was too horrible a thing for that. Worn out from striking skin rather than keeping up pants, the belt hung from a nail by his bedroom door, a place that gave easy access. I always wanted to take that belt and throw it in the fireplace, but I never did. No it hung from that nail like a trophy on display for the world to see my shame.

My grandparents’ farm was surrounded by over five hundred acres of dark forest that, for me, became my place of refuge. I had no friends, and even if I had, my grandfather wouldn’t let me go into town to see them. The farm was miles away from anyone and so the mysteries of those woods became my companions. I would play in them for hours, building in my imagination a kingdom only known to me. In those woods I discovered fascinating things, crooked trees, glassy ponds, twisting streams and security. I invented life in those woods. One tribe of faeries lived in the earth under the sycamores and another in the tops of oaks. Occasionally they

Essay

would have small battles and I was there to write down the events and draw them in my notebook. Never did the friends of my imaginings tease or hurt me. Never did I have to worry about being different around them, for they were different too. Not a one was a like and all were happy to be with me.

In those woods I discovered life that was lost and forgotten. Deep in the trees I found the remains of an old house. There was nothing left of it except the foundation and the front steps. I pretended it had once been a wonderful home until a tornado took the house to live in the Munchkin providence in the Land of Oz. Close by the remains of Dorothy's Place, which is what I called it from then on, was a graveyard. It was small and untended, but there were plenty of markers. Some were tall and some had no names. I asked my grandmother about them once and she told me I was lying about her having a graveyard on her property, but I knew it was no lie. I visited those stones a lot memorizing the names and inventing the stories for those that had been forgotten. One of the grave stones had broken beer bottles around it. His name was William and I dreamed that he was probably a drunk in life and had such an addiction to alcohol his ghost would try to bring the quenching drink to his body only to have it smashed against the stone that guarded his craving body. Once I stole a

can a beer from the fridge when I was home alone and took it out to Willy. There I poured its poison over the stone and over the unkempt grass that padded the earth. I did this hoping it would appease his spirit and he would at last rest. Some spirits, however, I never found a way to bring peace to.

The plane arrived in St. Louis three hours after leaving Salt Lake City. Quickly we grabbed our luggage and rented a SUV, a beautiful, golden Chevy Equinox; it was big enough for the three adults and the car seat. Stephanie kept saying over and over how she was going to convince her husband to buy her that car; it was so roomy. It took us three hours and fifty-seven minutes to reach the farm and it was dark and foggy. The house looked only different in color; my grandfather had replaced the old, puke, green color siding of my childhood with sky blue, my grandma's favorite color. We went inside and unpacked our things. Grandma sat in her chair and told us about the morning she found him cold and unmoving, the whole time her hands shook and her eyes watered. She offered me the bed he died in; I declined reverently and took the couch to sleep on.

When I woke the next morning at 6 am I quickly showered and changed and went about the farm duties that had

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been neglected the past two days. My grandfather sold all the cows and chickens years ago, so I was only left with feeding a school of pigeons and cutting the expanse of grass. Fortunately, before his death, he had obliged to let a neighbor house his horses in the far field behind the house, so there were only fifteen or twenty acres left for me to cut. As I sat atop that old jalopy of a lawn mower, I couldn't help but look at the woods that lined the fields of the farm. They seemed to be watching me, beckoning me to enter them.

"I want to go and try and find my old fort," I told Stephanie.

She looked at me quizzically for a moment then offered to come along. She knew what had happened to me in those woods the last night I was in them. Soon we were trudging through overgrown brambles and bushes and under fallen cedars and oaks. I had to admit to myself that I couldn't remember it that way. The forest had changed too much. Constantly there was that foreboding feeling of something lurking behind a tree a shadow hunched in stealthiness ready to pounce. The woods were like eyes watching in wait. When we finally did find my fort, I was amazed to see that the once glassy pond that it sat next to had overgrown with foliage and mud. The fort was exactly how I had left it;

three walls and one crumpled heap of wood. There was no roof on it now, but I once remembered it as being the grandest fort in the world. I thought back of the night that wall fell and how I never thought I could see those woods again.

It was fall of my fourteenth year and the temperature had dropped a little, resulting in trees colored brilliant shades of red, orange and yellow. My restrictions to the farm had been extended to not include the woods that I loved. My grandfather blamed it on ticks and told me I was forbidden to enter them. I didn't understand why I was restricted; I could handle the ticks. I got a ring worm in my palm from playing in an old oak tree, and I never complained about having to apply iodine to the scared circle each night. Ticks were easy, if you found them on you pulled them out careful not to leave the blood-sucker's head in.

"Because I told you," was the response I received to my questioning, so I stopped asking. I felt like I was being cut off from yet another thing that gave me joy. I could stay in the house or play in the barn or the few acres of field, but I wasn't allowed to enter those woods. One day my grandfather, however, was up early and finished with the outdoor work by the time I got home from school. I told the grouch, our nickname

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for him adopted by his foul mood, that I was going to do my homework in the far field behind the house. I took my notebook with me. He said nothing of it. As long as the daytime dramas on the tube held out I was free to do as I pleased. I went directly to the field, but did not stop at the line of trees. From that corner of the field I could cut directly to the fort I had erected next to the pond. The fort had taken me days to build, but when all was done it was a construction fit for any king who ruled those woods. It had four walls and pine tree branches for a roof. In front of the fort a large tree lay that lightning had struck down. It was naked of branches and so served nicely when I wanted to lie on my back and gaze at the sky. The day was warm and I was tired, so I laid down on that makeshift bed and soon fell asleep.

I awoke suddenly when I rolled too far and fell on the damp ground. It was eerily dark, with only the light of the moon casting shadows of demons on the trees. The ground had been covered in a blanket of fog that shifted and drifted over the earth. The pond mist covered, glowed ghostly in the moonlight. Instantly I was on edge, I had never been in the woods at night and the friendly image of my trees had changed. The small hairs on the back of my neck pricked up and goose bumps trickled down my arms and thighs. I heard a

noise and looked toward my fort. Someone or something was inside of it. I held my breath because it seemed too loud. I stood... slowly... hearing the twigs and such break under my weight. I heard my knees pop one by one as I stood straight. I wished I had a flashlight. Why didn't I bring a flashlight? Cautiously I risked moving toward the fort. It was probably my brother hiding, trying to scare me; nothing to fear. I got close enough that I could peer in through the doorway. It was staring back.

Eyes, golden in the moonlight, stared dumbly at me. I immediately froze unable to move by any will exerted on my part. It made a noise, a rumble, a growl?—to this day I can't quite remember which. I can only remember the fear that I felt, the fear and the throbbing of my heart in my chest and neck. I thought of a million things and yet nothing all at the same time. Then without warning the creature leapt from the fort. It knocked over the front wall as it escaped the dwelling. It was then that I felt the shame that comes from feeling stupid. The doe dashed off into the trees and soon vanished from sight. I stood for a moment feeling the elation that comes from not being in danger and then turned toward my fort. It was hopeless to do anything right then. The night was growing steadily darker and I needed to get back to the house. Hurriedly, I

Essay

snatched up my notebook and jacket and turned toward the path that would lead me to the field. Then I heard the call. It sounded at first like a woman calling for help. When I remember it today she was calling my name, but I don't think it happened that way. I twisted my head round toward the sound of the caller. I was struck at once how bright she was. Not lighted by the moon but by some inner glow that reflected on the mirrored pond. She was running. The iridescent white of her gown flowed magically in the mist. I reached up my hand as if to wave. And then she was gone. Vanished. It was different with the girl than it was with the doe. With the deer I could hear her retreat as she pranced through the woods. With the girl her disappearance was silent and without warning. A light was coming toward me. It was yellow and small and kept bobbing up and down. The shadow behind the light called my name and I recognized it as my grandfather. I went to him without hesitation, without any thought of the belt that hung on the nail in the house. I was frightened and confused. Had I seen what I had just seen? My grandfather looked me up and down inspecting my face and the expression of fear I must have had on it.

“Johnny are you okay?”

Johnny—that was the only time I remember him calling

me by name. To my great annoyance he always referred to me as John, because to him Johnny was a childish name. Maybe he did it because at the moment I looked so childish, frightened and helpless. I nodded my head and he touched my shoulder. That touch was so different to me than anything I had ever felt. Usually I feared my grandfather's touch; it came with the bite and sting of a belt. Too often I had upset his order of things and acted like a child when I should have acted like an adult. Here, at this moment, his touch was gentle and had love in it. He nudged me forward and we began to walk back to the house. It took longer walking through those woods than any other time I had walked through them. The trees were watching us and my place of refuge now felt like the Garden of Eden, a place that I could no longer dwell in, my paradise gone forever.

“Grandpa,” I asked in a shaky voice, “do you believe in ghosts?”

He stopped and turned to look at me. Then he shifted his head eyeing the trees with speculations. The flashlight's light dimmed and winked and the eerie feeling of the unknown trickled down my back once more. He motioned us to walk a little further and we were soon out of the line of trees just behind the farm house. The view was picturesque, a glowing

Essay

moon and a million twinkling stars lighting up the way home. I looked at my grandfather and he had a small smile cross his lips.

“Yes I do.”

Preparations for the funeral went quickly and my time in that old farm house soon came to an end. I took a moment, when all the women went into town, to examine the house by myself. I started with my grandparent’s room. Everything was clean and in its place. The dresser held my grandma’s antique hairbrush and mirror and a box of old love letters from the war. Slowly I turned to go out and saw on a large nail protruding from the wall the scared leather belt. At age twenty-seven the pains inflicted from that whip were still felt even though its last stroke hit me thirteen years earlier. I looked from the belt to the box of letters and then to a picture of my grandfather. I turned and walked down the hallway back to the room that used to be mine. It was cold in there even though it was approaching summer. Across from the door was a window overlooking the dark woods behind the house. For a moment I watched them—perhaps waiting to see something in white move through the trees. It never happened. I looked away from the window to the dresser that had held my clothes

and then the oil painting above it. I had attempted to create a scene of the universe that my grandfather would love. In the end the painting looked nothing like I wanted and was so botched the creation was good only to burn. But he had kept it. He had hung it up like a masterpiece. I smiled. That was my goodbye to that house, to the farm, woods, and to my grandfather. I left them all in that room next to the painting. A few months later the farm was sold and the haunting of those woods went with it. Thinking about it now I wonder who she was, a ghost of a lost woman, a memory of a lost love, a hope for a returned mother, perhaps I’ll never know.

Poetry



"Triple Ascent" by Eric Woolley
Honorable Mention Undergraduate Art

FIRST PLACE GRADUATE POETRY

Quail Killing

by Russell Winn

Fresh death has its own yawning
earthen scent.

I drive to work today to smell the death.
It straddles the corrugated tin
of a still bird coop,
drapes dry gravel floors,
hangs under the bald wooden eaves,
stills the wild birds this Thursday morning.

Jon says a coon got in, cornered

quail. Chewed off tops of heads.
We sweep pink strips and light
coffee feathers into sticky balls
of sand and wet. Scoop mounds
of clumped hay slivers and dust
into black plastic bags.

Jon's response will be swift:
six raccoons in six days.
Treed, trapped, and holed with buckshot.
I'm not very good at growing things,
but I can sure kill them.

All those quail left over, those
who clung all night to the top net,
upside down, wings pulsing for balance,
sit in silence.
Among Rorsach clots of dust and blood,
they require no solace.
They do not huddle in packs and hiss,
do not look for answers among their own.
They simply breathe.
And await the heat of noon.

Poetry

Miss Afton

By Russell Winn

Grandmother's hands shelled thick peas
with a slick, wet sound. Fingernails like old
fossils. She told tales. We sat in dry
clumped prairie dirt, hooded in heat and flies,
among dusty green sinews of squash and pea plants,
and imagined her, a girl of the Bear River Valley.

The bugs there hummed with purpose,
thick tides of mosquitoes off the river every night
washed a tenor over the bass of the big black bees.
Cows spread across arid grass like slow splayed fingers.
Olive trees reflected sun off silver-gray slivers,
leaves that twinkled sleepy green.

She spoke of the ranch and how she with her thick dry feet
and gray dress grabbed the garden hose
and that smooth sumbitch was a blow snake.
You never seen anyone ran so fast up a bed
of greasewood and into the trailer.

Us hillfolk pay attention to things,
she said as she squished fresh
tomato pickings under an accidental heel.
But if she said there was rain you believed her.
And if she pointed out a weak calf in a herd
he'd be dead with the first cold snap.

Later I saw her in town,
resting in dark textiles under the creak of a Lazy Boy
hidden behind the tang of urine and 409,
attended by clear plastic tubes and Coumadin
bottles, The Price Is Right
humming on a wood paneled TV jammed in the top corner
of a light-filled recovery room.

When grandpa died and they took her here
she just shook her head
and said she could use the quiet.
She spent all day listening to the old green heater drone
and the echoes of movement in the hall.

Poetry

Spud

By Russell Winn

Dad named the dog
after another dog in a beer commercial.
It didn't stick for long.

When the Spud herded cattle in the valley,
Dad showed him how to move like a Navajo,
like he had moved in his youth,
quickly and straight toward the group to drive them.
The dog was kicked in the side by a young bull
and after that would hover just outside of range.
His name became Ten Foot Pole.

One time the cows got on the highway.
Dad used the Chevy to push them back.
When that old blue truck hit a bump and the dog
flipped out, hung in the air like a pinwheel,
Dad didn't bother with the rear view,
just kept driving out to the river.
His name was Grape Shot that day.

For lunch, dad would take blue corn flower,
roll it into soft slabs of dough.
k'ineeshbizhii noodles.
"Geen eesh beez shi" he'd say with me.
He fed those to the dog too.
Then the dog's name was Noodle Nose.

On the way to the river he leaped out of the truck,
and landed on a black chasing dog,
then he was a fighter. He bore war wounds.
Dad sewed him up and bought antibiotics.
But for weeks he walked like an old prize fighter.
His name was John Wayne.

Then dad busted a knee tripping on barbed wire.
He went to the hospital, got an infection,
and told me he was proud of who
I had become.
The dog sat on the faded back porch, and
looked through the dirty glass door
at old rubber ditch boots and fencing tools.
He kept his old name after that.

Poetry

SECOND PLACE GRADUATE POETRY

Makhani

by Whitney Olsen

This flavor doesn't
belong to me, exotic
pungency of garam
masala, numb bite of clove,
black or green or brown cardamom.

I steal the subtle breath of glowing
yellow turmeric, nutty tones
of mace and cumin,
bittersweet of cinnamon,
opulent velvet of ghee threaded
through simmered puree of onion and tomato
finished with glossy cream.
Tender chicken that separates like orange
segments flashes vermilion skin.
I savor burgled cashew halves,
golden sultanas, singular pleasures of
delicate crunches,
sweet, gentle pops.



"Manzanita Morning" by Audrey Merket
First Place Undergraduate Art

None of it
belongs to my rice-pale hands—
some slender cacao pair
owns every orangey sheen,

Poetry

caresses soft powders in the mortar,
bright tomatoes, vessels of cream.

I am a thief,
an open mouth,
I take the color of tandoori-red
chicken skin
for myself.

Pomegranate

by Whitney Olsen

This red brain, Mom,
this chambered fruit,
it's your fault
that I peel back
one spare square inch
and pluck
vermillion teardrops out.

I watched you eat pomegranates,
most uneconomical fruit,
obsessive-compulsive, pick

out the firm crunch,
seeds suspended in wet red crystals
one by agonizing one.

I always thought of a brain
beneath a skull
when you placed a pomegranate,
mealy yellow skin peeled back,
on your office desk
next to the ledgers
and the payroll.
I remembered you telling
me about counting steps
in size one shoes
down orange and brown
elementary school halls
to the drinking fountain,
counting anxious slurps, five, seven, or nine,
washing your hands three times
with pink liquid soap like melted
taffies, or something bad would happen.
Seven was a safe number. Seven
meant your Dutch father wouldn't hit

Poetry

you when you got home.

Were you counting
pomegranate seeds
even though he was dead?

I creased my eyes at them,
meticulous bleeding brain fruits,
and went back to math games
on MS-DOS. I got your
obsessive-compulsive disorder.
I played until I memorized
long division, three-digit
multiplication tables.

There were your numbers
and my numbers;
I counted
on nineties in mechanical
pencil on English essays,
thick stacks of poetry portfolios,
and culinary practical exams,
lamb rib chops propped

over whipped potatoes,
twenty-four pomegranate seeds
on each bed of romaine and frisee.

I pulled my hair out in second grade
and hid it in blonde piles
between my bed and the nightstand.
I had a bald spot like a lemon
between my bangs and my hair
for most of that year.

It's your fault, Mom,
that I belabor every seed,
that I eat pomegranates this way,
that the skin beside my nails yellows
from their juice.

Terroir

by Whitney Olsen

Myself: A French vintner,
on steep, terraced Côte Rôtie,
the roasted slope,

Poetry

stained hand balancing stem
glasses for syrah,
the other penetrating a crust
of earth, shale or granite—
Côte Brune or Côte Blonde—
aroma of minerals, compost rising,
ground threaded for centuries
with root stock, *Vitis vinifera*, wine grapes.

Written into each clouded fruit,
character of soil, rivulets of water, tongues of fog,
days of sun, blasts of wind—terroir,
shaping the bouquet behind dark-glassed
bottles with moist corks.

My roots spread in stiff, grayed mountain earth,
shores of Bear Lake awash with miniature white shells,
icy water whipped like cream and Mexican vanilla.
In tingling fog, stretches of sun, I write.

Myself: A French vintner; poems are wine,
and home, terroir in every line.
A stanza break, chill of a Rocky Mountain snowfall;

a poem, trills of American Robins in the maple
tree and on the lawn.

The blaze of lines, the legs down a Riedel
stem glass—brief, tannic on the tongue like burnt cotton,
bouquet full and ripe with notes of raspberry and anise,
deep and lasting on the palate with tinges of raspberry
and licorice.

Poetry



“When I Didn’t Know” by Michelle Larson
Honorable Mention Undergraduate Art

THIRD PLACE GRADUATE POETRY

california poppies

by Kirsten Nielsen

solitary on long stems;
four fans neatly coiled
inside the pointed elf cap of the flower bud –
soon to be pushed off

by expanding petals
leaving behind at the base
a pink ring.

entire hillsides along the coasts of california
were washed in reflected sunlight
from satin orange-gold blossoms
rising out of blue green carrot-like foliage,
causing russian mariners to exclaim
“this is the land of fire!”

the spanish called them:

copa de oro –
“cup of gold,”
harmonious with
indian legend
that the gold in california comes
from fallen poppy petals,

and sometimes
dormidera –
“the drowsy one,”

Poetry

when at dusk
petals fold in on themselves
and nearly disappear.

the day i married you
i held them nestled
in sweet alyssum;
dense clusters of tiny
snow-white flowers
cushioning each orange bloom.

an involuntary physical reaction to an emotional state

by Kirsten Nielsen

my mood ring is stuck on Black.
which,
according to the mood ring color meaning chart
indicates that I am:
“tense,
nervous,
harassed,
or overworked.”

dad thinks the upset stomach
is giardia – a protozoan parasite colonizing my small intestine.
i’m getting by on a line-up of plastic bottles;
digestive enzymes – elastases and nucleases,
garlic capsules (complete with allicin),
and phsyllum husks.

once in an interstate burger-king,
over buttered pancakes in a styrofoam box
jeremy told me when there’s attraction there shouldn’t be
picture him taking a dump
and you’re free.

appreciation
the noun you never gave
despite the times i cut your hair
made your birthday card
admired the things
you love most.

and remember is a verb,
to care enough to keep (someone) in mind
even when caring has stopped.

Poetry

there's a boy outside reading on
steps so shallow his knees are on level with his chest.
the book is thick
and I want to run down
cement stairs
out the door
and ask him
who are you reading?
instead i throw away my apple core
on top of crumpled paper and orange peels.

i don't think you meant to say it that way

by Kirsten Nielsen

i do think the toes of your words
caught the heel of your intentions
– and while you were able to catch yourself
you lost the anonymity of even measured steps;
habitually cautious and deliberate.

i know i was lucky to catch you stumble;
you and i are too often like two seagulls

squalling back and forth –
really leaning into it.

but today i was listening
and as i drove away,
wheels beating the pavement to a froth,
i heard again
your accidental candor lending a third dimension
to simple 2D sentences.
and i felt as though i might spill the egg of sun
out of it's careful place
balanced in the concave of a spoon
whose long neck extended
right up to me
in my '93 Buick Century.

do you mean it as a compliment afterall
when you tell me how much we are the same?
i do have your nose,
short legs,
innate pessimism...

so, it made sense.

Poetry

FIRST PLACE UNDERGRADUATE POETRY

As the Sun Sank

by Ellen Reimschuessel

As the sun sank behind the Oquirrh mountains,
the shadow of a corn stalk,
stretched long
like the finger
of the devil,
wrapped
my thigh
while I sat
cross-
legged
on the
grass,
during
my
fifteen
minute
break,
trying
to just



“By the Dawns Early Light, Colorado National Monument” by Natalie Watkins
Honorable Mention Undergraduate Art

Poetry

breathe
because
tomor
row
she
gets
mar
ri
ed.

Sins as Scarlet

by Ellen Reimschuessel

I heard you in the creaking of the house.
So I walked outdoors at 2 am
in below freezing weather,
climbed the hill to campus
and traced words in the snow.

In the Library's flower bed,
a generation curse:
"Lamentable
Preordination"

In the walkway between biology buildings,
a line from a poem about you:
"Lost forty years, but her, water springing from the rock."
I tried to leave you there.

On a concrete bench beside a parking lot,
a soliloquy:
"What am I looking for?"
"God, proof there is no God, a
girlfriend, a way to sleep
'til my twenty-first
birthday when drinking
won't require social
contact."

In a drift near a maple outside the English building:
"I will show fear in handful of dust."

On the ground before the institute:
"I am that I am.
This is my name for ever,
and this is my memorial

Poetry

unto all generations.”

It snowed the next morning,
filling my words, pressing
them deep into piles
unmeltable ‘til spring.

The Downward Pegasus

by Ellen Reimschuessel

Lost forty years Darling, but you, water springing from the
rock.

In the parched years of my adolescence
I said once, “You laugh like a desert rainstorm.”

Plato said, we are charioteers, driving two winged horses.
One, our reason, soaring towards the sky,
the other, plummeting passion,
threatening to crash upon the earth.

The night one hundred miles south
flash floods ravaged the desert, killing
nine, in cut-offs and T-shirts,

the suburban universe
belonged somewhere
between our bodies
pressed against the plywood
of a new house.

You are the downward Pegasus.

Somewhere in this desert:
a slot canyon rippled like flesh,
the walls pulling into themselves,
pushing out, thrusting for each other.
Then a surge of water
filling the divots, closing the rift.
Then, an emptiness like the terror of God.
The sandy floor swept thin,
the rock walls rubbed raw.

Would I look Darling, if bitten, some brass God could save
me,
or so love the ground, that even
as the venom curdles my veins,
I dare not raise my eyes.

Poetry

SECOND PLACE UNDERGRADUATE POETRY

Before the manic-depression. Summer of '96.

by Amanda Kay Burnett

The first summer in our first house was the last
time you smiled.
Can I take a bath?
Inside the kitchen, the please? smile on your face
glows amber.
Mom rinses off soap foam and pats you on the head.

The glass door rumbles
against your two-handed push.
Buried in crocuses--
my mother's hope flower--
I stare as you strip off your Pikachu
swimsuit and go tearing through the sprinklers.

You don't understand you have monkey ears like Grandpa.
You haven't gotten locked out at recess in the middle of a
lightning storm,
yet. In five more years the voices will tell you to run in
front of a car.



"Gustave" by Whitney Olsen
First Place Graduate Art

Poetry

Now, you're three years old.
Your skin is brushed
in sun-flecks and dew crystals. The water-starved
grass chatters under your feet while
the sun peals, and you have both hands twisting
your hair high.

Naked, sudsy,
delighted in your miniature shower.

A year ago
I punched you and told you "I'll love you
when you're older."

No night-lights, isolated in a basement bedroom
I roll over to hug you--you're in my white-iron bed,
terror in a lace-frilled nightgown--
because you've heard the first voice in
the dark you don't understand.

Distance.

by Amanda Kay Burnett

Eleven, I discover emptiness
in a pink and green neon sign.
The lit edge rests above the backyard's warped fence
we are hiding

seeking
but Lacy's tired and goes back inside.
Sandaled feet in a bed of starflowers, I linger
with the smell of wet milkweed and plume grass.

I quiver in the epicenter of alone, heels locked
arms loose and a breath
soft as starlight.
The sign says Dee's in pulsing cursive.
The world in conversation
outside of wilderness.

cracks A thud like a falling body
me open, sleep gone like water to
the parking lot.

I push the rag quilt off and shiver

Poetry



“The Hug” by Darren Edwards
Honorable Mention Graduate Art

THIRD PLACE UNDERGRADUATE POETRY

Remains

by Heather Griffiths

A thin layer of red dirt
washes over my body—
a warm breeze
fills my lungs
with incense
of pinyon pine.

I watch
a tree grow
which had long stood dead.

Roots twisted
around roots
and something
no longer there.

Then I saw it.

A small, dried pellet

Poetry

of dark, grey fur
and a brittle, pointed
claw.

Purged
by owl
or hawk,

who now carries
its blood and
muscle
with her
throughout the desert.

Flight

by Heather Griffiths

A blood orange red
changes to orange
then yellow
then without green
Blue
deep velvet blue,

the difference of sky and horizon.

35,000 feet in the air,
over an airplane wing,
heading West,
I watch this sunset.

One thousand feet above the trail,
atop a plateau
of rusted earth and sagebrush,
the sky is cobalt blue.

Covered in dirt
and sweat and warmth,
heat consumes my body
as I relent into this earth
to rust.

Now green,
gold and midnight blue converge
in the flux of sky,
Limegreen.

Poetry

I had to come 35,000 feet in the air,
sit over an airplane wing,
head West,
to see this sunset.

Lying among Indian ricegrass,
looking up at a turquoise sky,
Red robin flies over
to sit next to me
and tell me
That I will never see a sky this blue,
or land this red,
I will never be as red skinned
as I am now
covered in this earth.

Robin
flies away—
heading East.

Sitting over an airplane wing,
watching the blood orange sun
set.

I head West.

Toy Aero Plane

by Heather Griffiths

Unpacking our first apartment
we came across his childhood.

Squashed between family photos
and pilot autographs in his boyhood book—
of aero planes.

A small model
Grumman F4F Wildcat,
“Flown in World War II” he said.

He dusted off the dirt and grime,
placed it under rushing water
and watched it begin to shine,
as I watched him.

He held it out in open palm

Poetry

but the metal did not move,
not until
he held it high and
showed me how
he used to make the noise,
“putt putt pudrrrrr”
and he is gone.

Metal spinning in a blur of blackened
steel swooping madly at thin air,
tiny propellers pulling him skyward
two inch wings travel farther
than I can comprehend—
he has lifted off.

Eyes gleaming with windblown tears,
he maneuvers around the small apartment.
Flying over mountains of laundry
and lakes of dirty dishes,
ensuring his airspace is clear.

“Enemies approach!” he shouts,
“Standby for evasive maneuvers”

An unsuspecting cardinal
pecks his reflection in the sliding door
not knowing the pilot on the other side
is ready to take aim.

“ch.. this is the USN Wildcat
Calling crazy cardinal ..ch..
You are engaging in threatening behavior ..ch..
Desist your actions and
Divert your direction or prepare to be shot down..ch..”

The cardinal’s wings now beat the door.

A dogfight ensues,
shots are fired,
“khkhkhkhkhkhkh”

His cheeks spewing out casings
like sunflower seeds
falling on to my clean floor

I watch him sway from left to right

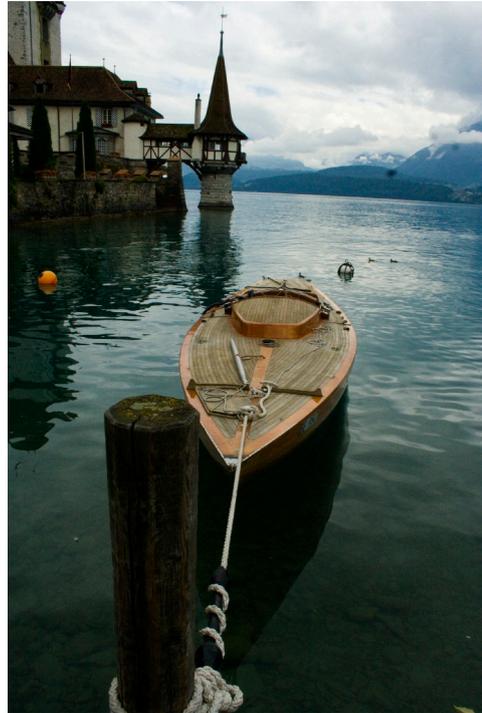
Poetry

avoiding unseen bird bombs,
then circle 'round
to lock in on his target
to fires once again,
“khkhkhkhkhkhkhkhkhkh”

I assume
he is the victor,
for the cardinal is gone
and the boy—who is the man—begins his descent.

Circling around to find his runway
he finds my arms outstretched.
I feel the small synthetic wheels
move along my limbs
to stop at my pursed lips.

And the man—who was the boy—returns.
Coming in for a kiss.



“Untitled2” by Sarah Jane Webb
Second Place Undergraduate Art

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*Artwork is noted in **Bold**

Scribendi: meaning a compulsion to write

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