



Scribendi

STUDENT WRITINGS

UTAH STATE UNIVERSITY

CREATIVE WRITING CONTEST

2010

Scribendi: meaning a compulsion to write.
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JUDGES

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

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Thanks also to Matthew DiOrio for judging the artwork submissions.

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.

Thanks belong to the following people for this year's production of Scribendi: Christina Wright, the contest intern, and Robin Wheelwright, Corey Clawson and Annie Nielsen from the English Department administrative staff.

—Charles Waugh, Contest Director

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“Cut Short” by Nate Whipple
First Place Graduate Art

FIRST PLACE GRADUATE FICTION

Mess

by Samuel Howard

Here. Let me give ya the blow by blow.
It was after The Bulge. Still cold, but warming up. Mud in everything.

I was lucky enough to have a jeep at the time, lucky enough to sneak by in the artillery, and lucky enough to not be Nazi—at least, there and then. The Nazis was on the run, gettin’ confused and sort of sloppy. Being an FO—that’s a forward observer—I got plenty of opportunities to watch their spirits bleed out from a hazy, distant mile. Now, when their captain would see the glint of my glass and start winking back with his, he’d take a few slow, smoky breaths before he’d order some of his men to start shootin’ my way. Whereas before, I rarely got too comfortable sittin’ in the same place. Lost my shoulder stripes to one of their bullets once. Can still smell the burnt cotton.

I remember there was this German soldier’s corpse swelling up off the side of the road for all the soldiers to see at as they marched in and out of the area. We were based out of a slapped-up camp near a crossroads, there between Roetgen and Stolberg. I’d tell you how low and grey the sky was, and how that wind shot the frost through our bones all-and-every night long, but I don’t want to depress you. This camp had been here a spell, though. Long enough to merit the construction of a makeshift pub and next to that, a mess tent—the former being our saving grace, the latter, a warmer tent than the rest.

Despite what you’d think, we spent more of the war playing cards and gum flapping than we did blasting or getting blasted. Most times you’d find us in the mess tent, squatted on ammo cans throwing jacks on the pallet. And that’s where we became acquainted with the cook.

That sumbitch never shut up. Even if he wasn’t crowing on about all his Belgian fornications, his voice was always turned up a few notches more than was necessary, he’d bang his kettles and ladles around his kitchen and clear his throat while he’d warsh the dishes—to keep himself company, I suspect. One time Slim bet the cook he couldn’t be mute for just one minute, “Just one damn minute,” he said.

“You watch me!” the cook said.

Well, we zipped our lips, grinned at the cook, and Tooty tapped his watch. It wasn’t twenty seconds before the cook’s pink jowls started twitching. Then his face flushed up, and we guessed he was holding his breath. Everyone in the tent fixed on him at that point, and started holding their breaths too, just to accentuate the silence. At forty seconds he started sweating and rubbing his thumbs on his apron, eyes diving all over the room.

At fifty-five seconds, the cook coughed and spit before he said, “Two minutes! You owe me double!”

Fiction

Of course, we laughed at him then, and called him a piccadilly. I'd made that insult up while I was in England waiting to come over. Not sure what it meant, but the cook 'd get all flustered every time we said it. So we said it regularly.

That reminds me of old Pvt. what's-is-name? Yup, that was it. He'd just been assigned to the 951st Field Artillery Company, and we called him a piccadilly too. Utah boy. Mormon, I suspect. All clean and sparkly.

Well, one night, they were shellin' the hell out of us, the sky all flashing and shrill with whistling banshees, and I'm huggin' the sides of my foxhole with my elbows piled over my ears. Through the hullabaloo, there, I hear Slim yell out and see he's up at the lip of our hole with his hands cupped around his mouth callin' at someone. I brought my head up a skosh to see who it was, and low and behold that dumbshit private was leaned up over a low rock wall shooting his rifle in the general direction of the enemy, just bawling and blasting away all his ammo. So I started yelling too, tellin' him to get his ass back down, but it wasn't long before he'd got his head blowed off by some shrapnel.

Yup. I remember now. His name was John Walker. Slim hadn't smiled, not once, since he'd seen that boy die. Anyways, that body had been dead on the road for a few days, thawing out enough during the day to escalate his decomposition, so that a reek wafted its way over to camp to remind us he was there. But no one had been ordered to clean up the mess yet, I suspect 'cause none of the officers had the heart to ask any of their men to do it, given its state of decay.

But this cook, he used to like to show off. If any greenhorns showed up in the mess tent, he'd get this switchblade out and start slicing potatoes with it. Some of these boys'd be credulous enough to slide up and ask him questions about it, and the cook would get all fevered over having an audience to himself.

After opening with a speech about his virile adventures with the local frauleins—'course, neglecting to tell them he'd bribed the half-starved women with chocolate and margarine—he'd tell 'm about how he'd grown up in Vegas, been a card shark, bartender, bouncer, and confidant for some mafia boys. And the longer these kids listened to him, the more he'd embellish. You could tell when he was lying too 'cause his voice 'd take on a Chicago accent and he'd start gushing inflections like they do in the newsreels.

If his audience started to welsh on him, roll their eyes, or search for another game, his voice would take on a more panicked pitch, and he'd pull 'em

back in by offering cigarettes and, of course, his most cherished spiel. According to the cook, he'd shot a man once. Shot him dead. While attempting to rob his bar, this feller had started waving a revolver around the room, causing people to duck and cover under the benches and tables, piss their britches and wail. But while the man was working so hard to make sure the crowd was sufficiently intimidated, the cook says he reached under his counter, pulled out a sawed-off shotgun, and blasted him right in the chest.

"Boom!" he'd say, then curl his smile like he was glad he done it. Done tellin' his bull, the cook would just lean back and fold his arms, relishing their gawks and gazes.

What really got us grumbling and snapping our toothpicks was how he'd commence jawing about how, if it weren't for his age and feet, he'd be out there on the line killing Krauts too—like he'd been robbed of his privilege. How he knew that if they just put a gun in his hands and pointed him in the right direction, he'd kill him a hundred Krauts. Then he'd lean forward, sigh into their faces, put his hands on their shoulders and pause before saying, "Do it for me, boys. You send those bastards to hell, and tell them that I sent you," like he half-expected them to write his name on all their bullets.

We'd bust up laughing at that point, ruin his ambiance, call him a picadilly, and tell him to make us some flapjacks. Some of the other boys in the tent, though, ones who'd been closer to the heat of that fire already, either left the tent to cool off, or strafed him with their eyes, ground their teeth, and frowned at him in all the cold hate they could muster.

* * * *

Well, one day it came down from on high that the smell and sight of that corpse there by the road was demoralizing the men. Our commanding officer had also caught wind of the cook's yapping about his desires to engage the enemy. So he obliged him and assigned him to burial detail. Me too—'cause the CO wouldn't give up his jeep as a hearse and 'cause, me being a sergeant, he knew I'd make sure it got done properly.

Slim said he'd come along too, claiming no other reason than to have a chance at seeing the cook's reaction. But Slim and I had been buddies for a while. In fact, he was the one that coerced me into the Army in the first place, though he says I was the mastermind that tricked him into it. Anyways, where

Fiction

one horse went so did the other. We was pretty well herd-bound, then.

It was the next early morning before we set out 'cause we hoped the night's cold might quell the smell a bit and make the body stiff and easier to move. The cook, he smoked and cursed for the whole slow minute it took to drive to the body through the ruts, all full of muck.

"Damn Bars!" he said, trying to sound like one of us. "Shitting on us just because they can. Right boys?"

But I just looked forward at the sliver of bruised sky hanging below the clouds and didn't say nothin' to him, and neither did Slim. He sniffed and spat to the side, turned to me and said under his breath, "I think this dipstick is actually happy to be here."

We rolled to a stop several feet from the body, and for the first time, the cook saw that corpse staring at him. A second later, a breeze came up and soured the air for all of us. First the cook shut his mouth, then shaded green, then tumbled out the jeep and over to the berm on the other side of the road where he fell to his knees, and spewed his breakfast. He must'a eaten a whole lot too, 'cause he kept going for half a minute while Slim and I got out of the jeep, watched him, and tied kerchiefs around our faces.

"You coming?" Slim asked.

The cook hauled up onto his knees, breathing heavy, and just tilted his head a bit to the side but wouldn't meet our eyes.

"Com'on and help us pick up this stiff, Cook," Slim said.

But he just held on to the dirt and shook like a new-foaled colt. So we grabbed the stretcher, walked over, laid it next to the German's body, and stood there lookin' down at him for a bit. The fella 'd been shot in the gut, his purple hands still clutching and smeared with the blood he'd tried to hold in. With half-open eyes, blued and milked over, he peered at us, while his lips curled back from the teeth, pulling his face into pained smile.

I shifted my weight to disguise a shudder, and Slim coughed and spat before we knelt down and started sifting through his pockets to see if we could find his identification papers. The German had a scarf wrapped down over his ears and under his chin, keeping his jaw from hanging down. I suppose he'd been cold and died cold. I also figured he'd been infantry, based on his clothes and patches. All we found on him was a Zippo drained of fuel.

I'd seen a load of dead bodies by this time in the war. But that look that isn't there in a dead man's eyes always made me want to cry, even though I

never did.

So we hauled his body up onto the stretcher, slogged out into the field there 'til we found "as good as spot as any," and set him down there. Once we were back to the Jeep, we grabbed the shovels, and Slim threw one of 'em at the cook, the end of the handle twanging off his skull. He swore and whimpered at us a bit, but I pulled down my kerchief, spat my toothpick at him, and told him to pick up the damn shovel. So he did.

When we got back to the body, Slim and I started laying into the topsoil, there. The cook stood a few feet away, keeping his back to us 'n the German as he tried to light a smoke, but his hands were shakin' still, and he couldn't keep a match calm long enough. Slim started to grumble, then leaned forward to rest and said, "We're doing this in shifts, Cook. Get your ass down in this hole." So the Cook, he shifted around and looked all pale and bloodshot in our direction, but we just gave him deadpan in return. After another few cloudy breaths, he hobbled over and into the hole. As we worked, the cook would occasionally stop and glance over at the German, shiver, and then he'd scrape his eyes and nose in a blur with his sleeve to hide his seepage and start stabbing at the dirt again.

It took us just over two hours to get the hole dug and the body buried. Slim and I had taken off our jackets, were steaming in the dull morning light, and stood leanin' on our shovels catching our breath. The cook stood there waiting with his back to the grave and hands in his pockets.

"Want to say a few words for the man, Cook?" Slim asked.

The cook, he just stared down at the dirt at his feet for a while, his lower jaw sort of slack and jutted forward. After a minute, he said real quiet, "I didn't kill that robber."

"What?" asked Slim.

But the cook, for once, had nothing more to say.

On the way back, no one said a word. Slim and I had planned to savor the cook's mortification and to rub his bleeding pride in salt and lemons, but we just puffed on our smokes instead.

* * * *

The next few days, the cook started drinking every night for as long and as much as they'd let him. He still wasn't talkin' much either, and several

Fiction

of the men in camp were happy about it too. A few gave him a real hard time, sitting next to him and asking if he thought it was easier to bury a Kraut or kill one. We'd just keep playin' cards, though. And Slim still hadn't smiled.

But that's what it was. Just a damn mess.



"I Watched You Gaze" by Michelle Larson
First Place Undergraduate Art

SECOND PLACE GRADUATE FICTION

On Principle

by Nate Whipple

I don't think they know how loud they are. I'm really getting pretty sick of it. I can't stand hearing it, nevermind listening. All that squawking. If they'd listen they could set themselves straight. I thought I could set it straight myself. I get it. The shit they fight about, it's not that complicated, you know? But that's not it.

They can't listen to each other. I don't know why I thought they'd listen to me. They really don't know how loud they are. They can't know. I mean I hope they don't know. I think maybe if they did know they wouldn't be so loud. I hope they don't know. But I suppose it's not their fault. The problem is they can't hear much past themselves. All they want to hear is themselves. But really I just don't think they care. If they cared, they might hear each other. I mean really hear each other.

Dad's smart. Doesn't get in the middle. I think he knows they'd eat him alive; mom would take the left, Sara the right. Tear him right up. It'd be over quick. That poor guy tries real hard. Never gets into anything with anybody. Tries to make everything real easy. Makes money, lots of money. Doesn't bother anybody. That's sort of how he's lived his life, not bothering anybody. On principle, you know? A real yankee; he knows a lot about principle.

But what does mom do? Shits all over him. Not in any direct way, she just doesn't know any better. Most of the stuff she does, she doesn't think too much. Hanging out with those dumb friends of hers. Getting drunk, coming home late. He takes real good care of her; she's just too dumb to know what to do with it. She hasn't even had to work in ten years. All sorts of time. Too dumb to do anything with it.

Dad's a smart guy. He was going to be a high school history teacher. Not that that makes him real smart, you know, but he's smart enough to stay out of the middle of those two. It's a real shitstorm when those two get together like that.

If they'd just stop being so fucking loud they could hear each other. It's too bad. But it works sometimes. Keeps the fuss off me, you know? That lady can be a real, real bitch. I mean she's not; but she can be. I know she means

Fiction

well; she just doesn't know what she's doing, I really didn't wanna go in there. It didn't seem so complicated when I thought about it. When I could think. It's hard to think around here mostly.

But I don't know anything. They said I'm still just a kid, and I think they believed it. And that's how I like it. But I know I'm not. I lost a lot of that kid stuff. I stopped getting so mad at least. Well, at other people. I still get pretty bent with them. They're family; should expect that sort of thing, right? So after I went about my explaining I got bent. Oh well, I'll be gone soon anyways. Getting the hell out of here. My dumb sister wasn't so smart; now she wants out and it's a big, big deal. Real dumb.

So I try not to give them a real hard time now. She takes care of that. But I do still get sort of bent out of shape. Mostly when they treat me like such a kid. I don't think they treated my sister like that, so I think mostly it's her fault. Well it's not like she makes my mother pour that damn water on my head in the morning. Get up sunshine. And she sings that stupid fucking song. I hate her the most then. Love her the most then too. I think I'll miss that stupid song. Buttercup she calls me.

If only she could see what a buttercup Mary is. Then she wouldn't have to worry so much. She does worry too much. I know Mary. I know what she responds to. I know what she wants. I know she's not much to worry about. Doesn't take a Freud to figure her out. I don't even think you'd need to know much about Mary to know how to handle that situation. Just have to know something about people. I don't think Mom knows much about people. If she does, she didn't tell me about it. So had to tell her. And Mary. I went in there and told them everything I knew. But they didn't listen. People don't listen unless you tell them in the right way. That was one of the things Tommy Newcourt's sister told me.

A lot of the stuff I know about people I learned from my friend Tommy Newcourt's older sister Sara. Tommy is real with it. He's got a lot more stuff than most of my friends. His sister is twenty-four. She's real with it too. But Tommy's sister has been places, you know. Done things, been out. I met her at a party at his house last summer. I don't know how I managed it, but I did. I think I surprised myself on that one.

Tommy's parents were asleep and we were all in the basement. Me and Tommy and Dan and Derin and Joe and a bunch of other kids I didn't really care for, and some girls. I don't really know how Tommy's parents slept. We

were pretty fucking loud. Cars coming and going all night. Kids standing outside smoking cigarettes, being all belligerent, you know?

When we were at Tommy's house, I tried to keep things calm. Tell kids to shut up, watch out, keep peaceful. I liked playing the overseer. I liked Tommy's parents, and I thought I was doing them a favor. Tommy's Dad was actually my AP English teacher. He challenged me. I didn't do much past what I needed, but he challenged me – to think mostly. I respected him because he respected me. And he wore those bright shirts with the floral ties. Real ridiculous, but they made you think.

I don't know how they slept, though. The bulkhead was just below their bedroom window. When we were at Tommy's kids were always storming up and out, slamming it shut like idiots. I think mostly they just didn't care. Sometimes we'd smoke in the basement. No cover, no nothing. Just smoke climbing up the stairs and under the door and into the house. You'd creep upstairs to take a leak, the bathroom at the top of the steps. Slip in, do you thing, slip out. You could tell the house stunk real bad. Not just the bathroom, the whole house. Tommy's parents would sit on the couch in the living room watching a movie. If you were lucky you didn't make eye contact. I guess they figured we were going to be stupid no matter what. If it was a weeknight and we were being loud Tommy's dad would call him to the top of the stairs. Tommy'd go up there all pie eyed and talk to him in a real sensible way. Don't know how he did that. I guess the Newcourt's thought it was better for us there than anywhere else.

Tommy's sister was home from Illinois the weekend I met her. She was living in Chicago, working for a nonprofit or something like that. So I was in the kitchen, Tommy's parents were asleep. I had been drinking but wasn't feeling too hot so I slid up to the kitchen to get a drink of water, to get away. I was standing over the sink thinking about all the bullshit I was about to drink when I heard her.

"That stuff will kill you," she said from behind. I jumped a little, dropping the ceramic mug into the sink. Throwing my hands into the air, my mouth half full of water, the other half in my lungs and nose, burning, I turned around. I tried to be mad. Real pissed off, but quiet. That all caved when I looked at Sara and she moved toward me.

Man was she something. She wore this flowy dress skirt thing. Crawled over her skin, stuck, and crawled again. You could see everything. I had been in

Fiction

the habit of noticing these sorts of things for a while now. I noticed a lot. Not people so much as things. Some things I didn't necessary want to notice. That morning I noticed how our neighbor Mrs. Donaldson, the 39 year old widow who lived in the blue Victorian next door, clutched the newspaper to her chest and pulled the sheer of her silk robe over her chest. I swore she could've had red skin. Soft, red skin. But this was different. Sara's skirt skin moved, flowed, like her thoughts.

She was real. Real untreated. She poured. Everything seemed to fit together in her, without any real effort at all. She was organic, but not like the hippie girls at school. Her charm was natural. Everything she had was made for her. Her hair loped around her head, shifting and moving in an indeterminately fixed sort of way. Her legs and feet moved together in a free form sort of dance. It all worked for her. It really did. I never knew someone it worked so well for. You know the type.

"What?" I asked. I really knew exactly what she was talking about. I'd been reading about it for a while. I knew about all the shit in the water. Law-suits, lymphoma, leukemia – it was all in there. I remembered the dried up public pools, scrawled with tags, filled with leaves and broken glass. Water was going to kill a lot of people a lot quicker than it was going to kill me, though. I think she knew that too. Those idiots downstairs didn't though. They were spoiled like everybody else.

"The water. Out of the tap. It'll kill you." That shit all looked real pretty coming out of her mouth.

"Oh, all that then, yeah. I know that." I thought quick. "I'm banking on it, really. Going to sue the food-packaging plant after I get sick. For all that dumping, you know. Most of the money will probably go to legal fees." I ran out of words so I stopped. Then, "might have to rethink that." It was real awkward of me, but I could tell she was maybe a little surprised that I knew something about something. There were a few of us, a few of Tommy's friends, that could surprise people. Mostly we didn't though.

"You got it all figured out then," she said. She pulled some stuff out of the fridge and put it on the counter – fruit and tofu, crap like that. I watched her open a cabinet on the top shelf of the cupboard, reaching for a big clear jar of oatmeal. Then she got on her tiptoes. That was something. Her slender arm pulled at her skirt and rode up the backs of her legs, one foot off the ground,

the other thrusting her upward, calf fully flexed. That was really something.

Grasping the jar, she returned to the floor. I looked away quick, but I think she noticed me. "Nah, I don't have anything figured out. Nobody can really. It takes more than fifty people to figure something like that out. What's that you're making?" She started in with her preparations. You could tell she cared when she moved. Tearing, chopping, mixing. She was real smooth and deliberate in all her motions. I really liked that.

She didn't hear me talk, or else she didn't act like it. So I said it again. "What are you making with that? That stuff will kill you too, you know." I was getting pretty nervous. She really was something preparing that food.

"What stuff?"

"That... those. Those grains. I worked in a wheat mill last summer."

"Oh yeah?"

"I drove the combine."

"Oh, the combine."

"You know what's in those grains?"

She toyed with me. "These grains? What's in these grains, huh? What do you know about these grains here?" She opened the fridge and pulled out some milk made out of coconuts. I thought that was pretty strange. Milk made out of coconuts.

"I just worked in a wheat mill last summer, that's all. I drove the combine. I was the one picking up grains like those."

"Oh yeah? Just like these, then?"

"Yeah, about like those." I was pretty nervous by then. Felt like a real jerk. I was going to tell her about her grains. Man, you should've seen her. "So I drove the combine. You know what that thing looks like, the combine? The big trucks?"

She opened up the fridge and back went the milk made out of coconuts. She smiled at me as she leaned in to replace the milk made out of coconuts. She smiled at me. "I know what you're talking about," she said, backing out of the fridge.

I felt like a real dummy now. Treating her like that, telling her about her grains. Where did I get off talking like that? Where did they get off calling that coconut drink milk?

"Well the front of those things are like twenty-five feet wide. The part that picks it all up, you know? And they go like twenty-five miles an hour. You

Fiction

sit up real high in that truck with the twenty-five foot face, bumping along through the wheat field going twenty-five miles an hour, you know?”

“Yeah.” She went about preparing her meal, fitting her food together in a real nice way. She moved with her back to me, but I could tell she was listening now.

“Well it’s not like those fields are in the middle of nowhere, you know? There’s stuff out there.”

“Oh yeah, what kind of stuff?”

“Like animals. Squirrels and rabbits. And those things are out in the field just the same whether you’re riding through in your twenty-five foot face combine or not, you know? So they’re out there running around like they do, not really thinking about much of anything. But then all of a sudden you come driving up the field in that combine. They don’t know what to make of it, you know?”

“That doesn’t sound good.”

“Well it depends on how you look at it, really. Anyways, you come driving up, perched up on top of your combine coming up on a rabbit. He sees you all right, but he sort of freezes. The same way he does when he hops out in front of your car. Rabbit caught in the headlights, you know?”

“Right, yeah. Rabbit in headlights.” She was done preparing now and circled the counter. She sat down to eat at the closest stool and for a minute I thought we had chosen to sit right there together.

“Well, not just rabbits, really. Rabbits, snakes, squirrels. Maybe a rabid raccoon, I don’t know.”

“Gross.”

“Yeah. Yeah, so you come along in your twenty-five foot face combine, staring down these dumbstruck rabbits and rodents and things. But they don’t think they’re so dumbstruck. They’re just playing the game, right? What do they do just before you hit them in your car?”

“They jet,” she answered. I was feeling pretty alright about my story at that point.

“Yeah, they jet.” I liked that. “They jet. But out in the grains, they don’t get it. They don’t get that you can’t jet from a twenty-five foot face combine coming at you at twenty-five.” I stopped. I took a drink from my glass and watched her eat.

I waited until she looked up. “Yeah, and?”

“And what?”

“Well what happens?”

“Oh I thought it was pretty obvious.” I was a real cool guy then. “Then you pick them up in your twenty-five foot face combine going twenty-five. Turn them over like everything else. Guts and bones and fur tossed all into the heap of wheat. Real gross stuff. You should hear it.”

She stood looking at me. She must’ve known what I was talking about. I could’ve looked at that stupid face forever. Her pretty face there, attached to her neck, running down to her shoulder, arm and hand. All real pretty. Her right hand holding that big knife, pointed at me. Gorgeous. Left hand open like a claw. Gorgeous. I saw all that. It really worked, too. Together like that, it worked. “Where did you say you worked again?”

“Oh yeah, I worked long hours. Lots of long days. After you tilled the field with your big twenty-five foot face combine you had to come and sift all the stuff. Then you had to pick out the rabbit bones and snake skins.”

“No,” she repeated. I heard her. “Where did you work?”

“Down at the mill,” I said. She was getting annoyed.

“Which mill?”

“The one over on Shephard Hill. The certified organic one, you know. The one that sells at the market in Putnam, yeah?”

“Yeah, that’s what I thought.” She got serious for a bit. I liked that too. “Well didn’t you think there was anything wrong with that?”

“Well, yeah, I suppose. But I just drove, you know. They could’ve gotten anybody to drive.”

“Right.” She went back to her preparations.

“Well, what would you have done?” I asked, pretty serious now myself.

“Doesn’t matter.”

“No,” I said. “What would you do? You buy the stuff. What would you do?”

After that she told me what she would do. She told me in such a way. She got real mad at me for a bit. Told me I was just as selfish as those other dumbies, you know. Said it didn’t matter if I knew anything.

But she kept telling me. I loved that she told me; nobody ever told me stuff like that before. I never met anyone like her before. She could talk. She made all that twenty-five foot face rabbit stuff sound real unromantic. She took all that syrupy stuff about the saving the world and licked it straight off. She

Fiction

had a tongue on her. I liked that. I didn't like all that saving the world stuff. But I liked her.

She told me what I needed to do. And this is where Mom and Mary come in. It's all about handling people, she said. She told me all about it and went off back to her room. I wished she had never left, I really did. I could've looked at her forever. But I didn't want to forget it, which was stupid, because it was all in those three sentences.

I jetted downstairs. It was louder now, more people. Stunk real bad now too. I pushed past a mess of people and into Tommy's room. I fell to the floor and opened the armoire next to stereo where we kept all the paraphernalia. Didn't want it to get busted, you know. I pushed a few pieces to the side and pulled out the old grey Smith Corona Tommy and I snatched at this yard sale. Right then I typed it up, what Sara said.

That's what I'm looking at now. I look at it when they start in with this fucking racket. I can't stand it. I tried to tell them. I really did. It's not complicated or anything. But they don't listen, and that's it. I'm going to pull my desk as far away from that wall as possible.



"Sunlight" by Melinda Rich
Second Place Graduate Art

THIRD PLACE GRADUATE FICTION

The After

by Kayla Jean Anderson

When Henry was ready, he thought back to the September afternoon when he was twenty-five and the world felt fresh.

He realized the year preceding that fall day had been orchestrated. Each moment during those eleven months had pushed and pointed him to that minute when, under dying leaves and autumn rain, he told Penny Larkin that he loved her.

Now at thirty, and still alone, he could see the mistake.

The fatal second sat in the line of his past, a glowing spot in his history that called, "this was it." The brightness of it cast a shadow over the next five years and her absence haunted every other decision.

Henry tumbled through each morning, working the roads outside of New York, sealing the black asphalt until it absorbed his memories, the heat steaming up from the tar, horizon blurry. He marked each year in lines of orange construction barrels and the sameness of it sucked him in and allowed a life without reflection.

He had thought of her during those months and days—how could he not? But when memories of that year shook him, he waited them it out, like a seizure. He let the images rake through his tall frame, clutched at the ground or dashboard of his truck until they passed.

It wasn't until the eve of his thirtieth birthday that he really came to. He sat behind the compressor, rolling a freeway outside of Albany, and his eyes focused on the road ahead. The past five years sharpened into view, and taking in his surroundings, he felt like an amnesiac. How had he come to this, this life? he wondered. What had he become? He fought to remember back to the before and realized he was treading in the after. But the during, the time with her, the orchard, the running—the during took five years to solidify.

He found her shoes first.

Henry hiked around a bend and the lake opened before him. Slow-

Fiction

ing, he reached for his water bottle and felt he could breathe better out of the wooded trail and in the valley; the sun hit the water and sharp light bounced against the trees.

Walking towards shore, he came upon on the shoes. Sensible hiking boots unlaced and toes pointed at Snowflake Lake, as if enjoying the view. They sat just out of the water's reach, brown socks crumpled inside.

Henry's eyes flew to the lake. He scanned the surface. Squinting through the sun a moment ago, he had been sure the lake was still, but he knew the shoes belonged to someone.

Snowflake Lake lies buried, tucked inside the Catskills, and is not well known. Henry discovered it three years before while headed to Beaver Springs, the trail overgrown by firs and maples, and the path circling the lake even more rugged. Pines lined the shore, swallowing the small body of water and leaning towards the other side, protecting the lake from sight. Henry came here each Saturday to fish but had never seen another person, until the shoes.

He felt exposed, like someone had been through his things, as if he'd come home to find something moved an inch to the left. The shoes sitting there at his feet felt like an intruder.

The lake was ruined.

He turned to go, to find another spot to fish, but realized he couldn't leave. Out of place and in a strange spot, the shoes seemed to sit expectantly—waiting for someone.

Searching the edges of the small lake, he fought indecision. Had he come upon an accident? It had to be—no one else was in sight, and the water was still. Someone might take off their shoes to wade into the cool lake, he reasoned. Should he jog the four miles to the trailhead or the ranger station, to report a missing person? What would he say? He knew nothing of this person, a woman, judging by the size and style of the shoes. This felt like one of those moral tests, a “what would you do” scenario. If you come upon a supposed drowning, he could hear the situation being presented, what should you do?

Before he could act, she burst from the trees, the leaves bending back before her, pushed aside and giving way. Startled, adrenaline shot through Henry making his nerves raw and hands numb.

He took in a lot of things at once. She stood at the mouth of the trail, twenty yards away, catching her breath. Dressed for the outdoors in shorts and a long sleeve shirt, she was close to his age, twenty something, attractive. Her

wide eyes inspected Henry, who by now, had recovered from her entrance.

Henry looked at her feet.

Under his gaze, her toes dug down, curling into the dirt, planted into the soil.

These must be yours, he said, pointing down to the shoes.

She waited a minute, eyes narrowing, before she responded with thanks, but stayed still.

At once he recognized her nervousness, saw how she must feel, alone in the mountains and with a curious stranger, so Henry moved back towards the trail.

I'm Penny, she said behind him.

Turning, he saw her sitting in the dirt, tying the laces, her brown hair falling down her back.

Henry, he answered.

* * * *

He stood facing the closet. His mother shrugged on her faded wool coat and knotted the tie around her narrow waist. She pulled **her** long hair out from under the collar and let it fan across her back as she smoothed the sides. At eleven, Henry knew the dress coat meant something serious, worn only to parties, church and today, the hospital. She reached for him, and he allowed himself to be held against the wool, one of the buttons smashed into his cheek. Up against her chest he thought he could feel the cancer burning off her, like smoke.

It will be fine, she whispered into his hair.

His father stood at the front door, hands in his pockets, his eyes down.

Weeks later, after she was gone, he retreated deep into orchard. He remembered his father standing in the doorway. Henry realized then that he should have known she wouldn't return when, arms tight around his mother, his father's eyes had never left the floor.

* * * *

Penny traveled to New York from Wichita, Kansas—or at least that's where she had been for the last three years. Moving around—an actress—she

Fiction

came to New York to audition for a play. She didn't get the part and decided to seek comfort in the Catskills.

Henry knew this was strange, that she trusted a man she met in the mountains. But he found himself pulled towards her, like with the what-would-you-do shoes, he couldn't let go. Never good at relationships, he found her cathartic. She spent the afternoon watching him fish as he waded into the water, casting and recasting, but not catching.

She spoke. More words than Henry used in a month. Stories of auditions, sightseeing and her first slice of Grimaldi's. The drive to the east coast, her roommate, why she left college. Later that afternoon, when he felt they were more settled with each other, he asked about running without shoes.

With her back up against a tree, she took a bite of apple and didn't answer. Henry waited and dug through his tackle box, rifled through hooks and lures, rewound some line.

Finally, the right one located, he looked up at her.

They are too heavy, she said, meeting his eyes, the apple still in hand. I can't run right with them on.

Nodding, he waded into the murky water.

Two days later, they met for breakfast. In the popular chain off the highway with wide blue booths. Penny ordered a stack of pancakes, squares of butter melting between them and crisscrossed with syrup. She filled her fork and ate in mouthfuls. His hands cupped coffee.

She talked about her family, asked what he did for a living.

I'll show you sometime, he told her, wanting to be mysterious, interesting.

Anxious away from the water where he had been able to occupy his hands with line and lures, he straightened and rearranged the silverware next to his plate, over and over again.

She put her fork down and played with the straw wrapper on the table, twisted it around her finger until it stayed curled and then tied it in knots.

When was the last time you did something dangerous? she asked.

Henry couldn't remember. His life had been fairly unremarkable. High school then college, a degree in business and now, at twenty-five he had just

inherited his father's orchard. A field of three hundred cherry trees in Greene County. This was his second season alone, his father too ill the previous year and his mother gone for years. He pruned, hired seasonal workers to pick and sell the fruit and lived off the profits. It wasn't anything dangerous.

I'm not sure, he told her.

Not ever? she responded? Nothing at all?

He shook his head, nervous.

Well, you can count meeting me then, she told him, pushing away the pancakes.

His hand trembled as he lined up the tips of the fork and knife, the sharp ends even and pointing towards her.

Once, as a teenager, his father took him into the orchard to prune, the large loopers swinging at their sides as they walked deep down a row. Together, among the trees, Henry couldn't help but think about the day his mother died, about how his father had come to find him in the orchard.

She'd loved these trees, and after learning of her death, Henry ran there to say goodbye, her voice in the leaves. His father had found him in the back of the orchard, her favorite place. Henry remembered the way the sky looked that night, when in his father's arms, he watched the stars winking through the tops of the trees, like cinders in a dying fire.

Now, four years later, his father taught him about topping a tree, how to remove all the branches and growth until it looked naked and bare before them. Henry wondered if it worked, if cutting off the diseased parts of something living would make it grow better the next year. It seemed extreme, he thought, leaving a tree raw to the elements, to force it to be stronger. Still he followed his father's example and moved on to the next tree in the row, started from the top, and heard the soft sound of cuttings drop at his feet.

Later that afternoon, he took her to the trees. The orchard sloped, the trees growing in angles to the ground. When they hit the crest next to his property, she shifted in the passenger seat, excited. It was late July and the fruit was

Fiction

ripe, with red and leafy green visible from the road. He parked and they walked to where his manager, Ray, sat behind a table in Henry's front yard.

Shielding his eyes from the sun, Ray stood up and greeted them.

How's business? Henry asked, watching Penny take in the trees, the large brick home and summer workers rolling fruit into gray crates and stacking them in the shade next to the house.

Busy today, Ray answered, turning to weigh the fruit of a customer who had come out of the orchard.

We are going to pick, Henry told him and Ray nodded. He led Penny over to where the washed kidney bean shaped buckets sat upside down in the yard. As he suspended one to her waist, she met his eyes.

This is beautiful, she said and he smiled.

I knew you would like it.

They walked into the orchard. A-frame ladders stood in rows of wild grass and mahogany barked trunks. He led her to the back southeast corner where the road and house were hidden from view. This was the place where he felt a part of the orchard the most. A thick Bing tree, one of the oldest, grew thick in this corner and split into thick boughs about six feet up. It was as if two trees had grown from one trunk, their canopies full and intertwined, hanging heavy with fruit. Hauling over a ladder, he buried the top in its full branches.

Before she climbed up, he taught her about picking.

My father told me once, he said, that cherries are like people.

He reached behind her and pulled off a bunch from a low hanging branch. After pressing in the sides of the fruit, he held it out to her.

They bruise easily, he explained. He turned the cherry, so she could see the dark impressions made by his fingers. Pick from the stem. Don't drop, but lay them in the bucket. He demonstrated, grabbing a bunch from behind her head, and fingers splayed, rolled them into her bucket.

She nodded and climbed the ladder.

Henry stayed on the ground, near her, watching her pick. He told her stories about his father, the years growing up around the fruit. Which cherries were best for pie and which were best for canning. All the while she picked, truncated in his cherry trees and listening to his past.

Later, she ran the rows. With purple fingers and lips, she slipped off her shoes and headed to the end of the orchard. She weaved between the trees,

changing direction and speed. Henry sat underneath the tree they had picked, her pumping legs standing out and visible from the ground, the calves tight. Watching her wind through his orchard, feet flying, he worried about loving her.

* * * *

He ran with her one morning in August. Penny, an early riser, got up ten minutes before the alarm. Her actions were muffled in his state of wake and sleep. He heard her pad to the bathroom and run some water. He hated mornings, so it took a while for him to surface. Once out of bed, she refused him coffee and he didn't speak. Just pulled on his shoes and shrugged on a jacket. Her owl eyes watched from the end of his bed.

They met the morning. At the end of the sidewalk, he could see what the dawn did to her. Breathing it in, she softened, the last lines of sleep draining out of her face, with eyes bright.

They ran. He followed, his strides long enough to keep up with her experienced pace, cringing at the flat slap of her feet against the road. He ran carefully, as if it was his bare soles hitting the ground. But running with her pain put him behind. She made no indication of discomfort, so after a while, he let himself forget.

They ran past his orchard and into the sleeping town. She avoided the sidewalks and used the roads. Henry tried to stay on her left so he was exposed to the traffic, but they switched sides and streets so often they danced around each other. Four miles later, they hit the bottom of the hill near Henry's house. Penny slowed, letting him rest for a minute before they climbed.

Go ahead, he told her. I think I'm about done.

It's okay, she replied. I'll wait.

When he was ready, they climbed at a slow pace. But no matter how hard he pushed himself, the last hour had taken too much out of him. He started walking about halfway up the hill, telling her to keep going and wait for him at the top. He concentrated on breathing in from his nose and out of his mouth, a trick she had taught him before they started. Watching his feet, he finally made it to the top, but Penny was gone. Already down the other side of the hill, he saw her small figure turn into his driveway.

He felt a little betrayed. This had been her idea, after all. Running wasn't something he enjoyed and now he was tired and alone. He sulked home

Fiction

to find her sitting in his front yard.

Sorry, I couldn't help it, she called out to him.

It's okay. He collapsed next to her, tried to breathe out the stitch in his side.

She put her feet in his lap. The bottoms stained and dirty from the pavement, calluses red and irritated.

It's my fault, I couldn't keep up, he told her, rubbing her feet.

I love it here, she told him, eyes on the orchard. It's permanent.

Henry wasn't sure what she meant, the trees or the two of them.

Yes, he told her. No matter what the winter brings, the trees still find a way to make it back, to bear fruit.

She didn't answer, just watched the first breeze of fall shudder through the trees.

* * * *

They lived that way for a while. Penny ran in the mornings while Henry closed up the orchard for the season. He sometimes would watch her retreating figure make its way down the road, anxious already for her to return. Her shoes, sitting by the front door, waited with him. Her absences became longer as the weeks passed, and it was often into the afternoon when she would return home, finding Henry in the orchard pruning or running the mower. He would spend the rest of the day trying to pull her back to him, always touching her arm, shoulder or hair. He taught her about the trees, an attempt to give her a reason to stay rooted to this place, to him.

As the fall settled in for good, the orchard at rest, he knew it wasn't working.

On that September day, when he told her he loved her, she had gone running later than normal—well into the afternoon. That day, Henry had asked her to help him set up an air cannon in the back of the orchard.

As they loaded the machinery into his truck, she seemed distracted.

It will scare away the magpies, he told her. I don't want them in the trees.

Climbing into the cab, she nodded.

Henry drove along the west end of the orchard, to the space where his truck could reach into the deepest part. A fall rain was rolling in but she kept

her hand out the window, catching the drops, both of them bumping around in the seat as he worked his way through the trees. Once there, they set up the cannon and Henry connected it to the generator. It boomed—the forced air blew through the trees tops, scattering the birds. Penny stood next to the truck and watched them fly from the trees, their calls drifting farther and farther away.

He saw the restlessness move through her, shake her small frame as her eyes followed the birds out of the orchard. He realized he needed her to stay, to fill the orchard, to push away the others that haunted this place.

Henry walked over to where she stood and took her hands in his.

I love you, he said.

She met his eyes. He saw the color so clearly, a light blue with green around the center.

The cannon sounded again. They both jumped.

* * * *

During the first two months she was gone, Henry held onto hope. He closed his eyes and wished so hard, he thought he could will her return. Force her presence into existence by sheer want.

Once, he stood in orchard and tried to bring her back. He found the tree she picked that first day and stood underneath its empty branches. The winter had settled and the branches were stiff and icy cold, but Henry closed his eyes and put her in the tree top. He clung to the space she had occupied, let the peace of that day fill him, but when he opened his eyes, the bitter trees were all he had left. After that day, he gave up on the orchard, found a job working the roads, and sunk into memories.

* * * *

Five years later, Henry fumbled through his apartment in the dark. He dropped his keys in the bowl by the door and kicked off his heavy work boots. They landed on top of another pair—a pair that had sat in the entryway for five years, shoes he had packed with his own when he left the house and the orchard. He stayed there for a long time, looking at the shoes. Finally, he picked them up, slipped his boots back on and marched to his truck.

Two hours later, he stood at the banks of the lake. He held her shoes and a small flashlight from the glove box in his truck. Breathing in the night, he

set the shoes down as the water's edge. Looking out, he saw the still water and floating moon. He switched his flashlight off and watched the water, his eyes adjusting to the night, the view sharp.



"Prayer" by Alexis Tate
Second Place Undergraduate Art

FIRST PLACE UNDERGRADUATE FICTION

Fire and Lightning

by Vienna Goates

I woke up suddenly when I heard Grandpa's boots stomping up the old wooden stairs. With a groan, I rolled over and jammed the pillow over my ears, preparing myself for the shouting. He reached the top of the stairs and threw my bedroom door open.

"Boy, I am sick and tired of coming all the way up here to get your sorry skin out of bed every morning."

I was silent, pretending to still be asleep.

"Josh. You hear me? Get on up out of that bed and get ready for work."

I continued to ignore him.

"JOSHUA!"

His mighty bellow scared the crap out of me and I leapt out of bed. "Alright already." I said through clenched teeth, pulling my jeans on and grabbing a T-shirt off the floor. I shrugged past him out the door without looking him in the eye and ran down the stairs. I followed the smell of bacon and pancakes into the kitchen and sat down at the table for breakfast. My grandma stood at the sink, already washing Grandpa's plate from that morning.

"Good morning Sweetie," she said. "I saved you plenty of food—we need to get some meat on those skinny little bones of yours."

I just smiled at her, mouth already full. I loved Grandma, I really did, but she talked to me like I was seven. I will admit though that the one good thing about being stuck at their house in Wyoming all summer was her cooking. I hadn't eaten a single Hot Pocket or frozen pizza in the two weeks that I'd been there, and the change had definitely been nice, if nothing else about the place was.

Grandpa stood in the kitchen, leaning against the fridge as he watched me eat. The old guy had a mean glare in his eye, and I knew I was going to pay for sleeping in today. I'd already been working my butt off for him ever since I'd come here; you'd think he'd give his only grandson a break. But I guess I was stuck with them out here in the middle of nowhere, so it's not like there was anything else to occupy my time, even if he did.

Fiction

I finished my fifth pancake and stopped to drink from a tall class of milk Grandma had set in front of my plate. Grandpa took this as an opportunity to lay into me.

“Josh this sleeping in ‘til ten o’clock every morning just isn’t gonna cut it. You’re here to work, and if you don’t hold up your end of the bargain, you know where you’re going come start of school.”

I didn’t say anything. Of course I knew. The only way in a million years I’d ever agreed to come to this place was because my dad threatened to send me to a high school for “rebellious young men.”

“After that stunt you pulled in the spring, you’re lucky you got off so easy.” Grandpa went on. “If your dad had done anything like that, I’d have taken him behind the woodshed and let him have it.” He looked at me with a mean, steely look in his eye, just the way my dad did when he was trying to tell me what to do. I guess now I could see where he got it from. “You got to start pulling your weight around here and helping me out on the ranch. Got it?”

“Yeah,” I mumbled, without looking at him.

“What did you say?” he demanded, expecting something more I guessed.

“Yes sir.” I could feel him staring at me as he stood there, though I willed myself to keep looking at my empty plate. He finally left the kitchen, the heels of his boots clanking across the worn wooden floor.

Getting up from the table, I walked across the kitchen floor to put the milk away. On the fridge door something caught my eye. It was my report card. Not the one from this last year. No one would ever hang that thing anywhere, except maybe as an example of the kind of grades NOT to get. This was from seventh grade, two years ago. Straight As. I wondered why my grandparents had kept it so long. My parents must’ve mailed it to them forever ago, and they just never got around to cleaning off the fridge. Next to my report card was a picture of grandpa and me from a fishing trip a couple summers ago. He’d helped me reel in this huge one, and we were holding it together and smiling. Grandpa’s eyes were squinted in the sun, but you could still see that they were warm, deep brown like mine. A far cry from the cold stare I got every time he looked at me these days. I didn’t want to think about that, so I walked down the short hallway and out the side door to start another long day on the ranch.

It was about a million degrees outside, as usual, but today the air was

heavy, weighing down on my shoulders like a fog of heat. Glancing skyward, I saw gray sky, obscuring the white sun from view, and probably causing all this muggy heat. “So much for that ‘skies are not cloudy all day’ crap,” I muttered to no one.

An hour later I was out on the ranch mending the barbed wire fence that the stupid cows kept running into. Grandpa had put me on fence duty, probably because it was the most boring job he could think of, and because it would take days to finish, seeing as the fence ran all over the ranch, and the ranch was huge. I would have much rather worked with the horses, or something that required a lot of my attention. Repairing the fence was so mindless, it was much harder to keep from thinking about what had landed me here in the first place.

The last day of ninth grade, my buddies and I had decided to celebrate. We were going to head over to this field where we like to hang out and have a grand old bonfire of celebration. We’re all pretty fond of fire, and blowing stuff up was a standard pastime for us, so I decided this one had to be bigger and better than anything we’d ever done.

As I untangled the barbed wire on the fence, sweat ran down my face, even though it was only midmorning, and the clouds were blocking the sun. For the millionth time in the two weeks since I’d come to Wyoming, I found myself replaying that night in my head.

* * * *

“Come on man, it’s gonna be rad,” I said to my buddy Steve as we wandered through his garage back home.

“What are you talking about? We’ve already got everything we need. There’s plenty of wood, matches, newspaper, s’more stuff...”

“That’s kid stuff dude. We gotta make this huge.” I was rifling through his dad’s camping stuff, and I found a can of lighter fluid. I tossed it into my backpack.

“What’re you doing man?” Steve asked. “That’s my dad’s stuff. You can’t just steal it.”

“Dude, he won’t even miss it. Shut up and help me carry some of this stuff,” I replied, and I started handing him anything I could see that I thought would stoke a good blaze. A can of paint thinner from the workbench, an

Fiction

aerosol can of bug spray, one of those red gallons for emergency gas that happened to be lying on the ground, and almost full of gas.

“Seriously Josh, we can’t take all this stuff. Besides, don’t you think it’ll be kinda dangerous if we throw all this crap on the fire? Someone could get hurt.”

I couldn’t believe him. Of course, he was always the boy scout of the group. And in the last few months he’d been driving me crazy, always trying to act like he was our dad or something. Usually we just ignored him, but I was sick of his crap. “Listen. Are you in this, or are you out man? No one wants you there if you can’t handle it.” We just looked at each other for a minute, faces hardened, neither one wanting to back down. Finally, he caved.

“Fine. But let’s get out of here before my mom catches us.”

“Nice to have you onboard, Steve-o,” I smiled, to reassure him. Arms loaded with stuff, we ran out of the garage.

A crack of thunder shook the sky and snapped me back out of the past. I glanced upward into tumultuous clouds and wondered if Grandpa would let us call it a day if it rained hard enough. Probably not, I thought. Dad had said once that Grandpa worked through blizzards, running around the ranch making sure the cattle were all rounded up and inside the barn with enough feed. I was sure the rain wouldn’t get me out of this, so I got back to the tools I was borrowing from Grandpa and turned my attention back to the fence. As I ambled along the wires, my mind wandered back to that night, and the fire.

Steve and I made it to the field, the one a mile or so from our neighborhood where my buddies and me would meet for bonfires. It was pretty secluded, so we figured that no one would bother us or notice this particular fire, which was going to be the biggest and the best we’d ever had. Middle school was finally over and we didn’t have to go back to that hell-hole ever again, a cause for celebration for sure. Adam and Mike were already there, getting a site picked out for the fire.

They had it lit when I ran over with my spoils. The adrenaline of my thievery ran through my body as I pushed them out of the way and started dumping everything I had into the fire. With a mighty breath the flames gusted upwards until they were taller than me, but that wasn’t good enough. The guys stood a bit back, looking impressed with the quick job I’d made of it. Wait ‘til they see what I can really do with fire, I thought.

I opened the can of lighter fluid and threw the liquid into the flames. The fire swallowed it up as if it were dying of thirst and with a WHOOSH the fire exploded into the night sky. The heat was overwhelming, but the danger of getting burned was almost exciting. To be that close to something so huge and wild was incredible. I felt more alive than I ever had. Muffled by the crackling and spitting of the crying fire, I could hear shouting, but didn’t try to make out the words. I was intoxicated by fire. As it grew higher and hotter, at first I was scared, more frightened than I’d ever been, but soon I lost sight and thought of anything else. I wasn’t even sure how much time was passing. Nothing else existed except me and that fire.

Suddenly something slammed into me, hard, and before I knew what was happening my body was being dragged away from the fire and towards the main road. My eyes were cloudy; everything I could see moved in a haze like the area just outside of fire. But through the waves of heat in my vision I saw a cop who must have been the one who pulled me away and another cop talking to Adam and Mike. Steve was off to the side, looking scared and talking to his dad. The aftermath of it all was just as blurry. Cars pulled up, our parents. My mom was crying, looking at the mild burns on my body and my singed blond hair. Dad was yelling at the top of his voice, trying to make me hear him over the sirens and the chaos of the fire department arriving to put out my fire. As they drowned and smothered the flames, I felt like I was being stamped out too.

The field was burnt pretty bad, and so were a couple of trees on the edges. The cops said that since no one was hurt, and we were underage, they weren’t going to press any charges this time. In the next couple of days Dad called my grandparents and packed a few of my things and it was decided (by them, not me) that I would spend my summer in Wyoming on the ranch. Dad said it would not only be a punishment, but he hoped the hard work would help me “build character,” or some crap like that. I was too angry to care about anything. They took my fire, and Steve, my supposed best friend, was the one that helped them do it. When the fire started to get bigger, he’d ran back to his

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house as fast as he could and ratted me out to his dad, who'd called the cops, and that was then end of our summer plans, and as far as I was concerned, our friendship. Best friends since kindergarten, and he had to go and stab me in the back.

I tried to think about something else as I wandered along the fence, fixing loose wires as I found them. But since I'd been here, there was nothing else to think about. Just the ranch, the stupid cows, the ugly brown grass, and the hot sun burning the back of my neck everyday.

The thunder rumbled again and the clouds churned in the gray sky. I'd never seen it like this in Wyoming before. Not in the summer anyway, which was the only time I'd really ever been here. Suddenly a bolt of lightning sliced through the gray, and I stood, awestruck. I'd never been that close to lightning before. I would never have admitted it to anyone, but for a second, I was scared.

"Josh!" came a remote yell from the direction of the house. I picked up the toolbox and ran towards it, figuring we would at least be having lunch soon, even if we weren't quitting for the day. As I neared the barn I saw Grandpa, leaning, the way he always leaned, against the doorway. His eyes were focused on the horizon, out in the direction of the mountains in the distance. Flashes of lightning were everywhere, cutting the clouds into chunks. I'd never seen anything like it. We stood for awhile in silence, watching the lightning dance across the gray sky.

I don't know why, but for the first time since I'd been here this summer, I wanted to talk to him. "Grandpa?" I asked, sort of regretting having spoken.

"Yeah?"

"Uh. I was just sorta wondering. Why do you and Grandma have my report card from seventh grade on the fridge? It's pretty old, and I don't get those kind of grades anymore." Now I was really regretting it. This was awkward, and I was stupid for saying anything. To my surprise, he laughed, but in an almost sad kind of way.

"That was your grandma. She put up your old grades, and that old picture of me'n you, day before you came."

"Why'd she do that?"

"I didn't understand it either. I asked her. She said she wanted us to try to remember you as our smart, sweet little grandson. Said she thought it

would be easier if we thought of you that way. She's better at it than I am, I'm sure you noticed."

I didn't reply. We were quite again for a minute, watching the storm.

Finally I had the courage to look at my grandpa's face, and was startled, and a little embarrassed, because he had tears streaming down his face. "What's wrong Grandpa?" I asked. "Listen," I went on, when he didn't answer, "I'm really sorry I've been slacking off. I'll wake up early tomorrow, I promise, and I, I'll try to get better grades in high school. I'm sorry I'm not as good as I used to be, I..." I couldn't think of anything else to say. I don't know why I suddenly cared, but I'd never seen the old man cry before, and I was terrified, like I was a little kid again and afraid of monsters, or something I couldn't see in the dark shadows of my room. I mean, I knew Grandpa was old, but he was the toughest old guy I'd ever known, and to see him cry shook me up.

He looked at me for a minute, tears still welling, and put a work-worn hand on my shoulder. His gaze returned to the lightning storm, and he nodded to me, beckoning me to look with him. "When I was a boy, younger'n you, I used to come out here with my dad whenever it would thunder and lightning like this, and we would sit, and watch the light slice up the sky. I've never seen anything else in this world like it, the bright light cutting through the dark clouds the way it does. My dad used to tell me to look at that sky and think about my place underneath it, and remember that there was something bigger than me in the landscape."

As he spoke I felt something like reverence in the cadence of his voice, and I didn't know why, but listening to Grandpa's voiced was the most important thing in the world to me at that moment. That, and seeing the sky meet the land.

"I never get tired of the feeling," Grandpa went on. "Of being so close to something so dangerous, so wild. Something that could burn and kill you, but looks so beautiful. The lightning, in the sky like that. It always makes me feel so...alive, part of the wilderness. Even with as old as I'm getting these days."

He was silent, but he kept his hand on my shoulder, and its weight was comforting. My eyes were wet, from the sound of his voice, and from the scene he described. Without speaking, he looked at me and pushed me towards the house for lunch. As we walked I kept my eyes on that sky, determined to do something worthwhile in my place underneath it.

SECOND PLACE UNDERGRADUATE FICTION

Bedroom Window

by Scott Ficklin

My mom had been sleeping with Mr. Robinson, the 85 year old man who lived across the street. Okay, I don't actually know his age, but he definitely looks every hour of 85. The untied navy blue bathrobe he wears when he checks his mail every afternoon at exactly 1:42. The slippers worn down so much from the cement leading to his mailbox, it is a wonder there is anything left. The hair growing from his ears and nose. It all screams 85 years old. And on his tongue. Three summers ago, my ball rolled onto his yard just as he came outside. He yelled at me from his porch and I could see the hair on his tongue. I wanted him to shave it, but then I thought maybe razors don't work on tongue hair like they do on your face, and the whole time he was yelling at me even though I was only 11 then, but I just stood there staring at his tongue instead of apologizing. That's the part that gags me when I think about old people, the tongue fuzz.

I know I shouldn't have gone through his mail. I wish I hadn't, I really do, but what would you have done? It was driving me insane. Every day, 1:42. Door opens, old fogey emerges, checks his mailbox to find nothing, and goes back inside. Every day at 1:42 and every day it was empty. He never said a word to anybody, except that time I told you about when he yelled at me for my ball going onto his yard. Nobody even would know his name was Mr. Robinson if it wasn't painted right there on the side of his mail box.

It all started three weeks ago, the last day of my freshman year. I ran home from the bus stop due to the fact that I was happy school was over. I threw my backpack in the closet under the stairs, knowing I wouldn't have to see it again for three more months, grabbed the bag of Oreos my brother, Steven, hid in the back of the pantry, poured a glass of chocolate milk, and went upstairs to eat in my room. I sat at my desk, leaning back in my chair and trying to balance on the two back legs while I dipped my Oreos in the chocolate milk. I have a perfect view of Mr. Robinson's front door from my bedroom window. When we moved into this house, I wanted my brother's room and if my mom didn't let him have his way like she always did, maybe none of this would have happened. I definitely wouldn't be sitting at the window at that exact moment,



“Bell Tower” by Kayla Jean Anderson
Third Place Graduate Art

Fiction

1:42 p.m., watching Mr. Robinson check his mail, that's for sure.

At that time, that is, the day I was eating the Oreos and dipping them in chocolate milk, I didn't know he checked it every day at 1:42. Maybe I never used to get home until 1:44, a full minute after Mr. Robinson would go back into his house until the next afternoon. Maybe I just never noticed him checking the mailbox because now that I think about it, I don't think I had ever seen him before that day.

Anyway, as I sat there minding my own business with my Oreos and chocolate milk, Mr. Robinson cracked his door open just enough to peek through the crack. I could see the light escaping from his entry way, lighting up a sliver of the shadow that hung over the porch. If he just opened his door and walked out like a normal person to see if he had mail, I probably wouldn't have paid him any attention. He opened the door just wide enough to slide through and shut it immediately behind him. You can't blame me for being fully interested now. He was acting like some kind of pedophile, or serial killer. He isn't a pedophile or anything, at least I don't think he is, but he was acting real suspicious. I think he just must be a paranoid old man. I let the chair I balanced on fall back to all four legs and watched. I wasn't paying a lot of attention or anything, I was just watching. It is like when I used to go to the park with Steven and we would just sit and watch the girls playing with those really long jump ropes, the kind where it takes two girls to spin it and one more to jump in the middle. You don't really stare at them or pay a lot of attention to them, you just watch what is happening. That is how I was watching Mr. Robinson when he came outside his house, his pale legs sticking out of his open robe like toothpicks or something. Then my phone rang.

"Hey Steven, what's crackin?"

"Have you seen my Oreos?"

I'm a good liar. Really, I am. I could convince my teachers that I did my homework and my dog ate it, if I really wanted to. I would tell them it is such a cliché excuse that I wouldn't actually use it unless it were true. They'd believe it too. Teachers always want to believe things like that, that your dog ate your homework, so then they could think how nervous you must have been to tell them because you are afraid they probably won't believe you.

"Your Oreos? No, why?"

"I hid them in the.." he paused. I knew he didn't want to give away his hiding spot. "in my underwear drawer and now they're gone."

"Wait, are you calling from your bedroom?" I asked.

"No, the kitchen. Are you home?" Steven usually got home before me because he was three years older and drove to school. That's why I never got to steal the Oreos before. He was always home, sitting in the kitchen eating pizza or ramen noodles or something when I walked in.

"I thought you hid them in your underwear drawer. Why would you be in the kitchen looking for your Oreos?"

"I'm looking for something else now. It doesn't matter anymore. But hey, I'm leaving at 2:00 to swim with the guys, if the phone rings and it is for me, tell them to call my cell."

I checked my phone after Steven hung up. 1:43. That gave me 17 minutes until he would leave. I could go back down and put his Oreos right back where I found them. I had been watching Mr. Robinson while I talked to Steven. He reached the end of the sidewalk, his toes dangling over the curb like an Olympic diver, leaned forward in his 85 year old way, opened the front of the mailbox, bent his neck around and looked in. I don't know why he didn't just walk onto the street so he wouldn't have to bend around to see in. It was awkward as hell, the way he tried to check his mailbox without leaving the sidewalk. Maybe he didn't want to get his slippers dirty on the street, I don't know. I could see the mailbox was empty from my window. I have very good eyes. My mom was always telling me I should be an astronomer or a pilot or something, my eyes are so good. She still does tell me things like that, just not as much on account of her moving away and all.

The next day, being the first day of summer vacation, I slept in. My mom wouldn't have allowed me to, but her and my dad got divorced a few months before and she went to live with some relatives in Reno. That is why she moved away, and why she doesn't tell me I have good eyes as much anymore. Not because she is a bad mom or anything, she is just never around now to tell me things like that. As I got dressed, I saw Mr. Robinson open his door and start shuffling toward his mailbox. I looked at the clock, more to see how long I had slept in than anything. 1:42. I picked up my cell phone and checked my call history. Sure enough, Steven had called at 1:42 and hung up at 1:43 the day before, the exact time I had watched Mr. Robinson check his mail. And like the day before, the mailbox was empty.

This continued on. It wasn't just a coincidence that he checked his mail at the same time for two days in a row. Every day I would make sure I was in

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my room at 1:42, just to watch Mr. Robinson check his mail. There was never anything there. He didn't even look sad when he opened the mailbox to find nothing but dust and rejection. I remember wishing somebody would just write the old geezer a letter. They didn't even need to write anything on the letter, it would give him something to pull out and confirm his suspicions that there was a world past his driveway and carefully guarded front door. I don't know why, but I feel like he doesn't even know anything exists past what he sees from his house. I have never even seen him drive anywhere to get groceries or anything, and my window faces right to his house, so you'd think I would notice something like that if he left.

The next week, as I sat at my desk waiting for ol' Mr. Robinson to check the mail, Steven walked in and asked what I was doing. I explained about the 1:42 thing. He thought it was weird that I knew the time our neighbors checked the mail every day. I explained that it wasn't all the neighbors that I watched, just Mr. Robinson, and that I only knew what time he checked his mail because Steven had called me at 1:42 when he thought I stole his Oreos. He still thought the whole thing was weird, but he stayed to watch. At 1:42 sharp, Mr. Robinson crept out of his house and down the driveway.

"Why 1:42?" Steven asked.

"I don't know. Maybe that is a commercial break during Price is Right."

"Or maybe he is just off his rocker. We should hide and throw water balloons at him tomorrow."

"Yeah, that would be hilarious."

I didn't think it would be hilarious though. Usually I would, but I liked watching Mr. Robinson check his mail every day for some reason. I didn't really get giddy with excitement, hoping somebody wrote him that day or anything, but I liked the way how he never looked disappointed. He would just turn around and shuffle right back up his driveway.

One afternoon, a few weeks after school had ended, my mom called me from Reno. She could tell her call had woken me up, so she yelled at me for being such a lazy layabout. She was always calling people things like "lazy layabouts", I don't even think they mean anything but she always said things like that anyway. Don't ever tell her something she says doesn't mean anything, or that she uses the word "irony" in the wrong context. She will slap you with her ring hand, you can trust me on that. I guess she doesn't wear that ring anymore now though, since her and my dad got divorced. Anyway, after she was

done calling me a lazy layabout, she told me I had to go into the garage and see if she left any seed packets in there. She loved her rose garden. Whenever me and Steven were home my mom would go outside and work on her garden, just to avoid coming back into the noisy house until she had to. When she packed up and moved to Reno, she made sure to bring her garden shears and all of her other tools. I'm pretty sure that when she moved she left one of her boxes of clothes sitting in the living room, instead of her box of gardening tools, because they wouldn't both fit in her car. I told her there were two packets still here and that I would mail them to her. I grabbed an envelope from the kitchen, opened the door to the garage, then opened the big one that lets your car drive in, and walked toward the mailbox. The mailman was at my mailbox, it was near perfect timing. I always have things like that happen to me. Whenever I need to mail something or talk to somebody, they always just show up at my door right when I'm thinking of them. It is like *deja vu* or something, I guess, except it happens in real life instead of just in my head. The mailman started crossing the street toward Mr. Robinson's house with an envelope in his hand. I checked my phone for the time. It was 1:something, I can't remember now, but it was definitely before 1:42.

"Hey, how are you?" I asked the mailman.

I think I scared him a little because he stood straight up, like somebody yelled his name from behind him, and he stopped right there in the middle of the street.

"Fine, and yourself?"

"Good, good. Hey listen. You don't have any mail for Mr. Robinson do you?"

I don't know what made me ask. I probably wouldn't have even thought of asking if the mailman wasn't already walking towards Mr. Robinson's mailbox with a letter in his hand. I wanted to see what the old man was expecting that made him check every day, even though nobody ever sent him anything, but that day somebody had sent him something. I mean, the man never even took junk mail out. At least not the few weeks I had spent watching him.

"Who?"

"That house, right there."

I pointed at Mr. Robinson's front door, picturing him standing on the other side basically sweating in anticipation to go look at his mailbox even though nobody

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ever wrote him a damn thing.

“Just this one thing. Do you know him?”

“Yeah. Well, kind of.”

I knew the mailman was suspicious and instantly wished I had kept the “kind of” to myself. “I’m house sitting for him. He is visiting his daughter in Jamaica. He wanted me to get his mail for him and save it for when he gets back.”

I told you I’m a good liar. I came up with that right on the spot. Really, it just comes to me when I need to tell a story like that.

“Jamaica, huh? Well, I’m not really supposed to just hand it to you, but seeing as you could just walk across the street and take it out of the box after I leave, here you go. You better be telling the truth though, otherwise that is mail fraud, you know.”

I walked out to the middle of the street where the mailman was still standing. He must have been stupid, standing in the middle of the street like that, but I guess it might not be that stupid because it wasn’t like there were cars going back and forth or anything. Cars never go down my street unless it is somebody who lives here. I took the letter from the mailman’s hand and half walked, half jogged, back through my garage door, afraid that Mr. Robinson would be cracking open his door any second, or watching me through his peephole. The mailman yelled something about me wanting my own mail too, but I ignored him and shut the garage door behind me. I didn’t even hand him the envelope with the seeds that my mom wanted or anything.

Steven came down the stairs in his boxers. He always walked around in his underwear like that. It annoyed the hell out of my dad, but he worked all day, so Steven could get away with it as long as he got dressed by 5:00. I guess I would have worn my underwear all day too, but I don’t have muscles like Steven, so I’m a little self conscious. I’m not weak, don’t think that, my muscles just don’t stick out like his. You just don’t look good in only boxers if you aren’t strong.

“I have a letter.”

“Good for you, did you write yourself a love note?”

“It is for Mr. Robinson.”

“Oh, so you wrote Mr. Robinson a love note? Did you tell him all about your stalking ritual?”

“No it isn’t from me. I took it from the mailman. Somebody actually sent Mr. Robinson mail today.”

“What are you waiting for, then? Open it.”

I don’t think I would have read the letter if Steven didn’t tell me to. Yeah, I got it from the mailman and I wanted to read it, but I wouldn’t have actually done it. But Steven was standing right there, leaning against the counter in just his boxers, waiting for me to open the letter. So I did. I opened the envelope and pulled it out. The letter was written by hand, which I admit made me more excited than if it was typed because handwriting just seems so much more personal, I guess. I don’t know why, typing just feels like it came from an office or a billing company. The letter was addressed to “James” and the James part was written in nice cursive, but the rest of the letter was normal handwriting.

“So the old fart has a first name!”

Steven laughed and stepped behind me so he could read over my shoulder. I hate when people do things like that, especially older brothers. They are always doing everything over your shoulder. I continued to read it out loud as he read it in his head. I’m not going to repeat what it said, but it was pretty funny. At first anyway. The letter was obviously from a woman. She said how she missed James Robinson’s warm body against hers in the early hours of the morning, and how she missed looking forward to seeing him every day. It was mushy to the point of making me sick, actually.

Even if it wasn’t my mom’s writing, I still would have thought it was gross. But I didn’t know it was my mom yet, I just kept reading, and me and Steven would pause and make fun of some of the sentences, like this one that said “the wrinkles from your smile are etched into the inside of my eyelids” or something stupid like that. Basically she was saying that whenever she closed her eyes, she could see his old, saggy mouth smiling in her mind. We laughed the most at that part, but only because we didn’t know it was our mom. We didn’t know it was her until we got to the end of the letter and it was signed “With love and passion, Olivia” with a rose spiraling down from the L under the rest of the name, like the letter L was the stem, and with thorns and everything poking out from it. That is how our mom always signed letters and that is how we knew it was her.

“Dude.”

Steven turned around and went back upstairs, shaking his head. He didn’t even seem that surprised. I sure was surprised though, I was as surprised as a pope in hell. I just stood there, the letter still in my hand. I didn’t know what I was supposed to do. So I just stood there for at least a few minutes,

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trying to figure out what to do with the letter. I wasn't going to go give it to Mr. Robinson, that was for sure, so I brought it upstairs to my room. My alarm clock showed 1:54. Mr. Robinson, or James, I don't know which one to call him anymore now that I told you his first name, had already checked his mail and gone back inside. I sat at my desk and leaned back in my chair, balancing on the back two legs. I crumpled up the letter and threw it at my trash can in the opposite corner. It missed and came to a rest against my wall. I always miss things like that. Guys like Steven always make it look so easy. They never miss the garbage can when they throw a crumpled up love letter from their mom to their 85 year old neighbor at it.

I don't know what to do, though. I don't think I am going to tell my dad. Maybe I could get a lot of money if I sue the Oreo company. I bet a lawyer could prove it was their fault that I ended up reading that letter because I ate Oreos while watching him get his mail at 1:42. They could talk about irreparable damage to my childhood innocence, I don't know. I would probably have to tell my dad though if I was going to court against the Oreo company. Or the chocolate milk company. I guess the only reasonable thing for me to do now is to move my desk away from the window.



"Alcatraz" by Tessa Ryser
Third Place Undergraduate Art

THIRD PLACE UNDERGRADUATE FICTION

The Yellow Shoes

by Hannah Cole

The aged trucker closed his cell phone with a loud snap and slipped it into his grease-stained flannel shirt pocket alongside an empty cigarette lighter. Thanks to his busted fuel pump, he would be a day later than he had expected getting home to Virginia. Walking around the back of his maroon Freightliner, he climbed onto the deck next to a pretty young woman. Kicking his feet up onto the edge of the flatbed trailer, he scanned his tarp-covered load before turning to glance at Carrie. Eyes lost in her yellow shoes, the young woman seemed determined not to show her elder companion the emotions that played themselves out on her face.

She wasn't a bad looking kid, Jack thought. Reminded him of Tom. Their hair had the same curl, though hers was the brown of Brazil nut shells instead of her father's red. Her hair hung around her face, brushing against the dirt smudge that had been on her cheek since half way across Nevada. A gust of wind blew some of the all encompassing sand from the desert floor across Jack's line of sight.

The chill breeze caused Carrie's bronzed shoulders to raise to her ears as she drew jean clad legs up toward her green tank top. Her eyes squeezed shut against the onslaught. She must have noticed Jack's stare, for she glanced at him before she let go of her legs, allowing them to dangle off the back of the truck, and plastered a neutral expression on her face. Her arms lowered from around her torso as she said, "So, how soon can the service truck be here, Mr. Ely?"

He rolled his eyes. "It's still Jack, kid. And it will be an hour and a half at least. We're pretty far out of Delta still." The sun, hiding behind the trailer's load and the Snake Range, barely kept the landscape warm anymore. The desert night was coming on. Jack glanced at Carrie's arms again, noticing goose bumps. "Come on in the cab, kid."

She rolled her brown eyes. "I'm not a kid, okay? I told you, I'm eighteen already." She hopped off the truck, folded her arms across her chest, and walked toward the passenger door.

Jack shook his head. As he pulled himself up through the driver's door,

the last rays of sun disappeared behind the mountains. By the time Jack climbed up into his truck cab, Carrie had already settled into her seat.

For an instant Jack's head must have looked like a cloud of gray hair floating independently above the desert floor, looking for a body to rest on. His formerly orderly ponytail, long beard, and red flannel shirt gave him a Santa Claus-like appearance. He idly thought of crooning out a bold "Ho ho ho" for a moment.

Climbing around his seat, Jack walked to the double bunks in the back of his sleeper cab. He lifted up his bottom bed, revealing a hole underneath stuffed with cloth bags and tools. Reaching into a mass of fabric, he pulled out a Virginia Tech sweater. He thrust the sweatshirt at Carrie, who nodded, giving him an awkward half smile as she pulled the maroon and orange mass over her head. The burnt orange color almost matched a stain on the toe of her left shoe.

Her half smile didn't light up her eyes like it should have, but it did look so much like a young Tom that Jack had to turn away to hide the pain in his face. It would not do to upset the girl this soon after the funeral. "Hey, are you sure you want to come with me? Virginia is a long way from Vegas."

Eyes defiantly steady, Carrie turned to address the him. "I'm not running away, okay? So you don't have to get all worried about my future or anything. I'm sure I want to come with you. Dad trusted you, and I just can't handle Tina. I can't stay with her."

Jack thought she looked more serious than any teenager should. "Sorry, kid- I mean Carrie," he said as he sat on his bunk. "You just look so much like your father. You don't get along with your step-mother? She's the only mom you've known, right? You would have been too young to remember Jean." Jean had been a friend of Jack's wife. Jack had introduced Carrie's parents. That was a long time ago, he mused.

Instead of answering his questions Carrie responded with one of her own. "How did you meet Dad, anyway? You never did tell me."

The old man glanced at his pocket before responding. "You want the whole story? Are you sure you can handle talking about him this soon after the . ." he bit his lip and choked out the next word, "funeral?"

She stared at him. "Uh, yeah. I'm not like heartbroken or anything. It's not like this was unexpected. Dad had cancer for years, and once it spreads to the liver, you're pretty much the walking dead anyway." Jack took in her dull

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eyes. All the light had gone out of her father's eyes too, long before he knew he was dying. "No more avoiding this, okay? I really want to know."

Jack's lip turned up slightly. The first stars began to appear through the windshield as he spoke. "Alright, ki. . . Carrie. Don't let the greasy clothes fool you, I never planned on being a trucker. When I was your age, I was in my senior year at Jefferson Prep back in Roanoke. You ever been out there?" She shook her head no. "It's a whole 'nother world. Green, wet, with that red clay soil that gets into everything instead of this sandy crud. Anyway, Jefferson Prep was where all the rich kids went to school. My parents were-" Jack paused to think. What could he say? His parents could have bought the school if they wanted. Then thrown everyone they didn't like out. They always pushed their weight around like that. "Well, I guess it doesn't matter why I went there. The point is that it was a place your Dad could never have gone. Probably wouldn't have wanted to even if he could get tuition money. He was a public High School kid. He always left an impression on you, though, right from the moment you met him.

"The first time I saw him, I was heading down the hall to- calculus, I think it was. Just past the ladies room there was this gangly kid leaning against the wall. He was maybe fifteen and had a uniform jacket so he looked like he belonged, but his shoes were full of holes and the tie was the wrong shade. Not sure why I remember that- the tie being the wrong color. Suppose that is a strange thing to notice. Anyway, he was so focused on that bathroom that I don't think he realized I was there. Started to walk over to him, intending to talk to the kid, when I heard this scream come out of the ladies room. I stopped in my tracks. I knew that scream. Sure enough, there comes Maxine Nightingale storming out into the hall. She was in my English class. I used to worship the girl. She caught sight of the kid right away. He was trying to hide his laughter with the back of one freckled hand. Had those freckles even then."

Carrie smiled. Jack thought he could get used to that smile. Her eyes softened a bit as his story went on and he got more animated, talking with his hands, almost acting out the action.

"She stormed over to him, with her blond hair all streaming behind her like a comet tail, eyes blazing almost as hot, and starts to yell at him. Don't remember what she said, just that it only made him laugh harder. It was probably her family tree mixed with threats against his future. She did that to everyone- pushed her weight around because her father owned half of Roanoke back

then. So she's yelling at him and he's laughing at her and I'm just confused until two more girls come out of the bathroom with wide eyes, chattering to each other so fast they sounded like chipmunks. Turns out your Dad had put clear gelatin in all the toilet bowls, so it looks like normal water at first glance, but when you shi. . ." He paused, his eyes growing wide as he realized what he was about to say. For a moment he had forgotten that Carrie wasn't the kid in the story. She was a teenage girl who needed her family, who should be sent home to her stepmother and younger sisters.

She was grinning now. He continued, "well, it doesn't work like water, kid."

That big grin stayed on her narrow face. Jack again realized how much father and daughter looked alike. She was so much Tom's kid.

As he paused, he turned to look out at the multitude of stars over the barren desert. He had never realized how bright the stars could be, bright and silent.

Carrie's voice broke into the still night air. "So, did he do that a lot? Pranks, I mean?"

Jack nodded to her. Frowning, he stood up, going over to the cabinet mounted behind his chair. He pulled out a Sunbelt granola bar covered in chocolate, tossing it to her before taking out a second for himself. "Well, that's about all he did do in the early days. The only times I saw him for that first couple of months were when he came to pull a joke on someone. It was later we became close friends." He slumped back into his seat. Eyes flickering toward the girl, he wondered how much he should tell her. Tom was a great friend, but not exactly material to be copied. After all, it was Tom who had started Jack's brief smoking stint. The kid always wore a smirk, always had a trick up his sleeve, and always stayed thigh deep in trouble. Grinning and shaking his head, Jack decided that less was better. He tore open his granola bar and took a large bite just as Carrie began to speak.

"Yeah, that sounds like Dad. A couple of years ago he put blue ink in Tina's coffee. Dyed her lips and teeth. . ." Jack tried to laugh, but coughed up half chewed food instead. "For the longest time she looked like she had hypothermia. She was pissed." Carrie sighed. "They screamed at each other for two hours after she noticed. I guess he slept in the garage for a week afterward. At least that's what my stepsister said."

Jack's laughter stuck in his throat. "You," he inhaled deeply, "you don't

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know for certain? Where were you?”

Gazing into her own lap, Carrie could not have seen Jack’s brow furrow. “I didn’t stick around to listen to that harpy yell at my Dad,” she said. “About half an hour into the fight, I took off. Went to a friend’s house. Tina never cared where I was anyway.”

Tina wasn’t a pleasant person, but Carrie should still be sent home, Jack mused. Shouldn’t she? He thought back, remembered the last time he’d seen Tom alive.

* * * *

Pulling around the KFC, Jack parked his big rig in the back of the North Vegas K-Mart parking lot. It was not hard to spot Tom. The Virginia Tech colored BMW was a dead give away. Jack wondered how the man managed to get his wife to let him paint that car Chicago maroon with burnt orange racing stripes. The grin on his face was just as wide as usual, making the dullness in his eyes easily ignorable.

Climbing down from the truck, Jack watched as Tom slid from the hood of his van, showing off a pair of bright yellow sneakers as he walked to meet his friend. They clasped right hands tightly before pulling in to slap each other on the back with their left hands.

The red-head pulled back first. “Hey, good to see you, Jack,” he said. “Glad you called. Where are you headed to, anyway?” They both turned toward the KFC, the wind kicking up bits of Jack’s long hair as they went.

“L.A.,” Jack replied. “I get loads there a lot. Most truckers hate the traffic, so my boss has a hard time getting people to take the deliveries out there. I don’t mind it, though. Sorry I haven’t stopped before.” His head dipped. “Deadlines and all. Last time I came through this way I had a load of wall board that some bitty was desperate to get.”

The two men reached the restaurant. Both grabbed for the door handle at the same time. Tom elbowed Jack in the ribs before sliding through the half open portal. Pushing his weight against the inside of the door, he crowed, “ha ha, I win!”

After ordering, the old friends caught up over lunch. Jack told Tom about the “lot lizard” problem at his favorite truck stop just outside of Denver, complaining that the hookers kept waking him up by beating at his truck doors

despite his yelling at them to leave him alone. Tom had suggested a sign in his drivers side window: “whores will be shot on sight.”

Near the end of dinner, Tom spoke of his oldest girl, Carrie, just entering high school. Her younger half sisters had been so jealous, a feeling that only got worse when she started getting rides to school with a friend’s “hot Dad” in his Ferrari. Tom told Jack that he had teased his daughter about the older man until Tina caught wind.

Jack asked why Tina finding out was so bad. Tom turned to Jack, his eyes large and wet, and sighed. “Tina started to make excuses for Carrie to stay at her friend’s house. I swear, Jack, that woman is trying to destroy my girl. She bought my little baby this set of high heels in different colors, told her to wear them with those tiny skirts to ‘show more leg.’” His voice jumped up an octave to imitate his wife’s. “Carrie would at least be able to do one job then.” Playing with his left over mashed potatoes, Tom’s frown warped into a smirk. “So I bought her sneakers just like mine.”

One tear fell into Tom’s food, then another. “Jack, I’m not doing well. The chemotherapy isn’t working like it should. What will happen to my girl after I’m gone?”

Jack glanced at his empty plate, pretending not to notice his friend’s tears. “What do you mean gone? You’ll be fine, old friend. You were always lucky when it comes to getting out of scrapes. You’ll be fine.”

“I’ve been lucky to have you, Jack.”

* * * *

Carrie’s halting voice interrupted Jack’s memories. “Hey, I was wondering. . .” She bit her lip, and played with the sweater’s elastic hem. “How did you become friends? I mean, Dad talked about you a lot, but you never went to the same school, right?” Her hands paused in their fiddling. “And how did you go from private school to truck driver? No offense.”

Leaning over the dashboard, Jack replied, “none taken, kid.” He closed his eyes for a moment, steadied himself, and turned to look at her. “That’s another story. Sure I haven’t talked your ear off already?” Head shaking negative, she leaned toward him. He studied his finger nails for a moment. “Well, those are related, I suppose. You remember Maxine?” He glanced up at her face.

Carrie lowered one eyebrow. “Uh, no. Who?”

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"The girl I told you about who screamed about the gelatin thing in the bathroom?" She raised her head in recognition. "Well, she didn't get along well with Tom. She was kind of a rich bully- used money to get her way instead of brawn. Of course, I didn't realize that for along time. Your Dad used to work for her family after school. He messed up one day- don't remember how, spilled something on Maxine or lost a copy, something small- and she got him fired for it. It wasn't his fault, I remember that.

"That kid was so set on torturing her. He used to do the meanest things to her. Funny, but mean. Carved her phone number into all the boys bathroom walls once. 'For a good time call. . .'" Jack's hand raised to present an invisible sign. "Anyway, they had a real vendetta against each other, so he was always around our school trying to prank her, instead of going to class at his own.

"This one day Tom snuck into our class room right after lunch and put super glue on her chair. He had to have cut the timing too short, because I looked toward the teacher's desk during the lesson and saw one freckled hand in the gap between the desk and the floor. He hid under there all period- maybe to hear her reaction, now that I think of it. It never occurred to me to get nervous. Maxine spent all hour sending notes to the guy sitting in front of me. When the bell rang for class to be over, she stood up real fast to catch the guy and then- I remember the sounds best. There was this ripping sound, then an instant of total silence, then laughter." He stopped for a moment to chuckle to himself. "The glue stuck to her skirt so good that it tore clean off her."

The two laughed together, their sound ringing out in the otherwise silent cab. Jack's face was red again as he said, "No one knew until then that she didn't wear underwear."

Between giggles, Carrie intoned, "Hey, that didn't answer my questions!" Her eyes shown with the light that had disappeared from Tom's years before. "You're just trying to avoid them aren't you?" She kicked her yellow shoes up onto the dash.

Taking a number of deep breaths to calm himself, Jack sobered. He stared at her shoes as he began to speak again. "She saw him. Just like I did. She saw him and cried out to the teacher that some "dirty little street kid" had done it, and deserved to be arrested. She could have, too. Could have had him arrested. A kid like him never would have survived, either. People don't look under the surface, Carrie. They look at what's obvious. What you can see. No

one would have bothered to ask why he did what he did. They would have seen his shabby shoes and high school discipline record, and booked him right there. So there I was, looking at Tom's eyes and Maxine's back. She looked so bizarre, with her jacket wrapped around her waist, yelling at him for the accident like she was a slave master. She just lost all her hold on me, right there, that moment. So I said I had done it."

Carrie put her feet back on the floor. "Wow." Blinking back tears, she whispered, "what did they do to you?"

Jack glanced out the window, noticing a set of distant headlights. They were the first he had seen on this barren road since Nevada. He sat back in his chair. "Kicked me out. Tried to sue me, but they never won anything. My Father always had the best lawyers."

Molding her face into a neutral expression, Carrie reached out to catch Jack's hand in her own. "You know, you are a good guy, Jack. With a big heart." The corner of her mouth began to twitch. "When we are done in Virginia, can we come back to Vegas and try that super glue thing on Tina?"

Jack laughed and squeezed her hand. He glanced at the young girl. Her eyes were bright now, shining like Tom's had before he married Tina and got cancer. Tom would want her to be happy like this. "I don't think we can get back to Vegas for a while, Carrie." The headlights turned out to be the repair truck. It pulled nose to nose with Jack's Freightliner. The driver turned off the lights and got out of his truck. Jack reached for his door handle. "Traffic is terrible down there by California, you know. Better if we stick to the Eastern states for a bit."

Carrie shrugged. "Okay." She glanced at the repair man, waiting outside his truck. "Mind if I stay here?"

She meant stay in the cab, Jack knew, but he couldn't help smiling at the unintentional double meaning. He watched her fiddle with the laces of her yellow shoes. They really were just like Tom's had been. "Stay as long as you like."

FIRST PLACE GRADUATE ESSAY

Following the Footsteps of Fun: One Woman's
Appropriation of Power in Polygamy

by Bonnie Moore

On a warm fall day in 1948, Amy Teresa Leavitt Richardson swung her eighty-year-old leg across her son Lionel's motorcycle, centered her rear on the seat behind him, waved to family members, and went for a long ride about town in Mesa, Arizona. Always up for a bit of fun, Amy Teresa (pronounced "Tressa") smiled broadly and seemed to completely enjoy the moment, laughing with her son as they watched onlookers gawk while they rode by. When my eyes peruse the photograph of this event (figure 1), they encounter a somewhat jarring juxtaposition. Instead of seeing bandannas and black leather, the typical attire for motorcyclists I'm used to seeing, Lionel wears a jaunty cap, while Teresa sports a slat bonnet—the same style of head gear she undoubtedly wore sixty-three years earlier when she drove a covered wagon from Snowflake, Arizona to La Ascension, Chihuahua, Mexico. Although Teresa appears with modern sunglasses in the picture, she also wears stockings and a long skirt bunched up over the motorcycle's seat—not the norm in the 40s—along with her pioneer bonnet to protect her face from the glaring Arizona sun. The caption under the photograph in the family album states: "Life begins at 80," and from the stories I've heard about my great-grandmother, she believed that cliché, as partially witnessed by the photograph.

Amy Teresa lived life to the fullest at any age, teasing, playing pranks, and having fun, even in the hard poverty-filled years when she grubbed out a living for nine of her eleven children in Mexico. When I was young, the notion that my great-grandmother enjoyed pranks, teasing, and a good time appealed to me, I could never hear her stories often enough, and as I grew up, I often wished that she was still around to go toilet-papering with me or participate in the other pranks I loved. No other grandmas I knew of were famous with their grandkids for playing around and having fun when they were an adult, especially not when they were in their 80s and 90s. At that time I had no idea of the poverty, the hard-scrabble existence, the adversity which underlined the life of my effervescent great-grandmother; I didn't foresee the impact she would play in my life.



Figure 1.
Lionel Richardson and Amy Teresa Leavitt Richardson.
Mesa, Arizona – 1948.

There is no photograph of the night that Teresa and her best friend, Becky, played a prank in Colonia Diaz. Amy Teresa was polygamist Sullivan Calvin Richardson's second wife (figure 2), and Becky [Caroline Rebecca Jacobson] was the third wife of Sullivan's brother, Edmund Calvin Richardson. The two women were down in the dumps and decided to have some excitement and fun, so they got some five gallon cans, put nuts and bolts in them, used skillets as drums and hammers as drum mallets, and "sallied forth into the moonlight," as Amy's daughter, Teresa Mae, told the story. Everything was quiet and peaceful: two hundred fifty milk cows were lazily chewing their cuds, a hundred pigs snored, and the horses were enjoying doing nothing. Suddenly the awful commotion of clanging skillets and banging, clattering tin cans shattered the stillness. Calves began to bawl, pigs squealed, cattle bellowed, and corral boards crashed down as the horses, cattle, pigs, and chickens all stampeded. All that could be seen in the bright moonlight was a big cloud of dust as the animals ran in every direction. A big red pig ran right between Becky's legs, giving her a very unexpected ride. Such bedlam! As the sun was going down the next evening, the last of the cows was finally given her morning milking, most likely



Figure 2.
L: Amy Teresa Leavitt; R: Sullivan Calvin Richardson.
ca mid 1880s.

by Amy Teresa herself, since she milked cows and made cheese from the milk in those days.

I thought about this story often as I grew up, wondering what my dad, a dairy farmer, would do if I went out in the middle of the night and stampeded his milk cows and pigs; I knew he would not be happy, that I would get in trouble of the worst possible kind. I'm quite sure that the men in Colonia Diaz were not very happy with the prank my grandma and her friend played, either, but that didn't stop the antics of these women. According to my uncles, whenever Becky and Amy Teresa got together in the decades after they left Mexico, they talked about the old days, relived all the pranks they pulled, and giggled hysterically like a couple of school girls, even into their 90s.

I agree with my grandma, Teresa Mae Richardson Blau, (called "Tessie" to differentiate from her mother, Amy Teresa) who made the following comment about her mother, my great grandmother: "The patchwork quilt-top of Mother's life would have been rather drab with hardship and discouragement had she not taken so many of the dull moments and dyed them a bright color with her own originality and humor" (A.T. Richardson, History, 14). Another

incident that colored the texture of my grandmother's life also took place on warm Mexican night. Amy Teresa and Irena, Sullivan's first wife, were out walking and came near the tent of Charles and Verona Whiting. (At this time the Mormons had not yet secured land upon which to build homes in Mexico, so they were forced to camp out for a year and a half near La Ascension, next to the Casas Grandes River.) The women could see by the lamplight from inside the tent that Charles was sitting very close to the tent wall. Picking up little pebbles, they tossed them at the tent, hitting not only the tent, but also Charles's head. After several such bumps, Charles, thinking the culprits were kids, burst out, "Verona, go spank those kids and send them home" (A.T. Richardson, History, 15). Irena quietly and quickly went on home, but Amy Teresa, laughing, poked her head between the tent flaps and chortled, "That is a luxury I've never had, so I've come for it" (A.T. Richardson, History, 15). Luxury was, indeed, something she knew little about; for most of her life Amy lived in stressful financial conditions. Twice during her life she took only what she could fit into a covered wagon to build a new home for herself and her family.

In 1884, Sullivan Calvin Richardson, my polygamist great-grandfather, took his 16-year-old second fiancée, Amy Teresa Leavitt, on the Honeymoon Trail from Brigham City, Arizona, via Lee's Ferry, to St. George. In those days, so many couples traveled from Mormon communities in Northern Arizona to the St. George Mormon Temple to be married, a journey of a few days to several weeks, that their horses and wagon wheels created a long, narrow, winding road that is still easily visible in places today. Since most travel along this road culminated with a wedding ceremony, followed by the return trip to Arizona, often referred to as the "honeymoon," by young couples of the day, the road was commonly called the Honeymoon Trail.

According to Sullie's journal, when Teresa was preparing for their journey to St. George to get married, her aunt commented, "When you get Sullie, you can't make your dresses like that. And you'll have to stop reading novels." Teresa replied, "I'd like to see the man who'll tell me how to make my dresses or what I can read." Later, as Sullie and Teresa were packing for the trip, Teresa put a book in Sullie's satchel and dared, "I'm putting in this novel for me." When Sullie made no reply, she went on, "Ain't you going to say anything?" Sullie responded, "No. Why should I?" She confessed, "Well, Aunt Amy said you would." Sullie asserted, "That isn't my way. When your own good judgment tells you a thing is wrong, you'll stop. I'll try to bring that happy time by

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influence, but never by word” (S.C. Richardson 113). Of course, Richardson may not have actually lived up to his claim, made before the marriage, before any major conflict, that he would never tell Teresa if he thought she was doing wrong, but the fact that he wrote about her challenge to his patriarchal control shows not only her independent thinking, but also says something about how he accepted her self-directing spirit—more liberally, perhaps, than many men of his era.

As a voracious reader from my earliest years, I love the fact that my great-grandmother determined early on, before she ever married, that no man would monitor what she read, that she challenged patriarchal authority regarding reading from the very outset of her marriage. At a time in American history when reading novels was considered “evil” at worst and “naughty” at best, definitely outside the bounds of what a “good” woman should do, Teresa showed great personal authority and demonstrated that she would live on her own terms.

Amy Teresa married Sullivan Calvin as his second wife in the Mormon temple, and then spent several days in Utah’s Dixie (Ninety-three years later, I actually got married in the same room as my great-grandma did.). With her beautiful, long, wavy hair, sixteen-year-old Teresa looks elegant standing next to her handsome, rugged-looking husband (figure 3). The sacrifices and trials of her life were unknown to her then; she appears peaceful and serene, her right hand rests lightly on her husband’s shoulder, a shoulder that in future days would often be unavailable to lend support, since she shared her husband with his other wife, and because for years he was a traveling school teacher in the Mormon colonies, often unable to live with either of the women he had married.

Within two months of their wedding, Amy Teresa and Sullivan began the trip to Mexico in a covered wagon so that they, along with his first wife, could live “the principle” (as polygamy was often called in those days) without fear of prosecution or persecution. The journey to Mexico, the long wait for land of their own to build on, and the intense work of building farms, homes, and the community of Colonia Diaz in the desert, created hardships for my great grandmother and all the Mormon colonists. Amy Teresa remembered these experiences and wrote about many of them. Through her writing and the stories she and her children told, I gained some understanding about the difficulties and she faced as a pioneer, a polygamous wife, and a mother of eleven

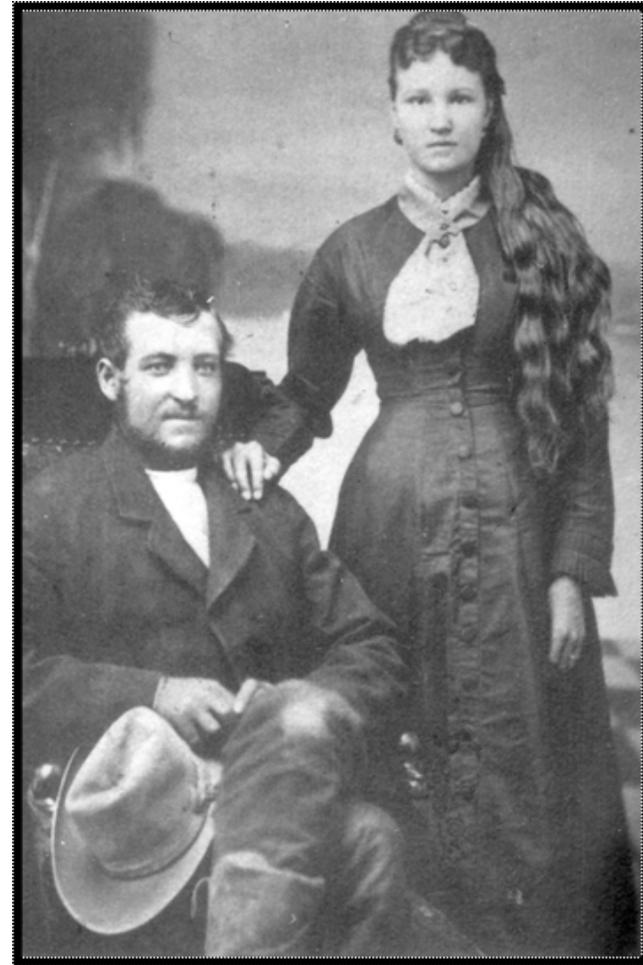


Figure 3.
Sullivan Calvin and Amy Teresa Leavitt Richardson.
Married 11 December, 1884.

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children (two of whom died young.)

After an eventful journey to Mexico, complete with encounters with Indians, bad weather, mud which sucked down the wagon tires, threats, bad water, and lack of water, when the Mormons were camping near La Ascension waiting for the land purchase which would allow them to begin building homes and a town, the Richardsons grew tired of flour tortillas and ash cakes. They craved vegetables. One morning, before anyone else in camp was awake, Teresa got up, strapped a six-shooter around her waist, grabbed a large gunny-sack, and quietly hiked three miles up the Casas Grandes River. Here she spent several hours gathering a large bunch of pigweeds for “greens.” Her actions ran counter to the express counsel of church leaders, but as she usually did, Teresa followed her heart instead of tradition and rules, and everything turned out fine. Since everyone in camp enjoyed the greens, she didn’t get into too much trouble with camp and priesthood leaders.

* * * *

Mormons lived in the borderlands before they were called borderlands, and they stayed for twenty-seven years before they were driven out in July 1912 during the Mexican revolution. Carmen Duarte, a writer for *The Arizona Daily Star*, compares the lives of her Hispanic relatives who worked on Heaton Lunt’s fields in the Gila Valley of Arizona during the 1930s for a dollar a day to Lunt’s father and grandfather and their families, who lived in Colonia Pacheco from 1890 ‘til 1912 until the Mexican revolution. Duarte explains:

They, [the Lunt family] too, moved easily between the United States and Mexico. They have lived in both worlds for more than a century. The Lunt’s family history, which mirrored that of other Mormon settlers, is filled with some of the same hardships and discrimination as my [Hispanic] family’s. It’s another tale of strong religious faith and survival. (2)

This is an interesting comparison from an unlikely source, since comparing emigrants on both sides of the border—in this case Hispanics in the U.S. and Mormon polygamists in Mexico—doesn’t happen often in today’s society. It may be interesting to do further research in this direction. My great-

grandmother, through the chance of where, when, and to whom she was born, became one of these borderland people, looked down on and “othered” by the contemporary society of her day on several levels: because she was a woman, a headstrong and assertive woman, a Mormon, a polygamist, and then, in Mexico, an emigrant.

* * * *

Sullivan taught school for twenty-seven years in Mexico, and often accepted teaching jobs in other colonies away from Diaz. He usually asked his wives to go with him, and Irena went along several times; Teresa always refused. She finally had a home of her own, as she describes: “Daddy [Sullivan] had a good chance to buy another home; he decided to do it. It was a plain Mexican house with [. . .] dirt floor, and mud walls. But it was my own and my first home. I had always felt that it was the right of every mother to be queen of her own home, and now I felt like I really was the monarch of all I surveyed. Happy? I’ll say I was!” (A. T. Richardson, *Shuttle*, 10). She had worked hard to establish roots in Diaz, a stable home for her large family of nine children, so she did not want to tear her children away from friends and teachers. Besides that, according to her daughter Tessie, she had a “green thumb.” Teresa loved a beautiful garden and continually had trees, flowers, and shrubs she was trying to establish, which meant she and her children hauled innumerable buckets of water. She couldn’t bear to abandon her landscaping efforts and expose her beloved plants to a dry death.

It was easier for Irena to accompany her husband because she had only five children and she didn’t like working outside as Teresa did. Irena’s passion was sewing, and she was an excellent seamstress (Johnson 254). Sullie states: “I had asked Teresa to go with me to this school (at Colonia Oaxaca) but she felt she could hardly take her whole little crowd of kiddies away from home. Would rather stay and keep the old home up. This is why I have always taken Rena with me where I have taught. Teresa would always rather stay at home, than drag the kiddies away [. . .] Rena and I rented one of Sister Scott’s rooms [to live in at Oaxaca]” (S.C. Richardson 127). Teresa so enjoyed her family home, her yard, and her freedom that she chose consistently to stay in Diaz, and never accompanied Sullie when he went away to teach. Always independent by nature and by upbringing, Teresa acted as the head of her home the great majority of

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the time and became increasingly self-sufficient.

Sullivan helped Teresa as much as he could when he was in Diaz, and he sent her some financial support after dividing with “Aunt Rena’s” family, but Teresa worked diligently to provide for her large family, and didn’t have the resources for many beautiful things. Teresa’s youngest daughter Tessie told how Irena and Amy Teresa worked together to make ginger and lemon snaps which they sold to the local Mexican markets for cash, and how Teresa also:

[. . .] dug ditches, spaded and planted gardens, planted flowers and trees. She worked with the bees to get honey, chopped wood, and helped the boys haul hay, plant and dig potatoes, etc. She milked cows and made cheese, cottage cheese, and butter. She cared for stock and chickens, too, for it all meant so much to the living of her large family [Teresa gave birth to eleven children, two of whom died in infancy / early childhood]. Besides her regular work indoors, she corded and spun the wool and knit socks, braided hats, made tallow candles for light, parched wheat and corn and ground it in a coffee mill for cereal, gathered shucks and made bed ticks, and even made many a pair of shoes. (A.T. Richardson, Shuttle, 10)

In spite of such a work load, nine children, social expectations, church obligations, and the quite strict religious rules she lived by, Teresa still had the chutzpah, the drive and the energy to pull pranks and make fun, which speaks to her strong desire for self-expression, her sense of humor, her verve.

Another undocumented family story demonstrates the power Teresa appropriated when she decided it was necessary to do so. One day, Sullivan found some of Teresa’s older boys engaged in an activity he didn’t like, so he went after them with a stick. When she heard about it, Teresa told him flat out that if he ever hit any of her sons again she would kill him. I don’t know what tone of voice she used or how serious she was when she made this threat; the story is part of the oral history of the family, and I haven’t found anything written about this incident, but the story demonstrates again that Teresa was not afraid to stand up to her husband. She was not the only plural wife who acted on her own accord.

Other polygamous women realized that they had autonomy and freedoms that women in monogamy didn’t share. Annie Clark Tanner claims that mothers were responsible to rear their children almost alone, and declares, “I had the attitude of many Mormon women in polygamy. I felt the responsibility of my family, and I developed an independence that women in monogamy never know” (269). Tanner also asserts, “The plural wife, in time, becomes conscious of her own power to make decisions” (270). In his article “The Awesome Power of Sex: The Polemical Campaign Against Mormon Polygamy,” Charles A. Cannon states, “Many Mormon wives [. . .] saw their condition under polygamy not as slavery but as a form of liberation that allowed them to improve their own position and provide a better life for others in society,” and goes on to quote Martha Hughes Cannon, the first woman state senator in the United States and the fourth wife of a polygamist, who argued that a plural wife was not as much a slave as a single girl, as saying, “If [a plural wife’s] husband has four wives, she has three weeks of freedom every single month” (76). While it seems that Teresa Richardson didn’t mind being on her own most of the time, and actually chose being on her own on more than one occasion, some wives may not have enjoyed the freedom and agency that came to them as a result of polygamy. However, whether women embraced it or accepted it as a trial, Mormon polygamy allowed space for female self-determination that was remarkable for the time period.

One familiar story in the family regards Teresa’s affinity for fresh air—she insisted on keeping her windows open unless it was bitter cold. In the beginning of their marriage this was no problem, but after a few years it became apparent that Sullie had grown susceptible to illness—cool air made him sick. Their daughter Tessie declared, “She [Teresa] was an outdoor woman, so to speak. Mother would say, ‘Well, you had better sleep there [at Irena’s] where you know you will be warm and out of the draft’” (Blau, 2). Of course, that means she chose fresh air over having her husband in her home, even though she often wrote that she loved him. One poem she wrote in her later years states, in part,

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Your pleasant smile and your words of good cheer
Help to remove worries from those who live near.
There are many things you do nobly and well
Your patience and kindness all make my heart swell.
Another thing I can say and I know it is true
No wife has a husband that's better than you.
With love always, Teresa. (A.T. Richardson, Richardson Shuttle, 7)

Fresh air and freedom obviously meant a great deal to lively Teresa, even more than having her husband in her home when it was cold.

I remember well my great-grandmother—she died in 1961 when I was six—and her Mesa living room, which was lined with narrow white shelves that showed off many dolls, trinkets, china plates and cups, and other knick-knacks that she collected (See figure 4). The room seemed a magical place to me as a child, but I didn't know then what it must have meant to my great-grandmother, who lived for so much of her life without any sort of trinkets or lovely trappings. By decorating standards of today, these trinkets may seem kitschy, but knowing the history of the woman who collected them, I can understand her desire for pretty, unneeded things. As she raised her children in Colonia Diaz, and then later, in Joseph City, Eden, and Thatcher, Arizona, Teresa worked diligently to provide for them, and didn't have the resources for many beautiful things. She used every opportunity available, and her struggle to supply the needs of her family gradually improved with time, but frills were unknown for many years, certainly until her children were grown and gone.

* * * *

After twenty-seven years, Colonia Diaz had grown into a vibrant community with beautiful homes, a wide variety of musical and dramatic groups, and large, productive fields. Life had become easier for Great Grandma and everyone else as the Mormons enjoyed the results of their combined labor. However, the political unrest in Mexico began to affect the Mormon colonies. In 1911, Sullivan Calvin decided to move back to the United States, and to take up a homestead in the Gila Valley. He invited both of his wives to come along, and Irene went with him, but once again, Amy Teresa chose to stay with the home, yard, and garden she'd worked so hard to build and beautify; she re-



Figure 4.
Amy Teresa Leavitt Richardson in her Mesa, Arizona living room full of her treasures.

mained in Colonia Diaz. Once more, she was on her own.

Amy Teresa and other citizens found themselves in the midst of growing animosity against President Porfirio Diaz that ended with rebellion and revolution. Around 2:00 a.m. on July 28, 1912, the church bell unexpectedly began to ring in Colonia Diaz, and when the townspeople gathered, they were told to pack up and leave as soon as possible. The situation was no longer safe—they had to get out for safety. Teresa packed what she could into her wagon on the spur of the moment in the middle of that July night, and left early in the morning. When they drove their wagons out, most Mormons believed that their evacuation was only temporary, but the majority of them never returned, and soon the town was pillaged and burned; the Mexicans hated anything connected with President Diaz, so the town's name cemented its fate.

So it happened that not only once, but twice during her life Teresa took only what she could fit into a covered wagon to build a new home for herself and her family. First, she went to Mexico as a new bride to flee polygamy trouble in the U.S., and then, twenty-seven years later, she fled her Mexican home and its revolution at age forty-four, along with nine children ages five to twenty-

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three (along with her oldest daughter's husband.) Anything that wouldn't fit into the covered wagon was lost; she began again, in mid-life, without many resources except her children and her own determination, agency, and personality.

Teresa and her family eventually made their way to Joseph City, Arizona, where Teresa's sister, Nina and her husband Marius Porter lived, along with Teresa's mother, Sarah. To me the fact that Teresa turned to her sister and mother at such a time, instead of to her husband is interesting, but I haven't found anything written about this incident. It could well be that Teresa preferred to face this new trial on her own, since her husband had tried to get her to move to Arizona over a year previous, and she had refused. Perhaps she didn't want to burden him with the results of her decision. Or it could be that she felt more secure with her sister and mother after losing all she had, that her ties with the females in her life were closer than those with her husband.

Later, after they were better established and had some resources, Teresa moved her family to the Gila Valley and lived in the towns of Thatcher and Eden, Arizona, quite close to Sullie and Irena once more. Teresa, Irena, and Sullivan stayed until the children were all grown and gone, and then they moved to Mesa. Sullie bought two small lots a half block south of the Mormon temple there and built two homes, one where he lived with Irena, and one for Teresa. The three Richardsons spent most of the rest of their days doing temple work, enjoying their simple lives, visiting and singing with their combined fourteen children, children who loved and respected both of their parents.

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After polygamy was disbanded, Great-Grandma relied mostly on herself and her children for support. So the trinkets and lovely things she eventually collected at the end of her life, the many beautiful things I loved to look at as a child, were without doubt the things she did without and so yearned for in earlier years when she lived first in a wagon box, then in an adobe home made entirely of mud, and later, her nicer adobe and log home with a shingled roof in Diaz.

When I was born in 1955, Amy Teresa sent me a gift: a small metal purse, 3" tall and 3 3/4" wide with a small chain handle (figure 5). Inside are three small pockets: the middle pocket has a metal clasp, and inside that middle



Figure 5. Purse given to the author by Amy Teresa Leavitt Richardson.

pocket, my great-grandma placed a penny. In the other pockets were small pictures: one of Amy Teresa and one of her mother, Sarah Angeline Porter. The gift seems significant to me; instead of sending a blanket, booties, or sleepers, which were popular gifts for a baby in the 50s, my great-grandma chose a penny in a purse; perhaps she wanted me to have something lovely early on, and the penny could represent her hopes for me of financial stability. I don't know if the connection I feel to my great-grandmother began with this gift, or with the stories of the shenanigans she had the chutzpah to participate in, even when she worked incredibly hard, but for some reason, I always felt close to her.

In the 4-generation photos of me as a baby with my mother, grandmother, and great-grandmother, I see strong, energetic women who shared love for each other, and who were happy to extend that love to me (figures 6-7). This kind of photograph is very common for Mormon families who value family relationships above all else, with the exception of the relationship to God. Because of the LDS belief that with proper temple ordinances in place and continued righteous living families are eternal and transcend the bonds of death, not only the nuclear family, but the linking of generations is vital. When

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Figure 6.
Left to Right: Irelta Mae Blau Bastian holding the author, Teresa Mae Richardson Blau, Amy Teresa Leavitt Richardson.



Figure 7.
Left to Right: Irelta Mae Blau Bastian holding the author, Amy Teresa Leavitt Richardson, Teresa Mae Richardson Blau. 1956.

my mother, Irelta Mae Blau, graduated as valedictorian from Mesa High School in 1948, she took a job working as a receptionist for Lyle E. Trimble Ford Tractor Company in Mesa. After she received her first pay check, Mom acted quickly to have a telephone installed in her grandmother's (Amy Teresa's) home, and Mom paid the monthly phone bill until Amy Teresa began to live in the homes of her children. Amy Teresa was eighty years old, and this was the first time she'd ever had daily access to a telephone, one result of the dire financial situation that the Mexican revolution dealt to Mormon colonists.

However, in those days, long distance phone service was pricey in rural Utah, so I grew up watching my mom type long letters to her mother and grandmother every Sunday afternoon from the time of my earliest memories until Amy Teresa died. After that, Mom continued to type weekly letters to her mother until long after I moved away from home in 1973. In return, Mom received a letter each week from her mother (Tessie) and often from her grandmother (Amy Teresa). I knew that these women cared for each other, because they took the time for close communication, they supported each other, and I have some of these letters. Maybe as a young child I instinctively wanted that same female connection in my life, I'm not sure. I only know I felt drawn to them.

Another reason for my closeness to these women probably has to do with singing. My mom, my grandma, and my great-grandma sang almost constantly: while breaking beans, shelling peas, bottling food, weeding the garden, cleaning house, and late into the evenings on many nights. They sang to lift their spirits when they were sad, and sang to express their joy. I grew up with their songs in my ears, the old ballads and songs in English and also the Spanish songs that came into the family during Colonia Diaz days. Singing brought unity, harmony, and joy into the family back then, and it continues to affect the family even today, as I sing these songs with my children and grandchildren. The Richardson family has a long ballad-singing tradition that extends over at least six generations, but it was only after I became a re-entry student at USU that I discovered that several of the songs in the family repertoire are very old ballads from England, among them *The Farmer's Boy*, which is perhaps the favorite of all the family songs. Singing was (and is) a part of any family get-together or celebration.

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On her 90th birthday (figure 8), Amy Teresa's children gave her a party to remember. They crowned her with a hand-made tiara of hearts; a heart-shaped picture of Amy Teresa arching over the nine smaller hearts that circled her head, each one holding a picture of one of her children, and they celebrated her life through story and song. The vibrant colors of the Mexican blankets that form the backdrop and line the chair Amy Teresa sits in for the photo seem appropriate; they remind me of the family's ties to Mexico, as well as the colorful character and verve Amy Teresa chose to exhibit throughout her life. Of all the stories I know, though, my all-time favorite about my great-grandmother took place in southern Utah.

When Amy Teresa was 85, in 1953, she vacationed with some family members, and went for a short hike at Cedar Breaks National Monument, located east of Cedar City in south-central Utah. While she was walking through the pine-scented forest, Teresa tripped on a log and fell to the ground, breaking her hip. Several of her children were present; they carefully loaded her into the car and drove Grandma to the hospital in Cedar City. The nurse, who admitted Grandma-Great, as we often called her, was gently helping Amy Teresa take off her blouse and then her bra, when two wadded-up dishtowels fell to the floor. "You little cheat!" accused the nurse. Grandma-Great just laughed and said, "A woman has to do what she has to do."

Amy Teresa lived her life with zest and joy in the face of almost overwhelming odds. She endured losing two babies, fighting recurring illness in her family (scurvy, whooping cough, croup, and measles), and caring for a son who was injured in World War I and was never mentally sound afterwards. She faced attacks by Indians and Mexicans on more than one occasion, provided for a family of nine children largely on her own, and had to build a life from scratch not just once, but twice. When times were very tough and it would have been easier to be depressed and complain, she instead chose to make fun and humor; that's the biggest reason I feel drawn to her and to that unquenchable spirit of joy she exhibited.



Figure 8
Amy Teresa Leavitt Richardson on the occasion of her 90th birthday. Mesa, Arizona.
Feb 1958.

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"Trouble in the Fields" by Melinda Rich
Honorable Mention Graduate Art

SECOND PLACE GRADUATE ESSAY

Deductive Spirituality

by Darren Edwards

“The religious experiences which are the bedrock of religious commitment and understanding are several steps removed from the rational explorations of the meaning of such experiences.”

-Blake T. Ostler

When I sketch the tree in my notebook, I’m compelled to leave out the braces—steal poles ranging from five to eighteen feet tall, metal toothpicks, charged with the enormous task of supporting the horizontal spread of branches. I draw this tree, not as it is, not as it ever could be. Were it not for the braces the tree would have succumbed to its own weight decades ago. Instead, I draw the tree as I wish it could be, as, were I God, I would allow it to be.

But this tree isn’t the work of God. Well, not technically. An early nineteen-hundreds experiment in cross-breeding trees, the Ogden, Utah nursery owner who sold it to Roni, a Provo city worker charged with collecting trees to decorate the outside of the court house, called it a Weeping American Elm. The Utah County government website points out, “it is the only known tree of its kind in the United States. Landscape experts have not been able to find another one like it.” So, here, behind the Provo City Courthouse, stands this grand rare tree. A tree so unique even its own seeds haven’t been able to reproduce it.

It’s hard to imagine that Moroni Wilford Christopherson, whom friends called Roni, knew what he had gotten his hands on when he brought the tree down from Ogden to Provo in 1927. Could he have imagined what it would grow into? Had he known what a dump truck was, could he have ever guessed it would take seven of them just to haul off the leaves this tree now sheds every fall? Did he see in his mind the bend and twist, curl, tuck and summersault its branches would take as they shot out to fill the trees table top form?

Lately, I’ve been craving reason and logic; I’ve been starving for understanding of my experiences in life on a deeper, more detailed level than I ever have before. As an English composition instructor, I am constantly urging my students to push from abstraction into real concrete details and description. Don’t tell me your faith sustained you, that’s cliché and abstract, it’s easy and undefined. What do you mean by faith? How did it sustain you? How is this mystical sustaining faith different than the faith you have that turning the ignition of your car will make it start, or the faith you have in the people around you, in their honesty and love? But it isn’t my student’s lack of concrete, base-level detail and understanding that has stirred this desire in me. It’s been my own.

This hunger is the result of a decade long struggle to find balance between a sense of reason that likes to poke holes in the religion of my youth and personal beliefs tied to that religion. Beliefs based off, what I can only describe as, transcendent experiences with the divine: those quiet experiences that go beyond reason to explode your understanding of the world. It’s a struggle between logic and faith.

Standing beneath the massive tree’s naked winter canopy, I feel like a child swept off to Neverland. Surely, the network of branches would make a fitting home for Peter Pan. Even wrapped in the chill of a January evening, the tree screams life: from the rise and dive of each branch—a physical hallelujah—to the visible struggle of the whole to support each of its parts. This tree is a firework caged in bark; sparks and flares shooting every direction dragging heavy branches with them as they dance, thirty-feet at times, out into the air.

This tree is not logical; it is beautiful.

It is the corporeal representation of our human nature to be oblivious to boundaries; or, not to be oblivious to them, but to recognize them, give them a happy wave and a nod, and then walk right through them. But here, again, I’m erasing the tree’s braces from my mind: Consequence, solid, cold, and inevitably the outcome of our ability to see far beyond the length of our arms. Is this the curse of the human eye, and mind, to see past the tips of our fingers, the fence at the edge of the yard, the street sign, corner curb and city boundary? We can

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see, from the top of a mountain, forever, until the details blur into a mesh of beyond that our minds take in, but cannot identify on any concrete level.

* * * *

“We are skeptics or true believers” says Chet Raymo, professor of physics and astronomy at Stonehill College in Massachusetts and author of a weekly science column for the Boston Globe. According to Raymo, a skeptic is someone, religious or not, who doesn’t take anything to be a fact easily. Skeptics question everything, even their cherished beliefs. A practice French philosopher Rene Descartes, the man many deem the father of modern scientific thought, suggested with a warning in the 1600’s in his world-changing Discourse on Method, “The single design to strip one’s self of all past beliefs is one that ought not to be taken by every one.” True believers, as Raymo describes them, “Seek simple and certain truths, provided by a source that is more reliable than the human mind... They are repulsed by diversity, comforted by dogma, and respectful of authority.” Perhaps the most defining characteristic of a true believer, to me, is the ability to accept things blindly, not only believing things without evidence—that is part of faith—or believing in something that someone else can find evidence or present an argument against—that could be seen as faith in the face of trials—but often believing things that don’t agree in their own mind, things which some part of their own logic tells them can’t be right but which they accept in the name of faith. So, does the person of faith have to be divided? Are logic and reason fixed opposite faith and belief?

For most of my life I’ve been a skeptic but believing Mormon. This hasn’t always been an easy lifestyle. As Raymo writes, “If (skeptics) are theists, they wrestle with their God in a continuing struggle of faith. They are often plagued by personal doubts.” I cannot overlook contradictions or inconsistencies the way a True Believer might. But yet, and Raymo would cringe at this, I still hold onto certain irrational assertions: angels and miracles and a physical, personal God among them. How? How can I believe in these things when every piece of scientific evidence points to the void of their nonexistence? Just as Mrs. Barker pointed out all those years ago, the scientific method is based on observation made through our physical senses: What I can see, feel, hear, taste, and smell. Scientists like Raymo and Richard Dawkins are quick to point out that through all of the scientific discoveries and advancements of the last

hundred years there has not been one drop of real, peer reviewed, verifiable evidence in the bucket of faith in things like angles and miracles and the God of the prophets, and I have to agree.

However, there is another sense, a non-physical sense, which science cannot yet measure—many would say because it is by its very nature, beyond measure—I’m talking here about the ecstatic religious experience, the momentary communion with the divine. This is more than a heightened emotional state. It is more than awe or wonder at nature or the world. It is Elijah after the earthquake, after the wind and the fire, after awe and wonder have passed; it is the still small voice that creates a more powerful undeniable impression upon the individual than bearing witness to any force of nature. It is more than the centuries of art created by people who said they were told by God to create it. It is the feeling, real, personal but actual, that told them to create it. It is the mother kneeling at her bed who is suddenly overcome with peace and feels a voice, actually feels words through some sense that, again, science has not yet explained, telling her that her daughter who is studying two hours away, cut off from her by a storm, is going to be okay.

A True Believer might point to the details of such an experience as evidence of God. “The woman prayed, felt overcome by a feeling that her daughter would be alright, and her daughter was alright” this, in the True Believers eyes, is a foolproof $A + B = C$ equation. The mother prayed for her daughters safety and felt peace in answer (A) and the daughter was safe (B) so there must be a God who heard the mothers prayer and kept the daughter safe(C). I must acknowledge these examples are not proof, at least not in the way a True Believer might label them. The ultimate evidence of this human ability to interact with the divine cannot be found in inductive reasoning and post hoc explanations that label A the cause of B without any evidence other than chronology. The rooster’s crow doesn’t cause the sun to rise. Nor, can evidence of this communion be found in explanations of what it feels like—since these experiences are by definition, beyond description—or in examples of the art and literature it has inspired. After all much of the worlds great art has nothing to do with God and for every good act or great institution carried out under any God’s name, there has been a war or atrocity carried out to match. This is all too inductive. No, the only proof of humanity’s contact with the divine (and as such the only proof of the divine) lies in the individual’s contact with it. Not in the safety of the daughter, but in the moment the mother felt overcome. The fact that any

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human can feel, could have already felt, the ecstatic. It is in its involvement with the individual that the divine best proves its existence.

Some may scoff, may say that this cannot be proof of any kind because it is dependant on the individual. It cannot be verified by multiple sources. It is interesting though, that the rise of scientific reasoning went hand-in-hand with individual experiences becoming valid. That same Descartes whose ideas inspired science and logic, was also a champion of the individual and their good sense. In his history of Descartes, Russell Shorto sums up Descarte's thinking on the subject, "If my own thoughts are the only indubitable ground I can stand on, apparently they aren't so flimsy after all." There is credibility in the individual experience, if not in the interpretation of the experience, surely in its mere existence.

Here, perhaps, is the most overlooked difference between science and religion: They run off of different currency. Science builds its logic off of what is observable through the physical senses; while these moments where the sky cracks open and the individual finds themselves eclipsed in some connection to the divine are religion's currency in trade.

But what has religion done with its currency? Science has broadened our understanding of the world, cured diseases, and shown us the mist and haze beyond the edge of the galaxy. It seems to me that religion is too often wrapped up in the wonder of these transcendent experiences—that and arguing over whose are more righteous than the others—to use them to achieve some form of deeper understanding. It is too busy polishing the shine on the experience, noting and praising the joy or peace that came with the moment, and not busy enough tearing it apart. It handles the moment with kid-gloves and a feather duster when it should be using latex and a microscope.

From an early age I was taught in Sunday school not to share such personal experiences casually with those who might treat them lightly, lest they mock or attack them. I was told not to, "cast my pearls before swine." I listened, keeping these moments close to my chest, refusing to toss them in front of swine, but they never said anything about tossing them under a scalpel.

* * * *

In the eighty-three-years since the Weeping American Elm was planted behind the Courthouse it has shown great resilience. It has had a city thrown up

around it. The dust of construction and the vibration of massive earth moving machines didn't stop its growth. It withstood wind storms that threw down trees and telephone poles. Hordes of voracious nibbling insects have infested it, but here eighty-three years old, it stands magnificent enough still, to fill me with awe. Granted, it hasn't done all of this on its own. In 1980 the tree was officially listed as "historic" and became protected by various laws and organizations. Signs warn, "Historic Tree Do Not Climb." When the tree was being treated like a banquet by invading aphids, city workers transplanted lady bugs by the thousands to take care of the problem. And the tree spreads over the east lawn spanning the distance between buildings and it grows, so we enable it. We, humans, who are so apt to destroy nature in the name of asphalt development and steel structures, have built braces for it, pruned it back to help it grow forward, fertilized it, and given it daily checkups. We have placed this tree upon our backs because its existence has spread the wall of our minds.

* * * *

As part of my religious upbringing in the LDS Church, I was allowed to skip out on one class every other day in high school. During this time I was to attend (in a building just off the school grounds) a religious seminary class. There, surrounded by pictures of prophets and pioneers, I learned about God and his plan for me. I'll admit I was more interested in whatever girl happened to be sitting next to me than what was being said, and most of my seminary memories are filled with their giggles rather than the teacher's sermonic words. Still, a few things stand out: I remember an unfriendly looking teacher with puffy blonde hair telling us a story about a man he knew who once saw Satan riding down the stream from a shower head into his body—though I forget what I was supposed to learn from this story. I think it had something to do with avoiding drugs. I remember a number of stories meant to explain the importance of Christ's sacrifice and its impact and purpose in each of our individual lives; but by far, the thing I remember the most is this other teacher, who I recall as a balding scarecrow of a man, telling us that we couldn't and shouldn't believe in God, Christ, or the church for any reason other than a personal answer from God that he was there and the things we were taught in church were true. I clung to that idea.

So much of my religious life at that point was filled with people telling

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me that the “Church was true” often emphasizing that I should believe for the sake of believing, or that if I wanted to have some sort of spiritual experience I first had to believe, a kind of fake it till you make it mentality that didn’t sit well with me intellectually. Here though, I had this scarecrow in a suit and tie telling me not to believe unless I received evidence, through an undeniable spiritual experience, that God was there. I let this sink into my mind like a personal motto—one which fit nicely next to the dozens of motto’s I picked up from punk rock songs which all said close to the same thing, “Question everything.” I felt quietly empowered in the face of anyone who dared tell me anything that sounded like a dressed up version of the fake it till you make it idea.

* * * *

A one-of-a-kind tree, hybrid or not, is a hard idea to buy. Sitting at my desk, eyes dried from staring at a computer monitor, I scan through images of other elms. There are large elms and small elms. There are elms with thick branches like my weeping American elm, but these ones, these other elms, branch off at two and eleven o’clock, not a sharp three and nine. I even find a picture of an elm with branches that twist and bend a little, but not with the flourish of a Japanese maple or bonsai like the branches of this historic tree, hiding between buildings in downtown Provo.

Is this tree a miracle, or is it a fluke? If it was an experiment, can it be determined a success? Its results, if they were what the breeder predicted, have not been repeated. Somehow, this makes me happy. I don’t want another weeping American elm. Not that its beauty lies only in its singularity; if there were hundreds they would each be worth a visit. Still, it feels wrong, the idea to keep trying, as if it were somehow insulting this tree to try and duplicate it. However, that is one of the strengths of science, the ability to make a mistake, analyze it, and try again. This makes the soft spots, where the scientist can’t quite get his footing, also some of the most interesting. It’s a form of redemption, this scientific trial and error, the great miracles of science: As soon as a failure or mistake is acknowledged and the theories are moved back an appropriate step, the ground firms up instantly and they can once again dig their hands into this world while kneeling on solid ground. This is a miracle religion denies itself.

It seems like a long held rule in most (if not all religions) that to admit that some aspect of the religion is wrong, that some mistake has been propa-

gated through doctrine or cultural tenets, is akin to heresy. Anytime reason or hindsight shows us that somewhere along the line religion screwed up, we deny logic in the name of faith. We adjust the way we tell our history, brushing the tattered pieces under the rug, or create elaborate apologetic arguments in an attempt to discredit logic and those who would dare point out religions faults. Within my own faith the argument is often that those who acknowledge these moments of religious fault either lack faith, or far worse, are the Apostles Paul’s, “grievous wolves” in the midst of the flock. For the religious zealot, the soft spots are not interesting. They are terrifying.

* * * *

I remember being invited one Sunday during my senior year to speak to a group of younger teens about the importance of having a testimony of the church. I was supposed to be a shining example of faith, one of the big kids running the high school that these youngsters could look up to. I don’t know that I gave them what they wanted. When it was my turn to talk I stood and, with all the fervor of a television evangelist—an uncommon and usually unwelcome form of presentation in the Mormon church—I preached about the importance of the word “If” vs. “That.” With a sea of wide eyes looking up at me, I passionately demanded that we not ask to know “That the church is true” in our prayers—as I’d commonly heard people say. This was a mistake, it was close minded, it was the harbor from which blind faith set sail; I was sure of it. No, I said, we must ask “If things are true in our prayers.” If was open minded, it was in the spirit of questioning, it was true seeking rather than lip service covering a desire to fit in with the community of believers. Though I didn’t see it the day I made my little speech, I was arguing for a more scientific attitude, a deductive approach to spirituality.

* * * *

The beauty of this tree is part nature and part science, part God and part man. This makes its reaching, its flamboyant branching, more balanced in my head. Here, nature, like man, is pushing beyond its grasp. Here, man has studied his way into a beauty he cannot duplicate. Here, I feel science succeeding through its failure. But is it here that man supports religion, adding braces

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to support the limbs of doctrine as they grow wild and twisting away from the simple whisper of a moment that started them? Or, is religion the brace, supporting our infant efforts to make sense of these passing glances with the divine we refuse to let go? If I try and apply logic to faith, the scientific method to religion, am I making a martyr out of my moments with the divine? Am I kicking at the base of those braces that support these experiences?

What would happen if religions the world over—which seem so much to love miracles anyways—allowed themselves this miracle of science? What would happen if the ardent Catholic were to acknowledge and explore any of the dozens of Papal mistakes? What if the Baptist was allowed to dig into witch burnings, or the Mormon to pry into the spaces between contradicting statements made by their leader? What if the individual felt peace not guilt as they peeled back the layers of their personal religious experiences? What if I could say, without fear of church or God, “I felt something I cannot explain or describe while praying about the Book of Mormon, can this mean something other than what I’ve been told it means? Could it be simply that whatever divine force is out there loves any sincere effort to connect with it?”

Descartes, himself an ardent yet conflicted—he was often accused of heresy—Catholic, theorized that the universe contained three substances: the mind (human thought), the body (the physical world), and God. Thinking back to the times I’ve stood below the arching, wonderful branches of that weeping American elm, the result of someone applying their mind, their logic, to the physical world around them, I can’t help but wonder what could come from the logical application of the human mind to those experiences that connect us to the divine.

If the believer looked at their faith deductively, holding on to their own ecstatic religious experiences, not what they’ve interpreted them to mean, but held onto the moments simply as existing, couldn’t they then use them as sign posts marking the spots where the ground is sold, where they could start, again and again, to dig out new territory of spirituality? Because, braces or not, it is in our very nature to arch and twist, spiraling off after understanding.



“The Waters of Venice” by Tessa Ryser
Honorable Mention Undergraduate Art

THIRD PLACE GRADUATE ESSAY

Last Pajamas

by Jennifer Bateman

Lighter in hand, I pick up the fluffy ball of lint from the top of the cold dryer where Mom had begun making a pile out of laziness and the lack of a nearby trash can. The small palmful of gray cloud dwarfs my young hand. It smells of sugar and wildflowers. I hold it out and flick the lighter, hoping it will catch with the first try. I am proud when it glows; my small hands often had trouble pressing the safety firmly enough to transform spark into flame. But not this time.

It grows, heat spreading down to bite my pale palm. I look for somewhere to deposit the ball of smoking flame. My eyes dart and then land on the sink standing alone across the sandy carpet dotted with mountains of laundry. The flame gnaws into flesh again and I have to let it go.

I can't make it to the sink. Fire falls into beige and eats its fill; a small space of cool gray concrete appears in its place. Maybe if I move one of the piles of towels my parents won't notice. Maybe they'll never know it was me. Maybe the hole was always there.

* * * *

When I was a kid, I used to carry a lighter around in the front pocket of my Levi's. I would sit in class and reach in to touch the smooth plastic of my secret. I was constantly flicking it in its hiding place, burning the lint deep in my pockets and then letting go in an instant. I was careful to pull it out only when fire was needed, not to brag about what I carried. I was old enough to know that my prized possession would likely be considered commonplace by my peers. I don't remember hiding it from my parents but I also had no reason to bring it out in front of them.

* * * *

As a family, we would grab food from KFC and go up to Mueller Park. We'd even take our beagle Sara. It seemed like such a long journey because of

how much time went into getting ready. It always took forever for Mom to get ready to go anywhere, even if it was just up the street for a picnic, though it took years for me to realize the park was literally just up the street.

It didn't matter how much notice you gave her, you'd undoubtedly be waiting on her for some reason. On days when we were taking Sara somewhere, she would always get frustrated looking for the leash and say it was too stressful to go at all. Then, our food order at the drive-thru window took at least fifteen minutes - ridiculous for a drive-thru - because the menu seemed to always be too complicated for Mom. But we were all happy once we arrived at the park, despite the flies that swarmed the paper boxes of greasy chicken. I wonder if Mom ever got a hot meal there. I would always complain about the bones. Mom loved babying me and every time she would cheerfully pull the meat away for me. I still can't eat off of a drumstick.

It's been at least ten years, probably more, since we last came for one of our picnics, and today, Jess and I have come for a much more solemn purpose. She and I never really got along, extreme opposites forced into a tight proximity by our genetics. But, as I drive up the familiar canyon road with Jess riding shotgun, I feel relieved that she has agreed to burn the clothes Mom had been wearing that tragic afternoon. I watch through the windshield as the suburban surroundings I've hated as long as I can remember grow more sparse and the trees thicken into the edges of forest land. The road narrows as we cross Bountiful Boulevard, and I stop at the stop sign, glancing left at the LDS Temple glowing even in the daylight before I continue on my way.

The drive isn't nearly as long as I remember and soon we pass through the open brown metal gates at the entrance to the park. The road is barely wide enough for my large Dodge pickup and I hope no one is leaving the park. It's irritating when I have to pull over for other cars, especially when I'm trying to get something important done.

I ease my truck into the first parking space near the first fire pit I can see from the road, no reason to search for the perfect one. Each dirt plot with its wooden picnic bench table and concrete fire pit looks the same to me. They're all pretty close to the creek too. If it was summer we could probably hear it bubbling nearby. I grab the bottle of lighter fluid from the backseat and jump out, telling Jess to bring the bag. It is bright red and emblazoned with black biohazard markings, warnings of the contents inside. We aren't afraid. It is the reason we have come.

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I pat the front pocket of my jeans with my right hand, instinctively checking to be sure I have the lighter. It's a habit I learned from Dad when I was small. Every time Dad was preparing to leave the house he'd pat his jeans to make sure he had keys, wallet, money clip, whatever he might need while gone. I pat the bump of the lighter and find it strange I had to buy one at Smith's along with the thirty two ounces of lighter fluid; black seemed appropriate. I remember the days when I carried one every day. They don't seem that long ago really.

We walk to the fire pit and assemble our tools of destruction. I eye Jess cautiously as she sets the bag on the picnic table and slowly pulls out the white cotton pants, Victoria's Secret and dotted with a block print pattern of black Scottish terriers. They are discolored where the legs meet and, as quickly as they are free from the bag, the smell has taken hold of me. She then draws out the silky purple shirt. It has silver plastic squares adorning the neckline, a bit fancy for a pajama shirt but that makes sense for Mom. The shirt is not stained by the human waste but, after being trapped in the plastic bag with the pants, it is also marked by the stench. I am not repulsed. It makes me feel that incredible loneliness even stronger than I have been since Dad gave me the news over the phone three weeks ago. I was alone in Boise at a conference and that deep, aching hole has grown inside me every day since, hitting me hardest the moment the casket lid closed on her forever.

At Mom's viewing, Dad held me tight against his stiff black suit, whispering through my tear soaked bangs, "This will make you stronger. I promise."

Mom's been gone three months but it feels like last week. I remember asking Dad on the phone if it seemed peaceful or if it looked like that scene in Pulp Fiction where Uma Thurman's character snorts heroin, thinking it was coke, and immediately starts bleeding violently through her nose, practically hemorrhaging, then vomiting. He'd made Jess and I watch just that scene at about the time I was entering junior high - preventative action against teenage drug use. It worked. Later I watched the movie in its entirety to discover that

scene had been the most disturbing one in the movie. Dad quickly replied that Mom just looked like she had been sleeping. I didn't have any reason to not believe him. Dad always gives the facts but in a way that you can handle, no matter the situation, probably a skill he developed as a boy wanting to be a minister. He would've been a good one.

Jess folds the clothes delicately and lays them together in the ash-filled circle like she's laying out clothes for the next day. I don't say anything. I'm not sure I'd do it any differently. She asks me again if I'm sure this isn't disrespectful or something. I stare at the pile and then look up at the sky. Watching the clouds I reply, "It's the best I can think of." The sky is gray, threatening snow. I wish it would. It's cold here, cold enough for snow for sure. But it's always cold here. "I feel like it's kind of like giving them back to her." Jess and I came here for day camp as girl scouts every summer as kids. It was chilly then too. "Plus, it's not like there's any reason to keep them." I'd kept the clothes away from Jess, afraid she might try to claim them, maybe even wear them. "They're stained and all it would do to save them is to commemorate the day she died. It's not like they were even her favorite pajamas or anything." I suddenly get the shivers and wonder why I hadn't brought a coat. "She just happened to put them on and then she just didn't wake up."

I can hear my voice waver a bit and stop talking. I know I was rambling. I've been doing that a lot lately, losing control of my words, in my thoughts and out loud. I want to believe it had happened that peacefully but life isn't that easy, and I know now that it hadn't. Her clothes are stained. The other day, I looked at her bed and saw that her sheets were also stained black with blood and waste. This was not an easy passing.

I take a deep breath and look at Jess. She's been so agreeable about everything we've had to deal with lately that I find myself not trusting her even more because of it. She nods. I grab the hefty container of lighter fluid and stand over our offering. Emptying out just over half, I welcome the heady aroma and hope they'll burn easily. I crouch down on my heels and flick the lighter near each corner and step back, eyeing my efforts. White cotton pajama pants burn like thin paper, the dogs disappearing into ash. I watch the smoke rise into the ring of tree tops above us before blending into

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the dark sky.

The shirt takes some effort. I watch it struggle for a moment before stepping up to the edge of the concrete circle again. I empty the bottle over the already soaked purple. Jess glances around and finds a long stick. "Maybe this will help?" I guess my face is intensely focused on the fire at my feet, probably a lot like Dad's is when he's thinking hard - I tend to take after him but only in the ways Mom and Jess always saw as negative. It takes a minute to realize she's asking my permission. Jess never does that. "Yeah, go ahead." She jabs at the shirt, trying to help it burn. It folds into a tight rubbery length of about a foot. She lifts it up with her stick and a chunk breaks off and disappears into black ash. After a few more lifts and another ten minutes or so, there is almost nothing left. I throw the red plastic bag in on top and watch it crinkle up and disappear.



"Breakfast" by Nate Whipple
Honorable Mention Graduate Art

FIRST PLACE UNDERGRADUATE ESSAY

The Celestial Gazer

by Brian Cook

I often sit in the Utah State Writing Center hunched over my black hard-bound math text book, working on problems and calculations even I hardly understand. A fellow tutor inevitably says, “Oh, I hate math. I have a hard time understanding any of it. I’m glad I’m finished with it.” I just look up, nod, and say that I’m glad I only have one more semester to go before I don’t have to worry about equations and algorithms. Then someone says, “What math class is it?”

When I look up at the other tutors, a grin crosses my face before I can stop it. “Oh, I actually have two,” I say. “Foundations of Analysis and Algebraic Structures. They come after Multi-Variable Calculus and Differential Equations.” Their cocked heads and stunned faces are priceless. I know what they’re thinking. Of all things, why would an English major decide to minor in mathematics? They assume I’m trying to be more marketable in the future, and that’s partly true. But as they shuffle off away from the Writing Center when their shifts are over, I find a place to keep hunched over my book, reading and rereading the chapters, the problems, enveloped in a language that’s finally opening up to me.

I am learning that mathematics holds ground in everything.

I was religious for a long time. I lived in Vernal, Utah, and went with my family every Sunday to the Mormon church up against the base of the Uinta Mountains, the closest hills being mounds of yellow dirt and sandstone outcroppings scattered with sagebrush and cedar trees. I still remember sitting in Sunday School, looking out the window and wishing I could have a chance to break through those brick walls to shuffle up the base near Rock Point, just half a mile away, and sit in the cool shade of a cave barely larger than I. My dad had taken me up there several times before. I had a hard time climbing up those steep rocks quickly, but he lifted me up when I needed help.

A layer of broken shale sat on top of the wall – a battlefield of kids

against rock where the rock obviously lost. When we climbed up, my father and I sifted through those rocks, breaking them apart, looking at the fragments until we found small marks on some of them. “These are fossils,” he told me as he showed me one with snail-like curls. “They’ve been dead for thousands of years, but their imprints are still left on the rocks.” After each trip, our pockets bulged with rocks as we climbed back down to go home.

That was out of church, though. While I sat inside the walls, all I could do was dream.

“No man can serve two masters,” Sister Bingham said as we sat on our small plastic chairs in one corner. I was eight years old – old enough to be baptized into the church and say that I believe in God and Jesus but too young to understand. That a child can be entrusted with such a sacred vow as baptism still escapes my understanding, but, back then, I leaned forward and watched Sister Bingham as closely as possible. She stooped down and put two lines of tape on the floor forming a v-shape that spread out. “James,” she said, “can you help me?”

James, my best friend, was the disruptive one in the class. He bounced onto his feet, smiling broadly as he walked over to her. “James, I want you to try and walk as far as you can keeping your feet outside the ‘v.’” He started at the point and walked a foot or two, but the tape spread quickly. James grunted as he started doing the splits, trying to walk farther and farther until the gap became too wide, sending him toppling to the floor. We all laughed.

“You see,” said Sister Bingham as she picked James up under his armpits and pulled him back to his chair, his legs dragging on the ground, “serving two masters is like trying to walk outside the tape. You can try, but eventually you’ll fall.” She let all of us try it. I remember feeling the inside of my legs burn as I tried to not step on the tape, but I fell over just like the rest. I had to choose Jesus or Satan. The lesson was clear; the decision was easy.

What I never wondered back then, though, was what happened to a person that refused to walk the “v” at all, remaining at the place where both sides come together.

Essay

All of mathematics hinge on a set of axioms or sayings that were created thousands of years ago. If those ruled were destroyed, mathematics as we know today would fall into a pile of numbers and funny-looking Greek letters. The original philosophers didn't have a concept of negative numbers or even zero, for that matter. What mattered to them was what existed – what could be seen, felt, touched. These simple things were seen as whole objects to them. No parts, decimals, nor fractions. Thus, the basis of mathematics began with the numbers of our fingers and toes – the counting numbers.

Before negatives even existed, order was created in the numbers. Specific symbols were designated to certain quantities along with a rule to make sure those values didn't get mixed up. The rule that created the order was called the Well-Ordering Axiom. Imagine taking a bucket with all the whole numbers in it and dumping them down a well. In the massive pile, a number has to be on the very bottom – 1. If that's removed, the next number is on the bottom – 2. Going up, each number rests in a natural order, growing as we climb the well. No matter how many of the numbers are removed from the well, there will still be one lowest number left. Of course, unless you remove them all; then you'd just have a bucket.

The first time I heard this rule, I'm sure I was doodling some anime character in my notebook. The Well-Ordering Axiom was already a core of all the mathematics I knew. It took me a few days, though, to realize that something gave more weight to the rule – because every number has an order, no two numbers in the well can possibly be the same, and because they are in the well, they must exist. That is, one cannot equal zero.

I sat in the front pew of church surrounded by other boys dressed in white shirts and ties. The bishop had told us that white is a symbol of purity – we had to be pure to pass the sacrament. The cloth covering the sacrament – the flesh, the blood – was also smooth, white. I knew I was participating in something holy.

Then I heard it. “Faggot.” I looked around me, seeing a few of the boys snicker, but I couldn't tell who said it. My face glowed red. Back then, I didn't know what the word meant, but I knew it was something that shouldn't be said. How could I know that my friends knew more about me than I did?

Sin, as I was taught, was like a stain on a white shirt. We were often taught that one day we'd have to stand in front of God to be judged, and if we had stains, we'd be embarrassed and shrink before Him. But my friends, Jeremiah and Jake, sat to my left. A year ago at a camping trip, they had dared me to take off my pants in front of everyone else. They promised to have the lights off in the dark tent, but as I did it, they flashed a light on me. Only weeks later, the boy sitting on my right, James, had punched me in the middle of the church basketball court. Joey, a kid behind me kicking my pew, had kicked my bicycle tire until the bike wasn't rideable. Each time the other church boys just watched and laughed. Even ones that weren't there – good Christians – had punched me, kicked me, dragged me around the auditorium stage with a rope around my neck.

And we all wore white.

A year ago, I stopped going to church. Mentally, at least. My body went, but I didn't care any more. One of my friends, Nick, knew this and decided to take me to a church activity. I sat next to him as he drove his Honda Accord seventy-five miles per hour down the dark interstate towards Lehi, Utah. The GPS stuck to his windshield beeped at us, and Nick turned the car down an unlit exit. Even with a navigation system, I had my doubts that we would arrive at our destination on time.

Nick had invited me to go with him to what he called “Gay FHE.” He had joined an online support group called North Star, an organization created to help gay Mormons that wanted to stay in the church. Simply put, “gay” and “Mormon” have never mixed any better than cats and blenders – there was always bound to be blood at some point. My dad had even told me stories about how religious people in his home town rallied together to drive gays out of the county.

I sat back in the cool seat of the car. “Have you ever considered telling your parents that you go to these monthly meetings?”

He nodded and turned the steering-wheel, leading the car through some darker roads, away from the lights of the freeway. “I've thought about it,” he said. “My mother would probably be okay with it. My dad would kill me.” I could understand that; I had worked with his father at the post office

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for three months. The guy only ever thought of work and Jesus. Anything that tripped those two things up had to be fixed as soon as possible.

“We’re here,” he said, pulling the car up to the house, parking in the darkness.

* * * *

The subtle realization that something cannot come from nothing enters a child’s mind at a very young age. I used to play make-believe where I would run an imaginary store with my sisters, make the white plastic table my check-out stand. Sometimes, I’d think of something I really wanted, and I thought that if I focused hard enough, closed my eyes and focused, just focused, the object would appear. I did that for a video-game that I wanted. But no matter how hard I tried, something crawled in the back of my head telling me it was impossible. While I could make-believe whatever I wanted, it could never become real.

This doesn’t mean that childhood is wasted in any sense. I’m as much of an advocate of Harry Potter as the next Luna Lovegood lover. The desire to have an explanation for why strange things happen, why we feel that something higher up reaches down to us, even why the universe exists, echoes through all of us at one point or another. We are children in grownups’ bodies, just as lost as we have always been, unable to create or destroy. Only imagine.

While I was at my grandmother’s house one day a little before I graduated from high school, I picked up some magazine, a science one I had never heard of, and thumbed through a few of the flimsy pages. Something caught my eye – the creation of the universe. Rather than taking a look at the surface, all-encompassing theories that we learned in school, the article dove into the subatomic level. Matter and antimatter, like a hole and spackle, together bind and undo each other. A cataclysmic clap, and nothing but pure energy is left where they meet.

This cancellation of matter and antimatter, then, would obey the law of conservation of energy – the matter and antimatter release the same amount of energy through cancellation that they contained in the particles. Einstein’s theory of relativity claims that there is no need to distinguish between mass and energy; they, in essence, are equal.

But what shook me in the article was a diagram showing matter and

antimatter. According to the article, billions and billions of years ago, no mass existed. When the Big Bang came along, an equal portion of matter and antimatter were created out of pure energy. However, right after the moment of creation, something changed. The author claimed that some particles of antimatter jumped – shifted, if you will – and became matter. All the other particles canceled each other out and became nothing again, but because more matter than antimatter existed right before the cancellation, a small amount of matter remained after. From that, the universe was created.

I found that article about five or six years ago. Since then, Frank Close, professor of physics at the University of Oxford, has found that quarks – the basic elements found in atoms – respond abruptly to electrical charges, causing the particles to decay. If this interaction is repeated, certain types of quarks can transform from matter to antimatter, or vice versa. Following this, atoms, molecules, planets, universes could be created from nothing.

Basically, if this theory were true, then zero would equal one, a contradiction that would shake the groundings of mathematics.

* * * *

“Every soul has the right to come to this world in a legitimate way – in the way that the Father wants souls to come,” I read in the second volume of *Doctrines of Salvation* by Joseph Fielding Smith, former prophet and leader of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints, also known as the Mormon church. “All those that go against that path are guilty of an almost irreparable crime.”

As teenagers in seminary, we sat in Brother Wheeler’s classroom. The purplish-gray walls were lined with pictures of Jesus, leaders of the church, scriptural time-lines, quotes, a flowchart showing the “pride cycle” – the way God punished ancient people in *The Book of Mormon* when they became rich and forgot Him. Brother Wheeler, a tall skinny man with large glasses, stood at the front of the room grinning and said, “I want you all to write down on a piece of paper something you want to be when you grow up.” He waited for a few minutes as we wrote down our desires.

I didn’t have to think very long to know what I’d write. I scrawled down the word “prophet.”

As a church, we believed that our prophet was able to talk to God;

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anything he said or did was supposed to be directed by God. These leaders throughout history were men that stood up in front of crowds and told them to repent or face the wrath of God; no other choice existed.

As Smith continued in his *Doctrines of Salvation*, “Sexual impurity is one of the most deadly sins. Anciently it was considered that way, and according to the law of God, those guilty run the risk of being slain.” Even at a young age, I knew I liked boys, and I was terrified of it. People in the church spoke of those that had lived dirty lives and been kicked out of the church for all kinds of sin – adultery, murder, apostasy. The excommunicated remained nameless, but the stories felt real.

“Brian,” Brother Wheeler called to me, smiling from the front of the classroom, “could you read what you wrote down for us?”

I blushed and hunched over my desk. “A prophet,” I said quietly.

His smile became uneasy. He looked straight at me. “Well,” he said, crossing his arms, “you know, Brian, it takes a lot more than desire to become a prophet. I doubt anyone in this room will be one.” I knew that was true, but even as the other kids snickered around me, I thought it could be possible, maybe. The biblical Job had to keep living when his house collapsed on his children, killing every single one, when he was stricken with boils and told by his wife that he’d be better off dead. Abraham was told to sacrifice his son. David faced the giant.

Who was I to say that I couldn’t fight – couldn’t overcome – my sexuality? Though it were unlikely, being a prophet would be a sign to me, to everyone, that I had conquered the unconquerable.

“We’re going to be too late for the lesson,” Nick said as we stepped out of the car into the frigid night air and walked toward Fred Matis’s house, “but we should be able to get a bit of food, at least.” The front of the two-storied house was covered with cobblestone – something typical of newer, fancier houses in Utah. We opened the wood door, took our shoes off, and walked in.

I had been in many houses like this one before. The walls were painted an off-white hue near the wood floor entrance that was surrounded by statues and pictures of Jesus. It was just like stepping into church. As Nick and I walked in towards the kitchen, I started to see people all around, one guy wear-

ing black gangster clothes with a large fauxhawk, another sporting an argyle sweater-vest and slick jeans. All sorts of colors, clothes, styles swam around me. A few had piercings, others tattoos. Some looked like calm choirboys. One guy, with his long blond hair and shorts, looked like a hippie.

This was family home evening.

What kind of family was this?

After I grabbed a plate of cookies and a drink, I sat in a large red chair in the corner of the room. The hippie guy looked over at me, smiled, and sat down. “Hey, I’m Kamren,” he said as he offered his hand. I took it and introduced myself. We talked about our lives, how we ended up there that night. Then Kamren turned the line of thought to his own beliefs. “You know,” he said, “I find a lot of meaning in nature, in the things around us. I mean, you might be confused right now, but if you find a totem guide, you’ll be able to work these things out, I promise you.”

“Hey, who’s this?” the guy with the fauxhawk interrupted. I stuck out my hand, but he didn’t take it. “Whatever,” he said. “You’re new here, huh? Well, do you ever...” He stuck his thumb in his mouth and raised his eyebrows at me. I shook my head. “Oh,” he said. “There are a bunch of guys here that do. They think it’s not that bad, you know. Like those two guys,” he said, pointing towards a strong man in a tight blue shirt and a spiky-haired blond. “They’re dating. They know they’re not supposed to come here to find guys to date, but they do anyway.”

I looked around me, trying to find my friend Nick, but he had disappeared into the crowd. I rubbed my hands together and tried to say something back to the guy. Words wouldn’t come to me. I raised my head to look at him, this fauxhawk-haired man hinting at oral sex while standing in front of a picture of the Second Coming, and I knew I was out of my element, not because I was surrounded by people that had been hated by others they had worshiped with but because they still believed. They all had different mindsets, beliefs, yet somehow – in a way I couldn’t understand then – they pulled together to believe in a religious community that said they were wrong, that was ashamed of them, that even tried to conceal their existence.

But there I sat, listening to people talk about gay sex and Jesus in the same sentence, not even thinking twice about it.

Essay

A few days after that FHE, I sat in the GLBTA office at Utah State University decorated with bright red walls and a dangling rainbow flag. My friend Riley sat across from me, laughing from a joke someone else had made. I laughed, too, as I sipped from a bottle of lemonade.

“You know,” Riley eventually said, “those closeted gay Mormons are so frustrating. All they’re doing is hurting themselves.”

I looked up at him. “What do you mean?”

“Look,” he said, leaning towards me in his chair. “They’re never going to change who they are, and the church’s teachings just keep them pounding themselves into the ground, driving them to depression, suicide. It’s horrible. It’s just horrible.” He leaned back and slumped in the chair. “They just need to leave the church and accept who they are.”

I sat there staring at him. The GLBTA office had become a symbol of tolerance to me, of acceptance, a place where anyone could enter and feel like they wouldn’t be judged. I’d heard the same thing said by others almost every week, and I just sat back, listening. I believed what they said then, but now. Now.

“No,” I said to Riley, my hand wavering as I put the bottle down on the floor. “They don’t need to leave.” I breathed deep. “Maybe the church needs them more than we know.”

* * * *

As I sit here typing, watching the snow fall outside on rows and rows of cars, I’m not sure what to write. What can one write after all the rules of the logical world have fallen apart? How could it be more logical to number this page with a “10” than with a “10,000?” If zero is one, then anything is anything, and everything is everything.

Yet I know that in most cases with mathematics, rules will still exist. The square root of four is always two. One minus one will give zero. Maybe the rules are only broken for the creation of the universe.

I don’t know. I didn’t write them.

Could it be that rules are simply observations we make of the surrounding world that, as far as we can tell, give stability to that world? We often refuse to think of the numerous exceptions around us. A triangle drawn on

a ball will have angles with a total of more than 180 degrees, and two perpendicular lines on that same sphere will eventually become parallel at a point. But when the general public finds out about these exceptions, they blow it out of proportion, saying that the world they know and love can never work that way because they had never seen it act like that before.

I left the church thinking that I was going to hell. I was certain of it because I chose the devil over God. Religion had taught me, coached me, whipped me into thinking that the only way of finding any piece of joy in this world and the eternities was to reject a part of who I was. “And if thy right hand offend thee, cut it off, and cast it from thee: for it is profitable for thee that one of thy members should perish, and not that thy whole body should be cast into hell.”

But watching the gay Mormons gather, talk joyfully, was like watching two worlds collide, each man standing at the point of the “v” where heaven and hell are alike, the two crossing when they should run infinitely parallel. I never knew about that point, never dreamed of its existence, that my God and my sexuality could abide together. Those men are the rule. Those men are the exception. I had thrown God so far away in my mind that I’m not sure if I can get Him back. But now I lift my eyes with them, the celestial gazers, trying to spot that place in heaven that will take me for living who I am. For once, I can hope for it. My God, I can hope.



“Impending Storm” by Kathryn Andersen
Honorable Mention Undergraduate Art

SECOND PLACE UNDERGRADUATE ESSAY

The Gone, the New, and the Garden

by Julie Sheen

“There is nothing to be done about it, but ignore it, or see. And then you walk fearlessly, eating what you must, growing wherever you can, like the monk on the road who knows precisely how vulnerable he is, who takes no comfort among death-forgetting men.”

--Annie Dillard

It just so happened that the night I prayed the hardest was the night you slipped from us and got the dodge outta this life, which might be why I had such a hard time believing later. When mom came home from the hospital, she couldn't climb the stairs and my own knees were hurting as I held her arm. Her voice was hoarse and when I asked her why, she told me right there in the darkness that at the last your doctors were trying to start your heart with their electronics and she knew they needed to let you go, so she'd screamed until they stopped. At your funeral when Justin reminded us that in the Father's house are

many mansions, he added that he knew there was a ranch or two for you, and Justin is always so sure of everything and is usually right, so that made Mike add that all your horses long-dead would be there also, waiting for you to saddle 'em up. And that's probably why, that first year I rode my bicycle everyday to the stables down the road and met each horse, and I know you love those creatures, but I have to say that I'm still not sure about them, because they never did tell me what to do with all that sadness.

It seems I was born with a grip like a vice. But most are. Look at that baby with the tight tiny fists holding onto her mom's shirt. She is Ben Franklin clutching the key saying: it all depends on this. As the lightning fires all around her this baby thinks, “This right here, this grasp I use to hold onto the shining things of my world, proves that the loss stops now, with my life, and I will be the one who keeps what I love.”

But no, baby. You see, every other baby has thought that too, which is why all come armed and ready to grab-a-hold. They learn as they grow. First auntie teaches them. She dies in December in a hospital in some southwest town where the weather outside is warm like that sunny morning in April fifteen years earlier when the telephone sang her awake with news of a new niece. Baby will not be the only one to call that same phone in the weeks after auntie's death to hear the recording of her voice alive on the machine. Even though auntie will never be at home again, hope springs eternal, as they say. So later, baby and her first lover will sit late into the night in front of an old house, listening to each other tell predictable stories of past antics and old friends. The hum of these two voices which could say anything and still be loved by the other, simply for the sound, will cause baby to believe again that she won't lose everything she loves.

* * * *

I was eating Greek food on the porch when I heard your motorbike coming up the road and when you stepped off, thinking you were The Shit, I asked if you wanted some and you declined which I thought was odd, not only because you are Greek, but because you always ate my food. So, when my mouth was full of falafel and yours wasn't, you really had no excuse for your lips not even quivering when you told me this was goodbye. At that party where I saw you next, boy you should've waved or something, but I guess your

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hand was busy feeling out the skinny thighs that sat next to you and all I got was a chin-up nod that you used to tell me not only that you acknowledged I was there, but also to show me what a super-cool-dude you'd become. The party-people began to talk of movies they'd seen and I remembered one I'd been in. You were in it too, remember? We were in the Oldsmobile and you told me that every time you touched me, you wanted me to understand the vastness of your love. So I gathered you loved her, the girl next to you. You never did take me up on that just-friends beer I wanted to buy you for your birthday; the tides turn quick around here and alcoholic-nerd is out and religious-but-still-cool is in, so I suppose you never will but my legs still go so weak I have to grab onto something when I think I see you walking on a sidewalk in the distance, though I haven't really seen you in months. I've not yet found another who can make moments perfect like in movies.

* * * *

The lady asked for your name and breed and when I couldn't tell her because the water was coming out of my eyes so fast and was filling up my mouth whenever I opened it to speak, she took me to the room you would die in and asked me to write them, which I couldn't really do either because we had called you so many things, but I thought of you confused in the car and picked one of them, Mittens. When they stuck the needle in your skinny leg a dog was yelping in the next room but you were purring cause so many hands were on you to hold you down; I knew they didn't need to cause you'd think they were petting you and would lay there content all day. I was glad to see you go that way, thinking they all loved you. When you went limp my knees sorta gave and they asked me to sit down but I just picked you up and held you like a baby in a way that not five minutes before you would have been too dignified to allow. Back at our house I thought of calling some friends to help me dig you a grave under the snowball bush, except I remembered that they were not there when you woke me up every morning before school and like in those days, this should also just be you and me.

* * * *

My aunt had a way with a tomato plant. That was clear. Her kitchen counter was our summer Christmas tree, its ornaments bright red and green tomato-globes. When she died, I believed she took them with her. There is something about the first great loss in a family, the first great goodbye, that makes it all seem not so "worth it" anymore. The first loss shows you that all these happy times you've been having together, all these carefree days are not exactly what they seem and will, when yet another goes, haunt you with their completeness. You learn to look differently at birthday presents and at photographs and at weekends at the lake. All becomes memento. Sentimentality reigns. The gift that is given by someone now alive becomes a gift given by someone who will one day die. And you wonder, should you be taking these photos that you now know will someday haunt you with their lively tones? You switch the film to black and white as you wake up to the fact you've really known all your life. We won't always be here, all together like this, diving into waters and sitting in the sun on a blanket, biting into tomatoes like apples. There is something about this first domino drop that makes the collapse of the whole line more probable. Dad moved out. And we each became separated, by continents and oceans.

And faith in the story, the story I'd been told of why we're here and where we're going, that faith dimmed. And went out.

* * * *

Months after he's left, baby-all-grown will wake from a dream in which she held in her arms the long-gone lover. So real will be the sensation of the bogus embrace, she will feel again his slender shoulder blades colliding with her forearms. In sobs she will open her eyes and find that the hug has not brought him back to her- the other half of her pillow lies empty. At this moment she won't remember her lofty baby-goals of keeping loss away. Who remembers a baby's thoughts? But she will be engulfed in a feeling of failure, a feeling whose origin she cannot quite trace. For now, in the total darkness reserved for the newly alone, it is only clear that she, like all humanity, has failed to prevent loss by holding on tight.

* * * *

Essay

I was sure of only a few things when I planted my first garden. That my family needed my aunt's tomatoes, and that I needed a way under ground. I needed my own pathway or messenger to the land beneath where we had all come from and to where we were all going—to where some had already gone. I needed to know what was down there. Were brutes waiting to chain the dead, as some say? Did the lost go on to be lost forever? I thought of the roots of plants winding through the soil-underworld and wondered if they could be my discoverers. I'd had it with prayer and the promises assured to people who kneel by their beds. I went out to kneel in the dirt.

So I pulled the weeds and spread the compost and turned the soil and dug the rows and made holes. I planted the seeds and placed the plants and padded the soil around them. The rain fell, but not often enough, so I watered them by hand, too. The plants grew sudden as the sun rose each day higher, staying above us longer.

I discovered that these things rooted in the Earth, dependent on the swallowing soil I'd feared because of its seemingly wild givings and takings, these things were beautiful. The zucchini bloomed bright orange. The sunflowers couldn't not shine. And the tomatoes. The tomatoes came from her, I think. The roots made a corridor, a corridor of connection to her and all the rest of them the Earth is holding. Seeing that first summer garden alive gave me clues to the fate of the buried. They are there still, growing their tomatoes. But it was seeing garden in winter, dead and dying, that became my magic. The Earth didn't swallow the dead plants up into darkness. It cradled them. It cradled them as the clouds moved in and the ground froze solid. What some would call their slow decay, I learned to call their metamorphosis because in spring they rose new and beautiful. They rose and grew and recombined into flowers and more vegetables, and even into weeds. Not a leaf was wasted, not a twig disappeared, all was reformed. The Earth giveth but the Earth doesn't taketh away. The Earth keeps for a while. In its own spring, everything re-emerges.

It was in the chilly fall when I buried my cat and I wasn't planning on burying her deep, so I wrapped her in a sweater I'd made. I planted gaillardia over the grave. In the spring, these dead-brown seeds would wake up. Their roots would start to grow and spread. They'd seek the open spaces in the soil. And the closed. They'd crack and sever clods, wind around rocks, and seize each other. They'd be violent. Destructive as they got deeper. In a few years

they'll reach her. They'll pass through the fibers in the sweater. Then they'll pet her. Then they'll grab her. They'll latch on and wind around her and drain her.

When they bloom fiery red, it will be my sign that she is alive. The roots will be pumping her blood. Her heart will beat again. Mine will too.

I guess I was lucky when that lover left that it was summer and that my garden that year was a farm. Even the most juvenile romances leave vacancies big as caves when they end. Like with death you find yourself wondering how to reconnect with the rest of the world, wondering how to fill the cave or at least how to knock a hole in the other end so you can see out.

Each morning I woke with the piercing remembrance that he was gone. This time I didn't even think of prayer, but went to work in the field. The beauty of nature is in its ability to deny what is valued falsely. I went to the farm to learn all that did not really matter. Plants grow, and plants die. People come, and people go, for everything- its season. All is never lost. There is no need to depend on only one when the web of life is strong and will catch you if you let it.

* * * *

For some the memories of the lost do not last long. For some, all already has defined meaning and life is not made of discovery and dealing, for everything is answered. Could we be divided into three kinds? The first are the forgetful. They forget about their farewells, or don't become attached enough to lose. I meet them everyday. They are consoled by many things that leave them disconnected. Are they protecting themselves, surrounding themselves with the things that do not die?

The second are the dreamers. They dream-up or are told a story which provides reasons for all the loss. For them, everything is explained. There is a purpose and a plan made by a man in the sky who has not yet come to me. They are lucky to be so sure.

The third group remembers and can't find a story worth buying. This group is for the artists, and if I may, the gardeners. The gardeners and artists see the world in its living and dying and coming and going and in its confusion and admit they don't know how to take it. They'll never explain it away, but they'll express how it comes to them, how all this life comes to them like an angel in a cloud or a demon in the night, or usually both. They'll never forget

Essay

or anesthetize their life 'til they're numb with explanations, for they want to feel it, because feeling is life. And life is a gardener's art.

My garden is the hall of mirrors at a carnival whose emphasis is less on terror and more on illumination. Ideas and feelings I thought would be trapped, forever frantically bouncing off the insides of my skull, are out and reflected back at me at a hundred different angles. I bear them no more. The pumpkins grow entwined with the weeds in a way that cannot be predicted. The beans violently climb the corn and it seems they'll choke it. The daisies, so bright in June, will in September be only dry sticks poking from the ground. The chard will be buried in a hill of dirt by a passionate dog who's lost his bone. The anarchy is natural and I make no attempt to explain it or forget it. The garden is a medium for the anarchical reality of my mind. Vincent Van Gogh, who suffered from mental illness most of his life said, "I put my heart and my soul into my work, and have lost my mind in the process." Though I do not suffer as he did and most never will, who does not wish to give expression to their head and heart? Who does not wish to "lose" their mind in this way, just for a while? So, I will put my heart and soul into each garden, my work, with the hope of again showing my mind, showing my life and my love and my frantic misgivings to all the world, through a shiny eggplant or a head of cabbage savagely eaten by aphids, without timidity: my starry night of fifteen sunflowers.

I believe that no matter our group, from the forgetters to the artists, from the alcoholics to the apostles, we are all trying to loosen our grips on things we know to be temporary. This much we realize, that loss might be less painful if what was lost was released from our hands gently and not wrenched lose from trembling pale knuckles.

The gardener plants a seed knowing that this seed will never again be seen as a seed. Gently and calmly the seed is let go and turned into the earth. Though no gardener could tell you just where the seed is going, all assure you that out of the hole it leaves behind will come something greater. Be it watermelon or maple, it is seed-inspired. Water and shine on the hole left behind. Can not our greatest trees or inspirations also come from spaces left vacant from our deepest wounds? For me it's a first garden started years ago to cope with the sudden death of an aunt who also planted during her life. And this garden allowed me to practice the letting-to which will be the only constant in my life. Dig the hole, drop the seed, say goodbye, and wait with hope.

With this hope I'm free to leap. Leap into love and connection and leap into the web of human ecology and natural ecology. Leap like you are skipping rope, I say. Two friends stand on either end, holding the rope and directing it up and down in unison. They sing and laugh and the whole game seems fun. But they are missing a jumper. This you know but you also know that whoever jumps cannot jump forever and must sometime trip. But it is a game which cannot be enjoyed from the periphery. It can be painful to be apart of the living and dying. But it is like what a woman I met on the street said to me as we both shivered in the sharp iciness of that December morning. Well, she said with a grin, at least you know you're alive. And every time I feel the familiar ache of goodbye, there is no question that I am living. I guess that is warmth enough.

* * * *

I was far away teaching English to Byung-soon who is Korean the morning you were born, and when she asked about the new light in my eyes I told her all about you and tried to teach her your name, but she confused the P sound for an F sound and the R sound for an L sound and vice versa and the EA she said like the EA in the tea we were drinking and you came out "Feeler" instead of "Pearl." When I finally met you I held onto every minute cause everybody was already saying how fast you would grow and how these days would pass like lightning. When you were sleeping I lay next to you and I was going to sleep too but I couldn't take my eyes off you long enough to close 'em cause you were laying in the sun and you were the prettiest tiny thing I'd ever seen. And now you help me pick cherries and you're a bit bigger so you're prettiest little thing I've ever seen and you got your own style and you don't always give hugs and kisses when people ask for them, even real important people like grandparents. Its mostly cause you gotta see and do everything and don't always have time for such things. You're busy discovering this place, and I like that. And now you can even say your own name and when anyone asks you for it you say "A Pearl" and I'm not sure if someone taught you that or if you just know you're a pearl, but you are so you'd better not stand up in the bath when your mother tells you not to cause its slippery.

* * * *

Essay

I am a little scared for her. I am little scared for all the new ones. I'm scared for them because it's not just the pains of passing. It's uncertainty or it's disconnect or it's guilt or it's boredom, or it's that empty feeling there's no word for. It's modern life, the side-effects of capitalism, lack of community, or the failure of faith; everyone's got an opinion. I don't know what it is. I don't pretend to know exactly what it is that has us all searching for that missing something. As Thoreau put it, "I long ago lost a hound, a bay horse and a turtle-dove and am still on their trail."

I know Pearl will need nature. I know she'll need nature to help her understand this life because she's got that look in her eyes that says she's not gonna take nothing from no one. Even answers.

I know she'll need the sky to weep for her sufferings with her and trees who'll grow up with her. But I also know that the truth of this whole story is that the lover of nature ends up losing the most. I'm not talking now about the coming of winter and the freezing of the meadow, or the leaves falling off the trees and filling the forests with skeletons, or a seedling in the garden eaten by slugs. I'm talking now about parking lots and coffee plantations and the tennis courts I used to play on. I'm talking about those who don't give a shit about the truths of the trees or the comfort of garden in spring. If growing plants is religion, than modern life is the great trial of a gardener's faith and some days I find myself hiding in bed from the speeding cars on the speeding freeways and the endless rounds of the garbage truck that spin the tale of a civilization that has doomed itself. "Turning and turning in the widening gyre/ The falcon cannot hear the falconer./ Things fall apart; the center cannot hold."

And the hardest paradox of all is that it's not just those who don't give a shit, for the lovers of nature have a role in it too. From our morning cups to our cotton sheets at night—we're all screaming for blood. Aldo put it best: "We shall never achieve harmony with land, any more than we shall achieve absolute justice or liberty for people. In these higher aspirations, the important thing is not to achieve but to strive."

So how does this stuck generation strive, this generation raised on a bottle of fossil fuels, from which we were never weaned and without which most will starve? We are told tales of a babe born in a barn in the desert many years ago who became the great hope of another hopeless age. We are told he inherited gifts from three wise men who expected of him great things. It's just wise guys who greet the little ones in their nurseries today. With a flare that's

more circumstance than pomp, the first unwraps an axe. He has made up his mind about this gift and there is nothing yet to be done about that, because just by living, we're all dependent on the destruction of nature and those goodbyes we impose. But the following two, could they not be persuaded to give the child a few garden tools, perhaps a shovel and some seeds so that later in life, when the youth needs nature, when the youth begins finding the only comfort he has ever received coming from the life-giving soil, he can become, not only a taker, but a giver. He can enter the ecology. No matter his situation, in the city or the suburbs, wanting or wealthy, he has a few things going for him; he has the tools for a garden. He can grow his hope for a better world and in a small way, free himself from the existing one which insists on destruction.

Here I am standing on the right hand of god knows who and speaking the word of god knows what. I am a lover of the living, but am tired of losing them. I am a lover of nature, but also its unwilling destroyer. My mind is a torrent but I insist on feeling it all. I don't believe, but I want to resurrect the dead by growing them into something new. I am a gardener because it is my only way to live beautiful in all this.



“Thorough in the Garden” by Nate Whipple
Honorable Mention Graduate Art

THIRD PLACE UNDERGRADUATE ESSAY

Blood, Not Water *by Ellen Reimschuessel*

The chlorine hangs thick in the air, making the light dance as though the whole place were under water. The old ladies, in their skirted floral suits bounce and raise and lower their flabby arms in rhythm with the instructor. Everyone moves in slow motion. My mother swims laps at the other end of the pool, leaving me and the ladies to the shallows. I've been turning endless doughnuts, dunking myself, arching my back, letting my legs hang limp, and whipping my arms like windmills. The wonder of the water is that it's not my arms that spin, but me, rolling over and over in the aquamarine blur, 'til I am a blur, no more than a streak of color. My mother always tells me that I'm a natural. That I've been turning these somersaults since I was in her tummy. Used to kick like the devil and make her sea sick. That's why they had to pull

me out. I was too happy in the water, in her belly, to leave on my own. Upright again, I run my foot over the light on the bottom of the pool. It's smooth and warm. The floor around it glows white, then yellow, then turquoise. Next year I'll start kindergarten and the swim team. Learn strokes and race in meets. Win too, because I'm a natural, meant for the water.

* * * *

In an hour I will walk into my fifth grade classroom, hang my coat and backpack on the rack and sit at my desk. My classmates will talk to each other, the girls grouping together, complimenting each other on hair or clothes, the boys talking about last night's game, but no one will talk to me. I go days without talking. Hover behind the groups, translucent, wanting to interject, but their voices reach me in slow motion, like I'm listening to echoes and by the time I decipher them everyone has moved on; I'm left drifting somewhere in their wake.

Right now though, I am exhausted. I rest my forearms in the pool gutter and hold my body away from the wall. I spent everything I had this morning, made sure I beat everyone to the wall every lap, even on the cool down. I felt my energy, my thoughts, and my loneliness seep out into the cool water. Now the water has replaced me. If I hold perfectly still I can't feel anything but a slight swaying. To keep the snow out, a giant inflatable bubble, held up by a fan constantly pumping in air, covers the pool. The voices of my teammates on their way to showers bounce around the plastic dome until meaningless. They become a rhythmic murmur added to sound of the lapping water. All of it, the echoing hum, the dim light, the smell of chlorine, the cool water, fills the space my body should occupy; I am nothing. I disintegrated, washed away.

* * * *

It's the summer after sixth grade. The bubble is off the pool so rather than chlorine making the air bend, it's the heat. It rises in curved lines from the cement deck. It must be close to a hundred degrees. My mother has bought me private lessons to work on my breast stroke, so half an hour after practice I hang on the wall, one of the assistant coaches hovering over me, talking about "scooping all the ice cream out of the bowl," as if I haven't heard the analogy

Essay

for years, tens of times from her alone. I block out her voice, focus on the water murmuring below me, the other kids shrieking in the shallow end. I watch her arms pull wide, the muscles in her back flexing. She stands on one leg. Her other pulls up to the knee, kicks out in a duck-footed circle and snaps back together. While I don't listen, what does come across in her flexed muscles, the momentum of her whipping leg, is that I must pull harder, must give more, must be less, must obliterate myself in pursuit of speed, strength, perfection. The body is drag. With a body I'll never be perfect. But I imagine if I swim hard enough, ignore pain, push past the limits of my muscles, joints, tendons, I can swim right out of my body, leave it floating behind and shoot forward at infinite speed, like a beam of light. To be nothing is to be invincible.

My coach stops talking. I drop below, a few feet under the water, scrunch up against the wall, belly down, then push, stretch into a tight streamline, arms so hard against my ears it hurts. One pull down. You get one pull down and one kick in a breast streamline. As soon as I start to slow, I push my arms out in a circle, then slowly down to my side, moving my hands in and out, drawing a keyhole. I whip my legs open then snap them back together. Stretch my neck towards the surface. The sky inches away, I bring my palms together, as in prayer, slide them above my head, flex every muscle as I pull them apart, scrape the bowl. My shoulders hunch, forcing my head above the surface, and there it is: air. I take one draught before my legs snap together, my arms shoot forward and my head submerges. I stretch, willing myself to be nothing but a thin line, then pull hard and wide, snap my legs together and breathe. I pull, snap and stretch across the pool, trying to be nothing, to put everything into the stroke. I become a rhythm, only a rhythm: pull, snap, stretch. Pull, snap, stretch.

Years later, after I've made any return impossible, I will dream about this. My high school flooded, I surge through the deserted halls. Arms flexed, strong. I am nothing but a powerful rhythm. Pull, snap, stretch. Pull, snap stretch. When I wake, the dawn is gray. I shake like a drug addict or an arthritic woman. I spend the hour before my alarm goes off standing on one leg like my coach, prodding and kicking the air, trying to get the rhythm back, but on land I stumble.

I gouge in with the corner of the razor blade and pull, the flesh parting as though unzipping. The resulting furrow slowly fills with blood, a few drops bubbling up from the floor, then dripping from the walls until the void fills, domes up like the roof of a palace, only to burst and run down my leg. In this moment I am so real, so solidly flesh and bones and blood. I don't remember the first time I split open my skin and noticed that the blood flow surged with each heartbeat. I can't remember the first time because every time feels like the same moment; each cut merges into the last because with each cut I am connecting to same thing, to solidness, physicality. I live the rest of my life in a bubble, a dream world of murmurs, but when I'm cutting I am real. I connect to the purely tangible, the core of mortality.

I allow myself only one hour a night because I'm scared of the scars piling up. I'm scared if I'm not careful I'll have too many to hide. I took one season off because I was starting junior high and wanted afternoons to make friends. I hoped if I wasn't always underwater I would learn to talk to people. Stop being translucent. Now I'm visible. I'm solid. Clunky, bumbling, awkward. An oily blob of fat and joints. I'm still lonely but I can't escape it. I can't go back. In a swimsuit everyone would see my scars. Instead I spend nights sitting on my bed watching red stains grow on Kleenex, or sitting in shower following the blood as it swirls like smoke down the drain. I am no longer an artificial rhythm, a spent energy, a blur. I am a heartbeat. I am blood.

Sitting on the couch, between frantic gulps of water, I tell my roommate I ran home before my second class because I spent the first one dreaming of slicing through the tendons in the back of my hand. I tell him I could feel it, feel the pressure of the blade, the stinging of my skin splitting, hot blood pouring out and the tendons snapping. And I wanted it. My right hand clenched around an invisible knife, my left spread flat, shaking, ready to be carved. I say that even though I've quit and learned "new coping mechanisms," sometimes these images, these urges come without warning, come with physical force that rattles me, even wakes me up in the night. They are hardly phantoms, I tell him, instead, somehow more solid than this couch we're sitting on, than my own bones. I say it's about self-destruction. I think some deep part of me needs to destroy myself, that it's the same part of me that puts off assignments to the

Essay

last minute, forgets about midterms, refuses to go to the doctor when I'm sick. He laughs. "Why don't you do it? You still think you're self-destructive, go get a knife out of the kitchen right now. I'll drive you to the hospital. Hell, forget about the back of your hand, slice something serious. If you really want to destroy yourself, you could do a lot worse than some minor cuts. I mean, come on, you could cut off a limb, a finger at least, something that won't heal itself." He shakes his head. "You never actually wanted to destroy yourself."

I can't look at him. I take another swallow from my almost empty water glass. This is my third glass in fifteen minutes. My nervous habit. When I'm writing a paper, studying for a test or worried everyone hates me, when my hands shake like something is trying to crack its way out, my bones itch inside my skin, when every part of my needs out of me, I pace around my kitchen chugging mason jars of water, as if I could somehow wash my insides away or at least dilute their intensity. My friends have all puked from drinking too much alcohol, but I never have, only from too much water. I put my glass down. My roommate's right: the cutting wasn't about self-destruction. This story isn't what I thought it was. Then what were all those nights about? Why is my right thigh rippled with raised scars thick enough to feel through jeans? Why does my skin look like the bark of a birch tree, pocked with rhythmic scars, so layered even now I don't dare put on a suit? Why would I keep myself from the place I felt strong, the place I felt safe?

* * * *

Years ago, I unzipped my own skin. Poured into it. The torn flesh an entry wound, the scars like stitches ensuring I'll never wash my way out.



"Seriously" by Megan Murray
Honorable Mention Undergraduate Art

Poetry

FIRST PLACE GRADUATE POETRY

Intangible

by Simone Suddreth

You're inside of me,
pulsing through every cell.
And I know you said goodbye,
but I can't forget the moon;
how it controls my fate
and pushes me through
the umbilical cord,
back into the center
of universal consciousness.
Won't you just tell me
you feel me in the invisible wind,
the whisper of a voice
I know you can hear,
like the ache of your favorite chord.
But if not, look to the stars,
each tiny sun a splinter
of soul broken
when we leave this earth –
buried in our own minds.

Misguided Graduation

By Simone Suddreth

Pacing a hallway of University marble, I mutter amongst
faded paintings of men
who wear thick glasses and smirks.

I say, "This cruise through courses is no gallant with
intellect. Identifying one's – "calling" as you label it, should
be made after a girl's nubility, when a woman's mind vibrates
with urgent demand for more!"

Although their lips stay pressed in awful grins, their laughter
echoes in my head,

"Girl. You want too much."

Hysterical now, I feel oil paint build beneath my nails,
because I know

I am confusing their words for my own.

The West *Simone Suddreth*

My father cradles The West in his hands.
See, he demands, see how it's changed?
His damp eyes plead with me.
I look away – afraid to witness his tears.
I think of the Flood; wonder if I should round up
two of our best horses content in the field.
My father's body shivers.
Are you cold, I ask.
He wipes his brow, careful not to let The West
shift between his fingers.
No baby, I'm just tired.
So I take The West and soothe it inside my palms,
summon strength from gods to let it live.
But I see The West is dying, shriveling,
suffocating in the flesh of our hands.



“Child’s Pose” by Michelle Larson
Honorable Mention Undergraduate Art

SECOND PLACE GRADUATE POETRY

Through Hell *by Bonnie Moore*

An out-of-body experience covered
the road with fires still smoldering. He raised his hands in the
dance of death
rough and narrow on the pavement, packed into the canyon in
horrifying detail,
wanting to give away everything they had.
Me, running out into traffic to see
the commotion,
cringing—he’s got something bigger than acting brave.

Sharing the story, the gloomy
assessment and words that I would never say in church
a bishop hiding,
backward in the darkness, but I must reveal them.

Though someone snapped, I got my free papers,
fireworks in the air.
I look them straight in the eye in the
bye and bye,
eking out my original route
jagged on a steep hill.
Fires still smoldering.
Period.

Poetry

conversation

by Bonnie Moore

i grew up praying for rain
on a dry, dirt-farm in the middle of Utah;
kneeling next to my parents and my five young brothers and sisters,
sore-kneed
on hard linoleum around metal kitchen table legs,
sometimes peeking through squinting eyes
while one of us prayed.
for years, though, the sounds of rain were
silent as a farmer's yearning, a family's dream.

falling on the red powder soil,
raindrops
plopped, puffs of red-dust bomb explosives attacked earth and
sage, scenting the desert cleanly with tentative reprieve.

somehow we survived the hard-scrabble
eighteen-hour days, grubbing a living from drought-lined
soil, from never-ending baking days.

now
rain whispers down my window, shushing
fleeting words through wishing ears,
hushed secrets i only feel;
rain taps happy on my walls,
telegrams i can't translate;
dances, glass-slippered toes on the wind,
clear choreography, my granddaughters for partners;
rain puddles against hot pavement, steams,
blurring views, tasting translucent, metallic on my tongue.

rain speaks the language.

i remember praying in silence for the sound of rain.

The Modern Polygamy

by Bonnie Moore

Amy Teresa was wife number two
Colonia Diaz days dawning
commanding zealous dedication.
Clothing and feeding all nine,
mothering most of the time
and fathering faithfully, too,
wading steadily through deep dark waters
in her desert-dry
dark-skinned home.

I see her there, in her 90s, neatly hung
on my comfortable living room wall
wishing words would cross death's veil
in vain,
wishing she could speak.

Polygamy ended, they say, in 1890.
But sometimes, over a century later,
with my Bishop-husband sequestered, still,
at his "office, sweet office"
until long past time for sleep

night after night after
night

It feels like another woman
(face after face)
another wife, welding a wedge between us.

The principle she practiced, though,
my "Grandma-Great," was permanent,
and single-mother-like
she carried on, faithfully welding her family

Poetry

together with sure-footed tread
alone
in her own self-styled fashion.

This out-of-balance beam I'm on
Keeps changing angles---
being first wife now and then
and last wife
the rest of the time ---
constantly changing under my
grasping, slipping, sliding feet.



“Reflecting” by Megan Murray
Honorable Mention Undergraduate Art

THIRD PLACE GRADUATE POETRY

Witness

by Darren Edwards

You can hear her
screaming from the other side
of the room
wide eyed
tight toothed
close lipped
silent.
She's got this one
bulbous knuckle like all
the pent up screams
have pitched camp in the joint
at the middle of her middle finger.

Her three-year-old is pulling at the hem
of her skirt and crying
Mommy, momma, mom, mom, mommy
and I can see it in the way
her cheek rises at the corner
like it's trying to pinch
a single sheet of paper to her eye—
She might lose it.
But the trick is
the paper being pinched
between her cheek and
that eye is scrawled
all over with marching orders
for those rising screams
saying
*I don't have time to loose it today
I don't have time to peel back the eyes
and shock the minds of the people*

Poetry

*in this waiting room with the thoughts
screaming through mine.
I don't have the energy to feed
this world with my anger.*

And her three-year-old is crying
Mommy, momma, mom, mom, mommy

And the nurse is fumbling through files,
And the overgrown mustache sitting next to her
is eyeing the line of her denims as they round her hip
And the middle aged gaggle across the room is whispering,
not so quietly, about her inattention to the child
And I'm fiddling with my sun glasses
like a scientist watching the slow traverse of stars.

And her three-year-old is crying
Mommy, momma, mom, mom, mommy.

So, when she stands
sudden
unannounced
three-year-old attached at the hem
everything stops.

I can feel my shoulders tighten
as she lifts the child
onto her hip,
takes three brisk strides
to the nurse,
child now pulling at her blouse
her mouth opens,
 and the gaggle is holding their breath
 and their whispers
even the mustache has traded his leer
for a look of quizzical concern,

and I'm waiting for a supernova
some cosmic collision
another big bang
when she asks
in the most polite tone
how much longer might the wait be
and the nurse smiles
gesturing with the space between two fingers
just a little while longer.

Lowering the child to the floor
she retakes her seat,
where she can feel
the whispers
and the eyes
and she goes back to rubbing her thumb
in circles over that knuckle,
circle after
circle
to the rhythm of all those screams
marching on.

The Night Before I Lost My Retainer *by Darren Edwards*

The sun sits heavy,
pulling the lapping ocean
up against its skin.

My dad is lighting the barbeque
dirty fingers pinching a fast burning match
below black bars caked in the residue of other peoples
evenings, other fathers and sons, the burnt crusted food
stuffs of late Alaskan nights at Fisherman's Warf.

Poetry

In a moment we will grill the halibut we caught just hours before
on the boat that tried to teach my head a new rhythm.
The boat, it spoke to me, told me what the ocean had told it,
life moves forward and down, then back and up, then forward and down,
and back and up.

This lesson rolled around inside my head, but I couldn't grasp the
concept,
couldn't picture a world revolving in cyclical motion,
and so I spit its words back at the sea in a vibrant mix of pink and
orange, my gift
to the fish we wouldn't catch.

Back on shore I watch my dad working the flame
that now outshines the sun as though
the rotation of the world shifted
and the galaxies now rotated around us
around this boy and his father
around his weeks worth of beard growth and my weeks worth of trying
around a modest step in the transition to manhood.

Just like Ptolemy and Aristotle thought

we are the center of the universe
or at least we were then,
sitting on a park bench with peeling paint
eating flesh carved from the softest most honest part of our world.

I say honest
because what it told me was true
life does move forward and down, then back and up
and the cycle repeats
and most days I can't take it
can't take the drop and rise of life
so I put my head between my knees
take deep breaths

and hold fast to whatever is near
hoping someone is near
and I find an arm
and I feel the arm
is it his?
is it yours?
it doesn't matter
because they all have the same beat
the same rhythm beneath the skin
blood pulsing forward
vessels pushing one way—onward
in veins that cut narrative lines through
the forward and down and back and up.

From Outside the Settlement

by Darren Edwards

but here Death is already chalking the doors with crosses,
and calling the ravens, and the ravens are flying in.

— Anna Akhmatova, translated by Stanley Kunitz

It's hard to balance
the pads of your feet on a railing.
He hadn't thought of that
until just now,
with the sound of water
skirting below him.
He'd thought of his people,
of belonging,
the way smiles are like sign posts
marking the miles home
but the mileage always reads
the same,
marked in zeros
as big as their eyes.

Poetry

And he'd thought of the men
up north that would soon
be circling in preparation
like ravens.

Just south, his people
would be setting out dinner now.
He knew there would be
potatoes, carrots
and venison.
He knew the children
would play games
beneath the table,
little fingers tracing pictures
they found in the patterns of the floor.
There would be words of prayer
and the low vibrating hum of hymns.
He knew this.
He knew that after the evening sermon,
after parents let go of children
to hold onto each other
beneath blankets
stitched in a history
of always hoping
the future might contain
the light their god had promised them—
instead of clouds and ash,
tar, torn flesh
and shallow hurried graves—
there would be dreams
of fields and sky
and harvests without retreat.

He also knew he'd grown too weary,
knew he held no more space inside himself
for prophecies or light,
ghosts or grace,
gods or the doleful smiles
of this people.
He knew
behind the clouds
there was no light,
just the flap and crack
of wings
and the ravens flying in.



"Take a Bite II" by Tessa Ryser
Honorable Mention Undergraduate Art

Poetry

FIRST PLACE UNDERGRADUATE POETRY

When I First Sit Down in Dr. Conover's American History Class

by Brian Cook

Carvings in a desk
Sink into the wood— pictures of
Small stick men, the words
“Burn in hell” etched below.

Maybe the same kid
Came back each day, scratched
Out another image,
To keep proving he existed,

Just like the soldier
Who scrawled “Kilroy was here”
On a ship hull, sparking
Others to carve and recarve

The phrase on walls in German
Cities, into trees
On the Japanese shore
To prove, prove

There is no line
Where carving ends
And the carver
Begins. Once I saw etches

In black desert varnish
Along the edge of mountains.
I had a rope tied
Around my waste to keep

From falling. I saw
The carving of a pregnant
Goat, a large one with
A smaller one inside

Its stomach. I imagined
A nervous boy, thousands of years ago,
Sitting on the edge of the cliff
With a flint knife in one hand,

Carving pictures into the stone wall.
Once I looked around, carefully, before
Tracing my own initials in wet cement.
Years later, they're still visible.

Not Everybody Can Walk Across a Rainbow

by Brian Cook

But if you do,
The first step is uncertain, shaky,
Like standing on Jello.
If you grab the hand holds
In the blue and green stripes,
Each step gets easier until
You're at the top
Looking over what looks like
Doll houses surrounded by pine trees
In the green, green valley.

You're mother might see you sitting
On the purple edge
And get sad
Or worried
Or angry.
She'll tell you that you'll fall and break

Poetry

Your neck, or that she'll
Disown you, or that she'll
Take you to live in a cave
Where there are no rainbows,

But you're there
At the intersection of sunshine and rain
With a puffy white cloud in your palm,
The stormy ones already tipping
Their hats to you.

Chip off a piece to take along,
Your little rainbow geode.
And don't wait too long--
The climb down is steep
With sharp rocks at the bottom,
And you just might slip
If you're not careful enough.

It's scary, I know.
That's why
Not everybody can walk across a rainbow.

I suppose most stay at the top
And go to the place
Where rainbows go
When they disappear.

Sighting – February 2005

by Brian Cook

At 7:13 in the morning,
I sit on the Great Salt Lake's shore
With binoculars in my shaky
Hands unused to the early morning's

Chill. I wait, hearing
Seagulls' caws, seeing the 'v's arched
Over the horizon -- flapping silhouettes.
He appears, squawking

On the western bank, twisting
His neck to snatch something off
The shore. A Chilean Flamingo
(The great Pink Floyd as they

Call him), escaped from Hogle Zoo.
The keepers forgot to clip his wings.
"Not many pink things live
In Utah,"

I mutter, puffing white
Into the air. "How could this creature,
So accustomed to hot tropics,
Survive in this desolation?"

He lifts off, as if in response, cruising
The sky like
A painted javelin spearing
Lightning-blue sky, or

Poetry

The feathered arrow I never shot.
Year ago, at scout camp,
Others flocked to the
Archery range while I roosted in

The nature teepee, hearing lectures
About forestry, mammals, wildlife. I
Discovered that the term
“Exotic” extends to more than bright,

Colorful, deadly species, but to the foreign,
To what doesn't belong. In new places,
Some exotic species explode in numbers, others
Survive. But most wither and die.

That solitary avian, strange
Pink intruder, should have starved,
Or fainted from the cold,
Or contracted some disease,

Yet he glides, his bright feathers
Reflecting in the jade lake
That swallows his image, giving birth
To an exact replica, a twin

Flying inverted, parallel.
Floyd might not see it, but the lake
(Salt water, insect-infested shore and all)
Makes one, two. Two, four. Until

Solitude becomes a type of togetherness,
Comforting itself, giving place
For the lone exotic to spread
His wings and cruise the sky.

SECOND PLACE UNDERGRADUATE POETRY

Independence

by Kathryn Andersen

It's been years since you lifted me
from nightmares we left tangled in my bed sheets,
picked me up from rough spots
where I scraped my knees,
cradled me,
made me brave again in your arms.

But I never needed you
to hold me with my head against your shoulder,
kiss away uncertainty,

Like I did the night I stood alone
in that half-empty parking lot,
watching your car roll out of sight,
half-sick with fear
of my own dishes and silverware,
a new backpack, waiting on the bed.

Poetry

“Get Well Soon” Card

by Kathryn Andersen

I stand on jagged streaks of grass,
beside a scribbled ball of green tree with a swing,
smiling because I like orange sun, blue sky,
and because I don't mind being thin
as the black line protruding from a head
with hardly any hair.

A nurse finds me sitting up in bed, staring
at the crayon masterpiece sent by one of my kindergarteners,
crying at the cruel innocence
of his realism.



“Crumbled Cream” by Alexis Tate
Honorable Mention Undergraduate Art

Otekah Remember

by Kathryn Andersen

Summer and autumn submit to the dull white
of winter. So I go to school.

Every day, I speak English.
At night I dream of loss.
I dream I've lost myself
in a classroom where white
chalk-dust covers everything,
hides our faces.

When I wake, cold in pre-dawn darkness,
I speak my family members' names and my name,
mostly my name,
speak our names in Navajo,
evoke memories of home.

Otekah. Remember the morning you left?
A fistful of seeds escaped
your palm, soared across September sky.
Otekah. You saw the soil embrace them,
know where your wildflowers will grow.
Otekah. They will be free.
Otekah. They will be strong and bright.
Otekah. You will see them one day—
bobbing in warm wind, like different-colored suns.

THIRD PLACE UNDERGRADUATE POETRY

Sermon on the Mount

by Daniel Tate

We breathe in the mountain,
away from the car, exhaling
aspen and warm yellow ochre.
Your cheeks rain like berries
in afternoon fog.

We rest in a symphony
often called
silence:
rhythmic spearmint,
sultry wet grass,
cold sudden mud,
and a fair virgin air
in wild flirtation,
who stirs late at night
whispering secrets to stars.

This muddy ground
is the ground we have lost,
beneath expectation,
and faith,
and upheavals.

Faith consoles dying
but here we're alive.
Look: in that tree
sit Gautama and God.

Here we peel open
like big golden onions
and find living
skin beneath skin beneath skin
and we can't find a wound
that could ask
for such tears.

Every So Often

by Daniel Tate

Every so often a package arrives
from a distant unease or a forgotten fate
and heavily speaks
with my unguarded door,
cracking the frozen cement underneath.

Inside I hear sobs from a guilt-ridden woman
and a pale homeless man
clutching dead walls,
two hemorrhaging lovers
huddled in red.

But it holds only stones,
my name stained on each,
each staining a stone on my loosening name.
Like the peach,
whose stone lives alone in the end.

Poetry

For An Old Teacher

by Daniel Tate

Our morning finds root
on the wild coast of Maine,
where silence breathes, grateful,
in rich home and season,
safe and sublime, under
thundering white splashes
of Prussian blue waves.

We bloom into lawn chairs
and feast on the sun, and
the breeze feasts on us, and
we feast on spiced words,
until all that remains
unaddressed is the weather.

And soon we are buried
in cold living rain, a falling
parade of sparkling glass,
that softens to find
us, our unafraid life,
a blue rush of freshness.

We escape to find evening
and a red grape wine
couch, where I lie while
you go to your temple of
wood, for confession and
prayer, invoking Schubert,
rather than grace.

Your music flows into
forgotten terrain,
a cold distant grief
I have always contained.
How can I know all the
curtains of ice you have
softened for harvest in
this dark frozen landscape,
this strange lonesome forest
I've always called self; I
can't hold my eyes on such
ease of cold weight.

But you've wandered
this country of death
for so long, known its horizons,
hidden and clear, that you now
walk the black porous ground
with repose (though all the time
darkening, thickening, closing)
and love the dark land
in its season of night.

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