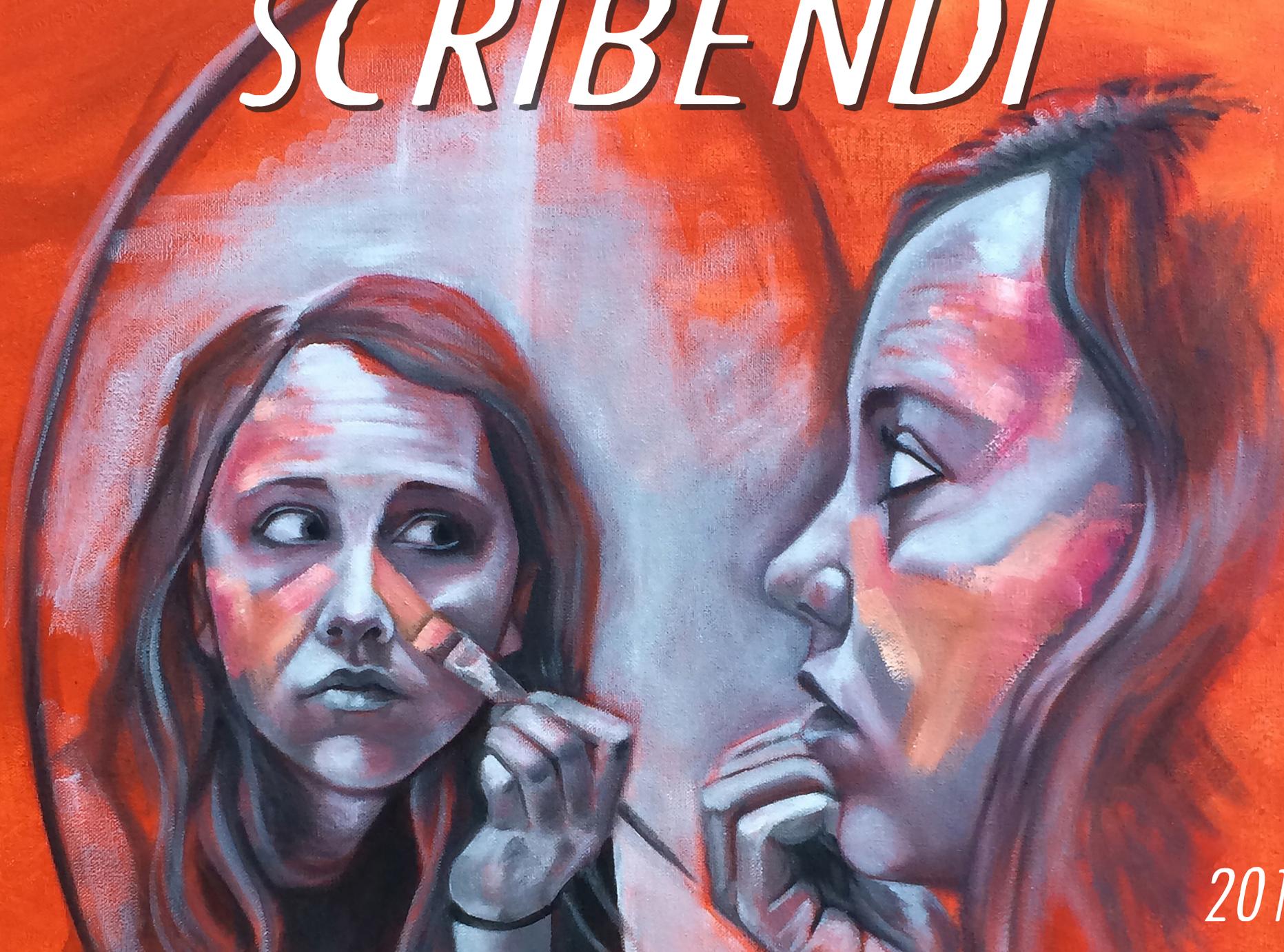


USU CREATIVE WRITING CONTEST

SCRIBENDI



2015

Utah State University

2015

SCRIBENDI

Creative Writing Contest



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THANK YOU

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Annie Neilson, Kuniko Poole, Lori Hyde, and Carol Hatch.

And as contest director, I want to thank our two wonderful interns, Shay Larsen and Emily Holmes, for their hard work and enthusiasm while promoting, editing, and designing the magazine.
— Ben Gunsberg

The online version of the magazine is available on the
USU English Department website, www.scribendi.usu.edu.

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Cover Image:
Self Creation
by Grace Ryser
Undergraduate Art, First Place
Image appears in its unaltered
form on page 39

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Valued Employee, Kendall Pack
The Empty House, Matt Halaczkiewicz

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Constellations of a Pescador's Wife, Mitch Hawk

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Bloodhounds

Aiya Sakr

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FICTION

GRADUATE

1st

Anastasia Lugo Mendez

Honeymoon

I spent every summer of my childhood out at the lake behind my grandparents' old home. My grandfather and I would spend each day in oversized hats, fishing rods resting over the edge of his small, wooden boat, waiting for something to bite. The boat on the placid surface was almost like the bowl of a wooden serving spoon. A serving spoon nestled into a big bowl of liquid jello. That's what I told him, and that's what he told my grandmother in turn.

A week later, when I turned nine, instead of a birthday cake I got a bowl of jello with a wooden spoon in it. Everyone ate around the spoon until there was so little jello that the spoon was about to flop over sideways in the bowl. So I pulled it out. For a moment the jello stood upright, the imprint of the spoon like the imprint someone might leave behind on a sofa cushion. Then the jello tipped over, and it got spooned up and served out to anyone who wanted it. I kept the last bite until I was sure everyone was done. I had the first bite, and the last. I spent that evening sticking my tongue out at the mirror. A cherry red taunt. There and then gone again.

I had my first kiss on the boat, the summer I was fourteen. I snuck out one night and met Maddy Clemens and paddled it out to the middle of the lake on a moonlit night. She told me I looked dreamy, and in the shadows I was nervous I was going to miss her

mouth and do something sloppy: kiss only the corner of her mouth, or her nose, or her chin. I didn't want to slobber on her chin. But the kissing was fine.

Two years later I took her sister Emma Clemens out on the boat on the same kind of night, and she dropped a handful of curling maple leaves on the water. We watched as some sunk and others spun slowly out away from the boat. I took off her shirt that night, and she unbuckled my pants. We didn't have sex. The boat rocked too much and she shrieked that we were going to drown. She stood up so quickly that she almost fell out and drowned anyway. I pulled her back down before she did and we sat there, half undressed, as the boat slowed its tottering.

I lost my virginity the weekend after that, on a Sunday morning when our families were both at church and Emma and I had been left behind, taken for granted as the sleeping slovenly teenagers that we both were. I had wanted it to be on the boat but in the end it was quick and sweet and blinding, like I had walked into a field of new snow on a cloudless day the second I moved inside her. I forgot about the boat, and I forgot about the threadbare paisley sheets wrapped around us. I could only think of how her hair smelled like honey. When I told her that, she almost seemed upset. Another week later and she was back in Poughkeepsie. The Clemens' stopped coming to the lake after that.

Two years after that my grandparents died. First my grandfather, quickly and quietly in the night. Two days later, my grandmother quickly and quietly followed.

When I got up the nerve to propose to Megan we were on the boat. She brought along a picnic in a wicker basket, checkered red

tablecloth and all, because she grew up in the city and she wanted the picnic to be exactly right. I put the ring on her finger and she cried, and for a second I had that feeling I used to get with when I was with my grandfather at the end of a long, hot day on the boat when I walked home with our catch in a bucket, swinging the weight lightly, waiting to fling open the screen door with its telltale creak and shout for my grandmother, saying, "We got dinner!"

I wanted to have that moment with Megan. I kissed her and we held each other as the boat rocked, so slightly, and when we went back to the house, now empty and forgotten except for my summer visits, I took her to the bed I always stayed in, the bed that I slept in with Emma Clemens, and even though it had been nearly ten years since that day and I'd been with several other women, lying in that bed with Megan somehow felt just like being with Emma. Blinding. But Megan smelled like perfume, not really floral or sweet or musky, I could never say what it really was, other than decidedly her perfume, her scent.

It was the boat that gave us the idea for the honeymoon cruise. The Ocean of Paradise traveled the Gulf of Mexico, and

we boarded in Florida. Megan was sick for the first day or so but then she got used to being on the ship, and we were so busy that I forgot about it at all. Our cabin was huge and we kept it stocked with chocolate covered strawberries and champagne and spent a good part of every day walking around in silk robes or nothing, lounging on the king-sized bed and watching bubbles

The doctor calls it Mal de Debarquement Syndrome. MDDS. It sounds like it should be one of the outlets on a television.

of sky through the portholes. When we bothered leaving we spent a day at the spa and at the casino, where we won enough money to pay for another trip to the spa. The on-board entertainment was tacky but they played the songs we used to listen to in high school and we danced like we were ten years younger. We spent time poolside, and she bet me that we could kiss on every deck, in every hallway. We narrowly avoided being asked to leave at the next port when we were found in a maintenance elevator. They caught us too soon for our clothes to come off, though of course the crew knew what we were up to. We were sent back to our cabin with only the most tired and feeble gesture of disgust on the part of the crewman who found us. We giggled into our robes that we were neither the first nor last couple that would be found sneaking off to find dark and unpopulated corners on the cruise ship. While we had our own corner, we made use

of it. When we docked, we traveled the islands and beaches for other corners, getting into trouble and always managing to board again before it became too serious.

Two weeks seemed to last a lifetime, though when we got back to Florida it seemed that we had only just left. Megan felt sick again on the ground, and I said it would pass and that I felt kind of fuzzy too. We flew back north to my dream house. My grandparents had left me their home and Megan had agreed that we should live in that cove of green and quiet. She had found a job teaching at the elementary school and I found a position as an accountant for a small company in town. Wedding gifts waited for us, stacked inside the front door.

I carried Megan across the threshold, which she said made her dizzy, so I put her down and kissed her forehead to say I was sorry. We tried to unwrap presents, but before long Megan said she was tired and that she'd be going to bed. I followed her up but what greeted me and our newly purchased marriage bed was only sleep.

I had the weekend to adjust before going back to work, and by the time I woke up and went downstairs Megan had left the bed. I called for her throughout the house but she didn't answer. I went outside and saw that her car was still in the garage. The boat was missing. For a moment my heart pushed against my ribs and throbbed there, but then I saw her, wide brimmed hat and a stripe of zinc oxide on her nose. She and the boat



Graduate Art, First Place
America Through a P.O. Box
Katharina Marchant

rippled with the waves. I waved, and she waved back, and I had this big, stupid thought: “Wife. She’s my wife.”

Megan spent most of the weekend on the water. On Sunday, I went out with her, and we floated in silence, our bare legs touching as we lay back in the boat. I read the paper. She worked on her lesson plans. It felt better than being in an office. Megan sat there with a hint of a smile, and I thought she felt the same.

That week at work I was thrown into the deep end, a sink-or-swim scenario at work. I succeeded, of course, but it meant more work at home. I wanted to keep the honeymoon feeling. But Megan was also busy with work, and she slept more than I had ever known her to. She still felt unsettled.

On Thursday I left the house early for work. At noon I got a call from the elementary school. Megan never made it in and she wasn’t answering her cell phone. No one picked up at the landline either. When I pulled into the driveway at the house I was still re-dialing robotically. I could hear the phone ringing inside the house. Megan’s car was in the garage. I ran through all the rooms calling her name again, until I remembered Saturday. I headed out the back door and saw her. She was lying in the boat. I could not tell if she was awake, or hurt, and the sun was bright and she was out there without a hat, without that bright splotch of zinc on her nose.

I took off my shoes and jacket and dropped my cell phone and car keys on the pile of rumpled black cloth, then ran into the lake and waded out as fast as I could. I lost my balance and tipped over into the water, then swam out to her. I didn’t think I could call to her. I was afraid she wouldn’t answer. When I got closer my arms splashed water into the boat as I pulled myself nearer, and she opened her eyes.

“Hey,” she said. I held on to the side of the boat and churned water with my legs to stay afloat and look at her. The reflections on the humors of her eyes shifted and changed like ripples in a pool.

The doctor calls it Mal de Debarquement Syndrome. MDDS. It sounds like it should be one of the outlets on a television. When he

says the first two words it just sounds like “Mal Day,” and my pidgin Spanish makes me think, over and over, “Bad day, bad day, bad day.” Megan just nods, and on the drive home she asks me to wander. I drive for hours, until just after dark, when I go home and she goes to sleep without eating anything.

I unload the groceries. Ginger ale and wintermint gum, the doctor says, can help with an upset stomach. After that, there is only time, and if she wants them, the soporific meclizine pills. Megan might feel as though the world is made of tumbling blocks collapsing under her feet for the rest of her life. She says that when she can fall asleep it stops. Her dreams are normal. When she drives it stops. After the diagnosis she leaves her job and I never know where I’ll find her. Oftentimes her car is gone from the driveway, and I know she is weaving through the suburbs nearby, though once or twice she’s gotten on the interstate to drive uninterrupted and on solid ground. A few times I’ve found her spinning in the living room. Sometimes all-out spinning, like a windmill or a toddler just discovering how heavy their arms can be, and sometimes just swiveling on a barstool, a hypnotic back-and-forth. I just want to hold her, but I can’t hold her still, and when I tried dancing she said, very quietly, “You’re very sweet, but I just don’t feel well.”

She becomes so much like a child. I want to build her a swing set and a merry-go-round and ferris wheel. I put up a hammock in one of the spare bedrooms, and I fall asleep to the sound of her creaking from side to side in it. I miss her lying next to me in the bed, but I am in a world where the ground lies flat, and in hers everything that shouldn’t move is secretly an ocean being pulled by a thousand moons into a thousand tides.

Most of the time I find her in the boat. She floats out to the middle of the lake and crests and troughs like any other wave. Some days I can’t see her because she is curled up in the bottom of the boat, where she rocks to and fro. Other days she sits there, stock still while waves and ripples unfurl like vines that push and pull her every which way. She can only keep still when she is moving.

Today, she is reclining toward the prow, her right arm hanging slightly over the side, her fingers curling in toward her palm. It

looks like a movement from memory rather than intent, the same loose grasp on the intangible that she seems to hold when she sleeps. I take a seat on the weather-worn bench behind the house and watch. I wait for her to come back to shore.

2nd

Kendall Pack
Valued Employee

Valued Employee,

We regret to inform you that your position at our company has been terminated, effective **January 17th, 2014**. Your service to the company has been invaluable and, were circumstances different, we would keep you on as an employee. However, due to the economic crisis and/or changing business practices, your position has been deemed an unnecessary cost and/or obsolete in today’s business environment. We feel confident that, with the skills we have taught you, you will be highly employable. Please visit our **Exiting Employees Office** for information regarding future employment opportunities.

As an exiting employee, it is vital that you fulfill the **Exit Checklist** provided in this email. Please print a copy and complete each task as it is outlined on the checklist. Bring the checklist to the **Human Resources Department** for processing. Failure to do so may result in a delay of severance pay and/or recommendation to other employers.

We wish you the best in your future employment opportunities.

Sincerely,

The Company

You did not wake up this morning hoping to find out which 80's metal band suits you best, but by 9 a.m., and with the help of an online quiz, you know it's Warrant and you spend the next hour listening to their discography but always coming back to "Cherry Pie" in the hopes that "I scream, you scream, we all scream for her" might reveal some subcutaneous understanding of your own predicament in life.

It's a week since you left work for the last time, the sleek front doors whooshing shut behind you and the nagging feeling that you left something incriminating behind, locked away in a forgotten file drawer or lodged between your cubicle wall and the back of your desk pounding away at your mind.

But you can't think like that.

EXIT CHECKLIST

To Do Prior to Termination Date

Remove any and all personal items from your workstation. The only remaining items should be as follows:

- 1 computer tower
- 1 monitor
- 1 keyboard¹
- 1 mouse
- 1 company-issued mousepad with the company logo²
- 1 brown chair³

¹ Use Company-approved dusting spray (available for purchase in the **IT Office**) to clean keyboard or a **Deduction** will be made.

² **Do Not** take the mousepad with you as this will result in a **Deduction** and possible legal action.

³ **Deduction:** coffee stain from your first day, when you spilled coffee while trying to answer your phone, resulting in offensive burns on your hand.

- 1 desk with 2 drawers⁴

Any damage to company items will result in deductions from your severance package.

Sunlight sprays through the slits in the shades and fills the room with a thick glow. Summer's here and you think that maybe you can get your old job back at the pool, just for a few months.

But you wonder if that might be a downgrade, going from being team lead to being a subordinate lifeguard, getting minimum wage and working for some teenage head guard as one of four interchangeable placeholders during the morning swim and water aerobics, watching old women go under in the deep end and counting how long they take to come up for air, and you think that if just one of those women could be rich, could be the daughter of some wealthy benefactor who some building is named after, and she could drown for just a minute and let you save her, you might parlay that into a large check.

Attend 1 course on resume-building (**\$52**) in the **Exiting Employees Office**. All courses must be arranged with the office at least **24** hours in advance. When preparing to arrange your meeting, **do not** slam your fist on your desk.⁵ **Do not** go to the break room and complain to your fellow employees. The following is a dramatized script that details how **not** to act in conversation with co-workers:

⁴ **Deduction:** the lower of the two drawers is broken from when your wife called your work phone (improper conduct) about the divorce papers.

⁵ **Deduction:** Damage done to the desk both by this infraction and by previous ones (responses to Raiders games, especially in **2004** when you placed an ill-advised bet on them and lost your Christmas bonus; responses to conversations your ex-wife abruptly ended without resolving, specifically when she called to tell you she was sick of your red wallpaper so she had a man come in and change it to lime green which then turned into a conversation about your lack of "manly skills").



Art, Honorable Mention
Splinter
Macy Marin Keith

You: Hey.

Co-worker: Oh! Hey, man. Heard the bad news.

You: Yeah? Did they send it in a memo? (use a sarcastic tone for maximum effect)

Co-worker: I'm sorry, man. That's really rough.

You: Yeah, well now they want me to go to this self-help seminar or whatever so they feel better about firing me.

Co-worker: Really?

You: Yeah, it's total bull, but they said I won't get my severance if I don't go to it.

Co-worker: Well at least you're getting severance...

You: I'm sure they'll work out another way to screw me out of it.

Co-worker: Tough break, man.

You: Yeah, no shit.⁶

Refuse to call the office and set up your appointment until **1 hour** before the office closes for the day. Arrive **15 minutes** early to your appointment the next day. This will give you an opportunity to hold your head in your hands and tell passersby that you're "A little sick, but thanks for your concern." The meeting should allow you to voice your concerns to a small group. Example concerns heard from previous participants include:

- How am I supposed to pay rent?
- You think my parents might let me move back in?
- Would walking into traffic and getting hit by a bus count as "forward progression"?
- How flammable is this building?

⁶ **Deduction:** Vulgarity and profanity in the office are prohibited, a guideline you have regularly broken.

Lessons learned from the course as submitted by previous employees include:

- Good thing no one's depending on me to bring home a paycheck.
- Some people just don't deserve to be happy, I guess.
- I just spent **10 years** doing a job that no one needs done anymore.
- I can use all these brochures as a blanket when I'm sleeping in the park.⁷

You look through the shade, through the leaves of the aspen growing outside, across the courtyard to the adjacent apartment where Kate used to live before you married and subsequently divorced her, and you realize how stupid it was to think that a woman who owned a Jetta would want to settle down with the team lead of a dead end section of a faceless company, so instead of regretting it, you close your eyes and remember the worst times of the relationship as a reminder that the breakup wasn't just inevitable but positive.

To Do on the Day of Termination

Bring your identification badge to the security desk.⁸ Keeping or misplacing your identification badge will result in a delay of your severance package.

⁷ The brochures are not to be taken from the office and doing so will result in a Deduction and possible legal action.

⁸ We would not advise shouting, "Here!" and tossing your badge at the security professionals employed by the Company. They are instructed to pacify any threat of violence with reasonable force. Any hospital time spent after an altercation will be calculated in the **Deductions** from your severance package as we may be moved to purchase a get-well card.

Clear your computer's browser history and delete your username from the database. Any offensive materials accessed (e.g. violence, profanity, vulgarity, sexual materials) have been noted and will count against your severance package.⁹

Update your permanent contact information with the **Human Resources Office**. This is also your final opportunity to have a conversation with the woman at the front desk, the one you've been watching for **3 months**. Enter the office with the intention to do so, but find that she is out sick today. When asked by the substitute at the desk if you would like her contact information, think for a moment, then mutter, "No, that's okay," and fill out your paperwork.

Leave the building and go home. Lie in bed for the next **3-5 days**.¹⁰

Employee Name (print) _____

Signature _____

Date _____

You wonder what life might've been like if you'd taken that test before yesterday afternoon, before last week, before Kate left you. You wonder if you would have heard Warrant's Jani Lane sing the

⁹ Your hard drive is full of pornography. We at the Company were at first impressed by the sheer amount of pornographic material, but it will still result in a **Deduction** as we are required to scour the hard drive, resulting in a loss of valuable time during which the IT professionals could be doing progressive and imaginative work in the advancement towards perfection in workspace efficiency.

¹⁰ After this period is over, find your printed copy of the checklist at the bottom of a stack of papers and return it to the **Human Resources Department**. You will be informed that the checklist was supposed to be in before your termination. Argue with them for **1 hour** before giving up. Note as you leave that the woman at the front desk is back and is in the process of packing up her things. Ask, "You too?" She will nod. Rather than continue the conversation, grunt, shake your head, and walk out the door for the last time.

words, “I don’t need to be the king of the world/as long as I’m the hero of this little girl” and decided that your job with the company mattered less, that, when you were told you would not be needed as an employee, it might have struck with less force because, as Warrant would have you believe, you at least would have Kate, your “little girl” to go home to. Maybe the company would check in and say, “Hell, we don’t like the way he works, we hate the way he dresses, and his attitude is terrible, but he’s that little girl’s hero. Wow, I guess heaven really isn’t too far away after all” and throw you an extra couple thousand a year just for being so cool.

In your recliner, in your matching top and bottom pajamas, in the living room of your \$300-per-month apartment, you ponder on all these things and conclude that it isn’t worth your time to dramatize the malaise of your life and instead crank the arm of the chair and lean back. You think you might jerk off, or watch tv, or sleep, and while you think about these things you lie motionless and watch the ceiling do the same.

3rd

Matt Halackiewicz
The Empty House

The boy lies on a bedding of moth-eaten sheets and unwashed clothes. The threadbare cotton his safe place from the attic’s cold...and the dark. His shoulder blades press against pitted hardwood panels bowed from years of heat and damp. Pupils the size of pennies swallow blackness; scrounge for light. Slanted planks, burdened by the memory of decades’ worth of wind and rain and snow, hover over his emaciated form. Blue-gray paint chips litter the rot creeping out from underneath the corners of the attic’s floor. Across the room a staircase reaches down from an opening in the boards and anchors the attic to the rest of the house. Only his empty belly, the rain, and the shadows pulled from off the twisted paneling of the walls, stir his mind.

The home had looked abandoned. A crippled mass of cast off parts. Shattered windows. Unhinged door. Wooden shingles blown clear of the roof and sunken in mud and yellowed leaves. Its shape dissolving in the dusk; bleeding over into the night. But it was shelter. Even so, it took some doing to drag his little sister across that black river and toward yet another strange and broken home.

That little sister, a twitching clump of

elongated limbs, lies next to him too tired to let the rancid smell of a half-dead attic keep her from another night of sleep.

He rests his hand on her hip. If only to make certain she’s still there. Still his. Keep her close...his mother said. He tries. He nudges himself closer. Touches his calf to hers. Makes certain she’s still there, still real.

Hours pass. He catches himself slipping. His eyes falter. He promised himself he would keep watch but the weight of hunger and lack of sleep pull at his eyelids, numb his thoughts.

He takes a last look at the opening in the floor. His eyes are almost closed when faint light emerges from the black. A warmth seeps in and dances, for an instant, against his chin.

He gets up. He sits back down. The house was supposed to be empty. His feet, fastened to the ground, wait. Wait. Wait. He gets up. He shuffles across the wood flooring catching a left toe on the edge of a raised board. His eyes water but he stays quiet. Always quiet.

He reaches the staircase. He stands at the edge of the hole. The chasm stares back at him. The light slithers from underneath the door at the bottom of the stairs. It licks his feet. He licks back. He bites his lip and takes a step.

And then another.

Before he realizes what he’s done, he finds himself clutching an old brass knob. It turns. He turns and looks back. She sleeps.

He pushes, head still turned away, eyes still fixed on the place where his sister rests. The door creaks forward an inch or maybe two. He turns and squints. His eyes feel a thousand needlepoints of light flicker from across the hall. He pushes the door a little further. His neck leans up against the edge of splintered hemlock. His matted hair the only thing that protects his skin from the jagged frame.

His eyes adjust. He stares, investigates the passageway. Only the light disturbs the otherwise black corridor; its walls empty.

A doorway to another room across the hall stands open. The boy can just make out a hearth, its blue and yellow tongue calling him. The warmth of that throat ready to swallow every last shred and scrap...consume him whole.

No longer contained by the attic staircase, he nudges forward, shoulder pressed against the wall and drawn to flame.

He stops half way.

To his left, and level with his head, a charcoal ghosting marks the place where a frame once hung. Even in that passing light, the absence startles him. An empty box. An imprint meant to hold the unwanted recollections of a wanting man. It disturbs him and he can't quite figure out the reason why.

He continues on.

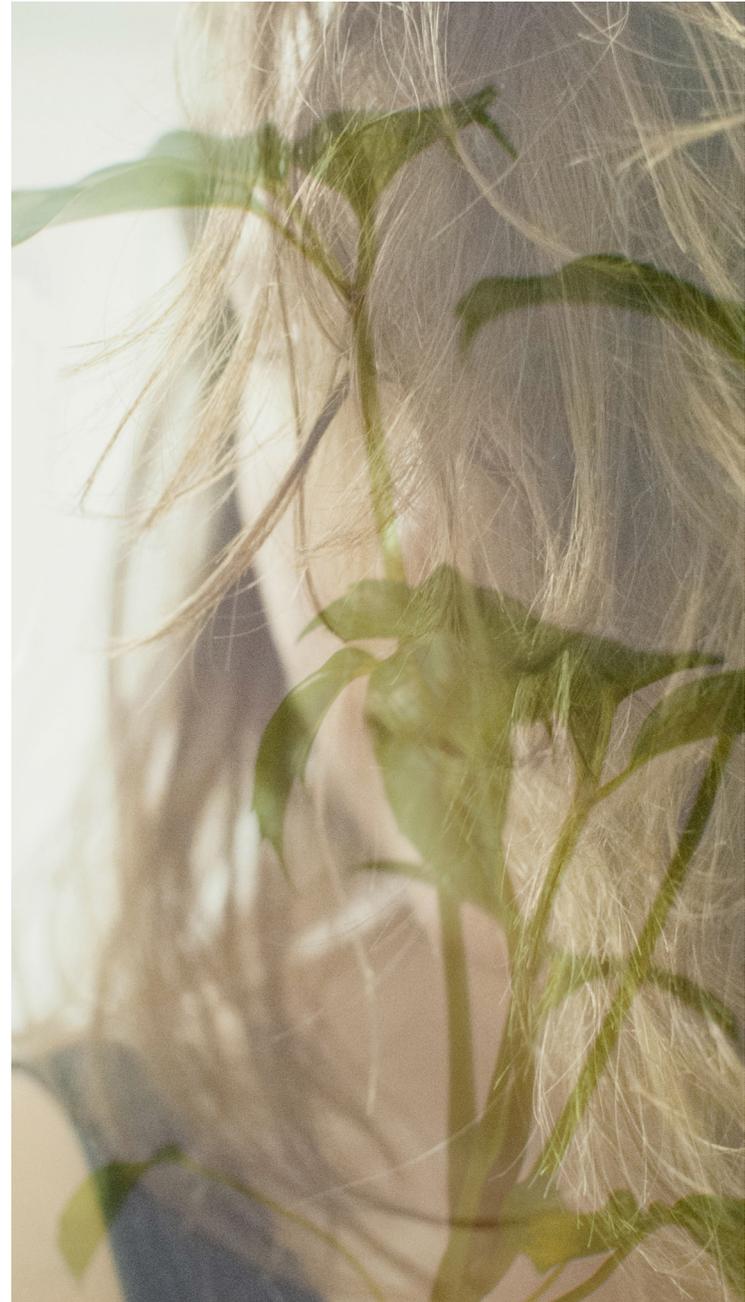
He stops just outside the entrance to the room. The doorframe anchors him to the floor. The heat exiting the room washes over him. He bathes himself in its glow. The warmth carries him to a safe place where there is no cold, no ash, no war.

He peers in.

Left of the fire, suspended over the edge of an antique armrest, upholstered in horsehair and a century's worth of wear, rests an arm. Between its thumb and forefinger, a photograph.

Just beneath the photograph the boy spots a small, framed crate with missing boards, serving as an end table. A mason jar of water, an inch away from full, balances upon its makeshift legs. The water waits. Persists. Unconcerned. Musing over its most recent shape.

Or is it bait?



Art, Honorable Mention
Bloom
Macy Marin Keith

His thirst gets the better of him. He enters the room. Eyes bouncing back and forth between the jar and the figure in the chair. As he circles to the right of the room the figure becomes a man. An old man, as dated as the rifle resting at his side. An old man, greying, wild. And large...he sits, a stone monk, adrift in blue then yellow, orange, red.

The old man never turns to look at him. But the boy can no less feel the man's attention pressing on his chest than he can turn his thoughts away from the water.

The boy stays...fixed to the floor.

The old man, still facing forward, photograph in hand, slides the jar with his bruised, dry knuckles, across the makeshift table toward the boy.

Like a wild dog, the boy darts at the table, grabs the jar, and retreats back to his corner.

The boy puts the Mason jar to his mouth and tilts. The water exits the glass and rushes past his lips and tongue like a late March mountain river overcome with spring. The water crosses his throat and slides down into his stomach. His hollow insides come alive, wake, quiver, burn. Hurt stirs his intestines.

The boy stops drinking. He lowers a half-empty jar.

He lifts his eyes back toward the man, pausing at the photograph on the way up. The old man flips the photo over, placing it face down on the table...but not before the boy makes out the image of a child about his age.

The boy dips his head back toward the jar

of water, trying not to look up at the man.

Take it.

The boy jerks his head back up but the man's eyes are still fixed on the fireplace.

Go on...take it.

The boy turns, almost too fast, and nearly trips kicking over a metal bucket and the last remains of unused wood. As he regains his footing he retreats back toward the attic with the half-filled jar.

The old man never moves, but he hears the boy scuttle down the hallway, frantic, a blind mouse, helpless and afraid.

The boy swings the attic door closed and stumbles up the stairs gasping for air...the water still in hand. He sets the Mason jar down and drops on top of those old worn sheets. Is she still there? He searches with his hands.

She's still asleep. He considers waking her but it's no good traveling at night and she needs the rest.

So he waits.

A loose board, nearly as long as himself, waits with him. He presses the splintered wood to his body. His hands tighten around the edges of his last defense as it moves in rhythm with the rapid inhalations of his chest.

Hours pass. The rain has stopped but his limbs shiver from the penetrating cold. He

clenches his jaw to keep from waking his sister. White knuckles still firmly wrapped around the rough margins of the wooden board. A half-light pierces his iced breath. Daybreak punches through the cracks of the shuttered window.

He wakes his sister. She drinks the remaining water, too thirsty to even question where he found the jar. They both stand. He takes her by the hand and pulls. She pulls back. She holds...then sees the urging in his spent eyes and gives herself over to his muted pleas.

They barrel down the attic stairs, through the hallway, down another set of stair and through the kitchen leading out into the yard.

Before they exit the home the boy stops just long enough to place the empty jar on a window ledge.

They find the old man fighting with a ghost. The line taut. The rod bent and praying to the river gods.

As he sets the Mason jar down he looks through the soot stained glass and sees the old man's shadow fishing that black river. His sister holds her place and

his hand as the boy watches the old man cast a weighted line. Its waves spread and sail out and over the fickle water.

The boy has never seen a rod before. He recalls the stories his father used to tell of men catching fish with sticks and hooks. And how those fish would serve as food.

There are no fish...leastways not here. Once he saw a picture in a book but he knows the water's too foul for any fish.

He pulls his sister's arm. They exit through the door. Her feet scramble to keep pace. They work their way around the old man and back toward last night's river crossing. The hewn sugar maple waits.

The old man stands a hundred meters upstream, knee deep in river water. He casts. Consumed, he watches as the nymph descends. Feels it drift with the current never taking his eyes off the water's surface.

Last night's rain, frozen, hangs. A hundred crystal chrysalides droop from slanted maple twigs.

Winter's comin'.

Another cast.

The boy's hand tightens around his sister's trembling fingers as they step onto the tree. They shuffle halfway down the makeshift bridge when they're stopped by the sound of slapping water.

They turn to look upriver. They find the old man fighting with a ghost. The line taut. The rod bent and praying to the river gods. His arms pull, lift, veer. Then give back. Then pull again.

They stand as the old man works the reel. His body shifts. The weight of that mad ghost keeps forcing the man to move downstream. His eyes stay on the end of the weighted line. Their eyes on him.

A few more minutes and the silver back of a phantom emerges from the water's surface.

They stare as the old man raises the fish, and himself, from out of the river.

As he turns to walk back to the house, he motions with his unburdened hand for them to follow.

The boy hesitates. He looks back at his sister. He sees the hunger in her eyes. He frees her hand. They turn and climb back down from off the tree. The old man disappears into the house. They follow.

UNDERGRADUATE

1st

Lorelle Frank
Case Study

The clumps of tuna oozing out the sides of Archie's sandwich look like they have already been eaten and regurgitated back onto the smooshed slices of knockoff wonderbread. Darwin can see the eczema medication Archie's mother appears to have used as a garnish, a thick layer of vibrantly pink cream, peeking out from beneath the sandwich's fleshy, runny globs, which gleam unpleasantly in the afternoon light.

Archie raises the sandwich from the table. "Want to trade?"

Silence follows. Darwin pauses with his own turkey and ham sandwich half-unwrapped from its plastic bag to stare at Archie for a moment, gauging whether or not the other boy means it.

Archie scratches his leg.

Darwin suspects Archie has somehow gotten it into his head that normal kids in public school trade lunches as a matter of routine. Since the biweekly Homeschoolers of Utah Valley fieldtrips remain the closest Darwin and the others get to a regular lunch hour, Archie tries to pawn his mother's unholy culinary creations onto the other kids precisely biweekly.

Darwin coughs. "Maybe not today," he says as kindly as he can manage.

"Okay," says Archie with a shrug of his wire-hanger shoulders, his fluffy hair ruffling in the breeze.

Darwin tips his head down to stare at the stainless steel picnic table, feeling the afternoon rays hot on his crown. He deliberately

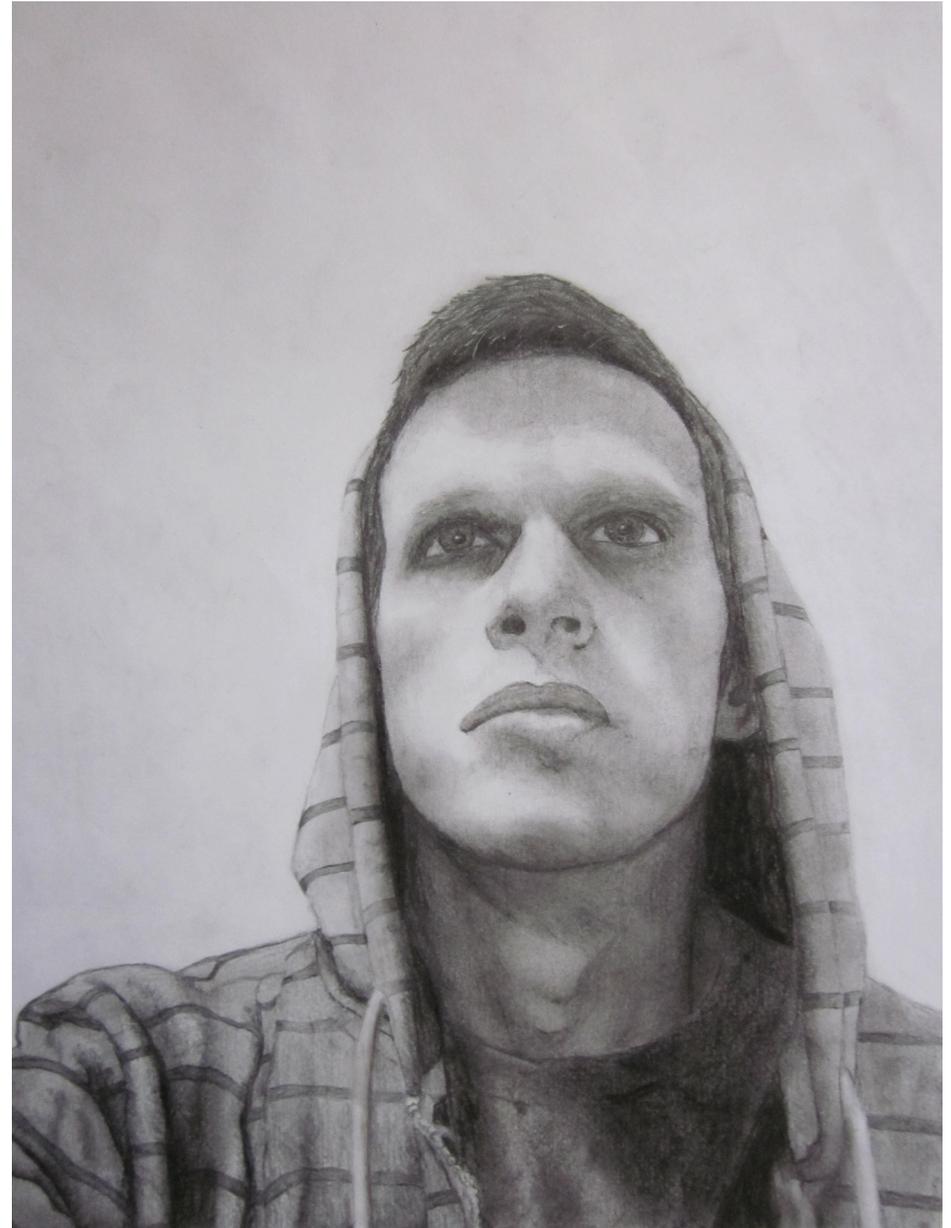
doesn't watch Archie bite into the catsick sandwich or look at the peeling flushed skin on his neck because he would like to keep his appetite.

The brown paper lunch bag half-crumpled between them on the picnic table reads *Archie Foote*. Darwin puzzles over how Archie's cruel parents, with full knowledge that their last name was Foote, could have gone ahead and called Archie something that even resembled a word connected with actual feet. They could have done worse with Smellman Foote, Harry Foote, or Swetty Foote, but not much else.

Darwin hears the kids at the other picnic table laughing and feels a little grating of sandpaper annoyance inside his belly. Carolyn and Shaun seated themselves with the four Blearson siblings and left him alone with Archie and two of the littlest kids, who sit on the far end of the table. Darwin tries to hurry and finish his lunch so that his mom and the other parents will maybe hurry the others and take them all to the museum already.

Darwin has heard normal-schooled kids say that homeschoolers are socially awkward and generally bad at life, but Darwin doesn't think that's true. Darwin has acquaintances outside the homeschool group. He plays on a community baseball team, and the local elementary school lets him play percussion for their afterschool band club. Darwin's much older siblings Virginia and Gary easily made the transition into public high school, and both of them made plenty of friends while racing ahead in every academic subject. Now Gary has a fiancée and a job making computers' insides and Virginia goes to college learning how to fix people's insides. At the other picnic table, Carolyn, who's eleven, a year older than Darwin and Archie, wears a shiny black braid, and she knows a lot about Egypt and history and dragonflies, Shaun plays video games—the cool kind that the teenagers play—and the four Blearson siblings are collectively good at everything.

"I found a dead peregrine falcon in my yard this morning," says Archie. "Peregrine falcons can dive two hundred miles per hour. I mean, not that one because it was dead, but," and he takes an extra big bite of tuna and eczema medication. "It's pretty amazing."



Art, Honorable Mention
Spark
Brady Hunsaker

Kids like Archie give homeschoolers a bad name.

Several sweat-sticky minutes later, Darwin's mom and the other parent volunteers cart two minivan loads of kids from the park to the dinosaur museum. Archie scratches his eczema on Darwin's right, but at least Shaun sits on his left so that Darwin can watch him shoot aliens on a tablet.

A huge dinosaur embossed and painted a cloudy greenish brown on the side of the building towers over them as they pull into the parking lot. The other car arrived first, so Darwin jogs to catch up to the Blearsons and Carolyn's black braid.

Archie walks toward the tall, glass doors slowly, looking up at the painted dinosaur, craning his neck, squinting in evident wonder against the sunlight with his algae-green eyes. He bumps into a stranger and apologizes absentmindedly. Startled from his trance, he sprints to join the rest of the group where Mrs. Carson delivers a lecture on museum etiquette. Archie doesn't appear to listen, however, dazzled by the rust-brown skeleton of what looks like a T-Rex just behind the glass doors. Darwin sees it and wants to get in too, but he wishes Archie would listen. Archie probably needs the lecture more than anyone else.

The homeschoolers finally enter, and cool air-conditioning tingles their sweat as the parents wait in line to buy tickets. Archie gawks at the T-Rex, so Darwin doesn't. They enter a second set of tope doors and pass a fake archaeological dig with wax people and

rust-red rocks.

Beyond the next wooden, rustic-looking door, Darwin forgets his irritation as he drifts across a bridge in a black hallway dotted with pinhole white stars in every direction—floors, walls, ceiling. The dark presses so close that Darwin can barely see his feet on the bridge, much less the other homeschoolers, and he feels as though he has grown a million times his size and walked through the Milky Way and into a time warp, because everything on the other side of the star hallway comes alive straight from prehistoric times. Skeletons of sea turtles the size of cars swoop toward him in a rippling ocean, and sleek model animals like fierce-looking dolphins tear apart plump tentacle creatures. The scenes don't move except dancing light effects on turquoise backdrops, but Darwin can feel the currents and taste the saltwater.

In the next room, live plants behind a wall of glass curl around shiny giant centipedes with dozens of legs as long as swords. Suspended mud-brown bones of upright carnivorous lizards pose in hunting packs.

"Come look at this," Darwin says to Shaun, bending close to the massive aquarium that protects a miniature display of sand,

tiny trees and plastic water dotted with land dinosaurs doing dinosaur things like eating each other and guarding their eggs. Each tiny figure is delicately painted in deep greens, burgundies, sandy-browns, and vivid red for the blood. Several pterodactyls soar over the scene, suspended by almost invisible, spider-silk threads. The intricacy of the tiny scene holds him.

"I've already been here before," says Shaun in a drawling monotone.

Darwin holds his mouth tight, glancing around for Carolyn's black braid, but she has run ahead and now stands leaning over a railing to look at live fish in a narrow river threading through another exhibit.

"Cool," says Archie, sidling up next to Darwin

uninvited, touching his arm. Darwin recoils. Archie explained the non-contagious nature of eczema to him a few weeks ago, but since the explanation subsequently led to a discourse on scabies, impetigo, and ringworm, Darwin's disgust toward skin conditions in general remains homogenously high.

Archie doesn't seem to notice Darwin's aversion. "Look at the raptors eating that long-neck guy. You know, birds came from dinosaurs. That's why they're called raptors."

Darwin has heard normal-schooled kids say that homeschoolers are socially awkward and generally bad at life, but Darwin doesn't think that's true.

Darwin feels blood stretching the vessels in his forehead as he realizes nobody else cares about any of this except Archie Foote. The ancient spell breaks and the little grating of annoyance in his belly twists and burns like the annoyance got stuck to a motorized wheel and all his guts have gotten caught in the gears as the sandpaper spins and spins.

Darwin tries to escape by catching up to Carolyn and Shaun, who sit in front of a TV screen rolling dinosaur facts. Archie follows him, itching.

"...theories, but we don't know exactly why dinosaurs went extinct."

"Peregrine falcons almost went extinct," Archie volunteers.

Darwin rolls his eyes so that Carolyn and Shaun can see. He needs them to know that he and Archie haven't bonded over the miniature display or something.

"People think peregrine falcons are still endangered," Archie continues, "but really they're doing just fine now, have been doing just fine for years. People think we need to take care of them or that humans need to stay away from them but actually they take great care of themselves."

"Let's go," says Darwin pointedly, turning away to continue along the dark blue carpet pathway.

The homeschoolers spend hours in the last room, a hands-on network of waist-high basins filled with sand, running water, and little plastic trees and triceratops. The oth-

ers laugh and make dams and drown each other's dinosaurs in flash floods, but Darwin quietly piles sand in a corner to recreate the miniature scene and wishes two things: that he could start in the Milky Way again and experience the whole trip through time once more while the others play, and that he could do it without Archie Foote breathing over his shoulder.

"Hey, way to nail that snare solo," says Tina Parkinson, one of the skinny flute players.

"Thanks," Darwin smiles mildly. "You guys sounded good, too."

Tina launches into a short rant about the brass section rushing its eighth notes. Darwin energetically agrees. Afterward, Tina and Darwin have nothing more to say to one another, and she joins the other flautists sitting in the shade of a cherry tree on the grass. The rest of the percussionists sit on the slab of pavement in front of the school, smacking each other's belly fat and practicing accent exercises on each other's heads.

The speculations about their performance have ended, and now Darwin sits silently near the clarinets.

This is the trouble with the band kids. The only thing Darwin has in common with them is band.

Earlier this year, Darwin began following in the footsteps of Virginia and Gary by plunging into full-time public middle school. He quickly found, however, that his

legs couldn't match Virginia and Gary's long strides. The "just be yourself" and the "put yourself out there" clichés sound easy until you're the kid whose only talent is smacking hollow things with sticks.

As the students wait outside at the conclusion of the regional junior high school band festival, Darwin decides he will quit drumming. The decision makes his throat ache because he knows he will miss the staccato vibrations of the snare and the boom of the bass rocking the echoing space in his chest, and the band joining his rit-a-tip-rit-a-tip-rit-a-tip with the sudden, bright blaring of the brass section. He won't, however, miss the way nobody but the band geeks want to hang out with the band geeks. Pre-teens are brutal.

He considers replacing band with the after-school science club. Miss Simms, the youngish, ice-blond biology teacher who decorates her classroom with dead things in formaldehyde jars, says they're going to New York next spring. At length, though, he decides he just can't join a science club—not when his own cruel parents named him Darwin. Besides, he doesn't exactly want to go straight from the band clique to the science club clique. He doesn't want to be in a clique at all. He wants to fit in with everyone.

He will have to go clubless. Darwin likes time alone, but he feels obligated to have at least as many friends as Virginia and Gary. Maybe with his free time he will make more friends and by osmosis get involved in lots of things at once. He tells himself this.



Art, Honorable Mention
Whiteout
Grace Ryser

The school district holds the band festival at a junior high a few miles from Darwin's. Darwin uses the ten minute break between the end of the competition and the predicted arrival of the bus to sneak off alone and find a drinking fountain among the unfamiliar, alternating marsh-tan and purple lockers.

Class has just gotten out for the attendees of the junior high, and swarms of pre-teens swirl through the hallways like schools of fish. They pause in the intersections to chat, clogging the way forward.

Darwin has finally spotted a drinking fountain when he halts suddenly in the middle of the hallway.

Archie Foote's eczema has cleared up, but he looks frighteningly unchanged. He has grown taller but not larger, as though his wire spine and forearms have simply stretched.

Darwin doesn't notice many other details because he is distracted by the fact that Archie wears an honest-to-goodness red cape, Superman style.

Darwin hopes that Archie won't see him. He hopes Archie will have the sense to avoid a conversation that he's certain neither of them want to have. But no, Archie's eyes find him before he can decide to turn around. He hopes for a second more that Archie will pretend not to recognize him as he pretends not to recognize Archie, but then Archie's grin widens so much that it looks like the corners of his mouth will stretch right off his face.

"Darwin Evans!" Archie crows, running up to meet him with that dumb red cape fluttering behind him.

Darwin stands stiffly, dearly hoping Archie doesn't try to hug him. Archie literally slides to a stop, red high-tops squeaking on the polished floor. He grabs Darwin's hand and gives it a firm shake.

"Long time!" he says. "Remember me?"

"Yeah, Archie Foote." Darwin smiles to hide the fact that he's cringing. "How could I forget?"

"You here for the band thing? Still drumming? Still like paleontology?"

"Uh, yeah. Do you—" Darwin flounders for something polite to

say that isn't, *um, still like falcons?* "—go to school full time now?"

"Yep. First year. It's awesome to see you, man. I feel bad, but I've got to run. I'm going to be late for rehearsal."

"Oh, you're in a play?" Darwin asks hopefully, looking everywhere except the cape.

"Uh, no. Well, not right now. I'll probably try out for the one in the spring. We'll see. The rehearsal is for choir."

Darwin hopes for an *I lost a bet* or an *oh, it's for a pep rally* or something, but Archie makes no comment about the cape and Darwin is fairly certain Archie just wears the thing for fun.

Archie snaps his fingers. "We should keep in touch. I'll look you up online."

"Sure," Darwin lies, knowing full well he will quietly ignore a friend request, because who knows how Archie Foote will fill his newsfeed. He clears his throat, surreptitiously glancing around to make sure none of his bandmates have wandered here to see him talking to the kid in the cape. "Well, I gotta go too."

"Yeah! I'm sure I'll see you around." With that, he charges off.

"Looking good, Archie," calls a boy in a baseball hat.

Archie gives the boy an enthusiastic high five as he passes.

Darwin burns with embarrassment for Archie. Can't he tell he's being made fun of? How can he consider wearing a cape to school socially acceptable? His sympathetic embarrassment burns so hard that the lingering childhood annoyance with Archie burns clean away and a puddle of pity remains. What a jerk, he thinks with a sharp look the boy in the baseball hat. Darwin doesn't want Archie for a friend, but at least he's above that kind of heartless taunting.

Far down the hallway, somebody else wolf-whistles at Archie and Archie halts to pose, flexing his scrawny arms like a muscle man before rounding the corner.

Well, Darwin thinks, at least he seems happy.

Darwin meets Cori Waters working at a customer service calling

center the summer before his junior year at Pleasant Grove High. Cori has smooth, thin blond hair and exactly six dark freckles on her round nose. Through conversations interrupted frequently by, "Thank you for calling Security Assist this call may be recorded for quality assurance how can I help you," Darwin finds that she goes to school at the nearby Mountain View High and that she likes elephants, caramel popcorn, choir, and for some reason, Darwin. She slips him her number in purple gel pen on the back of a tracking sheet the day before school starts and he asks her to homecoming—at her school, not his, because he knows how she would feel about surrounding herself with bitter Pleasant Grove Viking rivals. Fortunately, she doesn't appear to mind dating one.

They poke each other with the corsage and boutonniere, and Darwin drives her to an Italian restaurant in Provo with his palms sweating on the steering wheel of his mother's car. When they meet up with a group of Cori's friends for dinner, Cori introduces Darwin right away, and the group greets him warmly. He likes them at first; they all laugh a lot. But they begin a lot of sentences with, "Remember that time..." and Darwin remains quiet as he picks at his pasta al forno. Cori makes a valiant effort to explain the inside-jokes to Darwin, but the conversation keeps changing by the time he understands.

He's pretty sure none of Cori's friends remember his name by the time the waiter takes their sauce-smear plates away.

Darwin would love to blame the homeschooling for his social clumsiness, but he can't do that, not with Gary and Virginia grinning from the wall in their pedestalled photographs every time he leaves his house.

The scowling teacher-gatekeepers at the dance almost don't let Darwin in despite his principal-signed permission form, but they eventually cave, though they watch him like he is an alien until he retreats into the dark and flashing flock of sweaty satins and taffetas.

Darwin sees him right away. He couldn't easily miss him.

In the center of the dance floor, wearing a violently orange suit with a tennis-ball green bowtie and suspenders, Archie Foote dances

the *Thriller* dance, which he appears to have memorized. This wouldn't seem so horrific except that the song roaring through the black speakers isn't *Thriller* but some awful, whiny country ballad. A circle of students surrounds Archie, laughing at him—and not laughing at him with the surreptitious, secret kind of laughter, but openly guffawing at his antics for him and everyone else to hear. Darwin feels a strange, protective urge to tell them off and take Archie somewhere where he can't hurt himself, but he feels the tulle of Cori Waters' fluffy skirt against his leg and doesn't want her to know that he is in any way connected with the nutter in the bow tie.

Somehow Archie sees him through the spinning lights. He waves from a distance. "Hey Darwin!"

With a suffering look, Darwin waves back.

Archie begins fighting his way through the laughing and dancing couples.

"You know Archie?" asks Cori.

"Yeah," Darwin admits. "You know him too?"

She smiles with strobe lights catching the matted glitter on her cheekbones. "We're in choir together. Everyone knows Archie."

His hands and feet feel cold as all the

A million times his size, he drifts through the Milky Way in the black hallway with the swirling stars.

heat drains to his face.

Archie reaches them and grabs Darwin's hand to give it a vigorous shake, and then he offers Cori a preposterously deep bow. A girl wearing a dress of the same phosphorescent green and orange sidles up behind Archie.

Her big, round, perfectly made-up eyes, narrow face, and slender hands make Darwin think of a doe somehow. Darwin guesses he has located the kindly soul who

actually agreed to come to the homecoming dance with Archie Foote. She's pretty and by all appearances a relatively normal human being. What a saint, he thinks.

"Sandy, Darwin, Darwin, Sandy," rattles Archie, pointing at each. His breath comes heavy, his narrow chest expanding and contracting under the offensively orange lapels. "Cori, Sandy, Sandy, Cori, Darwin, Sandy, Archie, or something."

"Hi," says Darwin. He tries to give a meaningful look to Sandy to convey his awe at her noble act of service, but Sandy doesn't seem to catch his meaning, her wide doe's eyes cheerful.

"Still like paleontology? Still drumming? I happened to come to your school's band performance a while back and I didn't see you," says Archie.

Darwin shakes his head with that old, particular sandpaper annoyance in his belly.

Archie remembers random personal details of his past. Cori's friends can't even remember his name. "No, quit a while back." He shifts his feet. "It's good to see you."

Sandy catches that hint quick. "Nice to meet you, Darwin. See you, Cori." She tugs on Archie's arm. "Come on, Archie. Let's go dance."

Archie snaps his legs together in attention and salutes before turning back toward the dance circle. Sandy follows him with what Darwin considers a highly convincing show of excitement.

What a saint, thinks Darwin, shaking his head. What a saint.

The Mountain View high school graduation starts an hour after the Pleasant Grove one ends, so once Darwin has taken a few pictures with his parents, Virginia, and Gary, who kindly say nothing of the fact that Darwin has done nothing but survive his high school career, he decides to postpone the family party and stay to watch Cori walk.

Darwin climbs over two proud, chest-puffed grandparents who tried to deter anyone else from using their row by sitting next to the aisle in the huge, round university stadium. He folds down the plastic seat of one of the chain-linked chairs and sits alone as thousands of students and families file into the stadium, a speck of Viking blue in a massive funnel of bruin burgundy-red.

Cori sings "Simple Gifts" in a big, combined choir, band and orchestra number,

and Darwin notices the perfect rhythmic precision of the drummer, takaka tak, rest, rest, takaka tak, rest, rest. After sitting through approximately seven million speakers at his own graduation, he feels his brain settling to gloop. Valedictorian, student body president, and somebody with cancer and a canned inspirational message. The formerly proud grandparents at the end of the row slump with chins to sternums.

By the time the “class-voted Most Influential Senior” stands to speak, Darwin’s own head teeters on his neck as the temptation of a nap taunts him.

Darwin has seen trembling hands on most of the speakers, but the slim, tall young “Most Influential Senior” tosses his tassel out of his face and leans on the podium, the picture of ease.

“Knock, knock,” he says much too close to the microphone. Feedback chimes and a collective flinch sweeps the stadium.

“Who’s there?” chorus the Mountain View students with a sudden brightness of enthusiasm in their voices, like the high whistle has shot an electric current through the seats.

Archie taps the microphone, generating more eardrum-assaulting feedback, then overcompensates and steps several feet too far away from the podium so that nobody can hear the rest of the joke. He animates in silence, and everyone laughs anyway—they laugh hard. They laugh in the unfettered way people laugh with someone whom they already know can make them laugh.

Archie, Darwin realizes with a haze of bafflement that reduces the rest of Archie’s speech to a set of stinging impressions, did that on purpose.

Archie speaks without consulting so much as a notecard. The dozing grandparents at the end of the row have woken right up. Rapt, delighted attention shines on Archie Foote from every corner of the stadium. Darwin feels like the solid matter of his body has thinned to a gas, wandering and drifting in the reactions of the crowd. Tears chase gusts of laughter through the funnel of graduating seniors and supportive families. Even if Archie’s speech was the only thing Darwin ever knew of him, Darwin would know that

Archie is a genius. If Stephen Hawking, Leonardo De Vinci, and the Three Stooges collectively had a baby, it would be a toss-up whether Archie would be the scientist brilliant and weird enough to figure out how to make that happen or the kid.

Darwin rakes his fingers through his hair, holding the sides of his head as though trying to keep it in one piece. He read it all wrong. He thought someone needed to take care of Archie, but Archie is doing just fine and has been doing just fine for years. Archie kept reaching out to Darwin not because Archie needed friends, but because Darwin did. The others were never laughing at Archie, not when the kid in the baseball cap high-fived him for wearing a cape to school in junior high and not when his doe-eyed date watched him dance *Thriller* to a country ballad. Archie was the one laughing. The hopeless, eczema-riddled kid with pink tuna fish sandwiches had metamorphosed into something still peculiar but a good peculiar a long time ago. Only he, unlike Darwin, did it without ever losing his sense of wonder.

Darwin feels his guts unwinding and the relief brings pain. His insides stayed twisted, it seems, from his homeschool days. He had simply gotten used to the sensation.

Archie gets an honest-to-goodness standing ovation. He takes a sweeping bow.

Darwin wanted to make time for everything because everything was the only thing Gary and Virginia hadn’t done, and instead he ended up doing nothing at all. Precisely because he cared what people thought of him, nobody thought of him.

The next day, Darwin wipes dust off the drum set in the junk-stuffed garage with an old beach towel and annoys the neighbors with percussion drills for three hours straight. His hands fall out of sync as he drills his double-stroke rolls. The muscles of his wrists and forearms feel weak and awkward. Discouraged but not defeated, Darwin puts his drum sticks away, but he sets them near the lip of the shelf where he can see them. Then he drives to the Museum of Ancient Life and gawks openly at the embossed wall and at the T-Rex

inside the glass doors. He buys a ticket for fifteen dollars and passes the fake archaeological dig with the wax people and rust-red rocks. A million times his size, he drifts through the Milky Way in the black hallway with the swirling stars. On the other side of the time warp, the ancient sea-life scenes don't move, but Darwin can feel the currents and taste the saltwater and see the giant centipede clambering over the plants. He stops at the miniature display of sand, tiny trees and plastic water dotted with land dinosaurs doing dinosaur things like eating each other and guarding their eggs, and Darwin remembers that peregrine falcons can dive over two-hundred miles per hour. He pictures driving two-hundred miles per hour to really grasp how fast that is and imagines falling out of the sky at that speed, and he thinks that's pretty amazing.

2nd

Alyssa Utley
The Tool Shed

The blood in Pat Tyler's carotid artery had been clumping for months before the stroke. With each pulse, a few more red-black blood cells snagged on the slick endothelial lining, thickening and hardening until one day, they sealed right up and the oxygen stopped.

His face sagged, his body slumped into his armchair, and Denise, Pat's wife, shrieked and dialed 911, their episode of *Friends* rattling with canned laughter in the background.

In the hospital the doctor gestured to the greyscale blotches of a CT scan while Denise cried her mascara off into her palms.

"Will he be able to go back to work?" she wanted to know. Denise worked part-time as a teacher's aide at the local elementary school. She played with die cuts and neon cardstock and escorted first-grad-

ers to the bathroom. Her husband had just celebrated his thirty-fifth year with the power company; he paid the bills.

"It all depends," the doctor said.

From under the baby-blue hospital sheets, Pat's tongue groped for words that weren't there. He looked at his wife, but her eyes were fixed on the pattern in the linoleum.

Pat and Denise had been married on a throbbing July day in 1979. At eighteen, Denise had been warned against marrying twenty-nine-year-old Pat, but had gone ahead and done it anyway. He was tall, solid, and sported a thick brown mustache. His big, rough hands smelled forever of motor oil. Next to the skinny high school boys with their wispy blonde lips, Pat was the image of virility.

There they are in the pink-tinged Polaroid, standing next to a four-tiered cake with sagging fondant. Denise's honey curls tumble over her organza bodice, the crown of her head roughly even with Pat's neck, where thirty-one years later, the blood would curdle and clot, sending them spinning.

This photo frame with its foggy glass sat on the Tylers' kitchen table through years of lasagna dinner and boys' birthday parties, bearing witness to the change from lovers' red-wine whispers, to the brusque exchanges of busy parents, to the silence of two people who had very little left to say to each other. And now it had been all but pushed aside by the mass of paperwork Denise had brought home from her new job: insurance booklets, 401K information, W2s.

Her three sons crowded around the table, giving advice, pointing out the differences between this life-insurance policy and that one, between Roth IRAs and mutual funds. Pat sat in his armchair with the TV on. If they needed anything from him—a social security number or an internet password—they'd ask him, then drop silent while his lips scrunched in concentration and his eyes flicked upwards, as if trying to pry the answer from the folds of his crippled brain. One by one, his tongue fumbled the words, mouth struggling around the jagged edges of the Ps and the Rs. His wife and sons kept their eyes on the table.

Denise had been hired at a cell phone company, providing over-the-phone tech support. She found the hours inconvenient and the computer systems baffling. Upon coming home in the evenings, she'd usually walk in to her fourteen-year-old daughter stretched on her belly on the living room carpet, texting friends and popping a wad of grape flavored Hubba Bubba, her Converse sneakers kicked up in the air.

"Baylee, did you clean the bathroom?"

A purple gum bubble ballooned from Baylee's pursed lips.

"Did you clean the bathroom?" The bubble kept swelling. "Baylee, answer me!"

Baylee made an angry noise and jabbed a finger in the direction of her bubble, indicating she couldn't talk just now. Denise huffed.

"Where's your dad?"

Baylee jerked her thumb towards the backyard. Dropping her handbag, Denise walked out to the tool shed where Pat had taken to hiding lately.

The shed had the warm, woody smell of particle board, mixed with a metallic whiff of auto parts cleaner. A naked light bulb hung from a wire in the ceiling and spots of grease darkened the cement floor like the inside of a McDonald's bag. Denise never used to go in here.

Pat was sitting in a plastic chair in the middle of the shed. In one hand he held a soldering iron, in the other, an instruction booklet. In his lap was Denise's favorite cast iron pot. Its handle had snapped off several

months ago and, up until the stroke, Denise had been pestering him to fix it.

She should have felt touched. She should have felt grateful that her husband was finally taking the time to do this for her. But instead she felt angry. She looked at his lined forehead and his puzzled eyebrows as he struggled to decipher the instructions, and she felt angry.

"Pat, what are you doing?" She strode towards him and took the soldering iron away. "Let one of the boys do that."

She put the iron, the instructions, and the broken pot on a nearby table and lifted her husband to his feet, brushing sawdust from his shirt.

"Come on, let's go inside."

She had her hand on the shed door handle when Pat's voice stopped her.

"Duh....neese."

She turned around. "What is it?"

He frowned. She could see his tongue sweeping back and forth behind his cheeks. His mouth opened. It closed.

"Honey," Denise said. "It's fine. Come on, let's just go inside. It's fine."

She opened the door and trekked briskly

back to the house. Pat followed.

"You know, it wouldn't kill you to make dinner once in a while," Denise said when they were inside. "And supervise Baylee. Make sure she gets her homework done."

Denise's eyes roamed the kitchen as she spoke. Pat sank into his armchair and flipped on the TV.

The next day when Denise got home, the house smelled like tomato sauce. In the kitchen, standing over their old gas-coil stove, Pat was stirring a bubbling pot. Three empty SpaghettiOs cans sat on the counter, their sharp-edged lids sticking up in the air.

SpaghettiOs. That was his idea of dinner. Denise snorted.

"Baylee, come clean up in here," Denise yelled upstairs. The table was covered in paper plates of chocolate chip cookies,

cellophane bags of homemade caramel popcorn, and loaves of banana bread wrapped in tin foil. Ever since the stroke, neighbors had been appearing on the Tylers' porch, arms full of baked goods, sympathy dripping from their lips.

Sometimes they shoved the gifts into Denise's arms and left as quickly as they could, having fulfilled their neighborly duty. But

Denise's honey curls tumble over her organza bodice, the crown of her head roughly even with Pat's neck, where thirty-one years later, the blood would curdle and clot, sending them spinning.

sometimes they wanted to come in and see Pat. They'd make halting attempts at conversation and he would smile meekly while Denise banged around the kitchen, causing as much noise as she could until they finally left.

The worst was when some of the guys from the power company came by. Their wives sent jam jars wrapped in ribbon, or entire chicken casseroles. The guys, all of them younger than Pat, would sit and make jokes about work. Pat tried to laugh along.

Tonight, after the SpaghettiOs dinner, Denise and Pat sat up in

bed. Denise had her cell phone clamped between shoulder and jaw and was talking to her sister.

"Yes, *SpaghettiOs*," she said, laughing. "And get this—the other day, he tried to spell "company" K-A-M-P-N-Y. Yeah."

Pat rolled over, head on his pillow. He was thinking about the broken pot still sitting out in the tool shed.

Denise laughed again, and Pat closed his eyes.



Undergraduate Art, Third Place
Hooded Siblings
Grace Ryser

3rd

Mitch Hawk

Constellations of a Pescador's Wife

Raúl gently raised four year old Niko's arm off his chest and slipped out of bed. The concrete was cold on his bare feet and a shiver shot up his legs and through his spine. He stepped into his *llantas*, preferring the stiff rubber sandals over the bare cement floor. He found his shirt in a ball near his wife Suníva's feet. He carefully untangled the shirt that was tangled between feet and blanket. He smoothed it out on his lap and read the letters to himself, *Budweiser King of Beers*. He recognized *King* as *El Rey* and wondered what Budweiser was. The too large gray shirt slipped over his head and fell loosely on his shoulders. Suníva rested her hand on his shoulder, and Raúl covered it with his own. He looked back at her: She was wearing her black tank top, her long, night sky hair lost in the cotton material. He kissed her hand goodbye, and she watched as he gently kissed Niko's sweaty head of matted black hair. Raúl

stood on his toes and kissed the head of his only daughter, Evíta, who lay in the bunk bed just above, along with Suníva's mother. Raúl had built the bed years ago with the help of his father. Finally, he went to the foot of the bed and kissed the forehead of his eldest son, Emílio, who laid perpendicular on the floor. Raúl turned and saw Suníva was now out of bed. He marveled at her beauty. Her tall, slim figure fell perfectly into his body. He rubbed her long black hair down the back of her head to the small of her back. She kissed him softly on the lips. Neither wanted to pull away completely. Raúl unlocked the pad-lock on the inside of the thin plywood door, handed the key to Suníva, then stepped through the door of his home.

Raúl lifted the sea green tarp, uncovering three white buckets. He took with him the half full toilet bucket and his fish bucket, leaving one empty bucket as the new day's toilet for his family. He unburied a small, leather coin purse. He opened it and counted the twenty two *soles* he had saved. He placed the coins in his shorts pocket, then whipped the tarp up in the air and guided its fall over the remaining toilet. He stopped by the side of the house and looked in through the thick, clear plastic he'd scavenged from the beach. He watched his wife snuggle next to their youngest, and stared for a moment at his body's imprint on the thin mattress. He started his cold walk west toward the Pacific, knowing he would have to hurry to get a head start on the others.

Tumbes was a tiny coastal town that smelled strongly of ocean mist and fish. Large banana, papaya and other fruit trees filled every crack and crevice between the homes. He built his home about a forty-five minute walk away from the ocean, hoping the smell would be less strong. He didn't notice it, but his wife grew up more inland and had a hard time adapting. He once went to the public showers in town to surprise his wife, but even after a twenty-minute scrub she could still smell it in his clothes and hair. A deep fog rolled in

from the ocean and filled every corner of the *pueblo*. Early morning workers started to appear in the streets as grayish figures. The homes built of the reddish brown brick stood apart from the mud huts in the slums. No one built immaculate homes; they were small with enough room for their families to sleep in. The *Abuelas* were taking their spots on the streets, sweeping the dirt off their tiny porches and sitting in front of large wash basins full of clothes. The *Abuelas* wore traditional Peruvian clothing: sandals, tall thick socks, long colorfully striped skirts with plain blouses that matched, and small sun hats with brims wrapping all the way around. They had to start washing early, allowing the wet clothes to absorb as much

sun as the clouds and fog permitted. Stray dogs scoured the trash in the streets and alleys. They moved in packs of five or six, imitating the slum gangs. Raúl started to jog, worried that he might have delayed too long at home. The salty ocean mist was beginning to cover the smell of the toilet bucket.

Throngs of waves crashed near the beach, pushing the tide further and further up the sand. Behind him, people set up canopies and shops along the main road through the *pueblo*. All of these different canopies made up the *Mercado* and sold everything the people needed: clothing, food (Raúl's fish), clean water from nearby

wells, ropes for work, and much more. Raúl continued another half mile down the beach, reaching his tiny, secluded inlet of calm water. He followed a skinny peninsula out to deeper water and dumped the toilet bucket. He refilled it with water and shook the bucket trying to remove the murky residue that stuck to the round corners along the bottom.

Tall trees and lush green bushes covered the top half of the beach furthest from the ocean, dividing his small bay from the *pueblo* just on the other side. You would never think people lived in the thick forest, but smoke started to rise from the top of the canopies from

I wish I could keep a constellation. Claim it as mine. Ball it up and keep it in my pocket, looking at it whenever I like.

early cooking fires. He picked up an old growth of vines and unburied his fishing rods, line, hooks, and old dried up fruit for bait. He took each stick individually and wrapped the sturdy, clear line seven times around the ends and tied a knot his father had taught him as a boy. He laid the sticks down on the rocky sand and counted out twenty large steps with the bundle of fishing line wrapped around an old Inka Cola bottle. He bit the line off, then opened the yellowish bottle and dumped three hooks into his hand and tied them. Raúl placed each pole into three fishing holes near the corners of the peninsulas, in the calm water. He threw out the line with the dried up fruit out into a slow current stream that carried the bait and hook into the fishing holes. With each stick buried in the sand, Raúl took his spot near the top of the rocks. Rays of light flooded over the horizon, and Raúl stared at the lines as they reflected and bounced bright beams over the water. The line of the furthest stick stiffened, and it started twitching violently in the sand.

Half the day had passed and Raúl had already filled his bucket with fish. He removed the fishing line from the sticks and rewrapped it around the liter sized bottle. He dropped the hooks back through the mouth and buried it all underneath the vines at the top of the beach. He smoothed the sand on top to make it look more natural. Further out on the ocean a fishing boat bounced up and down on the waves. A group of men pulled a large net up and

onto the boat, releasing more than double the amount of fish that had taken Raúl eight hours to catch. He studied the net. A sick feeling crept into his stomach as he thought of the fishing boat's efficiency. Soon, Raúl would have to come up with another way to make money for his family. For now, he would continue to beat the fishing crews back to the *Mercado*, selling all he could to those who didn't want to wait.

He walked through the *Mercado* with his fish bucket in one hand and clean toilet bucket in the other.

"What do you have for me today, *Pescador*?"

Raúl reached into his bucket and laid four of the largest *Caballa* onto the table. Piero weighed each one on his scale and added it all up. "Four pounds twelve ounces," the vendor concluded, "that comes out to twenty two *soles* and fifty *centavos*, fair?"

"An even twenty three, and I'll keep bringing you this top quality early in the day," Raúl countered.

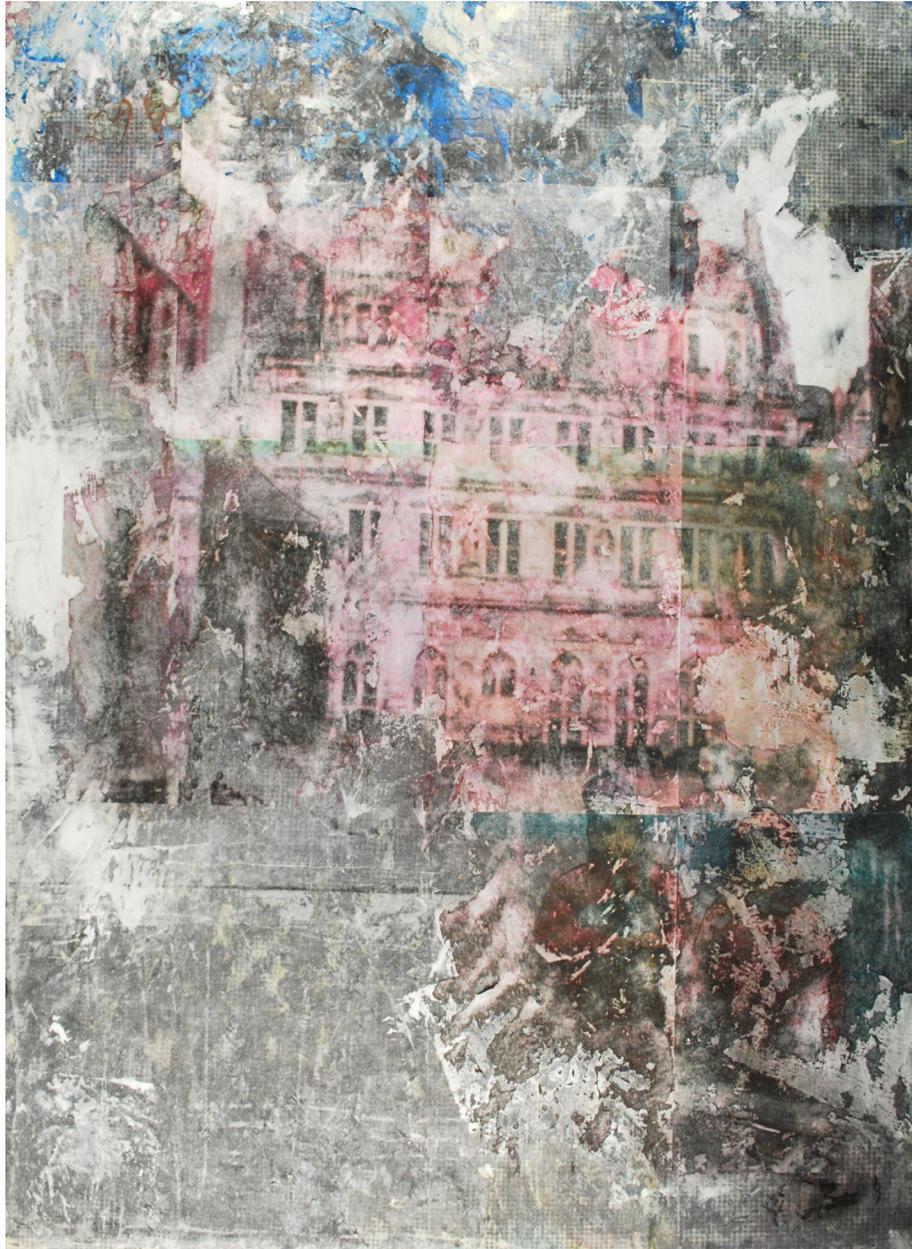
"Bien." The two men shook hands and exchanged goods.

That left Raúl with six fish for his family, and enough money to buy a couple more pounds of rice. He stopped to admire the booth selling soccer balls. The vendor left his booth unattended, and Raúl thought how easy it would be to grab a ball and hide among the crowds. His oldest son, Emilio was old enough to play, but they never had

enough money after buying food and clean water. Raúl reached into his pocket and pulled out the money he got from the fish and combined it with the money he had been saving secretly. He totaled the coins in his hand: *twenty three from the fish plus the twenty two saved, that's forty five soles. Take away ten for rice and twenty for the necklace, only fifteen left over.* He looked up at the sign and saw the bold black price of forty *soles*. Clean water from his neighbor would cost thirteen soles, leaving him with two. It had taken Raúl only a few weeks of selling his portion of fish every other day to save enough for the necklace he would buy for his wife. He figured it would take about a month, just before Emilio's birthday, to have enough saved. Raúl tucked the coins safely into his cargo shorts pocket, looked up, and saw two men in ripped shirts and no sandals staring at him. The smaller man's ribs pushed against his chest. The large man stood tall and muscular. He couldn't help but stare at the long scar running down the right side of the bigger man's face. He picked up his buckets and made his way to the old jeweler woman.

The clothing section of the *Mercado* was strewn together with bright fabric and hand crafted necklaces, beaded rugs, and blankets with large faces of American cartoon characters. Raúl studied the blanket door into Francesca's shop: a large black and white animal, with a smile and eyes like a human. The human animal waved his white gloved hands in the air.

"Can I help you Señor?" said the shop-



Graduate Art, Third Place
Invisible
Katharina Marchant

keeper's fat son. Raúl envied the chocolate bar he was eating. He didn't wish it for himself, but for his youngest son, Niko.

"I'm looking for Señora Francesca." El gordito climbed down his stool and ran into the back room past a wall of bright yellow and red blankets. The colored fabric lining the walls of the shop glowed with sunlight from the front windows.

"Señora Francesca, do you remember me? My name is Raúl Villanueva and I asked a few months ago about a star necklace." Francesca studied Raúl for a minute, and pulled out a large binder of scribbled names and dates. She flipped back and forth through the pages, an unorganized mess only she could translate and unlock.

"Yes. I have it finished for you now." She opened a box beneath her table and pulled out the necklace. A thick leather strip joined at the bottom by a constellation of silver stars. Raúl's memory went back ten years ago from today, when Raúl took Suníva to the highest hill top, an hour away from the *pueblo*. They lay together on the grass looking up at the stars. Raúl lost himself in the memory. *I wish I could keep a constellation. Claim it as mine. Ball it up and keep it in my pocket, looking at it whenever I like, Suníva had said. I'll get you a constellation! Which one do you want? he asked. You can't give me one, she said. He picked up a strand of her hair and followed it down to the end where the tip had frayed. Yes I can.*

"Señor, it will be twenty five *soles*." Francesca's deep voice rasped like she had permanently lost her voice

"We agreed on twenty when we first met."

"The silver cost me more than expected, the price is twenty five."

"All I can give you is twenty two."

Raúl walked out of the shop with the necklace, an empty toilet bucket, a bucket with six fish and thirteen *soles* for clean water. He looked up and saw the sun had passed the center of the sky and started its decent on the other side of the *pueblo*. Raúl zigzagged through the crowded *Mercado* labyrinth, his heart racing with anticipation to bring his wife the necklace. The fish bucket sloshed water over the edge, spilling on Raúl's shorts, and leaving a trail of mud

on the road behind him. The road came to a fork; the left leading through the pueblo slums, the right passing through more tiendas selling shoes and knives. Raúl decided on the smaller, less populated path through the slums; a more direct route back home.

Sweat collected into little pools on his forehead and streamed down his cheeks, between his eyes, falling off his jawline. A couple beads of sweat slipped into his eyes and burned. He was at a full sprint. The water keeping the fish fresh was mostly gone now. The dirt trail became less and less defined, with bushes and fruit trees crowding its edges. Clay and mud huts replaced the brick homes. Raúl stopped to catch his breath and take in his surroundings, it had been a long time since he cut through the slums. He looked north east, trying to determine how much farther it could be. He saw something move in the bushes farther up the path. He inched towards it, squinting his eyes to bring the mysterious figure into focus. His slowed heart rate picked back up, one of the homeless men he saw earlier stood in front of him. The large man stepped onto the path. The late afternoon sunlight weaved through the papaya tree palm fawns and on the man's face. Raúl felt a panic build up inside his chest. He felt childish for not taking the patient road back home. He looked to his right hoping to find some sign of the main road. The man with bulging ribs stepped out from behind a tree, blocking the only suitable path to the right.

The taller man pointed at Raúl, large muscles popping out as he flexed his arm. "Put the bucket down, and go home, *Pescador*."

The other man stepped closer from the right; he held a large knife, trying to conceal it near his thigh.

"Please, don't. I need this—for my family." Raúl squeezed the handles of the buckets, his hands started to shake.

"I need it for *my* family." The large man smiled.

The smaller man on the right stood only a few steps away from Raúl now. Raúl knelt down on one knee and set the buckets on the ground. He let his hands fall to the ground. The man with the knife reached for the fish bucket, but Raúl couldn't stand to face his kids and wife without food. He threw a handful of dirt at the small

man then leaped from the ground and tackled him. The large knife dropped on impact and Raúl landed on top of the man a few feet away. The man's head smashed against a rock and his body went limp. Raúl pulled himself off the still body by gripping the shredded bark base of a papaya tree. The tall man stood behind Raúl, holding the fish bucket.

"Give me my fish." Raúl said. Adrenaline pumped through his legs and arms.

"I don't think you'll get so lucky with me, *Pescador*."

The two men stood only a few feet apart, the knife lost somewhere in the dirt between them. Desperation set in; Raúl could feel the silver metaled constellation pressing against his left thigh in his pocket. His kids had to eat, many villagers were dead from malnutrition and he promised Suníva long ago that they would always be taken care of.

"Take this instead." Raúl grabbed the necklace by the string and let the constellation dangle between them. His heart dropped as he thought of how long it took him to save for it, and now how easily it would slip from his hands.

"What's it worth?"

"Triple the fish in that bucket."

The man stared at the necklace, greed crept into his eyes. "Leave the necklace, and I won't kill you."

"You will not catch me. Take this necklace and leave the fish. Tomorrow you can buy three buckets worth." Raúl pulled the necklace back, bracing himself to run just in case.

The scarred man thought for a few moments, "Fine."

"Leave the buckets and walk backward. I will throw you the necklace. If I don't, then you will easily be able to catch me since I'll be running with the fish."

The large man smirked, set the buckets down, and walked backward. Raúl reached for the handles and the man came running at him. Raúl grabbed a palm sized rock in the dirt and swung as hard as he could at the man's head. His fist crashed into the man's left

temple, making him fall to the dirt in a daze. Raúl dove for the buckets and took off running, searching for the main road to find help.

Raúl's heart raced uncontrollably as he dodged tree branches, boulders, and animal holes. He could finally see the main road where some of the shopkeepers finished packing their stores up for the night. He looked back and saw the scarred man blazing through the trees, blood pouring down the left side of his face. Raúl pushed himself until his legs started to go numb. He made it to the road, but tripped and fell, spilling his bucket of fish in the muddy street. He screamed for help but the large man was already on him. The man hit Raúl hard in his ribs. Raúl sucked air through his gritted teeth. The man reached into Raúl's pocket and took the necklace. Other men rushed to help Raúl, but the large man ran back into the forest, leaving Raúl in a puddle of mud with all his fish and tipped over buckets.

The strangers from the market helped Raúl to his feet. He thanked them as they replaced the fish in the buckets and left him alone in the middle of the street. Raúl had never felt so much anger towards another man in his life. He believed himself a disappointment to his wife; he felt he was a weak burden on her, underserving of her love. He grabbed his buckets and returned home.

He set the buckets down quietly behind the small brick house and went up to his neighbor's door and purchased fresh water from his well for his family to use the next day. He set the water container underneath the tarp with the fish, and one empty, one full toilet bucket. He turned the corner to go in through the front door, but Suníva was already standing outside waiting for him. He stared at her. She smiled back and gestured with her hand for him to come inside. He fell down to his knees and hung his head low, refusing to cry.

"Raúl, what's wrong?" Suníva ran quickly and dropped down to her knees in front of her husband. Her tender voice made Raúl turn his head away in shame. "Raúl?"

He lay down in the small patch of grass with his wife. He ex-

plained everything that happened. Raúl's eyes fixed on the stars and constellations above them. Suníva rested on her side, curling the black hair behind Raúl's left ear.

"I love you," she said. "You, Niko, Evíta, and Emílio. You four are my perfect constellation."

Raúl turned to her, and imagined the necklace dangling around her neck. He thought of revenge.

"Wait here," Suníva tip toed into the house.

Raúl sat up and waited for her. A few moments later Suníva came back outside with a large potato sack thrown over her back.

"Here let me help you," Raúl jumped up and ran to his wife, picking the sack off his wife's back and setting it down on the ground, his left rib cage burning inside him.

"*Feliz aniversario*," Suníva whispered in Raúl's ear.

Raúl kissed his wife on the cheek and opened the sack. He unrolled a large fishing net on the ground that spanned half the length of their twenty one foot long house.

"I've been hiding it at Josana's place and making it over there," Suníva said, seeing the smile on Raúl's face. "Maybe now you can start coming home earlier, which is my gift to myself." She laughed.

"Where did you get money for the cord?" Raúl's fingers ran along the edges, comparing it to the one he saw on the boat.

"I've been doing extra chores for the neighbors; washing clothes, dishes, whatever they need done. It took me half a year to save."

Raúl squeezed his wife into him and they rested on the fishing net looking up at the stars. She lay there speaking of love while he lay next to her imagining himself strangling the thief with his new net.

POETRY

GRADUATE

1st

Anya Hawke

(Our father has never been sorry.)

I'm sorry
I made you pick
the weapon I would use,

(The thinner belt bit
into our backs like a whip,
but the wide leather left thicker
bruises.)

but you made a mistake.

I'm sorry
I made you watch
while I beat your sister,

(Our hair clumped
against our swollen
faces,
eyes clamped shut.
The room smelled of salt.)

but you needed to learn.

I'm sorry
when you
cried I hit harder,

(Marks puckered
like flowers on our arms
where we would dig
our nails to hold our tears.)

but you deserved it.

I'm sorry
I told you
it would be your fault
if she died,

(Our fingers clutching
and grasping
in our sleep. Even our softest
shirts would scratch
our bruises.)

but I was only human

And now you've burned your cookies.

What
happened?

The grass in Jessica's backyard, damp from the water guns
and over-stretched balloons, squishes beneath your bare feet.
The early summer blossoms leave you intoxicated with the
freedom from school. Your wet clothes hang off your skinny
waist. (You should have worn a belt.)

You lean against the wall near the kitchen door, waiting for
the signal bell for food to come. You already smell the sugar
and soft bread. Your stomach rolls marbles, bouncing them
around in a siren call for sweetness coming. Mouth wet with
anticipation.
Only four minutes more.

Jake leans next to you. He laughs at your jokes and looks at you
as if you are something beautiful. Special.
(But you are not special.)

The monotone melody calls out from the kitchen, and you
volunteer: *I'll check the food.* He follows, offering help and a
flirtatious smile. You eat it up
(and feel guilty later).

Remember: He wears dark jeans, washed out on the thighs.
They compliment his black shirt. A single bracelet on his
left wrist, colorful, and it reads "What Would Jesus Do?" His
clothes are wrinkled but clean. His hair spikes delicately, his



Art, Honorable Mention
Storms
Macy Marin Keith

beard missing, leaving behind a smoothness you can feel with your eyes.

You are wearing something similar. Jeans, boot cut. Without your belt they hang low. Your wet shirt clings to you. You feel brave and sexy when you notice how his eyes linger on the low V cut.

(It's a whore's color red.)

These things are important. You will be asked to repeat them for cops and judges, friends and relatives. They will be repeated back to you and you will have to defend them.

In the kitchen, alone but for him, you grab the oven mitt, reach for the handle, but he steals the crook of your arm and swings you around in one

fluid
motion.

One hand in your hair, the other on your neck. He kisses deep, tongue delicate. His fingers caress your collarbone, then your breast. Sweet smells of baked promise now dancing around you.

Your stomach stirs impatiently, demanding satisfaction. You pull away with a smile. Maybe it's reserved and polite. Or maybe it's daring and tempting and sexy. *Let me pull out the food*, you try to say but he squashes your request before it's given life. His soft fingers harden against your neck, twist around your hair. His body presses, restrains. He holds your breath, and when you push he squeezes tighter. You try to move but he's too

heavy.

You do not want this and you're on the floor. Disorientated and confused. Your head throbs against the cold tiles. He becomes fear and fear keeps you still.

You *do not* want this and one of his hands clamps your mouth, the other slides your loose jeans down.

You do not *want* this and you smell him as he settles down, on you, around you, in you. Access taken easily without the protection of your belt. (You'll never leave home without it in the years that follow.)

You do not want *this* and you feel him. Inside you he becomes you and you become him in ways you never wanted. One with agony, one with anguish, one with something wicked and twisted and stolen,

you feel him.

You feel yourself breaking, broken, broke, like shattered ice melting on the floor
you lie in pieces.

(No one will want you anymore.)

And then he's done.
He lifts himself off you and you breathe again,
but the air's stale and scratches your throat. You whimper,
choking sobs escaping as you scramble to cover yourself and
push your back against the wall.

Gone as easy as he came.

A dark, burning taint churns the air and fills your lungs. It rolls and swirls, mocking you with stench, choking out the oxygen.

Jessica opens the kitchen door laughing: laughing as Jake passes her; laughing as she waves the smoke away; laughing as she looks at the oven, at you sitting against the wall; and laughing asks:

*what
happened?*

Open your mouth and all
that comes out:

My cookies are burnt.

The Mind's Illness

Why fill a broken vessel just to watch it bleed? I have a crack running or escaping down my arm and through my chest a slit across my face they leak such pretty colors blood-oranges and blood-blues but nothing beats the vibrant greens and yellows (also all blood-hued) that seep beneath my toes and runoff from my shoes but even as they leave my body no emotion comes I'm told to feel they're soft as feathers and warm as fresh laid eggs but I can't feel what's missing

I've nothing to compare.

2nd

Kendall Pack

Heavenly Throne

Bod of God release your pent up waste
that overbearing load
that unassuming pinch
the stomach-punching pull
of so much devoured ambrosia

Your holy hands wash clean in blood
or soap that smells of spirit
soap that smells of justice
the lavender soap of mercy
the green apple suds of redemption

Who is he the sinner who bears
happily the waste away
who scrubs the holy throne
who dips his rough bristles
into eternity's porcelain dish

And who is he pastor of God
who looks up to see the sky
dark sagging with its pressing load
who in his zealousness cries
Thank you for your bounty

At a Disciplinary Hearing

I took a paperclip, I'll admit,
a flimsy little metal thing from the top drawer
of my coworker's cabinet, I'll admit,
and unfolded it like a pocketknife and gouged
the wall of my office, I'll admit,
and I pressed the tip of it into a socket
full of white hot electricity and burned
my finger black

And I took a paper bag, barely a crime,
from the refrigerator in the break room
and devoured first the sandwich, barely a crime,
then the apple then the cookies
and I tossed out the bag of pills, barely a crime,
and watched Bill from the fourth floor
scream for his medicine before
he collapsed

And I took a key, can't call it criminal,
from the boss' desk, a long thin bronze key,
and crept up to his house, can't call it criminal,
when he shut off the lights and went to bed
and I entered his home, can't call it criminal,
and stood beside his bed while he wrapped
his wife up in his arms
and snored

Then I stole a child, no apologies,
from the boss' house, his only son,
and told him we would be friends, no apologies,
and we drove to Nevada for a chocolate shake
and I drank them both, no apologies,
and we drove west while he screamed
at the wayward women
along the highway

Bloodhounds

They can smell it can't they
oh yes
the scent of criminal ne'er-dowelledness
stompy stomp
the footsteps run that way

in the snow the imprints of bare feet
press heavy toe delicate heel
and the howl of the hounds
pierces the path

where that stinky stinky
no-good-son-of-a-bitch
slinks away his body cold
naked in the snow

and there
on his brow a drop of sweat
and there
on his face a wild-eyed oh-shit-they-knowledness

and there
in his guts so rumbly-tumbly
the feeling of what-will-I-do-what-have-I-done
deep down
deep deep deep deep down
in the pit where he keeps his secrets
and his undigested snack'ems

he can't resist
the thrill undying
that get-it-get-it-get-it
push towards hot bods untarnished
flesh metal electric bods
bods asking for the kissies he gives

stripped down
his nethers
swinging disease
he threads the empty forest cabins
but the scream of he-who-knows-shall-make-all-known
blares out and shatters windows
behind which he hides

and he runs out into the night
that bastard-son-of-a-bastard-son
whose heart drips black
with the sweat of his lungs
breathe heavy fall heavy

and the hounds heave after him
their jowls flip-flop
their feet pitter-pat
their teeth snag-rip
their eyes seek-kill

they'll catch him
they'll grab him
they'll tear him
woof woof

3rd

Aiya Sakr

Graffiti

My room is painted white old friend. Over all my letters on the walls	Remember paint splashes and splatters. Now I am painted too.	Believe me I never meant to have painted over you
--	--	---

Dampened Prayer

As she rinsed the shampoo off of my body, my mother's rich Classical Arabic demanded that the *shirreer*, the evil version of me slink down the drain. I would watch, giggling and enchanted, sometimes cheering along. My wicked counterpart, shed like snakeskin, invisible yet present amidst the discarded foam and dirty water, slowly washed away. My mother would then wrap me in my pink towel and declare me fresh and good.

I was fresh and good.

Yesterday I stepped out of the shower, hair dripping onto glistening skin, forming a puddle below. A stray hair or two clung to my thigh, a different towel draped over my face, this time green patterned with grey. My mother would approve. With eyes shut, I wondered if the water was not quite hot enough. Could my Classical Arabic ever be as rich?

Mint, Milk, Tea

I clip a sprig of our
peppermint plant.
It was the last one at Walmart,
dying beside a healthy rosemary
and a vibrant parsley.
He and I bought it
hoping to save it—
why do I want
so desperately
to save it?—
I drop the sprig in my tea.
When I pour the milk,
It swirls and swerves
layer upon layer,
moonflowers unfurling.
With more sugar
I recreate my mother's cup.
Over Skype's shaky signal, broken
again, she said
just this morning—to her, evening—
"I miss your tea."
She showed me how to harvest mint. When I was six, crouching
to my height, "Clip the stem starting
at the top, above two emerging leaves,
like that, see? That way,
it grows bigger." That mint stood
rooted in the garden ground.
Radiant. Potent. Glowing.
Because of her,
I was sure it could make a thousand cups.
My mother could make anything grow.
Over Skype, I found
her again. Sometime between mint clipping and leaving; I
lost her to coffee shops and
cleaning the kitchen. Beyond that

it was only tea.
At every dusk to wake her from her nap,
I delivered
a steaming mug into her bedroom;
mint, milk, sugar and all.



Undergraduate Art, First Place
Self Creation
Grace Ryser

UNDERGRADUATE

1st

J. Conrad Lucus

Phineas Gage

Not sure if you've ever
heard of
Phineas Gage,
but he was a railroad man somewhere
in Vermont
and one day he accidentally blew a
fucking iron rod through his
fucking think-box and
here's the kicker:

*He
fucking
lived.*

Now, this big metal cylinder,
on its flight path,
carved a cavern in Gage's
cerebrum, more specifically
through his frontal lobe
and when the bleeding finally stopped
and they got his left eye all sewn shut
he told the first person he saw,
probably a loved one crowded around his
filthy hospital bed
to kindly
Fuck Off and Die.

He got out of that hospital bed,
eventually,
and when he did, he tried his damndest
to go back to work
but he just couldn't.

What's more his friends said he just
wasn't
Gage
any more. His personality
had changed.

He didn't give a shit about
the sunset anymore.
He liked his coffee black and his pan-
cakes
dry.
Which is strange because beforehand
he didn't drink any coffee
and he didn't like pancakes much nei-
ther.
He also became quite
the drinker,
which is funny considering he hadn't
had
a drop
of alcohol
in his life
before then.

You see I always thought that
personality
was something you couldn't
touch.
That it was some grand unifying evi-
dence
of the existence of the human

soul.
But here's Gage,
who just so happens to take
a pole to the dome
and suddenly he's just
not
Gage.

So maybe it's true
that we're all just
machines
and you can pull a man's
favorite color
or his taste in music
or his eating habits
out of his head
and set them on a sterile tray
right in front of him.

That makes sense.

But everything in me
still wants to
believe.

human.

Growing up,
They tell you all about how the world will
surprise you,
as you grow
older and
how *cruel* life can
be and how *heartless*
people can be.

What is more important is what they
don't
tell you; about how you will surprise
yourself—

With the things you do,
incredible things—
the things you make,
but also your ability

to destroy—

and that, though your intentions may be pure,
you **will**
cause pain to others.
that you,
yes, you,
you yourself,
will have moments of heartlessness
and selfishness
and cruelty.

And **that**
is what it means
to be

human.

Between Spaces

It's not a question of
who
but a question of
where
I am.

I am the median between the street and the sidewalk
I am the threshold of every waiting room
I am the spaces between spaces
I am shadows looming
and fumes pooling above puddles
of spilt kerosene

neither seen
nor heard,
but felt
in the vignette of a dated photograph
the border between
fine
penciled lines

I am the mist after rain
I am scars
and streaks where tears have stained the shells
of crustacean people
I am crushing hangovers
and embers glowing

Who am I?

I am the
spaces
between
spaces

Stairwells and parking lots
unmarked graves
condensation on a whispered word
floating up into
frigid twilight

under an off-white
half-
moon.

2nd

Alyssa Utley

My Brother Runs Away

On a smoky January morning,
my brother boards a Greyhound bound for Fresno.
He presses nose to glass as the engine rumbles,
lurches. The wide bus winds past panhandlers,
brisk businessmen with hair-gel heads; past
billboard bargains, dollar sign windows,
and the salt-streaked city streets.
He hates the smog. He hates the neon glare.

He heads West.

When they catch him two days later,
he says he planned to hitchhike up the coast.
He talks of sun, and rain, and soil.
He quotes Thoreau.

We all scorn him.
“Don’t be stupid,” we say
to his dreams of furrowed earth,
of bare brown skin and pumping muscles.
My mother stacks applications by his door
and whispers in his ear: “Electrician. Plumber. Welder.”
He stuffs in his earbuds.

“You’re crazy,” I tell him. “It’d never work.”
But really, I want to say he’s brave.
I want to say, “Next time,

take me too.”

Wardrobe Neuroses

I.
Over peach cobbler
and scoops of Dreyer’s vanilla,
they curl into each other.
He pecks her cheek,
she pats his khaki knee,
and I watch,
smirking.

II.
At three and a half weeks
he proposed.
While trying on suits, they ask her
his height, weight, phone number.
She stares back,
blank.

III.
It was six months before
our first fight;
eighteen before I learned
his wardrobe neuroses—
hanger hooks all pointing left,
jackets there, long sleeves, short.

IV.
In the big wedding book, I write,

“Good luck.”

American Sniper

In the darkened theater,
people stop slurping Coke, snapping red licorice.
Oily fingers hang in popcorn bowls
as Bradley Cooper jams a scope to his eye
and squeezes.

A kid drops in the desert dust.

Bullets pump chests,
shrapnel snaps bone,
and empty eye sockets stare, blinking blood.

The credits roll in silence.
Based on a true story.

So many corpses.
So many centuries spent
destroying each other—
humans
breaking
humans.

On the way out,
a man
holds the door.
His skin is leathered with age
and veins bunch in his hands.
He smiles at me with
silver-blue eyes.

Walking into the frosty night, wiping my tears,
I feel a splinter
of hope.



Graduate Art, Second Place
The Places You'll Go
Katharina Marchant

3rd

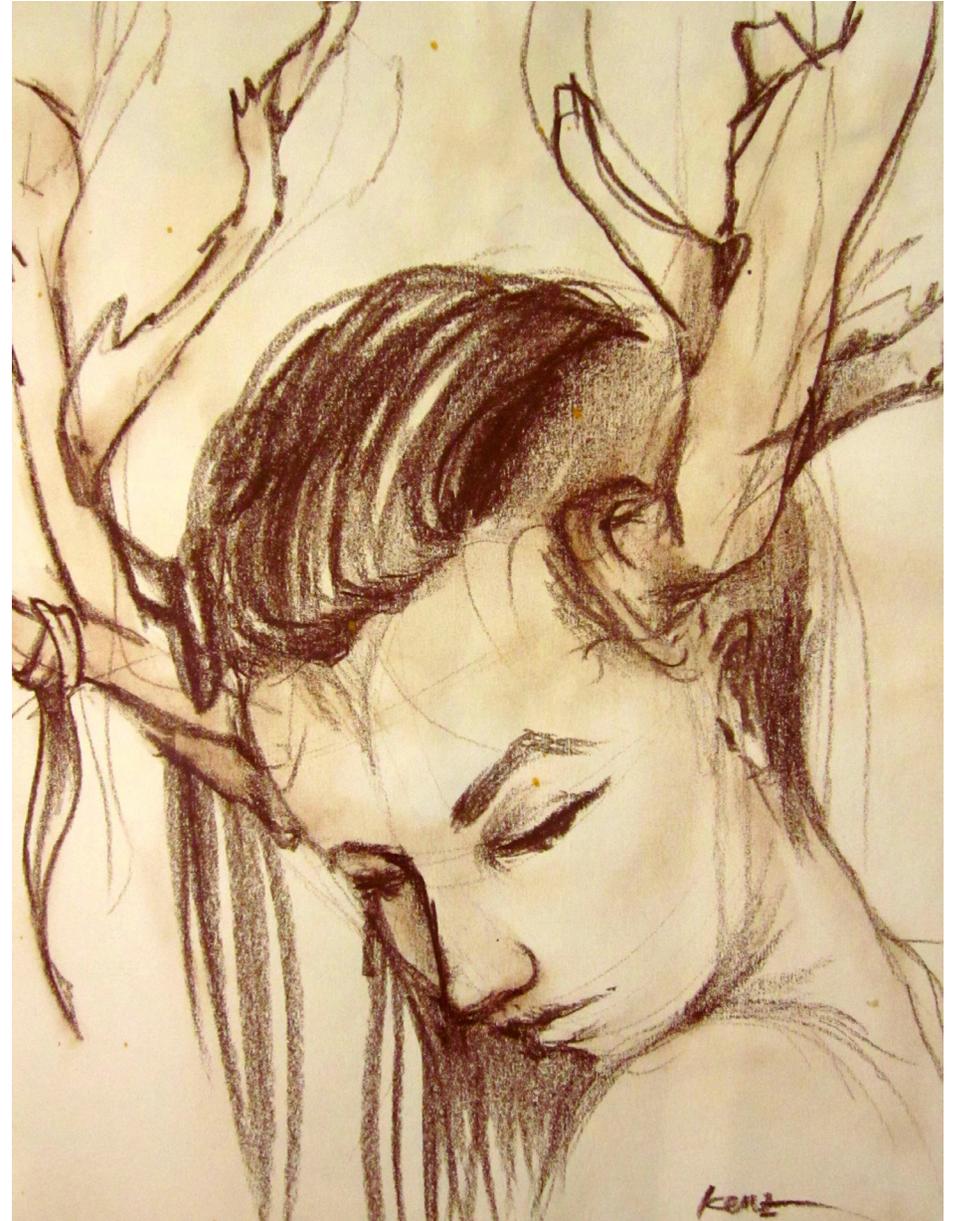
Loren Smith

Rhapsody For A Child Of The Sagebrush

-After Rhapsody For Children Of The Midwest by Ben Gunsberg

1.

You are no longer a child of the sagebrush,
or a child of the Arizona sun
singing to the desert stones.
You are not the mesas of
mother earth laying lazily over
the terrain. You are not
the clods of dirt under the
bandstand that hosted rowdy
rodeo scenes or the splintered,
wood of the stair rail that led to
the announcers box. You are not
the pomegranate trees lined up along the driveway
whose seeds you savored with
greedy fingers on the top
of the garage roof or the coarse shingles
of that place that left rocky imprints
in the palms of your hands. You are not
the tire of the rope swing
spinning and twisting in circles back and forth or
the cotton plants craning their
anorexic necks heavily to the earth
or the conversations of the chit-chatting chickens
chumming together in the shade.
You are not the chimney churning out smoke
or the concrete patio it rested on or the bitter orange



Art, Honorable Mention
leave her - wild.
McKenzie Lowry

trees in the backyard with white painted trunks
you looped up in a hug so you could
press your face up against the bark or the swings
of the park that was wedged into the block like a couch
in the waiting room of adulthood.

You are not the smell of dill
pickling the kitchen or the hard shell tacos
made in sizzling oil in the
house haunted by unseen memory.
You are not the homemade chili,
hot and howling in the mouths who attacked it or
the creamy lemon that oozed out from under
the meringue or the olives,
black as a dark room, plopped
onto your fingers and eaten
one by one by one. You are not
the bible cartoons camped out on the shelf
of the brown boxy tv or the blue suitcase
you stuffed yourself into when you played hide and seek.
You are not the blanket decorated with pictures of dalmatians
you held to your nose that smelled human as you walked around the house or
the bed at the foot of the stairs that you laid in so long when you had chicken pox
you were sure it would forever afterward be spotted. You are not
your brother's rooms at the top of the stairs, one to the left, one to the right
standing big and tall above you or the plastic,
pink tea set of the girl down the street
you and her drank from like a prince and princess or
the white teddy tucked underneath your fingers
in the nights that belonged to adults or the books
by Roald Dahl you read on the porch during the days that
belonged to children.

2.

You are not the Nevada sagebrush,
teal in the tawny morning or

the irrigation canals feeding
lusty crops or the cantankerous
mud colored Muddy River churning along.
You are not the coyotes scuffling their feet in the dark
yipping and howling their strange tales or
the squat mesquite trees
hunkered down and ready for war. You are not
the tumbleweeds blown around by carriages of wind
that get stuck against fences along the highways to form
prickly walls of thorns that guard the desert or the
ethereal oasis of the steamy hot springs
sweating the swimmers or
the sunflowers leering down at you
preaching yellow with the sunshine or
the trains squashing pennies,
like Satan on a Sunday or the maw
of the flood tunnels that run under town
teasing you with darkness. You are not the fires
that blazed up the mesquite trees consuming
your self proclaimed Forbidden Forest or the plywood
of the treehouse stolen from the construction sites at night or
St Thomas, the drowned town, baptized by the waters
of Lake Mead for fifty years only to be recovered
by drought or the Anasazi village of Pueblo Grande
that suffered the same fate or the blankets on the ground
in parking lots of swap meets in rows upon rows or
the wares that waited on them. You are not
the scared bats that lived in the holes
of the tunnel that transported the river under the two lane
road that you and your brothers slapped dead with wet t-shirts like
whooping cavemen or the dam you built of logs
big enough a child could carry so that a swimming hole would appear.
You are not the cliffs you leapt from that only
seemed tall when standing on top of them or
the fish you stabbed with pocket knives tied to sticks that
you etched scars into or the dirt path that lead to
your little fishing spot that was filled with so many divots

you might think that “this is where God scratches the backbone of the world.”

You are not the house that smelled so strongly of citrus that you wondered if it had been made from an orange or the tilted basketball hoop you played dirt ball on or the velcro sneakers whose straps ripped apart like a whoosh of rain ripping itself from the clouds in the sky. You are not the dismembered bicycles sewn back together by your brothers then jumped with power pumped by limber legs into the sky stained gray by clouds. You are not Keyote, your dog, who ripped up rabbits and left their bloody bodies on the back doorstep or that doorstep stained black with blood or the hitchhiker, all grimy haired and wooden toothed, your dad picked up when you went out for a hamburger on father son night or the dirty yellow pigtails of the girl who sat in front of you in elementary school drawing rotund boys and girls with glasses or the clutter of your school desk that contained a jumble of smashed papers and books or the rubber kick balls that made your hands smell like recess you blasted with your rocket feet onto the roof of the school or the boy that assured you “if you put your hand out the window of the bus, a sign’ll chop it off. I seen it once.” You are not the stinky butts of stink bugs next to the door of the classroom that crunchy, crunched crunch under your velcro sneakers or the teacher who said “thank you” afterward or Tad, the boy who threw your backpack into the girls’ toilet because you were a four square champion or the hypnotist that hypnotized the students during an assembly or the student under the hypnotist’s influence that said he wanted to kiss Yolanda Barkis or the collective groan from the students that followed or the rollerskates you zoomed around on without knowing how to stop

in the old gym of the school during skate night or
the pull up bar where your whole class stood in line
alongside the teacher to do chin ups or the tree you tied captives to
during lengthy games of capture the flag that sat between
the two overhanging fences of the baseball fields or the white birds
that pooped on Travis who always threw basketballs at them or
the vicious games of Bump Out where you blasted the
basketballs of your opponents into oblivion when they came near you
or Burn Ball, played with tennis balls, that others slammed into your butt
if you didn't touch the wall quick enough after you missed the ball or
the yellow field that you were too yellow to cut across
when you walked home because you thought the owners were mean or
the Taylors' faded red truck thrown up into a tree for a treehouse or
the movies, the shows about killer apes ripping out peoples eyeballs,
and dinosaurs eating out your guts while you're still alive
that kept you up all night. You are not the castles of legos
with makeshift catapults that launched globs
of legos at the ignorant smiling faces of lego men who
never knew they had been conscripted to fight in a war or
the green, plastic army men surrounding the cowboys and indians
from Mom's hutch who killed plastic Davy Crockett in the battle of the Alamo.
Davy who was solemnly buried in the back yard and then cemented over
before you could exhume him for another fight and
whom now remains forever lost in a tomb of stone.

3.

You are not that child of sagebrush anymore.
You are not the snowy nightgowns of Utah's mountains
that strip themselves clean during summer or the salt flats
always saturated in winter white or the water rot
of the Great Salt Lake that perfumes the shores and towns
bold enough to build next to her receding waters or
the snow that seeped into the cavities of your heart
so slowly that the passage of time was numbed
until all you could ask for was cold, cold, cold. You are not
the rock walls of the canyons that shaded you from the sun or

the mountain lakes with diamond waters that drank the snow or
the little reservoir whose shallow waters hid
drowned deer, birds and stray dogs or the big reservoir
up the road that had fish in it you could not catch
even though others pulled gleaming trout from her bosom like
rabbits from a top hat. You are not
the goats who munched on alfalfa in the afternoons of austerity or
the cows giving birth under the lamplight of stars or
the horses neighing in the dreams of speed or the tree,
that bent the road as it lifted up the edges of the asphalt or
the forest where every tree had a human name or those same trees
that were toppled down by the winds that zipped
down the mountains into the valleys on skates of sleet. You are not
the alleyway that pooled up water into puddles you stomped through
during summer or the roof of the shed you ate lunch on while you
watched the dogs sulk in the backyard or the flat rock pathway
that led to the front door that was evened out with sand or
the three tiered garden surrounding it where velour
petunias mingled with lilacs and daisies. You are not the corn
stalks that gave birth to sunshine we ate with salt and butter or
the deer with stoic faces that snuck into town to steal it or
the mazes of corn eerily crooning when the wind blew or
the green blades of grass that wiggled between your toes
or the apple trees that were so overgrown with green fruit
that the branches practically begged you to pick a few.

You are not the swim trunks
gone stiff from the salt of the lake
when you swam in it or the ink
of the newspapers that rubbed off
onto your fingers when you threw them
onto doorsteps in the early morning or
the metal extension ladder that shimmied
in the wind when you climbed to the roof of the house
to put Christmas lights on the trim or
the green strands of those lights that had cancer warnings
printed on the labels or the fireworks of July

illuminating the nights with imitations of stars or
the sprinkler pipes that water slushed out of
when you carried it over wet rows of emerald alfalfa or
the brown couch that sagged in the middle
when you collapsed on it or
the glowing lamp that sat next to your bed
you spent quiet nights under reading Jack London or
the high school band who played music in your yard
on your birthday or the cold silver of the trumpet you played
with them for parades or the dirt paths
of the cross country races that lead
the runners into the scent of canyon dew or that first kiss
you tried with your girlfriend who has disappeared
from your life like autumn leaves or the last smile
of your grandfather and the last hug of your grandmother
that rings out like a bell in your soul when you dream of them or
all of your brothers and sisters and friends who no longer sing
the songs of childhood joy you once shared with them or
your mother and father who were so slowly touched by time
you scarcely noticed they had become sunsets.

You are not the last time you really looked
at the little hills of sagebrush outside of town
and heard them serenading the sky in syllables of dawn
believing, that even if you could not,
the sagebrush would live on forever.



Art, Honorable Mention
Red
Macy Marin Keith

NONFICTION

GRADUATE

1st

Chloe Hanson
Remnants

The Outlaw Saloon in Ogden, Utah, is one giant room divided by cherry-stained wood columns resting on what are meant to look like old-fashioned barrels. The walls are decorated with smoke-dulled posters of half-dressed blonde models in Daisy Dukes and cowboy boots holding dripping bottles of Bud Light and Corona. The bar, dance floor, and stage are crammed together in one corner. The rest of the space is taken up by massive circular tables, billiards, darts, and an old jukebox. At 7 PM on a Friday night in August of 2012, the only other people in the bar apart from the band—my dad’s band—setting up on the tiny stage in the corner were the bartender, Candy, who had fake boobs and a tattoo of a star just above the waist of her extreme low-rider jeans, and Barry, a bald giant with a full black beard who my dad explained was the new “sound guy and line dance instructor.”

It was far from my first time in a bar. Since I had turned 21 in March I’d been everywhere from Salt Lake’s gay-friendly dance clubs with weekend Drag Queen competitions and fruity cocktails to the White Owl in Logan where all there was to do was drink Big Dogs of Blue Moon and play darts until last call. But it was my first time anywhere like The Outlaw, a country-themed saloon, and it was certainly the first time I’d ever been to a bar with my dad. He walked me over to the counter where Candy stood and ordered me a huckle-

berry vodka in a short glass, telling her to “keep it weak, she’s never had alcohol before.” As we approached the bar, my dad hacked, and turned bright red, and spit phlegm into a Kleenex from the box next to the stacked water glasses. “Ow,” he said. “Get me a gin and tonic, please.”

I downed my drink in the few seconds it took Candy to mix the gin and tonic for my dad—the huckleberry vodka was too sweet, like soda, and not even strong enough to burn on the way down. I watched a couple old men in sun-bleached plaid shirts and baseball caps wander in and settle themselves down at a table near the door and wondered how I’d ended up in the Outlaw. I’d wanted to play music with my Dad’s band since I was three years old, singing along to Alanis Morissette and Mary Chapin Carpenter in the car. When I was eight, my dad bought me a guitar, a blue, half-sized Yamaha. When I taught myself to play, he’d told me I was so much like him; his dad had never taught him a single chord either, he’d said. I’d imagined the places my dad played as sold out arenas and glamorous nightclubs. I’d pictured myself in a sequined dress and cowboy boots like a country superstar, singing to swarms of beautiful, cheering people. As I looked around the Outlaw, that fantasy died. I told Candy to make me another drink, and she handed me something tall and blue. “It’s called a Candy Got Fucked Up,” she said. I tasted the drink carefully. It was strong, almost medicinal.

My dad shot his gin and tonic and flirted with Candy, telling her how hot her body was after having two kids, and asking me if I could believe that she was a mom. I looked at her wrinkles and sagging neck beneath the fake tan and sunset-colored makeup and nodded.

“You two are too sweet,” Candy said, her hands on her exposed hips. She was wearing a pinstriped vest as a shirt. I tried not to make a face at her. “And you look so much alike! Talent and beauty

must run in the family.”

“I’m going to go help Doug and Dave set up,” I said, interrupting Candy. I’d been told I looked like my dad my whole life, but since I’d gotten older, dyed my hair, and grown into my baby fat, the comments had been less and less frequent. It was always unsettling to have our similarities pointed out by strangers.

“What you got there, Chlo?” Doug asked. I shook my head a little to clear it and set my drink down on a free patch of grey-carpeted stage. “It’s called a Candy Got Fucked Up,” I said. Doug and Dave both laughed.

“Are you allowed to use that kind of language?” Dave asked. He adjusted his baseball cap and winked at me.

“Knock it off, Dan, she’s 21,” Doug joked, but with a real warning tone. Doug had been my dad’s best friend since before I was born. He’d warned me that Dave was a notorious flirt. I felt queasy—though from excitement or fear, I wasn’t sure—at the prospect of Dave flirting with me.

“You want to do a mic check?” Doug asked me. He directed me to the microphone at the front and center of the stage and adjusted it to my height. “You’ll be singing in this one.” I stepped up close enough to smell the stale, rotten smell that a mic takes on when you’ve been singing in it for a long time. Mixed together with the metallic, almost sterile metallic tang, the scent had always reminded me of what I imagined a morgue would smell like.

“Check, check,” I said quietly.

“Barry, could you turn up number 2 please?” Doug yelled. Barry, who was chatting with my dad and Candy at the bar, whirled around on his black-booted heels and flashed us a huge smile. “And who’s this pretty little thing? You old enough to be in here, sugar?” he asked, his voice easily carrying across the tiny dance floor.

“I’m 21,” I mumbled, the sound magnified as Brent turned up my mic.

“Say that again, sweetheart, but louder,” Brent called.

“I’m 21,” I repeated myself.

“Wow, 21! Brent said. He crossed from the sound booth to the stage, his cowboy boots clicking on the hardwood dance floor. He stopped in front of me and looked up. “Well, I just might have to take you home,” he said. I glanced at Dale, but he was busy tuning his guitar.

“Hey, that’s my daughter!” my dad yelled, but he was laughing.

“Will you hand me my drink?” I finally asked Brent who obliged me with another big grin. “You’re gonna dance with me later, sweetheart,” he said, turning around and walking back to the sound booth. I downed the last of my drink as quickly as I could and felt a warmth spread between my ears.

“That’s my girl,” my dad said. He crossed the floor and came to stand beside Barry. “She can put it down just like her dad.”

I painted on a smile at the comment, but on the inside I suddenly felt very cold.

*

A body, if left to the whims of nature, would decompose completely in a matter of months. Ants would arrive first, feeding on eyelids, lips, and knuckles. Blue blowflies and carrion flies would lay eggs in orifices, up to 2000 at a time. Insects would secrete enzymes that would dissolve the skin. Within a year, bacteria and moths would eat the corpse’s hair. But the bones, without the influence of a predator or strong natural elements, can last 2-500 years, sometimes even longer. It’s a grim thought, and at the same time, there’s a sort of peace to it, knowing that you, like everything else in this world, are fragile, breakable, disposable. You are no more or less than any creature that has ever lived or will ever live on Earth. Your body can be eroded, changed, and molded by wind and rain, extremes in temperatures, and the animal kingdom, until it is unrecognizable. Yet, somewhere, all pieces of you, all of your matter, exists. The proteins in your flesh, the carbon that makes the core of what you are, the sodium, potassium, nitrogen, calcium, and phosphorus, are formed into something completely new. It’s almost like being reborn.

I know my family, however, will never give me a Tibetan Sky Funeral. In a Christian society, a traditional burial is seen as an act of compassion for the deceased, or at least, that’s what people say. Most of my family takes issue with my father’s request to be cremated. Personally, though I don’t believe in an afterlife or spirits, I believe honoring

the last wishes of the dead is much more compassionate than a burial, feet to the east in preparation for the second coming of Christ. But to my family, and to many others, it's the preservation of the body in its most recognizable state that's important. I guess that's why funeral homes, like Miner Mortuary in Montpelier, Idaho, stay in business. In towns as small as Montpelier, where the only break from the orange dust roads is the grim, grey Bear Lake, receding further and further from the town each year like blood being drained from a corpse, death seems to be the only business that's thriving and alive.

It's been two years since I lived in Montpelier, working fourteen hour shifts at the lake, renting boats and SeaDoos to sunburned tourists and locals with rotting teeth. Once we closed for the season, I drove out of Montpelier and never went back, having had enough of Broulims and their six dollar loaves of bread, Kings Convenience Store, the Bear Lake gift shops full of tacky DIY projects priced at 15.00 apiece. Still, it's easy for me to find Miner Mortuary on Main Street next to the antique shop, which also houses the town's tiny hospital. The electronic message board outside flashes pictures of the babies that have been born recently, a number small enough that some of the pictured infants are probably walking. The picture intermittently changes to an ad for the mortuary—a tasteful, black and white display that mirrors the sign hanging over the double doors.

I know the basics of the embalming

process already; I was determined to come prepared. I had hoped that it would make me feel less squeamish. I can recite the ingredients of embalming fluid like a well-loved recipe for chocolate chip cookies—formaldehyde to preserve the tissue, glycerin to keep the body from becoming dehydrated, borax to keep the blood in a liquid state so it's easier to drain, phenol, potassium nitrate and acetate to act as disinfectants, saffranin and methyl red dyes to make the skin appear more lifelike, and water. Mix these ingredients together and pump into body through a tube inserted into the heart, axillary artery, and, if the body doesn't pump up enough, or if burial won't take place immediately, into the femoral and brachial arteries, as well as directly into the flesh on the abdomen. I've seen pictures of dead bodies in pallor mortis, blood pooling on the backs of their legs and arms like grenadine syrup in a glass of tequila. I've watched videos of students at the world's top school for morticians massaging the fingers of corpses to spread the dyes around

**It's a grim thought,
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under the skin. I've even attended a cadaver lab and managed not to faint as the professor made an incision in the corpse's embalmed skin, pushing it away in two pale curtains to reveal the red muscle underneath. Still, the second I enter the lobby, I feel a cold, dripping feeling down my spine

and between my eyes, the same feeling I get when I'm up high or I cut myself while chopping vegetables. It's the feeling that tells me I'm ill-equipped to handle my current situation, that I'm too close to danger, that something could go terribly wrong if I continue standing where I stand, doing what I'm doing.

Sam Miner, the funeral director, is

my best friend's great-uncle, otherwise he wouldn't have met with me. I can tell he'd rather be somewhere else, though I don't know where, as the mortuary is still open for a few more hours, by the way he smiles at me just a little too often and by the way he sounds when he says "ask away, I have all day!" and runs his hand over his bushy brown and grey beard.

I have a list of questions, but I don't

really know how much more Sam can tell me about the embalming process that I don't already know. I suppose he can act as a sort of fact checker, but I got my information from some pretty reputable sources. I don't much feel like asking him questions like "what's the most decomposed body you've ever worked on?" or "how often do people request open-casket funerals?" Though I'm sure that he'd love to tell me stories—from what I've heard about him from my best friend, her Uncle Sam is a great orator who will keep talking as long as you let him—I'm just not interested in any of his tales of the bizarre. What I'm interested in is seeing a corpse, watching an embalming, though at the same time, I am fairly certain that I will pass out immediately if I'm in the same room as a dead person.

"Is the mortuary a family business?" I finally ask, looking at my notebook and pressing the tip of my pen into the paper until the blue ink bleeds out.

"Yes, my grandpa started it. I couldn't tell you the exact year, though," Sam says. He watches me, his mouth still twisted up in that too-big smile, and rolls his fingers across the desk while I study my list of questions. I feel stupid for not having asked him ahead of time if I can watch him embalm someone. I don't know what the legal repercussions of that would be, if I'd have to sign something to make the family feel more comfortable, if he even has anyone to embalm that day.

"Didn't you bring any more questions?" he asks. He drops the smile just a little, converting it from an all-out toothy affair to a stretched, all-lips grimace.

I glance down at the notebook in my lap again. "Sure," I say, skimming over the questions I can't ask. Luckily for me, he's impatient.

"Do you want to see the morgue?" he asks.

And even though that cold feeling is threatening to freeze me to my chair, I say "ok."

*

In January 2013, it was snowing—big, fat, flakes, the kind that look pretty in movies and photographs but pile up on streets and keep tires from gripping the pavement. My car, a 1995 Toyota Camry,

was a definite upgrade from the barely-animated pile of parts I was driving in 2012, but my Dad could have picked any car on his uncle's used car lot to give me, and I wondered why he didn't pick one with 4 Wheel Drive. He knew I lived in Logan, Utah, where winter lasts from the beginning of October to the middle of April. Of course, I should have been grateful that he got me anything at all, but on a Sunday night, stuck two hours away from Logan in West Jordan, it was hard for me to be happy with what I had. I'd simply wanted to come home for the weekend to see my family—a rare occurrence on account of my work schedule. Now, if I wanted to make it back to Logan, I'd have to wait until morning.

We'd watched every episode of *Parks and Recreation* on catch-up, every YouTube clip my fifteen year old sister, Emily, showed us during commercial breaks, and twenty minutes of three different foreign horror movies. My dad switched them off for nudity, as if I'd never seen breasts before, as if he was bothered by nakedness, as if he hadn't let me be hit on by cowboys at the Outlaw, hadn't laughed on the drive home when I told him that their sexual advances made me uncomfortable.

"Will you let me take your car to the Redbox?" I finally asked my dad, who was lying across our almost-new brown leather sofa, the one we got when we "remodeled" the house last summer and effectively stripped the upstairs of its skin of paint and furniture-flesh, leaving only the nearly bare-bones kitchen essentials and beat up dining room table behind. We grafted everything else on to the basement, bringing it to life. Though we'd given the whole place a fresh coat of paint, covered up the dents and dings from moving things around, we hadn't done much.

"I'll drive you," he said, swinging his legs onto the floor with a little grunt of exertion. He coughed, and I remember not thinking much of it other than it was gross and I wished he'd stop doing it. He hacked up phlegm and winced at what I can only assume was the taste of the stuff, though I tried not to think about it. He reached out his hand and I automatically gave him a tissue from the box on top of the DVD player. He spit into it and opened his eyes. They were red and watering.

“Ow,” he said. He wadded up the tissue and tried to hand it back to me, and I took a defensive step back, hands raised. “Take care of it yourself,” I said.

He nodded, started to hold out his hands for help standing up, and then withdrew them, pushing himself to his feet. He coughed once more; a wet sound.

“Want to go get a coffee while we’re out?” he asked. I hadn’t had caffeine in two years, not since I found out it was exacerbating my panic attacks. But instead of reminding him, I said “sure.”

Dad’s car was parked on the extreme right of the garage, so close to the wall that I wondered how he managed not to hit his side mirrors as he pulled in and out. He made me wait on the porch while he maneuvered his silver Nissan out into the snow, turning the steering wheel as far as it could go, swiveling around Brynn’s car parked directly behind him in the driveway, ending up half-parked on the lawn. He waited until I was close before he honked the horn at me, laughing as I flinched, jumped. The first time he pulled that trick on me, I cried. But I was too old to cry over things like that anymore.

I stared out the window and watched the fat, bloated flakes fall, sprawling out on the asphalt before they were ripped apart by fast-spinning wheels. Over-confident drivers with chains on their tires zipped past us at 55 mph, spraying grey slush in their wake, skidding to a stop at the red traffic light ahead reluctantly, like it was an inconvenience. Our own car, creeping along at 30, fishtailed ever so slightly when my dad pressed on the brakes, pulled into the left-hand turn lane. I glanced over at him and he grimaced, exaggerating the expression by squinching up his eyes and cocking his head to the side. I remember noticing that his seatbelt was unbuckled, and thinking about the time I asked him to buckle it, when he told me he was too fat to dislodge from the car. I shrugged it off the way I’d been shrugging off my dad’s ailments and shortcomings for years.

My Dad coughed again, opened his window, spit into the street.

“What’s up with your cough?” I asked, careful to keep my tone light. If he’d heard the disgust in my voice, the I-wish-you-wouldn’t-

do-that meaning behind my words, it might have set him off. I couldn’t remember how many years it had been since I didn’t have to tiptoe around him, hoping that I was saying and doing the right thing to keep him happy, or at least the odd sort of middle area he was in in January of 2013, depressed, but not angry.

“I’m having some tests done,” he said, and I remember thinking that he meant tests for something like bronchitis. My dad was a hypochondriac, a trait he’d passed on to me. I’d had my fair share of almost-certain heart attacks, aneurisms, and meningococcal meningitis. I’d learned that it was best not to get worked up over any mysterious illnesses without a diagnosis.

“Oh yeah, Mom said that you weren’t feeling too good,” I said, keeping my statement as general as possible, hoping he wouldn’t realize that I didn’t have enough knowledge of the situation to fill in the gaps.

“Yeah, well, I’m over that now. The bronchitis, that is,” he said. I nodded and looked out the window again. I remember wishing he’d turn on some music. Then he told me.

“They think I might have a tumor,” he said, like he was telling me he was tired or asking me to remind him what kind of coffee my sister wanted. I felt lightheaded and cold, despite the little stream of heat from the vent in front of me. My dad never turned the heater all the way up, just like he never buckled his seatbelt or listened to music in the car.

“A tumor?” I paused. “What?”

“Yeah. Pressing on my gag reflex. That’s why I’m always hacking this stuff.”

“Dad, you’ve been doing that for years. You’re just now getting it checked?” It was out of character for my dad to let a symptom persist that long.

As if on cue, he hacked again, harder than before. When he spit out the window, it was a mouthful of clear vomit that mixed with the snow and splashed against the side of the car.

“I know,” he said. He winced. “I didn’t really want to taste my dinner again.” He turned off the heater but left his window down.

All I could think was I am just like my father. Impulsive. Making decisions I know will hurt me.

“It makes me throw up like that all the time. I can’t control it. I’ll just keep hacking and hacking until stuff comes up. I feel like I’m choking all the time,” he said.

“I always just thought you had a lot of phlegm,” I said, because I was trying to be funny, because I was remembering how often, growing up, that he’d spit into a tissue and open it up to show me the green and red-splotched mess inside, how he’d try to force me to take the open Kleenex to the garbage for him, how sometimes he’d laugh and sometimes he’d get mad when I said no.

“Do Brynn and Emily know?” I asked. We pulled up to the Beans and Brews, which was completely empty inside except for a bored-looking barista with red hair; the shade you might see in stage makeup—brilliant vermilion to paint life back into the actor’s stage-white face.

“We’ll go through the drive through,” he said by way of reply. “What do you want to drink?”

“Nothing,” I said, because it was easier than asking him if there were decaf options and having to re-explain why I don’t drink coffee any more.

“Whatever, dude,” he said. He leaned out the window and chirped happily to the barista girl, the kind of manic energy that others found charming and I’d always found exhausting. When we left, he tipped her five bucks.

*

I’m not sure what I expect the morgue itself to look like. Or smell like. As Sam unlocks the door at the end of a dimly lit hallway, I try

to recall what I’ve seen in movies and TV shows; a white room full of silver drawers that contain the dead bodies, a silver table on wheels where a corpse lays covered in a sheet. Tags on toes purple with pooling blood. *But there won’t be a corpse*, I remind myself.

The first thing I notice is the odor. The sharp bite of antiseptic, like the room where my Grandpa lay, shaking off anesthesia, his leg freshly amputated. Like the smell of the wet wipes my dad used to use to sterilize his insulin injection sites. But underneath that, just barely discernible, is a smell like carrion on the highway. Death-smell. I gag.

“You’ll get used to the smell,” Sam says, like something straight out of a prepared script. I nod and try not to cover my nose, to distract myself by studying my surroundings.

There are several silver gurneys, like I imagined, and the place is very white. Spotless, even. Each gurney is pushed up against the wall, and at the foot of each bed there’s a white wooden shelf holding a machine that looks like a blender, except for the yellow and blue tubes wound up around the bottom. From the videos I’ve watched, I recognize this as the machine used to pump the embalming fluid into the corpse.

Across the room from the gurneys is a long counter that reminds me of a doctor’s office, but where you might see pamphlets advertising Botox injections or microdermabrasion, the dangers of unprotected sex or how to know if you have strep throat, there was a squat white box full of thin silver scissors. A green plastic bucket. Unlabeled spray bottles full of orange liquid. A bathroom cup with a brush and comb. A roll of twine.

On the counter, there’s also a picture of Sam with his kids. A miniature radio, which Sam explains is there “because he doesn’t like to work in silence.”

“You know I can’t let you watch an actual embalming,” he finally says, running his hands over his beard. “But there is a funeral tomorrow at one. You know where the chapel is, right? Out in Dingle? You could get a look at an embalmed body, if you want.”

I drove past that chapel every morning on my way to work. Din-

gle, about ten minutes north of Montpelier, is a collection of old farms and dilapidated sheds, trucks whose engines won't start, empty fields that used to hold horses and cows.

"Yes," I say. "The family won't mind?"

He gives me a phone number to call, to make sure. The family doesn't mind at all.

*

"How's your dad?" Tyler asked, his head in the fridge. He pulled out four bottles of Woodbridge wine, three the same yellow-white color, one deep burgundy. He shut the fridge and leaned back against the counter, looking at me with his I'm-listening face through the thick-framed glasses I remember telling him he should buy the last time I saw him exactly ten days ago, when he'd randomly texted me to come over and watch Harry Potter.

I watched him watching me, taking note of his light brown hair that had grown out from the "hipster haircut" he was so proud of a few months earlier, so long on top that it would nearly brush his chin if he didn't style it. At that moment it was hat-mussed and wavy, and I wanted to play with it, but I didn't. I reminded myself to have some self-control, that two months ago the only

reason Tyler wanted to talk to me was because he thought that I'd sleep with him if he just complimented my shoes and told me my last love interest was a jerk. I remembered meeting him at my friend Hillary's backyard barbeque weeks after breaking things off with Nick, the guy with a serious girlfriend who was most definitely not me. I remembered Tyler's perfectly straight, white smile and plaid button up shirt, and the way he'd asked me if I wanted another drink at least three times over the course of the night. How he'd told me I deserved better than Nick while we smoked hookah and listened to Hillary sing while David played the guitar. How later that night Tyler had told David he was disappointed I hadn't gone home with him. But in that moment, with Tyler leaning against the counter, asking me if I preferred red or white wine, we were bound by more than a group of mutual friends. Tyler's dad had died of cancer, and my dad, it seemed, would follow suit.

"I don't know, he doesn't talk to me," I half-lied, because I knew that my dad wouldn't disclose much if I did call him, and also because I'd been refusing to contact him since the last time I was home. I wasn't sure if it was because I didn't want to know his prognosis, or if it was easier to let him go early.

"Well, how do you feel about the whole thing? I know you two aren't...close," he said. I could tell he was picking his words carefully, but he needn't have bothered. I didn't mind that he knew the gory details of my life, shared with him on another night like that one, under the influence of another bottle. He handed me a white wine, and I studied the label instead of answering him. "It's a Moscato, that's my favorite," he said.

"I don't know how I feel about the situation with my dad," I said by way of reply, setting the wine down. "Where's your corkscrew?"

Tyler opened a drawer to his right, but instead of handing me the corkscrew, he opened the bottle himself, looking at me expectantly.

"I mean, I have so many unresolved issues with him. Especially with his...infidelity."

Tyler knew the whole story—how my dad used to work with a girl named Ashley, how I remember visiting him when I was eight or nine. How my mom hugged him, and though I couldn't remember my dad's expression, I heard her accusing him over the phone, locked in the bathroom, of "shooting Ashley a look" while they were embracing. I'd told Tyler about how my mom always made lists on yellow legal pads—chores, homework, and whatever else was on her mind. The list I'd found on her bed, forgotten, contained bulleted items like "why?" and "she's so young." I'd told Tyler how she'd said, "I don't care what fan-

**Looking at the face of the man in the coffin
feels like looking at the wax figures at
Madame Tussaud's in Vegas.**

tasies you have about her, it's over." I was eight or nine, and I never forgave my dad for that moment. I had never heard my mom cry before that night, and except for a few tears in sad movies, I'd never witnessed her crying since. I'd thought, fleetingly, that being Nick's "mistress" would give me some insight into my dad's state of mind, and I'd understand how a relationship could be dead before it took its first breath. Instead, being with Nick had just reminded me of all the ways my dad and I were alike.

"I have a friend," Tyler said, "who was abused by her dad. I think sexually abused. And he got cancer and died, and she wore red to the funeral." He held out the bottle of Moscato to me. "Smell," he said. I leaned forward and inhaled the sweet, sharp smell, green and fresh, like the skin of a grape under the sun. Tyler smiled at me. "We'll let it breathe for a moment," he said. He set the wine down on the counter. "As long as you don't want to wear red to your dad's funeral, I think it's OK that you're so conflicted. You guys don't have the best relationship in the world."

Tyler poured us two glasses of the Moscato, letting the liquid rise nearly to the rim. "You need a big glass for this kind of night," he said and led me upstairs to his bedroom. There were greyscale pictures of cities I couldn't name on the walls, leather bound books lined up on the desk, a dresser that must have come with the apartment with heart-shaped cutouts on the drawers. I sipped the wine and smelled it at the same time, because Tyler told me that it improves the flavor. I felt the wine-fog growing warm and welcome between my ears, while Tyler explained to me that he had five copies of *Dorian Grey* because it's his favorite novel, showed me the wine cabinet he'd made in his desk, told me how he didn't remember anything from the time his dad got diagnosed to the time he died just three months later. I let the wine fog take me from my spot, arms folded, as close to the edge of his bed as possible, to the air above his lips, beneath them, and all the places in between.

"I don't think my dad would be proud of the person I am now," Tyler said. He rolled over onto his back so we were no longer looking one another in the eye, his naked shoulders and forehead slick with sweat. "I know that sounds like a line from a movie. But by the time

he was my age, he'd already worked for NASA, and here I am, trying to get my degree, and I'm not even that good at anatomy and physiology. I'm not that good at anything." He pushed his grown-out hair out of his eyes. "I don't keep...him alive? Do you understand what I mean by that?"

I shrugged my shoulders. "I don't think you're supposed to keep him alive. You're just supposed to remember him."

"It's the same thing," he said.

"Tyler," I said after a moment.

"You don't have to do this," he said.

"I'm not trying to cheer you up." I rolled over onto my back and stared at his ceiling. "I just think...you have control over your own life. If you're not happy with it, change it. If you want to be more like your dad...do it. He's half of your DNA. You already have a good start."

"It doesn't work like that," he said. He brushed the hair out of his eyes and twisted it around his finger for a moment. "Goodnight."

The next morning, I got my keys, pulled on my dress, and found my shoes by the door before Tyler had time to wake up. I walked out of his apartment into the new snow. I hadn't realized how cold it was the night before. The snow blew, stinging my face, in the morning wind from the canyon, and I thought about my dad. Not about whether he was going to live or die, but about his affair so many years ago. I thought about my dad and Ashley and their clandestine relationship, so similar to every relationship I'd ever had. I wondered if they'd ever loved each other, or if they'd used each other, or if one of them had been in love while the other one got used. And I thought about Tyler, and what I'd said to him—that he could control himself. That his father was already half of him, preserved in him whether or not he knew it. I thought about the parts of my father in me, and wondered if what I had said to Tyler was true, and whether or not I wanted it to be.

*

Looking at the face of the man in the coffin feels like looking at the wax figures at Madame Tussaud's in Vegas. His skin has obviously been painted with foundation. His blush is just a little too red

for his light complexion. I feel like I can see every pore desperately trying to draw breath through the sunset-colored crap. Except, of course, that can't happen, I remind myself. He's dead.

To make a person appear alive for a viewing or open-casket funeral, after the embalming fluid has been pumped through the deceased, the eyelids are super glued shut. A needle is threaded behind the upper lip, across the nose through the nostrils, then down behind the lower lip where it's tied in a knot. This is to keep the corpses mouth closed, both because of the unsettling effect of a swollen dead tongue protruding from a dead man's lips, but also because the organs will soon begin to putrefy, and the methane-stink is far from pleasant. The hair is washed and combed, if needed, and the nails are clean, a habit that many don't take seriously even when living. Vaseline or cream is used to moisturize the skin, and then cosmetics are applied. For all Sam's talk about how embalming is an art, and his job is to preserve the corpse just as they were in life, the result is a person who looks so lifelike, it's unnatural. The cosmetics, the sewn up lips and eyes, the organs prevented from decaying naturally, seem like a form of denial. A way to keep something alive that clearly isn't. It feels almost selfish, in a way.

I try not to take too much time staring at the stranger's face, but I can't help but think about what my dad would look like in a coffin. I wonder if it'd be more or less unsettling than seeing his body rolled into a crematorium, or knowing that it's being eaten by animals. Or maybe dissected in a cadaver lab. Then I realize that it's not what happens to something once it's dead that's unsettling, it's realizing that there's no spark of life left, no matter how much we try to disguise it. That no matter what colors we paint on dead skin, no matter how we form faces into peaceful expressions, a corpse is just that—a corpse. The only things that won't decay are the things we can't control. Those little blips of genetic sameness like eye color or musical ability. Those things I fight so hard to change.

*

Two weeks after my dad told me about his tests, I sat in my room, waiting for a reply to my text asking if he'd gotten any results. My room was a museum of unwashed clothing, empty bottles, paper-bag

corpses that once held warm fast food. I hadn't cleaned anything in days, and the filth made it hard to function. But I didn't want to pretend that things were OK, so I simply didn't do anything at all. My grades were slipping, professors and friends were becoming worried, and there I was, day after day in bed with a beer or glass of wine, watching Netflix on my laptop and trying not to think.

Because when I thought too much, I remembered that my father didn't know anything about me, nor I about him, except that we were supposed to love each other and care when bad things happened. And I felt worse because I wasn't sure I cared. I wasn't sure I wanted to try to care. I wasn't sure I wanted words like "cancer" and "biopsy" and "malignant" to mean something to me.

So instead, I'd sought comfort in alcohol, in sleep, in nights with Tyler that occurred only on his terms and ended with me fumbling for my car keys, trying to leave before he woke up. And all I could think was I am just like my father. Impulsive. Making decisions I know will hurt me. I thought about what Tyler said—that remembering someone and keeping them alive are the same thing. And I had to wonder if this was how I'd keep my dad alive—in drinking, in sleeping around, in never having a complete loyalty to anyone.

I hated those things about myself, and it made me hate him more.

I'd pick up my guitar, play a couple of chords, and put it back down. I couldn't make music any more without thinking of my dad. I knew he had given me positive characteristics. I knew that when he died, the pieces of him that he left behind, the parts of him in me, were not completely bad. But the things that I gravitated to, the things I did not have to preserve, but did... those were the horrors.

So when I got the text back that said the tumor was benign, I didn't feel happy or relieved. I didn't feel disappointed. I felt like I was in a nowhere place. Cold and quiet and still.

2nd

Lori Lee

River Touchstones

San Juan River, Southeastern Utah

"You cannot step into the same river twice." — Heraclitus

A warm breeze hums through the screens along the top of the palapa-style hut. Grass walls swing like skirts as I stroll in, unintentionally late, my Chacos picking their way across the dirt floor scattered with peanut shells. My navy sarong wisps around my tan legs, natural air conditioning in the hot, dry desert air, and the pre-trip dinner fills with the chatter of strangers. "Where are you from?" "What do you do?" "What brings you to the San Juan?" "Have you been here before?" I see him then. But at the time it means nothing. He means nothing. Instead I glance at the lady wearing the red and blue Hawaiian shirt with naked surfers on it, and the two older gals with funny sun hats and drooping skin that fill the first table. A pudgy rocket scientist from Colorado and a newspaper owner and his wife chatter as their verbal exchange disappears on the San Juan breeze. I am the journalist-on-the-job and I plop down by an artist from New York and him, the writer for the New York Times, at the corner table. We introduce ourselves and make pointless chatter about the wonderful week ahead. We have no idea the difference seven days will make. In our mid-thirties, we claim the title of "youngest in the group." It's the night before we launch. The energies and gestures, some indifferent, some intense, have started to intermingle between everyone; the beginning of our metamorphosis from single to collective.

Tonight we will sleep in our B&B's, our motels and lodges; tomorrow we will pile, one on top of another, into cargo vans, our torpedo-like gray dry-bags filled with too few clothes and a shortage of sunscreen. Tomorrow we will begin to share more than we ever intended--the river requires intimacy. You cannot live for seven days

in the wild without in some part, meshing with those you bathe, barf, sweat and eat with. There are not many circumstances in which you find yourself peeing in public with recently acquired acquaintances, but river running is one of them.

One thing I do not realize the first time I head for the river is that the person who steps onto the raft will not be the same person who steps off. The water washes not only grains of sand from the belly of the rock; it washes from me my routine, takes me to a momentary place, a liminal space, where so many things cease to matter. The consequences of the step onto the river are as opaque as the red silt water. It is a time and space where, like the rock, I am carved... we are carved, yet added upon one grain at a time.

It's only been a few months since I took my children, divided nine years of belongings and left my husband to try and find the happiness I was certain I deserved. Loneliness is a multi-sided space. There is the loneliness when one simply wants companionship; there is the terrible loneliness one can have despite being with another person; and then there is the compound loneliness of being untouched, unappreciated, unconnected. This is the loneliness I carry on my back as I step onto the river.

At 6:00 a.m. we struggle to push the rafts from the shore, the sun filling the desert with color and warmth, the blue bulk of the rafts scraping the sand, the trailer, our legs and hands. The water laps at us, pulls us in, and we find our place in the sun. Eyes locked downstream, we scan the silt-laden waters of a prehistoric desert river that has held its course for a thousand lifetimes and watch 12,000 years of human use and occupation. When John Wesley Powell passed the mouth of the San Juan River in 1869, he barely acknowledged it. Powell and his crew of archaeologists and geologists spent the next decade exploring and mapping the last blank spot on the United States map --the Colorado Plateau. Like others before and after, Powell could see no practical use for the river and so the San



Art, Honorable Mention
Scuba Diving
Maria Williams

Juan stayed a terra incognita, difficult to access and even more difficult to harness. Our first days and nights on the river reveal snatches of history, give the tiniest peek, just enough for us to wonder at those brave and hardy pioneers who made their lives at its sandy flanks. It is along these sandy flanks that I begin to pick up stones.

Our first day we raft to River House. River House claims status as the most extensive Ancestral Puebloan dwelling on the San Juan between Bluff and Clay Hills Crossing. With 14 storage and living rooms, a kiva and petroglyphs along the upper reaches of the alcove, this dwelling has given up secrets and clues to an ancient people we will never know. The 1,500 dried corncobs, hundreds of potshards, a sandal and fragments of cloth and yucca date the site at 700 A.D. – 1300 A.D. Hiking west we climb Comb Ridge, a 700-foot wall over which the Mormon pioneers struggled to pull their wagons. The effort was so extensive oxen died in the yoke and stumbling horses left blood on the rocks. Our efforts require nothing more than sipping our Gatorade® and at the top we peer across the vast muddy swath washing through the desert; burnt rocks lined in millennia with chocolate browns, frosted oranges, burnt sienna and buff. James, the journalist with the New York Times, banters with me as we hike. He and his brother-in-law are out for their annual trek to a Utah river and I think little of his attention. It's no more than I would have exchanged with anyone else...but quietly, in my own mind, I am enjoying his attention, his verbal sparring, his company.

As night falls we wrestle our tents, despite the wind, flapping and colorful onto the sands below River House. Here I learn that sand does not hold tent stakes, and only large stones—inside my tent—will keep me grounded. The cooks make the futile attempt at using their suntanned hands as sand shields over strips of sirloin sizzling and popping for fajitas, while the monochromatic browns surround us: the water, the sand, the cliffs in their patina and lichen clothing. Before I learn of stones, my tent lifts into the air, a green kite on the wind, my river mates catch and secure it for me. George and Nancy, my tent neighbors, go about my business while I sit unknowingly, by the coursings of the muddy river in my Therma-rest ground chair watching the river flow with a quiet, but startling power. These two have known me only hours, but my tent now sits staked—7-mm

rope and river rocks. When I find out what they have done, how they saved my only shelter, I am touched. We have floated only one day together. I put this small touchstone, rubbed smooth by the river, in my pocket to remember their kindness.

The first night is the last night I sleep in my tent. Too much sun. Not enough water. Day two surrounds me like a gorgeous blister: chocolate desert water, the friction of my swimsuit clad body perched unprotected on the baby blue tube of the raft, forgetting the sun holds the power of gods. I spend my second night curled next to the coolness of the river my head a throbbing mass I'd like to tear off and send downstream. I don't go to my tent, the stuffiness a prison, but more importantly it is too far from the river and I need quick access as I repeatedly retch into the sienna current as the night passes. I lie still, curled in fetal position on my sleeping pad. Late, dark, but desert warm with a solid black sky of screaming stars. I expect nothing from anyone. It's my own fault I wasn't more careful—I know better—and the flat desert night spins around my head, around my body. And it is here, in this scene that James comes, sits next to me, brings his sleeping pad out and lies by my side. He tethers me, keeps me from spinning away.

"I'm sorry," I grumble. "You don't have to stay here." I'm embarrassed. I hardly know him. He keeps his hand on my back all night, does not leave me to the loneliness of being sick with no one by my side. I think I shall love him forever simply for that comforting hand. My first year at college I found myself

kneeling on the floor over a cold apartment toilet, the first time I'd been sick without my mother to bring me water or soda and brush the hair from my face. I cried, not because of the wretchedness of being ill, but because of the realization of the solitary aspect of growing up—the pang so stark I remember it 13 years later. James becomes a touchstone. At critical times what seems small to the giver makes all the difference to the one who receives. That night something invisible happened.

His hand on my back, his body sleeping by my side through the darkness and heat of the desert night, the kindness. It wasn't a gift, it was a tie—invisible, unspoken, but from that night on I always knew where James sat, walked or swam, and I could feel him. Heat stroke sends me to the river, lays me out under the stars, shows me how it feels to sleep under a black sky of delirious, glowing orbs unfettered by human light, unblocked by tent mesh. Of all the stones I collected, this small, smooth pebble is the one I kept. This touchstone of the freedom of the dark desert night without filters; this I can always return to.

In the morning when I groggily force my eyes open, I find we have slept beneath a towering red-rock structure that resembles

a man's face so completely no one has to point it out or describe it. It is simply there, across the river, looking down, a guardian. Guardians surrounded me. And so now does James.

In 1965, in *Down the Colorado*, Robert Brewster Stanton wrote, "The red is not in itself brilliant, but the effect of the morning and evening sun shining upon the cliffs

through the peculiar atmosphere of that dry country, produces a most startling effect, till the whole side of the Canyon seems ablaze with scarlet flame." Rafting the 83 mile stretch of meandering river from Sand Island to Clay Hills takeout, takes us through a

history from which we lie so far removed it is hard to fathom the eons that have passed in forming the faces and layers revealed. Shortly after the initial launch the river runs by Navajo sandstone walls lined with thick black streaks of desert varnish where minerals from the dirt atop the cliff have bled down the face year after year after year. The cliffs have the look and name of "Tiger Walls." We pass through the Honaker Trail formation dated 290 million years old, we pass through the Triassic, Jurassic and Pennsylvanian eras. And yet the San Juan is fa-

Tomorrow we will begin to share more than we ever intended—the river requires intimacy.

mous for the Goosenecks, a tight twisting path the river has cut into the rock where it takes eight river miles to cover one mile of land. A prime example of an entrenched meander. When taking the path of least resistance the route is seldom direct. James and I become an entrenched meander. We talk on the back of the raft mile after mile. His vocabulary astounds me. I want to have him just for the words he knows. I'm kind of ashamed to call myself a writer next to him. Shit, I need a dictionary to keep up, but it's gorgeous on the ears. The river cannot claim independence of the larger landscape surrounding it; it has evolved as a consequence of the land. We are the same.

The sun catches up with me despite wet draped towels across my shoulders and a wide brim hat. My skin screams in vibrant red and yet tomorrow is more sun that I can't avoid. Nurse Lynn takes me to her tent and pulls out a bottle of soothing after-sun burn relief. I can't remember the brand, but when she sent me out with the bottle in hand and told me I could keep it, again I was surprised at another personal kindness. The lotion smelled tropic and clean and I slathered it on, day after day, cooling my skin and blessing nurse Lynn. I picked up another stone, this one speckled, and added it to my pocket.

The river guides have two inflatable kayaks referred to as Duckys. Each day we choose to either ride the big blue rafts while a guide rows, or to row ourselves in these bright yellow banana boats. Near the beginning of the trip, Joan and Jean, the two older women, carefully scoot their bodies into position in the Ducky. Joan, in back, her face lost in her lifejacket, becomes nothing but a hat, a life vest and two arms. Jean, in front, seems less secure with this idea, though the two have rowed together off and on over a forty-year friendship. Each day they choose the Ducky. They have discovered their place on this trip, like I have discovered my place under the stars. Their second day we notice the Ducky rocking. Jay guides our boat toward them. "I was just trying to hang over the side to pee," responds Joan matter-of-factly with a bit of a sheepish grin. "Courageous," says Jay, "but your technique requires refinement."

On the last day, when Duckys are being divvied, Joan adamantly stakes her claim. "We are going to die sooner than the rest of you," she says, "so you will all have another time to row a Ducky. We are not getting out!" I thought of offering to wrestle her for it, but am afraid I might lose. They do their thing. We do ours.

The days and the nights pass and the older crowd says "the younger generation just likes to spend time together," but I know this is how they let us save face, how they justify his attention to me when the sun glints off his wedding ring. Fun, gentle, intelligent and the tension between us is a tightly woven spring. It's day five of seven and the guides paddle the bulging blue rafts toward a sandy beach take-out. As the rafts slide ashore, rubber grinding sand, everyone scatters like candy tossed at a parade, finding space from each other, putting up our tent city; but somehow James and I gravitate like magnets to a desert waterfall just south of camp. It is hot and wet and we rinse the grit from our hair and feet, the water splashing from us in joyous hops, reflecting in the sunlight. I languish in the pool beneath the falls water splashing off my upturned face, and he slowly sits down next to me. "Are we going to do this?" he whispers, as he looks me straight in the eyes, water running down his cheek, the air alive with tension, with the unknown, with the hopes of the body. In one sentence James, with his words, transforms what is visceral, unspoken attraction into something concrete. Into a stone. I look back, into his blue eyes, needing him the way the desert needs this waterfall, and say, "No. I won't do that to you...or your wife." The words are a stone in my throat, I swallow hard. It has become real. It has become words. And I have let go of the tether I so badly wanted to hold on to.

At week's end when the rafts slide into Clay Hills landing, one tan leg, then the other slides over the hard, bloated muscle of the raft. Our feet touch a concrete ground that leads us away from the river. Only then does leaving become real. Only then do we realize we will never step into the same river twice. Only then does the liminal space disappear and the reality of leaving him, the river – wide and fast, dark and powerful, hit me hard in the stomach and the panic rises.

Washing the red desert silt from our clothes cannot be done; washing it from the soul proves equally difficult. This is the way water carves. The way of creation. I have filled my pockets with worn river touchstones, and as I reluctantly step from the river to the cement launch pad, I dig my hand into my pocket to make sure I haven't lost them. I want to turn around, get back on the river, but I know it is gone. The river we stepped into has swept past us.

3rd

Paden Carlson

Nocturnal Navigation

Night isn't bad, only misunderstood. Owls know that; their saucer-eyes, black pearls bobbing in yellow yolk, are more moon than anything—mysterious, peculiar. It seems that these feathered statuary have forever known something terribly great, never telling, never sharing the secrets tucked in their lethal beaks. When they do manage to regurgitate information, it's usually as they hack it up in private, sliding furry cocoons of bone and beak up their gullets.

Motionless plumes, owls are an appendage of trees, breathing branches. Disguised in earthy tones, they are swift autumn leaves that plummet through air, silently crunching their prey. The stroke of an owl's talon slashes the underbelly of its victims as they are swallowed whole.

Some compare the owl's talons to those of other raptor's—birds of prey such as the eagle, hawk, or falcon. I prefer to think of them as being distinctive to the owl, living fossils that are firm and immovable, striking flawlessly in the dark. The dark. That's something distinctive to the moon-bird too. Owls and other raptors share a common ancestor: Velociraptor, the bird-dinosaur. But unlike Velociraptor's other descendants, the owl is nocturnal, subclassed in its

own category because it thrives in the dark.

Velociraptors stopped thriving; they don't live on in the same fashion they once did, probably because the flightless bird succumbed to its animal nature. Couldn't sort the chaos. Couldn't find balance in the madness of its wild life. The Velociraptor had to adapt to survive, evolve into something new, thus giving rise to the vulture, the osprey, the harrier, the buzzard, and other birds of prey.

That's how it happened, Velociraptor's weakness giving rise to a new species, creating creatures that possess the necessary skills to survive. But the owl wasn't content. While other birds of prey ceased adaptation, obtaining flight and other minor adjustments to their genomes, owls persisted, becoming exceptional.

Not only have owls acquired the ability to effectively navigate the dark, they have also developed a wonderful silence, using the serrated edges of flight feathers to muffle their wing beats. The eyes of owls, different from other birds, are forward facing, allowing greater depth perception. Such vision enables them to better discern their surroundings in the dark.

I saw one a few nights ago, an owl, though I couldn't believe it. At first I drove past, barely catching sight of the creature, charmed by the notion that the downy effigy may have been the elusive bird I sought. But I wasn't convinced. When I turned back, guiding my car south on Bridge Street, I saw it clearly: a gray-white tuft perched on a city sign, species determinable because of two horns, one protruding from either side of its head. Jerking its neck with sharp accuracy, the owl watched me for a moment, and, as I neared, floated away in the dark.

**I couldn't help thinking we
are all visitors of some sort,
to mortality and life and the
unknown.**

Once the owl uncovered the sign, I could better read it. Big white letters spelled “VISITOR INFORMATION.” I couldn’t help thinking we are all visitors of some sort, to mortality and life and the unknown. Unlike owls, we don’t gracefully maneuver the dark. We aimlessly clutch at our problems, the metaphorical prey in our lives—the pests—never able to strike our difficulties dead. So we cease to thrive, flightless and chaotic like the Velociraptor.

But it’s not enough to simply go on surviving, either, like modern birds of prey—adapting just enough to prolong their species’ exis-

tence. We should yearn to flourish like the owl. In time, we too could learn to maneuver the dark, silently (even nobly) manage our struggles, use new vision to glimpse meaning in the madness. So, I say we adapt, evolve, prosper, thrive. We’ll no longer rely on owls to guide spirits through the afterlife; we’ll not worship the wisdom of the bird as Greece once did, or fear its mysterious presence as the Arabs do. We’ll pursue the owl that swoops down from the “VISITOR” sign, accompany him into the dark, and obtain his knowledge for ourselves.



Undergraduate Art, Second Place
Attachment
Norian Cruz

UNDERGRADUATE

1st

Tracy Jones

The Cost of Love

Chin cupped in my hand, I gazed through the small, oval-shaped window of the airplane. Staring absent-mindedly, I meditated on the unending cerulean sky and the swirls of clouds that seemed to carry us along on a lazy, white cotton-candy river, 35,000 feet above the ground. Below that lay a sheet of sapphire blue Atlantic Ocean, occasionally dotted with tiny white specks of ships, much larger, I'm sure, than they looked from my vantage point. We were Haiti bound.

Beside me, Zach*, my 17-year-old son, shifted in his sleep. We'd had to get up at an ungodly hour to catch the shuttle to the airport, and he'd fallen asleep almost immediately after takeoff. He had graduated from high school 3 weeks prior, and this trip was part graduation gift and part dream fulfillment of helping on an international mission trip with our church's youth group. The foray had been planned since early in the year, but he was the only male going, and there were no male chaperones available. Unwilling to see him miss out, I offered to come along, trusting we would somehow find the money to cover the costs for us both.

The rest of our group had scattered throughout the plane, so we had only each other for the next 4 hours. I sighed and glanced back down at the textbook resting on my pull-down tray: *Stress with a Human Face*. Taking an online class to nibble away 3 more credits in the interminable quest for my degree, I needed to steal every moment possible during the trip to keep up on my homework. I had signed up for the "Stress Management" class back in the spring, either a freak foreshadowing or cruel irony of what would soon come. I again looked over at the window, my own stress-filled face reflected back as my thoughts turned once again to Denny*, my firstborn. The always-threatening tears from these past two weeks

trickled down their well-worn path, even as I tried to blink-blink-blink them away.

It had all started about a month before. Okay—if I'm honest—it started a lifetime before that. But after years of begging, of fighting, of pleading, of rationalizing, of broken promises and lies as thin as the first freeze on a wintry marsh, it became clear that nothing but a bitter dose of tough love would work. And as his mom, I knew I must force-feed him the heaping spoonful of that awful medicine that might prove to choke us both. I had my grown baby boy arrested.

Haiti shares the western half of a large Caribbean island with its neighbor, the Dominican Republic. Originally home to the Arawak Indians, the island is well known as the landing spot for Christopher Columbus, which he renamed Hispaniola, claiming its people and their land for Spain. Typical for this period of history, Spanish ownership didn't last long. Over the next 100 years, French buccaneers stole the western half of the island from Spain bit-by-bit, and the French monarchy eventually established command over present-day Haiti. They established massive sugar plantations throughout the country and imported huge numbers of African slaves to provide the necessary labor. This group of strong, beautiful, spirited and spiritual people united themselves together in the 13-year-long Haitian Rebellion, in 1804 becoming the first nation to break free from slavery.

Surrounded by heavenly looking crystal-blue seas that I had only ever seen on postcards, Haiti measures just slightly larger than the state of Maryland, with a population of 10.5 million, nearly double that of Maryland. Sadly, over 80% live below—far below—the poverty line, the poorest nation in the western hemisphere. The causes of that poverty are extremely complex, and they began almost immediately after the new nation's 1804 birth. At their root they involve both corruption by a small group of elites within the country and interference and pressure from outside nations, including France and the United States.

Like a wayward child, the country has fallen far since her glory days.

As our plane swooped toward the lone runway, the Haitian passengers erupted joyously, hooting and cheering, clapping wildly, and shouting praises to God. Unsure if it was a show of love for their homeland or the thrill of having arrived safely at all, I couldn't help but share their enthusiasm. I grabbed my books and my carry-on, and waited patiently behind Zach to exit the plane, listening to the excited Creole chatter all around us. We had reached our destination: Port-au-Prince and the Touissant L'Ouverture International Airport, a lofty name for a bedraggled 2-story concrete and glass edifice that resembles a 1970s-era prison I'd seen in an old movie. Portions of the building were barricaded and covered by battered plastic tarps, large areas still under construction to repair damage from the deadly 2010 earthquake two years before.

Our group was there to volunteer in an orphanage for two weeks, founded and run by the most amazing woman I've ever met, Barbara Walker. A large woman, 68-years-old, Barbara bustles around in her trademark blue gunny-sack dresses, barking orders one minute and laughing with the kids who run and play in the orphanage courtyard the next. Her tough New Yorker exterior attempts to camouflage her golden heart. When I first learned of the work she does, I couldn't help but envision a modern-day Mother Theresa. Meeting her for the first

time, I immediately understood why Mandi, my friend leading this trip, fondly refers to her as "Rambo in a blue dress." Others who volunteer there call her "the General." You can't help but love her, but don't expect to pull anything past her.

Always strong-willed, Denny could act sweet as golden honey one minute and in the next drive me over the edge with unrelenting arguments and attitude. Not that he didn't have reasons—their childhood had not been the innocent, carefree time I had dreamed of for either of my sons—with an early divorce from their father who had abandoned his commitment as a parent and the later challenges of blending into another family, just two of their many trials. As his mom, I rationalized and defended and enabled with the best of them. I felt sure my love would eventually see him through: past the overly-angry outbursts after a missed goal at the soccer game, past the manipulations against his siblings and parents to gain what he wanted, past the stolen change off the bathroom counter or the pocket of my purse. As he grew, so did the problems: failing grades, larger amounts of money stolen, vanishing items likely sold to buy the drugs I later learned he'd used.

He was nearing 20, but my husband and I had invited him to live at home again, to help him get back on his feet. We hoped that this time would be the turning point, that this time he would keep the job, that this time he would follow through with the counseling appointments I set up...

After an hour of waiting in the sticky, sweltering air to get through Customs and fighting through the throng of other sweaty, frazzled passengers trying to find their luggage in the free-for-all that constituted baggage claim, we were finally en route to the orphanage. Lucien,

"I will have you arrested...This. Has. Got. To. STOP!"

our driver, careened in and out among the other vehicles, pedestrians, and bicyclists, often creating a third or fourth lane on the two-lane road, miraculously avoiding the oncoming drivers all doing the same, everyone's horns a-blaring. We drove the pitted and pocked chalky-gray roads, most with tire-eating craters, past untold numbers of street-side vendors, their cheerful colors standing in stark contrast to the drab gray that cloaked the city, past heaps of garbage poised precariously on street corners and overflowing the gutters, spilling down the embankment and into the river, past free-roaming goats, pigs, cows, and the occasional chicken, until we shuddered to a stop outside the electric-blue gated compound of

Ruuska Village, our home for the next few weeks. It was time to meet the general and get settled in to the cement-block guesthouse.

I received a call from my bank the Monday after Zach graduated.

“Mrs. Jones,” said the brusque voice. “I need to know when you’ll bring your account current.” With her words, I felt the roar, the tear, the annihilation of my heart’s walls, my emotions crumbling like the mounds of rubble amid the Haitian devastation I’d witnessed on the news in the earthquake’s aftermath.

My husband had lost his job a few months before when the dealership he’d worked at for years crumbled, and we had become another innocent bystander driven to our knees by the struggling economy. After a few months of fruitless job hunting, he decided to open his own shop. Because of this, our savings had already dwindled down to nothing, even without the constant stealing.

I had checked online the week before and seen that, once again, Denny had siphoned off more money without my permission, only this time he had left me slightly in the hole. I confronted him, as I always did.

“If I see so much as five more cents missing from my account, I will have you arrested,” I had threatened. “I absolutely do NOT have the money to keep covering for you. This. Has. Got. To. STOP!”

“I know... I’m sorry... I’ll pay it back.” I’d heard this mantra before, accompanied by manufactured tears meant to show his sincerity.

The woman’s voice continued buzzing in my ear, my brain and heart staggering drunkenly when I heard the amount I now owed. Rather than a manageable \$50 dollars in the hole as it had been days before, it now yawned into a chasm-like \$700... He had stolen my checkbook and written several checks for hundreds of dollars, pre-dated to make it look like it had been done before we had the talk, but the bank’s dates clearly showed they were cashed after.

Sickened, I slumped to the floor. The remnants of my emotions crumbled like chalk dust and sloughed away with my tears.

Orphanages in Haiti don’t necessarily house just orphans, as the name implies. Of the estimated 30,000 “orphans” in the country, 80% have at least one living parent who has given them up for adoption, literally choosing between life or death for their children. They have made this choice because of their extreme poverty—70% live on less than \$2 per day. Two-thirds of the adult population don’t have formal jobs, and nearly 2.6 million kids between the ages of 5 and 14 are forced to supply child labor to help support their families. Malnutrition is rampant. Add to this widespread health problems due to major infectious diseases such as malaria, cholera, typhoid, Hepatitis, and Dengue fever. A lack of medical care then exacerbates the problem: Haiti has 25 doctors per 100,000 people compared to the US’s 250, and the depressing numbers go on and on... No wonder then that they have a child mortality rate over ten-times that of the United States. No matter what social measurement you want to study, Haiti always seems to be on the losing end.

I soon learned that hearing the stories and reading the figures is one thing, but watching them play out in real-time is quite another.

First, I called my mom, then my pastor, and finally my husband. Hide it from him! My instincts begged. I knew he would be furious, and rightly so, but I feared his anger would take aim at me as much as at Denny. We’d battled constantly over our years of marriage, unable to agree on how to discipline him: I thought him too harsh and he thought me too lenient; the truth probably lay somewhere in between, but pride and baggage kept us both from admitting it.

“It’s your fault he’s like this,” became the refrain he’d fling at me in the heat of our arguments.

Rather than tell him over the phone, I drove to his shop. Eyes blood-red and blotchy from crying, I poured out the whole story: the confrontation I’d had with Denny days before (which I’d neglected to mention when it happened), today’s call from the bank, the new charges I’d just found in our joint account, everything... Then I waited for the storm.

Holding my trembling hands in his, sad eyes locked on mine, he kissed one of my palms.

“I’m behind you, whatever you want to do,” he said.

The important job of claim-staking our rooms and our bunks done, we all met under the blessed shade of the covered patio to get our marching orders. As we listened to Barbara go over the expectations for us during our stay, a commotion arose near the gate. We could hear several of the nannies speaking in their rapid-fire Creole, hands gesticulating and pointing toward Barbara. Finally, one of them led a defeated-looking woman and her tiny, sickly baby over to us. Our meeting over, Barbara shooed them into her office, taking Mandi, a nurse, with her.

Later that evening, after stocking the storage depot with all the donated food, diapers, and medicines we brought with us, and having eaten our sausage jambalaya dinner, we gathered once again on the patio to enjoy the cooling night air. In her arms, Mandi cradled the baby brought in earlier that day. She looked about 3 months old, but with ancient eyes, the color as deep and rich as the Haitian coffee I would drink each morning. Her skin sagged elephant-like from her tiny form, drooping in folds on her legs, around her armpits, and the scruff of her neck, the underlying bones clearly delineated. So tiny and weak that she could not even lift her head, her mother informed Barb that she was 11 months old. With 3 other children at home and little food, she made the decision to stop feeding this one, her youngest. Unable to watch her die, friends convinced her

to bring her here.

“Come back tomorrow,” Barb said through the interpreter. “If she survives the night, we will talk about her future.”

I knew I could no longer protect him. If I didn’t turn him in, I knew someone else eventually would and he’d face far greater consequences. The time had come to act, and I must do it. I dialed the phone.

Originally I wanted an officer to talk to him, scare him straight like they did on that show I’d seen on TV. However, I knew that wouldn’t work. He needed a wake-up call, not another threat of a wake-up call. Not only that, without a complaint and a corresponding case number, the \$700 in charges on my personal account, hundreds more in fees, as well as the charges he’d made on our household account belonged solely to me. Already emotionally bankrupt, I had no money left either.

“Is she dead?” the mother asked upon returning the next day, seeming resigned to her baby’s fate.

Thankfully, she was not.

Little Mandi-Carole—named in honor of my friend Mandi and her nurse friend who’d served at the orphanage when the earthquake struck—had not only survived the night but seemed to have blossomed in her short 24-hours with us, our own vibrant hot-house flower with a huge, toothless smile and personality bursting straight from

her center through those cappuccino-colored eyes.

I had asked Barbara earlier what options the mother had available: as an alternative to giving her up for adoption, she could also keep the baby but come to the orphanage for regular food packages and commit to some sort of job training. After their meeting, I watched in disbelief as she left, having signed papers surrendering M.C. (as we’d come to call her) to the orphanage’s care. I thought for sure she’d take her home, given the promise of help. However, there she went, food packet in one hand while the other held tightly to her next oldest child, a scrawny-looking little boy of about 3. My heart broke as he glanced back over his shoulder before they passed through the gate.

“Help me, too,” his eyes implored.

The days leading up to Zach’s and my departure had been filled at first with phone calls from jail, then angry, profane-laced tirades after his friend’s family bailed him out, followed by accusing, hate-filled emails.

One thing he’d purchased with my stolen money was a new iPhone, which got left behind when he was arrested. After his release, he called the police on me, saying I wouldn’t let him retrieve his things. What I’d actually said was that he couldn’t come get his things unless his dad or I were home to supervise. Technically I paid for the iPhone, I wanted to yell at him, but I stood aside as he snatched it and the boxes of his other things I’d packed up. The policeman stood watch,

his embarrassment outmatched only by my own.

How had we come to this?

As a mother myself, I couldn't imagine how that woman could hand over her baby and just walk away. Looking around at all the other children in the orphanage, ranging anywhere in age from one week to about 13, running around, playing in the sandbox, a gaggle of the preschool crowd helping Zach as he loaded the wagon with the buckets of well water that we'd use for our baths later that night, I grew angrier still. How had they come here? Where were their mothers? Their fathers?

How could they do this? I asked myself, again and again.

That night I lay in my bunk, the sound of the generator humming away in the background as it powered the oscillating fan perched as close to my bed as I could get it, the thin mosquito netting blowing against me, the air flow not nearly strong enough to provide relief from the heat.

When my eyes finally closed to sleep, I dreamt of that little boy and his last backwards glance. The face and body were his, but Denny's striking blue eyes, the color of cornflowers, gazed back at me.

Needless to say, all this put a damper on my excitement for this trip, and I worried it affected Zach's as well. Usually unflappable, I could sense that even he was not quite himself. I felt torn between them, wanting to make everything perfect for them both.

Why does love always have to hurt? I tormented myself. And how can you put someone you love through this kind of hell?

What if he never forgives me? Will we EVER get past this?

How can he claim to love us and continually put us through this? the angrier side of me would counter. After all, he'd stolen from us many times before. He hadn't only hurt me, but his brothers and sister too as they each watched their relationships with him implode. He carried out a one-sided war on social media, disowning all of us as family and claiming kinship with the family who had bailed him

out of jail, proclaiming them "more family to him" than we'd ever been.

For many months we corresponded only through email. Each flaming barb he'd fling my way I tried to douse with love. I signed each letter "Love always, Mom." Logically, I knew I was doing the right thing, for both of us. Still, I felt like a sadistic nurse scrubbing an open wound with steel wool to make way for the eventual healing.

I've never had the stomach for nursing.

After our return from Haiti, the return to real life quickly swept me up and flung me back down in a relentless undertow as Denny's case moved at a snail's pace through the court system, but somehow I had changed. My thoughts constantly strayed to several of the kids I'd grown to love in the orphanage: Phadline with her sing-song "Merci!" after she'd drink all my water, Sarah subduing Zach's short hair into cornrows before dragging him off to the swing set for "just one more" push, and sweet little Davidson with his haunting black eyes and the thick corded scar around his wrist, most likely from being tethered in his crib at the hospital where he had been abandoned, a common practice.

I especially missed M.C., though. My mind kept going back to one particular moment: I had kept her with me one night at the orphanage when Mandi and the other nurses had gone to a village high up in the hills and wouldn't return until morning. She had fussed every so often throughout the night, so I patted her back and tenderly whispered each time to get her back to sleep. The next morning I woke, and slowly opened my eyes, careful not to move so I wouldn't wake her. Studying me intensely were her beautiful eyes, her body held up in perfect pushup position. Eyes crinkling, her entire face lit up with a grin when she saw I was awake.

Months later, Mandi returned to Haiti and sent me an up-to-date picture of M.C. She was almost unrecognizable, except for those expressive eyes! Months of good food, attention, and love had filled out her drooping flesh, and she could walk where before she barely had

the strength to sit upright. The best news yet: a family from Argentina had begun the process of adopting her, the finalization mere months away.

Happy and relieved for her, I thought back on my anger toward her mother. It occurred to me that we really weren't so different, we two women from different countries and lives. Rich or poor, educated or not, the most painful role we may ever endure is motherhood. It means putting yourself last and doing your best for your child's future, no matter the cost to you. It means sitting up during long nights with a sick baby, or endlessly massaging aching pre-teen muscles when they go through a growth spurt. It means worrying and praying constantly about their choices and doing everything you can to help them through, intact. It means making a phone call that will alter your lives forever. And it means walking away from a child so she can have a better future than you know you can give her.

Six months after I had Denny arrested, the case completed its trek through the justice system and he was finally sentenced. We stumbled awkwardly through another year after that before we had much communication, although I never quit trying. I sent "thinking of you" texts and emails on a regular basis, trying not to let it bother me when I got no response, reminding myself that at least he knew I still cared. Still, it hurt trying to bear up the collapsed walls of our relationship, more erect but still tottering.

Late this past summer, my phone made its peculiar chirping noise that indicates I have a text:

"Hey. What are you doing Friday? Want to go to dinner? I'll buy..."

Stunned, I immediately wrote back: "What time should I pick you up?"

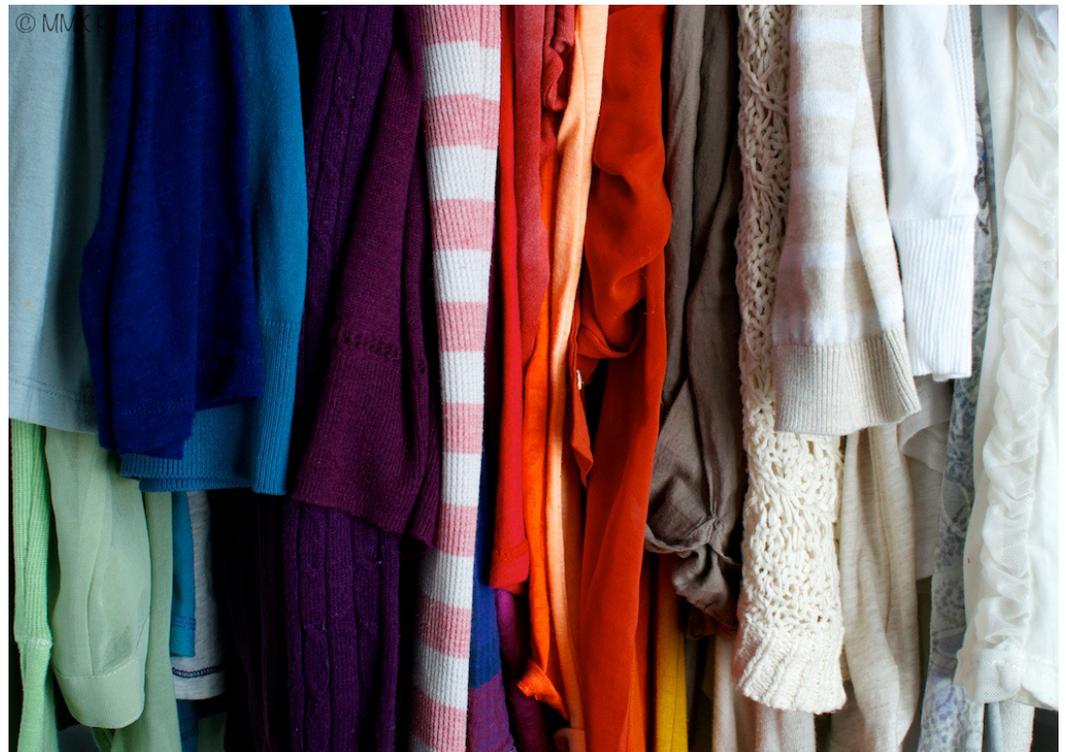
Sitting outside under an umbrella at a favorite cafe, we chatted for hours, watching tables fill and empty around us

as the sun set. Somehow he steered the conversation to that awful June day, two years before.

"I really should thank you," he told me, "for turning me in. I know I wouldn't have stopped if you hadn't done that. I'm so sorry..."

Hugging him, I feel we have finally turned a corner. Will there be detours on the path ahead? Undoubtedly. But at least now there is forward motion and we are getting there, step by cautious step.

There will be no more looking back for this mom.



Art, Honorable Mention
Full
Macy Marin Keith

2nd

Sarah Timmerman

Conversations with My Past

How we remember,

Mad, passionate, extraordinary love

They were desperately in love. This is how the story sometimes goes. An epic love reminisced over mashed potato dinners, or again over Sunday morning golf. Synchronized reassurances that I wasn't born out of a selfish desire to outrun loneliness. But most times the account is just that they were in love, isolated and manipulated by some cartoonish person in their memory that they've painted over the reality: they never really loved each other. When we talk, I tell them I don't remember seeing them in love, and I don't tell them about last month. He stopped by to satisfy a limited hunger, and stayed for an early dinner. We pushed chunks of dark chocolate fudge cupcakes topped with whipped cream, raspberries and mint into our mouths – danced recklessly. Moving like Celts to the Wild Rover. His hands warm against my back. When we stopped twirling and jumping, I climbed over the back of the couch, next to him, and glanced back into the kitchen. For a minute, I recalled a glimpse of them as they must've been twenty years ago. They were laughing, touching each other with an ease that seems impossible. Jazz dancing to a song I never heard again. I curled into his arms and watched my memory parents smile at each other and softly kiss. I could have sworn they never did.

and daydreams lived in music

Risk your heart

They want me to find love. They try to fix me up. I have a great personality, they tell me. I am smart, they assert. By the way, had I thought about going back to the gym? I tell them I am doing yoga, and I don't mention the repressed bundle of my soul that believes that the size two version of myself could ruin a relationship just as fast as the size twelve. In downward facing dog, I glance up at the never changing mound of my stomach, and moving into cobra press it hard into my green mat – as if I can force it to disappear. Taking with it, the fear embedded within the soft flesh. The intense panic that foams in the pit of my belly when a man looks at me as if he's imaging me entwined around his life instead of his body. Instead, I confess a fear that men won't ever love me – that they just want me to love them. And I'll never tell them how reassuring this thought actually is. How I draped that thought around myself as he moved his warm hands against my shoulders. His fingers pressed into my skin as if he was sculpting me, as he softly told me about the project he was working on. Instead, in deep discussions over shallow advice, I tell them about my other crushes, ask about their most recent date, and agree that it isn't their fault they are alone. They were just too different. He needed someone who could serve him dinner on time and have sex on a semiannual basis. She needed her father to keep his hands to himself, and my father to recognize her depression fifteen years earlier.

But the pillars of the temple stand alone

become a bandage for dirty sores

They are sure that it's better to have loved and lost. I try not to drop the phone as I maneuver into my trench coat, trying to hold my notebook and coffee in the other hand, and laugh at that ridiculous statement. They try to prove they are right. They are happy with the way things turned out. They learned, they have six beautiful children, and they did their best. They are happy. I smile, move out the front door, and let them have this one. I am happy they are happy. I talk around the money I lent them, the upcoming court dates, the job hunts, the therapy sessions, and their latest breakup. I am just

They want me to find love. They try to fix me up. I have a great personality, they tell me. I am smart, they assert.

happy they are happy. I check my watch, and pick up the pace to get to my class, pressing the phone closer to my ear to block out the wind. I start to tell them about the giddy feeling I felt this morning. I tell them that I am in love. They assume that I am talking about a man. I try to describe the satisfaction I felt as I slipped the right word into my newest poem and felt it hum it life. The love I have for this thing I created. They laugh and recommend therapy. I laugh and quip that I don't have time. My fifty-minute therapy sessions are full of the issues they pushed my way as they tried to shed their own. They are silent for a moment. Then they say they are proud of me for pursuing my dreams. They are happy I have found something to occupy myself with while I am waiting for Love to find me.

But smile

Life's a bitch and god is awake

They are depressed. They feel like failures. They are bothered that they couldn't make their marriage work. At eleven o'clock at night, the events of the last month are ready for an emotional reheating. I tell them

to go to sleep. They tell me they failed at raising their kids. I try not to take this personally, and remind them how hard they try. I hold the phone in place with my shoulder and clean the dishes from his visit last night that were left undone because my hands were exploring more interesting surfaces. I remind them how much I love them. I remind them that I will always love them, that I'll always be there for them. They joke about committing suicide. Everyone would be happier. I sigh and rub the rag around the inside of another mug, repeat everything again. They ask what I did last night, and I tell them I made him dinner. They try not to seem too interested, but a few sentences later they reminisce about my little sister's wedding. Didn't I notice how in love they were? Wasn't it beautiful how her now-husband cried when he saw her coming down the aisle? Don't I want that eventually? Hasn't she chosen a better life? I wipe my hands on a red dishrag, tell them my own wedding is a long way off, and we spend the rest of the evening planning our funerals.

an obesity of grief

doesn't go away

once is enough

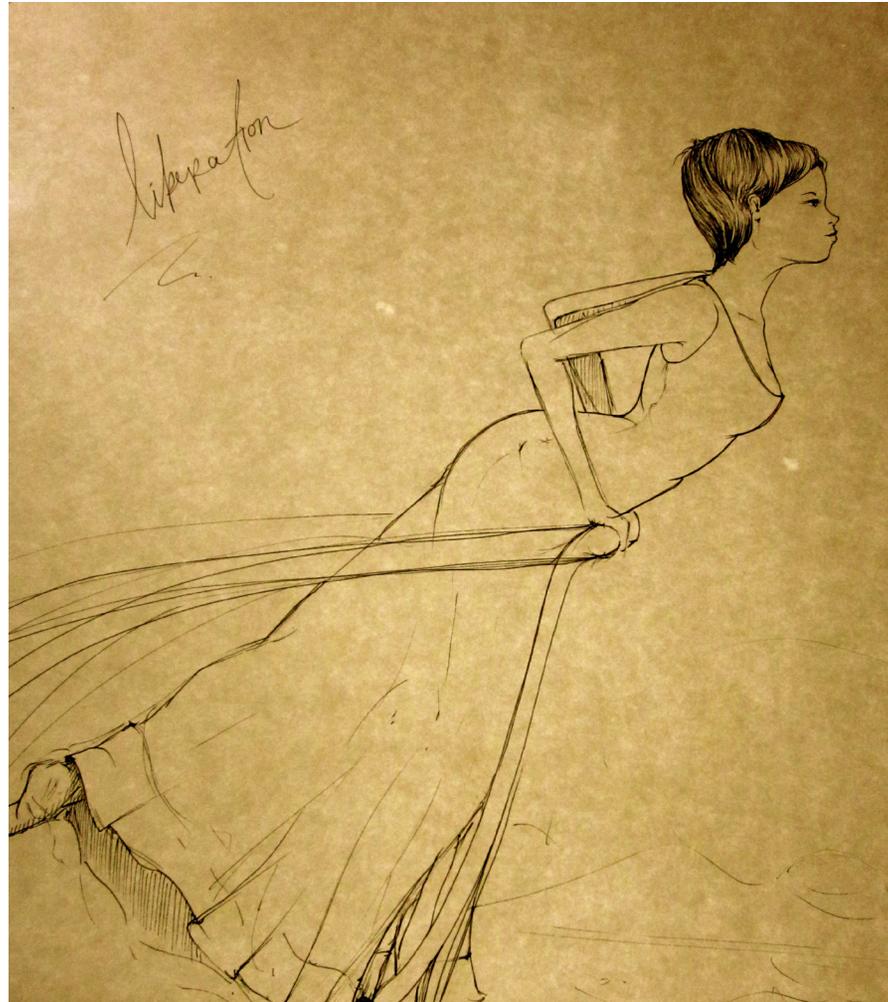
They call to ask if I considered trying online dating. I ignore the newest email invitation to join match.com that they forward me. They invite me to hallmark movie nights or send me articles defending male chivalry and the importance of letting your date get the tab. I reminded them how shitty they treated each other. They accuse me of only remembering the bad. I think silently of frivolous restraining orders, Christmas mornings ending in the kitchen table heaved across the room, and the look of contempt that became standard whenever one of them was speaking: things I can't mention or forget. The defensive note in their voices rises even without these recollections, and I try not to tell them that those things don't happen when you love someone – that the bad sometimes makes the good irrelevant. Later, I sit on the kitchen counter across from him and try not to fall. It's four in the morning and his hands are holding my favorite volume of poetry. The images he's reading blend into my other senses. I can almost taste the words along with the dark chocolate and wine residue. I casually wonder what his mouth would taste like, and, as I twirl my fingers around his knee, I play with the idea of trying. His voice drops and moves around the lines on the page. The thought of doing just this for another twenty years whips around my brain, and I start to entwine his life with mine for a few minutes, before I pull back my hand.

*how I remember,
Insanity without music*

I've never been in love. Not the sticky sweet, weak knee, meet cute, irresistible fantasy love that I grew up hoping was the reality. Not the everyday version where loving someone consists of tearing

apart their heart, trying to stuff these pieces into the holes of your own soul. I happened to choose a different life.

*So, BE lonely,
isolation is a gift.*



Art, Honorable Mention
Liberation
McKenzie Lowry

3rd

Preston Grover
Like Magic

I wish I could remember everything that my mom would cook in that tiny kitchen in that tiny house for her tiny family. There were a lot of soups, because that was an easy way to make what little food we had go a long way. Every once in a while there would be a small ham or roast, celebrating a holiday or a birthday. But I don't remember the way my mom looked exactly when she cooked, I don't remember specific smells that would come from her craft. I can just barely remember the plates that the food was served on, though I'm sure she still has them somewhere in the house she lives in now with her husband; they were a vibrant blue with a yellow trim and a hideously obnoxious floral pattern (plates only a mother could love).

But I remember helping her cook. I remember measuring out spices, sugar, flour and tamping it down perfectly for an exact cup or spoon. I remember adding various powders to soup, pouring slowly and watching as the particles separated and eventually disappeared completely. Cooking was akin to magic to me, before I understood the properties of powders in liquids, the dissolving and dissolution that happens, and why it happens easier at higher temperatures.

I remember my mom chopping potatoes and beef to add into a stew or hash. She would have to chop straight down to separate segments of the root, but she would have to slide the blade along the fibers of the meat, tearing it until it separated. What a magic knife, able to separate substances of completely different consistencies and build!

I used to beg to help my mom cook. She would come home from work, exhausted, strands of her dark brown hair falling out of her bun into her face, and would go into her room to change into an old shirt riddled with holes and some sweatpants, and go straight to the kitchen. I would follow her and ask her what's for dinner, knowing exactly what she would say.

"Depends on what we make," she said with a tired smile. She would start taking ingredients out of the fridge, the cupboards, the spice rack, and placing them on the counter. I know that she knew way beforehand what she was going to make, but she always used to treat it like she was as much an observer of this magic act as I was. Every step in the recipe was a suggestion, a question posed by a magician. "Now if I could have a volunteer to chop these carrots... Ah! You, ma'am, if you'll be so kind as to assist me! And you, young man, if you would please measure out a tablespoon of basil, that would be grand!"

We used to be so poor after my mom left my dad. I don't really remember them ever being together, so my earliest memories are

when we were dirt-poor. The house we lived in was entirely hardwood, with dull, blue paint chipping on the outside, and it was infested with ants; we would have to seal anything we stored in cupboards literally air-tight or we would come back to it riddled with frantic black specks. But despite all of this, when my mom entered the kitchen, the entire place turned into a circus, with the range top being the star attraction that people would push and shove just to get a glimpse of. It was the poorest circus in the world, but it was still magic.

When my mom remarried, she stopped working as an accountant, but started working as a jack-of-all-trades. She became an enthusiast for printing logos and other images on tee shirts, embroidering, crocheting, working payroll for my stepdad. Not to mention, she had three more kids to take care of. She's the sort of person that needs to have a project of some sort. Not a hobby, though. A project: something someone will reward her for in some shape or form, whether it's money, praise, or a thoughtful card during the holidays.

March and April were always the worst. Though she was no longer employed as an accountant, she would do taxes for family and friends privately at a fraction of the cost that professional companies would charge. She would hold herself in the family office for days on end. I would come home from school and find her there, surrounded by greasy plates, half filled cups of water, and

sometimes one or both of my half brothers asking for attention and being shooed away. If there wasn't a bathroom right next to the office, I often wonder if I would have found two-liter Coke bottles filled with her urine.

The closer she would get to April 14th, the more she would rely on me to do cooking for her. It would start as defrosting some hamburger or chopping some potatoes in mid March, but by the beginning of April she would be asking me to cook entire meals that she would sometimes not even come to. The problem was, by the beginning of April, I was involved with a high school show and I wouldn't even be home until six sometimes.

My senior year I was the lead in the musical, "Kiss Me, Kate." We were a week out of performance and drastically underprepared (the set wasn't up, one of the leads had literally none of his lines memorized, still no romantic chemistry between me and the leading lady). One day, after an especially strenuous rehearsal ("I'm getting about ready to call this whole thing off"—My Director), I came home to my mom hiding from the world in her mountain of numbers and papers. I went in and she didn't acknowledge my presence.

"Mom," I said, annoyed. "Have you started dinner?"

She took a couple of seconds to process what I said, then turned away from the computer screen. "What time is it?" she asked, like someone waking up from a coma.

"It's almost six." I tried to suppress my irritation.

"Sheesh..." she said, like a cuss. "We're having spaghetti tonight. Can you go defrost the meat, and I'll be in in a few minutes."

I glared at her, but her eyes were glued back to the computer screen. "No you won't."

Again, she took a while to hear what I said, but my words eventu-

ally caught her full attention. She turned to face me again, and now she was the one who was irritated. "Could you please just go do what I ask." This wasn't a question.

"I will." I said back. "I'm just tired of playing the mom is all."

"You're not playing the mom," she said, and I could feel the heat coming off the words. "You're helping the mom, ok?"

"Sure." I started to leave. I thought that was the end of it.

"Tax season's almost over, ok? I told all these people I'd help them out. I'm obligated."

"Ok," I said, with an undertone of venom. If I could go back in time I'd slap myself for being such a brat.

I stomped into the kitchen and unceremoniously dumped the frozen block of ground beef into the pan to brown. I started a pot of water to boil as the meat was defrosting and raucously poured noodles into it when it was ready. When the meat browned I drained the grease

and added canned tomatoes, tomato paste, water, oregano, basil, minced garlic, onion, and let it simmer. I was a fine cook, great for my age, I'd say, but it was just a chore. The magic was gone.

"These noodles are a little chewy," my mom said, when we were all sitting down.

"You're welcome for dinner, by the way," I retorted. My mom looked up from her plate, and I glared back. My stepfather didn't say anything; a battle of looks between his stressed out wife and moody teenage stepson. He was best to sit this one out.

Nothing more was said at the table that night, and after dinner my mom went back to her cave. I loaded the dishwasher and went to bed. When I came home the next day, my mom had already started a pot of soup.

Every step in the recipe was a suggestion, a question posed by a magician.

My first summer away from home, I ended up calling my mom about mid June. She picked up. “Hi, sweetie!” she shouted. My mom seems to think that the louder you talk into a phone, the better the connection will be.

I gingerly pulled the phone away from my ear. “Hi, Mom.” I said. I couldn’t help but smile at how excited she was to talk to me. She asked me the same questions as always, am I doing good on money, am I seeing anyone, etc. etc. Then I asked her what I called her for: The Spinach Artichoke Lasagna recipe.

She whistled like she was impressed. “That’s a pretty tough one, sweetie. You sure you want THAT one?”

“Well, you know how I like food. It’ll be gone in a couple of days.”

She chuckled softly, and I used to think she chuckled because she knew I was making it to impress someone, a love interest. But now I think she did because she was relieved. Relieved that I didn’t think of cooking as a chore anymore, but as a performance, as a feat, like I used to, back in the tiny kitchen in the tiny house with the tiny family.

When I hung up, I went to the cupboard to start taking out the things I knew I’d need: tomato paste, diced tomatoes, garlic, onion, basil, oregano. I would need to go to the store for most of the key players in the recipe, spinach, artichoke hearts, parmesan, feta, but what I had was enough to get the show started.



Art, Honorable Mention
Ascension
Maria Williams

