UTAH STATE UNIVERSITY

creative writing contest 2012

SCRIBENDI

student art & writings

SCRIBENDI

the magazine of
THE USU CREATIVE WRITING CONTEST
2012

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

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Scribendi is the publication of the winning entries of the Utah State University Creative Writing Contest, which is open to all USU undergraduate and graduate students from all departments and disciplines. This year, the contest received 185 entries from students in 22 different areas of study across seven colleges. With so many excellent entries, the judges' task wasn't easy, and we want to thank and congratulate not only the students whose work emerged at the top, but all the entrants for raising the level of the competition. We urge all the writers in our USU community to continue to cultivate their sense of craft, their appreciation for good language, and their spirit of artistic camaraderie.

The online version of Scribendi is available on campus at the website of USU's English Department, and at www.scribendi.usu.edu, or off-campus at the same addresses through the VPN.

OUR STAFF

Thanks also go to Robin Wheelwright, Katelyn Anderson, and Annie Nielsen from the English Department administrative staff, whose assistance in running the contest and producing the magazine has been invaluable.

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—Charles Waugh, contest director

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UNDERGRADUATE FICTION

1st

Scar Tissue
Brian Jackson

I hustle toward the entrance of the mall to escape the lashing Wisconsin rain at my back. My nose nearly strikes the dirty, rain-peppered glass of the automatic sliding door before it finally grinds open like an old piece of rickety wooden furniture being dragged across even older floorboards. I wonder then how often sliding doors break down and, more importantly, how often people walk face-first into them as a result. That's sad, isn't it: putting so much faith into the belief that these kinds of things are supposed work—that they will always work—that we ignore every little twinge of common sense in our bodies telling us not to walk into the wall of glass? And what do we say after we've embarrassed ourselves? I'm disappointed in this door because it was supposed to open when I approached it? Yeah, that's sad.

My breath feels like cold needles in my lungs. I labor through the food court just beyond the mall's entrance; each step I take emits a watery squeak from my sneakers, so I try to walk lightly—easier said than done—to the point that I'm nearly tiptoeing, yet the sound does not diminish. The food court, a pastel wasteland of yellow tables and chairs, hasn't a single patron. In fact, only one restaurant is even open: Chang's Chinese Food. Plates of orange chicken, fried rice, and moo shu pork that smell a day old fester beneath heat lamps. A young teenage boy wearing thin plastic gloves stirs the rice with a finger. The gloves don't make the act any better.

A small waiting area past the food court with couches laid out in the shape of a square encloses a small play area for kids. A little boy climbs over a giant plastic cupcake as another boy screams at him from atop a giant ice-cream sandwich shaped like it's melting into the floor. There's a giant apple nestled in the corner as well, and although no kids are playing on it, I think it's nice that the option is available.

I try to sidestep a couple of kids chasing each other in a circle, but a young girl bumps into me anyway. She looks shocked when she sees me, says, "Excuse me, sir," and then continues on after her friends. I stumble toward a video game store, stopping briefly to wipe my feet on the thick black rug at its entrance. A cardboard cutout of a soldier adorned in blue body armor stands like an idol before me. His arms cradle some sort of laser gun that he's pointing at the ground where his right boot grinds into the skull of some hideous alien that he's dominated. I roll my eyes and enter the store with a wary stride—as if I need it to be evident I don't belong in such a place—and start looking for a present for my brother's fourteenth birthday tomorrow.

I skim through the rows of games all promising unbridled action and mind-boggling graphics while a weather alert loops over the store's PA system for a few minutes, cautioning that severe thunderstorm warnings are in effect for the next couple of days. When the announcement finishes, it dawns on me that I have no idea what kind of games my brother likes. Definitely not sports: he hates sports. He'd probably like the game that the blue spaceman represents; that seems like the kind of thing I would have been into at his age.

I turn my attention to the small woman with dusty brown freckles clerking behind the counter. She is wearing a Nirvana T-shirt and has red electric hair that gravitates off her head toward the cellophane wrapping of the video games on display behind her. Another customer occupies her attention: a young man that looks to be a few years younger than me—probably about twenty-five—wearing a plain white polo, khaki pants, and tennis shoes. His body jolts uncontrollably every few moments, and as I listen to his voice and watch his gesticulation, I know immediately that there is something wrong with his mind.

He waves a game above his head and asks the woman if she will hold it for him until his mom can come in and buy it. The woman sighs

"Spain – Make Pretty Things" Sara Jordan, honorable mention graduate art

heavily—I can tell she has dealt with him before—and firmly tells him no, and that he needs to put it back until he has the money. This doesn't sit well with the man, and he begins to stomp his feet and howl in the shrill voice of a small child. He says that someone else will take the game before he can make it back with any money, and then he throws the plastic casing across the store. It strikes the wall next to me and lands neatly beside my left foot. The clerk yells at the man to calm down.

I pick up the case and inspect the cover. It is a used game with frayed packaging. A muscular man stands at the base of a mossy-brown cliff. He has beautiful brown skin and golden blond hair that lolls over his shoulders. A long red tunic stretches just beyond his groin, but he's wearing no pants. He brandishes a large broadsword encrusted with diamonds and rubies above his head. Next to him a brunette woman wears two pieces of brown cloth like a swimsuit and wields two silver battle axes like hairbrushes. Above them an elderly man clad in a purple robe stands at the precipice of the cliff. A white beard and pointy hat accent him perfectly. In his left hand he holds a staff imbued with fire and his right hand stretches outward like the claw of an eagle, the tips of his fingers spitting blue lightning. Looming over the wizard is a slinky green dragon coiling its scaly body around the words: *Dungeon Voyages*.

No one would ever buy this game, I think; then I look back at the young man who's now sitting cross-legged on the floor in front of the counter. He runs his fingers violently through his hair and mumbles gibberish to himself. It occurs to me that there is no God.

***

That night I am half-awake, half-dreaming. I see a little boy—no older than three—sitting in a car seat on a sweltering summer day. He plays with a stuffed dog and sweat glides down his forehead and cheeks like snowmelt. Suddenly the car door opens; he drops the stuffed toy, and it tumbles to the floor, landing without a sound. He reaches out for the dog, but a dense shadow overcomes him, halting his motion. He jerks his head upward to see why the world has gone dark and finds a hulking silhouette crouching over him like a giant that has fully eclipsed the sun. The boy stares into the featureless black, his eyes compressed with fear.

A voice, forceful and predatory, erupts from the mass and repeats itself like an echo, decimating the silence. "What's wrong? Can't you reach your doggy?"

I know why the little boy is afraid. It is the voice of his father.

***

Rain splatters over my mother's house, an idyllic structure of peach-colored brick and clouded windows pinned against a patinated sky that would be more appropriate hanging over Neptune than Wisconsin. The hair on my arms prickles as I trot up the concrete porch steps, wet with rain, carrying a small wrapped package with torn and uneven edges beneath my right arm. I pause before the white steel door at the entryway of the house and give myself a moment to breathe before knocking. I stand in the rain for nearly a minute before my brother finally opens the door.

"Hey, Brennan," I say, pushing past him into the house. I kick off my wet shoes. He shuts the door behind me. "Happy birthday." I hand the package to him.

"Thanks," he says. He scoffs at my shoddy wrap job and takes off toward the kitchen.

I follow him into the living room where the TV is turned on, tuned to the weather channel. A shaky home video of a thunderstorm is playing. Spurts of lightning, green as the alien sky that reared them, throb like veins through the horizon of a yellow hayfield. The farmer manning the camera mumbles incessantly that he can't believe what he's seeing. I throw my jacket onto the brown suede recliner next to the window and walk into the kitchen. "Be grateful I wrapped the thing."

"You didn't need to. I can already see it's a video game." He sets the present on the kitchen counter and jumps up onto a high-stool.

I take a seat next to him. His hair, longer than the last time I saw him, is so black it absorbs the cheap fluorescent light in the kitchen completely and has no definition; it looks like empty space, a nowhere from which his forehead emerges. I consider reaching out to tousle it, maybe just to verify it's actually there, but think better of it. He's not so young anymore. "It could be a movie," I say.

"Movies have a longer shape."

"Fine: you win. Where's Mom?"

"Back in her room. She's been having a hard time today." His voice slightly quivers. "I'm surprised she got a cake." He motions toward a brown box in the center of the table. "It's forest-themed. Lots of deer and other woodland creatures."

I smile. "A simple happy birthday message is never enough, is it?"

"I haven't seen you in months," he says. His voice is still weak and sounds like the low hum of a heating vent.

I pull the cake box toward me and open the flap. The aroma of cheap frosting plugs my nose. The cake is a wash of emerald green with a few brown shapes thrown in here and there that are poorly molded into forest animals. "I'm sorry I haven't made it up much lately. I've been busy."

"You only live twenty minutes away."

Before I can answer, my mother walks into the room. She's wearing a black sweater and faded blue jeans. She looks thin and etiolated—too delicate even to touch. Her face is dried out and discolored; small dead flakes of skin, like tiny insect wings, peel upward around the corners of her mouth and nose. Her brown eyes seem to be withdrawing deep into their sockets as if the air around her has been condensed and her entire face has caved in under the pressure. She gives me a smile, but even that is weak and just reinforces the thought that if I hugged her, she'd crumble into dust.

"How are you?" she says, moving slowly toward the fridge with the gait of a drugged animal. She opens it and pulls out a two-gallon jug of strawberry milk, unscrews the cap, and then puts it on the table. "Could you get some glasses?"

"I'm doing well," I say. I go to the cabinet next to the sink and pull out three glasses. I lay them next to the milk and start to pour the pink liquid into each one.

"I hope you still like cake," she says, "because we've got plenty." She reaches her pale arm into her "Going Green" grocery bag on the table and reveals a small packet of candles. She deals them out over the counter like cigarettes at a party and then starts shoving them one at a time into the cake, which is still sheathed in its cardboard casing. After lighting the candles she slides the box toward Brennan. The outermost flames flicker dangerously close to the edges of the cardboard. "Make a wish," she says.

Brennan leans forward and begins to blow, but only a few flames flicker out before my mother interrupts him. "Wait!" she says. "Let's say a prayer first." Brennan looks back at her like she's crazy and is going to burn down the house, but she's already closed her eyes and is beginning to worship, her voice barely above the sound of a whisper.

Neither Brennan nor I close our eyes as she says grace over a twenty-dollar cake, and we watch the candles melt down into pools of colored wax. When she gets to the part where she thanks the Lord for watching over our father, Brennan grunts like he's been punched in the stomach. My mother stops speaking and silence permeates the room for a few long seconds and then, finally: Amen.

Brennan blows out the candles and I wish him a happy birthday again and clap my hands, but neither he nor my mother is smiling, so I stop pretty quickly. The air contin-

ues to breed tension with silence. My mother says: "Let's wish Dad a happy birthday too."

Brennan pushes the cake away. "I wish he didn't have the same birthday as me."

"Don't, Brennan. Not today."

"But it's true. He's dead, and he's still finding a way to make it all about him."

My mother's right temple twitches and trembles incessantly like there is something living burrowed beneath the skin. "Just stop."

"Why, Mom?" Brennan asks. He's trying to sound older than he is, but his voice squeaks and cracks like a dog whimpering from behind a window. "Why do you keep defending him?"

She clenches her hands into fists and then reopens them, repeating the motion like machinery. "Things don't get any easier when you get older. Me and your father did the best we could with what we had. I'm not perfect and neither was he. But he worked hard, and it's because of him that we have this house and those games you love so much. Now that he's gone he deserves your respect."

"Just because he's dead and was well-insured doesn't mean he wasn't an asshole."

"Goddamit, Brennan!" She's screaming now. "Why do you do this?"

Brennan turns to me. This is the moment where the older sibling comes to the defense of the younger one. I say nothing.

My mother spins around suddenly, as if she's just been pushed by a phantom or some other unseen force, and strikes the open milk jug with her hand in the process, sending it toppling across the table. Strawberry milk blasts forth from the open container like a deluge of pink lava and cascades over the edge of the countertop, soaking my shirt and pants. My mother looks at me, her lips quaking with rage, and gives me an instant's worth of sorrow before she storms off toward her bedroom.

I look at Brennan; his eyes are girdled with tears. But as I stand there, saturated in artificially sweetened cow product, I have no idea what to say. The best I can come up with is: "I have milk all over me." With that, I retreat to the bathroom.

After I clean what I can off my clothes, I grab a fresh towel and run it under warm water in the sink. I walk into my father's study, which is where he kept his clothes. He always used to say that he could never bear to share a closet with a woman. His custom-built mahogany armoire stands erect at the

You'll have one just like mine, he said.

back of the room like a monolith to his memory. I walk toward it, noticing that none of his things seem to have been disturbed, as if the room had been sealed shut the instant he died. I suppose it isn't all that surprising: it's only been six months after all. But it's still unsettling that even though he's exited this world, he still very much owns this room.

I try not to linger, almost believing he could still step through the door at any moment and accuse me of invading his space like when I was a kid. I take off my shirt and my pants and dab the towel over my stomach and legs, wiping what's left of the syrupy feeling the best I can. I open the armoire's cupboard and search for something to wear. Half a dozen business suits hang there like husks of his skin that I could never justify wearing no matter the circumstances. I open the first drawer below the cupboard and rifle through it until I find a set of sky-blue silk pajamas. A silver chain with a crucifix attached to it is coiled on top of them like a snake poised to strike. Ridiculous, I think, but better than the suits. I swat the crucifix aside and remove the pajamas.

I slip the pants on carefully, like they're some sacred garment, and they fit snugly and comfortably. I shudder at that reality. My father was a big man, well beyond the simple state of being a little overweight, and I don't even need to tighten the drawstring of his pajama pants around my waist. I hold the button-up top before me and slip my right arm into its proper sleeve, but I let the remaining sleeve hang idly behind my back for a moment and rub my thumb over the long scar running up the underside of my left forearm and wrist. I remember being in the hospital a few days after the accident. At only eight years old, it was one of the few times I had ever sat in a room alone with my father. He had pulled up his right pant leg to show me his own scar deeply embedded in his shin. You'll have one just like mine, he said. His words had made me happy even though his scar was from a baseball accident—someone's cleats had pinned and broken his leg when he slid into

second base—and mine was from when he pushed me in the garage and my arm had caught a motionless table saw.

I trace a finger lightly along a blue vein running parallel to the old wound like a trail of footprints; at the base of my wrist the vein disappears into the scar tissue, still slightly tinged with a purple shimmer even after all these years, never to reappear. I shove my left arm into its sleeve and then button up the middle of the shirt before unfurling the cuffs so that they cover my wrists.

I close the drawer and the cupboard of the armoire and leave the study, throwing the wet towel and milk-drenched clothes into the laundry room on my way back to the kitchen. Brennan sits at the table eating a piece of cake on a white dinner plate. There's a second plate with a piece cut for me. The milky mess on the table and floor has already been mopped up.

"Sorry I didn't help with the cleaning," I say. I grab a fork from the drawer and sit down. My piece of cake has a little fawn on it smelling flowers. I sever a corner piece and pop it into my mouth. The miserable Wal-Mart frosting evaporates like cotton candy, and a foul taste loiters at the back of my throat after I swallow.

We eat without speaking for a while until Brennan turns to me and says: "Dad used to hit me, you know."

I continue staring at the fawn on my cake, as if it has just informed me that it also was abused by my father. It makes sense. He was a hunter, after all.

"Did you hear me?"

"I heard you. You shouldn't say things like that. It'll upset Mom."

Brennan snorts, though it's more of a sob. "Yeah, because the worst thing about being beat up by Dad is that it upsets Mom."

I finally look at him. His eyes drown in tears and beg me at that moment to understand. All he wants from me is to tell him that when I was growing up I never saw our father, first because he was going to college—night school—then, after he graduated, because he started sleeping at the office, or so he would tell Mom anyway, and that when he did come around, it was only to shake up the world that he'd created for himself. The world that he couldn't stand, made apparent by the doors he kicked down, the windows and mirrors he smashed, and the little boy's wrist he sliced open.

All he wants from me is to tell him that I know he had it worse than me because he came so late and so unintended in my parents' lives, and that I should have been there to help him.

All he wants is for me to concede that our father's image metastasizes in the chasms of my memory like a brain tumor, utterly silent and frightening. But once again I say nothing. I can't even come to terms with my own abuse, my own fucked-up dreams regarding our father, so how can I possibly help him?

***

I lumber through my apartment only half alive, navigating through the pallid sprawl of my living room, feeling and lugging every ounce of my mass like it is something separate from myself—excess baggage that I can just discard onto the black leather couch in the center of the room. I pass up the urge to collapse and sleep and go into the bathroom. I flip on the light switch and wait for the energy saving bulbs to flicker and hum themselves to life. Once the room is illuminated, I thrust aside the vinyl shower curtain strewn with mauve Asiatic lilies and turn the translucent knob for the water to hot.

While the shower heats up I throw off my father's pajamas. There is still a slight sense of stickiness across my midriff, like the feeling left by masking tape after it has been removed from bare skin. I step into the shower and force myself to stare down instead of outward so I can see the weight I'm carrying. The hot water sluices over my body, expanding my pores as it disappears into the seams of my skin where my arms lie against my sides, reemerging at my fingertips in tiny waterfalls. I force my eyes to linger on my stomach, a pale and bulging hummock of flesh and dead-grass-colored hair. Beyond its bulk I see a spatter of hairs from my head spinning in halos around my feet.

This is the patience of death, I think. It starts with a swelling stomach and a balding head. And then my gut will continue to grow throughout the years, as will my apathy toward just how disgusting I look, until I'm nearly fifty, and the doctor tells me that I need to lose weight because I'm pre-diabetic—which I'll probably scoff at and proclaim that I don't give a fuck, like I imagine my father did before me. By sixty I'll be led to an early grave by way of a heart attack, and I'll have followed in his footsteps perfectly, disappearing beneath the earth like my veins beneath the scar tissue.

But I'm being hyperbolic. Death truly is a patient thing, and that's something I should be grateful for. Besides, I can't solely blame death or time—which seem to me to be one and the same, or at least close siblings—for the way I look. My stomach, for as long as I can remember, has always been soft, pudgy, and the hair on my head was never the thick mane that people would be quick to compliment. No, my original packaging gave my pathetic nature away immediately. Just like that damned video game at the mall. But

"He slept and I painted" Tessa Ryser, honorable mention undergraduate art

rather than go through the bitterness of blaming my creator for that fact, I've always found it easier to presume there never was one.

This is why I don't want to be in Brennan's life, I tell myself. I close my eyes and lean forward to rest my head against the wall beneath the shower head. I don't want to infect him with these thoughts of ineptitude and indifference; I don't want him to lose his faith in things as I have. He deserves better than he's gotten, and he deserves better than I can give him, and if I stay far enough away, maybe he won't be positioned to inherit the ennui of a cipher like me. I open my eyes to a darkened world: the storm must've knocked out the power. My body sways in the darkness beneath the rush of running water, and I begin to wonder if my father used the same justifying excuses on the nights he never came home.

***

In a dream, I glide up a marble stairwell. It ascends through a slanted tunnel of rotating clouds like the spinal cord of heaven. Stone pillars levitate on either side of me; each one tapers into a diamond tip that lances the sky with a white light emanating from some unknown source at the crest of the stairs. I continue to climb effortlessly, reaching the apogee in no time. The dark figure of a man is waiting for me there. A sense of urgency besieges me, and I step closer until finally I can make out his features. It is my father.

He stretches his arms in welcome, and before I can react I am heaved off my feet and pulled toward him like a bug to the windshield of a speeding car. When our flesh collides, the folds of our skin fuse together like hot metals, and in an instant, we're transmuted into one colossal lump of fat: a wretched end for two wretched souls.

***

The cardboard cutout of the blue spaceman at the game store in the mall is already gone, the space it occupied ready to be replaced with a newer, better hero from a newer, better game. Brennan peruses the shelf of new releases, and I wander absentmindedly about the store behind him. He'd already owned and sold back the game I bought him for his birthday—which I should have expected—so an exchange was necessary. On the ride over I told him that I thought we should start spending more time together. I hadn't intended on saying it, but the words had forced themselves out like vomit. The suggestion seemed to make him happy, though. I think it'll make me happy too.

I glance behind the counter and see the same redheaded clerk kneeling behind it. She ties her hair, still infused with static, back into a tail as thick as a fox's. It crouches over the top of her head, nearly covering her eyes, as she leans forward to unpack a stack of magazines from a box, throwing them one at a time into a wire basket at her side; she grips each flimsy booklet with her bony fingers like she'd rather be ripping them to shreds. She looks up at me, and her eyes flicker with recognition. Just then the phone on the counter rings, and she rises to answer it.

"Hurry up, Brennan," I say, turning toward him. A waist-high black

cage containing a heaping mound of forgotten games stands between us. At the top lies *Dungeon Voyages*. I walk over, lift it from the pile, and hold it out to Brennan so that he can see the cover. "What about this one?" I mean it to be a joke, but somehow it comes out sounding serious.

He cranes his head back and gives it a hard look and then laughs and says: "No one would buy that game." He goes back to searching for something that will impress him.

"Yeah, I thought so," I mumble beneath my breath.

I put the game back. The words, Oh my God, fly on one breath from the redheaded woman's mouth. She rattles the receiver of the phone back into its resting place. I turn just in time to see her eyes widen and lacquer over with what I know immediately is fear. The hair on my arms rises like the hair on her head. She chokes out the words: "A tornado's just touched down about a mile away," and then, as if her voice had been the cue, raid sirens erupt from somewhere outside and wail on continuously. A sickly pallor flushes across her face.

I look back at *Dungeon Voyages* for a moment, at the green dragon's lissome body twirling through the stylized gold lettering of the title, and then slowly start to bury it under a dozen other games, each one looking just as disappointing as the last.

2nd

Grief Wrinkles
Tina Sitton

Death's the only real truth I know. So I, Renee Lamoreaux Hollinberry, lie by doing little things, like not putting on mascara until after the drive to school, since I've cried the whole hour and a half there and don't want people to know. Or, how I heavily conceal my prematurely wrinkled eyes with make-up. Grief Wrinkles I call them. Not to mention the Sleepless Circles, haloing purple under hollow brown eyes. At twenty-six, my eyes shouldn't look forty. I'm sure it might be wrong hiding things from people, keeping my issues unseen, but they don't want my truth. I don't want my truth either.

I lie about other things too. I used to be an Emergency Medical Technician, running for Flathead County EMS most days and moonlighting for St. Joseph's ER down in Polson. I wasn't a doctor or a nurse, but in a small town like Big Fork, Montana, it doesn't really matter. It's not a big hospital, but being the only one this side of Flathead Lake, our radius of intake patients is pretty large, and they're usually desperate for help. Especially since the scenic highways 93, 35, and 83 all intersect in Polson. Take your pick which highway is deadlier. Mostly tourist deaths though. Tourists were some of our best paying customers for both EMS and the ER. Well, tourists and yuppies. They're interchangeable. No matter a yuppie or tourist, both are a superficial interaction with the world. Living a false life. Yuppies are usually rich tourists who think it's a good idea to move to northern Montana from their big cities and live a "simpler life." Searching for that "real deal," they mass migrate, coming for our purple mountain majesties, filled with silver lakes, white rivers, and yellow Alpine Larch. For our burly wildlife. For our lack of stoplights. However, tourist or yuppie, neither one takes the bears, the fickle elements, the undeveloped forests, the solitude seriously. Eyes always fixed on the scenic wonders and not on the road. But I'm out of that line of work now. I don't have to deal with them anymore. Before everything happened, I hoped to remain in that field, so I attended University of Montana in Missoula, an hour and a half south on Highway 35 and 93, on Tuesdays and Thursdays planning to go to med school, and if things went well, become an ER doctor.

Things didn't go well.

It's why I lie. My brother, Benedict, was killed in a small plane crash eight months ago while approaching the Helena Regional Airport for a routine transport flight of a Cessna that had just been maintenanced. Everything changed. People changed. What's real changed. People assumed that since I've seen so many accidents, so much death, his death would be easy for me to accept. As if being an EMT came with a sage understanding of why things like this happen to people so young. An ability to sift the randomness. Oh, but you know how these things go, they'd say, then pat me on the shoulder and never mention my brother again — reassured by my clean dry eyes and seemingly wrinkle-free face — as if I was going to be okay because I certified as some backwoods EMT. I didn't and don't understand.

Am I okay? When people ask how I'm doing, I say, I'm okay — and people keep telling me I'm okay. I don't think I am. But, I still tell them I am; it's what they want to hear, after all. The times I've strayed, they squirm. I feel trapped not being able to say how I really feel. Or don't feel. Trapped by not being accepted for the person my brother's death has turned me into. My own mother even believes I'm okay. Except she's angry. I guess that's why I haven't told her I stopped going to my pre-med classes. Stopped trying to become the doctor she's always wanted me to be. Right now, she says my work has made me callous, that I don't grieve like her. That I don't understand the pain she's still going through; it's trained me to put my grief

aside and be able to do my work, but she can't. She can't deal with working.

You haven't worked in years, Mom, I say, standing in her small kitchen between mounds of boxes. If I stretch my short arms out, I could touch both asylum white walls on either side.

You know what I mean, Renee! she retorts, pulling her pink bathrobe tighter. It's noon.

My mother, Valeria, makes beaded jewelry for a "living" and sells it at the scenic view pull-outs to tourists. But she really lives off government assistance and church charity.

Valeria flicks her curly hair back, then folds her arms across her chest saying, Well, the North Lakeside ladies are pissed about me selling too close to them on East Shore and Woods Bay. They say it's their turf. Don't laugh! They've threatened me! I don't see why the whole East Shore is theirs. It's a prime tourist spot!

She fidgets with the collar of her bathrobe, annoyed.

East Shore was Scenic Route 35. It runs almost directly along the shoreline of Flathead Lake, one of the largest fresh water bodies this side of the Misses. I try to keep a serious face as I say, You mean, the North Lakeside adult community? Their clubhouse craft group? That's who you're worried about? Mom, they're snowbirds! You know they only sell stuff roadside so they can call their city friends and pretend they're "livin' the simple life."

A threat is a threat! Valeria growls childishly. I need you to talk to Ethan!

I'm surprised she doesn't stomp her foot. Ethan Caelinus. Our county sheriff. He was a fellow French-blooded native of northern Montana. But I told Flathead County EMS that I needed to take a hiatus. They understood, but I have no intentions of ever coming back and don't want to be guilted into taking shifts. Besides, Ethan never forgave me for marrying Thaddeus Hollinberry six years ago, a light-eyed English descendant, a Catholic, and a yuppie's son. After three months of Thad and me being married, Ethan's mother told the whole town that Thad only married me because he'd knocked me up, and my wedding was a shot gun wedding. Of course this was sensational. The Hollinberry's brightest son marrying local teenage trash. Of course they believed it was a trap. The proof was my enormous pudding-like belly. I was pregnant, and looked about six months, but was two months along with twins. When I kept getting bigger and bigger and went to thirty-eight weeks gestation, the town finally quieted.

Not doin' that, I say sternly, my hands grazing my now flat belly.

Valeria cinches her lips like the mouth of a small purse with thin draw strings attached, desperate to fight with me and assert her disappointments. She starts another line of attack by saying, They've been asking about you at church.

I shrug. I used to be such a righteous Christian, going to Christ's Community Church of Flathead Valley every Sunday. Praying morning, noon, and night. But the last time I prayed was when I found out Benny had been killed. I got the phone call from my barely younger sister, Marielle. She said, Benny is dead. She said she had said a prayer to give her strength to be able to tell everyone. She told me to pray for peace. As I hung up, my knees hit the floor. I tried to pray to God for Benny, for comfort, for it to be a mistake. All that came out of my mouth was, Oh, God! Oh, God! Oh, God.

I didn't feel anything, no comfort. Nothing. What happened? I've been a good Christian. Where was Christ now? When I came back to church after getting my brother's widow, Genevieve, and their kids settled I couldn't stand the way people treated me. Nothing was real. I hated their happy pious faces. Trying to live the positive Christian attitude Pastor Russo always sermons about, and, more likely, trying to avoid the uncomfortable awkwardness of mentioning my brother. The congregation greeted me with, Good to see you back! and then they'd rejoice saying, We've missed you! as if I've been on some extended vacation. I wanted to say fuck you to all of them. I haven't been back.

As I look in her old fridge, I tell Valeria, I'm sure they've been talking.

There isn't anything in here, just a few cups of yogurt, a bread heel, and some grape jelly. I'll have to pick her up some groceries. I can't just give her money; she'll just spend it on bead paraphernalia. I look in her sink full of dirty dishes ready to crash and cut, knives jettisoning like silver claws ready to snag and slice. The small counters overflow with papers that have scraps of poetry, cereal bags, tea boxes, bead boxes, pictures of Benny.

I spin around and say, Mom, where's your table?

Sold it, she says with a defiant sniff, knowing full well I'll object.

I raise my eyebrow and say, *Mom*….

She looks away as she says, Digger McMurray wanted to sell me one of his enclosed apple stands from his farm. I need it if I want my jewelry to sell. I'd be more professional. I'm going to paint it and everything. Tourist season is coming, and I don't feel safe just behind my card table. Lakeside Ladies could easily turn a card table over. I'm left completely exposed….

I roll my eyes and say, Oh, Lord,

Mom. You're not serious? ...Okay, well, whatever.

I run my fingers through my hair, not knowing whether I should try to find another table to replace it, or if she'll just sell that one too. She's always been terrible with money. Especially after dad left us. I take two steps from the kitchen into her tiny living room that can barely fit the multi-colored 1980s southwestern style thrift store sofa. The mess panics me. I pick up books, pictures of Benny, and heavy jewelry pliers off the floor. I wonder what type of puncture injury they'd cause if my mom or one of my daughters stumbled on them. An E920.3? Accident due to knives, swords, or daggers? No. It would be an E920.4: accident due to hand tools. Most likely causing lacerations to feet or hands. Could penetrate all layers of dermis. Sutures needed. I worry that my mom's messiness is expressing her grief. I wonder if she's okay, or if she's like me. Is there more she's not telling me? Would I be as terrified and repulsed to see the horrors going on inside of her as I am with myself? Does she feel just as alone? Does she hide her wrinkles?

I reach to put the pliers and pictures on the table before I remember it's not there. I resolve to put the stuff on the dresser that's been crammed in the corner next to one of the two windows in my mom's apartment. I prop my brother's picture up against a book. I smile, before sighing at this place. If it weren't for the mass yuppie migrations to Montana, maybe my mom could afford a better home.

Valeria makes herself tea while I pick up and asks me, So how's your pre-med classes goin'? Do you think you'll take the MCAT soon? Do you think you'll move for med school?

They're not pre-med, Mom, I remind her, they're just biology classes.

But that's a lie. They're not even biology classes. All she's ever wanted is for me to be a doctor. I pause and wipe dust off the picture: Benny, about two years old, holding me as a newborn on a red checkered blanket with Shining Mountains' steep face rising behind us and the glacial blue lake in the near distance. The colors are still vivid. I still can't tell my mom I've stopped taking my pre-med classes for random ones; I haven't a clue what I want to do now, except that I don't want to do medicine, leaving years of Medical Anatomy, Organic Chemistry I and II, and Genetics to rot.

I finally mutter, They're fine, while keeping my back to her as I try to move around her apartment putting away dirty clothes. She makes a bigger mess than my girls.

That's all you're going to tell me? Well, how are the kiddos and Mr. Attorney General?

I laugh at her calling Thaddeus

"Crimson Zen Blossom" Tina Sitton, third place undergraduate art

"Attorney General." She always wants to inflate our status. If she only knew that most of his work for the local businesses is pro bono or paid in-store credits, like the little yuppie muffin shop down on Main Street. We have $5,000 in muffin and coffee credits from some corporate law Thad did for them. I'm so sick of muffins.

I say, Thad's good. He whines about wanting to go climbing. The girls are at Marielle's. Remember? They're going to visit Genevieve and the kids today. Told me I'm not invited until Sunday when I'll meet to pick them up. I'm supposed to be getting work done this weekend.

Oh, ya, that's right. I must've forgot. Senior moment, says my raven haired mother.

You're hardly a senior, Mom. You're fifty-three. Besides, the French have longevity.

But that's another lie.

* * *

One of my teachers keeps telling me that my work needs to be more "real," that something artificial dominates my essays and that I should write from a place that I "know." But it's as if everything after Benny shriveled into superficiality. I don't know how to get what's real back. Or how to write about it. I cringe to think of one story I wrote for an English class before everything happened, a story about a girl whose sister was killed in a car crash. How prophetic. Or pathetic. Whichever. I had no business writing it. I was too cocky. Thinking that since I had seen it so many times, I could actually create a poignant depiction of the aftermath when someone loved dies. I hate myself for all the lies I told to people in that story. I hate the praise they gave. How they nodded their heads, touched by the "reality" of my prose. They believed me, trusted me, because I could say, Oh yes, I've seen this a hundred times. But I knew nothing.

I hate all the times in real life I told patients, or the loved ones of those who didn't make it, everything would be okay. Lies. I would pat them on the shoulder after someone more official had given them the news, leaving me to watch them in case they went into cardiac arrest or had a cerebral embolism. I would stay by their side, helping them transition, making sure someone else would drive them home, while telling them how sorry I was and that everything would be okay. What a fucking liar. I felt sorry for them, sure, but I knew nothing of empathy. Of reality. Of how you can't go back to who you were no matter what. How death is the rape of the soul. How death will invade you so intimately, tear from you every belief you held sacred in your breast, every perception you once knew, and fuck with it.

Frustrated, I get up from the computer desk and sulk my way to our kitchen. My husband comes in wearing a cut-off T-shirt and wants to talk about going on a "Traditional" climbing trip at Mount Gallatin right now! for two days with his buddy Braun Bornhold. A wickedly clever man, with wickedly wild hair and Popeye forearms, Braun left his lecturing position in Financial Mathematics at U of M to dirt bag it and climb. I, of course, hate the idea. Braun is a bad influence. Thad is even letting his hair get long—he's looking like a surfer, not an attorney. Why does he want to kill himself? I slap some bread down on the counter, not bothering to get a plate to express my annoyance.

Thad stands behind me unaffected by my tantrum saying, The rock is calling.... Braun says a few routes have thawed enough already. I've got to answer the call…and I won't be distracting you with my good looks, so you can finally get some work done. Oh, and I need to take the Subaru. We need high clearance and all-wheel drive. Can you stand the Prius? Please?

I loathe the Prius. It's a yuppie car. I tell him, The weather reports said that there might be some more May snow coming. I don't want you to risk it. Think about the thaw cycle, Thad.

I imagine how slick ice melt can make rock, how unstable the rock becomes, and how easily it can cause an injury. An E884.9: a fall from a fixed object. If he takes a whipper, he could fracture his calcaneus, snap his fibula, then he wouldn't be able to hike out, snow could hit….

He's adamant that it will be a northern storm and it'll rain, if anything. And then they'll just camp out. I still fight him saying, It's too dangerous being the first to climb after the thaw.

He tells me, You can't stop bad things from happening. You can't control everything.

I say, I can try. You don't need to put yourself in a position to get killed. Holds break.

I trust Braun. I'm not gonna die, he says, swiping a finger in peanut butter.

I pull open the fridge door, grab the strawberry jam and say, You don't know that.

God will protect me.

I slam the fridge door closed and ask, Like He protected Benny?

What do you want, Renee? What do you want me to do?

I say, I want my brother back. I want my life back. And I want you to stay home.

He quietly says, I can't give you that.

The last one you can, I argue, waving the jam-covered butter knife like a threat.

Nope, Thad says, we still need to live our lives, we can't let our world get any smaller, Renee…it's a choice we can make. Now, try to get some work done or write something while I'm gone—Did I tell you, I really don't want my good looks to distract you? Besides, writing's always made you feel better, right? Uh, cathartic, right?

Smearing the bread with jam until it tears giant holes, I frown, shake my head and say, You already said that, and no it won't, as I slam the bread loaf back into the cupboard.

He rubs his light brown beard as he says, What? Since when? You've always loved it. Remember what Dr. Husher said about you losing the joy in life? Maybe...do you think, you might want to go back…to grief counseling? …Ya know, if the anxiety is getting to you again? We could go together again if you'd like.

I chuck the knife in the sink, hoping it doesn't bounce back and stab me in the eye; I think how I'd have to isolate and pack my own wound, as I say, Dr. Husher said I was fine. That I don't need counseling. I'm normal. I'm calling Marielle. I'm gonna pick up the girls if you go.

Thad kisses me and says, You're not calling. They're having fun with their cousins. I love you, but I'm going. I need to live…like a man! In the forest, doing manly things with these hands. Like climbing granite, catching fish, then using them to fist fight a bear!

He chuckles, deep and exaggerated, and pounds his flexed chest with fists of triumph.

Then, gently, he takes my wrists and unfolds my arms while saying, Come on, Sweetie, you can do this. I know you haven't been all alone after *everything,* but I think you need it. Get some work done. You'll feel better. I'll call you every hour until we're out of service. I'll climb up to the top of Mount Ebenezer for you. And call out your name to the heavens, then call you on the phone before I go to bed while gazing at the stars that I've named after you so you can know no bears have eaten me.

Not funny, I say, pulling my arms back to my chest. I think of how lovely I used to be.

No? Not even a little? …*Sweetie?* Why are you crying? I was kidding! I'll be fine.

He leaves. I cry, thinking I'll never see him again. Because that's life. Because I can't go back. Because I don't have faith.

* * *

Bad night last night. Now I'm heading south on East Shore 35 almost to the 93, hugging South Lakeside's many curves in the godforsaken Prius. To my right the choppy lake is dark with cloud filtered light—snow's coming. I pass apple orchards budding on the banks in strict controlled lanes. The slate gray lake water alternates between rows of lighter apple tree trunks. At my speed it's a blurred flickering of light and dark like an old movie reel. This place is in limbo. Neither winter, nor spring, just waiting for the sky to open with light, warmth, and purpose. I call Marielle again, since she didn't answer the first three times. Even though the girls are coming home tomorrow, I just want to see how they're doing with their cousins….

That's a lie. I couldn't sleep at all last night. Less than usual. The house too quiet. Thad gone. Girls gone. I'm in a sleepless-induced panic and heading towards Marielle's. Oh Lord, I say aloud, what if they got into a car wreck on their way to Genevieve's? I shouldn't have let the girls go. Why'd Thad leave? Why didn't he call this morning? What if something happened to him in the night? What if last night's my future? Empty beds. Silent rooms. Childless widow.

Marielle answers. I try to act bubbly, but I'm too anxious and quickly say, Oh, hey, Marielle. Just checkin' in on the girls; I know they can be a handful. Double-Trouble, ha ha ha....

But really I'm mad as hell that she didn't answer before.

Sorry, Renee, she says, I was talking to mom on the other line. What's this about Benny's spirit sending her messages? Telling her to stand her ground or something? She told me not to tell you. But that means I should do the opposite. What's Lakeside Ladies?

Oh Lord. I tap the breaks to slow. But the damned Prius jerks, giving me whiplash, and I drop the phone in my lap. I press the speaker button. Hairpin curves and pines block my view ahead, but I know this road by heart.

Marielle continues, Mom said she was talking out loud to Benny, *as usual*, asking him what she's goin' to do about the ladies. She said she usually talks to his picture, but couldn't find it. Then, she said she suddenly saw it next to her pliers? Don't know what that means, but she said it was a sign. That Benny had moved his own picture to be sitting next to the pliers to give her a sign. Telling her he wanted her to act…or something. I can't remember. It was nonsense.

Oh no, I say, trying to find a place wide enough to flip the little jelly bean of a car around; I think of the injuries my mother could try to inflict. Fighting isn't uncommon in a small town, especially when people are almost driven mad by the winter weather. Many of my calls as an EMT involved drunken domestic violence or drunken neighborly brawls simply brought on by a cloudy day. People get bored, drink, and start a fight. Well, at least in Montana they do.

I tell Marielle, I'm goin' to Mom's before she does something stupid.

Marielle's voice is quiet, reverent as she says, Do you really think it's Benny, Renee? I mean, can it really happen? Could he move his picture? Is he really around us? Protecting us?

No, I say harshly, I put the picture there when I cleaned Mom's living room.

Marielle sounds disappointed when she says, Oh. Well, wait. Mom's not at home, she told me she's already at her stand thingy. I can't remember where she's selling these days.

I told Marielle I'd talk to her later. Within minutes, lake effect snow starts falling.

The heavy, moisture rich spring snow is deceptive, blurring the road. I've seen too many accidents and know better. At the bend in the road ahead I see the oncoming southbound SUV fishtail. Overcorrect. A 360 degree spin across the narrow road, then an abrupt stop into a bordering field. An E8160: loss of control without collision on highway. This particular field sees a different crop every season. Probably alfalfa this year. Last year looked like sugar beets. The farmers prepped their fields months ago, tilling and aerating the soil to be ready at a moment's notice to plant when the fickle Montana sun willed it. The field looks like a chocolate mousse pie with powdered sugar sifted atop. Now, an SUV was taking root in its fertile soil. A place of rebirth between piney hill and lake. But not quite yet.

The SUV's wheels spin and spit, sinking farther in the loose soil. The wheels stop. I slow the Prius to make sure I keep control. The steep slope and dense vegetation bordering the road only allows for me to pull halfway off the road. My hand instinctively goes for the flimsy plastic door

"**Headless**" Grace Ryser, second place undergraduate art

handle, but my training has taught me better than to rush into the scene of an accident. I must stay where I am and objectively assess first, then act.

I look for any external damage of the vehicle, giving me clues to the extent of bodily injury from a deceleration type accident. A visual list of possible injuries instantly scrolls through my mind from such a simple accident: a concussion and/or contusion to the left side of the head with the possibility of deep laceration from hitting the driver's side door and/or window. Cervical trauma. Broken collar bone at site of safety restraint. Fractured bones in face, chest, arms, and hands if airbag deployed, including skin abrasions. Thoracic trauma. Soft tissue damage, particularly shearing type injuries due to sudden deceleration. The torn aorta. A critical III.

I stop my mind. I don't want to think about an injury similar to Benny's. I can't handle that. I try to stifle the panic in my throat by getting a mass estimate of driver and passenger(s) in the SUV. I see the sun light filtering straight through the back window coming over the rear and front seats unobstructed. They weren't tall. Or, there's only a driver. But then again, children could sit at that height. Even so, it's enough to estimate the body mass, the KE, and the possible MOIs. I deem serious internal bleeding not likely.

Maybe a part of me is too afraid of what I might find, but I stay where I am, unmoving, just looking into the sky blue Acura. I see a woman driver. Late twenties. Conscious. No visual signs of trauma. Her blond hair cut in a short bob frames her face, pale, but painted in beautiful make-up; the false rouge across her cheeks masks the shock her skin should be telling me. Her thin hands flail around the steering wheel and gear shift uselessly, then settle at the base of her throat. I'm sure they feel the flash of adrenaline pulsing, and the forceful contractions of her heart. Her red lacquered nails will make it difficult for me to test her capillary refill and assess her oxygen intake. I can't help thinking how different we are. Why am I driving the Prius? I don't have my emergency kit with me. Then again, since I'm no longer in the EMS, I couldn't legally use it, but I could assess, sustain, and call in for help. I feel a powerlessness. Not just being unable to act because of a technicality, but something holds me back.

Still in our cars, the woman and I face one another, the southbound lane between us, and stare at each other. She's lucky the mud stopped her and she didn't go into the lake. Her eyes, wide with adrenaline, seem to be green, but I can't check PEARL from here. I see no other passengers, but I double check for head rests of children's car seats. None. She's up to her axel in mud on the driver's side, up to her wheel wells on the back passenger side. Sinking deeper.

I place my right hand on the window. She mirrors me, her delicate hand trembling as it finds cold glass. I don't know her. Most likely a visitor, or a new yuppie. New puppy to the litter of yuppies more like, seeing the wild world of Montana for the first time. Either way a tourist.

I breathe. Slow. In through the nose, out through the mouth. She breathes, mirroring me.

Good, I think, as I mouth to her, Are you okay?

She keeps her hand on the window, looks around herself first, then quivers a nodded 'yes'.

She's alert and verbal. Good. Neither one of us moves, however. A gust of sticky wet snow blows between us from off the lake. It spatters my windshield like paint. I count her breaths as her body regains control. Rapid, but normal and slowing. We keep our hands echoing each other on the glass.

Suddenly, both of us look south. We feel the rumble of the semi-truck coming half a mile back too fast for this curve. This snow. It looks like one of the dairy farms' trucks, dusty white and filled with mother cows which can no longer produce milk. The cows have met their usefulness and are no longer needed that way. Off to McDonald's they go. In death finding a different consuming purpose. I'm in Cow Truck's way. I've forgotten the number one rule of emergency medicine: is my scene safe? No, it's not. Why doesn't it slow? Why didn't I think? Why did I stop *here?* I quickly assess the truck's speed and hope to God it's empty. The cows would only add mass and delay deceleration. It will slick around the road unable to stop, jack-knife, and hit me. I know it's possible. Probable. And I breathe again. In through the nose, out through the mouth.

I can feel the reality pulse through my rusty veins. Death is near.

Of course, I finally understand. Finally, something makes sense. Finally, something real. To die by a semi filled with impractical cows smashing into me on a snowy spring day makes sense. That's life. It's real. It happens daily. Dying is not the problem. Living is the problem. Living means risking that my husband, children, family could die. I can't live through that. I can't, or don't want to move. I want reality to beat through me like a truck collision.

I look back to the woman in the sky blue Acura, up to her doors in the mousse-like, life-giving farmland. She looks to me. Our hands still in place on wintered glass. Still

mirroring. Still echoing. Still trying to connect across a barrier of open space. The heat of our fingertips blossoming with opaque fans of condensation, as if trying to radiate the words we wish we could say, the words that bond in moments like this, written in white collected moisture. She too understands what will happen. There is a change. Her eyes have changed from the hard open, to soft concern. A concern I used to have for my patients. The familiarity unnerves me.

Go, she mouths to me.

I look back to the semi. I can see the shine of warped dents in its large front chrome fender coming for me. Then back to the woman. What if she's really hurt? What if I can't see it? What if I don't care if she is? What if I don't want to move?

I'm okay, her scarlet-painted lips urge. Go.

I feel the vibrations of the semi getting closer. I scan her pleading face. It's genuine. Innocent. Real. Like I used to be. But it doesn't make sense to go. To live. I'm too messed up. I'm not real anymore. I can't control anything. But this, I can decide this.

I think again about the semi jack-knifing, the tail end swinging around, and hitting her as well. My mind plays the crushing scene: Ethan Caelinus notifying my family, her family. Last year all over again. Then, my eyes catch sight of the two identical booster seats in the back of my small car, then the empty passenger seat up front. Oh, God. My chest starts to tighten. My hand, chilled, presses harder, tries to hold tighter to the pane. I realize that she's not the only one in trouble. I am. I realize I've lied to myself. I'm the tourist. Not her. I've let death be the only thing I know. Let my life become a superficial interaction with the world, like a tourist with eyes never on the road, the curves ahead. And tourists almost always get swallowed up.

I give her a jagged nod, and with my pale lips form, Okay.

We both drop our hands. My hand still hesitates. The condensation hangs to the windows in a perfect tracing of our desperate hands. I try to floor it. My right hand clumsily tries to finds the gear shift, and I jerk forward and stall on the snow melting on black asphalt. Shit. Shit. Shit. I see her take her cell phone out and dial for help. I find the right gear and finally start to move forward, looking for a safe place to turn around with the semi behind me. I worry the semi will still jack-knife on the bend and hit the woman. I dial EMS. My eyes glance back and forth in my mirrors until the bend in the road, and I can no longer see her sky blue SUV. I wait for the sound, the vibration of a crash. But nothing comes.

What's your emergency? a familiar voice in my ear says calmly.

Elsie, this is Renee. I'm on Eastshore 35, just passing Bowman Orchards, an SUV—

Elsie cuts me off—Oh good. You're in route to Woods Bay. Ethan's already on scene.

Already in route? On scene? I say confused.

* * *

I peel into Wood's Bay Overlook. The snow's already starting to peter out as I pull into the parking lot and into a stall by a mass of pines. I jump out of the car shouting, Mom?

Renee? Renee, I've been stabbed! She says, They want to treat me, but I won't let 'em!

What? Who stabbed you? Mom? I call out, searching in the direction of her muted voice.

Near a clearing in the trees where people usually set up stands, I see the Sherriff's truck, then Ethan Caelinus beneath his large beige hat. He's standing by a rickety wooden apple booth that says McMurray's in faded and chipped red paint.

Mom? I call out, as I push past pine boughs. A gust of wind off the lake chills me.

That's my baby! her voice yells, She's almost a doctor and will treat me better than you!

I go around to the back where there's a hinged wooden door. Inside I see my mother sitting on the ground beneath the wooden display counter window. Flecks of snow swirl in the opening of the booth without a sound. In a clean dark blue EMS uniform, a young man squats next to her. He turns his innocent face to me and reluctantly gets up. His badge says, Tyler Grube. I slide down, taking the spot next to my mom.

Mom? What's happened? I say, prying her blood stained fingers from her arm.

I see a laceration in her right triceps. I look for any other sign of injury, her breath rate, and feel her pulse. All normal. The laceration is long, but superficial and maybe to the subcutaneous level. I see the

I'm okay, her scarlet-painted lips urge. Go.

plump clumps of corn colored fatty tissue under the red plush skin. No clean white stripe of bone. She'll need maybe eight to ten sutures. Glue won't hold.

The Ladies got me! Valeria cries out. Probably severed an artery! Told you they're dangerous! Ruffians! Told you they'd be mad about my stand being here. I caught them trying to break into my booth; I heard them saying they were goin' to mess shit up...Saboteurs! Saboteurs!

I look up at Ethan. He rolls his eyes, but nods slowly in agreement with my mom as he monotonously cuts in, Seems like words were exchanged over the booth, and Julie Rollof threw the pliers. The others took off. Rollof's in my truck sobbin'. She called us to turn herself in.

The snow stops. New EMT Tyler hands me penny cutters, water, and gauze. I work.

Thank God you're here, Renee. This idiot would've let me bleed to death! Do I need surgery to repair the artery? Do you think you can sew it up for me, Dr. Lamoureaux-Hollinberry?

Are you current on your shots, Mom? I ask as I rub the dried flaking blood from off French alabaster skin. It looks as if someone drybrushed her arm in opaque crimson watercolor.

Valeria speaks through clenched teeth, the discomfort of me cleaning her wound causes her eyes to squint and water, What? What am I? A dog? How am I supposed to know? I don't have papers. Why? What's wrong? What does that have to do with anything? Did she give me some sort of Chicago disease? What's the diagnosis, Doc? Just give it to me straight.

Mom, you're going to be fine. It's superficial. But, I'm not going to be a doctor. I—I can't. I can't tell people everything's going to be okay when it's not. I can't lie anymore.

Valeria sighs, unable to hide her frustration as she says, I thought you might tell me that.

You did? I ask as I make a knot with the gauze right over the wound.

'Sss. Ouch. Figured, more like, after Benny, my mom says with a dramatically brave sigh.

Ethan and Tyler have their arms folded across their chests and nod in agreement.

Valeria looks past me, sighing once again, then says to poor Tyler, Well, Idiot? You better help me up and take me where I need to go. I don't want my daughter to get her hands dirty. Ethan, you can let her go. I'm not pressin' charges. But you better let her know how things work in Montana. Wonder if she'll tell her friends about this back home in Chicago? Ha!

The sound of a familiar car engine gets me to duck out of the apple booth. A door opens, and the unison squeals of Mommy! echo from within a dark blue Subaru. Thad jogs towards me. My mind flashes back to the Acura and the truck, and I feel guilty for my hesitation.

Thad! You're home early! I say. The wash of relief of him and the girls being home baptizes me like I never thought possible. I hug him, kiss his neck and say, What are you doing here?

Was on my way home from meeting Marielle—we got rained out and wanted to surprise you— when Ethan called and told me what happened. Your mom had told him not to call you.

I look back to Ethan. He's at the open door of his brown and white Ford Explorer, talking to Mrs. Rollof whose wet mascara streaks black down her face and settles in her wrinkles. He looks over and tips his hat to me. I bow my head into the Subaru, craning to kiss the cheeks of my sweet girls. This is real too.

3rd

The Obituaries Section
Heather Frost

2:58 A.M.
Fred's long gray coat was buttoned up, stiff old collar turned up against the stinging December wind. A coarse blue wool hat protected his silver head and large droopy ears, and the red scarf Mandy had made for him their first Christmas was wrapped twice around his flabby neck. They hadn't had much money that first year together, so she'd taught herself how to crochet a gift. In all honesty, the thing was hideous. She'd reworked the same yarn so many times that it was already frayed in parts the day he peeled back the wrinkled yellow tissue paper. Red and mustard yellow were not complimentary—at least not these shades. Strange knots that shouldn't have popped up during the crocheting rippled the surface like pimples on a teenager's face, scattered without pattern across the long scarf. He hadn't worn it much until after her death, three years ago now.

Breast cancer.

Fred Johnston stepped carefully off the back door stoop, a simple raised cement square that Mandy had always proudly declared their back porch. His scuffed black boots didn't have as much traction as they'd had thirty years ago, and the ground was icy despite the bluish beads of salt he'd sprinkled yesterday. The yellow glow of the porch light made the snow glitter underfoot, and Fred had to admit that despite the cold, he couldn't think of a more peaceful place to stand. And at sixty-one years old, he figured he had the authority to carry such a confident opinion.

"Backgammon" Weston Cook, honorable mention undergraduate art

Three inches of crusty snow covered the silent lawn, though it would perhaps be more accurate to describe it as a bed of ice. Fresh snow hadn't fallen since that initial dumping a few days ago, but temperatures were such that even the noonday sun wasn't able to melt much away. Two weeks until Christmas, and he already had his snow.

He was already running late, so he couldn't afford to get lost in the scene. Stomach cramps had kept him hunkered down in the bathroom for longer than he usually spent in the morning, so he'd left late for Brigham City. And though he'd swallowed crazy amounts of Pepto, he'd had to rush back to the bathroom the minute he pulled into the driveway at 2:36 AM, his truck loaded down with today's issues of the *Deseret News* and the *Salt Lake Tribune.* Talk about a bad way to start a workday. Though over the last several weeks he'd been finding himself in the bathroom increasingly often and for longer stretches of time. Maybe old retired people could take the extra time without complaint, but Fred had work to do—and newspapers didn't deliver themselves. So far, the eventual visit to the doctor's had only gotten him a bill. Fat load of good they were.

His breath billowed out in foggy clouds as he made his way to the old-style single car garage that sat several yards from his house. His nose hairs grew more frozen with every inhalation, and as he walked he thought about his cat, Misty, who was probably still curled up in the living room corner, warm and peacefully sleeping. The gray arthritic feline was a stray he'd taken in just over a year ago—right around the time he'd been laid off from ATK, the Promontory, Utah plant. He knew that not many companies would be interested in hiring an old taxi driver, and moving away from the Honeyville cemetery—Mandy—was out of the question. His two children—all grown and with children of their own—had both offered to take him in, but he was far too independent for that. Besides, Michelle lived in California and David was in Oregon. Both were too far from Mandy. And so he'd started the paper routes, knowing that the measly income would serve him well enough.

He slapped his new gloves with handy rubber grips together as he wandered toward the open garage door, hoping the movement and contact would keep them from going numb. There was a bare light bulb in the garage, but he didn't bother to turn it on. His '72 red Chevy truck was waiting for him, engine still cooling from the earlier trip. Set in the truck's bed, carefully wrapped in a brown tarp were the bundles of newspapers, fifty copies in each stack. Sitting next to the truck was the Dole banana box, filled with the newspapers he'd folded earlier. He didn't deliver papers to many houses, since he focused mainly on restocking the racks outside of gas stations and restaurants, but they were still an armload. He'd picked up the cardboard box from a local grocery store about a year ago when he'd started the paper routes. The handles would have been worn away long ago if not for the protective layers of duct tape he'd applied. That kept them from sagging too much even after all this time.

Fred hunched over to pick up the box,

but strained a tense muscle in his stomach as he lifted it up. The pain flared sharply, and he inhaled through his teeth, tightening his hold on the box. He quickly opened the cab door and slid the box across the bench seat, the pain lessening a little bit with each new tug of breath. He was glad he didn't have to jerk the garage door open again—that had really hurt him this morning.

He pulled himself into the arctic cab of his Chevy and slammed the door behind him. The truck started with a noble cough before spluttering and eventually revving to life. He aimed the vents away from his face and made sure that—in spite of the cold blast of air—the heater was indeed cranked as hot as the dial could go, and then he carefully backed out of the garage. The old radio was lit with a yellow glow, and the needle hovered right over his favorite station, which had started playing endless Christmas music since the first of November. The sound scratched out and tickled his ears—low, but comforting—and then he backed out of his driveway and onto the empty Highway 89 and headed north.

Before he had a chance to get up to speed, it was time to apply the brake and turn into the Hutshinson's driveway. They had a modest brick home with a three car garage, and they always wanted their paper placed exactly on the black welcome mat. In the beginning Fred had to walk half the length of the sidewalk at least before he was able to successfully toss the paper onto the mat. Now he was able to slip the truck into park, grab up a folded *Deseret News* and push open his door. He barely had to round the hood before he chucked the paper across the width of the sidewalk, over a skeletal lilac bush, down the length of the porch, and past the plastic Santa Claus that waved next to the doorway. Still clinging in the window behind Santa's head were window clings depicting bats, pumpkins, and a witch on a broom, apparently forgotten. But Fred was sure that the decorations were nevertheless impressed with his improved throwing abilities; every throw now, the paper would slide right into place on the mat.

He climbed back in his truck and pulled back onto the highway, continuing to meander his way to the bigger town of Tremonton, which marked his route's end.

Just over two hours later he pulled into the McDonald's just east of the freeway, his last stop. He parked right in front of the newspaper stands, the dash clock told him he was about a full hour later than usual: 5:12 AM.

Now that he was ending his work day, most people were beginning. Cars were now filling the roads and more specifically the drive-thru. He cut the engine and climbed slowly out of the cab, trying not to strain his body any more than necessary.

Fred closed the door behind him, hoping to trap some of the residual heat inside. The sky was still completely clear, and without the cloud cover the air was still bitter cold. Under the glow of yellow lights, Fred pushed the tarp aside and pulled out the last eight Tribs and five News', his arms protesting the weight.

With papers tucked under his left arm, he mounted the curb and crossed over to the two metal stands. Looking through the plexiglass, Fred saw that the *Deseret News* had had a good Monday; it was empty. The *Trib* had one paper left. Not bad at all.

Fred used his gloved right hand to pull out his keys to open the rack without having to use change. Once the doors were pulled down he placed the papers in their respective stands, sure to pull out yesterday's leftover Trib.

Fred tossed the single paper into the truck bed, not bothering with the tarp. That paper, with several others like it, he'd lug home only to recycle them on Friday—the same day he gathered the money.

Done with the route for today, Fred pushed himself back behind the wheel, fired up the engine, and turned toward home, a toilet, and a bed. *And in that order*, he grunted to himself, bending lower against the steering wheel, hoping the added pressure on his waist would offer some relief against the dry cramps.

***

Four days before Christmas, Fred sat near his wood burning stove, a crossword book in his lap. His yellow pencil tapped against the page along with the familiar tune of "Silver Bells" that scratched out from an old radio. Misty, his cat, was curled over his slippered feet, snoring lightly.

It was five in the afternoon, and the sun was already gone again. He gazed out the living room window, past the dusty lace curtains, to watch as a light snow fell. He hadn't slept well during his morning nap, and so he was more than ready to call it a night. 2 A.M. came early, after all. But he couldn't bring himself to get out of the chair. At least not yet.

It was Friday, so the stack of old papers that usually sat near the front door was gone. A patch of ink-stained carpet was the only sign that something had been there at all. He didn't have a Christmas tree. Hadn't bothered with one since Mandy's death. He hadn't really thought much of it, until right this moment. He almost wished he'd gotten one this year. Then he would have some colorful lights to look at, rather than just the snow.

The tests had come back today. Not that he'd needed any doctor to tell him he was dying. He'd felt like a decaying shell for a long time now. He hated doctors, and after losing his insurance with his job at ATK, he'd put off going to see a doctor until he couldn't stand the intense stomachaches anymore. The tests had given him the details: pancreatic cancer, stage four. Fast, furious, and terminal. The disease was spreading, infecting every part of him. Unstoppable.

Anywhere from two weeks to a month, they'd said. Told him he'd need to be hospitalized before long, due to the nature of the cancer, but he wanted to put it off as long as possible. He was uncomfortable around people and much preferred the idea of staying here as long as he had a choice.

He needed to call Michelle and David. But he'd convinced himself that it could wait until after Christmas. He loved his kids, but he knew it would rub him wrong if they were to suddenly become over-involved in his life. His stubbornness prompted him to hold off telling them about his condition until the last possible moment.

A new song overtook the old carol: Karen Carpenter's warm voice seemed to color the drab room. *"Have yourself a merry little Christmas . . ."*

Not that he'd needed any doctor to tell him he was dying. He'd felt like a decaying shell for a long time now.

He sighed and leaned his head back against the old green recliner. Closing his eyes, he tried to focus on every note of the song.

Mandy had always loved Christmas. But then, he supposed, such a thing could have been said of most people. Whether it was the magical air, the presents, the good food, religious pageants, family visits, or just the spirit of giving that marked the season, there was something about Christmas for most everyone to enjoy.

What about me? Fred found himself thinking. *Why do I like Christmas? Definitely don't miss Mandy's burned sugar cookies. How she managed to burn every batch . . . Christmas isn't the same without the smoke-filled air and chirping smoke detectors.*

He sighed, and then an idea wafted into his mind—past the memories and the music. He decided, then and there, that he was going to find someone to take over his route for Christmas day. This was his last Christmas, and he wanted to spend it here. He'd talk to Dan, his supervisor in Brigham, about finding a replacement tomorrow morning. He knew it would be hard—he'd probably have to pay his replacement extra, but he was determined. He was going to go to bed Christmas Eve and not wake up until late Christmas morning. It was his gift to himself, and it was one he knew he needed.

His musing was interrupted by the phone's ringing. He wiggled his toes until Misty stirred, then he pushed himself free of the chair with a grimace.

It was Michelle. "How are you, Dad? Keeping warm?" Her voice was deeper than her mother's, but Mandy's accent was there—warm, but quick.

Clutching the phone tightly Fred nodded. "Sure am. Pulled out that old red scarf your mother made me all those years ago."

"Oh, good. Daddy, I miss you so much. The girls miss you too. Paul and I really wanted to make it out to see you this year, but it's just not going to hap-

pen."

He pushed the heel of his hand across his stomach, tried to keep his voice level. "I understand."

"Dad, David called me last night. We both agree you should move closer to us."

"Honey, I couldn't leave this house. Besides, I don't have the money to move."

"Daddy—Paul and I, we think you should move in with us. We just finished the basement—you could have your own little kitchen and everything."

"I appreciate that; I just don't think it's going to work out." He knew he should tell her the truth: that soon enough it wouldn't matter. He was touched by the gesture, even if it confused him a little. Neither David nor Michelle had urged him to sell the house before now.

Though he wasn't sure he wanted an answer, he got one in her next words. "Dad, David was looking at your property taxes and land rates for the area—even in this depressed housing market, you could get a lot of money for that land. Rich city people want to buy rural land and build their castles there. Besides, you don't need that much space, and I hate that you're so far away."

He ducked his head, staring hard at the blue and white patterned floor. "Michelle. Let me think about it, all right?" It was perhaps the first lie he'd ever told her, but he figured it was only a half lie. Was he going to consider her proposition? No. Did that mean he was going to stop thinking about her words? Heavens no.

She wanted him to sell her childhood home. Well, it would be sold soon enough—after he was dead and buried in the cold ground, right next to Mandy. He thought it ironic that his children might visit his grave more often than they'd come to visit him over the past couple years.

After wishing his daughter a merry Christmas, he set the phone back in its cradle and clicked off the light on his way to bed with Misty padding along behind him.

***

Dan looked up from stacking bundles of newspapers in his garage when Fred cleared his throat. The supervisor's smile was fast and easy. "Good morning, Fred. I'm just about done sorting yours out. Aren't you a bit early today?"

Fred nodded, hands in his long coat pockets. The garage door was open behind them, the cold loosely held back by two space heaters that glowed red. "I had something I wanted to talk to you about, Dan."

The younger man nodded, brushing his ink-stained hands against his jeans as he turned his back on the newspapers. "Sure. I actually had something to ask you, too."

Curious, Fred nodded for Dan to continue.

With the slightest hesitation, Dan did. "Susan was really hoping to visit her parents this year for Christmas day. They live down in Manti, though, and that trip's a good three and a half hours. With how the weather's supposed to be, I'd really rather travel down on Christmas Eve." He paused, his eyes focused on Fred's nose, his heels scraping slowly against the cement floor. "Now, I've got someone willing to unload the trucks here in Brigham, and I've got a couple neighbors willing to cover our house routes. But no one wants the racks," he spoke in a rush now, as if embarrassed. "I was sort of wondering if you'd be willing to do them for us."

Fred's hands were clenched in his pockets. He wanted to say no. He was *going* to say no.

Somehow it came out as: "Yes. Of course I could do that for you."

A very relieved and grateful Dan thanked him, helped carry the bundles out to the truck that waited on the curb and, almost as an afterthought, handed Fred a printed list of addresses and how many copies of each paper to leave at each stop.

Fred wondered, as he drove his route that morning, what had made him agree. The only image that made sense in his mind was of Dan's four children, who he caught glimpses of when Dan's wife woke them up at 2:30 A.M. to help with the routes.

***

The drive to Brigham was quiet Christmas morning. Flurries of snow in the air, but nothing sticking to the salted pavement. The lights at Dan's house were off, and the family van was gone. A Hispanic man Fred had seen before but couldn't name was handling the papers today. The man greeted Fred pleasantly, wished him a merry Christmas, and even handed him a peppermint candy cane. "From Dan," Fred was told with a grin.

Fred thanked him and pocketed the candy. Breathing deeply, he loaded up his bundles in addition to the extra ones he'd need to take around Brigham, and then he was off, following a new routine for the day. His first new stop was a 7-11 convenience store, not far from Dan's house. He pulled out yesterday's pa-

pers, and then inserted the ones for today. *Merry Christmas!* the *Deseret News* told him in big bold letters.

The city was pretty dead. His back was aching, and the sharp muscle contractions that sporadically accosted him seemed reminiscent of labor, not that he'd ever given birth. But he had an imagination. The red and green street signals glowed more frequently than house lights, though there were plenty of shining Christmas lights strewn around trees and lining houses.

Consulting the list Dan had given him three days ago, Fred was a little surprised to see that his last stop in Brigham wasn't a gas station, grocery store, or restaurant—it was a nursing home. A little note by the address gave brief instructions: *Take the papers inside to the front desk.*

Great, he thought with a grunt, staring at the letters that made up his destination. *Just the place an old dying fool wants to visit on Christmas.*

With little trouble, he found the nursing home, a short brown-brick building with double glass doors that were filled with light. Once he was parked near the doors, he pulled out the necessary papers—two *Tribs*, one *News*—and without bothering to fold them, he turned off his engine and opened the car door.

He carefully navigated the somewhat icy sidewalk, his worn boots nearly slipping at the chipped cement curb. At the doors, he hesitated. Like an oversized doorbell, there was a round button set in the brick beside the doors with instructions to push before opening the door to avoid activating an alarm. Feeling like he was stepping into a prison, he thumbed the button and then pulled the door open.

The hall he stood in was bright, with flat pink carpet and cream-colored walls. Framed pictures of flowery fields and ocean waves were spaced on the walls, and the front desk was straight ahead. Three women—nurses or orderlies, he assumed—were standing in the rounded-off area chatting lightly. They hadn't seemed to notice his entrance, but he started to walk slowly toward them anyway. Halfway there he saw the large alcove on his right—like a waiting room or visiting area. There was a large decorated tree in the corner, surrounded by couches and easy chairs. A TV screen in the other corner showed the image of a roaring fire in a homey hearth.

"Who're you?" A gravelly voice barked.

Startled, Fred's eyes flicked to the speaker. It was a woman dressed in an ugly brown robe sitting in one of the plush chairs only a few feet from where he stood. She was facing the tree, and she was so short he'd completely overlooked her in his initial scanning of the room.

Her face was very round and large glasses with thin gold frames only made her accusing eyes look more dangerous. A walker with a wicker basket and lime green tennis balls sat near her chair, and she was actually wearing pink bunny slippers. She looked to be in her late eighties, but Fred never was good at the age guessing game. When he'd first met Mandy, he'd made the mistake of assuming she was thirteen years old, when in reality she was seventeen. Needless to say, they probably would have started dating sooner if he'd known the truth.

"I asked you a question," the old woman griped.

Fred blinked, then held out the small stack of papers. "Just delivering the paper."

She grunted, but rested her white permed head against the chair back. "Well, deliver it already. I'm Jamie Smith—you got my *Deseret News*?"

He nodded, stepped forward, and held it out to her. She took it with a nod, and then waved him away with the flick of one age-spotted hand, as if she were an imperial princess.

Fred left her rather quickly, hurrying to the front desk. There was only one nurse there now, and she offered him a nod of thanks when he set the papers down. More than eager to get back into his truck, Fred walked quickly down the hallway. But before he could pass the waiting room area he heard her voice again.

"You there! Get back over here!"

He was tempted to keep on walking—after all, he wouldn't have to ever see her again—but he found himself poking his head back into the room.

She was glaring up at him. "Where's Henry?"

Fred's eyebrows drew together. "Ma'am, I don't know any Henry."

"Of course you do—He's my husband. He always reads me the paper. Every morning. And if he doesn't got time for the whole thing, he reads me the obituaries at least."

"I really don't know, Ma'am."

At his words her plump body sagged and her head swiveled back around to focus on the tree's glowing lights. The newspaper lay slack in her lap, and though he wanted to just hurry out of there, her loneliness so mirrored his own that he couldn't make himself walk away. Instead he slowly backed out and returned to the front desk.

The nurse looked up from her computer, her scrubs sporting mini Santa Clauses, all the white and red going well with her ebony skin. "Excuse me," Fred said, his tone apologetic. "But there's a woman sitting over there—a

Jamie Smith. She's looking for someone. Henry?"

The nurse nodded easily. "Her husband. He died about a month ago. Some days she remembers, and some days . . . She sits there waiting for hours. She hasn't been sleeping well, and she hates staying in the shared room at this hour."

"Oh." Fred couldn't think of anything else to say. But as he turned away and started slowly toward the doors, the only image in his mind was of himself, sitting in his empty living room at home, sitting there waiting for who knew what. Just like old Jamie Smith.

His truck was waiting outside.

His protesting body wanted to hurry, so he could climb back in bed.

The people in Tremonton would be angry if they didn't get their papers…

Fred stepped into the room and lowered himself into one of the plush chairs near the hefty Jamie Smith. Her eyes were still focused on the Christmas tree, and he followed her gaze silently for a full minute before the woman spoke.

"So, you here for a reason, paper boy?"

"Just warming myself up," Fred replied, wondering when he'd last been labeled a "boy." "It's pretty cold out."

Jamie eyed him briefly. "You trying to put some moves on me? If you are, you better get lost. Henry will be here soon, and he's very protective." She leaned closer, whispering this next part. "He was a solider. Killed all sorts of people. He could take you on easy enough."

Fred almost smiled. "Well, I'll be sure to clear out before he comes around. I was wondering, though, if I might borrow your paper? I spend all morning delivering them, but I hardly get around to reading anything."

She eyed him like he was crazy, and her clean fingers tightened around the paper. "Not even the obituaries?"

"Nope."

"For shame. You look like you're getting older—no offense. What if you miss a friend's funeral?"

Fred only shrugged.

"For shame," she repeated.

There was pause—the fire on the screen rippled, the only movement in the room. Then Jamie sighed. "Oh, all right—I guess you can read the obituaries to me. But I warn you—Henry is mighty protective. You'd better be a fast reader, Mr. . . ."

"Johnston. But you can call me Fred."

"Mr. Johnston," she said firmly. "Are you going to start reading or not?"

He took the paper she offered and flapped it open. After a quick search he found the obituaries and began to read.

"The Sonoran" Tina Sitton, honorable mention undergraduate art

"Let's see now. Olivia Edwards Rhodes passed peacefully to the other side in her home in Salt Lake City, on December 24, at age 93."

"*Old* woman," Jamie commented with a stiff, approving nod.

Fred continued without a word. "She was preceded in death by her husband of 65 years…"

"Sixty-five? Heavens, that's impressive, isn't it?"

"…Isaac Rhodes, and is survived by their three children: Donna Rhodes Stevens, James Edward Rhodes, and Amelia Rhodes . . ."

The more he read, the more easily the words seemed to come. He never would have imagined himself sitting here, reading obituaries to a stranger, while he put his route on hold.

Twenty minutes later—after several loud comments from Jamie—Fred cleared his throat and began the last obituary of the section. "Thomas James Fordwick passed away at the University of Utah hospital on December 24, at age 60."

Fred paused, his chest tightening. Sixty. That's exactly what his obituary would say about him, since he wouldn't make it to his June birthday.

Jamie grunted. "That's all they say about him?"

Fred shook his head, then continued, more slowly than before. "He is survived by his wife of 35 years, Margaret Sidney Fordwick, and two children."

Again he paused. Two children. True, this man's wife still lived, but even so Fred was beginning to feel an undeniable connection to this deceased man.

"Well, get on with it!" Jamie Smith urged, nose twitching.

Fred did. "Thomas was known for his lifelong acts of charity and service to friends, family, and neighbors. He loved his religion and his community, and he will be sorely missed. His personal motto—the best way to help yourself is to make yourself selfless—was acted upon until the end of his life. He was the humblest father, husband, and friend, and continually put others before himself."

Jamie Smith was bobbing her head. "Mmmhmm—now that's a man who had it right. Like my Henry. Always did put others before himself. Yes sir."

"I do that." Fred blurted.

Jamie blinked through her thick glasses. "I never said you didn't."

With slightly flushing cheeks, Fred folded up the paper, more sloppily than it had been before. Of course he put others before himself. Why should he feel any guilt at all?

Still, the guilt was there. And though he didn't want to admit it, he knew the reason why. He wanted to be miserable. Plain and simple. Why else had he wanted to spend Christmas day alone in that old house? Shouldn't he have wanted to visit his children? Especially after he'd received the tests?

But no. He wanted to be alone. He wanted to selfishly clutch the news of his imminent death to himself, under the guise of "protecting" his children. What would Mandy say?

"Mr. Johnston? Can I have my paper back, please?"

Fred swallowed hard against the choking red scarf, and then handed the paper off to Jamie Smith. He stood slowly, bobbed his head toward her. "Ma'am. I'm sorry, but I've got to go finish my route."

The old woman watched him with wide eyes. "For shame! I thought you were all finished and done! Why on earth would you sit here flirting when there was work to be done? Henry would certainly never do such a thing."

Fred grinned despite himself. "Of course, ma'am—I'm sure he wouldn't."

"Well . . . If you get another moment and feel like arm wrestling my husband, feel free to come on back and read to me again."

Fred let out a short laugh. "Give me a couple of hours, and I'll be back."

"Good."

"Merry Christmas," he said with a small wave.

She returned the sentiment—along with a warning that he'd better not be late—and Fred made his way out of the room. The people in Tremonton would be pretty upset about his tardiness, but he'd move as quickly as possible. He may end up spending Christmas alone with Misty, but he had a couple important phone calls to make to his children before the day was out.

***

Fred stepped into his blue and white kitchen, smiling despite the discomfort in his gut. The old stove clock told him it was noon. He'd finished his route in record time and spent hours longer than he'd planned with Jamie Smith. They'd not only finished reading the paper, but they'd enjoyed a game of checkers and had joined in a larger game of Bingo. When he'd finally tried to make his escape, she'd asked him if he planned on coming back the next day.

His reply was spoken kindly. "Time's a bit limited. But I'll try."

The phone's sharp ringing jarred him. He grabbed for the receiver and lifted it to his ear.

"Hello?"

"Daddy!" Michelle's voice spiked. "Where have you been? Why haven't you been answering? I was scared that something had happened on the route!"

"Something did. I made a friend."

"You . . ." Her bafflement was clear.

He looked down to see Misty curling around his calf, silently begging for something to eat. The cat would have to wait. "Honey, I'll tell you all about it. But there's something else I need to tell you first."

1st

City Proper
Dallin Bundy

The children would release their breath in massive gusts.

Four days after the Augustine tenement fire emptied the St. Joan's northern barrio, Elias Bernaise painted the Laramy tunnel into a three-hundred foot walkthrough aquarium. He began blocking simple swimming shapes onto the concrete bend in the walls, splashing aquas, greens and purples with fluid abandon, like he piped the sea itself through the loose hoses of his sleeves. He affixed a new array of lights, custom fit with rotating cones lined with crumpled aluminum foil that spun to flicker soft, luminous drops across the painted tunnel, shimmering Bernaise's brush-stroke creatures with life and movement. A dragonfish skulked behind a blood-purple coral twist, whipping up the ocean floor with the delicate wake of its passing. Barreleyes clumped together meters from the sun-glimmered surface. Surface light penetrated their cellophane braincaps, so those who walked the tunnel could look on the high bend of Laramy's roof and see the thoughts of fishes spilling from the dark outline of a dozen, little, knifing bodies. Below the barreleyes the water stretched back into a blue darkness so infinite and thrilling that many who passed through the tunnel shied away from its walls, walking, as it were, an invisible tightrope stretching down Laramy's center.

And so it was that Elias Bernaise had worked a wonder through the underground passage. In that deep-water tunnel, the man accumulated an impossible collection of fish, crustacean and cephalopod life. He broke the boundaries of their ecosystems and spliced predator with predator, prey with prey until, like the compression of polar energies, this new ocean community condensed with a spark, surging into a hopeless arrangement of fish that seemed to comment on the natural order, as though Bernaise's aquarium expressed a truth larger than truth: that the special impossibility of his painting portended a new, yet undiscovered reality. Dumbo octopi shared space with giant isopods, lizardfish with anglerfish, medusa eels with goblin sharks. A pink cloud of flower hat jellies lifted to the surface where crystal eyes of sunlight swelled their bellies with brilliance. Children would clap a parent's hand upon entering Laramy. They'd grope the tunnel walls and press their faces to its glass to better see the hulking bozark crabs trundle underfoot. Emerging from the tunnel to the street, the children would release their breath in massive gusts, amazed to have held their air for so long and so deep under water.

The Laramy tunnel connected St. Joan's east and northern boroughs where the burned out Augustine tenement still shifted the weight of its charcoal over failing beams. Few walked the tunnel in the days before the fire, and fewer still in the days that followed. It was difficult to deduce a reason to ever return; there was simply nothing left to see. And so Bernaise encountered no particular challenge completing his painting. He dressed in orange coveralls and cordoned off the tunnel with police tape. He wheelbarrowed gallons of paint into the tunnel and brushed color over the black char and soot that clung to Laramy in lapping shadows. With rollers he covered the old imprints of fire. With clip-on eyeglass magnifiers he stippled away the smell of charcoal until the

people of St. Joan's returned to the Laramy tunnel, pulled there as if under a spell. They walked the tunnel to spite their schedules, to tease their destinations. They strolled Laramy the way some might stroll a park, and when they emerged from one side or the other, the realization of open sky and solid ground was often disorienting to bear.

The Augustine fire had come to stay. Though the flames did pass, they did so in a way that telegraphed a recession into hiding, that they still fumed under walkways and traded stories behind alleys. Heat buzzed under every St. Joansians' step. The sidewalks seemed to hum with it as though at any moment the correct mixture of concrete and shoe leather would flare up the streets with roaring, resurrected fire. Perhaps, unaware of why, the people of St. Joan's walked Bernaise's aquarium tunnel with a certain dogmatic adherence, an elemental hope its water would cool their feet.

Straight from the mouth of Laramy's north exit stood Iglesia, a city block in the northern borough all but erased by the fire. St. Joansians emerged from their aquarium tunnel to look up at Iglesia's black brick buildings and say, as if programmed, "Oh yes. I remember." Then they would return home, often with slumped shoulders. They did this for days. They'd exit the tunnel, frown at Iglesia and return to their lives, smelling the sea in their clothes and splashing water from their shoes. There remained in them a memory of St. Joan's, of the Augustine tenement, a candle wick of flame that the Laramy tunnel, with all its water, could not douse.

Elias Bernaise breathed in the night air as if to draw out the atomized remnants of St. Joan's and its people and the way they used to dream so plentifully they'd stuff the excess in their pockets and trade their visions on-hand with a neighbor. He breathed and breathed to mine the floating tatters of those visions from the precipitated air. He saw them spin and dip. He saw them vibrate in the space beneath stars, diffusing starlight into dripping streaks of glowing paint. He thought to write his name in that running light, but soon repented of it. He just continued to breathe and breathe, and from there came the dreams, dozens, hundreds, surging from the bricks where they lay preserved like detritus from a thousand years of rain. They cobbled and amassed before the artist where he began to plane them out, each one, cutting interlocking grooves into their edges, reverently puzzling them out into a single, collective tapestry. Then he looked for a canvas on which to paint it.

In the days that followed, St. Joansians continued to come up from Bernaise's aquarium where Iglesia loomed to dispel its wonder. "I wish that would just disappear," they said. "Ya know. *Poof!* Gone." Then, no sooner than they said it, Iglesia evaporated into the sky. Poof. Gone. They peered from the tunnel to the barrio discovering only heavy clouds streaking, they swore, slowly out to sea. And loping from cloud to cloud were trains of seagulls emerging and vanishing again into their own flock like the birds of M.C. Escher. "But these birds are real!" they would declare. Real and sweeping before their very eyes into a tessellated oblivion and out again reformed.

Below the birds the barrio opened to a view of the west ocean, bejeweled with rippling light. Ships of every description and every era chugged across the viewscape heading for ports unseen, carting cargo unknown. An ocean steamliner with three brass smoke stacks puffed clean white clouds from its rib-steeled chassis. Its red Plimsoll Line struck through the parabolic waves like the speed trail of a phoenix. A colossal freighter seemed to push the entire sea apart to break a path for its mammoth payload. It swayed and yawed, leaning heavy on its port side. St. Joansians held their breath for the men onboard no doubt presently in the act of correcting the ship before it rolled into the water. A submarine in the shape of a silver dining knife pierced the surface, returning from some uncounted depth. "A stalwart crew onboard," husbands confirmed with their wives. Children gasped at the ship and pulled

"Sierra Leone – In God We Trust " Sara Jordan, first place graduate art

their parents back into Laramy tunnel to look for where the submarine had come.

The citizens of St. Joan's ventured into the Iglesia barrio, expecting the painted illusion to fall apart as they rounded the street corners for a disrupting point of view. But the image remained. As the onlookers moved, the Escher birds moved with them, as though the flock's migration depended on that of the viewer. St. Joansians granted right-of-way to bird and cloud and ship, marveling at each taking its own course through the barrio. Ocean waves roiled and quelled with each step. The steamship puffed out clouds like pipe notes and the freighter righted its position over the water. The submarine emerged fully from the sea to display bronze portholes, clean and elaborate as fine china. Scrimshaw ornamented its hull, drawing counterfeit curves of surf foam across the body from point to point. Atop the rig, a periscope pivoted a mirrored glass across St. Joan's, and all throughout the copper housing of its shaft a relay of magnifying crystal balls aligned to scry over the ocean like a diviner's staff.

"Wondrous," exclaimed the clear-eyed. "Unequalled," chimed the lonely. St. Joansians in downtown offices began to take their lunch in the barrio in the light of Bernaise's beach. They'd lie on their backs to count the gulls or ascribe shapes to the drifting clouds. They brought blankets, parasols and beach towels. Many left these behind for the next fellow. Shirtless children and parents with lunch baskets peopled the streets of Iglesia, and so it continued through Spring.

In the new season, people still returned to the aquarium tunnel, admiring it as they did at first. It remained familiar and yet, somehow, it evolved every day. "The fish have moved," some declared. "No the coral is newly arranged," said others, without ever striking a solid accord. One change, they all agreed, was the whale. Deep in the blue distance, beyond the pink cloud of flower hat jellies, a massive whale hulked in suspension. It drew a long and bladed "S" with its body, like it had spent a thousand years coiled into a spring and Bernaise was only then pulling it out straight again. It hung in the deep so far from the tunnel that the distance seemed to promise the whale had much further to stretch, that, unless careful, the great leviathan would unfurl to fill up the entire ocean.

St. Joan's began to bustle with new energy. The city hummed with the spooled up power of a giant Tesla Coil. Every person walking to work, or for a loaf of bread, could swear to the hairs on their hands slanting to Bernaise's paintings like compass needles. In St. Joan's everything, everyone, everywhere sank and ascended. The streets passed under the ocean, then close to the clouds, and onto a beach where time and machinery stretched and snapped back into the same mass. St. Joansians whistled and proposed to their sweethearts. They powered off their phones to dip through the aquarium. "Of course there is no signal under the sea!" they would say. Sometimes, without realizing, they left them off all day. They spoke of the fire only in reference and contrast. They were, all of them, changed. They had traversed the sea floor to come out bright and clean before the clouds.

Elias Bernaise began to paint himself into the scenery. He appeared in the aquarium tunnel wearing a spun-copper deep sea diver's suit, leaping from foot to foot like a moon-walker, a trail of pearls and gold coins streaming from his fists. His helmet faced the deepening whale. Children and scholars pressed their ears to the glass confident to hear the artist conversing with the giant. "You can hear them talking about it," said the men with hats. "It won't be long now," said the women with red shoes.

In Iglesia, the painted Bernaise stood alone, ankle-deep in the beach. He wore khaki shorts and a Hawaiian shirt the color of coconut meat. He held sunglasses in one hand and shielded his eyes with the other, staring far into the horizon. "He sees another ship coming," they all agreed. "We don't see it yet, but he does." The submarine's periscope drew a line of vision to a vanishing point on the sea.

Next he appeared on the side of a city bank, painted into the brick and mortar creases like a corrugated ghost. He wore a chalk blue suit with wing-tipped shoes. He kept the sunglasses in one hand with a rolled-up newspaper under his arm. A white felt porkpie hat concealed his eyes as he blindly flipped a silver coin with his thumb. Next he appeared skipping to the corner of Firehouse 62, where the old char marks from the borough fire blackened the sidewalk. Bernaise didn't tarry, but painted as he went. The trail of his passing erased the soot on the ground with clean, concrete colored footprints. "He was here!" they said. "But from here to where?"

The artist continued downtown, to the recent ruin of the northern barrio leaning quiet and empty, its people and pets having fled or vanished now coming on a half a year. He passed through the burned debris like a soap bubble, cleaning as he went. He painted clear handprints on blackened deli windows. St. Joansians peered through these to see clerks in paper hats serving coffee and sandwiches to smiling patrons in upholstered booths. His footprints

stopped now and again to trace out the one-two-three formations of the Waltz, the Tango, the Cha-Cha. They who followed Elias Bernaise, dancing in his shoes though the hollow borough streets, would swear to the music they heard bouncing back from the void.

Filing lines of St. Joansians followed the artist's footsteps without looking up. Bernaise kept their eyes down on the baseball diamond he'd painted for the after-school games, and on a pair of clean underpants tumbling in the wind across the street. In this way, he hid from them the wreckage of their inner-city, what fire and rain and months of neglect had wrought. He took a brush and made it disappear. Blackened vehicles dotted the curb with their tires melted into the asphalt. Bernaise cleared out their windows to paint a smiling father pulling into traffic, his wife and kids engaged in a loud chorus of road hymns, their dachshund wagging its tongue out the rear. Charcoal colored stoops bristled with door-to-door salesmen in gray suits and polished leather briefcases. Shattered windows spilled out ribbons of drying laundry where women's hands pulled back from cooling pies.

Elias Bernaise led his locals deeper into the heart of the borough, blackened and wrecked as they shuddered to remember. But every step they drew behind him seemed to summon more of that new energy out of the ground, that spark which leapt from impossible fish to impossible fish and between the Escher birds from cloud to cloud. St. Joansians filled up the fire-broken streets as if to complete a ritual of transcendence; they were sailors and divers, taxonomists and explorers; they counted waves and carried ocean winds in their hair; they shook hands and clapped shoulders. They looked through burned windows to picture themselves inside those rooms with their feet up as dinner finished in the oven. "We should really move back here," they said. "Good for the kids." The burn marks on the street and against the brick served to contrast the painter's palate, no more offensive than the blank white of a canvas.

And finally, striped onto the broken wall of Augustine's tenement housing, hung Bernaise's final painting: a bench of ivory and silver scales and an open newspaper with man in a blue suit behind it. The paper dated months prior and its cover showed the northern barrio safe in the belly of a fish while a bright fire burned on the surface of the water. The man had crossed his legs at the knees, sitting in the disposition of contentment. His sunglasses hung over the crease of the newspaper by the temples, and those who peered into the reflection on their lenses saw all of St. Joan's painted with all of her people coming back to the site of the fire through an aquarium tunnel, along the shores of a beach, filing out of diners in dancing formations. They came in teams and multitudes, packs and throngs and the glasses revealed them all. They returned to the borough telling stories of birds and whales and Victorian submarines. They recounted meals shared at delis and road trips with family. They boasted home-run swings and swapped recipes for apple pie. They came back to the city proper where their forerunner pressed himself into the scenery, having painted his front the color of fire-blackened brick and sooty concrete. Elias Bernaise camouflaged himself against the ruined backdrop to his art, where, from hiding, he admired his admirers as they sat on his bench with their arms over his copy's shoulder, thanking it in turn, wiping their eyes to see the old neighborhood restored. And there Elias Bernaise stayed, the unnoticed cog keeping tempo against larger gears, revolving in secret rhythm until the weather changed to clean his work from the walls and wash it out to sea.

2nd

Boisea trivittata
Joseph Bradbury

For three years, my younger brother and I shared a room while my parents remodeled the basement, carpeted over the smooth concrete floor, wallpapered the sheetrock where we drew our own bull's-eyes and practiced throwing steak knives into the faded rock wall when they weren't home. After the renovation, our bedroom was the only room in the basement that didn't have columns of boxed-up holiday decorations, old quilts, new quilts we weren't allowed to use, wreaths for every season, greasy bicycle and car parts, a lime-stained canvas bag and piles of mason's tools, anything my mom's sister claimed she couldn't fit in her apartment. Our house became a frequent depository where my aunt dropped off and picked up boxes depending on the time of year, borrowed decorations and ornaments, argued over what my grandmother actually intended each daughter to own.

Tony and I didn't mind. We had our bedroom and Mom made it very clear our space was to be left alone. We had twin beds at opposite corners of the room, a four-drawer bank dresser, a cedar chest, and a closet. Our beds didn't have head or footboards, just rectangular frames with wheels that slid across the floor, crashing the box springs and mattresses into the walls when we jumped from bed to bed.

With our room at the opposite end of the house from our parents, at night we would stay up playing Guess What I'm Thinking. Tony tried to read my mind given a few discreet clues I'd reveal if he got frustrated. The image was always something ours, like running through stalks of corn on Mack's farm, taking groundballs and solo double-plays, wrestling the neighbor's blue-eyed husky––a list of fifteen or so recurring thoughts, like paging through an old photo album.

Late summer, our room sweltered with our hot breath and sweating bodies so we opened the window. Our bedroom window was right at ground level; Saturday nights the fresh-cut grass smelled thick and green. We could hear the neighbor, Mr. Devonshire, playing music on his front porch from an old tube radio, an RCA, until late in the evening. His front yard, the view from our window, was shrouded in fruit trees, cherry, apricot, apple, two adult box elders, and a blue spruce that shone in the sunlight like the morning sky before a storm. Mr. D and his son Peter lived in a boxy, white house; nestled among the sparse grove it looked like a painting in a cheap hotel, cozy and desperate. I only went inside the house twice. Once, I dropped off a plate of Christmas cookies from my mom and Mr. D invited me in. The wood floor in the kitchen was worn gray under the table and the rug pocked with grease.

The other time, my father and I helped Mr. D carry a wooden Indian into his living room. While I tired to move the couch, Mr. D lost his grip; the Indian twirled like a dancer out of my father's hands. The Indian's elbow, arms folded in reverie, hit the floor and the house grunted a hollow, lasting sound.

Peter D, a name I gave him, which progressed quickly to Peter Dunce, Peter Dink, Peter Dick at school, was the only kid on the block without a mom. Tony and I lay awake at night and talked about what life would be like without a mother, without rules and restrictions. Peter never had to do yard work. We never saw him mowing the lawn, weeding around the base of their home where Mr. D's weathered roses barely stood vertical on their brown stalks. Peter D never had to help pick fruit from the trees out front, which Mr. D gathered into plastic crates lined with newspaper and sold for cheap on the weekend.

Peter D was the poor, dingy kid that didn't have to shower, who could run on asphalt without shoes. Sometimes he would show up while a group of us were playing Hide n' Seek or Freeze Tag, brandishing a sidewalk-sharpened screwdriver or some other shiv crafted from a household item. He often took his father's bone-handle lock blade, an eagle's head carved into the butt. One time, while some friends and I were practicing wheelies near the school playground, he showed up shoeless, with a Mason jar of gasoline and a small box of wind-proof matches. He drew a trail of gasoline from the base of the tetherball pole to where we stood. He lit the match and the phosphorus hissed and burned blue. He dropped the match like a villain in a movie and the trail of gasoline ignited, rushed for the base of the stake. Peter D laughed and clapped while we stepped back; he gave the box of matches to Tony. Then, one summer when I was nine, Peter D had an accident.

I didn't see it. Tony was standing outside in the front yard eating half of a break-apart Popsicle. Peter D fought with Mr. Devonshire about going with him. He wanted to see his mom. Mr. D pointed at Peter D, told him to shut the door. Peter D slammed the door and tried to climb in the back of the truck. Mr. D looked over his shoulder, slipped and popped the clutch. The truck kicked and spun out, bucking over Peter D like a speed bump.

My brother, ambivalent and quiet, watched it happen while his Popsicle melted in his hand. I was inside the house, eating the other half. That night, after lights out, we put our arms around each other's chests and squeezed, trying to imagine being run over by a truck. I had Tony stand on my chest and stomach. He tried to keep balance while his heels bent my ribs. My skin shifted under his sketchy stance, unattached to my body.

When Peter D was released from the hospital after two surgeries, he wheezed when he breathed and he couldn't pronounce his R's. After a couple months when he emerged from his bed, we saw him in his front yard on a new 4-wheeler; for weeks we called him names like Accordion Breath and imitated him choking out the letter R, "Awah you a fast wunnah? Not if I can't bweathe". Until one afternoon when he rode his 4-wheeler into our driveway and asked if we wanted to ride.

After racing up and down the block a few times, Peter D showed us his backyard. He unlatched the cedar gate and unveiled a trove of illicit pastimes. He had a BB gun, a wrist rocket he'd found at the dump––he'd been to the dump––a plastic recurve

bow, a panoply of sticks, deer antlers, and broken lattice nailed and wrapped in oily cloth to make play swords and crude knives. There was a rectangular trampoline with rusty springs, the torn ribbon on the mat like old pantyhose. After his surgeries, Peter D's dad told him he could have anything he wanted, which is where the 4-wheeler came from. The other items came in quick succession.

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From our open window we could hear the unmistakable Casey Kasem working his way down from forty — through the hard water stains on the window, the nascent moon seemed to make the music glow. I was sweating under my oversized cotton T and shabby, diminutive briefs. Tony wasn't sleeping; I knew it. He tried to slow his breathing to fake it, then I called him Peter Dwheezow and he busted up laughing. The summer heat making us restless, we decided to play a round of Time Ya.

We both knew the intricacies of the neighborhood like a children's story. We knew the best curbs to jump our bikes from, which dog-safe shortcuts to take, the corner patch of grass in the Edgar's lawn where water puddled all summer long. After a few rounds of Time Ya, we knew the Cox's lilies were a 130 count away, the Knight's willow only 45-50 but you had to swing from the thin branches and that could slow you down. Stripping a fist full of leaves on the backswing, at night the bare yellow switches looked vulnerable and grave. I once snatched a mum from the Meachum's in under 200. Tony didn't believe it when he saw me sprinting toward our house, thought I got spotted, but when I thrust the chrysanthemums through the window, my hands stained green from the rain-swollen stems, he helped me scramble inside and patted me on the back like I'd hit a home run. We hid the proof under our beds and in the morning, after mom woke us and left for work, we dumped the evidence out back behind the shrubs that bisected our yard and Mr. D's.

Tony liked to flip a coin to see who went first. It didn't matter since we both always ran and went for personal bests, but Tony insisted on making each round official. He grabbed my shoulders and, in the dark, blindly positioned us in the center of the room on the braided rug that was as hard as the concrete floor beneath it.

"All right Ladies and Gents," Tony prattled on in his best announcer's voice, confusing phrases from street venders, used car salesmen, sports broadcasters––anyone he could imagine may address a crowd, "come and get 'em, step right up, for tonight only Cheetah and Whirlwind, watch 'em race, watch 'em run, while they're hot, read 'em and weep, next up, come one, come all, and see 'em on their marks," his arms waving, calling to the fans in the stadium of our room. I gave him a jab to the shoulder to wrap it up and he positioned the quarter over his thumb. He flicked the coin and it whirred in the air like the wing of a hummingbird. The quarter hit the hard carpet. In the dim light we scoured the filthy floor on our hands and knees, bumping heads and pushing one another out of the way, to find it. I held it in the light of the window, heads. Tony had to run first.

Outside, Mr. D knobbed through the stations on the radio and it sounded like an alien language. When no other stations appealed to him he sped back down to Casey Kasem. I stood on a wooden chest full of blankets and hung my head and shoulders out the window and surveyed the playing field.

Getting to the willow was out; Marny Knight was on the porch smoking. Tony didn't like the Meachum's since I aced it. The Salisbury's had a dog that barked to hell if you kicked the gate but it was on the other side of the house, out of view and in front of the smoker across the street. Just as I was about to call out a flamingo from the Godfrey's, a sleek, black car, ironed silk, pulled into Mr. D's driveway. His storm door opened and swung shut.

"Who is it, let me see," Tony said.

"Hold on, there's nothing yet."

The car door opened and closed. A woman's voice said something to Mr. D, hushed by the breeze in the tree limbs and the darkening night.

Mr. D let out a big, "Ha," and said, "you gonna aerate the lawn with those heels, darlin'?"

The voice turned, "Shut up," and said, "get me a drink."

Other than the RCA, the block was silent when the two went in the house. I tucked inside the window, crouched low with Tony and whispered, as if we were on a military mission, as if my parents might hear us.

"This one's different, Tone. On this one, time doesn't matter." Tony rocked nervously, with his knees tucked into his shirt he looked like a boa in a burlap sack.

"What is it? What do I have to do?"

"It's simple, but tough."

"Come on."

"Easy. Just change Mr. D's radio station."

The excitement waned from his face like an attenuating radio signal on some distant peak.

"I don't want to do that. Can't I just do the mums?"

"Nope, it's a stealth mission, real

secret. You'll be fine, just hide behind the big tree and when they're out of sight you slip up the stairs and twist the knob and run, simple."

"You do it," he pleaded.

"You won the coin toss."

"If I do it you have to do it next," he said.

"Nope. You can think of something else for me." We rarely sought retaliation in the game but I was lucky––Tony was too soft, too compassionate to be menacingly creative.

I slapped the top of the cedar chest, gestured toward the window. He climbed up and steadied his body in the window. He tumbled onto the freshly mowed lawn and disappeared behind the bushes; a lucent moon lit his way.

I didn't start counting—I didn't have to. I turned my back and sat on the chest. I thought about my father's gold pocket watch. My mother bought him a chain from a flea market in the valley that turned his fingers green. She was assured of its quality but wept when the chain broke and my father dropped the watch to the pavement, splitting the crystal face. I thought about the time, only weeks after Peter D came home from the hospital, when a neighbor kid brained him with a bocce ball in his front yard. Peter D was knocked to the ground, clutching his head and chest––as if from then on all his pain would manifest there.

Tony had been gone for some time. Casey Kasem was down to #17, *Right Here Right Now,* by Jesus Jones.

I climbed out the window and made my way around the shrubs, under the cherry tree where I knew my bare feet would be smeared with blood-red fruit, to the back of the silk-smooth car. I peeked around the trunk and saw Tony backed against the Box Elder tree next to Mr. D's front porch, the whitewashed walls and sickly-yellow plastic awning I knew too well to be repulsed by. The radio perched on the railing glowed amber like a warning light. Tony was rubbing his arms all over his body as if in a panic. I ran up to him, keeping low, out of sight.

"Hey," I said, giving him a start, "why didn't you do it?"

"You scared me," he said. "There's all these stupid fire bugs."

I didn't notice but I too had begun unconsciously brushing the bugs from my legs, swatting them from my limbs.

"Let's just do it and get out of here, this will count for both of us."

"I don't care about the radio, I just want to go back."

"Come on, we're doing it."

I got down on all fours, crept around the girth of the tree. I was about to sneak up the steps and turn the knob on the cardboard brown radio when Mr. D called out.

"Go on, get. Go wait on the porch."

I was behind the tree before he finished yelling and Peter D appeared on the front porch, the screen door knocking shut behind him. He sat on the bottom step, shirtless, slumped over, arms folded on his knees. He looked over at us and, as if he knew we were there all along and said, "Hey guys. I can't play. My dad has a fwend ovew."

"We just," I said, "We wanted to."

"Why are you two dwessed like that? You look like a couple of spooks."

"What's a spook?" Tony asked, like we were having a conversation.

"It's what my dad calls a ghost. You know, like Caspow."

"Yeah, Casper," I said.

There were burns high on Peter D's thigh, under a pair of faded nylon shorts that bulged thick with pain. Some were healed, resting like swollen maggots on his leg. He curled over and picked at his toenails. His feet were dirty, layers of filth that had been wetted and not wiped off. He smelled like a blanket left in the rain. Tony spoke.

"What happened to your legs?"

"Nothing."

"What about those scars?"

Without looking, Peter D said, "I did that with my dad's lightow and a bwoken hangow."

"Does it hurt?"

"At fowst, when it's hot." He examined his legs as if looking for something new.

"Does it hurt now?" Tony asked.

"If I touch them, see," and he slapped his upper thigh with two fingers, winced like it wasn't planned.

"But it's not as bad as when it's hot."

The limbs of the box elder tree held a sparse cover of waxy leaves twisting in the breeze, back-lit by a waning moon. I imagined six-legged figures, haunting and desirous, crawling into the window we left open. Tony pulled his arms into his shirt and backed away from the tree, from Peter D and the concrete steps. If the bugs were crawling on us, we didn't brush them away.

Inside, a wooden chair rattled across the gray floor. Mr. D's oak table banged against the wall and a maelstrom of tipped bottles and breaking glass erupted from the kitchen. All three of us peered through the storm door. Mr. D pressed his lady friend against the kitchen table, kissed her hard. Peter D looked over his shoulder once and brought his chin back to the palms of his hands. Tony and I stared, knowing we should look away.

Mr. D's hands scanned her thighs, clutched at the length of her skirt that even I knew was too short. He grappled with her underwear and peeled them down her legs. He spun her body and pushed her, bent her over, held a hand on her back while he fought with his belt buckle and button fly.

I pulled Tony away just as he worked himself into her. Peter D said something about a BB gun and I thought Tony might reply; his face was red, swollen, and sweating tears. I leaned on the tree and a dead shield of bark the size of my chest cracked and broke away. A colony of firebugs, Box Elders, *Boisea trivittata* spilled on our feet and shins.

The hoard was enormous. Inescapable. As if the very surface of the tree had become animated.

Tony let out a single cry, a pip, and tripped into the mass of crawling life. I pulled him off the ground and we sprinted barefoot for the window and slipped into the solace of our bedroom.

Inside we turned on the light, backs to each other, stripped off our shirts and briefs, and shook out our clothes. We crushed any fallen bugs into the hard, braided carpet and quickly shut the window. I got Tony a new shirt and underwear when he refused the same clothes. I pulled my shirt over my head and shut out the light, slid into my coarse cotton sheets.

After a few minutes Tony asked me if I was still awake.

"I ain't snoring am I?"

He limped out of bed and tiptoed across the corpse-ridden floor. He pulled back my sheet without asking, crawled into my bed. I slid over to give him some room.

"Hey Nick?"

"Yeah Tone?"

"Did you step on the cherries too?"

"Yeah Tone."

"Do you think it will stain the sheets?"

"It doesn't matter if it does."

He didn't speak after that.

I woke up in the middle of the night with Tony still in bed with me. His chest swelled with the rhythm of his breathing. It was strange, him being in my bed. I didn't mind him there but he seemed to be a great distance away. I called his name a couple times but he was much too far to hear me.

Years later, Tony called me while I was at college. He stayed at home after high school to help dad with the concrete company. He asked me how I was doing and then told me to listen up. He read an obituary, filled in the information that wasn't provided in the paper. James Peter Devonshire died on a houseboat at Lake Powell. Someone left a tarp draped over the exhaust pipe and the boy was asphyxiated while sleeping in the cabin. Tony told me page C12 was double printed, slightly off-kilter; the picture in the obituary was of two identical faces overlapping.

3rd

Fishmeal
Kevin Larsen

"What I want to know," Richard says, stopping the Pets-4-U employee with an outstretched arm. The boy jumps, but stops to listen. "What I want to know," Richard continues, "is if this fish," he points to a mass of scales, fins, and eyeballs that lurks in the corner of a tank, "this fish here. Would this fish eat all these other fish if they were put together?" He taps on a tank full of small, silvery things that panic back and forth in unison, afraid of Richard's finger.

The Pets-4-U employee shrugs and says, "We just feed it fish food." He starts to walk away, but Richard grabs his shoulder and snaps at him.

"That's not what I asked. I know fish eat food. Fish food. I know that." Richard glances at the tanks again. He still grips the employee's shoulder and pulls the boy close, as if he were confiding a secret. "I want to know if this fish will eat all these other little fuckers."

The Pets-4-U employee tries to shrug again, but the movement is awkward—his shoulder is still

pinned by Richard's claw. "I have no idea," he says, "but that fish does look pretty bad ass."

"Bad ass…yeah…you're telling me…"

They both squint and lean closer to the fish tank housing the ugly fish Richard is interested in. The fish floats, half in shadow, cold, grey, skin like blackened flesh, mouth open, jaws slack, eyes bulbous and staring. Its only movements come from the gills, which flash slits of red as they open and close, and from the translucent fins, which rotate in small, lazy circles. Richard thinks he sees rows of needle-like teeth lining the open mouth, but he can't be sure. He imagines this fish, a small brute, tearing, shredding, swallowing bits of silver. He imagines it eating and eating until all the silver is gone, consumed, digesting in a distended and grotesque belly. He imagines the aftermath of the feast, the threads of blood separating in the water, dispersing among leftover fish particles, a shower of tiny scales.

Richard buys the ugly fish, a dozen of the silver minnows, and a ten-gallon tank to put them in. He places the tank at the center of his kitchen table next to a pile of mail: collection notices, bills, statements, things that are past due and ignored, including an un-cashed severance check dated weeks before. Richard fills the tank, then adds the fish, and finally a decorative skeleton that he feels will set the mood. And now he waits. Nothing happens. Day after day, nothing happens, until one by one the minnows float to the top to stare and shine at the ceiling.

Richard sits, stuck in limbo, in purgatory. He wants something to happen, an outburst of violence, a frantic movement, a struggle, an act of defiance. For a moment, he considers eating the dead minnows, one by one, considers their small bodies in his mouth, being chewed, torn apart, their guts and flesh slightly rancid from going belly up. He considers doing what he wanted the ugly fish to do. The brute. The bad ass. But it still only floats in the corner, moving nothing except its gills and fins, just red flashes and translucent swirls. And soon all Richard does, or wants to do, is to wait for the fish to die and float to the surface, its eyes filmed over and dull, its stomach shrunken, empty, like a plastic bag crumpled in the gutter.

"Starfish on Brighton" Shanelle Galloway, honorable mention undergraduate art

UNDERGRADUATE POETRY

1st

Tessa Ryser

Attachment Therapy

When Christian and I were young, our mother
took us to weekly attachment therapy sessions:
the huge man, Larry,
would say, "Cry Tessa, I know it hurts. Cry!" while he lay
on top of my small body and pushed his elbow
under my ribs.

That was back when I liked wearing bright
green leggings and colorful cotton scrunchies
that held all of my hair in a ponytail on top of my head
like a helicopter propeller.

I didn't understand why
Larry wanted me to scream
like a baby bird fallen from the nest.

When Mom and Christian took their turns,
I watched the Disney channel in the front room,
trying not to hear the crying and yelling.

Today, Mom believes attachment therapy
helped Christian and herself,
but admits I was too young for it.

All about "re-attaching" children
to their parent
once they've been physically confronted
and forced
into an infantile state of being…

Dad always said, "You have a history
of self-esteem issues."

For the first month of my life,
he called me Samantha, but Mom fixed on
Tessa Rose, derived from Teresa, biblical,
like my siblings' names: Christian and Grace.

Once, Larry did attachment therapy
on my little sister, Grace,
and made me watch.

She was so small
with thick, waist-long brown hair
fanning out across the carpet like seaweed.
I squirmed in the worn, pastel-patterned armchair
while Larry—the black-haired, flat-faced man—hurt her.

Grace doesn't remember;
she doesn't believe that history matters anyway.
I remember
like a small, assaulted animal.
When Larry died in a car accident
eight years ago, I was glad.

Nowadays, when I feel scared or sad, Mom
lets me lay my head in her lap while she combs
her bony fingers through my long, scraggly hair.

I listen to her rant about means
for healing: 12-step programs,
meditation, affirmation, therapists,
psychologists, acupuncture, diets,
self-awareness, self-talk, self-love, and recently
John Bradshaw and Byron Katie—
a king and queen of self-improvement.

My mom is one of those people who when
a friendly passerby asks, "How are you?" she says,
"On the brink of death, but pushing on."
"I haven't slept in a week."
"Still waiting for some poop."

I remember
"I'm going to sell you to the gypsies!"
"Oh my sweet baby girl."
"We're all waiting for you!" and
"Tessa Rose, the sweetest flower that grows."

Mom blames her parents.

She says I should blame her.

I'm twenty-three years old, but
sometimes I crawl into my mother's
bed at night, to snuggle under the covers,
mascara and tears making black
spots on her sheets, and I ask her
to hold me while I cry.
A baby bird fallen from the nest,
a clam burrowed into a rock face
where tides crash, smash, and I suck
on a grain of sand, a pearl
like a piece of sour lemon candy.

Rain Falls in Strings at My Cousin's Wedding

Rain falls in strings,
splashing on the roof
of the cozy, warm barn with
windows big enough for
elephant guests and kitchen
doors tall enough for
giraffe catering—an Ark reception hall.
Tables line glass windowed walls,
center pieces spout lilies and baby's breath.
Candles float across white seas of linen
like fishing boats lost in heaven.

A musical trio plays:
Violin, Piano, Bass,
their heartstrings beat a serenade.
A cousin, Dave, silently pulls Rachel, his
spiky-haired, slender wife out
to join the bride and groom on the dance floor.
I sip from my glass of lemonade
muddy with raspberries.
The bride's dress twists around her,
mosquito netting in a tropical breeze,
as the groom twirls her, draws her in, kisses
her shoulder.

My parents, aunts, uncles, cousins move out,
two-by-two, onto the dance floor,
emptying the chairs around me.
I stab my fork into my second slice of cake,
a harpoon into a whale, my mate, with
blubber too rich and thick, pure dark chocolate fudge,
but I eat him anyway.

A forkful sticks in my throat
and I turn away from the couples

to look through a window to the lake.
Deep blue, midnight black,
rippling from silver strings.
Lights and swishes of color
splash the surface of the ice cold water.

The band transitions into a cheerful ballad,
What a Wonderful World, Louie Armstrong;
it soaks through my skin like an elegy.

I shove my empty plate away
before I can lick up the crumbs.
I weave through guests, tables, and doors
to stand outside under a parapet,
to stick my hands out into the rain,
and try to grasp onto a string,
a hope, an olive branch, to tie around my heart
and tug it out of my stomach

I grasp and for one moment
I see myself in the lake's reflection,
a tiny delicate figurine, dancing, in a rippling
tea green dress, twirling and holding hands
with a bear in pinstriped pajamas;
a tiny figurine that escaped
from the confines of the purple box
when music began.

But rain slips through fingers,
and I'm the only one out by the lake
isolated beyond the two-by-twos.
The lid closes and I'm back in the box, mourning,
attending my future's funeral
where rain keeps falling in strings.

Rollover

I slip on my night-dress, gunk my face with green, acne-destroying cream, and say my prayers:

"Dear God, Thank you for my family," "Dear God, Help me be better," "Dear God, I'm lost."

I turn on my music and crawl into bed. I roll

under the covers until they wrap around me like a burrito. One sheet, two blankets, and three comforters. I like to feel the weight.

Even in summer. Even if it means the bedding slips off to the floor. I roll

over and face the door. I sleep with the lights on like a turtle with its head outside its shell. When I was small, I feared fires and I'd remind Mom five times to turn off the oven. I always ran up the basement stairs because if you walked, the tiger would catch you for sure.

The dark had bodiless hands reaching for me. Goblins poked their faces up over the edges of my bed. Now I imagine burglars and rapists.

I can't close my eyes.

I slept with the lights off when Telisha lived with me. I need one other person in the room. Then I'll turn off the lights. Telisha crashed on my floor for four months. Every morning, I'd roll

over to say good morning to my best friend. Now the floor is as blank as sheetrock.

I snuggle into the covers, hug my pillow, and let my thoughts cycle like dirty laundry.

I don't know if I'm happy.

But I keep living as I always have.

I'll sleep when it's done.

I'll rest when it's done.

I'll cry when it's done.

I'll die when it's done.

I reach to the floor to grab my full face CPAP mask
(Continuous Positive Airway Pressure)
and attach it to my face, wrapping straps around my head.
When they tested me, the doctor said my results showed
my body wakes up every four minutes
in my sleep—unconscious to me—so I never hit REM.

I never had dreams.

Now I do.

I'm at the top of the high-dive,
my toes curling over the edge of the board,
breathing deeply, and then bounding and
rebounding into the air.
Nothing lasts forever I think
Nothing is lost
forever I touch the bottom with my feet,
open my eyes, and paddle my arms
to keep myself at the bottom of the
crystal blue abyss.
A great white starts to push its way through a
grate at the bottom of the deep end, but

I roll

over and I'm at the airport dropping off my brother,
Christian. He's going to graduate school in Pennsylvania.
He smiles as we all squish into a five-person hug.
He cracks a joke and I see it in his eyes again: fear.
I look at Mom. She sees it.
I reach out to brush away the tarantulas on his shoulder, but

I roll

over and Telisha is asleep on the floor.
I wish I could talk to her. I'm upset.
I sit down beside her, Indian-style,
and bear my soul to deaf ears.
I tell her everything I've ever wanted to say—good
and bad—everything she ever interrupted.
No, I don't think a boyfriend will solve
my problems. Yes, many of my relationships
are unequal. I'm not making it up. I cry.
She wakes up, "What are you doing?"
I tell her.
She laughs and rolls over,
"Okay, give me a minute to fall back asleep."

I roll

over and I'm tiny, running around like someone
from Honey, I Shrunk the Kids.
My giant father sits above me, using an abacus.
I yell, "Stop that!"
I stomp my foot. "I'm mad at you
for always wanting me to be different."
He looks down and gives me
his classic, soppy, I-love-you-so-much smile.
"I don't want you to be sorry," I yell,
"Or sad, but stop pushing yourself on me."
Dad frowns and tries to pick me up with a spoon, but

I roll

over and my sister Grace
and I are walking into Barnes and Noble
when she falls to the ground
and starts to writhe in pain.
"No, no, it's torture!" she cries.
She won't read anything.

It doesn't matter that she already has so few words.
I kneel at her side and ask how her day was.
Her lips are sewn shut like a zombie's.
Why can't I take some scissors and snip her mouth open?

I roll

over and my mom and I lie on her bed.
She tells me she's ready to be done.
I'm crying, pleading: I need her.
She rests her hand on the side of my face
and tells me stories about when I was small.
She promises to write it all down for my 21st birthday.
She tells me
"I know your baggage, Dad doesn't,"
and "As long as you still need environmental support
to validate your existence,
you will be compelled to try
and control other people to deliver it."
She calls me "Tessa Rose, the sweetest flower that grows,"
and I stumble over my words,
"You wouldn't… would you?"
"No," she says, "I'm just very tired."

My alarms sound off and I roll

OVER

I stretch, roll my ankles, and crack my toes.
Telisha always hated that.
I have seven alarms that sound off in quick succession.
I climb out of bed to turn them off.
I take off my mask and look down at the empty floor.
Telisha isn't there again.
I miss her. She made me laugh.

I'm awake and imagine all those things from my sleep, from my life, from in-between.

I want to

Roll

Back

Under

I want to be an artist.
I want to dream.
I want to fulfill my aesthetic potential
like my cat, Mittens,
spread out on her back, purring,
observing the world
with large, glassy, happy eyes.

She's beautiful.

I want to be beautiful too.

2nd

Jessica McDermott

Bear River Massacre

The road winds through the valley
like a knife.
We hit the Idaho border where willow trees
open into bloody fields outlined in sage brush.
You flip off the radio, and we hear the faint
cries of dead Shoshone. Sunlight drips
onto leaves, and prairie grass freely sways,
bending to the beat of drums.
Time pauses, and stillness eats my words.

Brisk Air

Idaho plays dead in the winter. The maze of cotton woods
become bare brown knots. The slew sits still, solidifying
deeper and deeper in cracked bubble sheets.

My cat disappears most days. Her fur thick as a rabbit's,
glows. I can barely make her out as she paws through
snow towards my, *Here kitty kitty, here kitty kitty*.

At sunrise, my gaze catches east, towards the Menan
Buttes. The sun's blanket of gold shatters the peaks.
Light stretches to the box car barn, and the feeding
shed, erasing the shadow of numbing air from the
gray wood.

3rd

Eliot Scheelke

My Scar

It's melted into my skin like a line of pink, chewed bubble gum.
I got the scar last winter, living at the Nottingham house. I
was pulling pizza out of the oven, when the baking sheet
bit my wrist. The stun of heat, like light after a night's
sleep, made my eyes shut and hot pads slip. I ran
water over my skin, it stung for days after.
Today it is numb. It rests now, like a body
in a grave. It is silent. And with time,
it might completely fade until
it is gone.

By the Red Door

On a little cold day,
grey outside
I stamp in from snow.

The old refrigerator
by the red door
Is walled with photos of

many people known to me.
Like old leaves, they
fight gravity's slide

down the side
to be forgotten.

Thirteen

When I turned thirteen a blizzard
struck me from behind,
surrounded me, whirled me with wind and icicles,
and took the world away.

I heard it coming, roaring down the seas,
and didn't pay any attention to it.
I was young, the green-gold world called to me,
the ground pulsed my heart red with warmth.
I wasn't ready for the cold, but it caught up.

Then the only place to stand was on the edge
of everything. The earth dropped away on every side;
the horizon was eaten up in
snow and rain I couldn't see,
but feel.

The ice blasted all green from the ground,
but the gold froze on the tips of my toes.
The weight of a timid new world shook me down
to the ground.

They Wear Their Hats

Wearing wool hats against a gray winter sky,
my grandparents focus on the lens,
smile lines warming their eyes.
Grandpa's red beanie makes him taller,
while grandma leans under his arm, her blue and white tassel
reaching up to his ear.
Their grandchildren sledded on plastic toboggans down
the hillside behind them,
diaphragms pumping warm breath into cold air
and obliviously whooping yells to the sky.

That was the year we thought my father would die.

Chemo caused throat sores so he couldn't swallow.
I didn't recognize him on the gray hospital bed,
his hair gone, and a yellow catheter running around the wall.

The year I thought my father could die.

I hold his green and white hat,
almost the color of our old worn toboggans,
that he used to cover his baldness.
Twisting it in my hands, I remember
how he hadn't died, thirteen years ago.

GRADUATE POETRY

1st

Tori Edwards

Beyond Black and White

I am White,
with my snowboard and Coldplay records,
casseroles and khaki shorts.
I can't be Black.
I can weave cornrows together,
make civil rights common speech.
Drive to African Dance,
transracial-adoption groups,
so my daughter won't be alone
in her difference.

But I can't be Black for her.

I can give her blue.
Yawning sky,
steller's jay,
Sapphire Pool
at Biscuit Basin.

I can give her red.
Fingered hoodoos,
windswept spires,
sandstone cliffs
that swallow whole.

I can give her white.
Dandelion seeds,
feather clouds,
powdered snowflakes,
that dust the tongue.

I can give her wilderness
that knows no *less-than* color,
no *better-than* race,
where sugar-spun whites
and creamy cocoa browns
coalesce with all shades
of bright day,
dark night.
Where my daughter's color,
my color,
are neither good nor bad,
but simply color.

Stolen Plums

The best time to eat plums is Sunday afternoon
in August.
The sun loosens bows of crumpled dresses,
unfastens top buttons of little boys' collared shirts,
turns placid tar on neighborhood streets
to sticky black rivers of goop.

Raucous voices, once a choir of children's song,
mix with the sound of feet on concrete,
the growl of rumbling bellies.
Behind us, a different choir:
Watch for cars!
Hold your sister's hand!
Must you run like animals?
But we are animals: greedy, self-serving,
a single goal in mind: devour, consume;
the target—fresh plums.

Each Sunday during the summer,
our careful eyes have inspected,
fingers poked and squeezed the fruit,
swiped the drool from our open mouths.
The kids who are first to pick a fight
are the first to take a bite,
first to spit out the bitter fruit.
I laugh with the rest.
Patience will bring my reward.

Finally today, the plums are not squat, green bulbs
clinging to branches for fear of falling;
today, the plump, soft fruit pulls the branches down,
like children too large to hold.
We tear into the plums, the first bites quick, sweet;
we fill our pockets with purple treasure.
And then, the bites are slow, savory;
we remember how long we watched and waited,
wanted the slow reward.
Or perhaps we know this flavor, this moment, this day,
won't last.
We stretch time the best we know how.

Today I think of the fenced-in lot
where the plum trees once stood,
as I walk home with my daughter.
She looks at the lot,
Costco plum in hand,
wonders aloud when someone
will plant some trees.

Dragonfly Soldier

College campus ghost town,
students home for the summer.
Spark the firework,
fire the grill,
tan the swimsuit lines.
Only the Twelve-spotted Skimmer works—
checkered wings throbbing,
a rapid heartbeat.
She hovers and zings,
circles above;
no thoughts of war.

I think of tandem-rotor
desert birds—
the CH-47 Chinook;
twin-engine lift capacity,
metalled mass,
bred for air assaults
and moving troops,
mountain terrain preferred.
Fire the engines, kiss your family photo.
Lift off and go.

Three Utah soldiers killed
in northern Afghanistan, July.
Artillery fire, roadside bombs
smoke-screen the stars,
light your night sky.
Wish for desert birds
to point you home.

2nd

Ian Weaver

When Landlords Turn the Drunken Bee
--after Brewster Ghislein's "Rattlesnake" and Emily Dickinson's "I Taste a Liquor Never Brewed"

I found it tipsy in the sweet
dust of a tulip cup, dazed
or trapped between stigma and pistil.

I first saw the flower twitching.
Then I looked in and saw its pollinated body—
yellow and fuzzy—convulsing.

I remember its desperate ways:
the drone sound from its wings
thumping inside.

I freed it with my weeding tool (a flat
head screw driver). It rolled out, pathetic
for a bee, as I pulled back the leather-like petal.

Its first jump at flight—a pollen cloud—failed and bounced
down the tulip leaf. Slowly its shaken
body gained control. It bumped itself
sturdy on the stem
and flew away.

Overlooking a Valley

The shelled bodies
of grasshoppers slap
dry grass, a hollow crack
at dusk. My eyes blur.
The valley is a smoke bush:
its tree boughs and leaves
now plume-like panicles—ripe
and full—hiding car lights.
My legs dangle
from the retaining wall.
But not too far out.
A bird's-rape weed juts
its yellow trumpet cup for late night bees
further than I dare. Any more than eye
pollinating makes me wonder
that such a shrug—from the ground—
might do something to the ten tons
of gravel, the street, houses
and families, brown grass
and grasshoppers. Unroot, maybe
loosen bolts—the earth let go?

Pruning a Mugo

The pine resists
        the candling time of year,
for without cleaning
the blade from each new cut,
the sap—a colorless resin—chaps,
        then glues it shut.

"Sierra Leone – Posters " Sara Jordan, third place graduate art

3rd

Jeffrey Howard

Bug Collection

Resting my head against the crabapple trunk,
I felt an itch, as if summer had crawled up my front
And scratched my right nostril with its see-through finger.
Of all the noses to pick, it picked mine to tickle.
I sneezed once.
The wind swatted the overripe fruit
From a branch not far above my head,
Like a prizefighter at his lightning bag,
Or an ape at the acme of a skyscraper's spire.
I followed the fall of a light green fruit, walnut-small,
As it dropped off its stem, like its shaking grip had grown
Tired of waiting for the pickers to come and rescue it.
It crashed into the body of a dull-winged bug
Among the browning blades of lawn;
Maybe that insect would have enjoyed the shade, as I did,
If the fruit's sudden weight hadn't dented its head and thorax
Like a pop can between the pavement and an all-season tire.
But snuffed lives don't have the option for recycling
Like wrinkled aluminum stabbed and pulled from a gravel ditch.
I took that bug between my thumb and my fingers, rolling
It over to inspect its green belly, like the homemade cigarette
Bert and his friends passed around as they smoked
Behind the haystack. I could
Attach the bug to a two-by-four and keep it by my bed,
The first piece of a new collection. Mom's net would work
To catch others, a thousand or ten thousand more; bugs
I had often seen and others no one had ever known about till now.
Maybe they would name one after me, whoever they are that are responsible
For bug-naming. Famous, that's what I'd be.
I found a cherry board in the wood pile and a pin in Mom's
Sewing box. But when I pushed in the pin,
The point turned aside, and the shaft bent double, tearing my bug
Wing to wing and pushing into my skin.
The blood came to my finger in a spot of red, but it came
Faster to my face, though no one could see what I'd done;
Angrily I threw the spoiled bug into the weeds near the garden spot,
Went back to my place below the tree branches
I thought about nothing, only sucked my finger
And waited for the apples to drop.

Barnyard Ball

My brother and I played baseball in the barnyard
Where the milkman turned his truck around
With Dad's beaten mitts and tennis balls, because furry plastic, air-filled,
Doesn't break windows like real baseballs do,
Like that snowball Dad told me not to throw and I threw anyway;
The bat we used was a Plexi-glass rake handle, faded red and light in the hand,
Trusty until it broke. My brother often fouled off my pitches
Into the corrals, and I'd have to fetch them out and wash them off
(According to him, that's "the pitcher's job"), but usually he homered
Into the alfalfa field. When it was my turn to bat, I tried,
And generally failed, to hit his eye-level fastball;
Worse than a mirage because I knew it was real, and I still couldn't touch it.

Our first base was the grain silo, ribbed silver, like an upward-facing ship
That dreams of finding worlds, or at least of escaping this one. I've felt like that
A lot after hours of pitching splitters, dreaming of a strike. Second base was a wooden post
The cows bit to pieces, a poor substitute for salt licks and silage, but a good cure
For boredom, I think. Baseball isn't much different than chewing on a post,
But sometimes I thought it might be preferable to standing on the mound
Watching pitch after pitch sail high, away and far. Third base was a brown bin
With the bottom falling out; we stole it from the barn and never put it back.
Someone might call it stealing, but Dad never asked us for it. Maybe he knew
We needed it more than he did.
Home plate was an old oil drum, our strike zone and our backstop.

My brother and I took turns pitching, half an inning each; when it was my turn
To throw, my pitching arm would ache; I was like the machine at the batting cage
And my parts needed replacement.
I bloodied my legs, sliding across the gravel in my pebble-frayed denim
To stop grounders;
Sweat and dust layered on my chin and cheeks like millions of years of sediment
Had decided my face was the best spot to make a deposit. My hands smelled
Like cows, crap, cracked leather; and after it all I never won a game.
I often didn't want to play with him. The world's second-worst impetus is unrewarded pain;
(The worst is pain unshared, but that's a secret only everybody knows).
I knew I'd lose, but he insisted; he begged, he pleaded,
With a sackcloth-and-ash two-step he danced daily. On top of that, he always lied
And said I was bound to do better than last time.
Every time, I said yes like a misery-addict and took my beating and hated him for it.
I suppose I could have let him play by himself. But nothing's worse than watching
Your brother swing at his own pitches. So I let him swing at mine; then I watched,
Sulking, as the green balls sailed beyond the fence.

On Tasting Manure for the First Time

Whenever I brought the cows into milk, I elbowed their sides,
Pulled their tails, or kicked their legs to make them run.
When they moved, I liked to grab their tails and let them pull me across
The wet cement. I had my favorite pullers.
Bertha was fine at medium-speed; she kicked me once mid-slide,
And it's hard to forgive a hoof to the shin.
Angel was slow, but she was safe, not to mention lazy and fat.
She was also blind, and she needed convincing to go anywhere
But the feed trough. I grabbed Angel's tail,
and my boot said go, not too loud but loud enough. She pulled
Me a yard, maybe two, or six, and I could her old bones squeaking
Like the hinges on the barn door; then a crack reached up
And grabbed my sole. Cracks have fingers, same as anything else,
And they always appear when a body's about to have some fun.
I tried to hold myself up, snatching at the long dirty hair at the end of her tail,
But she kept dragging me, face down, like a tongue up the side of a melting popsicle.
The muck was soft. Salty. It tasted like…well, I don't think I have to say
How it tasted. The name is enough to tell all you need to know about some things.
I might as well say flowers smell
Like flowers, and girls look like girls;
Except the girls like my big sis who tend to resemble boys
When they're little. Spitting like an un-pinched balloon,
I stood and glared through mucky tears
At the sightless cow as though she could see me or understand
That I had to blame her for my fall.

"High Flying" Tori Edwards, second place graduate art

UNDERGRADUATE ESSAY

1st

Harvesting Animals
Brian Jackson

"You have to shoot now."

At first everything was blurry. I reached my fingers, cold and freshly bitten by the wind after removing my gloves, to the rough-edged dial on the top of the scope and turned it slowly to the left. One notch at a time. Its power lowered, and the world contained in the circular lens bled into focus. The snow-covered shoulders of the Bear River Mountains, draped in jackets of storm clouds, rolled across the skyline, and a gray overcast billowed like fog over the aspen forest just below the ridgeline where I stood with my father. A group of five or so mule deer we had disturbed from their early morning beds in the snow loped down the mountain away from us. Up and down they vanished with the undulation of the mountainside and then reappeared. The crosshairs of my 7mm rifle bounced and bobbed in circles around the deer I was aiming at: a small forked-horn buck, completely unaware of the danger it was in if my hand managed to settle.

My hesitancy allowed the deer to put more and more distance between us. My father, wide-eyed and breathless beside me, leaned in from my left and hissed: "You have to shoot *now*." His breath was humid in the hollow of my ear despite the near freezing temperature. My hunting pack still hung by a strap on my left arm, the weight of it causing my sloppy aim. Or maybe it was my reluctance to pull the trigger that caused my arms to tremble nearly to the point of buckling beneath the weight of the rifle.

I could have easily not shot this deer. I could have averted my gaze long enough to drop my pack and never have found it again in time for a clean shot or pretended there were too many trees and too many other deer to have ever had a clean shot to begin with. I knew that if I had waited just a few seconds longer, I could have preserved nature, letting the buck disappear into the thicket of pines closer to the bottom of the mountain so that it could take its chances against the winter, which had already come early and fiercely.

"*Now Brian,*" my father repeated. His voice ground into my eardrums like handsaws into bark.

I held my breath, clamped my left eye closed, and then squeezed the trigger as the crosshairs circled back on the cold gray body of the buck. The sound of the blast swelled throughout the canyon like a jet flying overhead, and the cacophonous after-ring of rifle fire settled into my skull just behind the eyes. An instant headache. I lowered the gun and then stared outward through the highest branches of the aspen trees sagging like ropes beneath the strain of fresh snow, not down toward the living target I already knew I had hit.

My father's binoculars, fused to his hands, rose to his eyes in one successive motion in reflex to the gunfire. "You got 'em!" he shouted, half cheering.

I didn't answer and searched for my gloves on the ground. In the chaos of the moment, I had ripped them from my hands with my teeth and tossed them aside like a buzzard discarding the bad parts of carrion. I couldn't find them, and so I relented and raised my own binoculars tied around my neck by a cheap plastic cord that bit into my flesh and glassed down the hillside for my kill.

I looked to where the buck had been when first I pulled the trigger. The sudden scattering of the

deer had upturned the soil, black as tar against the snow, as if a small bomb had gone off. A thin line of destruction—broken branches, scuff marks, and unearthed deadfall that had been encased beneath the snow—ran down the hill. The trail of a wounded animal. Fifty or so yards from the spot I'd shot the deer was a solitary juniper tree. At its base I could see the hind legs of the buck thrashing about on the ground as it tried to stand, kicking up a storm of earthy debris. But it couldn't stand. The bullet had passed through its spine. I glassed farther down the hill at the edge of the pines where the remaining deer, frazzled by the gunshot, pawed at the ground and then gave one last look up the hill toward us before vanishing into the trees. I looked back to the buck beneath the juniper. Its legs had slowed to a small twitch.

"Let's wait ten or so to make sure it's dead," my father said. The word "dead" carried little sympathy from his lips in a sentence concerning a deer.

I sank to the snow, my legs nearly wobbling out from under me, and sat firmly against my backpack; my senses were too pulverized to continue searching for my gloves, so I covered my bare hands, which had already turned a puffy pinkish white, with the sleeves of my oversized orange sweatshirt that made me as fluorescent as a traffic cone. If my father noticed my despondency, he didn't say anything, and I couldn't bear to look up at his unshaven face, his fogged over glasses, his boyish grin—the same grin he always had when a day of hunting culminated in success. I couldn't bear to tell him that I had pulled the trigger for him, even though the words hung idly in my throat ready to be released like a slingshot. Closing my eyes, I turned away. He began to whistle no particular tune, like he so often did in those moments.

When I was very young, my father woke me up one early Saturday morning and told me we were going fishing. He said we needed to get some bait first, and so he waited while I got dressed, and then he took me by the hand and led me into our backyard. I remember his hands were very large, wrapping around and consuming mine entirely. But there was a certain gentleness in his grasp as well, a softness that meant I would have followed him anywhere.

Behind our house was a small untended field, all dead and yellow grass, that formed a symmetrical line with our lawn, which was always green and neatly trimmed. A perfect borderline. I walked side by side with my father across the threshold. Almost immediately, swarms of grasshoppers fanned out in all directions around us with each step we took. There were hundreds of them, flying, hopping, buzzing. Several became caught up in the folds of my T-shirt, and I laughed and swatted them away.

About halfway through the field, my father stopped and let go of my hand. He revealed a large mason jar from beneath his jacket and unscrewed the lid. He set the jar in the dirt and lowered to his knees. Curiously, I watched him slowly raise his right hand and hover it over a grasshopper resting about a foot away. Suddenly he thrust his hand downward and scooped the yellow bug out of the dirt. Then he raised his right hand and joined it with his left in the shape of a bowl and held it out for me to see. The grasshopper lay at the center of his palms, chirping loudly but otherwise unharmed. I smiled, and he dropped the bug into the jar, and then he handed the jar to me.

"I'll catch the grasshoppers," he said, "and you hold the bottle. Make sure you keep the top covered so they don't jump out."

I held the jar at eye level and stared at the lone grasshopper inside. Its antennae twitched and extended across the glass bottom as if it were trying to discern its surroundings. "What are we going to use the grasshoppers for?" I asked.

"For bait," he said. "Fish like live bait. Now let's hurry."

I nodded enthusiastically and followed him about the field while he rounded up more of the bugs, fulfilling my duty of holding out the jar for him as if it were the most important task in the world. It didn't take long before the jar was full, and when my father handed me the lid, I screwed it back on carefully, not wanting to let a single grasshopper escape. They bounced wildly against the sides of the glass, making loud pinging noises with each failed attempt at freedom.

Watching them struggle in confinement, it finally dawned on me what my father had meant by "live bait." I had been fishing before, and I knew that bait was put on a hook at the end of a fishing line. "Are we going to put hooks through these grasshoppers?" I asked.

"Of course," my father said. "How else would we get them on the line?"

I frowned and pulled the jar close to my chest. "Do we have to?" This turn of events bothered me. Even though I knew we were going fishing to hook trout, we only ever practiced catch and release in those days, so as far as I knew, the fish were never actually harmed. But the same couldn't be said for the grasshoppers. They couldn't just be set free after we threaded hooks through their thoraxes and cast them into the water as bait.

My father stared at me for a while, studying my face intently. Finally, he knelt down and took the jar from me. He smiled and unscrewed the lid and then turned it upside down, tapping lightly on its bottom with his right hand until every last grasshopper spilled out over the earth. They rose up on the

wind, wings gently humming, and then disappeared deeper into the field. Later that morning we drove to the store and bought synthetic bait.

My father's stories about the fall hunting months—adventures he would spin yarns about at the dinner table night after night like war stories—are my only real memories of him from early childhood. The prospect of one day hiking alongside him on a hunt ruled my small mind. Toy rifles became extensions of arms, and I spent hours in the backyard of our little three bedroom house in Logan, Utah, stalking the plastic deer manikins that grazed in our garden, aiming breathlessly at their kill zones—just behind the shoulders—as if I feared their plastic weather-warped bodies might ache to life at any moment and scamper off through my mother's tomato plants. It's hard to know exactly what my thought process was back then, but it seems clear to me that much of my early life was dedicated to believing that until I began hunting with my father, our relationship hadn't truly taken shape.

I can remember him telling me early on that hunting and harvesting one's own food was the sign of a true man, of a self-sufficient being. But his opinion was not the only one pervading our household. My sister, older than me by nearly eight years, used to say that a hunter was a murderer—a concept I didn't fully understand at the time—and that the animals my father killed were innocent and defenseless. There were many concepts I didn't understand.

My father would frown at her from the head of the table whenever she would say these things, his eyes ricocheting with flashes of anger beneath the pastel lighting of the glass chandelier hanging overhead. Then suddenly he would grin and rebuke her statements in words I *could* understand: "Ignore her, Brian. She's just a wishy-washy girl."

On my seventh birthday, my father said it was time: I was ready to go on the deer hunt with him that fall. I had been ecstatic to say the least. The rest of the summer was all about preparation. He took me shopping for all the essentials: a backpack, boots, winter gloves, rain pants, safety orange sweaters and beanies, and thermal underwear. We bought everything two sizes too big so that I could grow into them. But even as I grew older, I honestly can't remember a time when I had hunting clothes that actually fit me properly, because in later years I just wore my father's old things, and I never quite filled them right.

The weekend before the opening day of the hunt, he took me to an outdoor shooting range to watch him sight in his rifle. There were at least a dozen other men there doing the same last minute preparations we were. I squeezed my green earmuffs tightly against my ears as shot after shot pierced the air of the small concrete bunker we were crammed into. My body stopped jolting with surprise after the first two volleys or so. I watched through my binoculars as the paper targets stapled to wooden stands at the other end of the range, which was just a deep ravine cut into the hillside, became riddled with holes. The metallic tang of the heated rifle barrels hung in my nostrils as dozens of shell casings rattled across the cement floor, the tiny brass cylinders still emitting heat beneath my boots minutes after they'd been discharged.

After my father fired five times or so, he looked over his shoulder and gave me a thumbs up. His whiskers, already turning white by then, shone beneath the sun creeping in through the apertures at the front of the bunker. "Do you want to shoot?" he asked. His words sounded like they were being funneled through a heater vent to my vacuum-enclosed ears.

I shook my head almost immediately, trembling just at the thought of taking one step closer to the red line that signaled "Do Not Cross During Live Fire." The range instructor had beaten that one warning into my head for five minutes before I was even allowed to walk out of the gravel parking lot. Even though I had been yearning to fire a gun for months and had willed for my plastic rifles to be real when I played in the backyard, shooting one now after seeing and hearing their power for the first time seemed beyond my capability as a seven-year-old. And I was right. But my father insisted.

"Come on," he said, leading me by the hand to the resting rifle on the table, "you can do it." It was clear to me then that I had to prove myself to him—prove to him that I wasn't my sister.

I stepped up to the wooden bench and climbed onto two pillows he had set out for me to sit on. I could still barely reach over the table to cradle the rifle, which was nearly as tall as me, in my arms. My father leaned over me, positioning the stock of the rifle firmly against my shoulder and then whispered into my ear the fundamentals of shooting: take deep breaths, line the crosshairs on the target, keep both eyes open if possible, and squeeze—don't pull—the trigger.

My heart thumped, my arms prickled with sweat, and my body quaked as my index finger hovered near the cool metal of the trigger. I trembled so hard that the stock of the rifle slipped from the groove in my shoulder. My father didn't notice, and I was too scared to tell him. I waited. And then I waited some more.

"Come on, Brian," he said.

"They're waiting to call a cease-fire. You need to shoot."

I felt I had no choice. I closed both eyes, completely ignoring the target, and yanked the trigger backward. The uncontained stock of the rifle recoiled into my right cheek. The rifle fell from my grip to the table with a thud as I reached my hands to my face, throbbing now with violent pain. Tears flooded my eyes and nose and screams welled in the back of my throat. My fingers tenderly prodded at a bump growing larger by the second beneath my right eye. Finally my screams broke free from whatever had contained them to that point, and I began to sob with abandon, dedicating every ounce of my energy to reacting to the pain.

"I'm sorry!" my father said. "You weren't ready for that." He took me tightly into his arms, muzzling my face against his chest. My nose, wet and clogged with mucus, stung from the scent of his cologne and aftershave.

I cried harder, and he squeezed harder until my sobs were bottled back in my throat from the lack of oxygen. A new kind of terror, much different than the fear I'd felt moments before while shooting the rifle, seized my small body, and I pounded on his back to release me.

Back then I didn't understand why I had been so afraid of his embrace. But now, lucidly within my memory, I can see the judgmental faces of the men around us who had seen what happened, and I can see my father's face, his cheeks burning red with humiliation beneath his stubble, and I wonder where in that stifling hug his compassion ended and his embarrassment began.

It was very cold the opening morning of the deer hunt. A lumpy bruise the size of a golf ball still swelled beneath my right eye from where the rifle had kicked me a week earlier. When the thick cotton of my face mask would rub against it or the wind would howl particularly strong, the bump would sting like an open wound. But my excitement was still unwavering as my father hiked me through the CRP fields—land the government pays farmers not to farm in order to reduce soil erosion—of Clarkston, Utah, in the dark with nothing but the moonlight to guide us.

With me right on his heels, he zig-zagged through a cluster of sagebrush, searching for the perfect spot to set up watch. Sometimes I followed too closely, and the tips of my oversized boots nipped at his heels and caused him to grunt with annoyance. He did not take the time to turn back and scold me.

Finally we came upon an elevated mass of smooth flat boulders near the center of the field. My father paused and then whispered, "Good enough," into the dark. He kneeled and gently laid his pack on the ground and removed a set of shooting sticks from his coat pocket and erected them into a tipi shape at chin level. He placed the barrel of the rifle in the rubber support where the two black poles crossed and then propped the stock of the rifle against a rock so that it stood on its own. It was all done flawlessly to my eyes. "Now we wait," he said. "Shouldn't be long."

True to my father's word, within thirty minutes of sunrise, a group of nearly a dozen deer bounded in a single-file line up a shallow ravine just below us. My father raised his binoculars to his eyes, replacing them moments later with his rifle. He twisted his body into position. The metal poles of the shooting sticks wobbled and scratched against the rocks.

I held up my own binoculars, glassing in the direction of the deer, but the view was blurry, and I didn't know how to focus the lenses. I dropped the binoculars to my lap and turned to watch my father. His eyeglasses were starting to fog, and he reached up to wipe them clean with his thumb. Streaks of sweat rolled down his cheeks and fell in droplets over his shoulders. The seconds were agonizing as he took aim.

Suddenly he sucked in his breath and an instant later pulled the trigger. I had never heard a gunshot without ear protection before, and the sound, like a thousand hammers striking nails, made me curl away from him like a kicked dog. Before my head could stop reeling from the sensation of the first blast, he shot again, and then once more. He set the rifle down and then looked through his binoculars. A grin leaked across his face.

Ten minutes later we were trudging toward his kill. The deer he had shot had run back down the field away from us after the first bullet grazed its stomach. The second bullet had missed, and the third had struck it through the top of the neck, "torpedoing it," as my father put it, to the ground.

The deer was hunched on its side at the bottom of a ditch about twenty yards above the road. It was a small buck, much smaller than I had ever expected a deer to be. My father cautiously stepped into the ditch and poked at its marble-sized eye with the barrel of his rifle. The deer did not blink. A milky-blue film was spreading across the surface of the eye, and I wondered if that's what death looked like.

My father dragged the deer from the ditch by its antlers—small forks on either side of its head—with little effort. He tied his hunting tag to the antlers near the skull with a bit of brown string. I hovered at least five feet away at all times, afraid that the animal might leap up and enact its revenge at any moment.

My father shrugged his backpack from his shoulders to the ground and then unzipped it; he reached in and pulled out a pair of orange plastic gloves that stretched from his hands to his shoulders when he tugged them on. Next he revealed a brown leather satchel full of silvery knife blades gleaming in the sun. He grabbed a dark wooden knife hilt from the bottom of his backpack and then plucked a fat curved blade from the middle of the satchel and attached it to the hilt. He kneeled down to the deer and then looked back at me and paused. "Why don't you go find me two thick branches that I can prop this thing open with after it's cleaned," he said. "About the length of your arms." He looked around and then pointed to a small grove of trees a hundred yards to the south. "Over there looks good. But stay in sight."

My curiosity of what was going to happen next as he knelt there, looming over the deer with his knife in hand, kept my feet planted. I knew he was being cautious after what happened the week before at the shooting range—I had to beg him days before the hunt not to change his mind about taking me with him—but I wanted him to show me everything. "I want to watch," I said.

He wiped the sweat from his brow with his forearm. The plastic gloves crackled loudly. "There's no reason for you to watch this part. I need you to find me two good branches right now."

I opened my mouth to argue, but the fact he was enrolling me to help in some way kept me from speaking. I nodded my head and set off for the trees. I looked back over my shoulder after a few feet. He was slicing indolently down the stomach of the buck. At the first sign of its entrails protruding outward from its chest cavity, I quickly turned away, my curiosity already satisfied.

The summer I turned thirteen, my father took me to a place called Jebo Springs in the Peter Sinks area of the Bear River Mountains. It was mid July, and so we had abandoned our burdensome hunting packs and snow jackets for light provisions and T-shirts. After parking the truck and taking a short off-trail hike, we were standing at the precipice of a rocky outlook positioned over the turquoise waters of Bear Lake. In the distance, two adjacent ridges met at ground level, forming the shape of a chalice, filled to the brim by the blue vastness of the lake. Small white lines—wakes left behind by invisible boats—were etched permanently across the water's surface. It was like staring at a photograph.

"This is really *cool*," I said. I had almost said "beautiful," but I thought better of it, knowing my father would have found the word choice maudlin and made some crack about it.

We stood in silence for a long a while, taking in the view of the lake, until eventually he began fiddling with the markers on his GPS. Using the moment to my advantage, I turned quietly away and dropped down into the pine forest behind us that we had just hiked through. A hundred yards below the ridgeline I was stopped cold in my tracks by a deer feeding behind a rotted stump. The rays of the sun were breaking against the canopies of the trees and becoming diffuse, spreading downward in an ethereal haze between the trunks of the pines rising like pillars from the forest floor. The deer was barely visible at first, just a shadow in my periphery, and for a moment I thought it might be an illusion. Eventually it stepped out from behind the stump, and I knew it was real. It was a large buck, a male, with four points on each side of its antlers, and its body was broad and stocky.

When he turned his head and saw me, I waited for him to flee, but he only flicked his ears and craned his neck outward to examine me a little closer. Then he bent back down to the ground and continued feeding as if my presence were no trouble to him at all. Throughout the years, I had only seen deer as they were running away, scattering for higher ground to avoid the scopes of the thousands of hunters that filled the mountains on the opening day of the hunting season.

I watched the deer feed a little longer and noticed he was pawing at the ground with his left hoof. The hair on his leg was caked with dried and wet blood. The wound was probably from a hot spot rubbed raw against a tree. It reminded me of when I had broken my collar bone in the third grade. My arm had been in a sling for six weeks, and my shoulder itched and ached constantly, and I caused myself an extra month's worth of damage by scratching and rubbing my shoulder against any hard surface I came across, compromising the bone even further.

In that moment, watching the deer feed, I felt at peace in the wilderness—something that only occurred during the offseason. The chaos of the fall hunting months, of wondering whether or not every deer that passed by would be the one my father would shoot, had vanished, and for the first time I was captivated by a deer's life rather than immobilized by its death.

I hiked excitedly back up the ridge, eager to tell my father of the experience, but he had only laughed and said: "It's strange how they know when it isn't hunting season and that you can't hurt them. If it had been October, you probably would have never even seen the thing."

I sighed and sat down on the rocks. "Why is it always about that for you?" He stared back at me as if what I had said made absolutely no

sense to him. "I wasn't even thinking about hunting. I didn't want to shoot this deer. I felt like—I don't know—I had a connection with it." I regretted the words as soon as they spilled out of my mouth.

My father looked back at me, a wide grin on his face. "You 'connected' with a deer in the woods? The only connection you should of made is how good it would look hanging on the living room wall."

"Forget it," I said, trying to laugh off my earlier statements. I realized then that in my father's mind, the only way to participate in nature—to truly connect with it—was as a hunter. He felt it was our predetermined place in nature to be predators. Any experience I had with a deer that didn't involve me shooting it to the ground wasn't going to impress him.

I looked out at the lake, admiring its beauty once more, knowing that without my father, I would never have experienced sights like this one, and it was for that reason that I felt I owed it to him to try and understand why hunting was such a vital part of his relationship to the natural world. Once I had harvested a deer of my own, I convinced myself, I would finally see things from his perspective.

When I was sixteen, I sat in the snow, waiting for the second deer I had shot to die beneath a juniper tree fifty yards below. My father threw the gloves I had lost minutes before when I had been scrambling to shoot in my lap. The outer camouflage cloth was caked with wet snow, but the insides were still dry, so I slipped them on. It was starting to snow, though just barely, and the temperature was beginning to rise.

"I haven't seen it move for a while," my father said. "Have you?"

I shook my head even though I hadn't looked more than a few times in the last ten minutes at the body of the deer tangled at the base of the juniper. "No, I haven't."

"Let's mosey down and take a look then," he said, holding out his hand. I waved it away and stood up on my own.

I grabbed my backpack and my rifle, and we walked down the hill toward the deer, our steps getting smaller and quieter the closer we got. I approached its body carefully, poking the end of my barrel firmly into its paunch. No movement. Its tongue, tipped in blood, hung out of its mouth and lay in a heap on the crusted snow. A hole the size of a quarter lay squarely in the center of its back where the bullet had gone in. "He's dead."

"Great shot, Buddy," my father said, shaking my shoulder. "I think you broke its spine. Good thing this tree caught it, or it might've rolled down the entire hill!"

I managed to muster enough energy to say thanks and smile halfheartedly at the camera. He wanted to be sure he took pictures of my kill and me from all angles. When the celebratory moments had passed and we dragged the deer from beneath the juniper into the open, my father reached into his backpack and pulled out the leather satchel that held his knife set. I had seen my father kill three deer since I started hunting with him, and not one of them did I watch him gut. He always sent me off on some other errand or dismissed me from looking over his shoulder. Even two years ago when I had shot and killed my first deer and had been expecting him to finally teach me how to finish the process—to complete the act of harvesting an animal—he had sent me away. I hadn't cared then, never really wanting to witness how the carcasses had been hollowed out when my father was through with them. But this time, when he stepped in front of me with his own knife brandished once again, I stopped him. "I want to do it," I said. "I need to do it."

He had given me a look that I couldn't quite read. Worry or doubt, I think. He was quiet for a long time, and for a moment I had thought he was going to say no—maybe I was slightly hoping he would say no—but he finally shrugged and said: "All right. But it's like I've always said: this is the bad part of hunting."

"I know," I said. "Just show me what to do."

He handed me his bright orange plastic gloves and a large curved carving knife. I slipped on the gloves and pushed past him, dropping to my knees before the carcass. He grabbed the deer's hind leg and tied it to a tree with some rope so that it lay on its back with its stomach exposed to me. He showed me where to make an incision just below the breastbone. I squeezed my fingers into the cut and made a V-shape around the blade of the knife and began slicing in a straight line toward the pelvis, pushing down on the puffy white tissue and muscle of the stomach, peeling back the fur and skin like you would on an orange.

The first cut had gone well; I hadn't nicked the stomach or the bladder, and so the bleeding had been minimal to this point. I felt calm, but my hands were starting to shake.

Next my father showed me how to remove the genitals and saw through the pelvis. At first the knife chewed easily through the bone, but it became more taxing the farther I cut into the body cavity. I began to sweat and feel nauseous as the bone grinded beneath the blade. When the pelvis finally split, my knife hand jerked upward through the intestines and punctured the stomach. Steam hissed from the entrails and gurgling streams of blood, thick and heavy,

followed by clumps of green excrement, spilled from the carcass onto the snow, soaking through my gloves as if they were paper towels.

My head spun from the smell, and vomit rose to top of my throat. I coughed it back down and lurched away from the carcass, dropping the knife in the snow. "I can't do this," I said. I wrenched my arms free of the bloodied gloves and turned my back on the scene, no longer able to look at the mess I'd made.

"It's all right," my father said. His voice was flat—unrevealing of his thoughts—but I could feel his eyes searing disappointment into my back. I stumbled down the hill, getting as far away from the sounds and smells of the dead animal. Once I felt there was enough distance between us, I collapsed to the snow and ripped off my beanie. My forehead was drenched with sweat.

I was convinced then that my father had known all along that things would turn out this way. Even though I wanted to believe his motivation behind shielding me from the gutting of once living things had been out of a desire to keep a child's hands from getting bloody, in reality I think he had always known it wasn't in my DNA to eviscerate an animal. He had hoped that by keeping me from this, the "bad parts" of hunting, that I would continue to hunt and kill with him, oblivious to the roles of butchery that came afterward. But if pulling the trigger and hitting the target were enough to prove to him that I was a man, was it only about the killing—never about the harvesting—this entire time? If that was the case, the loss of my father's pride was worth the dignity of knowing that if I couldn't face the bloody pieces of nature contained in the entrails of a disemboweled animal, I had no right to take its life to begin with.

I sat there on that hillside while my father finished the job I couldn't. I hung my head between my legs and pawed at the snow, trying to rub out the blood imbued on my skin. Two birds called to each other from across the canyon like the steady measured pings of sonar. The sound was on the same echoing pitch as the rifle blast still ringing in my ears, serving as a constant, dissonant reminder that I was the one who pulled the trigger.

2nd

Rings
Kuniko Poole

It was my grandmother's house that was *her* real self, always, when I was growing up. I say her house because she was all through it, in every room – she had that kind of expansive personality. My grandfather did not. Papa's mysteries were contained inside himself, and there was something sturdily silent, complicit, about the way he lived there.

I loved that house – and so, by extension, I loved my grandmother, I think. Even now, there is not a texture, not a surface, that escapes my memory. I remember the spilled-wine color of the carpet in her upstairs office, the jagged feeling of the missing tile on the kitchen island, and the scraping indignant sound the poker made when moved from its gold container to the hearth. I remember the damp smell of the rose-saturated couch downstairs, the tickling of pillow fringe on my fingers, and the way the chairs spun dizzily in the breakfast nook. As much as I try to make them inanimate, to unravel them from my thorned emotions, my grandmother is in every one of them.

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It was in that house that my sister, Kiana, and I opened identical gifts one Christmas – yarn-haired Cabbage Patch Kids in gymnastics warm-ups. Their shirts were stamped with the colored rings that represented the Olympics. I traced the rings with my finger, following their swoops, their round-and-round dives.

The 1996 Atlanta Olympics were the first ones I ever remember watching. Kiana and I sat through the gymnastics events, each of us holding our dolls, our fuzzy-haired brother wobbling in front of the TV set until we shrieked at him to get out of the way.

I think it was in school that I first learned that the rings meant unity – as in the flaming splendor of nations coming together, their proud-faced athletes waving flags as if that, too, were a contest.

I used to wonder how they had been designed so cunningly, so that each ring was a continuation, a part of both the preceding and following rings. I used to wonder what held them together.

***

My two brothers, Colter and Caden, along with Kiana and I, are sitting in my grandmother's Suburban, in back of the Lion House, one of her rental properties. Behind us, the forest sighs and turns over in its sleep, and the steep, pined mountain rises watchfully.

My grandmother's holdings fit her spilling-forth presence; they are spread through three towns and varied locales that go from feral all the way up to respectable.

This particular property includes a clapboard monster of a warehouse, which contains, among other things, four motorless lawnmowers, decorations to be used "someday" which would clutter the most palatial of homes,

This woman is a near stranger, and I am only beginning to realize it.

tools still in their packaging, and two tired, gauged rocking chairs that Kiana and I have outgrown, still waiting for Papa to fix them.

Grandma comes out. I imagine her arms fitted around supplies she has gathered for the landscaping business she and my uncle run – because that is what she usually goes in to get. Grandma runs at a sprint always – it is the only thing that definitely proves my mother is her daughter. Unlike my mother, though, Grandma does not stop to read us a goodnight story or take us to the park to kick each other on the swings. We are just along for the ride.

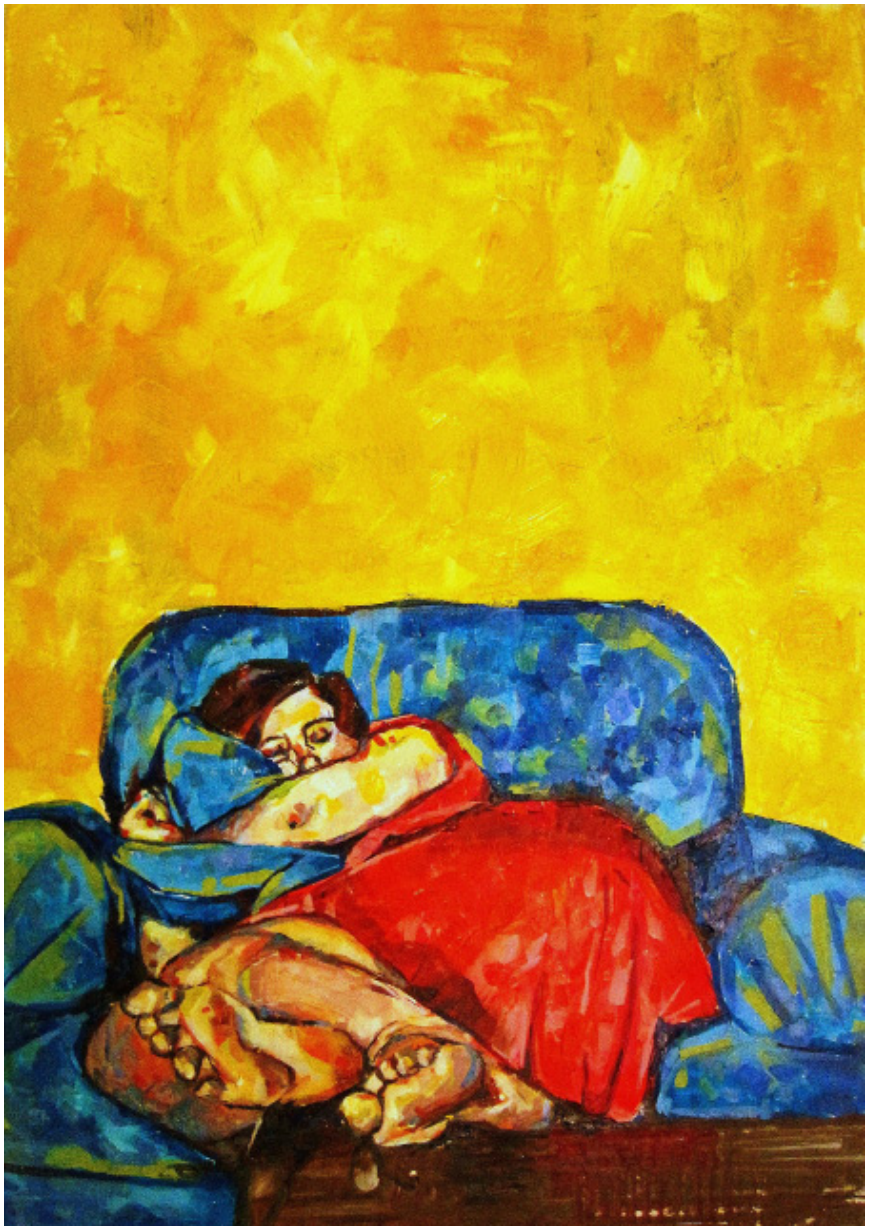
I do not traditionally mind this. Because of her violent red frenzy of a life, we eat out frequently – both Grandma's and my favorite being Wendy's. And she always buys toys when we go to Wal-Mart – toys my mother shakes her head at unknowably back home. But I am eleven now, and I am beginning to see that Frosties and My Little Ponies do not mean that she knows me, or that I know her. This woman is a near stranger, and I am only beginning to realize it.

We are fighting at this moment, probably over who will get to sit in the front seat. We are always battling for dominance; although I feel it should go to me de facto, the firstborn, I am not the only strong personality in my family.

"*Knock it off!*" Grandma yells. Our limbs literally hang, suspended mid-tug or slug or kick. "I've *had* it with you kids being so *naughty!*"

We sit dismayed, the gunshot of her short, stocky bark still echoing, drilling into our ears. For a second, I go deaf.

I can tell I am affected more than the other children – I always have been. The only people I can forgive near-instantly for raising their voices to me are my mother and father –



"One Sunday Afternoon " Tessa Ryser, first place undergraduate art

and that is not without its injured little pang. As I climb into the front seat, which is no longer being contested, I am swimming in a slow, dense anger.

"Look over there," she says, after a few seconds, worn smooth by their silence. She tells me that Papa used to work down the gravel lake road that is revealing itself to the left of us. He built a house there. I nod, but I don't care. I am waiting for the apology.

But it doesn't come. She goes on, her voice melted into a cookie-warm tone. At the time, I do not consider that this in itself may be the apology. I only know that I feel unjustly dealt with. I have seen a side of my grandmother not meant for grandchildren, but she doesn't seem to notice the awkwardness hanging in the air between us, gaudy and neon as a Vegas sign to me.

The first ring breaks, but I can't hear it for the sudden silence that has opened inside me.

***

By the time my brother Collin comes along, another Olympics is brewing – this time in our own area of the country – Salt Lake City, Utah. And my grandmother, for the first time in five births, does not attend. There is no one there with my mother when I go to spend time with her at the hospital. It is not something I feel, her absence, not with my mother and I shut into the warm not-womb of the neonatal intensive care unit, washing our hands at least ten times to keep my brother from contracting even the most innocent species of germ. But her eyes narrow with something silent like worry flitting in them, and I wonder if she feels lost, a child's tiny fear splashed with an adult's monstrous problems. I wonder if grown women even need their parents.

I ask her. She says no. Last time Grandma was here, for Caden's birth, she fed him the wrong formula and he became a squawking, ugly, featherless chicken, crying because no one is supposed to feel a baby's bones. "She just doesn't listen," is my mother's shrug-it-off phrase. "She always has to be right."

My mother is like this, too, I think. But she is always right.

"I have your dad to help me," she says. She tells me my grandmother stopped caring a long time ago.

***

It takes the shadow of Papa's impending death for me to get to know him. His leg has just been amputated from the diabetes, and I think he knows that his days are flying, leaving only a few sheaves for him to gather. Every time I see him these last few years in their new condo in Grand Junction (chosen for the safer altitude), it is like he is trying to throw me pieces of himself, small flashes that wink jewel-like in my palm. He is asking me to remember him, and the urgency terrifies me.

Grandma bumps around him, her brusque irritation showing in a blowing sigh. "Oh, Larry," she says, "stop boring the kids with your stories."

This isn't anything new – I always thought it was merely a slightly mutant form of marital affection – her nagging around him mosquito-like, and him swatting her away. But a dying man doesn't have the energy to swat anything. He just sits in his wheelchair, the once-filled Dickies overalls sagging around his loose-skinned, shrunken frame, the stump of his leg euphemized with a sock. When he says nothing back to her, we all know the end is coming.

By this time, the rings linking my mother's side of the family together are warped in some places, completely sliced in others. They are all weak. We have only started coming to Colorado again because my mother wants her younger children to know their grandfather before it is too late. She tells us we had better remember what he says, because this is the only time we'll ever hear about Papa's life from Papa.

But I don't keep much of what he tells us with me. I remember his rasping buzzsaw of a voice, rumbling from deep in his throat, while around us, Grandma gets out expensive sugar-strung store-bought

cakes, and my mother calls him "Daddy" for the first time I can remember. There is no such innocent endearment for Grandma, and seeing them together is like watching two people walking their fated, simultaneous paths, which diverge until an unretractable chasm opens between them.

***

I do not cry when my mother calls me. I have been expecting this for a long time now, and in some ways, the news of my grandfather's death is an exhalation. There was something prowling at that house while he wasted in his wheelchair – something about my grandmother that was elsewhere. She didn't ask us about school and sports – she offered nothing from her own life. She trumpeted all the deeds the other cousins had performed – only my uncle's children, of course.

I do not touch the biggest nerve of it – I do not see what is really there until after Papa is gone. My relationship with my grandmother has deteriorated from all the excitement of childhood to frosted hellos, but nothing about her has cankered us this way. It is my own realization that whatever she may say, she is speaking past me, not seeing. In a very real way, a way I know she can't help, I mean nothing to her. The rings are breaking; I know someday they will snap and be left hanging, colorless.

***

The funeral is macabre, a hillbilly-laden throwback to American Gothic. There is a photographer there, snapping arbitrarily, chirping as though this is a wedding. She keeps telling my dead-eyed mother to smile.

I do not go in to the viewing. "I'd rather remember him as he was," I say quietly to my grandfather's only sister, whom I can't recall if I have ever met or not. She is large, with a warm smile and missing teeth.

I do not say that if the shell sunk into the coffin in the next room (the same gray as his gun safe had been) were anyone else, I would be in there, gazing at the corpse with a cold-eyed, sterile fascination, having certain morbid sensibilities myself. But I can't do that now. Seeing him will give me a lightning-stab of my own mortality, and I don't want to think about how things have changed, rearranged themselves in his absence already.

Grandma stands across from me, not crying. My two cornsilk-haired younger cousins are gathered under the potato of her body like chickens. "The favorites," we call them – her only son's children. She has said little to nothing to us since we arrived. I think, looking back, that she knew. She knew exactly what she was doing, and how cold it was, cold as the body of her dead husband in the next room over.

***

We learn of him later – the man none of us knew at the funeral. Grandma's Friend. I don't remember many characteristics about him, and I don't really want to. Right now, all knowledge of him is a blank space in my mind – smooth and neutral. It's enough to say that he was tall, mantis-thin – as much unlike my strong, thick-bodied grandfather as possible.

My mother fumes when she finds out – in a Wendy's from her sister. "How dare she bring him to the funeral?" I watch her – I don't know how to react, or even if I am supposed to.

***

In the months following, the rings of our family reforge, polarizing into those who are okay with what Grandma is doing and those who are not. Of the latter, my family and one of my aunts form the only members.

My seven-year-old sister, Kassidy, asks, "Mom, if Grandma gets married, will he be our new grandpa?" Her face has all the patient confusion of childhood in it.

"No," my mother replies, with the firmed crackling bitterness that comes just before something bursts into flames, "that man will never be anything to you."

My mother says that she kept getting a sick feeling when she went to help care for him, those last few times. "She kept going out and leaving him, and I knew something was wrong then." She tells how he begged, even cried, at the end. "He knew she was screwing around on him." Her eyes hold their fire solemnly, as if she is waiting for the right moment to hurl the biblical rage of it at her mother.

She decides instead to hurl a letter, with no return address, even though we have just moved. My father suggests she address it to "Mrs. Hester Prynne," and Kiana wants to send a sweater stamped with a scarlet A. "Right over the boob," she says. Mom settles for "Mrs. Larry Piffer."

She asks me what I think of the letter. This peels me down to the core the way nothing else has. She never asks me what I think – I have no common sense, and I know it. She has little patience for things that are not earth-made, and my mind is one of these. She tells me what *she* thinks. But she is asking now.

"I like it," I say. "It's straightforward. It tells her how you really feel."

"How do *you* feel about it?"

This is the first time she has asked me in person. I think. "I'm not angry like Kiana," I say. This is true – Kiana did not invite Grandma to her graduation. Mom scolds her for calling my grandmother's – what? I can't think of a name – Joe the Ho.

"I'm just . . . surprised, mostly." But that isn't everything. "I never thought she would do something like this."

"How do you think *I* feel? This is the woman who raised me to be a moral person, and she's doing the things she always taught me were wrong."

"It's pretty pathetic when you can say your grandma's getting more than you," I say, my smile held in reserve until I see hers. I want to take some of the betrayed heaviness out of her eyes.

And finally, she does laugh.

***

"Do you wanna talk?" I call to ask my mother, around six months later.

"About what?"

"Dad told me. About Grandma getting married."

"Honey, I'm over it. I knew this was gonna happen." I can hear the exhaustion crackling over the line.

I know she is still upset, the cold slimed truth of it biting her when she does not expect it, but I also believe what she says. Since she stopped talking to Grandma almost a year ago, it seems as though the healing suture of distance and time has sewn up what she can never forgive.

"Just do me a favor," I say. "Don't go psycho when you get old."

"Honey, if I ever do anything like that, shoot me. I'm serious." She isn't laughing, but the dark fatality has slipped out of her voice, almost without either of us knowing it.

And even though my grandfather's grave remains headstoneless, his body forgotten just as incidentally as his memory by the woman he shared fifty years with, even though the rings binding her to her mother have disintegrated, slunk away on the wind like so much ash, I feel another set of rings lock into place. My mother and her mother have broken, but I don't think anything is ever really over. A second chance – a younger chance – lives in me, passes through to her. But we are spinning strand on chosen strand, hammering this silver love until it takes on an unshatterable diamond beauty.

3rd

Primrose
Jessica McDermott

When I was young, my dad used to joke that I must have come from the mailman. He was referencing my dark features in contrast to my four brothers. I had the darkest eyes and hair, and only my twin and I didn't get my mother's blue eyes. What he didn't know was that I used to wish my features were lighter. I wanted them to be more like my mom's. I wished I had her long, straight, straw-colored hair and light blue eyes, but I didn't get any of her coloring. It is my second oldest brother, with the lightest eyes and tow-headed hair that reminds me the most of her. Even now, when I try to remember what she looked like, I think of how much easier it would be if she and I had similar features. When I stare in the mirror, the only piece of her I see is in my smile. Our smiles are similar in the way that our bottom lip flattens out and our cheeks raise, barely revealing our top row of teeth.

The spring I was eleven years old, the evening primroses in our front garden patch seemed to bloom late, and I was growing impatient to see them begin to open. Primroses are distinguished by their basal leaves that look like lettuce and their five petals that create each flower. They bloom on stalks individually or in clusters. Primroses come in multiple colors; ours were a bright yellow. Besides the opening of the flowers themselves, the next best thing was to watch the hummingbird moths that they attracted. The moths would flutter over and land in the center of the flowers, aiding in the pollination process. Their wings whipped so fast that it looked like gray blurs were attached to both sides of their bodies.

That year I made it my duty to take care of the flowers. I often watered them with the hose, and I recruited my twin brother, Josh, to help with the killing of the green caterpillars that hung around them. Their scent of pollen and soil hung heavy around our front door. The smell seemed to tickle my nose even when the flowers hadn't grown back yet, a reminder that the earth was unthawing, sprouting again, and they would return with it. At night, right after the last Idaho light of pink and purple disappeared from the wheat fields across the street, I would go outside and wait, hoping they were ready to spread their petals.

When May came, the flowers were full-grown, and I was convinced that they were ready to bloom.

"Mom….mom…." I hollered,

sticking my head through the front door. "Come outside, I think they are gonna open!"

"Okay, I'll be down in a minute," she called back.

Mom pushed open the screen door and came outside. Mom's left leg wouldn't straighten, so she limped down the three cement steps to the small garden below our front window. It was made up of only primroses and two green bushes. She had hurt her left knee falling on ice before I was born, and all the surgeries afterwards caused scar tissue to build up to the point that it was stuck in a permanent bend. She would stay up into the late hours of the night due to the pain it shot up her leg.

"How many did I miss?" she asked.

"None, I guess I just thought they were moving," I responded.

"They'll open soon," my mom said as she turned to walk back inside.

I stayed out a while longer. I stared at the flowers thinking in an instant they would gently pull apart, bearing their tender insides to the cool evening air. Years later, in my research on primroses, I would learn that the Indians coined them as the "cure all drug." Among dozens of other things, supposedly, their oil could be used as a pain killer, a sedative, and also help with diabetes related problems such as obesity/weight loss, and diabetic neuropathy. My mom suffered from all of these complications, but no one ever thought of using the primroses as possible solutions.

The caterpillars that showed up when the primroses appeared were alien looking. None of us liked them, but it was my mom who was especially wary of their presence. They were a lime green shade, with a line of black diamonds along their back. At the tip of their heads was a wood-colored horn that protruded from their skin like thorns on a rose bush. One day, mom came home from work with white powder to kill these intruders.

"She's home!" Josh shouted. We both ran outside barefoot onto the circular driveway.

She opened the driver door of our white van and smiled at us. I bent my body into the van, giving her a hug. She got out, and we started walking back towards the house.

"Mom, it's going to happen this week. The flowers are gonna open," I said, pointing to the green stalks that stood in the soil.

"I think you might be right," mom answered. "I noticed more caterpillars around. I bought some poison to kill them with."

"Josh and me can do it," I said, excited to get rid of what I saw as a harm to the primroses.

Later that day, Josh and I poured the suffocating powder around the base of the flowers and all along the sidewalk where the soil began, but we decided that wasn't enough. We began pouring it directly onto the creatures themselves.

"Hand me that stick," Josh said, pointing to a twig next to my left foot.

I handed it to him, and he began prodding one of the green caterpillars that was now seizuring under the white powder.

"Huh….ya…" he said puncturing one of the worm's stomach and pushing the stick all the way through. He lifted the stick into the air as if it was a banner of victory.

"I hate their horns," Josh said as he swished the stick towards the ground, throwing the captive back on the pavement.

"Gross, even their blood is green," I said, pointing at the spot on the sidewalk where the victim now lay. Green ooze was seeping out of the wounded insect.

That same week, mom sent me to my room. My chest was heaving from the force of my sobs, and I stomped up the seven stairs to my bedroom, slamming the door shut. Now, I can't remember what I did. I probably screamed at one of my four brothers, or lied about ruining something. Like the time I cut open Josh's drum because I was curious about how it made the thumping sound. Or the time I cut my troll's purple hair off and told my older brothers mom did it.

I sat crisscross on the floor, trying to be silent. I did not want to make crying sounds. I did not want my mom to win the battle. I thought of the card she had given me a week ago, before she left to visit her sister in Utah. I opened up my 'special shoebox' where I had put it and began sifting through the papers on top. A gray cat, paws side up, arms outstretched, with the inscription *this is a hug* finally came into view. I had found it. Possessive thoughts of how she had wronged me returned to my mind. I thought of how she wouldn't let me buy those flip flops at Old Navy because she said they would "hurt my feet," or how she sometimes missed my dance classes on Wednesdays to

teach prenatal classes at the hospital.

I grabbed a pencil from my junk cup that sat on my dresser and let my hand go wild. I scribbled pencil all over that card, but I decided pencil wasn't enough. I walked over to my dresser and found a red pen. The inside, the middle, and the outside, was now covered in *I hate yous*, and across the back I wrote, *I don't love you* in red ink. Finished, I placed the card back in the box and lay down on the floor. *I got her,* I thought, staring up at the ceiling. Later, I would find that card and erase my words, but the red ink was permanent. I thought about this card the first time we visited my mother's grave. The entire cemetery looked like it was a shade of gray. My dad was loudly weeping, but the rest of us let silent tears run down our cheeks. I stood still at the back of her headstone. My eyes were glued to the place where my name was etched into the granite. As I stared at my name, I pictured the red ink that no matter how hard I scrubbed, I couldn't remove.

In mid-May, the flowers finally began to open. When they peeled apart, the earth seemed to breathe in and hold the air right there until they were done. In those moments, I felt that my existence was mine. With those yellow flowers, yellow like my mom's hair, yellow like the sun, there was no past or future, there was just now. Just the action of separating and letting life pour in.

"Here comes a hummingbird moth," mom said the first night they bloomed.

"And another," I said, clapping my hands with excitement.

Our adopted orange cat named Jasper also participated in the openings at dusk. He would sit watch on the square patch of grass in front of the primroses and wait for the hummingbird moths. When they came, he would sit still as stone, then suddenly he would leap into the air, striking at the flying insects. Once in a while, he would snag one in his claws and drag them to the ground. His paw would grip his prey tight, and he would tear off their flesh, crunching as he chewed. We were all fond of the hummingbird moths, but none of us stopped his killings.

I looked at Jasper, his white belly was pressed to the ground, and his tail end was raised up in the air, swaying back and forth at the tip. He leaped up and came crashing down.

"He's got one," I said, pointing at the fidgeting moth trapped under his right paw. I watched with both discontent that the moth was being eaten and enchantment at Jasper's ability to catch and control something that was able to fly away.

By the end of May, I was finished with fifth grade, and in no time, I found myself bored. I would often spend my afternoons aimlessly drifting through our yard. Jasper would accompany me, weaving in and out of my legs. Hi kitty, I whispered down to him, his green eyes looking up at mine seemed more yellow with the summer sun glaring off them. I sat on the grass in front of the rose patch and let out a sigh in a loud humph. I stared at the flower patch and wished something more exciting than petting Jasper's stripped coat was happening. I decided that I didn't want to wait until dusk for the flowers to open; I wanted them to open right then. Maybe I could open them, I thought. If I forced their petals apart, they could possibly stay that way. Without fully knowing why, I glanced about as if I were about to commit a crime. Realizing no one was watching, I began pulling on one of the flower's petals. It didn't seem to do anything but put yellow dust on my fingers and make the flower droop, so I moved on to another rose. I loosened the petals of at least four flowers until I finally gave up. I sat on the sidewalk and ran my dusted fingers across the ground, putting five stripes along the cement. I was ashamed. Four of the flowers now looked broken. They didn't stick into the air like the others; they just bent down, and that night they didn't open at all.

When July hit, the primroses began to die. Sometimes they would stick around longer, but for the most part their cycles all ended around the same time. Their yellow bodies would fade into a shallow shade of salmon, and soon they would shrivel up and fall off their stems, deteriorating back into the soil. This made me sad as a child. I didn't like it when they disappeared into the ground. I wanted them to stay strong and bright all through the year, but they didn't, they couldn't. Primroses are perennials, meaning they grow and bloom over the spring and summer, die, and then return the next spring from their root-stock. Looking back now, I realize that each spring the primroses were different. Once something has passed away, no return of any kind can embody what used to be. When the primroses returned, there would be a different number of flowers that budded, their colors would differ in yellow hues, and the world around them would be reshaped. New houses would be built where wheat fields once were, the crack in the sidewalk that lay in front of their bed would widen, and as the years passed, the air of youth would fade too. The only thing any flower had was their moment of bloom, their brilliant opening at dusk, before darkness closed them, and time shriveled them up.

The fall before our fifth grade summer, Josh and I stopped sleeping well at night. We would begin the nights in our own beds, but

I closed the door, wanting her to spend a few more hours in the only state where pain didn't clog her mind.

we would usually end up somewhere else. Sometimes we would take turns sleeping between my mom and dad, occasionally he would come sleep in my trundle bed, and sometimes I would get in the top bunk in his bedroom. Once in a while we would pull open the faded couch bed in our basement and fall asleep watching a movie. Each night seemed to bring something new.

One night in early July, I woke up around two in the morning, my skin sticky and throat dry. I hated the unexpectedness of night time, the idea of not knowing what was lurking about made me stiff. My bedroom door was open, and I strained my neck to see past the hallway and into my parents' room. The artificial beams of their T.V. shone a blazing blue against the darkness. I decided to be brave; I ripped the covers from my body and dashed across the hallway. As usual my mom was awake.

Once in my parents' room, I climbed onto the king sized bed between my snoring father, who was lying on his belly, and my mom.

"What's wrong sweetie?" she asked, rubbing her hand over her left knee. Their bedroom was my favorite place in the whole house. I liked looking at the old family photos that sat on top of their wooden dresser and the view out their window that faced our back yard. I would often watch the sunset in our horse field through its black screen, but the best thing about the room was how comfortable I felt in there. I rarely walked in there at night without my mom being awake. Her alertness made me feel safe.

"What are you watching?" I asked, looking at the T.V. that stood on top an old wooden shelf. The movies stacked below it bulged like an overstuffed belly.

I nestled into her shoulder, and she put her arm around me, "It's called *The Locket*," she said. I pulled the covers up over me and looked at the T.V.; an old woman with a face coated in wrinkles was on the screen. The movie was just beginning.

"Are you hungry? I was going to get some cheese and crackers," she said.

I smiled and nodded my head. My eyes fluttered shut to the sounds of my dad's snores, and silverware rattling in the kitchen.

I awoke to the hum of my mom's voice. "I brought you some water," she said, handing me a cup.

I sat up to grab the water and take the plate of cheese from her hands. She climbed into bed, and we continued watching our movie. In my mind, the hallmark movie was drawn out and boring, but I stayed awake for the entire thing.

I watched my mom rub her knee over and over. "What does your knee feel like?" I asked.

She looked at me, "Like knives. It comes in spurts though, some sting more than others."

I looked at her eyes that were now focused back on the T.V. and tried to imagine the feeling of knives being thrust into my knee in sporadic jolts throughout the day.

"That must really hurt," I said, laying my head back down against the pillow.

At the end of the movie she turned off the T.V., and we talked for a while. I felt closer to my mom after that night, and I realized that maybe she liked the evening company as much as I did. My father's snoring woke me up in the morning, but it was only him and me in the bed. Concerned my mom had left the house without telling me, I got up and walked into the hallway. I stopped in front of my room. She was lying on her side in my bed. Her eyes were shut, and her right hand was placed between her head and the pillow. Her face was soft-looking and calm. I closed the door, wanting her to spend a few more hours in the only state where pain didn't clog her mind.

Two days after my family's July fourth celebration, Josh, my mom, and I lounged on my mom and dad's bed. It was getting late, and I could tell mom was tired. Her cheeks were flushed a deep pink, and she was damp with beads of sweat. She had just gotten off her oxygen from having pneumonia, but I was more concerned that her diabetes was acting up.

"Are you okay, mom?" I asked in a concerned tone.

"I'm fine, just tired." She smiled, her cheeks still glowing.

"Mom, most of the primroses are dried up now. Should I pick them off the stems?" I asked, thinking that in doing so I would assist in them growing back faster the next year.

"They will fall off soon; just leave them alone," she answered.

"Okay," I said, still planning a way to aid in the flower's process.

"I'm tired," Josh yawned. He looked over at me. We had been planning on watching

Space Jam on the couch bed that night.

"Do you want to sleep in here with me?" my mom asked.

"It's okay," Josh answered.

"Dad told me he wants to sleep in here," I said, even though my father didn't tell me so.

Josh interrupted, "We're gonna sleep on the couch bed."

"Goodnight, love you," we both said. Her cheek felt hot as I kissed it. As I was leaving, I got the feeling my dad really should be the only one who slept next to mom that night.

Down stairs Josh and I put in our movie and fell asleep. In the morning, I awoke to sun rays along with red and blue flashing lights in the driveway. My mom didn't wake up.

Within twenty minutes of all of us pacing the living room, it was decided that the children should leave the house for a while, so my dad and the arriving family members could help sort out what needed to happen next. A neighbor volunteered to take Josh and me to her house. As she led us outside to her car, Josh kept the blanket he slept with wrapped around his small frame. Once we hit the grass at the side of our driveway, he fell onto the ground and rolled around, not willing to stand up. I was in shock and followed her obediently, almost robot like. When I paused to watch Josh, she put her hand over mine, coaxing me to continue while her husband helped him stand up. We spent the morning in silence, pretending to eat stale Cheerios at their unfamiliar round table. As I spooned puddles of milk with my spoon and let them drop back into the bowl, my mom's death felt distant, like a paper cut that hasn't been noticed yet. The reality of it hadn't set in, and I wanted to return to the familiarity of my own home.

A few hours later we were taken home, but it wasn't the same. Family members were walking around, patting my back, cleaning my parents' room, and making dinner, but the strangest of all was that my mom wasn't there. Even when everyone left us to ourselves a few days later, she didn't return. I refused to eat, and instead, I decided to take a shower. I stayed in the bathroom so long afterwards that the steam began to fade from the mirrors. I remember staring at myself in our full length mirror that hung on the opposite wall from the sink. I tried to convince myself that I wouldn't forget what my mom looked like, that I, unlike most people, wouldn't forget a single thing about her.

The next month seemed to drag by, but it didn't take me long to realize that even without my mom, the house still got messy, and we all still needed to eat. I began to take charge. I felt it was my duty. I was the only girl, and even though I was the youngest, I was the only one who spent enough time with my mom to know how to complete the household chores. I began by doing the laundry. I cleaned off the white shelves in the laundry room and divided each in half, so everyone could have their own designated spot. I wrote up each person's name on notebook paper and taped it on their side. It felt nice to produce order. Sweeping the kitchen, folding the laundry, and vacuuming the living room were tasks I could handle, things I was in control of. I even scrubbed the microwave clean. I remember thinking how odd of a task it was, something I had never thought a moment about because my mom had always been the one to do it, but now it was my job. I didn't want anyone to worry about something as basic as a clean house, or

"Shower Door" Grace Ryser, honorable mention undergraduate art

anyone to be hungry; I wanted us to feel secure again.

My family's favorite desert was cheesecake, and it was something my mom would often make. I wrote the ingredients on the grocery list for my dad the night before and wanted to have it ready when he got home from work that next day. I had watched my mom make it so many times; it should have been easy. I gathered the cream cheese, sugar, whipping cream, and vanilla on the counter. I was sure I could make it just like hers. I poured the whipping cream into the mixer like I had seen my mom do and turned it up to a medium speed. The texture began to thicken, and I started pouring in sugar. I was so consumed in my mixture that I jumped when I noticed Josh leaning in the kitchen doorway.

"What you makin'?" He asked, his word's emotions never quite reaching his hazel eyes.

"Some cheesecake," I responded with a sense of pride.

"Oh cool, that sounds good." His mouth curved up in a slight smile. I hadn't seen him look that way in weeks. Once I put in the cream cheese, things went wrong. I dropped it in and turned up the speed full blast. I began questioning my former confidence when the cheese got stuck in lumps on the beaters, and white drips of cream spit out onto our wooden cupboards and speckled my shirt. Assuming that if I removed the cream cheese it would mix normally, I jabbed my finger down into the beaters.

I immediately jerked back in pain, "Yooww…" I hollered. I had had enough. I ripped the plug out from the outlet and slapped the mixing bowl with my uninjured left hand. I shook my head in disappointment. The batter looked all wrong. It was runny with globs of cream cheese scattered here or there. I backed up into the fridge and slid down to the floor. I cradled my right hand, gently stroking the stinging sensation on my index and middle fingers. I sat there for a while until I realized I just wasn't going to make this like my mom. I stood up and grabbed the bowl, dumping its contents into the garbage. With tears running down my cheeks, I grabbed a rag and wetted it with warm water. I began doing something I was good at; I wiped down each white crusted cupboard and counter. I ended by washing the mixing equipment and hiding it in the back of the lazy susan.

Months went by, and soon leaves were changing colors, and the air grew biting.

"Are you okay, dad?" I said into the darkness. My dad was sleeping between Josh and me on his king sized bed, and I took his odd snores and jolts of movement as him not breathing, or worse, him dying.

"Uh..what?" my dad asked, waking from sleep.

I ignored his response and rolled onto my back and then onto my side. I knew I was being ridiculous, but I couldn't seem to help it. No matter who I slept by, I pictured them not waking up in the morning. I thought about my mom getting ready in front of the mirror that was now reflecting moonlight from the window on the opposite wall over my face. Before she would go to teach at the hospital, she would stick gold hoops in her ears and spray a purple perfume called "Moonlight Path" across her chest and wrists. The fragrance would stick in the air long after she had left, a steady reminder that she would be returning. In that moment I could smell it. I tugged at the blanket being shared between the three of us, but it was of no use. My entire left side was bare to the night air. A few minutes later, my dad shook and kicked his legs apart.

"Dad, what are you doing?" I asked, nervous he wasn't okay.

"Be quiet, Jess. You keep waking us up," Josh said, but his breathing told me he hadn't been sleeping either.

I got up and went downstairs. Throughout the night it seemed everyone took turns wandering the dark house. I thought about going outside, but instead I sat on the living room couch, staring out the front window. I felt alone, and I wanted things to be the way they were. I thought about going back into my parents' room, but I knew the room would never be the same to me. Instead, I went into the basement. I decided to sleep next to my second oldest brother, Justin, the one that looked the most like my mom. He often stayed up late, and I felt like he was probably still awake.

When I opened the door to his room, he was reading on the bottom bunk of his bed.

Justin glanced up at me with wet blue eyes, "What's going on, sis?"

I shrugged my shoulders, not wanting to talk for fear I would start crying.

"I was just going to go to sleep. Do you want to sleep by me?" he asked.

"Yeah," I said almost in a whisper. I climbed into his bed, and he turned off the light.

After that night I began to wait up for Justin. I would strain to stay awake, watching T.V. in our basement until he got home. It became our ritual. He would return from hanging out with his friends around twelve or so, I would wait for him to get ready for bed, I would even watch him brush his teeth most nights, and then we would go to sleep.

The evenings when Justin decided to spend the night at a friend's house were difficult ones for me. The first time it happened, I hadn't slept by anyone but him for about a month. I was restless. The moonlight flowed in from his basement window, and I worried he wasn't safe. I felt like

he needed to be home. Even though I woke up several times, I forced myself to stay in his bed the entire night. I awoke early the next morning with heavy eyes. No one else was up yet, so I sat on the living room couch by myself. I looked down at the patch of primroses. All of their deep pink bodies were now off their stems and mixed into the ground. No part of them was visible anymore; they had left. Even the green caterpillars had somehow disappeared, and it wouldn't be until just recently that I learned what those insects were. They were actually larvae from the hummingbird moths. The moths would plant their eggs on the plants, and when they hatched, the larvae would climb the stems, eating the leaves of the primrose until they got big enough to pupate. What seemed to us as destructive and ugly were really the flowers' survival; they were hummingbird moths. After another month, Justin moved out to live on his own. A few weeks after that, my oldest brother left to go back to school, and in January, a few days after my twelfth birthday, we moved across the railroad tracks and into Labelle. We left the primroses behind. I was beginning to learn that life was unexpected.

At first the move was difficult, and I soon realized that I couldn't do everything I thought I could. I cleaned once a week, only cooked meals a couple times a week, and everyone started doing their own laundry. Although the land was unfamiliar, something about the new area was peaceful. Labelle was a small farming community nestled in the Cotton Woods, close to the Snake River. We had a canal just beyond our back yard that locals referred to as the dry bed, because it was emptied of water each fall. Around the year mark to when we first moved in, Josh and I walked inside the water's muddy grave and back into the forest. The sides became surrounded by mangled trees with bare branches, which seemed to blend into the opaque sky. We stopped back by the fork on the east section of the canal for a rest. The once vibrant wild flowers and tall green weeds that poked up from the banks were gone, but the straw-colored moss and mud covering the smooth river rocks moved me to pause. I breathed in, then out, soaking in a moment I knew I would only get once.

"Surrender Means Die" Vardan Semerjyan, honorable mention undergraduate art

GRADUATE ESSAY

1st

Of Cartoons and Storms
Kevin Larsen

You haven't seen this kind of rain, he says. Trust me, it's wild.

Every year you go to Lake Powell. A vacation. One week. With your family. You wake up before the sun, before the automated sprinklers water the grass, and you pack. Swimming suits into suit cases, suitcases into cars. People into cars. Babies into car seats. Snacks into coolers for the babies and the children for when they get hungry. Water bottles for everyone. Diapers into diaper bags. Lots of diapers. And wipes.

Before the sun rises, you drive with your family. A seven-hour drive with your parents, with all your brothers and sisters, your brothers' wives, their children, your nieces and nephews, strapped into twenty-three seats and car seats in a handful of Suburbans barreling down the freeway. The babies cry, which makes the children cry, which makes you irritable. Everyone else ignores the wailing, the cacophony, but you listen to it intently, unable to block it out. You wonder how your brothers and their wives can ignore their children making noises like that. You wonder how they can carry on a conversation in the front seat, how they can even hear each other.

Your sister-in-law flips the television screen down from the roof of the car and inserts a DVD into its side. No more crying.

You spend the rest of the drive either staring at the cartoons on the ten inch screen or drooling on your niece's pillow. You don't notice the landscape change from mountain to desert to a different kind of desert where everything is red, orange, or brown sandstone. You sleep while you drive over the Glen Canyon Dam, reservoir on one side, river on the other, and drool on your niece's pillow while gallons and gallons of water, thousands of liquid cubic feet, surge every second into the canyon river, released from the dam. You don't notice how white the water is, how it swallows and regurgitates itself, churning with frothy madness, how it seems an eternal torrent, a chaos controlled by man. You don't notice any of this because you are asleep.

When you arrive at the marina, everyone has to pee. Those in diapers have already peed and need to be changed. Diapers are deposited into trash receptacles, which you are glad you will not have to empty. Everyone is grumpy but relieved to be out of the cars, stretching and scratching, though the outside air is hot and dry, and the wind makes it feel like a hair dryer is blowing in your face.

Your parents own a houseboat, docked at the marina. With the houseboat comes a concierge service. Workers in khaki shorts and white shirts pick up you and the babies and the children and their moms, your brothers' wives, and your brothers and sisters and your mom and your dad and all your luggage. They come in a fleet of golf carts and then transport you to the dock. The workers help you load everything, first into the cart, then onto the houseboat. They make small talk while they work and expect a tip when they're done. One of them tells you about the weather before they leave. He says there have been thunder showers all week.

You haven't seen this kind of rain, he says. Trust me, it's wild. Only find it in Arizona. It has something to do with the heat, he says, something about the water, the wind, all coming together for the right mixture. He tries to make it sound technical, but

it feels like he heard the technicalities from someone else, who heard them from someone else, who knew what they were talking about. He says the sky will darken quickly, that the clouds will deny the sun, and then it will rain and thunder and lightning for an hour, two, sometimes three. It will rain droplets like golf balls, he says, and the lightning will strike so close, you will feel the thunder rattle your soul.

You tip him ten dollars, and he leaves, falling in sync with the rest of the golf cart flock.

Your parents' houseboat is like a floating penthouse with engines. Air conditioned. Three king-sized beds, five queen-sized. Two sixty inch televisions, one inside, the other on top, next to the outdoor grill and bar. Satellite TV with seven hundred channels of anything you can think of watching. Leather couches. Heated showers. The only thing missing is a hot tub, which your parents considered putting on the top deck, but opted for an outdoor kitchen instead.

Inside the nicer-than-your-apartment houseboat, both the televisions are on, mesmerizing the children, distracting them from the water outside. Your dad wants to leave the dock soon, find a beach to park on, so he doesn't let anyone get in the water yet. You help your brothers, five of them, six boys in all, prepare the boat, checking engine fluid levels, gasoline and oil, transmission fluid, steering fluid. You check the filter on the water intake, make sure it is clean. Your oldest brother checks the septic tanks, makes sure they are empty. You unhook the power cables from the dock, momentarily stemming the flow of the cartoons on the televisions, though you quickly start the generator, and the screens flood back to life.

The engines start. The horn sounds. Your dad backs the boat out of the slip, into the harbor, then into the main channel. He sits in the captain's chair, top deck, navigation instruments blinking and squawking around him. Every year, he is more and more a grandpa. Every year, he does less and less of the work required to run the houseboat. He leaves more and more of that to his boys, all six. But he always pilots the boat himself. He always sits in the captain's chair, soda in one hand, steering wheel in the other. When asked where he is headed, he says, to find sand. Must find sand. Need a beach. Need to play with my grandkids. They want Papa to build a sandcastle for them. He smiles when he says this, already planning out moats and walls and towers for his grandchildren to build and play with.

The houseboat plows through the water, cuts through waves, and while it moves, your mom makes all her grandchildren wear life jackets. The kids don't mind. They are watching cartoons.

Your dad steers through canyon walls, hundreds of feet high. The sandstone is stained with streaks of white from rainwater runoff. The houseboat, a mass of aluminum and fiberglass, with its twin propellers, seems like a cheap toy floating in a gutter. In the distance, dark clouds gather and move towards the houseboat. You remember the golf cart driver and what he said about the thunderstorms. Thunderstorms you won't experience anywhere else. You are about to see what he was talking about.

The storm clouds surge ahead, overhead, and the water darkens with the sky. Your dad drives the boat into a wall of rain. The sky flashes, and the clouds belch, grumble into your ear, into your stomach. Again and again the sky speaks to you, into you, through you, and, for moments at a time, you feel something primordial. You feel something pierce you, body and soul, and you tremble, though you don't know why.

The rain continues, wind blowing it sideways now. Your dad steers the boat into the wind to reduce rocking and swaying. Fallen rain spills over the canyon walls, a frothing mixture of dirt and water. The rain covers the deck of the houseboat where one of your brothers slides back and forth on his belly like a penguin. You consider joining him, consider shrugging away the pressure of the storm, consider forgetting what is going on around you in order to strip down and slide, just slide on your stomach. You think about this until your brother hits his head on the railing.

Your dad continues to drive, to steer through the torrent. He is wet, soaked head to foot, but he doesn't seem to mind. He doesn't seem affected by the storm. He seems placid in the rain. The rain water is warm, like bath water drawn for a baby.

Just like the golf cart driver said, the rain stops in an hour. The storm moves on, deteriorating as it travels. The sun shines. The sky lightens. The water captures the blue in the sky. Inside, the kids are still strapped into life jackets, staring at the television.

Your dad passes beach after beach, some empty, some with parked houseboats anchored to the shore, ropes stretched out to either side to hold the boat in place. He finally finds a spot, a suitable beach, one with the right type of sand. The spot is secluded, away from the main bay, a small cove with high canyon walls that hang in the air. Walls of sandstone, marbled with colors of red and orange. Your dad beaches the houseboat, and you move, with your brothers, to place the anchors. Three on the left. Three on the right. Two out the front. Your dad stands on the top deck, observing. Check your knots, he says. You don't know if your knots are correct, so you give your rope to one of your brothers, who strangles the thick chord into a labyrinth of rope. You move to tighten the ropes, staying clear

of the knot work. You don't want to be responsible. You don't want to be at fault if the boat pulls free in a storm, a storm like the one you drove through earlier. A storm that could pull the anchors free.

Of course, that might not happen. The boat might not pull free. But the wind will blow. A storm will come. You know this. The wind will start as a breeze and stay that way. A simple breeze that you will watch as the mass of black clouds form and gather across the lake, miles away. You will think it won't come here. It can move in any direction. There are no mountains, just a canyon filled with water. The storm can go anywhere. Why would it come to you? But it will, suddenly and without warning. The breeze will turn into a gale, whipping itself into frenzy. You will be able to see the wind and the rain as it moves across the water, ripping towards you, pushing the water into waves that will beat against the boat and the shore. All of it will come towards you. The storm will vomit on you. The sky will speak again.

Once the boat is secured, the children are released. The televisions are turned off. Out the children go. Into the water. Onto the sand. Your dad starts to dig a moat with a plastic shovel. Vacation begins.

Later that night, in the middle of the night, while you are sleeping on a mattress, while the air conditioning whispers through the vents, someone wakes you. The boat has pulled free, the someone says. Get outside.

You rise quickly, pull on a pair of shorts, and dash outside. It is like before. Like the storm before. But worse. The air is black. The flood lights on the houseboat provide the only illumination. Candle light to push back the night. The rain is still tepid, still heated from the hot air, but now it stings, blown by the wind. The air has voice, and that voice howls and screams without purpose. It doesn't scream at you, to you. It simply screams, and you are there to listen, to hear it, to feel it, and to know that you are insignificant.

Your brothers are already trying to reset the anchors. They are knee deep in the water. Two to an anchor. Muscling the steel back into the earth, beneath water and sand. None of the knots failed. The anchors were simply torn loose from the mud. You move to join them, and your foot steps into part of the sandcastle your dad made earlier. It was made too close to the shore; the waves are eating at the towers and walls, overfilling the moat.

Your dad is on the top deck, again at the captain's chair. He's keeping the boat beached on the shore. Keeping it perpendicular until the anchors are set. The engines are at full throttle, churning the water at the back of the boat, churning a maelstrom. If he stops the engines, the boat will blow sideways onto the shore. The hull could be punctured by a rock, could be filled with water, could sink ten feet from the shore. He keeps the engines roaring. He tries to yell instructions to you, but it is useless. You cannot hear him. He waves his arms, and you can tell he is bellowing, trying to tell you something. Something important. But it is lost, drown out by the wind and the engines. Behind him, framed by the blackness of the air, the television is on. A bunny eats a carrot, talks to a cartoon man in hunter's garb carrying a gun. You don't hear what is being said and have no idea why the TV is on.

You try to ignore the cartoon. You help your brothers reset the anchors. Twice you place them, and twice they are pulled loose again by the wind. The cartoon continues. The rabbit could be narrating your life for all you know. Why the hell is the television on anyway? You work to reset the anchors for the third time. The bunny rabbit stands, gnawing at his carrot eternally.

You wonder if your dad had been watching the TV. You wonder if he stayed awake, watching cartoons and waiting for the wind to come, knowing that it would. How else would you be here now, hunched over an anchor, lake water splashing in your face with every wave, wind whipping in your ears, whipping rain onto your back, your shoulders, your arms?

The storm continues. Still black. Still darkness. Still rain and wind and thunder and lightning. The golf cart driver's three hour storm limit has long been passed, and you are left in purgatory, not knowing when the storm will end. The anchors are set, for now. You stand on the beach with your brothers, waiting for them to pull free again. You don't know if they will. You think the wind has calmed somewhat, but you are unsure. So you wait, with your brothers in the rain. Your dad waits too. He waits at the captain's chair, ready to spark the engines to life, to keep the boat from moving if he needs to. He waits while the rabbit chews his carrot on the screen behind him.

That damn rabbit, who so easily calms your nieces and nephews and seemingly your dad. A distraction from the elements around them. You wish the rabbit settled your soul. You wish you could watch its rhythmic chewing, listen to the crunch of the carrot in its mouth, and be comforted. But you know the rabbit can't do anything, about the storm, about the boat, about you. You are stuck with the tremors in your body and in your soul. Stuck with the wind that blows around you.

2nd

We Three
Joseph Bradbury

As we drove on highway 26 between Portland and Seaside, I realized it was the first time my two brothers and I had taken a road trip together. My older brother, Adam, just finished reading Walden and was getting some mid-summer cabin fever. We picked up my younger brother, Beau, who coincidentally had the next week off work, in Boise. Adam and I were fueling up at a gas station when we saw Beau drive by in his'78 Dodge Diplomat. I yelled at him and he instinctually slammed on the breaks and turned at the next light. He went around, scanned the sidewalks looking for where the voice was coming from; he spotted us and pulled into the gas station. The odd part was that my little brother didn't have a cell phone; Adam and I hadn't talked to him in four months, and only by chance did he drive past us while we were in town for maybe an hour before heading to the coast.

We asked Beau if he wanted to go, he borrowed my cell phone and called work.

"You said you didn't have to work," I said.

"Well, I do tomorrow morning but I told them I wouldn't make it in. I'll just cut the week short and go in next Saturday night."

We followed Beau to his house: a dingy shed behind an old woman's run-down rambler. He shared the house with her for showers, cooking, the phone, if necessary. She didn't have a cat of her own but instead a sunroom with cracked, foggy glass where she left a twenty-five pound bag of cat food for the local strays. The house smelled like a wet animal and Beau passed nonchalantly through the corridors of sticky linoleum, chipped Formica and paint flaking from the plaster walls. I was disappointed the woman wasn't home when we arrived. I wanted to meet the person whose dignity was in no way manifest by her private appearance.

We threw Beau's things in the trunk of Adam's Nissan Sentra and headed out of town. Before we hit the freeway it was apparent that Beau hadn't showered in a while, and Adam and I naturally started giving him a hard time for it.

"I worked two doubles in a row. You guys were all in a hurry so I didn't shower."

"It smells like you haven't showered in a week." The smell was putrid. His socks were the same ones he had worked in the last two days and he tried once to take his shoes off. We refused and insisted he slide his clammy feet back into the filthy, damp sock.

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Although Beau is the youngest, he is the biggest. He outweighs my older brother and me by fifty pounds and is about two inches taller. He wore a shirt that was too small and his barrel chest heaved in and out as he slept in the back seat, my backpack folded under his long, straight, shapeless hair. He wore a pair of old cargo pants I remember my mom gave to him two Christmases ago. He would cinch the belt around his wide frame and every time he would lean to the side, bend over, or stretch, the crack of his ass and his pubic hair would show. Despite all the harassment from my brother and me, and the once-a-month phone call to Mom and Dad, he never relented with his habits. I pictured him nodding and rolling his eyes into the telephone as my mother ridiculed him for not having a cell phone, for not telling her where he lived, for only calling once a month, for not checking in with some of their old friends in Boise. Eventually he would tell her he has to go, someone's on the other line, and his friend would pass the joint to him. Family relationships were easily disregarded. He is the most honest person I've ever known, not in the traditional sense of the word; if he wanted to swindle a steak from the restaurant he was working at, then by all means, the man has to eat. But all of his reactions and intentions were obligated to no one or anything but himself.

In contrary, my older brother was a pillar of example to the other siblings. He has always been my mother's favorite. He kept his hair clean-cut, his clothes never with holes, he never got into trouble, arrested, did drugs, never drunk, always at family functions, called our family twice a week, and bought nice gifts; last attribute always perplexed me. Every time someone opened a present from Adam, their face would share that identical expression of satisfaction and surprise. He prides himself in being able to do so and sets standards to maintain that every holiday and birthday. I imagine he's going to have a real backfire here in about ten years; no one can be spot-on buying shit for that long. I have no idea how someone can look at a loved one and think, 'This object will bring you certain happiness.' I would change the name of the designee and print it on one hundred cards, send it to everyone I know and believe in the kindness of my deed; needless to say, I give terrible gifts.

For instance, my mother loves gardening. And, like eighty percent of America, we give my mom stuff to stick in the dirt and watch grow on Mother's Day. I decided one year to give her a Bonsai Tree and an instruction book. She scanned over the first chapter and said, "This looks like a lot of work." Adam gave her petunias with a five-bound bag of

miracle-grow, underneath the tray of flowers was a six-month subscription to Better Homes and Gardens; you can imagine her surprise.

***

Just after one a.m. we reached Pendleton and I told Adam about a great whiskey distillery here in town. "So?" he said.

"So, would you want to stay the night and check it out?"

"Where are we going to sleep?"

"My friend Eric went to school here and I can find our way to his house."

"I'm not going to barge in on someone at one in the morning to see if the three of us can stink up his living room for the night."

"We need to sleep regardless. I'm just saying we should crash there and spend the day here tomorrow; it's only another four hours or so to the coast."

He wasn't having it, "No, I want to get to the coast. Let's just go find a park to crash in for a couple of hours and I'll drive the rest of the way. I'm good, I just need a little rest."

I conceded, and after we saw a cop patrolling a city park we headed toward Blue Mountain Community College, where Eric, the only kid from our high school team to get a scholarship, played baseball. We parked in some underground parking at one of the dormitories and took rest. After about an hour of restless sleep and foggy consciousness, I peeked over to see the flashing lights of a cop car and woke Adam up. The cop waited a minute in his car and I searched through the glove compartment for a map.

"What are you doing?" Adam asked.

"I'm getting a map, just chill."

The cop walked to Adam's side of the car and tapped on the window like a fishbowl. Adam rolled his window down, "Yes, officer?"

"Did you know it's illegal to park down here without a permit, and even with a permit you can't sleep in your car on school grounds?"

"I didn't know that," Adam said, the fool, cops are impervious to ignorance; as if a hunter asks a deer, 'didn't you know I had a high-powered rifle aimed at your dome?'

"Actually, I'm glad you found us officer," I said, "if we are trying to get to Eugene, would it be better to take the 395 from here or should we go up to the 97 down to the 26?"

"Where you boys coming from?"

"Boise."

"Boise? Huh, well you should have taken the 26 right out of Ontario all the way over to the 20, then to the 126 to Eugene." He was a native, probably lived in Oregon all his life. Oregon cops can be real pricks, but only if you're not from Oregon. All along I-84 cars will scream past you in the passing lane, but only out-of-state plates get pulled over. This cop was alright; as soon as I mentioned the need for directions, and allowed him room for correction his tone changed from investigator to assistant.

"Sibling ZZZZZZ" Grace Ryser, honorable mention undergraduate art

"Why you headed to Eugene at this hour?"

"It's our cousin's wedding and we're trying to get there before noon. We got started pretty late and we decided to pull in here, map it out, and eat a snack." I lifted an empty bag of pretzels, "Which, by-the-way, is there a trash can in here?"

"No, I can take those for you."

My brother's eyes got wide as he stared in my direction, trying desperately not to give anything away.

"I appreciate that," I said, "so the freeway is just down that way right?"

"Yep." He crunched the plastic bag into a ball and held it in his left hand, his right rested comfortably on his gun. "You boys drive safe tonight and if you get tired pull over and sleep."

"Will do. Thank you, sir," I said and smiled.

Adam started the car and we headed for the coast, along 84, nowhere near Eugene.

Once we hit the freeway the hum of the car woke Beau up. "Where are we?" he asked.

Adam and I broke into laughter; both of us forgot he was in the back seat.

***

We moved through Portland like shadows under the lofty pines. On highway 26 my brother's head started to nod. I smacked him in the chest with the back of my hand and he shook it off. Beau was in the back seat sleeping heavy, still stinking of restaurant and locker room. I told Adam to pull over to the side of the road and we'd find a spot to sleep.

"No, let's just get there; it's only another thirty miles. Just keep me awake, keep talking to me."

It was a strange request to hear my brother ask me to keep talking to him. His voice was soft and desperate. He wanted sleep but wanted the destination even more. We talked throughout the whole trip; it was nothing new to be talking, but the request was odd, damned quixotic even. Like a comic being told to say something funny I had nothing to say. I looked around the floor, at Beau in the back, the speedometer, right at 68 mph, the illuminated pines appearing out of blackness in the distance; I drew a blank. I looked over again and his eyes were getting heavy. I slapped him again and he sternly told me not to do that again: Adam.

"The trees up here are different," I said.

"Yeah, they're taller," He replied.

"No, they are just different. They're a darker green, and the way they move, some of them with the slope of the canyon and others against it. Like they're constantly apposing."

"They're not apposing; it's just the wind."

"Yeah, but it seems like that."

"It seems like that? That doesn't make any sense. The trees here are taller, the wind blows, they move. That's it."

"Man, you are quite the ornery bitch this morning aren't you?"

"I had to drive most of the way. I knew your ass would fall asleep."

"You insisted on driving; didn't I offer when we left Pendleton? Besides, I think smooth-talking that cop is worth something."

"Smooth-talking? You pulled a Utah map out of the dash, you call that smooth-talking?"

"It wasn't exactly, 'I didn't know that, Officer,' but it got us through."

"The guy asked me a question, I answered." Adam sat up in his seat; he was becoming more alert.

"You answered like a fucking dope. No sir, yes sir, please sir. Massa may I, Massa please. You wan me ta soff shoo fo ya Massa?"

"You are the only one that said yes sir."

"No, I said thank you sir, moments before we pulled away, without a ticket and without a hassle."

"Whatever, just shut-up and let me drive."

So I did, staring up at the trees catching the invisible breeze and tilting in all directions, neither apposing one another nor in unison, but their movements never congruent.

We reached Seaside in forty-five minutes and drove slow through the empty roads at 5:45 a.m. The sky was losing the black and morning bared its grey teeth. We stood shivering, rubbing our arms, watching the tongue of the ocean unfurl. We tried to sleep for an hour on the beach, despite signs posted everywhere: "NO CAMPING ON THE BEACH", and, "BEACH CLOSES AT 1:00 AM." A woman passed us just as we awoke, lifted our heads. She started walking faster, ankles shifty in the wet sand, as if she saw something dangerous, as if that evidence would need to be eliminated.

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We all showered on the beach, ice water from a grimy showerhead provided for the three surfers that chose the rough, small break at Seaside, then decided to get all-you-can-eat pancakes at a local diner where we caught an eye from the early-birds at the counter. The waitress told us, "Take a seat boys, I'll be right there."

We all ordered orange juice and the special; Beau and I had coffee as well. After a few minutes the waitress loaded the table with plates of gigantic pancakes and a pitcher of maple syrup.

"Eat up. Can I get ya'll anything else?" Her accent was forced but she played the part to a T. A handkerchief held her hair back and she wore a stained white apron over an 'I (heart) Oregon' t-shirt. She kept wiping her hands on a rag folded into the drawstring of the apron, asking us for "anything else."

After breakfast we walked up and down the main drag of Seaside. Merchant shops selling miniature statuettes, road maps, plastic gadgets that spin into a fan when turned on, there are shelves of paper weights, blown glass "art", coloring books, wicker baskets and footrests, fold-out chairs, a small selection of fireworks, and everything a couple with 2.5 children would need on a tour up 101. We found an arcade and killed about five bucks and an hour. After that, we reluctantly got back into the car where my brother's smell still hadn't diminished and the debris strewn throughout the back seat looked natural.

We took 101 down to Cannon Beach. Adam mentioned something about Haystack Rock being the most photographed place in America and I sarcastically mentioned, "Well, that's right where we should be."

He gave me a point-blank middle finger and drove on. At Cannon

Beach it was more of the same. The same cheap art, overpriced houses and hotels, rich assholes in luxury sedans honking and demanding parking spots; American flags were everywhere, attached to antennas, in front lawns, on light posts, everywhere. I ask Adam what day it is.

"It's the Fourth of July, dumbass."

"The fourth? Shit, I didn't even realize it."

"That would explain the crowds," Adam says.

"I guess it would. I thought this place just attracted assholes year round."

"It got you here," he said and grinned.

"Oh no, I feel right at home, the only difference is these assholes have money. There's something more dignified about being a poor asshole." I grin back.

"Is there?"

"Yeah, it really validates my bitching, where as they can just make everything better by paying someone to do "it" or buying something to make them feel better."

"And you wouldn't do the same?"

"I never said that. I'd just buy different stuff."

We walked down to the beach and saw Haystack Rock about a half mile down the beach. Beau took off his shirt in the cool morning and we walked barefoot toward the landmark. Beau kept a few paces behind us, veering off towards the ocean to wet his feet.

"If you had their money, what would you buy?" Adam asks.

"I don't know. A gun. Lots of guns, like a hundred or so."

"What?" my brother laughed. "Why guns?"

"I think I'd use my money as an example of irony. Everything I really despise I'd buy ten or twelve of and never use the thing for anything it is traditionally used for. I'd turn a Glock into a spatula, I'd strip the interior of a hummer and use it as a bed, or maybe put it in my garden, but then I'd have an old, rusty horse-drawn tiller for my couch. You know, just useless, excessive shit. What would you do?"

"I'd just travel. I'd have houses all over the world and go stay at them from season to season."

"That's lame. Travel? No shit. Everyone wants to travel. I'd go to the moon if I had the money. If you really had no limits whatsoever, no law, just money, what would it be?"

He thought about it for just a moment. "I'd make a colosseum. I'd bring Rome back, and I'd watch a guy take on a lion with his bare hands."

I laughed out loud. I never would have expected such a consideration from Adam. I was pleased to hear him say that. "That's what I'm talking about. Watch a guy get mauled by a lion. Would you ever take on a lion, with a gun, spear, sword, anything like that?"

"Hell no," he replied, "that's why I got money, to pay someone else to do it."

"You think you could pay a guy who knew he was facing eminent death?"

"When it comes to money, despite life or love, there is always someone desperate enough. Everyone has their price."

Beau slowly worked his way up to my brother and I, Adam asked him, "What about you, Beau?"

"What about what?"

"If you had endless amounts of money and no law regarding your actions what would you do?"

Without hesitation Beau replied, "I'd throw a huge party for all my friends and me and everyone would get fucked up on my dollar." There was nothing venerable about it but purely honest.

"That would take care of a night, but what about after that?" I asked.

"First of all, that would last a week," Beau notes, "after that I think I'd just live in Boise with all the stuff I don't have right now but want and need."

"Like a new place to live?" Adam asked. "What the hell are you doing living there anyway?"

"It's cheap. The old lady stays out of my business and half the time she doesn't even ask me for rent."

"That place is a complete shit hole," Adam said. "How can you stand it?"

"Look, just because it's a place you wouldn't live in doesn't mean someone else can't. I don't have a lot of needs, I don't have a girlfriend to impress, the friends I do have don't mind hanging out there every now and then and no one bugs me when I want to be alone. Where are you living now?" I was surprised to see my younger brother defending himself in a somewhat articulate manner, as if he was expecting an interrogation.

"I live in some student housing," Adam replies.

"Student housing? And you're giving me shit? You have a curfew, you can't drink, you have parking restrictions, you probably pay to park at the place you live. I have a one-room shanty where I can smoke a joint and do naked yoga at the same time and you wonder why I live there? Fuck that." Beau never got heated through the argument, even as my older brother proved a pretty legitimate retort about convenience of location, the fact that he doesn't drink and doesn't smoke (not to mention how Beau shouldn't either), and the real kicker was that he acquired it by a scholarship and it cost him noth-

ing.

"So you don't even pay for your housing?"

"No. The school pays for it for me."

"How 'bout you call me when the school stops paying for your stuff and you have to be a waiter with a useless degree that's sitting nice and framed in a cardboard box. By then I'll be the kitchen manager at my job now, about four years ahead of you, degree-less sure, but working at the same restaurant with you as your boss."

I laughed and applauded Beau.

"What are you clapping at? You live in the same apartments going to the same school."

"That doesn't mean it's not all just a jack-off waste of time."

"So why are you in school?"

"Why not? It gives me something to do before my restaurant shifts start."

Beau laughed and pointed ahead to Haystack Rock, only a hundred yards or so in the distance. The statistic was true. There were hundreds of people pointing and clicking cameras at the rock. Professionals with medium format and four-by-five large formats, amateurs with 35 millimeters, pseudo-artists with digital cameras where they can tweak the images at home on Photoshop, maybe sell them later in a novelty coffee shop to money-pinching tourists with their own hand-held cardboard cameras, all tiny devices that warp reality into an image on a screen or a three-by-five piece of photo-paper.

There were signs all around the rock advising people not to throw garbage in the ocean and informing them of the delicate creatures that would swallow such debris. We didn't spend much time at the rock, Adam's decision. He wanted to find a vacant beach and sleep for a little while before we decided what to do that evening.

We headed back to the car and drove further south down 101. We pulled off the road a couple of times but met full parking lots and turned around. About twenty-five miles south of Seaside we came to a small turnoff just before a bridge. At first sight there didn't appear to be any sort of beach access, but upon further notice we found a trailhead and descended. There were three or four groups of people strewn about the beach, each an appropriate distance from one another, not too far to appear secluded and unfriendly but not close enough to be intrusive.

The trail to the beach winded north and south for about a mile before letting out into a shallow creek where we had to get our feet wet if we wanted to cross. Adam and I kicked off our shoes and looked behind us to see where Beau was. About fifty yards up the trail we could see only his legs sticking out from a log; I handed my shoes to Adam and he went to find a sleeping spot on the beach, not far enough away to appear secluded, etc.

I walked back to Beau where he was investigating a fallen tree. The middle was rotted out and he was peeling away the moldy layers with his bare hands. Before I acknowledged my presence or asked him what he was doing he asked me, "You ever read that book, My Side of the Mountain?"

"Yeah, back in grade school."

"Me too. I loved that book. I thought that one day I was going to leave and do like that kid did. I stole that book from the library when I was in fifth grade; I still have it. I used to try and build snares for Frank's (our neighbor growing up) rabbits. Of course none of them ever worked, but I used to think that if I could even get one to slow down for a second, I could pounce on it, like a mountain lion or something." He told me this as he tore at the mold with one hand and swept it away with the other. After a few moments he turned on his back and lay down on his side. "I could sleep just fine here tonight. If it rained I'd be screwed with the slope this way, but I don't think it will rain."

"Yeah, it's been nice all day."

"You think Adam is going to want to get a hotel?"

"Not a chance. Adam may appear to be refined but he doesn't live the life of luxury he likes to present. The place we live in is a shit hole too, just different."

"I figured that. It just bugs me when he harps on me, and when you call me and tell me to call mom. I know she wants to hear from me, but sometimes I just can't handle talking to her."

"You don't think I'm the same way? Jamie (my sister) and Adam are the only ones that call on a regular basis. I get a phone call once a week from her reminding me that I haven't called for the week. You're just lucky you don't have a cell phone."

"That's not why I don't have one, though. I just don't like being able to be tracked down no matter where I'm at; your friends start bugging you, 'why didn't you pick up when I called, I know you don't have work?' Sometimes I don't want to talk to people, and that's it. I don't want to explain that to everyone every time I decide to call them."

"But mom isn't your friends. I feel the same frustrations, but you can tell your friends to fuck off, sometimes you have to put mom's mind at ease by talking to her for ten minutes."

"Yeah, yeah."

"You brought it up."

"Well I'm ending it. You wanna get in here?"

"Yeah, let me try it out, scoot."

He shifted his body to one side and told me there was room. I

crouched low and slid my body into the damp log. I lay cramped in that log with my brother and talked to him for some time. He joked about installing a kitchen in the south wing and I told him we should get some glow in the dark stars for the ceiling, he laughed and pointed out the irony. "Soon we'll never have to leave," he said, and neither of us wanted to.

When we finally walked down to the beach, my brother was asleep on the blanket and Beau and I scanned the beach for something to do. It was a semi-secluded little cove we were in. To the north there was a fire-pit with driftwood placed around it for seating. To the south a large rock formation hung out over the crashing waves. The ocean was cold as we kicked our feet through it, randomly stamping our heels into the earth, leaving imprints for the tide to wash away. Beau jumped in the air and pounded both his feet into the soft ground. He stood back and watched the water erase his mark.

"No matter how deep you press, it all gets washed away."

We walked to the rock formation and started climbing barefoot. The lava rock was sharp and would tear through skin if you panicked and started to scramble. After a few feet Beau dropped and complained of the jagged rock. I ignored him and climbed on. I felt my limbs moving easy over the rock, my feet instinctually finding a place to stand while my hands had limitless possibilities to grasp. Before I knew it, I was twenty feet off the ground with the waves crashing beneath me. I stopped and looked down at Beau.

"Jump," he said.

"I know it's only sand, but it's still going to hurt," I said, gratuitously loud, intruding on a couple rested in the shade of the boulder.

"Wait till the water comes in and jump. It won't hurt."

"Stand down there and tell me how deep it is."

He stood beneath me and waited for the next high wave. In the ebb tide the water rushed to his thighs. "You got it man, just wait for the bigger wave."

I grew more aware of my limbs, my hands were pinching tighter than necessary and my legs were flexing, shaking. The ocean crashed against the rock, Beau yelled jump, and I fell into the milky foam of the ocean. I let out a yell from excitement and fright as I crashed into the water.

"That looks fun," Beau said and immediately drew to the rock and started climbing. It took him longer to get up hauling the extra weight, but he went higher and fell farther than I did. We started pushing each other to see how high one another would go. After a half-hour or so of climbing, we woke my brother up and told him to come check it out. The first time Adam climbed up, he hung for a while on the side of the rock before he dropped and let out the same nervous yell I did. Around five o'clock the tide started to come in and we were landing on our backs. Beau traversed out over the deep end of the cliff and dove headfirst. I called him nuts and he replied by telling us it's safe.

***

We left the beach and went to a local diner that advertised "SCONES ALL NIGHT." The waiter was contemptible and spilled our water when he poured it. He routinely asked each of us if we would like a scone with our meal and Adam and I declined. Beau took one with honey and ate the entire thing, along with a double hamburger and fries. When we finally left the diner the sun was going down and the crowds stuffed the main drag of Seaside, the same drag we arrived at that morning at five a.m. We moved with the herd to see what was going on and when we reached the end of the road, a turnaround for foolish vehicles seeking an outlet, we saw thousands of people gathering on the beach, the crowd stretched to each side farther than we could see. There was a rope set up fifty yards out from a retaining wall to keep the people from getting too close. Another hundred yards farther than the rope, a makeshift trench was dug and there were rows and rows of plastic pipes aimed at the sky.

"Fireworks," Adam said.

We found a spot next to an older couple playing music out of a radio older than me, dancing with beers in hand. We asked if it was all right if we staked down and the man said he'd be offended if we didn't. He looked like Willie Nelson with his long, gray hair tied into a ponytail, his red neckerchief tied around his neck, and his wrangler jeans with the identifiable chew ring on his back left pocket. He smoked cigarettes to mask the smell of the weed his wife was smoking next to him. Police were walking the footpath above the retaining wall; Adam expressed concern when she offered Beau a hit and he took it. She just waved a hand at them as she exhaled a cloud of smoke from her chapped lips. She wore a homemade skirt from patterned cloth that looked anxious; she was barefoot and danced on the sand, gripping her toes in the earth as she swayed back and forth. She wore a bikini tank top that hung on her meager frame like a towel on a hook. Beau took a couple of hits and while the sun went down he lay on the blanket and rested his eyes. The man started talking to Adam about the energies of the earth; I took a walk.

People were lighting off their own mortars and cheering as the gray sky was lit aflame. I passed a man who meticulously twisted the fuses of several mortars. I stayed to watch the show, but only four of them went

off; with the explosion of the first, the rest of the mortars' wicks blew out. A group of dingy men were flipping their dreadlocks and kicking a hackie. I kicked with them for a few minutes before one offered me a beer. I took one, thanked him, and offered him money. He told me no way and said if I wanted to come back they'd be partying all night.

I heard the count later was 4,400 people on that beach. I didn't see one fight. I received more gifts from people than I gave. One man offered me a bone-handled knife he made from elk antler for ten dollars. I told him I already had a knife, and he asked to see it. I retrieved from my pocket a single-hand, four-inch locking blade with half serration. He looked it over for a minute and told me, "Nice knife." I thanked him and moved on. I felt comfortable in that crowd. I watched a man slap a djembe. I listened for a moment and started nodding my head. He slowed his drumming and patted only with his left hand while he reached behind his things and pulled out another drum, smaller than his, and put it at my feet. I sat in the sand and played with him for the next half-hour. People around us started clapping and a dreadlocked fellow jumped back and forth on each of his legs, throwing his wild hair and flailing his arms.

A man with a guitar was getting ready to sit down when the first massive pop sounded. The sky lit up and the crowd roared with excitement. People threw their arms in the air and screamed at the sky. The fireworks started slowly and soon the rhythm between pops became lost. The Jazz beat filled the air with each explosion and the spectacle before us shocked the crowed like it was unexpected, like something familiar.

I left the drummers and sought out my brothers. It took me a long time to find them through the crowd, the smoke––the brilliant-colored night. When I found them they were both staring at the sky, with 4,500 other people. Adam was concerned with where we were going to sleep that night, asked me under a canopy of noise and light. Beau was dancing to the boom, boom, boom. I watched the people, and the smoke, and the spectacle, and it didn't seem possible that there was an entire world of people beyond us, an existence out of sight.

That night, we ended up digging our own trench, concealing our bodies in the earth. Huddled together, exhausted, we waited for someone to tell us to move on, or the sun to remind us of morning.

3rd

My Father's Shotgun
Ryan Price

My father gave in to my begging and took his 12-gauge shotgun—a pump-action, Remington 870—out from the locked closet in his bedroom. The gun wasn't particularly special. It hadn't been fired in any wars or been passed down from father to son to son. It hadn't killed any prize-winning game (or any game, really). It was a pretty thing, though, a thing of beauty, a thing of destruction. Or, at least, it was according to a twelve-year-old boy who had never shot a gun before. The barrel and the receiver were both dark and black and made of steel. The rest of the 12-gauge was the rich brown of Walnut covered with the natural darker brown swirls of its wood grain. I felt a shiver just to touch the gun with my hands and feel its cold parts. It was my duty, I felt, to revive its rigid, lifeless body back to life.

It was a simple request—to shoot the gun a few times to feel the effect of shooting a shotgun. I wanted the butt to kick back into my chest and say it didn't hurt like most of my childhood friends bragged about. I wanted to say, "Oh, me? Of course I've shot a shotgun. What kind of guy hasn't shot a shotgun?" I wanted to grow up, and, looking back, shooting my father's Remington 870 represented yet another rite of passage. To shoot that gun meant that I knew how to use a gun, how to load a gun, how to pull the trigger if needed in dire situations. Shooting the gun that day meant more than just shooting a gun. It meant that I could take life from something if I simply pulled the trigger.

My father was with me at all times, showing me how to hold it, load it, pump it, reload it, everything that went along with shooting a shotgun. I could feel my brain expanding from the deep veins of knowledge my father had finally chosen to share with me. He showed me how to set the black rubber butt of the gun firmly against my chest next to my shoulder so that when I pressed the trigger, the kick from the blast wouldn't bruise my skin and launch me backwards on my ass. My friends joked about all the sissies they knew who got launched on their asses. That wouldn't be me. I listened carefully as my father told me everything I'd need to know about shooting. Hearing this gun-talk was better than talking about sex and girls with my friends. I don't remember my heart ever beating so fast.

The wind blew hard that day, almost blasting through my full-body Carhart work coveralls, bringing on the beginnings of winter from the North—from Island Park to Ashton to our house on the fifteen acre hay

farm full of horses and dogs and cats and goats. The leaves had turned colors a month earlier and now lay dead on the ground as we walked like hunters might walk in an Alaskan forest hunting the giant Kodiak bear. I checked my surroundings without showing emotion or even chattering my teeth.

We were very cautious—at first. It was, after all, a real shotgun. I kept my dramatics to myself. He would point and say, "Shoot that one over there…" meaning the remnants of some dying lilac bush he had trimmed earlier in the fall. We mainly shot at vegetation that day. And as innocent as all the lilacs and patches of alfalfa seemed, I came up with reasons to pull the trigger with justified intent for every one of them.

This bush was too bushy.

That bush was weak and needed to be put out of its misery.

You've left me no choice, I thought to myself.

I pictured everything happening as it might have happened on some European battlefield from WWII, like I had heard the old men at my Mormon church talk about sometimes.

Those bushes over there were Nazi spies.

Take cover behind this tree and kill those bastard branches because they fired first.

It was a bloodbath of chlorophyll and wooden twigs blown to bits. My knees were dirty, stained with the splattered guts of dead plants and cold, wet mud. With all the shooting that went on that day, there wasn't a single animal that came around. And I'm glad there wasn't, looking back, I might have been so insensitive to life, holding that gun—that seeming symbol of manhood and power—in my hands to shoot the poor thing because it could have had ulterior motives.

If I ever had trouble loading the golden-tipped pink shotgun shells, my father would load the gun and even do the pump-action for me. All I had to do was set the sight at the end of the barrel on a target, on an utter enemy, and pull the trigger. The day up to that point went smoothly, as I remember.

The intensity of my imagined war between me and the deadly army of shrubbery wore away as my fingers became too cold to pull the trigger. Now, standing inside our house—a singlewide trailer with a log addition attached to the front—my father and I took off our boots and coveralls and felt the warm air surround our bodies. Dad had built the addition and installed log siding on the trailer five years earlier. The smell of cooked pot roast in the oven filled our nostrils along with the Spade L Beef Seasoning, sliced tomatoes, mini carrots from a bag, diced potatoes, and precooked bacon.

I was still holding the gun when

"Barcelona Graffiti " Sara Jordan, honorable mention graduate art

we walked inside, and a few shells were still in the chamber and magazine ready to be fired. I handed the gun to my father for him to empty, but he told me that un-loading the shells was a necessary part of my training. He told me how to clear the chamber of an already-pumped shell. Then he instructed me on using the pump-action to eject the shells out of the magazine. The parts were stiff and cold and hard to move for my pubescent arms—not yet developed like my father's. I managed to eject, slowly, awkwardly, one shell at a time. Checking to see if there were any shells left in the magazine, I engaged the pump-action once more. The gun appeared to be empty.

Looking back, I don't know for sure if I had known there was another shell in the gun, but it doesn't matter.

My father asked if it was empty, and I said I wasn't sure. He asked if I had used the pump-action to eject the shells like he had shown me. I said I had. Then he took the gun from me and said, "If you did what I said, then it's empty. See, watch this."

Now holding the gun as if he were going to shoot, aim, and kill—like I had just done outside in the cold on the battlefield of bushes—he raised the barrel so it pointed at my crotch and then moved slowly, in a straight line as if the barrel were being pulled up by a string, up towards my head. He rested the sight in between my eyes for a second or two, the gun resting completely still, pointed at my face. Then, in an instant it seemed, he turned the barrel toward the wall and pulled the trigger.

My father and I stood there with our ears ringing from the blast of his shotgun. I remember him staring from the gun to the wall to me and then back to the gun. He kept saying over and over, "So stupid. So stupid. So stupid. What the hell just happened? What the hell just happened? Oh my God. Oh my God."

Sometimes, when I replay the shooting in my head, my father leaves the sights right above the ridge of my nose for longer than a couple seconds and then aims away from me in slow motion. Sometimes I even visualize my father keeping the sights on my head and pulling the trigger. I see myself rising from the floor out of my nerve-jerking body as a floating specter and then watching my father, who had just realized what happened, load another shell in the chamber and blow his own head off.

Sometimes I picture these memories and make-believes happening all at once, and I run to the toilet or wastebasket and throw up. The problem with either of these versions of the same memory is that the gun always goes off, and it's always faster than my mind can process, and my body always gets that sick feeling that makes me shudder whether I throw up or not. The earsplitting "Boom" is always the same. The smell of burnt wood, smoke, and gunpowder is always the same. My father's facial expression of wondering what the hell had just happened and how he could have been so stupid as to let it happen is always the same. And on top of that, the hole that the shotgun blasted into the log wall is always the same two-inch diameter hole that could have blasted through my naïve self.

That hole is always there and will be until the log it rests in either burns or breaks. Dad filled it the next day, however, with a light brown wood putty to cover it up. The putty filled the hole, yet it remains as an obvious blemish on an otherwise beautiful log wall.

Pictures of family members, Sugar-Salem High School wrestling memorabilia from my four older brothers and me, and an out-of-print edition of Christ hang on that same wall. Visitors never notice the hole though, so I guess it's hidden well enough. I never talk about it. He never talks about it—to me, at least.

When I think about what happened, I get sick. Sometimes I wonder if my dad has nightmares about that day, if that day marks the end of something between him and me. I don't suppose it even matters. The hole's right there on the wall and in my head.

Sometimes I wake up lying next to my wife who is sleeping soundly with her back towards me. I take a hot shower to rinse off the cold sweat. The soap doesn't wash away that sickening feeling of losing my innocence. The lingering smell of gunpowder mixes with the soap's fresh scent—a violent chemical reaction of present and past.

OUR CONTRIBUTORS

Dallin Jay Bundy, born in St. George, Utah, plans to graduate this semester with a Master of Arts degree from USU where he has spent the last two years teaching composition as a Graduate Instructor for the English Department and preparing a creative thesis. This issue marks the second consecutive year he has won first place in the graduate fiction category of the Scribendi creative writing contest, an honor of which he is both proud and humbled.

Joseph Bradbury looks like a normal enough person, but harbors many idiosyncrasies that he's come to believe make him a writer.

Weston Cook grew up in a small central Utah town called Fountain Green. His childhood consisted of little work (of the house, farm, and school varieties) and a good deal of play. In middle and high school, his least favorite subjects were English and Home Ec.. Today, he's a pair of papers away from a Lit. Studies degree and is married to a Family and Consumer Science Education major.

Tori Edwards is a grad student in folklore and will listen whenever there is a story to be told. She loves nature writing and writing poetry, especially when the subject matter is Southern Utah red rock desert. She enjoys snowboarding, hiking, trail running, photography, and generally anything that involves being outdoors. She discovered her love of writing poetry during Dr. Michael Sowder's summer poetry workshop.

Heather Frost was born and raised in Utah. She is the second oldest of ten children, and she has always been an avid reader and writer. She wrote her first short story at the age of four and published her first young adult novel, Seers, in October of 2011. To contact Heather or learn more about her and her novels, please visit www.HeatherFrost.com.

Shanelle Galloway lived in Star Valley, Wyoming. She's a Creative Writing Major, a Senior graduating in December. Her mother is a photographer, so she guesses she got her "photographic eye" from her. She does actually like starfish. She's fascinated by sea creatures and the sea in general. This was actually the first time she'd ever seen a star fish in the wild, and there were dozens lying on the pebble beachof Brighton, UK.

Jeffrey Howard is a graduate student in the Literature and Writing program at USU. He received his B.A. in English –Professional Writing from BYU-Idaho. His research interests include the works of Thomas Hardy and J.M. Barrie. Jeff likes to write poetry, but he also keeps busy writing and publishing literary articles. Growing up on a dairy farm has given him perspective and work ethic in addition to writing material.

Brian Jackson was born and raised in Logan, UT, and has been telling stories since he was in grade school. On more than one occasion he found himself in trouble with teachers for scaring other students with monster stories. He is currently pursuing a bachelor's degree in English with an emphasis in creative writing and plans to pursue a master's degree after graduation.

Sara Jordan is a graduate student in USU's Folklore Program and is finishing a certificate in Women and Gender Studies. Her photography reflects a search for articulation of the human condition that celebrates individual artistic expression and cultural reflexivity. In addition to travel and graduate studies, she enjoys good non-fiction, radio and documentary arts, fiber arts (particularly quilting), being outdoors, family fun and a great meal with friends.

Kevin Larsen is a graduate student studying literature and writing at Utah State University. If he has free time, he likes to play Starcraft II, read science fiction, and eat just about anything in the frozen foods section at the local grocery store.

Jessica McDermott is a junior majoring in Creative Writing with a History minor. Her favorite genres to write are poetry and creative non-fiction. Jessica grew up in rural south eastern Idaho and feels that the west heavily influences her writing. After she graduates next year, she plans to move out of the state and continue her schooling. Jessica plans to publish more of her work and one day teach writing at a university level.

Kuniko Poole is a creative writing major from Idaho Falls, Idaho. She loves long distance running, music of (almost) every kind, the word "frolic," and reading, especially anything by Dostoevsky or the Australian author Sonya Hartnett.

Ryan Price is a graduate student in the English Department at Utah State University. He aspires to continue his research regarding issues of medical rhetoric. Starting in the fall of 2012, he will begin working on his PhD in the Theory and Practice of Professional Communication program at USU. He also enjoys writing creative nonfiction braided essays infused with research.

Grace Ryser is a freshman at Utah State University majoring in art and emphasizing in drawing and painting. Originally, she is from Sandy, Utah where she spends her summers at Crestwood Swimming Pool as a lifeguard, playing soccer, drawing and painting, hanging with friends and family, running, hiking, and spending as much time as possible outdoors. In 2011, she was commissioned to illustrate a book for Echo Road Publishing. Later that year she created a website and a small business as a free-lance artist.

Tessa Ryser will graduate summa cum laude this May 2012 with a BA in English (creative writing) and a BFA in Art (drawing and painting). She has worked as a Writing Center Supervisor, Writing Fellow, and Undergraduate Teaching Fellow. She recently completed her English honors thesis on writing child protagonists and won Outstanding Creative Writing Student of the Year for the English Department and the USU Legacy Award for the College of Humanities and Social Sciences.

Elliot Scheelke has always loved reading books, which is why he finds himself a sophomore at USU, majoring in creative writing (because now he wants to write books too). He has grown up in Logan, and being homeschooled the whole time has been inarguably interesting. Since being born he has crafted and broken many wooden swords with his brothers and made up imaginary worlds with his sister, and done some writing.

Vardan Semerjyan was born in Armenia and is a senior in Mechanical and Aerospace Engineering. He is USU's Huntsman Armenian Scholar. He works at the Sodium LIDAR facility at the Center for Atmospheric and Space Sciences. Though he has never had a chance to take an art class, he thinks no one is forbidden to make art. He always looks for creative solutions in whatever he does, asking himself how his work might shine in the darkness.

Tina Sitton is from the outskirts of Portland, Oregon, but is currently living with two socially awkward barn cats in rural Nibley, Utah while she obtains her B.A. in English creative writing and works as a writing tutor. When she is not writing or tutoring, she generally spends her time painting watercolor and fighting off belligerent livestock that has wandered into her yard.

Ian Weaver grew up in Austin, Texas. He received his bachelors in professional writing at BYU–Idaho in 2010, and is headed to Texas Tech to study technical communication and rhetoric for his PhD this coming fall. He enjoys studying the rhetoric of nature, particularly weather. The inspiration for his poems came from his summer job at the LDS Logan temple where he is an assistant gardener.