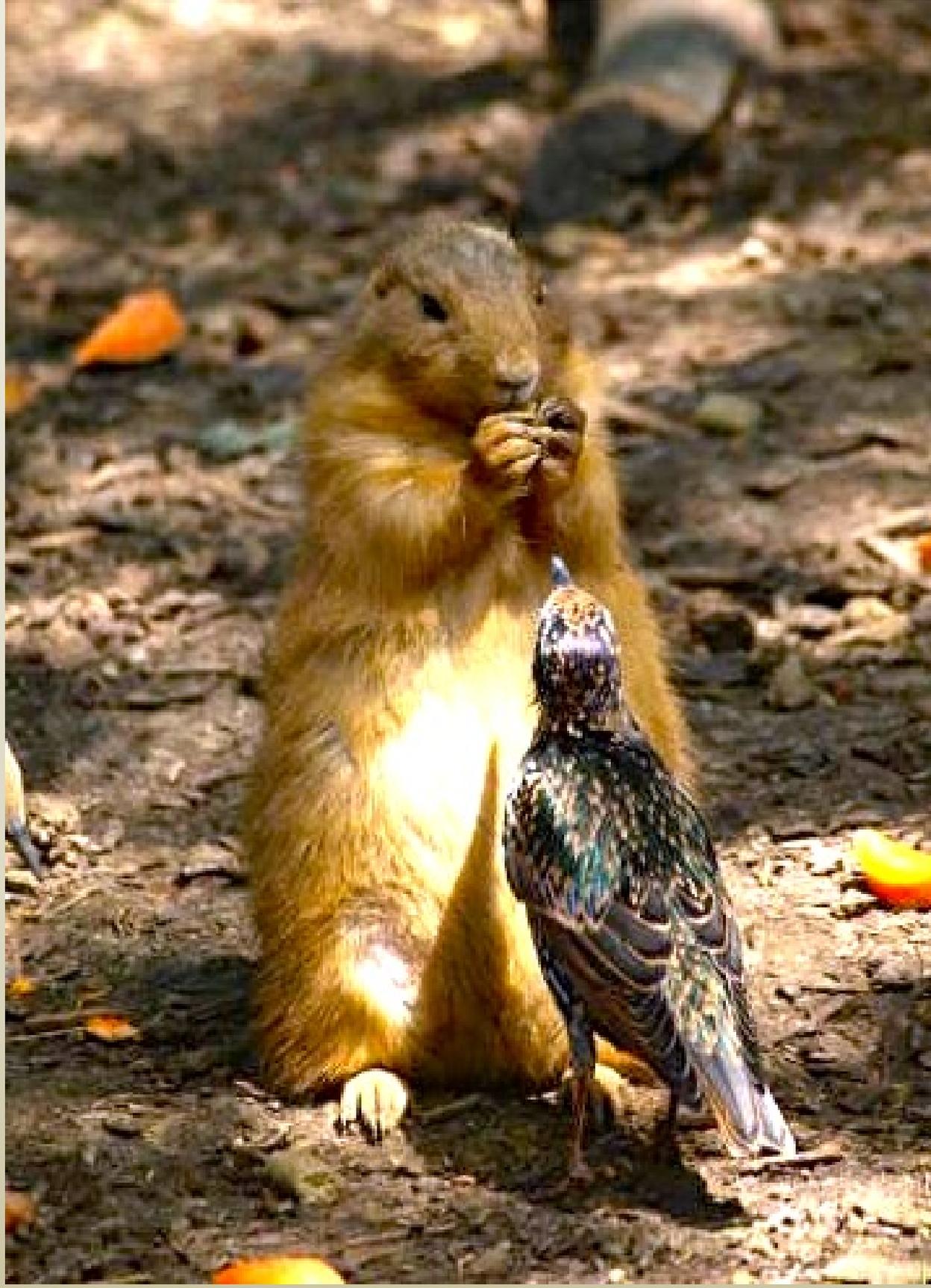
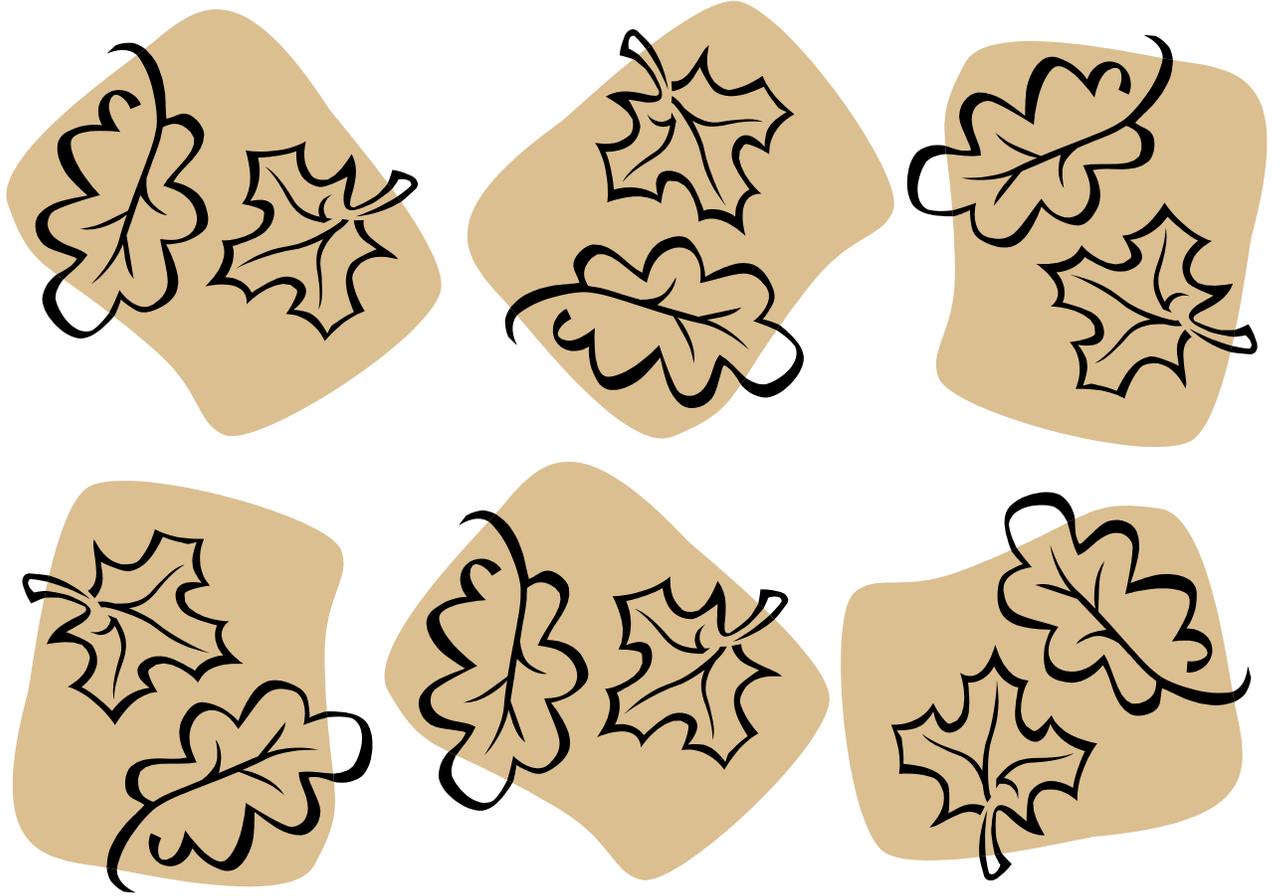


TALKING LEAVES 2012-13 vol. 16



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Talking Leaves 2012-13

Volume 16

From the Faculty Advisor:

Volume sixteen offers a wide range of poetry, prose, and artwork. The magazine has been created, selected, designed, edited, and published by and for IUPUC students. On the leaves of this magazine, you'll find heartache and joy, gristly situations and life lessons, witty wordplay and serious insight. You'll see and hear what students are talking about, and you'll feel the power of their ideas. I hope this issue tantalizes you with its foray into the hidden, the risky, the subtle, and the true. *Talking Leaves'* mission is to empower student voices and to encourage self-expression; as such, works receive only minimal copyediting to preserve each contributor's unique voice. You wouldn't hear these voices without the dedicated staff of English Club members who run the magazine, the fast and super-organized Vicki Kruse in the Division of Liberal Arts who tirelessly manages the blind submissions, the talented ARC Writing Tutors who contribute to the editing process, and the forward-thinking Student Government Association which recognizes and generously supports the priceless work of artful expression by our outstanding students.

Talk about a great magazine! Yes, that's what we hope you'll do: listen to what these creative students have to say, and celebrate their brave and vital contributions to figuring out what it means to be human. Share a link to our web site's electronic copy on your favorite social networking site, tell your friends about the magazine—do all you can to support student voices at IUPUC. With your help, we'll keep the leaves talking...

Lisa Siefker-Bailey, PhD

From the Managing Editor:

I'm excited to present IUPUC's 2012-13 version of *Talking Leaves*. I thank Teresa Ray and Adelea Willman for their great work serving as my team members. Special thanks to Bailey Moss for processing edits through the ARC and kudos to our advisor, Lisa, for her direction and *seeing eyes*. Without all of these women, this edition wouldn't be available to you right now. Thanks so much, ladies!

This is the largest edition ever published as we received three to four times more submissions in every category. Of course, that required more effort on our part to process them, but we feel we have developed a more inclusive magazine by receiving the large number and variety of submissions from many authors. Not only did we receive more submissions, but in this edition we have the greatest number of authors represented, the largest number of first-time published authors, and the largest pieces of artwork and photography ever published in our school magazine.

This year during our selection process, our team struggled with the question: **How much editing should be required before we reject a submission for publication?** To answer this question and be fair we created several guidelines. The submission must: require only light edits, be well structured, flow properly and make sense. With these guidelines in hand, we selected those works which are now part of this magazine edition.

We have made many improvements to the process and that will continue. We will be tackling improvements to the submission process to reduce the amount of manual effort required and to ensure the process is easy to follow for students to submit. We will also be spending time to create documentation on all processes, which will ensure smooth and proper handoffs as students roll in and out of the Talking Leaves Design team.

As we start the submission process for 2013-14, I encourage you to submit your work. What a great feeling it is to see your work in print! Sit back, relax and enjoy this edition! I will be talking to you in the next one.

Suzy Milhoan, Managing Editor

Talking Leaves Design Team

Suzy Milhoan, Managing Editor

Teresa Ray, Senior Editor

Adelea Willman, Graphic Layout Designer

Faculty Advisor

Lisa Siefker-Bailey

Copy Editors

Eleanor Billman

Rain Hash

Suzy Milhoan

Bailey Moss

Adelea Willman

Teresa Ray

Lisa Siefker-Bailey

Sherry Traylor

Policy and Purpose:

Talking Leaves accepts original works of fiction, non-fiction, poetry, art, and photography from students at Indiana University-Purdue University of Columbus. Each anonymous submission is reviewed by the IUPUC Division of Liberal Arts Talking Leaves Design Team and judged solely on artistic merit.

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Poetry



Serenity
by Kathleen Ford

Dorian Gray

Looking into the bright, glossy painting I notice the eyes
Squinting and devilish, Tired and angry
Discovery of digging lines on my face, I have never seen them before
Digging as if to penetrate into my mind
An old man's wrinkled skin holds a looming look of hatred
Gray hair as the sky just before it rains
Thin and wispy
A crooked nose hangs
Drooping above thin snarled, lips
Like that of a man who had recently gotten away with some terrible deed
Horror
Our souls' revealed

Krista Currier



A Face
by Memory Forwalt

A Picture Is... (The First and Last Love Poem I Will Ever Write)

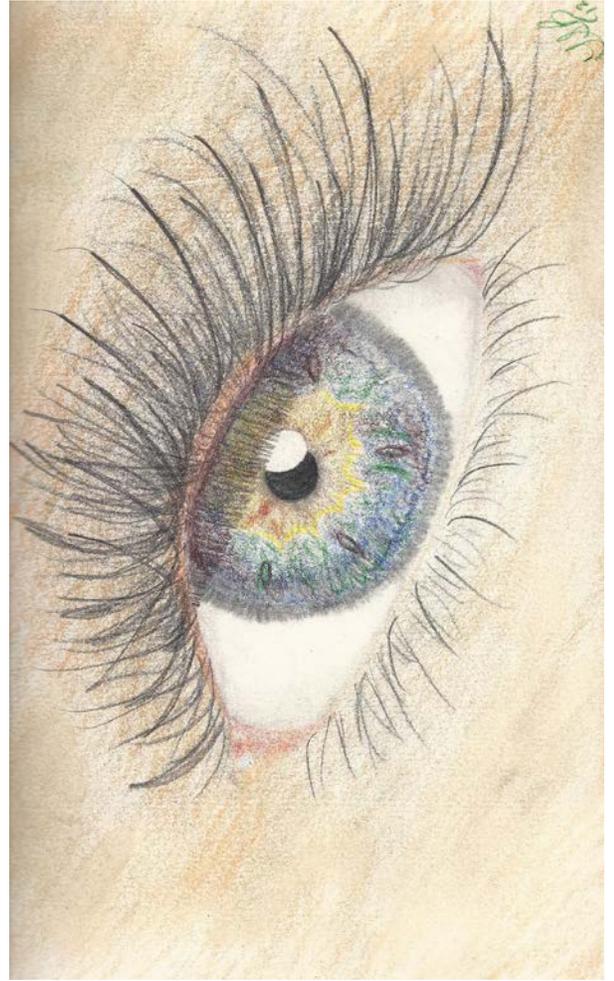
I am so mad
----ly in love. I am so deep
---ly in love. I am so mad-deep-ly in love
With your eye-holes (and the surrounding features)
That I am ignorant of the *color of your irises.

I do recall being "scolded" once
For calling your eyes green.
So I have eliminated one possibility.
How many colors are still left?
Well—I can cross out red, white, blue,
Purple, orange, and black—right?
I know you're not a demon or albino
Or—Man in the Sky forbid—a mutant.

But...you know what?
Fuck it.
It doesn't matter what color your eyes are.
I mean...uh...does it?
No, because...a picture is
...Only as beautiful as its frame
Or so the silly saying goes
(Which is surprisingly true when the picture is
...The size of an eye).

And if this picture is
...Framed by such rare organic beauty that
One's own eye never finds the time to find it (or its twin)
Past all that is lovely to gaze upon—what then?
Well...then you're stuck explaining
Why the hell you're tossing the L word around
When you don't even know the color of two tiny rings
That do little more than decoratively frame the portals to
your lover's soul.

Color being singular under the assumption the irises match—obviously



The Eye
by Tammy Burton

Lloyd Dobbins

May I...

Spit into your wind tunnel to wet my face?

May I...

Finally hear the starting gun so I can start this fucking race?

Testes. Testes. One—two—three.

Is this thing on?

Can you hear me?

Can you see this monstrosity I have become?

Or is it just the deception of this poison inside me?

At least I didn't get lost in a mirror this time,

Stumbling, fumbling awkwardly in the wrong direction.

What is the right direction?

Is it up?

Have you looked up recently?

What do you expect to see?

What do you expect to accomplish staring at your feet all day?

May I...

Have another cigarette?

Lloyd Dobbins



Oopsy Daisy
by Memory Forwalt

If it ain't fixed
Don't break it
If it ain't fixed
Don't get on it
If it ain't fixed
Don't take it
If it ain't fixed
Don't bet on it

If it didn't fit
Don't sweat it
If it doesn't fit
Just try again
If it didn't fit
Just wet it
If it doesn't fit
Don't stick it in

If it won't suck
Make sure you turned it on
If it still won't suck
It's time to blow it out
If it won't suck
Make sure you turned it out
If it still won't suck
Then maybe—just maybe
It's time to throw it out



With Eyes Wide Closed
by Memory Forwalt

Lloyd Dobbins

Rather Wash Away

Waiting here for rain is not as queer or insane as taking a beautiful Indian woman to McDonald's on a first date. It's not as disastrous as taking an ugly one there either. A dry creek-bed is a very nice place to sit in the springtime. Don't let anyone tell you otherwise.

I am oh so wise to their deception—but...Are they? Do the microchips lead them to say such things as normal people don't sit in creek beds? Would aluminum foil hats save them from that? What am I blubbering about? Big brother wants not for you or me to cast an eye on the contently suicidal. Stoicism is dangerous.

Stoics don't give a flying fuck about T.G.I. Friday's or Nike Air Jesuses. They don't stay glued to network tube to know what to purchase next. They congregate in drainage ditches waiting for rain. These daises and that maple seedling have congregated in this one with me. Yesterday, I was joined by a few tramps passing a bum-jug. Tomorrow it may be a creek again—Or today. Gully washers do happen. Floods are rampant these days. But do the daises care? Are the tramps worried they may get wet? Am I afraid I may get washed away with the rest of the debris?

What's the alternative? Assimilation? No thank you.

Lloyd Dobbins



America Lied
by Memory Forwalt

This Thing Is

Everything, everything is
Every thing everything is.
Every thing is everything, is
Every thing everything everything. Is
Everything everything every thing is.
Everything is, every thing is
Everything every thing is.
Everything every thing is
This thing is.

Lloyd Dobbins



Everything is (WordArt picture)
by Adelea Willman

Reflection

I wonder.

[I pretend] I am the journalist.

I sit as the watcher and look with calm eyes.

[My] imagination begins to flower, [as I] open [a] door and address the possibilities [before me].”

“Her eyes are a home to silent prayers.”

“[The] whispering has evoked an atmosphere of silence,
haunted by the ghost of sound.”

“Through the long corridors the ghosts of the past walk, un-forbidden,
hindered only by broken promises, dead hopes, and dreams–[turned to] dust.”

“[One will] travel the world over in search of what [they] need,
[only to] return home to find it.”

“Behind all [of] this; some great happiness is hiding.”

Underneath it all;

a longing or a glimpse of a something more.

“[Her soul is] hiding in a cold, dark place.”

“[In her] hand lies a beautiful rose;”

[a breath of choices merely waiting to transpire].

“[She’s] in the dark – [there seems to be] no escape.”

“[Her] anger [and pain] is shown by the tears in [her] eyes.”

“[She] longs for love.”

“[She] longs for a little bit of understanding.”

“[Fall is in the air] the [autumn] scene is colored by numbers.”

It’s as if the leaves are painted by the scars that have been left behind.

“[She has] come back again to where [she] belong[s]; not an enchanted place,
but [here] the walls [seem] strong.”

I step back. - I look again to see.

The reflection is familiar.

I discovered the reflection was of me.

Memory Forward

Shattered

She grew more tired by the moment.
Her eyes were heavy indeed-
as she drifted off into a slumber of sweet & innocent dreams.

Feeling his hands slowly, groping the flesh of her seven-year old body;
she could smell the stench of stale booze in the air.
She woke with her pants pulled down; past her knees;
her undeveloped breasts, bare.

Innocence shattered;
a moment when the sand in the hourglass stood completely still.
She froze in anticipation from the moment she could at last free herself from his constricting
grip.

Shamefully, she peered to the left of the room; wishing for a rescue, praying for her escape.
The babysitter was in plain view. She had just sat there and stared;
and the innocent child wondered why she had just sat there.

His bristly hands slid across her flesh, as if her body had been his own;
to steal a wealth of private places from a flower that had once been whole.
She had no say the moment it all took place;
as she had been immobilized by his repulsive embrace.

She was once innocent, a flower just beginning to bloom;
until she fell asleep that night.

Who knew?

When she woke, she would never again be the same.

Her innocence was lost...
but a child of seven remained and that child would forever be changed.

The Power of Three

I found myself standing in a circle;
holding hands with two other figures.
We were each dressed in long, white nightgowns with ruffled-sleeved cuffs
and necklines that were made in the old-style fashion.

It was a different time;
an era that had long since passed.
It was an era that had once belonged to our ancestors;
those that had come before us.

Somehow I had journeyed to another time;
a different place, but the setting seemed all too familiar.
The sky seemed to be veiled by the mysteries of the night.
evening had fallen upon us and a chill could be felt in the air.

A well contained fire was blazing high into the sky.
The fire was somehow lighting our way
and empowering us with great strength.

It was as if we were being stripped from all of those fears
that the devil fancies casting upon us.

We danced, grasping each other's hands;
as if we were in the midst of a ceremony.
Round and round in circles we pranced, chanting;
“The Power of Three!”
“The Power of Three!”
“The Power of Three!”—over and over again.

With each ring around;
and with each new chant, our enthusiasm grew stronger.
Our strength began to empower the entire world.

Or, at least the world in which we knew,
the one that existed so vividly; in the dream.

His pupils were black and were as large as his iris.
Those sky blue eyes that had once been so gentle,
turned evil and were now consumed with hate.

He shut the door.

“Wait!”
“I’m scared of you.”

Walking Away

He punches the mirror.
It shatters upon the floor.
He hit the door, leaving a mark behind that wasn't there before.

He takes his knife and he slices open his forearm.
His blood sprays everywhere.

He won't let me out.
He said, "This is for you," as I cried.

He had promised to protect me.
He lied.

Memory Forward

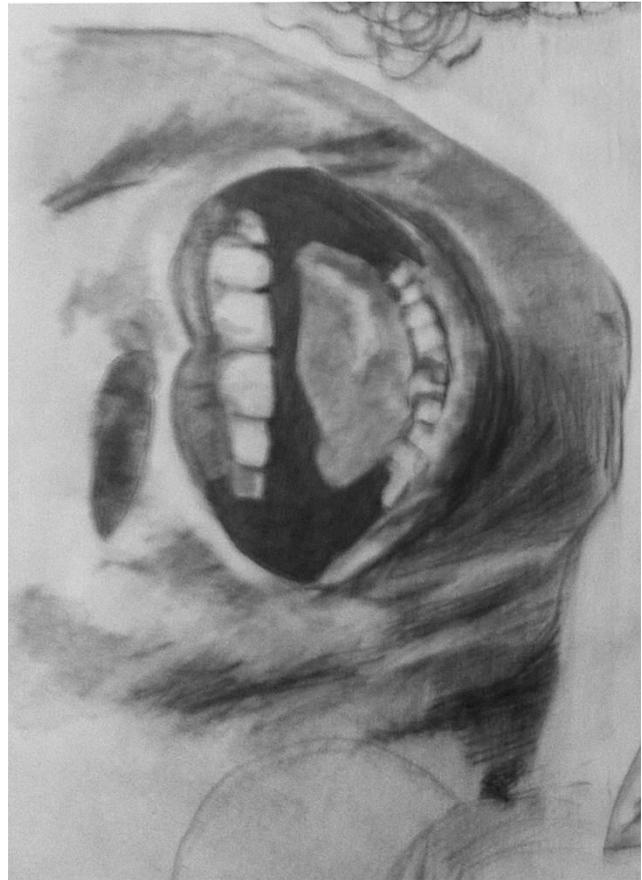
Seated at my
kitchen table I bring
stiff black coffee
to my lips
taking a sip, the dark
bitterness swirls
suddenly as I taste

metallic, sickly sweet
my tongue lolls wildly
around hard chunks
of detached teeth
rolling like warm marbles in my
mouth, coughing and choking
I spew pearly

white enamel
and bloody red roots.
they chime on the table
tiny nauseous plinking
bells scattering like
rancid salt spilled.

panic mounting my
rib cage, quickened
breaths saturate my ears
I lurch forward
out of my chair
the bathroom mirror
reveals red oozing

grisly blood stripes
trickling down
my neck
I'm caged by
these cursed bars.
my mouth wide
gaping pink gums
scream ungodly
rattling wail crashing
into the tile
then instantly jolted
I'm awake with
frantic fingers feeling
for teeth in my head.



Psycho Scream
by Memory Forwalt

Beth McQueen

Pressing Matters

1 Rich kaolin clay seeps through his caressing fingers.
2 Hands embark on silken mouth and neck, graceful form emerges,
3 as ancient as rivers tinged with mellow earth.
4 Gleaming musk coats him, salted ocean body swells.

2 Hands embark on silken mouth and neck, graceful form emerges.
5 Supple surface sighs like skin beneath his impressions.
4 Gleaming musk coats him, salted ocean body swells.
6 Palm heel delicately smooths fine crescent hips.

5 Supple surface sighs like skin beneath his impressions.
7 Blooming lips yield to the trembling crush.
6 Palm heel delicately smooths fine crescent hips.
8 Hypnotic wheel spins wildly in kiln-scorched air.

7 Blooming lips yield to the trembling crush
3 as ancient as rivers tinged with mellow earth.
8 Hypnotic wheel spins wildly in kiln-scorched air.
1 Rich kaolin clay seeps through his caressing fingers.



Shaping the Form
by Lisa Siefker-Bailey

Murky berry-whispering wine
slowly sipped and divinely savored,
elegantly heady and tannic,
the vintage frolicked on their tongues, flavor lingering.
Talking of Picasso, Degas, Led Zeppelin, and Twain
he watched her mouth rounding around words
Liquid red beads pooled in her lip creases,
blushing with wine-stain spreading to cheeks.

Restaurant crowd blurred and jived around them,
chinking glasses with haughty laughs.
She watched his eyebrows arc like furry blond rainbows
over two flickering pots of blue gold-flecked eyes.
They fidgeted with remnants
of a gouda, havarti, and manchego plate,
chatting airily about the restaurant's walls,
splashed loudly with Pollock-like designs.

Easy conversation flowed, Coltrane's sax purred
sultry notes tumbling in their ears,
trilling and floating through the air.
Jazzed with love jolt,
full and buzzing on food and wine.
They lingered on, eager to collide,
ordering affogatos and cannolis,
sugary cream, blending with wine lips.
She smoothed his flaxen forearm hair,
He caressed a stray hair strand from her face,
Tingles sizzled beneath fingers.

Beth McQueen



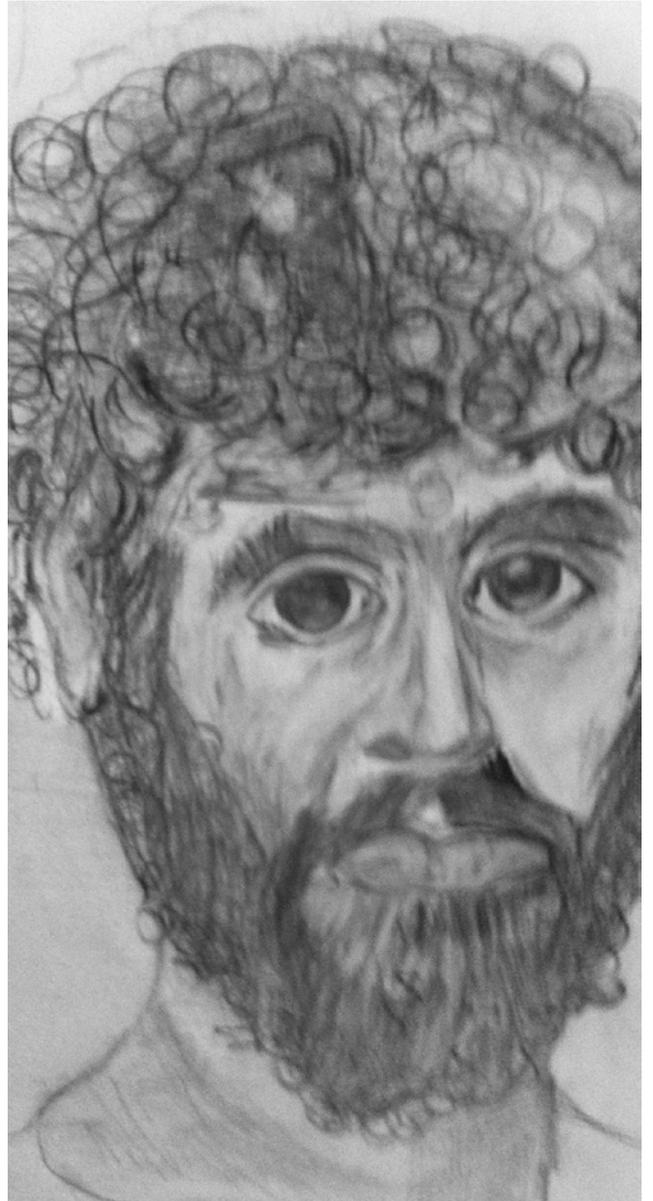
Untitled
by Tammy Burton

Blindfolded

Blindfolded, my brother and I race downhill.
The airy snow sprays our smiling faces.
The sled is our stability.
Turn Left!
Knowing not to listen, I go right.
We miss the tree and live another day.

Blindfolded, my brother and I race downhill.
The airy snow sprays our smiling faces.
The sled is our stability.
Turn Right!
He refuses to listen, and goes Left.
We hit the tree, injured, but live another day.

Blindfolded, Mike raced downhill.
The confusing world sprayed his dark, sunken eyes.
His split mind was his stability.
Turn Left, no Right, no stay Straight!
Refusing to take his meds, he went up and down.
He smashed head-first into the tree
taking his own life to finally be at peace.



Melancholy Man
by Memory Forwalt

Suzy Milhoan

My Mom Is a Rock

My mom, Darlene, was born in the rolling, green hills of Kentucky in a shack
with no running water, electricity, toilet or shoes.

Given away like a free puppy to her grandmother, Myrtie. Mom's mom was just fifteen, had a
boyfriend who left not knowing he had a daughter, Darlene.

Moving to Indiana, Mom was taunted and teased for being a wood chickⁱ and a hick.
She defended her honor and home with her hands and her feet.

Painfully passing the seventh grade, mom quickly threw her books off the Hawcreek Bridge
like the many moonshiners racing wildly to escape the law.

Mom married young. Her grandparents signed the form that she was sixteen. If they only
knew then what they learned later, they would have refused to lie for their daughter.

Mom's new life began as a wife at fifteen. Moving from state to state and overseas
with a Navy man who expected perfection like the soldiers he marched.

His temper exploded like the grenades his enemy was annihilated with.
Mom was punished with words, steel-toed boots, hands and fists. She was dragged with hair
twisted and gripped tightly as if his last piece of snake, while starving in Vietnam.

Horrific sounds echoing as he smashed her head inside walls. Her voice muffled,
sniffles heard in the next room from her eight small children.

Her face is a roadmap, each line trenched from hard times from being beaten like a hanging rug.
How does she remain so strong?
How does she remain smiling?

My Mom is a Rock.

She is now seventy-four and still dancin' on the dance floor.
Her shrine dedicated to the one man she trusted to ease her pain
as she listened to his sweet, exciting voice.

She gives tribute to the King on her sprayed red walls and immense storage shelves.
Her black and white checkered floor outlines her dance steps.

The room is trimmed like his tight black leather pants, which made women cry and pass out.

She brightens my life each and every day. Her unbridled spirit has remained strong, unmovable
but cracked. It is patched with the love from her family and friends.
Mom is called Grams, Grand Maw-Maw, Grandma, and A-maw.

My Mom is a Rock.

The Steps so Loud

One by one, he stomped up the steps.
Our hearts all stopping,
scared of the unknown.
What was he up to?
No one could know.
Our Father, crazy from hell,
Stomping each one.

Something was dragging
behind him so loud.
Thuds echoed
as it made its way up
the steps one by one.

The door slammed open.
Our faces full of fright.
What we could see behind him
was wooden with a razor end so sharp.
He slung it in front of him.
No breathing, No sounds.

I prayed Dear God,
please let him kill me,
I'd be better off dead.
A warm peace filled me
but was soon gone
as he and the axe went around.

Suzzy Milhoan

Tiny Hands on the Wheel

With angry eyes and sweating hands
my dad roars the engine and then soars
crashing the car through our sacred door.

Wood splinters. Glass shatters.
Mom and her children running,
taking cover in imaginary shelters.

Out of his weapon my father runs and hides.
Knowing the police are on their way,
he devises a plan of what to do.

Stretching forth the angel's hands,
he offers up his sacrifice and
plants the innocent marks.

Police arrive. Dad with that smirk,
getting away with murder once again.
All hope dashed—No help for us yet.

My sister's tiny hands on the wheel.



Sherry's Hands
by Sherry Traylor

Suzy Milhoan

Acrylic Lament

I painted her inside an English garden on a cold winter day
I gave her porcelain and flower petals
And an unobtrusive gaze
I wanted her like this forever, and in this frame she'll stay.

The water is clear and flows beside her
The sun lights up her face
Wrought iron curls beneath her
Melding her in place.

Green grass peeks through in patches
Sanguine blossoms bury leaves
A path leading to nowhere twists
Under her dried acrylic feet.

Sun hat dips low beneath one eye
Sunflower hair wraps vines down her neck
Her lips drip downwards towards her hands
Palms stained from where she wept.

Teacup stained circles eclipse the table
Both next to me and where she sits
She never looks me in the eye
Her neck is stiff, jaw clinched.

I painted her inside an English garden so she had to stay
I wrapped her in my laments
Surrounded with sunshine and flowers
But she will never be content.

Now the paint is old and chipping
The frame is covered in dust
The flowers look worn and withered
The stroke of her face is nearly crushed.

I wanted her to hang on my wall forever
A shrine to her relief
But years have passed and left her wanting
For nothing more than release.



Sad Escape
by Memory Forwalt

Bailey Moss



Untitled
By Tammy Burton

Fragile jellyfish
Neon colors dance
dandelion dances
Under a stained glass
monolith on display.
Seen by the Heavens
looking down, and the
Wicked looking in

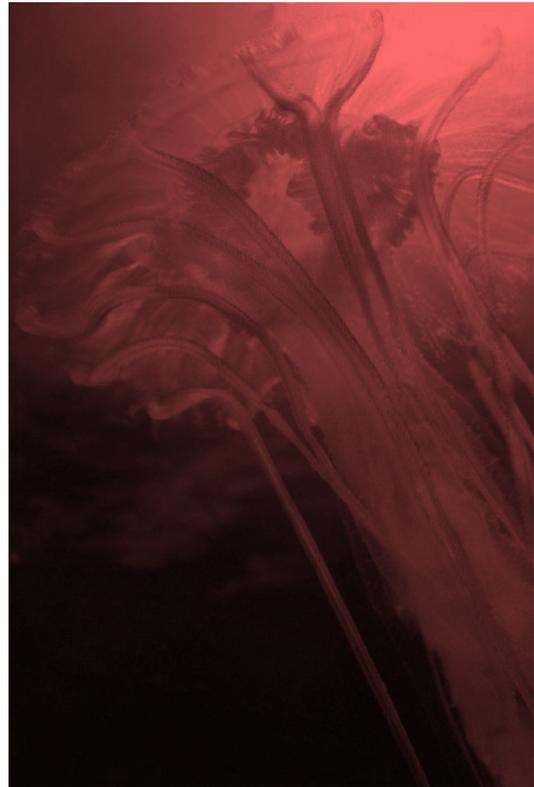
I stare.
you pulse
you reach
you try
to be
deeper

Twist yourself into grace.
Peel back your tentacles
Show the world your circus-
act contortion-lust.
Do umbrella back-flips
In your red light district.
Draw me in with your frill
Shock me with your poison.

You stare.
I pulse
I reach
I try
to be
deeper

Coiled limbs thread around flesh
Neon colors dance.
Nerve receptors react
Pressure from contact.
Release the stingers!
Toxin swims upstream.
Frothy sentiment
Lingers on damp surface.

We stare.
Hearts pulse
Heart s reach
Hearts try
to be



Red (Manipulated photo)
by Adelea Willman

Bailey Moss

deeper.

Fingerprints left on glass
Clean surface now smeared
Your lightning silhouette
buoys to the surface.
Leaves me sinking into
The deep midnight abyss.
Dandelion dancing
My way to the bottom.

Blank stare
No pulse
Still reaching
Still trying
To be
Deeper.

Stick Figure Misconceptions

Brother when you came out
there was a hush in the room and everyone listened for cries of normalcy.
You never made a peep
Instead you just stared,
Unprepared for the future

You were always soft natured and quiet tempered
You loved shoulders, wispy hair in your face, and your sister's silly singing.
You disliked surgery, loud male voices, and gas.

You lost your first tooth in an apple and the second in a corn cob
You were never deterred by the hard things in life
Even when they threatened to take a piece of you.

We would play
Three hour Uno games every night for almost a year.
You would draw card after card at every turn
just keep drawing and drawing till your hands were overloaded with possibilities.
I always wondered how someone could have luck as bad as yours
But you always managed to play a wild card

Later I learned you cheated every time
Cheated by pulling cards when you didn't need to
Cheated to give yourself more options
Cheated to make the game last longer
You were never trying to win,
Only trying to keep my attention.

As you grew older you learned more tricks of the draw
Draw eyes
Draw stares
Draw whispers
Draw conversations.
Draw lectures
Draw laughter
Draw arguments
Draw frustrations.

You draw stick-figure misconceptions under a rainbow colored sky
In almost every picture
And I always tell you I love it.

Little brother I can make you laugh till you pass out from euphoria
In fact, it's one of my favorite past times.
We laugh at how people pronounce words "correctly"
We laugh at how you never do
We laugh at how frustrated you make me sometimes
There are times when you just keep laughing I don't even have a clue
Why.

Bailey Moss

I don't know if there is such a thing as reincarnation
But if there is I hope you come back
As a freckle on the face of adversity
Freckles are precious on anyone.
I know I can't protect you from every bully
And you may feel like you live in the world's shadow
But I want you to know that even as an adult
Your feet will always be small enough for me to wear your shoes.



Untitled
by Tammy Burton

We Were a Crimescene

I hate him like the earth hates dead bodies.
Rotten chemicals I cannot reject
Dead thing walking.

His eyes have been glazed blue
Since the day he was born.
Blind to anything but his own reflection.

You don't look at me
Dead thing.

I absorb him
I take him in me like soil to a coffin.
His remnants will never fully dissolve.

Don't you look at me
Dead thing.

Set change on his eyelids, Coroner
He's beginning to stink.
He's been putrefying forever.

Don't you look at me, Dead thing?

His heart stopped beating long ago
Blood stopped moving
And he's been cold ever since.

Did you ever look at me, Dead thing?

There was no breath to his kiss
Only pale skin and a stiff upper lip
Rigor mortis left him rigid.

I can't look at you
Dead thing.

Body swollen, bloated
He was always so full of himself
On the verge of rupture.

I can no longer look at you
Dead thing.

His decomposition penetrated my bed
Gelatinous remains ate a body sized hole through the sheets.



He Lied
by Memory Forwalt

Bailey Moss

I was surprised at the rate of his decay.

You're dead
Dead thing.

Crime scene cleaners will cover this mess
The undertaker will remove his body
The gravedigger will give him a new home.

I won't see you anymore
Dead thing.

I won't go to his grave
I won't write a sweet epitaph
I won't read his obituary.

You're gone
Dead thing.

I will lay down as many flowers as I received.
I will hug his mother with the fake smile.
And I will buy a new bed.

Because I am still alive,
Dead thing.

Teresa Ray

Worker bee—
lives by list.
Run to work run to school run to store.
Catch breath.
Pay the rent pay the gas pay the debt.
Catch breath.
Juggle job juggle home juggle money.
One minus one equals zero.
Ends meet.

Wait—
say what?
Not technical not qualified not employed?
Can't breathe.
What about team what about years what about me?
Can't breathe.
Accept decision accept severance accept fate.
Work whore—put out, get out.
Ends don't meet.

Keep going—
look for work.
Apply at Engine Corp at Poly Corp at Moly Corp.
No jobs.
Apply at FoodMart at CarMart at ClothesMart.
No jobs.
Apply at FastCoffee at FastPizza at FastBurger.
Three jobs—three pissy, part-time, low-pay jobs.
Means to an end.

Keep going—
no alternative.
Up at five work for sixteen home for eight.
Sleep?
Work for fiftysixtyseventy hours a week.
Sleep?
Work for sixseveneight dollars per hour.
Make...chicken scratch, squat, nodda.
At wit's end.

Must—
keep going.
Sleep for threetwoone hours?
Not now.
Just onetwothree winks?
Not now.



Yellow Mystery
by Memory Forwalt

Sleep is overrated disturbed unproductive.
Don't get paid for sleep—too old.
Nights are endless.

Things—
go dark.
Birds don't twitter stars don't twinkle dancers don't twirl.
Fade to black.
Relive every failed interview failed project failed love.
Fade to black.
Can't concentrate...on who on what on why?
Just wad up—hide from the world.
How will this end?

Poles—
flip.
Nerves numb like north novocaine nitrous.
Can't stop shakin'.
Locked in house-body looking out eye-windows hearing through tube-ears.
Can't stop shakin'.
Wrapped in blanket wrapped in cabin fever wrapped in blue, blue winter.
Hate...feeling sick, useless, dead.
When will this end?

Poles—
flip again.
Unquiet mind runs laps vaults thoughts swims serotonin.
Feels good!
Body feels tickle-touched salt-scrubbed rock-rubbed.
Feels good!
Dance a jig ring a bell sing a song.
All is well.
An end's in sight.

Crash—
down.
Car breaks down work breaks down soul breaks down.
She implodes.
Skull cracks neck cricks house-body crumbles.
She implodes.
Assume brace position crash position fetal position.
Drown in the rhyme of a babbling mind.
The end.

Solar Storm

I know what you are,
Self-centered solar system of a man!
Been gone six months. Did you think about me?
No. Some lover, Saturn-haloed in light,
She rubbed you Mars-red, stroked your pride.
And now you're here again,
Just like that.

I know what you're not.
You're not wanted here—go away. I twist,
Tilt my northern axis away from you.
You radiate touch-less forces; I orbit
You, slave to gravitation's pull.
And now I'm here again,
Just like that.

I know what you are.
Ninety-three million miles fade to microns.
Ferrite tongue licks granite skin, electric
Desire surges, and protons wriggle and flow.
Warm neon plasma wraps us; we sleep.
And now we're here again,
Just like that.

Teresa Ray

The Night Moves

Rhythm of sleep
eludes her. She tries to sweep her mind of thought, and thinks
of not thinking. Can you think nothing thoughts? She listens
to the sucking sound her fluttering heart makes against

her ear drums.

Does everyone's heart skip beats? Is something out of sync?
She can't afford to have a heart attack now. Not now.
Her brain rambles on. And then through the screened window

the night moves
past midnight, keeping time to the I-65 diesel beat,
singing in bluesy whines and deep-throated chuffs, throbbing
to the machinegun pop of brakes ringing off blacktop.

The night moves
closer, quicksilvering the hills with fingerprints of
drizzle, dancing on mist legs to the beat of raindrops.
Fred Astaire noir, dapper in black, toe-tapping, closer

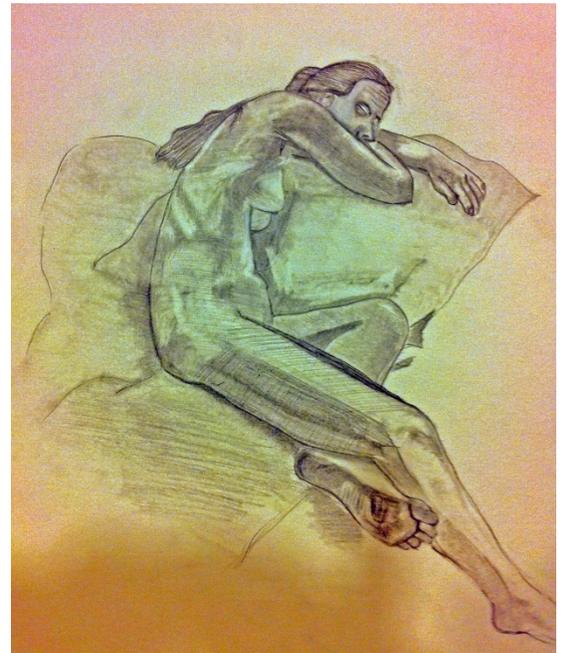
the night moves.
He slides to the left with the first moan of the wood-wind,
and slides to the right with the second. As sand rattles
maracas inside downspouts, he slides up the path. Closer

the night moves,
sashaying from tree to tree. He plays a child's game of
hide-and-seek with the glow of porch lights, Bojangle-dances
up the balcony stairs and over to the window.

The night moves
closer. Crouching beside the screen, he hums a melody
accompanied by the fiddle of crickets and the
chirp of tree frogs. He reaches toward the woman, and

warmth washes
her body, stilling the chatter inside her head. She
looks into and through the face of the night, stretches out
her hand to touch the pulse of moonlight and the skin of

the night, moves
her body to one side and presses her hand against
the screen. She drops her arm, her body relaxes, and
she falls asleep to the strumming of crickets at dawn.



Sleeping Lady
by Memory Forwalt

Teresa Ray

The Murder of Picasso's Lovers

Hey! Where'd they disappear to, them darn bones?
Ground to sand and mixed with oil and pigment—
that's where they disappeared to, them darn bones.

A vision of humanity? Not one hint!
Puzzle-piece body, wearin' a crooked grin,
glued to this canvas like Hoffa in cement.

Guitar crammed in the left eye, mandolin
crammed in the right. Scissor-cut feet danced
the flamenco with jester Harlequin

all night. Our loves' geometry condensed
to obtuse angles, upended cubes, and lines.
Lesser women would be downright incensed!

One tit here, flapping in air and split with splines.
One tit there, juggled by an ample behind.
What psychosis would Freud find in those designs?

To new conquests in supple curves he is kind,
painting octopus arms and pillowing hair.
To throw-away wives he turns an eye that's blind.

A love affair here, a liaison or two there.
Matrimony sprinkled lightly in between.
We stretch naked on linen, so much to bare.

One wife's neck is strangle-brushed so mean—
Adam's apple so thin, compressed to a dot—
Yet the public pays to see, and it's seen.

We are women in waiting. Waiting for what?
Crucifixion upon the gallery walls.
The stab of charcoal that burns Inferno hot.

We bleed paint-blood in the world's museum halls.
Our long-dead loves congeal inside modern frames.
We join the ranks of the avant-garde immortals.



Eyes Wide Closed
by Memory Forwalt

Teresa Ray

Dark Angel

Lonely angel sitting on your throne of stone.
Dark wings upon your back mirror my life.
Before I met you, dreaded feeling of loneliness.
You swept me up in your loving arms.
Showed me there was more to this life.
Took my heart and made it yours to keep.
But beware my love, it is the most precious and fragile thing you could ever own.
One word, one look, could shatter it into a million pieces.
So long I kept it locked and buried.
Hidden behind so many walls from my past.
You were determined to break them down.
Even if you had to take it one brick at a time.
You have seen the very core of me and it didn't scare you away.
The scars of my heart seem to attract you ever more.
My love, my dark angel who saved my life.
Thank you for wrapping your arms around my body.
And your wings around my heart.

Nathan Smith



Memory Self-Portrait
by Memory Forwalt

The Fall

Standing in a perfect world you gave to me.
Let the dream of tomorrow slip through my hands.
The way was so clear, the path ahead.
Had to take things on my own accord.
Darkness filling my perfect light as I slip further.
Shadows consume my every thought.
Desperately seeking the light I have lost.
Falling perfect grace.
Where is the light?
Where is the love?
Now I can't find my way back home.
Blindly I took the easy path.
The way looked so good, inviting, thought I was doing good.
The true path was the path less traveled.
So far away not I fear it is too late.
Doomed to wander my dark tunnel.
Until the day my bones turn to dust.

Nathan Smith



Untitled
by Sherry Traylor

At Water's Edge

On waters lapping
Edges of land reach out and take a drink
Clear skin slips back to leave a white foam
Parched from heat, earth drops
To the weight of my foot
The print fills and water's edge moves in
Partially trapping my presence
Water fills me, then escapes leaving behind
A stagnate pool of floating resolutions
But we are compressed, one firm while the other moves
Creating the shoreline with penetrating force
Leaving behind the under-caving
Dismissing any boundaries of the water's edge

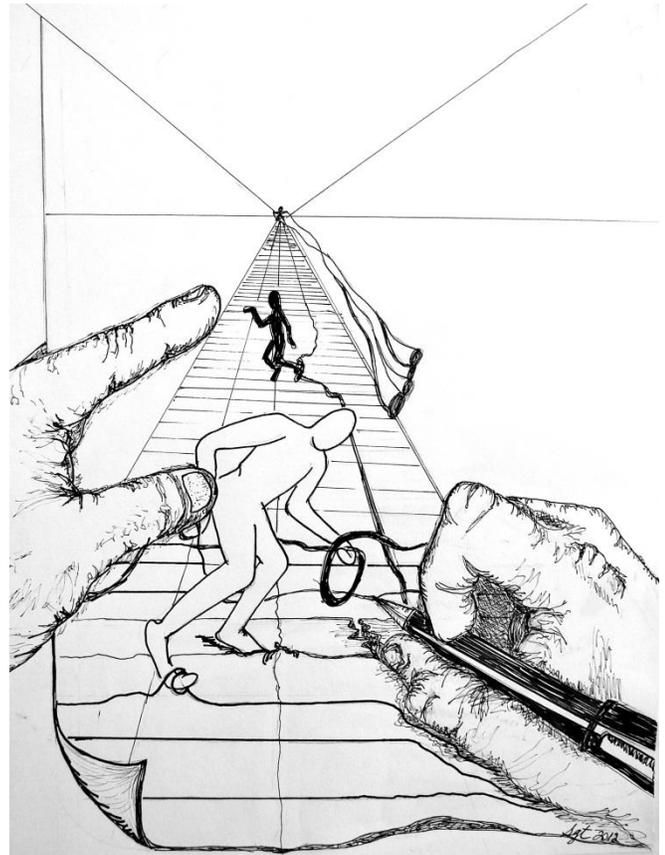


Untitled
by Sherry Traylor

Sherry Traylor

Sherry Traylor

Lines form and people follow the flow
separating into groups on the sidewalk.
Mannered in institution,
he, she, they.
Blur into one moving mass of color.
Then one yellow dot runs from formation,
chased by its larger who returns it to
the spot in symmetry.
Conformity, assimilation, and boundaries.
We file ourselves in order from the time our feet
bare weight, until our weight we cannot bare.
Then we seal our deaths in set form, row upon row,
marking our existence in uniformity.



Playing With Perspective
by Sherry Traylor



Foreshadow
by Kathleen Ford

She is nature
The iridescent rainbow
After rain

She is nature
The warmth of skin
And feeling of contentment
After a nap in the
Soft summer grass

She is nature
The morning glory
That stretches to greet
Each day anew

She is nature
The tall strong still oak
A safe haven
While wind whips
Leaves dirt and stones
About haphazardly

She is nature
The sound of a cheerful chirping
Bird singing for the day

She is nature
A cow that devotedly scours
The placenta from her newborn.

She is nature
A steam-roller bear that
Determinedly fights to the death to
Defend her cub from any danger.

She is nature
A pair of elephants
That sidle up next to
Another to be its crutch
After noticing it grows weary

She is nature
A cooling summer breeze
That is a relief from the
Burning heat of the sun



Sunset
by Kathleen Ford

She is nature
The much needed rain
That quenches the thirst
Of the dry cracked
Summer ground

She is nature
The tempest that rages
In the night
Throwing array
The best laid plans of all

She is nature
The earthquake that
Throws a town in devastation
And making everyone hold
Each other closer

She is nature
Anything because
She is everything
She is nature



Strike
by Kathleen Ford

The fog crowds around me,
Envelopes everything,
Making me feel anything but free.

He overshadows me like a tree
Anchoring it to all ground things
The fog crowds around me,

Overshadowing sends me to deaths' heady
Hold in darkness I feel I am growing
Making me feel anything but free.

I struggle to overcome his ability
To make me feel I am suffocating
The fog crowds around me,

I lose a battle of power seemingly
Not strong without light my tired limbs aching
Making me feel anything but free.

The war of wills wages constantly
Why do I want to win why am I'm fighting
The fog crowds around me,
Making me feel anything but free.



Uniform in Beauty
by Sherry Traylor

Adelea Willman

Fiction



Sideways Sunshine
by Kathleen Ford

At Odds and At Ends

The clear turquoise sky promised a beautiful day. Cars monotonously buzzed up and over Monteagle Mountain every now and again. Reina viewed the scene with a sense of familiarity and dread. Then, she smelled the acrid burnt rubber that signaled the brakes locking up on the sharp downgrade. The car began sliding sideways as it hit the dark oil stain on the pavement. Her stomach dropped to her feet as she saw the tractor-trailer appear over the mount's crest. It too hit the oil patch in the process of trying to stop. The semi blew the right front tire, sending rubber flying, and straightaway started a screeching slide sideways, toward the gray SUV.

"No!" Reina cried. "Get out of the way! It's going to hit you!"

She somehow thought she could make the SUV move; believing this time it would be different (although she had relived this scene in her nightmares hundreds of times since the accident four years ago). This time the semi would not careen into her parents 2005 Chevy Suburban, killing her mother, Mina, her father, Everett, and her twin brothers, Eryn and Adrian. This time all of her family would survive the crash, not just her sister Lena, but the relief of waking up was not realized; the scene transpired as always.

Reina watched as the semi tipped over after slipping in the oil. The semi rolled over more like an oak wine cask. As the semi rolled over the dents in its frame made it look as though a giant fist had tried to crush it. She watched as metal grated against metal and glass flew while the semi rolled out her family's SUV as though it was pizza dough, and the SUV certainly resembled it afterward.

Reina woke up, tears rolling down her cheeks. Next, she set about the task of trying to calm herself with the fact that it had happened almost four years ago when she was nineteen, not moments ago. It had been years, but Reina still felt responsible for her family's deaths; she was even sure her sister had lingering guilt, but they had never talked about it. *If only I hadn't signed up for summer school so I could finish a semester early*, she berated herself. *I knew it would interfere with the vacation plans. We took the same vacation every year. I should have told them just to wait the extra three days for me.* After Reina rehashed what she should have done in her mind, she tried to decide between staying in bed and trying to go back to sleep or getting up and starting the day.

Reina decided to get up and make a cup of peppermint tea. There was no more sleep after that dream anyway. There never had been. So, she decided to take a quick shower and get dressed before walking downstairs to her bookstore and open early. Reina had always sought solace in books, even as a child. All but a few girls in her grade had snubbed her over the years. The only friends she had most years were the ones she met in her books. *Books were the truest friends I could've had.* Since she had read books and rarely interacted with people as a child, she always felt awkward talking to people, even her family.

After she walked downstairs, she turned on the music for the store. Reina had always liked classical music, and recently jazz as well. She thought it provided a soothing background for customers while they browsed the store. The music ranged from "The Marriage of Figaro" by Mozart to Duke Ellington's "Dance Number 4."

It was 7:00 a.m. on the first Friday of May in Cardinal, a small town in Indiana. Just through the large picture windows on her storefront and across Avian St., the town's main street, was Bird Park whose most common diurnal and nocturnal inhabitants befitted its name. Reina especially relished seeing the intense red sphere break the plane of the horizon between the trees

of the park as it set fire to the sky with various hues of rosy pink, glowing gold, and blazing orange.

Reina also liked to watch the birds in the early morning as she drank her tea. The birds gave her a feeling of cheerfulness when nothing else could. The birds were always twittering and springing around. She loved watching the snotty blue jays, proud cardinals, modest robins, and frisky chickadees. Seeing the birds, especially the young ones, reminded Reina life could go on and there were things to look forward to in life.

As she stood at the counter sipping her tea, she thought about her day. Most of it would be spent either behind the counter waiting for customers or figuring out where to put the new books. *I should really get my papers together for next years' taxes for Lena. I'm glad I have someone that knows the ins and outs of tax laws. I never could figure it out.*

Every year since the accident, Lena did Reina's taxes and balanced her checkbook mostly because, as her sister said, **she** "worked as a Certified Public Accountant (CPA) for Trump National Bank (TNB) and **she** knew all the tax laws."

It was also because her father, who had always done the family taxes, was dead. The harsh clanging from the rotary dial phone on the chocolate and forest-green, flecked, granite countertop to her right jolted Reina out of her mental notes. (Reina enjoyed having old-fashioned items around because they were unique items that made her feel at home.)

"Hello, Mixt Bookstore. We have everything from the classics to today's bestsellers."

"Hi, sis, it's Lena. I'll come over at lunch time if you're not busy. We can find this month's receipts for your taxes next year. I'll even take a look at your checkbook and balance it for you."

"Alright, I was just thinking about that when you called. I'll see you at lunch."

Then, Reina and Lena said their farewells. A few seconds after Reina hung up the phone, it rang again. She sighed. *Hopefully today's going to be a busy day.*

"Hello, Mixt Bookstore," she repeated. "We have everything from the classics to today's bestsellers."

"Hi Reina, it's John," came the comforting, slightly rumbling reply. "Are you free around lunchtime today?"

Reina's first instinct was to reply yes. She hadn't seen John in a couple weeks. John McClellan had been her rock and paramour through the storm that had been her life for about two years after the wreck killed her parents and brothers and hospitalized Lena. Then, Reina remembered. *I wish I had said I would meet Lena after work.*

So, begrudging her sister she said, "No. Sorry. I promised Lena she could come over. She's going to get my receipts and balance my checkbook."

"Alright." *He sounds upset*, she puzzled. "How 'bout tomorrow? Are you too busy then?" *Why is he upset? I know I haven't seen him in a couple weeks but that is his fault as much as mine.*

"Nope. I don't have any plans tomorrow at lunch."

"Good. I'll bring sandwiches from the deli and we can eat at the park. What do you want to eat? The usual?"

"Yes, bring me a turkey bacon ranch on wheat, please." (It was a tradition.)

"Will do. See ya then. Bye."

"Bye."

Hmm. I wonder how he found time to get away from his job with his father at the McClellan Brewery. John's father was priming him to take over the family brewery so he could retire and visit his grandfather's homeland of Ireland.

While she walked to the back of the store to get the box of new arrivals and set them on the counter, Reina thought about her dreams to travel. *I think it would be nice to travel. I hope I get the chance to do that before I am sixty-five. I think it would be better to enjoy other countries while I am young. Oh well, I doubt I will get the chance, unless my boyfriend Thomas proposes sometime in the future. Then, we could fly almost anywhere together. I mean although we have been dating almost two years we haven't even said "I love you" yet, so how can I know how he feels? I love him; I suppose he might feel the same way. But it would help if I knew how he felt about me.*

Reina began taking the new releases out of their white cardboard tote and placing them on the counter, trying to decide which ones to put on display in the windows and which ones to put on top of the smaller, mahogany-stained bookcases. She decided to put the most colorful books in the windows, while the ones with plain covers went on top of the half bookcases.

Since she was going to wait until Lena arrived, she decided to settle behind the counter for a few hours on her padded, wrought iron, stool next to her antique copper cash register. (She always left a calculator in the drawer to double check her numbers.) Reina decided to re-read *Pride and Prejudice* by Jane Austen. It was one of her favorite books and love stories. Just as she got to the part where Elizabeth is thinking that Jane is in love with Mr. Bingley, Reina heard the tinkling of the bell on the door, signaling that someone has come in the door. As she unwrapped her green-blue beaded book thong from her fingers and put it back in the book, she looked up and saw Lena walk in the door. *It always surprises me how time and the world seem to melt away when I'm reading.*

"Hi sis," Lena said.

"Hi, how was work today?" replied Reina.

"Oh, well, you know, it was boring. All my team and I did, and will do is input information for income statements, balance sheets, cash flow statements, the statement of retained earnings, and statements of changes in equity. We have to do this the first week of every month so the higher-ups know how the bank is doing."

"Okay, so is there anything new with you?"

"Well, yes. But, I'll tell you about it after we get back from the deli, so we have something to talk about while we look for your receipts."

"Okay that's fine. Let me just run upstairs and get my jacket."

Hmm. I wonder what Lena could want to tell me. I hope she met someone. She needs someone in her life. She works too hard. You'd think that since she almost died, she would realize how short life is and get a man. I want to be able to have nieces or nephews, so they can play with my future children. Now, where did I leave my jacket? Is it in the closet or still on my bed? Ahha, it is on the chair in front of the TV. Then Reina headed back downstairs.

"Okay, I have it. We can go now."

"Good."

As they walked out the front door, Reina flipped the sign to CLOSED and locked the door so if anyone happened by in the short time they would be gone no one would barge into her store. The two sisters, though they had similar face structures, looked odd walking down the block and diagonally across the street together. Reina, who was the curvier of the two at a size six, had below-the-shoulder undulating ebony black hair pushed behind her ears and forest green

eyes, with a flowing white lace top and fitted flare jeans. Lena, on the other hand, who was three years Reina's senior at twenty-six, had straight chestnut-brown hair layered and cropped midway between her ears and shoulders with caramel-colored eyes, was wearing a slim size four charcoal gray perfectly-fitted, pantsuit.

Though they looked like they were from two worlds, any passerby could see they shared an easy camaraderie and were comfortable with one another. Once they arrived at Mama's Deli, which most people called Mama's, they ordered. Reina bought a cheesy, oniony roast beef on potato bread with barbeque sauce, an apple, and water. Lena ordered a veritable garden of green, yellow, and red peppers, lettuce, onions, tomatoes, and cucumbers on her turkey sandwich with potato chips and lemonade.

As they walked back to Reina's shop, Reina was excited to hear Lena's news. When they arrived back at the store, Reina shut the door, turned the key in the lock, reached up, and flipped the sign over again.

"So, what's your news?"

"I'm pregnant." Lena deadpanned as they walked toward the door behind the counter and the gray, metal, spiral, staircase behind it.

Reina was shocked. Lena looked serious, so she believed her. Reina just stood there, a million thoughts racing through her head, not sure what to say next. She almost forgot to keep walking.

"I'm joking, Reina lighten up. You should see the look on your face." Lena said as a slow smile slipped into place on her face.

"Whoohh. You had me scared for a moment Lena. That's not that funny to joke about, you know," Reina said as they came to the foot of the stairs.

"I know, but I don't get to joke that often."

"Why not? You have plenty of friends."

"They would think I was serious even if I told them I was joking. Besides, I wanted to shock you with something so my next news would seem like nothing in comparison," Lena said as they walked up the stairs and into Reina's kitchen.

"What could it be that you would need something more shocking to lead with?"

"You remember your friend John McClellan?"

"Yes," Reina said cautiously. Unsure of what was coming next, but dreading what she was about to hear, she prepared for the worst.

"I ran into him the other day."

"Okay, and?"

"I wanted to know if you thought it would be a good idea for us to date."

Wow, I was expecting her to tell me that she already had asked him out. That wasn't so bad.

"I asked him to meet me and some friends for drinks, and he said he would think about it. So, could you give me your opinion, and possibly put in a good word for me?"

Damn it! This is even worse. She wants me to put in a good word for her! After what she did to me in high school with Trevor Days! She really does embody a temptress. I know I shouldn't be upset about this because I've been trying to break off with John because I love Thomas, but still. Aghhh. And of course it's my fault for not telling her that John was more than a good friend, unlike so many of the other guys. It's okay, it's okay, calm down. Think about it. Maybe it would be good for her and him. She would finally have a great guy in her life and John

would be out, well mostly, of mine. And I would be noble if I put in a good word for her. It's funny how our names suit us even though for the longest time we never knew what they meant.

"I think you and John might be good together. I'm going to see him at lunch tomorrow. I'll mention you to him and I'll call you afterwards."

Why did I tell her that?

"Thanks sis, you're great."

"No problem."

It's going to be a problem. How am I going to bring THAT up tomorrow? I guess if I want this to happen I've got to. We'll see.

The girls sat down and spent the rest of the meal in quiet as each one munched on her food, thinking her own thoughts. After they were finished Lena stood up, brushed the chip crumbs off her slacks, and walked toward the sink to wash her hands off. As soon as Lena finished drying her hands on Reina's purple hand towel, Reina followed suit, washing her hands off.

"Okay, Reina, now where could those receipts be?"

"Probably in more than one place. Wherever I stuck my copy when a customer comes in, most likely, in one of the containers under the counter and the other receipts wherever I happened to be when I unpacked the new arrivals. Some could be in one of the containers under the counter or in the small back room in one of the drawers there."

"You really need to keep everything in one spot."

"I know," Reina said apologetically.

As the sisters rummaged through the various white plastic containers and drawers, Lena shook her head at the state of the papers that had been tossed in either the containers or drawers throughout the back of the store. When the girls finally had tracked down and organized the receipts the way Lena wanted, it was almost 2:30 p.m.

"Sorry it took so long Lena, there were a lot of new releases this month."

"It's fine; work was boring and unfortunately, I have to get back. But, I'm glad I was able to spend time with you. We don't do that often. I miss spending time and talking with you," Lena said as she pushed back her chair at Reina's kitchen table and stood up.

"I know you are busy with work, though."

"Work shouldn't be an excuse not to spend time with you. We are all the family we have left. I don't want to regret not spending time with you if I lose you, too. I will try to come see you more. I promise."

"Thanks Lena, I miss spending time with you, too."

Lena started across the worn wood floor, her heels stabbing the silence in the air, toward the old plank wood door—adorned with sunshine yellow paint and swirling, intertwined, vine-like black designs—but abruptly turned around.

"Hey Reina."

"Yeah."

"I love you. I know I don't tell you that often."

"I know. I love you, too."

Then both Reina and Lena rushed toward each other feeling sentimental and an extra sense of closeness as they pondered what they had lost that day almost four years ago. With a sense of reluctance, both women pulled away from each other. Reina and Lena walked together in silence down the staircase and into the store. Reina watched and admired the car from the door as Lena U-turned and pulled away in her jet black Tesla Model S. Reina did not own a car. She

had not had much to do with them since the accident, plus most everything she needed was in town anyway.

Wow. That was something new. Reina thought as she walked—slightly bouncing as her foot transferred weight from the very back of her heels to the tips of her toes—back to her stool and book behind the counter. *I didn't realize that she missed me, too. She's been so wrapped up in her job that it almost seemed like she forgot about me. I really hope she does come to see me more. I'm sure she will, after all it is me who is bad at forgetting and sticking to what I say, not her. Lena has always been stronger than me.*

For the rest of the evening, only three customers from out of town came in the store. That was not unusual as her normal customers were the people around town, but recently business had been slower. That's one of the reasons Reina was thankful for her money; if she ever needed money she had some in stocks that her parents had set up for her. That was how she had paid to go to college to get a major in English with a minor in Journalism, even though she had gotten a job with the University's literary magazine through a work study program. Reina had planned to be a book editor or writer instead of a bookstore owner, but when she visited Cardinal with Adrian, a girlfriend from college, to visit Adrian's grandparents Reina found she wanted to live in this quiet little out-of-the-way town. When she saw that there was a store for sale, for a relatively decent price, she jumped at the chance.

Her mother had always said, "Maybe you should own a book store Reina, you like reading. Wouldn't you like to sell books, too?"

Reina had considered the idea before, but she thought if she ever owned a bookstore, it would be after she had a career as a book editor or writer. Reina could still write, of course, but she enjoyed reading so much more. That and she never thought anyone would want to read something she had written. Everyone else's books and ideas had always sounded so much better and more creative to her than hers had. Reina had had ideas that she thought would be great stories, but when she thought about writing a book to be published that is where it stopped. She was terrified of being rejected, especially when so much time, effort, and energy went into one thing. Reina did not know if she could handle that. It stemmed from the fact that during her childhood the girls in her class had ostracized her. When she thought about it, it sounded like a sob story to her, an excuse.

Most people would think *Oh, no big deal; she could have just been friends with some other girls in her class. Surely not all of the girls rejected her.*

Well, that was not true. Reina had gone to a private school that had around one hundred kids. In her class there were only six girls, including her and they had all rejected her. The girls in the younger grades were no better. They were cousins and/or lifelong friends who just went along with the older girls. There had been some girls over the years who were her friends, but their families hadn't lived in the area for generations and quickly moved away when they had been treated the same as Reina. Reina had thought *they were not cut out to be loners.* Reina had even seriously considered writing a book about these experiences, but A) she didn't remember most of elementary school because she had blocked out literally years of it, and B) she thought if she started writing and remembered the experiences, they might traumatize her further and send her into depression (that's what her mother had thought her withdrawing was) again.

Currently, Reina was toying with the idea of expanding and finishing some of the stories she had written in school. Instead, she thought that was an idea for another day, so she decided to go to bed. Before climbing into her satin-like-feeling eggplant purple covered wrought iron bed with a canopy she had made herself, Reina checked her phone on her mahogany-colored

distressed bedside table for a message from Thomas. Thomas had flown home with another pilot from Tokyo sometime today to be able to see Reina on Sunday, their anniversary.

He probably crashed in bed after he flew home today because of the time difference. Crashed, ha ha real funny Reina. I wonder what time he got home. Oh, good there is a message.

Thomas wrote, "Hey babe, I got in safe. I'm going to sleep for a while. Text me when you get this."

The message was time stamped at 6:00 p.m., and three hours ago when she closed the store up.

She sent him a text back, "I'm so glad you got in safe. I can't wait to see you Sunday! It's been a great two years!"

Reina leaned over to set her phone on the bedside table as she reached with the other hand to pick up her comforter. Reina slipped her legs in under the soft comforter one after another and wriggled down under it to get comfortable and warm. As she lay there before falling asleep, she reminded herself what she was going to do tomorrow.

Since tomorrow is a Saturday, there won't be much to do. I should dust all the bookshelves off again, run the sweeper over the floor in the shop, and total up my drawer before I meet John for lunch tomorrow.

Reina yawned. *I hope I won't have a repeat of last night's dream again. I hadn't had the dream in a while before it started coming back. I wonder what had made it come back. Is it because I started feeling guilty about being with John when I realized I love Thomas?*

Reina was right: the dream only came back when she was feeling guilty or conflicted. The dream had been coming back, sporadically, worse these past few weeks since Reina realized she loved Thomas. She realized she loved him when he drove to see her because during one of their rare phone conversations she had sounded sick, even though she had not said she was.

While she was sleeping, Reina drifted into a life-like dream. John walked in the shop and Reina greeted him with a twinge of sadness as she realized this would probably be the last time they would spend time together. *I'm glad I get to see John today. Then I can finally tell him, for good, that it is over. I wish I didn't have to. Something seems different about him. I wonder why.*

"I have our food Reina, are you all set for lunch?"

"Yes, why don't we walk across the street to the park and eat it there? It's a nice day outside."

"That's alright with me," John said, as he opened the door for Reina.

They walked together in what Reina thought was an awkward silence. But, that was because Reina knew what the day had in store. As they walked toward one of the town's wrought iron benches, Reina took in the scene around them. It was a nice sunny day, but the sky was hazy and it was quiet. Reina thought it was odd. Usually the birds twittered more. As they sat down and began to munch their sandwiches, Reina wondered how she would bring up the topic of leaving him for good. So she decided to just say it.

But before she could, John turned to her and said, "Will you marry me?" as he pulled out an antique, cushion cut, grass green, emerald with round cut diamonds bordering it on a gold band.

"No," Reina said quietly, but with conviction.

"WHAT!"

"I said no. I'm in love with Thomas."

"Well that's a shitty thing to say."

"It's true. I won't marry you."

“Why not?” John demanded.

“You don’t respect my boundaries; I have to keep telling you no and you don’t believe me when I refuse you. Oh, and while we’re on this topic, we’re done.”

“You might be, but I’m not.”

With that, John whipped out his ebony 9 mm Glock and shot Reina in the heart. To Reina, she felt she had been punched so hard she would fly across a room like in the movies, if she were in a room that is.

Almost as soon as she felt the sensation of the bullet hitting her, Reina was looking at herself from the scene instead of being in it. Not only was John in the park, but Thomas as well. *Where did he come from? Why is he here?* Thomas was running towards her.

She wanted to tell him, “Stop! He just shot me! Are you crazy?” Thomas would run all the same, just as he had the day she was sick. He wasn’t thinking about getting hurt, he just wanted to save her. So, she watched as John honed in on Thomas running toward her. He maniacally laughed as if this was just too perfect of an opportunity. John leveled his Glock on Thomas. Reina watched as the bullet entered Thomas’ forehead directly between his eyes and blew out the back of his head spewing blood, bits of skull, and gray brain matter on the grass and trees within six feet.

Reina woke up screaming and crying; to make sure it was all just a dream, she called Thomas.

“Hello,” he said sleepily.

Reina sniffled. “He-Hello.”

A sense of alarm crept into his voice as he said, “What’s wrong Reina?”

“No-nothing. I just wanted to make sure you were okay. I just had a dream about you getting killed and I couldn’t do anything about it.”

“It’s all right Reina, I’m fine. Do you want to talk about it?”

“No, I just wanted to make sure you were alive.”

Thomas chuckled. “Well I am. You can go back to sleep now.”

“Okay. Goodbye.”

“Goodbye.”

Reina, satisfied that Thomas was not hurt, decided to go back to sleep. The rest of the night passed in a dreamless sleep and Reina woke up refreshed the next morning at 9:00 a.m. She went about her morning routine and opened her shop. This morning was busier than the one before with two regulars from the town coming in to buy some of the bestsellers they had seen in the shop window the day before. Those customers stayed and chatted awhile, which helped Reina’s morning to move along fast. She did not realize what time it was until she heard the tinkling of the doorbell and saw John walk in. When she saw him, she looked for any indication that he was any different, worried that the dream might come true.

“Hi John, I didn’t even realize what time it was until you walked in. It has been a busy morning.”

“That’s good. How many people have been in today?”

“Only two, Adrian’s grandmother and her best friend, but they both stayed and talked for a few hours, so it felt busier than yesterday. It was nice.”

“Yeah, it is always nice when the day goes by faster. Are you ready to eat?”

“Sure. Let me get my jacket from upstairs.”

“Ok.”

Reina proceeded to go upstairs and retrieve her khaki jacket from her bed, while unbeknownst to her John followed. Reina grabbed her jacket and turned around intending to go back downstairs. She stopped short when she saw John standing in front of her. Before she had time to say a word John stepped toward her, folded his arms around her shoulders and drew her into a kiss. Reina was drawn in like a moth to a flame until he started to ease her back onto her bed. That jolted her out of her hazy state, and she verbally assaulted John.

“WHAT are you doing?! I told you it was over! You knew we were done!”

“You’ve said that so many times and then went back on your word time and again. Like the summer after you started dating him, the year after that, and just two weeks ago, and all the other times as well. How was I supposed to know you were being serious this time?”

“It WAS over! I wanted to move on! YOU were the one who wouldn’t let me! You kept pushing when I wanted to stop! You wouldn’t take no for an answer!”

“Well, I thought if you were serious you would have stopped me!”

“I was! But, I was weak because I THOUGHT I loved you since you helped me through losing most of my family.”

“You never told me,” John said in a quiet voice.

Reina kept on like she had not heard him because she had to get her feelings out. She thought he needed to know how she felt. “But, you kept pushing and pushing and I caved again and again. Then my feelings for Thomas got stronger and I started to hate you for pushing me over and over.”

“It wasn’t easy getting pushed away from you. I loved you and I couldn’t understand why you kept pushing me away. I thought you knew I loved you and didn’t want me.”

“No,” Reina said in a small voice, “I didn’t know. You never said anything.”

“I shouldn’t have had to. Why do you think I stood by you and helped you get through what happened?”

“I didn’t know. I thought you were being a good friend and I was grateful.”

“I was being a good friend, but I loved you. I thought you loved me too until you started dating THAT guy and I figured I was just a fling to you.”

“You weren’t. When you never said anything I figured you thought I was just a fling. I wanted something more, so when I met Thomas I wanted to end it with you so I could have a normal relationship with him.”

“Why would you think I thought you were just a fling after all we had been through?”

“I remember one time, before my parents and brothers died, you told me you were done with dating for good.”

“Ah shit, I don’t remember stuff like that.”

“Well, I do. That’s why I thought I was just a fling.”

“Sorry Reina. I guess I should have told you.”

“Yeah, you should have,” Reina retorted, but then relented, “I should have too.”

“Is there any chance we can get back together now that we know we love each other?”

“No, John. I mean it this time. I told you I started to hate you when you kept pushing and I don’t know if I even love you at all anymore.”

“That’s a shitty thing to say.”

“Well, it’s true.”

“Well, I think I should go now.”

“Yes. You should.”

“I’ll see ya around.”

“Bye.”

Reina followed John as he left and went downstairs. She did not quite know what to do. She had hoped she and John could have parted ways in a more friendly way. Reina knew that it probably would be years before she and John could be comfortable in each other's presence again. Truth be told, she had not felt comfortable in John's presence for several weeks since she had realized she loved Thomas and truly wanted to break it off with John. Reina had been sure that breaking it off with John was the right thing to do, but after what just happened she wasn't sure now.

I didn't know it would feel like this. I figured I'd feel bad about telling John I wanted to break it off. I didn't think I would feel like I lost a part of me. It's almost like my parents are dead again. This sucks. I wish I could call him back and tell him I still loved him. Why do I still feel this way about him? Is it because I loved him first? Or because he was my first love? If I knew how he felt, none of this would have happened. Will I start thinking about John when I'm with Thomas? Will I be able to be happy with Thomas without John? I have always had John around when Thomas wasn't. What will happen when I need John to make me feel better and he isn't there and neither is Thomas? Wait. Why can't I just talk to Lena? I usually don't because I think she'll judge me, but she did say she wanted to be closer to me. I could talk to her when I'm feeling down. I don't even have to tell her about John. Maybe she'll understand when I feel down. That's what I'll try then. Instead of feeling mopey that I can't talk to John, I'll call Lena. That'll work.

As she pondered all these things, she was unaware of how much time had passed. But, it had been hours. It was around three when she finally came out of her mental musings. Then, it was only because she realized much time must have passed. When she shook herself out of her wanderings, she realized she had not yet dusted the bookshelves or counted her drawer because the women had come in just after she had finished running the sweeper. Reina set about to dusting the bookshelves when she heard the tinkling of the bell, signaling a customer had walked in the store. *Hmm. I wonder who that is. Usually no one comes in at this time.* Reina thought as she turned around.

“Hi Honey,” Thomas said.

“Hi Thomas. What are you doing here?” Reina asked, surprised and pleased.

“I came to see you early. I wanted to spend more time with you since it is our anniversary weekend.”

“That's great!”

“I'll close an hour early and we can do whatever you want. I usually don't have many customers around this time.”

“That sounds fine. For right now though, I want a kiss from you, come here.”

As Reina walked toward Thomas, she was relieved to feel that some of her inner turmoil went away. She was also relieved because she did not have anything to hide from Thomas anymore; she could give her, mostly, whole self to him. Though Reina still felt a twinge of sadness that she probably would not ever see John in the same way, she thought things would be right with Thomas now. *I think I can do this with Thomas. It's nice to know that when I see him some of the pain of losing John fades away. Hopefully in time all the pain will go away and I can be truly happy with Thomas.* Although the pain of losing John did fade over time, sometimes Reina still longed for her friend and lover because he had been such a big part of her life. It always felt to Reina that no matter what had happened with Thomas, no matter how happy she was with him, there was still a part of her missing that John had taken with him.

Mattie's Song

"Twinkle, twinkle little star. How I wonder what you are."

The room is dark, save the golden afternoon light flashing in and out through the open area between the deep dark blue drapes. The wind caresses the branches of the willow tree outside the window, which casts the periodic light and dark into the window. Tatum comes bounding into the room, looking around cautiously. Tatum looks to the left and sees her new bed that is much bigger than what she's used to. Her face lights up and she hops onto it. She starts to jump up and down as the dust flies from the dingy, smelly sheets. The dead odor fills the room and the dust tickles Tatum's nose and she sneezes twice. All the furniture in the room is covered in sheets but that doesn't stop Tatum from exploring her new bedroom. The corners of the walls are covered with cobwebs that look like floating clouds in the room. Tatum wonders when the last time anything was cleaned.

"Up above the world so high. Like a diamond in the sky."

That girl singing must be coming from downstairs where Alex is watching TV, Tatum thinks.

"Who's there? Who is that singing?" Tatum asks.

"Twinkle, twinkle little star.

How I wonder what you are."

"It's me. My name is Mattie. I live here. What's your name?"

Tatum's head turns toward the voice and sees a girl in the corner of the room rocking in an old, creaky, wooden chair. She is rocking slowly and enjoying each and every rock up and down with a bright, blue-eyed smile. Tatum was so excited about having her own room and the large bed; she didn't even notice Mattie was there with her. The bright, warm, yellow streak of sunlight is lightly touching Mattie's auburn hair. It's parted down the middle and is shoulder-length. She is wearing a light pink sundress with pink sandals.

"My name is Tatum. We just moved in today. How long have you lived here?"

"I've been here all my life and I love it. I don't ever want to leave. I love the hills, trees, lakes and all the land we own."

"Really, I hope you can show them to me sometime if you're going to live here with us too," Tatum responded excitedly.

"Well, there are two hundred acres. I haven't been able to see them all myself, but I can show you some. We can have a lot of fun together. There's a lot to show you," Mattie explains.

"Great. It's nice to have another girl here. I only have a brother and all he seems to want to do is play games on the computer. We don't play together very much."

"Well, we're going to have to fix that. I'll be glad to have someone to play with too," Mattie declares.

Mattie and Tatum continue to talk until Tatum is called down to dinner at 6:00 p.m. sharp. Her mother is a stickler for following rules and Tatum tries to adhere to them. She doesn't like to upset her mother.

Tatum and I talked for a little while longer. She seems very nice and I think she likes me. She has dark, black ponytails and was wearing a red, long-sleeve shirt with jeans. She was jumping up and down on my bed. I didn't mind. It was nice to have someone to talk to. We're almost the same age. I'm ten and she is nine, but she will be ten in June. I was rocking in my favorite chair.

It was very strange when Tatum and I finished talking. Actually, I wasn't done but I guess she was. I looked over and she had stopped jumping and then she dropped straight down on the bed. Her eyes were closed. I called her name but she didn't answer me. After a few minutes, her mother called her and she got up and went downstairs. She acted like I wasn't even here, like she couldn't see me! It made me feel invisible. I was afraid she had died. I was glad to see that she was okay.

I was so excited after talking with Tatum that I could hardly sleep. I tossed and turned all night and then woke up early today. I can't wait to see Tatum and see what we can do today when she gets home from school. We can play with dolls, have a tea party or go exploring on our land. I don't go to school. I wish I could. I spend most of my day outside, but sometimes, I go inside. I'll have to show her where I am most of the time soon.

Tatum and her family moved into the old, white, two-story farmhouse on Old River Road in Columbia, Kentucky, on April 13, 2012. Tatum's father, Josh DuPont, is the new sheriff in town. Her mother, Sarah, works for the *Gazette* as a reporter. Tatum has one brother, Alex. The family moved from Dayton, Ohio, where Josh was a detective.

Josh's dad, the previous sheriff ten years before, had killed himself after failing to solve the cases of the mysterious, missing young girls. He couldn't live with himself after no one was ever identified or charged. There were three girls between the ages of eight and twelve. Sue Stocker was only eight, the youngest. She was on her way home from school one day in the spring of 2000 but never showed up. They searched for her for years, but finally closed the case in 2005. No evidence was found and no suspects were ever identified.

Jan Sullivan was twelve, the oldest of the three. She was at the playground with two of her friends and disappeared. They had seen a man talking with her for a few minutes and the next time her friends looked, she was gone. The man was never tracked down and Jan was never found. Her disappearance was reported in the summer of 2002 and closed out in 2005.

Mattie Hunter was the third and final girl. After she wasn't found, the disappearances mysteriously stopped. When she was taken, she was waiting on her mother to pick her up from school. Her mom was late and when she finally showed up, Mattie wasn't there. She disappeared in the fall of 2006 and her case is still open. Being the daughter of the local psychiatrist has some perks. She has never been found and there were no clues.

My dad's name is George. He's a doctor. He lives in town at his office. Inside, there is only one large room downstairs. The receptionist has a small desk and there are chairs for people to sit in. Behind her, there is one room behind a large, wooden door. I used to visit my

dad when he was working and I had a hard time opening that door. My dad sleeps upstairs where he has a bed, TV and a hot plate to cook his food on. He has a small refrigerator too. I don't see dad much. I usually hang around at home.

“Mom, can Alex and I have some cookies and milk?” Tatum asks Sarah.

“Well, as long as it doesn't spoil your supper.”

“Alex... mom said we could have some cookies!” Tatum yells up to her brother.

Alex had gone upstairs immediately after getting home from school. He wanted to check out a game on the Internet his new friend had told him about.

“I'll be down later, Tatum. I'm busy,” Alex shouted back.

Tatum jumps up on the bar stool and looks seriously at her mother. “Mom, I had one of my bad spells again yesterday.”

“You did, what happened? Are you okay?”

“Yes, I'm fine. It was before you called me down to dinner. You won't believe me, but I was in my room talking to someone.”

“Who was it, Alex or your dad?”

“No, her name is Mattie. She lives here and has for a long time,” Tatum finally exhales after getting her words out. She is pretty sure of what her mother's reaction is going to be. She's had this conversation before.

“Come on Tatum. We've talked about this before. There are no such things as ghosts. You probably had a bad dream when you passed out,” Sarah declares with some frustration in her voice.

“Mom, I know what I saw and heard,” Tatum answers just as frustrated as her mother.

She continues, “I heard someone singing and all of a sudden I saw a girl, about my age, rocking in the chair. She was pretty and nice! We talked for a little while.”

“Tatum. Please, I don't have time for this right now. You know I was going to get you in to the local doctor for your sessions, so I guess I better get that setup sooner than later. I heard he is pretty good. Maybe he can figure out what is going on with you!”

Tatum storms off and runs upstairs to her room.

It takes Sarah a few days before she can get Tatum an appointment to see Dr. Hunter. She had to keep her out of school for her appointment with him.

“Hi, I'm Doctor Hunter. Are you Tatum?”

“Yes.”

“Well, Tatum, I'm going to need to run some tests to see if I can figure out what is going on with you. How long have you been having these issues?”

“She's had them for about four years, doctor,” Sarah responds.

“Mom, I think he was asking me. I have had them on and off ever since I was little, probably about three years old.”

“Okay. Well, the nurse will come in and draw some blood and we’ll get started. I want to ensure Tatum isn’t anemic, or having any other physical issues to cause these episodes, Mrs. DuPont.”

“Yes. Thanks Doctor.”

“After that, I’ll have you setup some sessions for Tatum to come and see me weekly. I think once a week will be enough to start with. We can reassess that later.”

“You sure are a pretty little girl, aren’t you Tatum?” Doctor Hunter winks at Tatum as he leaves the room.

Sarah and Tatum wait for the nurse to draw blood. After that, appointments are made and Tatum is disgusted that she has to endure these comical meetings with yet another doctor.

I was glad when Tatum came home and decided to swing outside. It is a little chillier out with the cold, damp air. It smells like wet, wormy dirt. Tatum is on the tree swing, motionless. She looks so sad with her head hanging down. I start whistling my favorite song to cheer her up.

“What are you doing here,” Tatum snaps.

“You looked so sad. I thought I could cheer you up,” Mattie answers innocently.

“Cheer me up; everyone thinks I’m crazy, talking to ghosts, talking to you. No one believes me,” Tatum begins to whisper, afraid her parents may be watching her talk to the air.

“You’re not crazy. I’m here. You can see me, touch me. I need some help from you. Can I show you something, can you go with me?” Mattie asks.

“Do what? Because of you I have to see a shrink in town. I hate that, do you know how the kids are going to make fun of me when they find out?”

“Yeah, I know, but it’s for a good reason. Please come,” Mattie begs.

“Sure, why not!”

Tatum and Mattie run across the wheat fields hand in hand with the shiny, golden fingers of grain lunging at their ankles. They almost trip, but catch themselves several times along the way. Tatum is smiling and laughing and has forgotten all her cares. They make it to the backside of the property.

“Here it is, Tatum,” Mattie shouts.

“Here what is?”

“This is where I spend most of my time. I have to show you what happened to me. If I don’t, the people who killed me will never go to jail. Do you want to help me?”

“You were killed! I can’t believe that, but yes, I’ll help you!” Tatum responds while looking at the small, wooden shack they are standing in front of.”

“Well, I was. Here, let me show you.”

Mattie grabs Tatum’s hand. Tatum falls to the ground, and her mind is overtaken while action scenes are shown to her in full detail. Tatum sees Mattie playing on the playground at school. She is laughing and running with her friends. Tatum then sees her alone; waiting crouched down in front of the school door. Mattie has her arms wrapped around her knees and

her head down. All of a sudden, a man grabs her from behind and runs with her in his arms towards a light blue, extended cab truck. Mattie is kicking her legs and arms and screaming loudly. No one is there to save her. The man puts a blindfold over her eyes, which covers her entire little, sweet face. He ties her hands behind her back with zip ties and does the same to her feet. He frantically opens the driver side door and pulls up on the latch to open the half door in the back. He struggles with Mattie while opening the doors; frustrated he throws her into the back seat of the truck.

Mattie is blind. She is scared and crying. For what seems like forever, she lies quietly, hoping she is going to wake up from the nightmare soon. She feels the road change from a smooth service to the crunching sound of gravel. She hears the night birds and crickets and is forced back to reality as the truck stops abruptly. The door blasts open and Mattie can feel a set of burly hands on her. She can feel his heavy breath on her and he reeks of alcohol. She is taken inside somewhere and thrown down on a table. At least, she thinks it's a table, it could be anything; she feels the pain stab her in her lower back all the way into her neck. She cries harder and waits, immobile, for whatever is next.

The man approaches Mattie and ties her down to the table. He also rips off all her clothes. Mattie is naked and goose bumps rise all over her body. Her fear is beyond fear. The man grabs something and begins to mark Mattie. He jabs a knife in the top of her right foot and drags it up her leg. The blood pours down both sides of her foot, calf, thigh, stomach, chest and shoulder as he splits her skin in two. Mattie hears screams and realizes it is her voice she hears. The process is repeated on the other side of her body. Her body is a seamstress pattern. Blood is rolling down from her head to her toes and out a hole that is in the bottom of the table. It looks like a morgue table used for autopsies she has seen at her uncle's mortuary in town.

A man in the next room appears beside Mattie with a movie camera in his hands. He has been taping the whole show. Mattie can't see either man, since they are both wearing black, leather masks but she senses the joy and pleasure they are getting from doing what they are doing. All she can think of is why? Everything goes black and Mattie passes out.

Moments later, Mattie awakens to a ripping pain between her legs and looks down to see blood pooled between them. Her gaze continues down and she sees the flesh pulled away from her body and hanging at her sides. It looks like mangled hamburger with bone fragments exposed and ketchup-thick blood surrounding her. The dark black leather gloves grab Mattie's neck and begin to squeeze. Mattie's eyes bulge out like those eye poppers and her face reddens as the man squeezes tighter and tighter. Mattie can't breathe, she can't scream. Where is the other man? Mattie thinks. Is he still taping this? The life is drained out of Mattie and she dies on the table. Her body lies limp like a noodle out of scalding hot water.

Tatum woke up and ran away screaming after I showed her what happened to me. I can't follow her. My spirit continues to hover over the old shack and I can't will it to follow after her right now. I am losing my power and I must sleep.

“Mom,” Tatum runs screaming into the house.

“What is it? What’s wrong? Slow down and tell me.”

“Mattie was murdered. I know what happened to her!”

“What! What are you talking about? Mattie’s not real. What are you talking about Tatum?”

“Mattie showed me. I saw her being killed by two men. I couldn’t see their faces because they had masks on, but there were two of them and they were very mean,” Tatum gasps out. She sits down on the couch in the living room and begins to cry. She is shaking wildly and her eyes are wide open.

“Tatum, please, calm down. Sit here with me for a few minutes and then let’s go and see the doctor. He can help you, and us.”

“Mom, please listen to me. I know this sounds crazy, but I know what I’m talking about. Mattie was killed. One man did it and the other was recording it.”

Sarah worries about her daughter. What can I do, she thinks. She calls Dr. Hunter and pleads for him to see Tatum right away. She explains to him some of what Tatum had told her. Sarah leads her young daughter to the front door, out of the house and into the car. Tatum gives up and goes quietly.

“It’s nice to see you again Tatum, how are you doing?” Dr. Hunter asks.

“I’m fine. I don’t know why my mom keeps bringing me here; there’s nothing wrong with me.”

“Why don’t we discuss what you told your mom and we’ll see what we can do? Your mom told me your story and it does sound very strange and unbelievable you know?”

“Well, it’s the truth. I wouldn’t make anything up like that.”

“So, you say there was a girl killed by two men?”

“Yes.”

“What was her name?”

“Her name is Mattie. She said her name was Mattie. I met her in our house in my bedroom upstairs. Why doesn’t anyone believe me?”

A small gasp escapes Dr. Hunter, his cheeks redden and his face turns white. After collecting his senses, he asks, “Could you see the men’s faces at all?”

“No, they were wearing masks.”

The air returns to Dr. Hunter’s lungs and he begins to breathe again.

Tatum and Dr. Hunter continue their conversation and Tatum tells him everything she saw in her vision. Dr. Hunter seems very interested and continues to ask her if she could see the men’s faces. They finish and he prescribes some mild sedatives for Tatum to take at night. Sarah takes her daughter home.

Immediately, Dr. Hunter scrambles to shut the door and makes a call. When the voice on the other line says, “Hello,” he shouts, “Something strange is going on here!”

“What, what are you doing calling me?”

“We have an emergency and I needed to get a hold of you! A new family is in town. The father is the new sheriff and his little girl knows a lot that she shouldn’t!”

“What do you mean?”

“Well, she knows about what happened to Mattie. She had details no one should know. How could she know that? She says Mattie showed her.”

“There’s no way that could be.”

“It sounds fishy to me. Maybe that dad of hers, Josh, knows something and is using Tatum to get to us, to make us squirm. He is the new sheriff you know!”

“Just keep low, and don’t panic. You know what we’ll have to do if the girl becomes a problem? She’ll be our next!”

“NO! You caused the death of my little girl and I’m not going to let you do that again. If I had known that was Mattie, I would have stopped you. That blindfold over her face, it was entirely your fault! You should have known that was my little girl. How could you have mistaken that?”

“It was dark and you know all those girls looked alike. That’s what WE liked, young girls before their teens. Long, flowing hair parted in the middle. I grabbed her from behind. I didn’t know it was her. After I put the blindfold on her, there was no way I would have known. I’d never even seen your daughter before. Who leaves their child alone at that time of night anyway?”

“My wife blamed herself. It wasn’t her fault. A wreck on the highway had held her up. She blamed herself and committed suicide. You ruined my life. I lost my little girl and my wife. I wish I had died with them!”

“Oh, come on now. We’ve been friends all our life; let’s not argue. We need to stick together so we don’t get caught. It’ll be the needle for both of us if we do. We’ve gone this long without even a word, or story in the paper. The girl must be crazy. No one will believe her. You can make sure of that!”

“Yeah, I can do that. As long as she sees me, I can keep her on the straight and narrow. You let me take care of that. I don’t want you doing anything to that little girl! I wanted this to stop after the second girl.”

“Hey, you loved every bit of what we did. You never stopped me with any of them. You had the taste for it when we were eight and grabbed that little girl after church. You liked what we did to her. I’m just glad we didn’t get caught then. Good thing she had some mental issues, or someone would have believed her then. Just stay cool and we’ll be okay.”

“Okay. If anything else comes up, I’ll give you a call. Bye.”

“Bye.”

Dr. Hunter slams the phone back on the receiver, pulls his handkerchief from his back pocket of his tan, khaki pants and wipes the sweat off his forehead, face and neck. For good reason, he doesn’t trust his partner on the other end of the line.

I haven't seen Tatum today. She had to go to school. I hope she's okay. After showing her what I did yesterday, she probably won't want to talk to me anymore. I had to show her what happened to me. It was pretty gross, though. I wish I had seen who did this to me and I could have shown her that too. That would help get those bad men.

Later after school, Tatum is waiting on her mother to pick her up. She's sitting on the school steps. She pulls her green jacket tighter around her, zips it up and pulls it down over her knees. She can't believe her mother isn't here yet. She is never late. There must have been a fire at her office for her to be late. A light blue, pickup truck pulls around the corner and into the drive for the school. Tatum wonders if it is someone her mother may have sent to pick her up.

"Hey little girl, are you Tatum?"

"Yes. Who are you?"

"My name is Rodney. I work for Dr. Hunter and he said he missed getting hold of your mother, but that you had an appointment with him today and he wanted me to pick you up."

"Mom never said I had an appointment, but I guess I better go or she'll be mad at me. She's been mad at me a lot lately."

"Yes, you better come with me."

"Okay, if Mom wants me to."

Tatum gets into the truck in the front passenger seat. Rodney speeds off. It appears he is taking Tatum to the doctor's office, but then veers off onto a country road. The road is somewhat familiar to Tatum since it is one they take on their way home.

"Hey, where are you going? You said I had to go to the doctor's?"

"Well, he is meeting you out at your house. He left a message for your mom to meet us there too. He wanted to talk to both of you," Rodney lies.

"Okay," Tatum innocently replies.

Rodney turns off to the dirt road that goes to the back part of Tatum's family property. Tatum begins to shift in the seat and feels a knot forming in her stomach. Rodney, quickly, pulls the truck over and grabs her. She screams a silent scream.

Tatum is jerked out of the truck and taken into the shed that Mattie had taken her to before. Tatum puts everything together and knows this must be one of the men that killed Mattie. She continues to scream and kick wildly. She is no match for the 5' 10", 250-pound man.

Rodney throws her down on the table and begins to tie her up. The large, shining tears are flooding Tatum's face. Rodney grabs an old, mildew smelling rag and stuffs it into her mouth. Tatum is silenced.

"You little brat. How do you know about what happened to Mattie? We know there's no such thing as ghosts, so who told you and does your dad know, too? I ought to kill you right now, but I'm going to make you suffer, you little bitch!"

Tatum is so frightened, she can't move. She stiffens as Rodney pulls a knife out of his pocket.

He begins to run the knife, lightly, up Tatum's legs and chest. He wants to savor this one. He'll keep her out here forever if he has to. Rodney runs into the next room to get the camera. He starts the video moving all around Tatum to get every shot. He thinks he hears a car pull up but shrugs it off and keeps the video rolling.

"Josh, I'm running late. Can you go by and pick up Tatum for me?" Sarah asks.

"Sure, Alex and I are done with the dentist appointment, so I'll run by."

Josh drives to the school, but to his amazement, Tatum is not there. He calls Sarah back.

"Sarah, Tatum isn't here!"

"What, she should be. She probably got tired of waiting and started to walk home or something."

"Well, I'll go and see if she's on her way there," Josh states with desperation in his voice.

Josh and Alex speed towards home. Josh has a bad feeling in the pit of his stomach and the old case files of the missing girls run through his mind. He continues driving until they are near the edge of their property when Josh spots a truck in the woods near the gravel drive to their property. Josh hadn't gotten a chance yet to spy the property to see what was back there since they had just moved in. It seems very suspicious, so he decides to follow the path. As he drives closer, he sees the shack. His intuition tells him something is wrong.

"Alex, stay in the car. Do not get out no matter what!"

"Okay, what's going on," Alex asks.

"Never mind, you just stay in the car."

Josh gets out of the car slowly and pushes the car door almost shut. He creeps up to the window of the shack and sees a little girl tied down on a table with a man running a knife up her legs to her chest. His training springs into action. He pulls his gun from his holster and almost crawls to the door. He has to be careful not to let the unknown man know he's there.

"Freeze and drop the knife!"

Rodney freezes and slowly drops the knife to the ground.

"Turn around and do it slow," Josh yells at the madman.

Slowly turning, Rodney faces Josh. Unbelievably, Josh is face to face with his own father. He almost drops to the floor.

"Dad, what are you doing? You're dead."

"Uh, no. It's okay son; she deserves it."

"Dad, that's your own granddaughter. That's my daughter, Tatum. Are you crazy?"

"You don't understand. She was going to tell. She knows too much. I had to do something or she would have ruined everything."

"Tell what? You need to tell me what is going on. Please, I don't care that you lied about your death, just tell me what is going on so we can fix this. Please, let me help," Josh sobs.

"I don't need any help. Just leave me alone!"

"Dad, step away from her, or I'm going to have to shoot you. I don't want to, please don't make me do it!" Josh pleads.

“She has to go son, you don’t understand!”

Rodney drops to the ground and lunges for the knife. Josh fires a shot that misses him. As Rodney is about to plunge the knife into Tatum, another shot fires from the doorway. It’s Dr. Hunter. He hits Rodney in the chest and Rodney falls to the ground. Blood is pouring out all over and soaking into the broken, shabby, wooden floor. Josh runs to get Tatum from the table. He could care less about his father dying on the ground. He was already dead, wasn’t he?

“How did you know, Dr. Hunter?” Josh asks.

“Well, I have a lot of explaining to do, Josh. I’ll do that down at the station after you let me check Tatum out.”

They untie Tatum. Josh grabs her and squeezes her tight. Tatum has a grip on her father that won’t quit. Dr. Hunter does a quick once over and Tatum doesn’t have a scratch on her.

“Dad, I told mom about what happened to Mattie, but she didn’t believe me. There were two men that killed her. Why didn’t she believe me,” Mattie cries.

“I don’t know Tatum, but everything is going to be all right.”

Josh doesn’t know who Mattie is, who the men are or what is going on. He is in shock over seeing his father raised from the dead and witnessing him about to kill his only daughter. Later, at the police station, Dr. Hunter confesses everything to Josh. He tells about the three girls, how they were abducted by Rodney, taken to the shack and tortured and murdered there. How he had videotaped everything. He also tells Josh where the girls were buried. He and Rodney both dug the graves and buried the girls. All three girls were buried under the old shack. Dr. Hunter spent his night on the cold, hard, cement floor in a 6x9 cell and was glad to be there. He had tortured himself over the years and it was a relief to get the murderous acts off his chest.

The next day, Josh meets the coroner and the state forensic team at the old shack on the property. It is setup like a dig to unearth treasures in Egypt. The mood is very dark as the men work hard to unearth each girl from her earthly tomb. Carefully, the remains are placed in bags, loaded up in the hearse and taken to the morgue. Each girl is buried with her schools books beside her, which makes identification easy since each one has her name scrawled in childlike handwriting in each book.

A week after the cases were officially closed, the funerals were held individually. Everyone in the town attended each one. The funerals were very sad, but also a relief to the families that never knew what had happened to their children. They were blessed to finally know what happened to their girls and to have them home again.

At home after the funerals, Tatum is jumping on her bed in her room.

“Twinkle, twinkle little star. How I wonder what you are. Up above the world so high. Like a diamond in the sky. Twinkle, twinkle little star. How I wonder what you are.” Mattie sings joyously.

“Hi. Mattie. I figured you would be in heaven now!”

Mattie is floating in the air this time. She has a white full-flowing gown on with a golden glow around her. Her face is so bright it almost blinds Tatum. Her eyes are a bright, light blue

like the sky. Her auburn hair, parted in the middle is flowing beside her and bounces lightly up and down.

“I can go now, Tatum. I wanted to thank you for what you’ve done. Now all three of us girls can go to heaven and have fun together.”

“I’m glad that I could help you. I’m so sorry for what happened to you. I’m just glad that your dad saved my life. If it hadn’t been for him, I would probably be dead and so would my dad, too.”

“Yeah, at least he did something good in the end. I had no idea he was part of this. How could he have let someone kill me like that and videotape it? I still can’t believe that, my own dad.”

“He didn’t know it was you, Mattie. He couldn’t see you because the blindfold covered your whole face. If he would have known it was you, he would have stopped him.”

“Well, I guess I can forgive him for that. Goodbye, Tatum.”

“Bye, Mattie.”

Mattie immediately explodes into a bright, blinding streak of light and is gone. Tatum can no longer see her. She feels sad that Mattie has gone, but knows that everything will be all right now. Her mother will believe her the next time she has one of her spells. She knows her mother will listen, intently now, to whatever she has to say.

On The Corner of Bliss and 2nd

“Will you please tell me your name, dear?” Dr. Feelbetter asks again.

“What do you want it to be?” I say.

The room is an absent shade of gray. Dr. Feelbetter sits relaxed but at attention in a high back office chair, dark red traditional leather overstuffed on the seat. She has thick gold-blonde hair with muted lines of bleached white running close to her face. She has it twisted into a knot at the base of her head, secured by a gold antique pin adorned with a modest gold flower at the top. She wears conservative-business attire, careful to hide all skin above the knees and below the collar bones—a long, gray, shawl over a black silk boat-neck shirt atop a matching gray pencil skirt to her knees. She pairs this ensemble with flashy six-inch heels the same color as her chair. The plaque on her door reads, “Anabell, PhD.” I think Dr. Feelbetter suits her better. She already knows my name.

“Will you tell me your story, Elise? Will you tell me what happened to you?” she asks.

My stomach cramps and my breath catches in my throat. The dry air in the room is burning the inside of my nose and my eyes begin to water. She hands me a tissue. I hate when she does that.

Voices from the past mingle in my mind, tangling conflicting messages and causing confusion.

They won't believe you. Tell her what happened. Don't you dare tell her what happened? Go ahead; tell her, she won't believe you. You're disgusting. You deserved it. You made it worse. She'll think you deserved it. Don't trust her; she'll hurt you in the end.

“My story,” I ask. “My story is not what happened to me. My story is a good one.”

“Of course it is, dear. That's why you're here with me today,” she tells me. “Tell me what happened to you, Elise,” she insists. “Start from the beginning.”

My eyes drift to the giant potted plant next to her desk. My mom calls those plants Elephant Ears. I pull a piece of dead skin away from my cuticle until it bleeds. I bring my thumb to my mouth to get rid of the blood. The metallic taste hits my tongue like a punch to the face, and I can smell my own breath under the cotton again. I close my eyes; try to get the scene out of my head, but the darkness makes it worse. I can hear the steady drip of the faucet behind me, and heavy footsteps coming close. My red hair is matted to my forehead with sweat, and I am trying not to hyperventilate under the hood.

“Would you like some water?” Dr. Feelbetter asks.

I move my head up and down slowly, staring at the floor. She leans over a stiff arm rest and reaches toward the cherry-stained wooden table. She daintily slips one small hand under the handle of a glass pitcher, steadies the tall clear drinking glass with the other hand. With one pinky finger raised, she pours ice water into the glass. The pitcher clangs against the lip of the glass, and ice rattles to the bottom before floating back to the surface.

I remember the sound of his glass banging on the table. How he offered me water and wouldn't let me have it. I remember the way the ice felt on my lips as he drug it over my face, and I remember how it was instantly followed by an unexpected slap to my cheek. I remember he told me to make my face pretty, and that pretty makes money.

“Tell me what happened after the party, Elise,” she says, patiently.

“My sister said she got a ride from one of her friends. She asked me to go with her,” I recalled, trying to remember why I declined.

“But you stayed, why?” she asks.

“I... I don't know.”

“You were drinking, is that right?” she prods.

I want to tell her no. I want to throw the water at her face and watch the make-up ruin her perfect cheekbones. I want her to stop asking me questions.

“Why do you wear those shoes to work? You're a doctor, for god's sake. You shouldn't wear shoes like that to work,” I say, trying to change the subject.

Dr. Feelbetter uncrosses and re-crosses her legs on the other side. Her eyes narrow as she looks down at her notebook of secrets. She sighs quietly, clicking her pen a few times, and then says, “Tell me about the last time you wore high-heels, Elise.”

He's pushing me up the stairs. Something sharp on the stair jabs into the ball of my foot and I fall to my knees. He grabs my arm tight, pinching the flesh underneath in his grip, and yanks me to my feet. He says, “Hurry up! Never keep the client waiting.” He throws shiny white platform heels at my shins. “Put them on. Now!”

I glare at her. I think of changing her name to Dr. Feellikeshit.

“I had a few drinks at the party. I was drunk and wanted to walk it off before I got home. I didn't want my parents to know.” It doesn't matter if it's true or not. I know she blames me.

“What happened when you were walking home?” she asks me, taking in a long breath as if to brace herself.

My sister looks at me with big blue eyes. She's telling me to come with her. She's telling me she's leaving. I roll my eyes. She's always so worried. It's because she's younger. I tell her I'll catch another ride.

“I saw a man on the street close to my house. He was dressed nicely. He smiled at me,” I tell her, staring at her shoes. “He asked me why I was out so late by myself. He said it wasn't safe. He asked if he could walk me home. He smelled good, and he looked nice and I nodded that he could. He told me I was pretty and he was nice to me.”

“And then what happened?”

“I don't know.”

“What's the next thing you remember, Elise?”

She's always asking so many questions. Every time I blink a new memory rushes in. Every question she asks raises the tension in my stomach. I feel my mouth fill with spit and nausea rush up my throat. My head is spinning and I feel his hand prying my mouth open. He takes an empty beer bottle and forces it in my mouth. The dark glass clangs hard against my teeth and a zing of electric pain pulses through my jaw and into my brain. He pushes it to the back of my throat. I instantly gag and vomit the only food I've eaten for three days.

My memories overlap with reality and I spring forward, doubling over and purging water all over the beige Berber carpet. I am glad that was the only thing in my stomach.

“Oh my goodness, Elise!” Dr. Feellikeshit gasps, jumping out of her chair and handing me a trash can. She pulls two tissues out of the box on the desk and hands them to me. I remember the tissues on the night stand—sometimes the only means of cleaning myself. I wipe spit and vomit away from the corners of my mouth and feel tears pool in my eyes.

How many times have I done this same action in the last three years? How many times have I had to smell tissue mixed with bodily fluids so close to my face? How many times have I made myself sick thinking about what I've done? What's been done to me? What's been done to me?

“Talking about this won't change anything,” I snap, sick and frustrated. “It doesn't change my past and it won't change my future. Why do you want to know all the bloody details

of the last three years anyway? Does this get you off? Feeding on the misery I'm trying to bury?" I feel myself unraveling. My cheeks are flushed, hands clutched into a tight fist—my nails press deep into my palms.

Dr. Feellikeshit doesn't waver. She doesn't flinch. Instead she leans back in her chair, clicks the pen a few more times and stares at the notebook. Without looking up she half-heartedly says, "You can't keep your past inside you. You have to let it out. It's the only way to be free from it, and it free from you. Let it go, Elise." At this point she looks up from her notes and gives a sideways smile adding, "You're safe here."

I stare at her. I look at her bony hands with the perfect manicure. I look at her vein-less shapely legs crossed properly all the way to the floor. I see her posture, stiff, but pushed into the chair—practiced. She would never sit like that at home. Even though sun pours in the window she stays wrapped in her shawl. I know it's because she's just naturally so cold. Leaning back into my own overstuffed leather chair I take a deep breath, calming myself, and cross my legs meditation style. I realize she's only doing a job, nothing more. Her job is to make me say things I don't want to say. That way, if I recover, she can say she helped. If I don't, no one will know anyway. I nod, determined to lay it out for her.

"Where should I start, then?" I say, no longer afraid of what she may think of me. I know she has already made up her mind.

"Start from the beginning, dear," she says, relaxing her posture and uncrossing and re-crossing her legs again.

I move my stare back to the Elephant Ears and then climb up the small stair-stepped shafts of light beaming on the plant from the open wooden blinds. My gaze makes it all the way to an open spot between two blind slats before I begin. There is a large tree planted not too far from the window. A squirrel rests on the side of the tree before making the journey all the way back to the top. I can relate to that squirrel. I'd give anything to be at the top of that tree, hidden in its quiet branches, safe from the rest of the world. But I'm not strong enough to climb to the top.

"I am only alive because my body won't work right if it's dead. That, and my ability to remove myself from the horrors of the present if I wish to do so," I begin.

"The night it started I was not drunk. I wasn't even drinking. I was fighting with my boyfriend of the time. He was dumping me for a mutual friend of ours. I was upset and wanted to cool off," I laugh loudly. "God, it's all so trivial now!" It seemed like the whole world was falling apart at the time. I guess that just comes with being seventeen.

"I had been crying," I continue. "While I was walking home a man noticed me. He approached and asked if he could take me home."

I can't remember why I thought I could go with him. A moment of vulnerability, I guess.

"He was nice to me. He said I was pretty and shouldn't be crying. He said no one should ever make me cry."

What a load of bullshit. I will eternally hate my younger self for being so goddamned naive.

"I got in his car and we started driving. He put his hand on my knee and asked if I was a virgin. I told him it was none of his business. He said that meant I wasn't and said that was a good thing. I realized we weren't going the right way and told him so. He told me to relax and said we were going someplace better. I told him to let me out of his car and pushed his hand away," I trail off. I do not like the words coming out of my mouth. I don't want to say the dark parts out loud. I want to keep things vague.

“It’s okay, Elise. You’re doing great. Your courage is inspiring. Please continue,” Dr. Feelshitty pushes.

“Well, and then he hit me. Hard. I remember the pain in my temple as my head bounced off the passenger window and everything went blurry for a minute. I was stunned for a while, I don’t know how long. Then I just started screaming. After that is fuzzy. It all goes dark from there,” I say. I remember his fists against my ribs, back, chest, legs—violent as he flailed his right arm in my direction while he drove. I decide these details aren’t important. I was trapped, and that’s all that really matters.

“Just start from the next thing you remember,” she says, trying to give a comforting smile.

“Sweaty cotton. I woke up to sweaty cotton wrapped around my face and blood in my mouth.” Bottom lip swollen, pounding—my own breath choking me as it becomes less and less oxygen. Hair matted to my forehead, eyes blurry and unfocused. I am completely disoriented.

“I started to yell for help, but a swift smack to the back of my head stopped me mid-word. He lifted the tee-shirt off my face and grabbed my chin roughly, leaning down so his face was in front of mine. His breath was a rotting corpse covered in liquor. He said if I was smart I’d keep my mouth shut. Said if I was smart I might survive. Then he said I was pretty like my sister.”

Pretty like my sister. Those words struck me harder than his hands ever did. I was reeling. How did he know my sister? Did he have her, too? Was she in some dirty room with a sweaty tee-shirt wrapped over her face, confused and terrified like me?

Dr. Feelawful’s face has changed now. She is flipping through the pages on the clipboard in her lap, wondering how she missed that detail.

“Elise, I didn’t know your sister was involved,” she says quietly, brow pinched, still studying the clipboard.

“I never told anyone that because it wasn’t important. It wasn’t the truth. He said he had her too, said he would kill her if I didn’t cooperate, but I learned a little more than a year later he was lying,” I say, eyes on my hands again. How could I ever have been so dumb?

“How did you find out she was alright?” the great inquisitor asks.

“I saw her crying on the news—my whole family. They thought I was dead. It was better that way.”

I couldn’t go home at that point. After the things I’d done? They would hate me. They’d think I’m disgusting. I am.

“I was thankful to see her there, between my parents and safe. No death scenario they would come up with would be a horrible as the things I did. To them I died an innocent, and that was good enough for me,” tears were swelling again, and I swallow back the emotion. Without thinking my eyes dart around the room, searching for something harder than water to drink. My hands begin to shake and I feel sick again.

“What did you do after you saw her,” Dr. Feelawful asks.

“I hugged my girlfriend. I told her what happened. She gave me two Oxys to celebrate.”

“And then what?”

“And then...” I trail off. Though some of it was fuzzy from the drugs, this memory was one I could not lose no matter how hard I tried.

“Go on, please,” she says calmly. I think she knows what’s coming. I think this is what she’s been waiting for. It’s what they’re all waiting for.

“And then I got the worst beating I’d ever suffered. I don’t remember going to the room. I barely remember lying on the bed. But I remember his belt. I remember his sadistic grin. I remember his vile opinion of women and the only thing they’re good for. I remember his spit on my face, my legs, and my ass. I remember his thrust/smack/thrust/smack. His insults are fuzzy. I tried to think about my family. I remember thinking about stealing a candy-bar. My father was so angry he whipped me with the belt. I was only five then. That was nothing compared to the swing on this guy,” I look up to gage her reaction. I figure I’ve probably said too much. I expect her to be shocked. She isn’t. Without flinching she asks me to continue. She’s even colder than I thought she was.

“Well, he left. Left me three hundred dollars, which was more than I had made by one man before. I gave a little more than half of it to Daddy as usual, and he said I should go buy something nice with my cut,” I say, remembering the feeling of brokenness. I remember feeling so dirty, being in so much pain. I couldn’t sit down for three days, and the bruises lasted weeks. Still, there was a small feeling of happiness for the money; happy to be able to eat a little, happier to afford a fix.

“What did you buy with the money?” Dr. Putyouonthespot prods.

“A cheeseburger and my first rock,” I say, mimicking the doctor’s cold tone. If she wants to know, I’ll tell her. She’ll either regret asking or get off, either way we can both get out of here.

“How did the crack make you feel?”

“Like shit. Awake. Aware. Nothing I wanted to be.”

“Did you buy more?”

“No. When I came down, I puked for six hours. Sweats, shakes, you name it. I wanted more but I didn’t want to be up so I took a pill instead. I was lucky, I guess.” I think back to the girls I walked with. Some of them were worse off than me. They would seek out the violent men for the extra cash. The worst ones would do anything for a fix, including not get paid. They’d work for drugs. I’m glad I mostly just drank.

“Are pills still your drug of choice, Elise?” she asks me.

“When I can get them? If not, booze does just fine.”

“Now that you have had a week of safety, a whole week without a Daddy, without clients, without abuse, can you see sobriety in your future?” Dr. Benormalnow asks.

I look at her blankly. I wonder if she has ever had to talk to someone like me. Someone who has done what I have done. I wonder how anyone else would answer this question.

There’s hope now. You’re out. No you’re not, you’re never out. Who do you think you could be now? No one. You’re always gonna be who you are right now. No, you can fight this. It’s over. You could be anything; you could be a goddamned nun if you want to. HA, you’re nothing but an addict-whore and no amount of praying will save you. You’ve made your bed here, now spread’em.

“Sure,” I say, my only response. I’d like to see how many sober nights she would last with the memory-nightmares I deal with on a nightly basis. Up to this point alcohol was the only thing granting me dreamless sleep, but I’m willing to explore other options now.

“That’s great, Elise. I’m glad to hear it. We’ll talk more about your treatment plan next time. That’s all the time we have today.” Dr. Bebetternow stands up from her chair, practiced legs unwavering on red stilts. I catch the inference and stand up to meet her face to face. She holds both notebook and pen in the same hand and arm in order to extend her right hand to my shoulder to guide me out the door.

“Take care of yourself, now. Try to get some rest.” She’s smiling at me, a fake, routine, glad-you’re-leaving smile and closes the door between us.

I walk through the small lobby and catch a couple, man and woman, looking at me. The woman’s lips are pursed tightly, and her left eyebrow is raised just slightly. She gives me a quick once-over and looks back down at her *Women’s Health* magazine, both eyebrows raised now. The man looks a little harder, eyes stopping on the stretched tee-shirt fabric on my chest for two seconds, then down to the butt of my tight faded jeans for another two. At this point the woman looks at him in disgust and mumbles something to him as I walk outside.

The cool breeze pushes against my face and swirls my long red hair around my face long enough to block my vision for just a moment. As I brush it out of my face I begin walking down the long sidewalk to the corner of 2nd and Bliss Street. I stop at the crosswalk and wait for the light to change. I look down 2nd Street into the little café and see a girl I used to work with. She is sitting with an older man, leaning towards him, shirt low. She’s smiling, but her eyes are sad and absent. I look down the street a little ways and see a familiar beat-up white Buick parked outside the café and my stomach clinches in on itself. My head begins spinning and my mouth fills with spit. Unsteady, I lean towards the pole to catch my balance, but it isn’t where I thought it was and I stagger a couple steps before a large man grabs my arm to catch my fall. Gaining my footing, I yank myself away from him without thinking. I try to look at him but the sun is right behind his head, casting a shadow on his face. Trucks, cars, and the occasional bus speed through the light at the corner where we stand. Engines rev as motorists speed past. Horns honk followed by angry long lost vowel sounds in the wind.

“Thank you, I guess I just tripped over my own...” I begin stepping to the side of the man so the sun stops blinding my vision.

A sudden pang of revolt lurches up my throat and I’m stunned, held hostage by my own feet now sewn to the street.

“Lex,” the man says, an undoubtedly shocked voice booming from his twisted mouth.

I remember the first night I worked. Daddy’s telling me my new name—Lex. “Lex rhymes with sex, easy as that,” he’s saying. “Now get in there and earn some money!” he orders, pushing me toward the door.

I stumble backward away from the man in front of me, toward Bliss Street. I stare at his face, a choppy mixture of repugnance and fear. Is this how it’s always going to be? I can’t go to a doctor’s appointment or café or grocery store without tripping into the arms of a past client?

Still backing away from the John, I look down Bliss Street and see a pickup truck speeding up to make it through the yellow light. The male driver is yelling at his female passenger and getting more pleasure from watching her cry than from watching the road.

I look back at the John and see his fear has turned to anger. He’s stepping towards me now as I take another step away.

“Lex, what are you doing on this side of... Lex... Lex, stop!” he’s shouting at me now.

I look back towards the fighting couple hurtling towards me and wonder what her life would be like without him. I take another step back into the street and think about the absurdity of sober, nightmare-less sleep.

Street Art

He was here again.

The artist meditated upon the stupefied crack head lying on the bench in West Hyde Park—the same crack head that wasted the same space last week and the week before that, slobbering beneath the *Tribune's* newsprint. Could this young man escape his fate? Or would reality chew him up and always regurgitate him here, upon this bench?

The artist walked east along Garfield Boulevard toward the offices of *Art Universe Magazine*. He arrived ten minutes ahead of schedule. The receptionist gushed and pressed buttons. A full-lipped assistant editor appeared with her entourage of photographers, cameras snapped, and he was ushered into a small conference room. The room was woozy-warm for three—the assistant editor, himself, and a tape recorder.

In the instant before the assistant editor pressed record, he looked down at his hands. Iron red pigment stained his nails, un-washable remnants of his latest project. This was it, he thought. He was living the life. A second later his interview for *Art Universe Magazine* commenced.

Assistant Editor: “First, let’s talk about your tag. You call yourself P-Casso. Are you actually comparing your work to Pablo Picasso’s or snagging some free publicity through association?”

P-Casso: “You one of them artsy-fartsy snobs?”

Silence.

Assistant Editor: “Let me rephrase my question. Has Picasso’s art influenced you?”

P-Casso: “Yes.”

Silence.

Assistant Editor: “How?”

P-Casso: “Picasso, he the man. I’m into his use of proportion and disproportion to telegraph emotions. He puts a hard-edged hot-colored woman in the foreground and plays her against a man’s cool-smooth silhouette in the background—that says somethin’ about their sex life. He draws an old woman wearin’ the same hair and clothes that a young woman wears—that says somethin’ about competition for a man’s affections.”

Assistant Editor: “Picasso was one of a kind. Let’s switch gears for a moment. What’s the difference between your work and graffiti?”

P-Casso: “Don’t go writin’ my stuff off as graffiti. You go look in the alleys and below the underpasses and everywhere else that paint’ll stick. Look at my work and the work of my fellow artists. We ain’t fingerpaintin’ adolescent graffiti in dark corners of the city, two steps ahead of beat cops. And we sure ain’t layin’ down hoity-toity puke that’s strung up under glass in the Tate Modern. What we do—what I do—it’s art for the masses, something that Taxi Driver Tim can touch and feel. It’s street. It’s culture.”

Assistant Editor: “Art dealers and critics categorize and market all kinds of street art for public consumption. How do you differentiate your art from the glut?”

P-Casso: “I’m not some street junkie sellin’ out for a line of critic’s blab. I got my own spin on things. I see the same stuff everyone else does—you know, lives and loves and sex. I just process what I see different than most folks. My art defies labels. It oozes connotation.”

Assistant Editor: “Street artists like Cree8 and SheBe are grounded in terms of their influences, attitudes, and their approach to work and life. What makes P-Casso P-Casso?”

P-Casso: “Here—this place. South Side punched me up and threw me down street.”

P-Casso couldn’t remember when he parted company with the University of Chicago. He did recall that the moment he left campus, he dropped his full birth name in favor of his street tag. He vaguely recalled some scholarly cretin saying something about subhuman grades and withered creativity. Well, maybe he exaggerated a little. Surely in an age where “PC” was king, that sort of bluntness would have broken all rules of accepted civility. He caught the gist of the message, though. The art of academia and the art of the street simply didn’t mix, and that was that. But those incidents sank beneath the hazy surface of his past, occasionally bobbing up during sleepless hours past midnight. He bid them good riddance until next they met.

These days, he wandered like a zombie among fellow South Siders. These nights, he searched out and found walls upon which to express artistic ruminations about the city he called home and the people who were essentially his roommates. One such wall, composed of interlocking concrete blocks and symbolic by its location within a collapsing slaughterhouse, threw fuel on the cracked remains of his creativity. The mixture of place and imagination combusted, and he worked as if possessed during predawn hours to create a scathing acrylic commentary on the corruption of Chicago’s mayoral election. When he was done, dozens of hog-faced South Side voters stared vacantly out from the wall and into extinction as slaughterhouse workers—wearing Rahm Emanuel masks reminiscent of the one worn by Michael Myers in *Friday the 13th*—prodded them with sticks. The impact of the images was olfactory as well as visual; the odor of butchered sows seeped from the packed dirt beneath his feet. Content with his masterpiece and feeling the effects of his high fading fast, he slumped to the earth beneath the painting and fell asleep.

P-Casso awoke, yawning and gagging. He stumbled from the building to a nearby pier, with the ethereal smell of countless bloody hogs clinging to his clothes and hair. He dropped down on the planks, leaned his back against a piling, and closed his eyes. He heard only the rhythmic suck and blow of his own breath, and then became gradually aware and entranced by the rusty-hinged squeals of gulls soaring outside and above his body. He floated up and through the air with them.

Something misty and cool rubbed against his forearms, and he dropped to earth to discover that fog twisted about him on Sandburg’s little cat feet. He looked up at the skyline of downtown Chicago. The Sears Tower and the tops of lesser urban castles rose above the ebb and flow of misty waves that crashed with the power of bus brakes at unexpected red lights and the fury of angry dagos narrowly escaping the grills of speeding taxis. And beneath all this grand illusion, the honking of car horns and the roar of freight trains and the hey-yous and f-yous circulated through the streets like blood.

P-Casso marveled at how he joneded for the South Side. South Side punched him up and threw him down street, but he always picked himself up—picked up his spray cans and his charcoals and his brushes—and punched the city back, leaving his artistic welts on walls and sidewalks. He guessed it was the Chicagoan in him.

He sketched cityscapes until the sun's fiery fingers slipped from bridge girders and building plate glass, leaving sooty-twilight smudges on the skyline. At first, P-Casso resisted the urge to pack up his things and leave because he knew he would end up *there* again. He toyed with the idea of making a fresh start, abstaining for a night or two and using his panhandled dollars to buy something else. He didn't need to go *there*; didn't want to go *there*. But—always a but!—if he denied himself access to the human and chemical substances that energized his mind, how could he hope to continue his current level of creativity? Not willing to chance that loss, he packed up and headed northwest, following the Illinois Central Railroad toward Michigan Street.

Assistant Editor: “You could express yourself in a dozen different ways. Why street art?”

P-Casso: “I studied impressionism and abstract expressionism and photorealism and surrealism. None of that ‘ism’ stuff spoke to me. After I got the scholarly boot, I wandered ‘round like a stray mutt and started sprayin’ my frustrations across walls here and there and everywhere—you know, flippin’ off the conventional art yahoos in my own special way. I became an anarchist. I painted things I shouldn’t have where I shouldn’t have when I shouldn’t have. When some cop radioed city hall that dispatched a cleaning crew to scrub my artwork, I was out the next night throwin’ it right back up in their faces.”

Assistant Editor: “When did you stop being angry and start enjoying your work?”

P-Casso: “I didn’t. One day I noticed scruffy-looking teens cussin’ and discussin’ somethin’ I laid down beside Lakeshore Drive. I remember thinkin’ ‘Hey, I like this’ and from then on I didn’t just paint for me anymore. But I stayed angry.”

Assistant Editor: “How do you create your art?”

P-Casso: “The outside stuff—the skin of my art—is latex paint topped off with enamel spray. Nothin’ new there. If you’re askin’ ‘Why’d he paint this picture at this place at this time?’ that’s psychology—angst and rage that spray out my can through somebody’s eyes to their brain when they look at my work. I shake up all the crap in my head and spew it out as images in an alley somewhere.”

P-Casso arrived at his destination forty-five minutes later. Not Your Mama’s, a striptease dive, catered to a not-so-elite class of posers—a mix of men and lesbians who introduced themselves by surnames never listed in the phone directory or by cutesy nicknames like Sucks-a-Lot or Tall Dark. He stood in the doorway, scrutinizing every man and woman within the establishment. They were all characters within an urban portrait, though the club would hardly be recognized by the museum set as a product of artistic inspiration. An urban cavern with low ceiling and craggy walls, it reeked of waterfront drunks, suggestive gestures, and obscene words mixed with spilled bourbon and cigarette butts.

Al “Maestro” Vinzanti, the joint’s owner, was as much a part of this urban portrait as his clientele. P-Casso watched as the little mobster-man leaned against the bar, chatted up one of the patrons, accepted bills passed, and passed something back in exchange. A transplanted New Yorker, Maestro was benevolent to a fault, gifting repeat customers with the poisons of their choice until tab balances outweighed his good nature. This usually resulted in Maestro’s resorting to bad habits to balance his budget, accounting for countless busted lips and missing teeth over the years.

This atmosphere combined with the girls’ struts and pole dances turbocharged P-Casso’s senses. Like a baby experiencing the joy of a new world beyond the limits of his crib, he left the doorway and assumed his usual position in the wallflower seating along the periphery of the club’s stage.

Maestro caught sight of him. “P, my most regular irregular. How come you always sit over here by yourself?” He invited himself to P-Casso’s table, grunting as he pulled a second chair up and straddled it cowboy-style. He leaned forward. “So, you lookin’ to score some stuff?”

P-Casso hated being referred to as “P.” “P” was just one of twenty-six first initials that he happened to share with countless other human atoms in the universe. He was P-Casso. He wanted to correct Maestro, but pressed his tongue against the back of his teeth. His pride wasn’t worth ten broken fingers, and he couldn’t spray paint with his toes. Instead, he shrugged. “Nah, not now, maybe later.”

“Eh, *maybe* later, Maestro says. With you there’s *always* a later.”

P-Casso focused on the stage. One dancer after another jiggled her assets in ten minute rotations. The last one wore black lace wrapped around her head and black lace gloves on her hands—a modern-day Gypsy Rose Lee. Off came the fishnet hose, the black lace garters, and—at the climax of her performance—the black lace thong. She caught sight of boss-man and tossed it in an arc from the stage to the tabletop between P-Casso and Maestro before disappearing backstage amid catcalls and woo-hoos and hey-heys.

Maestro looked from P-Casso’s face to the empty stage and back. “Maybe you wanna score somethin’ different tonight, huh? Like what you saw?”

“She’s okay. Got the right parts in the right places.”

Maestro laughed and motioned to the woman when she reappeared. “Doll Face, come make the man happy.”

She strode towards them—head up, shoulders back, and leading with a perfectly symmetrical pair of boobs. They were implants, but they produced the desired chemical reaction; the lady, fully clothed, attracted and held the attention of every testosterone-filled pupil in the house. Her swinging arms harmonized with the side-to-side shift of her hips and created a rhythm that flowed through the air and pulsed first in his temples before moving downward.

Maestro dispensed speed-dial introductions—“P, Faith. Faith, P”, offered the woman his chair, and made himself scarce.

P-Casso scrambled through his arsenal of movie pick-up phrases before catapulting to something short and stupid. “I like your face.” He wished he could Hoover the words from the air around them and pretend they’d never been uttered.

Faith threw back her head and laughed. Not the controlled heh-heh of a lady, but the deep-bellied and husky HAH-HAH of a woman who’d heard everything, including the lame line he’d just uttered. With her head tilted back, he got a clear view of her face and neck. Heavy makeup rubbed off during the strip tease revealed a fading scar that traced the ridge of her jaw

line. P-Casso couldn't begrudge a woman for going under the knife, but Faith's nickname Doll Face established a second meaning in his mind.

"Ah, I bet you like to look at my ass jiggle up there more than my face. Come clean."

He nodded and grinned, but the effects of her initial impact on him were beginning to wane. Faith leaned against the back of the chair and crossed her legs. With an artist's eye for detail, he followed the smooth line of one gam from the back of the knee down the curve of the calf, stopping just above the ankle. There he detected a slight ragged edge, like that produced by shedding skin. Faith's body makeup—invisible under stage lights but very, very obvious now even in dim lighting—thinned and exposed fine, blue veins. P-Casso figured she was trying to pass herself off as mid-twenties, but she was at best a highly evolved thirty-five.

A micro-sneer hitched up one corner of her mouth. "So, P, did ya come here tonight just to watch lil' ol' me dance?"

"Nah, nah. Just hangin'."

"That doesn't sound fun. I got somthin' that'll fix that. Wanna party with me upstairs?"

P-Casso viewed intercourse as a necessity of life, much like eating or shaving. He didn't expect passion, only rudimentary grunts and groans of effort proceeding sleep in a real bed. And, since Faith sweetened the offer with free dope, he really couldn't refuse. "Yah, if you got somethin' good. Not much goin' on down here."

"Let's go."

Faith led him up a narrow back staircase to the second floor and down a shotgun hallway, stopping in front of a black-painted door with a glass doorknob. She unlocked the door and pushed it open.

"Home sweet home. It ain't much, but I get it cheap from Maestro."

They undress and sit on Faith's bed making small talk while rock crystals heated and snapped inside the bowl of a glass pipe. They took turns placing the bit between each other's lips and inhaling the vapors. P-Casso felt a rush of warmth, followed by a state of alertness and a feel-good all-over sensation.

He tried to initiate foreplay but Faith, who had inhaled less, took control. "No time for any romantic crapola, P. We gotta do it now."

She treated him like a slow thirteen in a twenty-five-year-old body; old enough to have all the desire for women and none of the skills to bed them. At first, her whispered words sounded like instructions from a mechanics tutorial: put your hand here, move this way, don't paw. At one point he opened his eyes and stared into her face, only inches from his own, and was shocked to see dilated pupils floating above flared nostrils and a clenched jaw. It wasn't just the dope; she looked angry. He didn't know if his sexual performance or if love-making in general pissed her off. Her instructions turned into drill-sergeant commands and increased in volume until he suspected that people in the bar downstairs knew the intimate details of the activity taking place over their heads. And then came climax—blessed relief!—and a dopamine-induced mental orgasm that eclipsed the physical realm and sank him into blissful stupor.

Faith wasn't in the bed beside him when P-Casso regained consciousness. He laid still and used his eyes to search the room. She stood in a distant corner, looking at her reflection in a full-length mirror and stroking the scar on her jaw line. An odd look of disgust puckered her face and spread the crows' feet at the corners of her eyes.

When Faith noticed that he was staring at her, she turned quickly from the mirror, scooped up his khakis from the floor, and tossed them on the bed. "This little thing we just had," she motioned to the bed, "it's a one-time deal, kiddo." She opened the door to the bedroom.

“Get dressed and scoot. My man, Jake, gets off work at four. He don’t like me givin’ out freebees.”

He dressed without saying a word. As he turned to leave, he noticed a picture of a young woman hanging on the wall and paused. Jane Russell—radiant and smiling like she owned the world, this young woman dreamed dreams of...what? Becoming a model or movie star? Surely not a stripper. P-Casso looked from the picture to Faith.

“Yep, that was me,” she said. “Now get out.”

Assistant Editor: “How do you use symbolism and metaphor to layer additional meanings beneath the surface of your work?”

P-Casso: “Mental riptides sorta flow along parallel to the physical work I do preparin’ a wall and layin’ down basecoat and mixin’ my colors. Those currents connect to the motion of my characters and their features. I move colors around, and my characters speak for me.”

Assistant Editor: “Many of your characters are constructed of disjointed or reassembled body parts, or patchwork skins. What are you saying about people and society through these images?”

P-Casso: “Society grinds her teeth ‘gainst all of us. She leaves us in pieces, like Meryl Streep and Goldie Hawn in that flick—What’s it?”

Assistant Editor: “*Death Becomes Her.*”

P-Casso: “Yah, that’s it. We lose ourselves to work or sex or drugs and crack up. But, what the hell, you can’t give up. So we pick up the pieces, superglue ourselves back together, and we do with what we got. If we’re lucky, we got that little piece of God-given grace—some talent or intellect—to see us through. Each one of us is a beautiful, banged-up, piecemeal package of bio-matter.”

After leaving Faith’s bedroom, P-Casso stumble-walked out of the club and stood under the lighted marquee, swaying back and forth as thoughts and lines and colors slammed through his consciousness. When everything congealed into a single idea, he strapped on his backpack of artistic tricks and tools and took off in the direction of West Hyde Park.

On the outskirts of the park, he found *the* wall; the exterior rear end of a Parks and Recreation building that housed equipment used to maintain the grounds. The bricks begged for the touch of warm aerosol mist. He leaned forward and rubbed his cheek along the wall to experience its textures. In this spot within the city, covered by the building’s eaves and protected by an honor guard of six overarching live oaks, industrial smut and oil-saturated dew could not defile his work.

Something tickled P-Casso’s upper lip and he swiped the area with his fingers. His nose was bleeding. For a moment, he watched the blood trickle to his fingertips and collect under the nails. He wiped his nose again, rubbed his fingers against the brick, and imagined his blood and skin cells shed upon its virgin surface. Now his DNA would mingle with the painted image and his art would be an extension of himself. His art would speak for him when, someday, his voice and body failed.

Aided by light from a nearby street lamp, P-Casso modified, magnified, and intensified this line or that color as he built his characters. He mixed silver powder with Mars Black and used this to outline and pop portions of his images out of the wall—a poor man’s 3D effect.

The first image he created was Succubus Faith with medieval eyes, sucking mouth, and contorted skeletal body encircling an empty womb. P-Casso positioned her against a backdrop of stooping buildings and fading avenues; streets to oblivion. He yanked the démon femelle’s spinal column to the outside and molded the old stripper-whore’s form to fit her insidious sexuality, gifting her with four arms—all the better to clutch and grab her johns, or at least their wallets. And the demon’s face—ah, her face!—was a pimpled and patch worked vision that would surely grow more grotesque with each surgical embellishment to the living face of its inspiration.

He chose warm shades of flesh, brunette, and blush to fill the empty womb with his second image. The head and breasts of Young Faith nestled inside the uterus of the succubus. A powdery hand cradled an unbitten apple beneath her lips; sin yet to be tasted. P-Casso backed away from the wall after rendering this second character and leaned against one of the oak trees to survey the entire scene. As melancholy set in, he took pity upon the two Faiths. Deep down, there still remained a measure of a young woman’s dreams and talents inside the older woman—grace within Faith.

P-Casso picked up his paint and returned to the image of Succubus Faith. In an act of kindness or simple knowing, he added a rusty and weighty chain around her neck which he looped and stretched from the center of the painting to the lower left corner of the wall. On the cracked pavement near the foundation, he created a gaping black gate to hell with a Maestro-faced devil at its center, yanking on the end of Faith’s chain. Like P-Casso, Faith was a product of her particular circumstances and addictions.

The bottom fell out of his high and he crashed. As he looked up at the image of the succubus, he noticed that her face appeared to blur and morph. His psychic body suctioned against the brick until flesh gnashed to shades of pink and soaked into a background of sienna. Faith’s face became his.

Dropping to his knees, he managed to sign a single letter—P—in the lower right hand corner of the wall before puking his guts on the ground. He stood and staggered toward a nearby bench. The last thing he remembered was covering his torso with the pages of a discarded newspaper.

Assistant Editor: “How will your story end, P?”

P-Casso: “Don’t call me ‘P.’ I’m P-Casso.”

Silence.

Assistant Editor: “Excuse me.”

The assistant editor leaves the room. The lights dim.

P-Casso: “Somethin’ wrong with the power? You still out there?”

Silence.

P-Casso: “I’m still here. I got somethin’ to say. Please listen.”

After a few minutes, he gets up and leaves the room. There were no photos and flashing cameras to chronicle him as a known somebody. The building was devoid of life.

More spirit than body, P-Casso moves along the line separating shadow from light. He stops, as he always does, beside the bench in West Hyde Park and the crack head youth rustling beneath the pages of yesterday’s *Tribune*. The addict rubs dirty red fingernails across an equally red nose. Could this young man—irrevocably a part of Chicago’s street life and wrapped by addiction—change his fate? Perhaps there remains a saving grace—an ember of artistic passion in his soul—that could still redeem him.

But for now, he is here again.

The Greatest Story Ever Told

“A writer’s greatest aspiration is to create a story that everyone can relate to in some way,” I said, “and we all want to write a great story. Not just a good one that people like, but one that makes you feel alive when you read it.”

The reporter in front of me paused before asking his next question. “You’ve already written six bestsellers; don’t you think you’ve done that already?”

I thought for a minute, making sure I got that faraway look in my eyes, that look that the cameras would pick up and broadcast all over the country. I would look like a real writer, someone who spends hours staring out of the window pondering the mysteries of life. I had perfected this image with my first novel, a thousand pages about love and loss that sold ten thousand copies the first two weeks it was in print. My dreams of becoming a famous writer came true after my second novel, which made me a millionaire. Twenty thousand copies in two weeks, a record-breaker and soon to be a blockbuster. And now here I was, at my ninth interview with reporters who couldn’t seem to get enough of my words. I was a bigger celebrity than the actress who claimed to have been abducted by aliens. After I felt as though I had paused long enough, I said, “I will keep writing until the day I die. There’s always another story, always something more to write about. And I just keep getting better with every novel.”

After the interview was over, I stood in the hall behind the studio and signed copy after copy of the books I had written; the stories I had carved out of what felt like my own flesh and blood for the past eleven years. By the time the line died down, my hand was cramping from the hundreds of signatures I scrawled on flyleaves and in autograph books. Later that night I steeped my poor tired hand in a bowl of hot water and Epsom salts, soaking out the soreness before going to bed. I was used to typing more than writing longhand; the keyboard was better at keeping up with my fevered thoughts. I had once jokingly claimed that I even wrote in my sleep, having trained myself to type from my dreams. Of course the audience had laughed at that one, but it was the kind of laugh that sounded like they wanted to believe me.

As I have always done when writing, I started a new story by opening a blank document on my slim, silver computer. Then I went to make some coffee. When I came back, I stared at the screen, letting it come to me. I wanted to write a new book, to push the boundaries of what I had so far written, to see if I could break more rules and be even more outstanding in my field than I already was.

I had told my mother once that I wanted to write the greatest story anyone had ever read. I wanted to captivate millions of people with my words, to taunt them with foreshadowing and tease them with plot-twists. I had already done so in my debut novel, *FireHeart*; one thousand pages about a woman who had lived a life of luxury as well as poverty, experiencing the stiffness of an arranged marriage and the freedom of real love. Love was a great seller of novels, I had learned.

My second novel had been a historical mystery, a lengthy piece with lost bloodlines and treasures once thought vanished forever. I had even written a sequel for it, another historical book but a thriller instead of a mystery, spanning five continents. That one had captured the attention of the world. I had gotten calls from people who lived in the places I had written about, and every one of them had praised my accuracy. My research, as it turned out, had been flawless. To a writer, the Internet is a fantastic thing.

In reminiscing, an idea occurred to me. Not quite a title, but maybe a tagline: *the greatest story ever told*. I quickly typed that one in the blank document. Nothing big, but a start

nonetheless; something to work off of until I had something fleshed out. At least now the page looked like something was happening.

More memories came to me as I sipped my coffee. The bitterness reminded me of the sad and yet uplifting tale I had written as my third novel, *The Fishing Ship*. Despite the title, it hadn't been about a ship at all. Instead, I had written about a family who, through a span of twenty years, had unearthed family secrets in a manner that resembled a fisherman; dredge for a while and see what comes up. I had done a month's worth of research on genealogy for that one. I even wrote a war story, based on the French struggle in the World Wars. I had spanned three generations, starting with the grandfather who lost his leg in 1914 and married the nurse who cared for him in more ways than her job required. Eight hundred pages later, the grandson wrote a novel about life during the war and won a prize for it. I recalled how many of my stories had historical context. I liked history; it was like having all of the materials there and just piecing them together in the right way. All of my stories were, in a way, alike in that they were supposed to mean something. The human struggle or the power of love, for example. But the longer I sat in front of my computer and listened to the soft whisper of the processors, I began to desire something more than another bestseller. I wanted to write *the* novel, the ultimate story about life and love and all the things we know but don't always realize. I wondered how long it would take.

My sixth novel had just broken another publisher's record, and I was being interviewed for the tenth time. The reporter asked me, "You've just broken your own record. How does this make you feel?"

"Well, to be uncharacteristically brief, I feel pretty good." Everyone laughed. I was notorious for writing books longer than a thousand pages.

"This is the third time you've broken the *New York Times* bestseller record; are you doing this on purpose?"

I laughed. "Actually, yes. Every time I publish something, I'm always thinking about how I can do better. And I do."

"It's been two years since your last novel; are you planning anything new?"

"Aren't I always?" I quipped. The crowd liked that. They knew that I could be counted on to come up with something new every so often. I had made a pretty successful career of it so far. "Can you tell us a little bit about what you're planning?"

I couldn't tell them I hadn't written anything in six months. I was letting an idea work for a while in my subconscious, where I believed all of my stories came from. Still, I had to have an answer. Not only did I have to keep up my reputation, but I had to do so in a way that would keep everyone interested. "I, ah, have something in mind. I'm currently...doing research."

Several faces looked around; apparently they thought that was sufficient. A few more questions and the interview was over. And as always, I stood somewhere behind the studio and signed copies of my books: *FireHeart* *The Fishing Ship*, *Wartime Summer*, *French Quarter* (the supernatural mystery about New Orleans in an alternate universe). All bestsellers, all my own work; thousands of hours of research and hundreds of thousands of hours of writing. I couldn't begin to count the sleepless nights, sitting up with pot after pot of strong bitter black coffee and who knows how much caffeine. My entire life was about writing; I had made a more-than-comfortable living on it and could have stopped at any time, so great was my fortune. But I had to write, I had to tell stories. It was as though I feared my heart would stop beating if I stopped writing. The trouble was, though, that I seemed to be stuck on this one. Was I trying too hard?

The story I wanted to write was supposed to be *The Greatest Story Ever Told*, and it always appeared in my head like that, with capital letters. I wanted to write something that would

literally cover every moment in time from beginning to end. I wanted to write a story about opposites, about love and hate and happiness and sadness. I wanted to contrast beautiful things with ugly circumstances. I wanted to tell a story that everyone would relate to. I wanted to write something about life that was so great and profound that, at the risk of sounding audacious, after it was published there would be no need for anyone to write anything else. I knew it would probably take some time and a lot of thinking. I expected it to be a challenge, but I didn't expect it to be this hard.

Three years after finishing up *French Quarter*, I was still staring at a blank document. I had since erased the first thing I wrote, that little bit about *the greatest story ever told*. Since then, I had written no less than sixty false starts and fifty ideas for sequels. None of them had taken off.

To fill my time, I had read everything I could get my hands on. Was I doing research or avoiding the blank page? Sometimes I knew I was procrastinating: I learned to sew, I attended seminars about coffee addiction, and I read books about history and sociology. I took a night class on spinning and joined a gym. I suffered a brief relationship with another author, but we ended up splitting because they needed more time for writing. I have to admit that one made me mad; they were obviously getting more done than I was. I got a cat.

For nine months I traveled the world, searching for inspiration. I visited London, Paris, Brazil, Mumbai, and New York City. I even paid a translator to come with me to Tokyo, where I stayed for three weeks. In the four months that followed my world tour, I read history texts about all the continents, books about pre-civilized life. I even delved into science fiction for a year. That led to a convention, and I took my camera and notebook just in case. I even read all of my own novels over again. I spent a summer in Australia, learning about the history of the penal colonies that had once thrived there. After some time, I had seven notebooks full of comments and observations. I had two one-terabyte external hard-drives full of pictures. My home library was full to bursting with books. History, science, politics, psychology, geology, physics, even botany and half-a-dozen craft books. I was searching desperately for inspiration. By the dawn of the fourth year, I was nearly frantic.

I thought perhaps I was trying too hard, so I decided to take a vacation. I rented a car and drove across the United States, no notebooks or recording devices. I just wanted to experience and not think. I assumed I needed a break. Perhaps I was right; I wasn't sure. I thought maybe if I stopped actively looking for something, it would come find me. This time when I traveled the world, I did so without direction. I bought an electronic translator and took it with me. I drank tea (having finally broken my addiction to coffee) in India, tried chocolate in South America, wore a burka and traveled with a guide/bodyguard in Baghdad, rode a camel in an amateur race in Egypt, funded and accompanied an expedition to the center of the Brazilian rainforest and made contact with a previously unheard-of tribe. I learned French and worked at a bakery in Belgium. I lived with a family in rural China and helped harvest rice. I rented a cabin in British Columbia and watched the caribou migration in Alaska. I worked for a travel agency, then joined the Peace Corps and lived for four months in the Congo. I started a business, then sold it to a friend. I free-dived with a marine biologist and swam with whales. I ran six marathons and devoted countless hours to charitable pursuits. I converted to Buddhism, then Hinduism, then Islam, then the Native American Church. I spent two years working my way around the globe with no point in mind. I was looking for something and hoping that it would someday find me.

I had decided to come home and spend time with my family, converting briefly back to Christianity (though in my heart I was never really religious to begin with) so I could enjoy the holidays with them. After five years, they had stopped asking me if I was writing anything new. I guess they either assumed I was traveling for research or I had given up on writing. I didn't have the heart to tell them that I still hadn't written a single word. After I returned from Morocco, sampling the culture and the food, sleeping in my own bed felt strange. I felt like an alien.

And then one night, shortly after New Year's, I sat bolt upright in my bed and startled my cat. The idea came to me like so many of my ideas, like a bolt of electric brilliance that simultaneously shocked and delighted me. It was so easy it was stupid! I had spent so many years searching, thinking I had wasted my time because I hadn't been writing. I had thought my writing streak, the run that had lasted twelve years, was all dried up. I was certain that a five-year strain of writer's block was the end of my career. But now! Oh the fantastic Idea! And it was so simple, so brilliant that it could have occurred even to a child!

But it was daring. My method, the one that came to me as if in a dream, was an outstandingly strange one, something I was sure no one had ever tried before. I was going to do something that I was sure, I would, to put it bluntly, freak people out. But it would work!

"You're crazy," my editor said, "you're stark raving mad." He'd read my manuscript and declared me a nut. "You can't publish this; you'll become a laughingstock! No publisher will accept this, even if you are the best writer the world's ever seen. No, you have to do the whole thing all over. Better yet, write something else."

"You don't understand; it's perfect!" I said. "It's the story everyone's been waiting for! Even I didn't realize how great it was until last week!"

"You just got back from Africa last week," my editor said. I could tell he was still convinced that I had finally gone insane. "You can't write this in a week and say it's ready for release."

"You think too small, Dan," I told him. "Think about the Big Picture, think about the Whole Story."

"The whole story? There's only one word!" He sounded incredulous; moreover, he sounded like he wanted to have me committed.

"But that's the story! It's all about that one word! That one word says more about the world and everything in it than a book with ten thousand pages!"

"I don't know what you smoked when you were in Morocco, but you need to be cut off. Whatever you've been into is eating your brain."

I laughed. "I haven't smoked a thing since I was seventeen. Publish the story, Dan. You won't regret it."

"The only people who will buy a one-word story are loonies and hippies. It won't matter if it has your name on it or not; only crazy people buy a book that's got only one word in it."

"Fine, I'll publish it myself. You'll see, Dan. You'll see how good of an idea this is."

I paid for publication out of my own pocket. I hired several freelance salesmen and rented a factory and all the equipment to print a book. In two weeks we had fifty thousand copies ready to ship. Each copy was five hundred pages long, and each page had a single word printed on it. On the back was a brief description: "Stories from around the world, in a thousand different voices! Scenes of life from every corner of the globe! An astounding tale of epic proportions! Inside these covers: *The Greatest Story Ever Told!*"

The idea was indeed brilliant. The story itself had a simple premise: it was about everything. Not everything in a material sense, but a story about life, death, joy, sorrow, the past,

the present, the future, hopes and dreams, love and loss, creation and destruction, all wrapped up in so many pages (though I was certain that more would be needed before it was done). I finally realized that all of my experiences, everything I had done while on my search for inspiration, were a part of this story, but they were just a small part. I would need so much more to make the story complete. I would need more viewpoints than a single person could have. The idea was this: everyone could contribute. The purpose was to open up the book for each person who bought it, to allow space for them to fill in their own stories, their own experiences. In this way we would all write a part of it, and one day we might put it all together and have The Greatest Story Ever Told. My editor thought it was a crazy idea, but the numbers don't lie: in six weeks it had sold over thirty thousand copies. In six months it had been translated into four hundred languages. Within a year, it had surpassed even my records as the most popular written work of the century. Every cent of the proceeds went to thirty or more charitable causes around the world. I had more than enough money myself; I was satisfied with what I had.

It was a fantastically, ludicrously simple book. The cover was blank. The back was blank. The spine was blank; I didn't even print my name on it. All five hundred pages were blank. Except for one word, a single word in small font, printed across the top of each page with plenty of room for the white space beneath. The single word at the top of every page was a prompt; the subtitle for a story that would probably go down as the most incredible story in history:

Life.

The Nightingale Lover:
(Retelling of *Laüistic*)

Characters

Friend: Nadia Salesman 1: Tyson Dumalo
Wife: Amie Dumalo Salesman 2: Gerard Knight
Radio Announcer: Miller

Act 1

Scene 1

Setting:

Two women in dresses at a home are talking in the living room of a well-furnished home at the end of a cul-de-sac of a subdivision. There are two chairs stage left opposite a couch stage right with a coffee table in between. Upstage there is a TV set in front of a half wall that is part of the staircase. Downstage there is a fireplace facing upstage. Toward the far side of stage left, slightly upstage, we see a dinner table.

Nadia:
(Conspiratorially) Did you hear what Gerard did today?

Amie:
(Exasperated) No I'm sure I haven't, Nadia. What else is there for him to do? He already helps out at a soup kitchen on weekends and helps little old ladies across the street.

Nadia:
No. (Shakes head) You know I'd swear you don't like Gerard if I didn't know how nice you are to him at the weekend barbeques. Anyway, he has started coaching the boys little league team, AND he broke a record for the quickest account closing after a sales pitch.

Amie:
How do you find this stuff out Nadia? It isn't even 6:00 p.m. yet. I wouldn't even know until Tyson came home. (Worriedly) He'll probably be raging mad. He has the sales pitch record.

Nadia:
(Shrugs) Oh well. Speaking of Gerard, since you two are such close neighbors, do you know if he has anyone special in his life?

Amie:
No. Why? Are you trying to catch him?

Nadia:
Yes. He's a great guy. He's charitable, loves kids, and he's single.

Amie:
That's for sure. (Clock chimes five times) Wow, is it really 5 o'clock? I'd better get dinner started for Tyson so he isn't more upset when he gets home.

Nadia:

I don't know why you stay married when he gripes at you as much as he does. You don't have any kids, what's keeping you?

Amie:

It's not like that Nadia. He doesn't gripe at me all the time. Married couples just vent to each other sometimes. You'll understand when you're married.

Nadia:

Whatever, I don't think it's right. Anyway, I'd better go before *Mr.* Dumalo gets home. See you tomorrow. (Gets up)

Amie:

(Gets up) Bye. (Walks with Nadia towards the door at stage right and shuts it behind her)

Scene 2

Setting:

Amie is setting plates of food on a table as Tyson comes storming in from stage right, slamming the door.

Tyson:

(Angrily as he is walking to table) You wouldn't believe the day I had at work, Amie. Guess, just guess what happened.

Amie:

(Timidly) Someone broke your sales pitch record?

Tyson:

(Stops short, hand on back of chair) How do *you* know?

Amie:

It is one of the only things that could make you so mad. You didn't loosen your tie or put down your briefcase.

Tyson:

Really? (Quizzically as he walks toward coat rack stage right to set briefcase down)

Amie:

That and Nadia told me. (Tyson walks back toward the table, at a normal pace and loosens his tie)

Tyson:

(Both sit down and start eating) Nadia, that nosy—of course. Did she also tell you it was that goody two shoes neighbor of ours Gerard? (Amie nods) Of course she did. She's had her eye on him since he moved in. On top of his new record, maybe because of it, I think he might be

getting the Jansen account. So my day was in the crapper. How was your day? Any word from the doctor? (Takes a drink of water)

Amie:

Yes. It is just like the first time. He said to wait at least a few more days to be sure because the bleeding can last longer, even though last time it was only for a week and a half.

Tyson:

I'm sorry honey. (Squeezes her hand comfortingly) What did you do yesterday? You didn't do anything strenuous like moving furniture around to cause extra bleeding?

(Both continue eating and drinking)

Amie:

No, I dusted some and then talked to Nadia after she got off when Mrs. Nelman brought her older kids home from school, just like today.

Tyson:

Okay. But I want you on bed rest as much as possible no matter what the doctor says because this is the third time it has happened. I am going to check around for a maid for first thing tomorrow.

Amie:

(On edge) That's not necessary. I can do things myself. I'll be fine.

Tyson:

NO. You are going to rest until we are sure you're better. There is absolutely NO sense in you getting worse off because you're being headstrong.

Amie:

Fine. (Picks up dishes, turns around to take them to another room, lights dim)

Scene 3

Setting:

It is the next morning. We see a man, Gerard, in a masculine living room. There are two dark leather couches stage left and stage right facing each other with a glass coffee table in between. There is a side table with several decanters on it upstage in front of a half wall with stairs. The fireplace downstage has a TV on its mantle. We hear a knock on the door and the man walks to stage right to open it.

Gerard:

Hello Amie.

Amie:

(Holding a container of soup) Hello, I know you aren't sick, but when I saw your car still here I figured I would bring some over just in case. (Gerard gestures for her to come inside, she walks in) I'm glad you stayed home today. The only time I can see you is at the weekend cookouts and at the window at night.

Gerard:

(Hugs her) I know and then we can't really talk. (He walks over to couch and Amie follows.) So how have you been, was Tyson terribly upset when he got home?

Amie:

(Shrugs) He was upset, but it sounded like usual venting from work. We have both been stressed about losing another baby. He is so worried about me; he is hiring a maid because he thinks it will help. So I won't be doing much of anything or going anywhere.

Gerard:

What do you think? Do you think it will help if you are not doing anything?

Amie:

(Exasperated) I don't know. (Runs hands through her hair) It's just hard losing another baby. We don't even know what is wrong or why it is happening yet. Now I feel trapped because I will have someone watching what I do all day. I think I'll go stir crazy.

Tyson:

(Rubs her back then gets up while he is speaking and walks toward the side table) I think you'll find something to do, like taking up knitting. (Pours two drinks of amber colored liquid and hands one to her)

Amie:

(Amie chuckles) Yeah, right, so I can make little boots for the child I don't have. (Takes a drink)

Gerard:

Since you are going to be under house arrest for the foreseeable future, why don't we make the most of the time we have together? (Leans in, wraps his free arm around her, pulls her in, and kisses her)

Amie:

(They part smiling) I'd like that. (He sets his glass down, stands up, takes her glass, sets it down, takes her hand and leads her up the stairs as the lights dim)

Scene 4

Setting:

Amie is sitting on a chair in front of a mirror that is upstage from a bed whose head is facing stage right waiting for Tyson. The bed has lamps on night tables on both sides of it. She has a brush in her hand. The bedcovers are pulled back. Two walls are visible close to center stage one is theirs, the other is Gerard's. Gerard can be seen sitting up in his bed, which is facing

downstage. There is one nightstand with a lamp and clock in between the wall and his bed. During this scene Gerard is watching TV which is facing upstage then switches to reading later.

Tyson:

(Enters, sits on the bed, slips slippers off, puts socks on, slides under covers, and stays upright talking) Work was better today because Gerard was at home sick.

Amie:

(Starts brushing her hair) I know. When I went outside to check for the mail I noticed his car was still there. I thought it was odd because you said he has never missed a day yet. (Begins to braid her hair)

Tyson:

I thought it was odd, too. He didn't seem sick yesterday, and who takes off work on a Tuesday? Whatever it's not my business. (Amie finishes braiding her hair) Now come to bed, I want to get some sleep tonight. I have a meeting early in the morning.

Amie:

Alright (gets in bed, pulls up the covers, and they both turn out their lights) Oh I forgot to tell you I went to Dr. Smith's office for a check-up. He said he would call me tomorrow with any news.

Tyson:

I just hope it is good news this time.

Gerard:

(Checks his watch, after a few minutes Tyson begins snoring) I wonder when Tyson will fall asleep.

Amie:

(Eases out of bed, picks up and puts on her robe as she walks to the wall. She raises the window, takes something out of her pocket and tosses it at Gerard's window)
Hey. (She whispers)

Gerard:

(Looks up as he hears something hit the window, smiles, and walks toward the window and opens it) Hey, that was quick.

Amie:

I know. He went to bed early because he has a meeting tomorrow.

Gerard:

Yeah. He is pitching some ideas for the Jansen account tomorrow before I do.

Behind Amie, Tydon stirs in bed, sits up, but lays back down on is side to listen, he puts his hand to his ear to be able to listen better.

Amie:

Then why are you still up? (Excited) You should get sleep.

Gerard:

(Calmly) It's fine. After you left today I spent the afternoon practicing my pitch. I am pretty sure it will go well tomorrow.

Amie:

(Calmer now, puts hand on chest) Okay. If you're sure. I'm glad you had time to practice, but I still think you should go to bed.

Gerard:

(Chuckles softly) If you insist, then I will. Good night Amie.

At this point Tyson rolls onto his other side, pretending to be a restless sleeper.

Amie:

Good night. (She starts to close the window when Gerard starts to say something more)

Gerard:

Amie, you know I love you right?

Amie:

(Bows her head as if embarrassed and says softly) I know. (Both shut their windows and return to bed as stage lights turn off completely)

Scene 5

Setting:

Amie and Tyson are in the kitchen together. There is a fridge, an oven, a sink with a window above it, and a round table with four chairs. The table has a white table cloth, a coffee cup and saucer, an orange juice glass, silverware, salt and pepper shakers, butter in a dish, a metal rack with toast in it, and napkins on it. There is a rotary dial phone on the counter by the sink. There is a radio on playing 60s style song. Amie is standing in front of the stove which has two pans on it. She begins dipping eggs and bacon each onto two plates from the pans as the lights come up.

Tyson:

(Reaching for a piece of toast) Have you been sleeping well Amie?

Amie:

(Turns around with plates and sets them down as she talks) Yes, why?

Tyson:

Thank you. (For the plate) because I have noticed that you have been getting out of bed late at night recently.

Amie:

I like to hear the Nightingale sing at night. It sings the most beautiful songs.

Tyson:

You can't listen to it during the day?

Amie:

(Quickly) No. It doesn't sing as well as it does at night.

Just then, the song of the nightingale is heard lightly from offstage.

Tyson:

I'll take care of it. (Tyson stands up)

Amie:

No. (Amie stands up, as Tyson storms offstage to stage left Amie just stands there looking after him)

The radio is silent a moment as the song ends and a gunshot is heard offstage. Music starts up again and Amie sits down stunned at Tysons' actions. Shortly after, Tyson walks back holding the bird.

Tyson:

There. Now he won't disturb you anymore. (Then he throws the bird at her, it stains her dress, and he storms out stage right)

Amie gently picks up the bird and cradles it against her breast and cries. After a bit she stands up, wraps the bird in a napkin, and goes to the counter. She dials some numbers on the phone and waits for it to ring while she plays with the phone cord. Then she starts talking in a shaky voice.

Amie:

Gerard, (sniffs) I don't know how but I think Tyson found out about us. He was upset this morning.

(Pauses)

He said he noticed I have been getting up at night. When I told him it was because I was listening to the nightingale sing he went out and (voice breaks) he shot it.

(Pauses)

Well that wasn't the worst of it. Then when he brought the nightingale in he threw it at me and said "Now HE won't disturb you anymore." Tyson said, "HE."

(Pauses)

I know, but Gerard, I don't think we should see each other anymore. (Timidly) okay...?

(Pauses)

Okay. I don't know why you would want a dead bird, but I will bring it over. Then you need to go to work, so Tyson doesn't suspect anything more.

(Pauses)

Okay and Gerard be careful. Bye.

(Amie sits back down in the chair to think. Then the phone rings.)

Amie:

Hello?

(Pauses)

Oh hello, Dr. Smith.

(Pauses)

Thanks you for calling. I had forgotten you were going to call me today about my check-up. I hope it is good news.

(Pauses)

That's good.

(Pauses)

What!? I'm pregnant again!? Thanks for calling.

(Amie hangs up the phone in shock. Then a small smile begins, turns into a beaming smile, and then a small, happy laugh as she spins around the room.)

Amie:

I hope it is Gerard's.

(The music on the radio stops and a radio announcer comes on.)

Miller:

Miller here. For anyone out on the roads there has been a single car wreck of a dark green Citroen on 2nd street and the telephone pole is across the road, so avoid 2nd street if you can.

Amie:

(Gasps) That's what Gerard drives!

The lights darken suddenly. Radio turns off. Curtain falls (if there is one.)

The End

Non-Fiction



Reflection
by Kathleen Ford

Bags Packed and Waiting

It was a typical fall day; the air was crisp and the trees had begun their cycle of changing colors. The beautiful yellows, reds, and oranges filled the lawn like a rainbow. The geese flew over in their migration pattern, honking out directions to ensure each one's safe arrival at their final destination. The squirrels had begun to gather food needed to survive the winter, carefully burying each valuable find for later satisfaction on a blustery day.

My bags were packed and waiting for me at the door. I had examined their contents multiple times to ensure that I had packed what was necessary for the day. In the background, Adrian, six years old at the time, imitated mom by packing her backpack in preparation for another day of kindergarten.

Finally, we were ready to walk out the door and head off to school. Impatiently waiting for me to pick up my bags, Adrian commented, "Why do you have to carry so many bags Mom?"

Not wanting to give her a long drawn out explanation, I answered, "Sometimes moms have to carry a lot of bags with them."

This pacified her curiosity. We loaded everything in the car and off we went. I was a volunteer parent in the kindergarten art room. The day went normally, as so many days had before. Adrian and the other kindergarten children were like busy bees, buzzing around the room, soaking in as much information their little sponges could hold. Time flew by; once again, it was time to pack our bags and head home.

As Adrian and I got into the car, she asked, "Mom, did you make sure to get all of your bags?"

I responded, "Yes, sweetie, Mom did. Thank you for asking."

We arrived home, where we began our daily chores. Soon my husband, Ancel, arrived home from work. We sat down together as a family and discussed our day over dinner. Once we were finished, our nightly routine began.

However, this night would be different. This night I would receive a phone call that would forever change my life.

The phone rang. It was my dad. He and Mom had been to see the doctor earlier in the afternoon. A couple of weeks prior, she was feeling ill, so the doctor decided to run some additional tests. At first they thought it was bronchitis, but a biopsy proved otherwise. After Ancel spoke with Dad, he handed me the phone. The only thing I can remember from that phone call was one word: CANCER. They had given Mom a year to live. I felt my heart pound in my chest. It felt as if an elephant sat down on my chest. I could not breathe. I managed to say, "Goodbye" to Dad. I immediately sat down and began to cry.

After a few moments of numbness, I realized that the bags I carefully carried with me each day were now split open at their seams exposing every hidden secret about my personal life for everyone to see. Depression bag, Shopaholic bag, Abused-Verbally-While-Married bag, Divorced bag, Religious Beliefs bag, Ugly-As-a-Baby, Cried-the-Entire-Time bag, and I-Am-Not-Really-a-Bad-Person, I-Try-To-Do-the-Right-Things bag. How was I to scrape all of these secrets back into the bags I had managed to hide? My husband knew my secrets, but the outside world did not. I always carried my bags on my shoulders out of sight. What will people think of me now that they know my secrets?

The next few days were a complete blur. I went through the motions, but my mind seemed so clouded. The depression came flooding back in like a tidal wave. I could no longer

shop my way back to happiness. The feelings of worthlessness cowered in every corner I looked. The contents of my bags grew like poison ivy, covering everything in sight. My inner thoughts and feelings were all tangled into one huge conglomeration. Regardless of pruning, the vines consumed me. I felt trapped, with no means of escape.

Mom and I shared a relationship that had its ups and downs over the years. We did not always see eye-to-eye. Regardless of the differences we had, we put them aside when trouble hit our family. And trouble had hit our family like a ton of bricks. Mom was not going to get any better. As a family, my Dad, brother and I were going to have to make some difficult decisions about her treatments. All of the planning in the world couldn't prepare us for the next seven months. In that time, I watched my fifty-one-year-old mother go from a vibrant woman into a shell of a cancer parasite. I saw the agony, pain and suffering in every crevice of her body. Words could not begin to explain what she went through.

Then the day that I tried to convince myself would never come did. It was a beautiful day outside; people were going about their lives as usual. Could they not see the pain that I was suffering inside the hospital room? My mom was dying; their world needed to stop, too. The walls seemed to keep creeping towards me—closer, closer. My family was gathered around Mom's bedside when we watched her take her last breath at 9:30 a.m. on Thursday, May 11, 2000. Emotions consumed my body like the cancer consumed Mom's. It seemed as if I could feel nothing, as if my world had ended—as if I could not go on. I was completely numb.

The issue of my split bags, open for everyone to see, overwhelmed me because now I carried a heavier bag; my mom's passing. I was not sure if I would ever see her again and that scared me to death. There was no way I could carry all of them, again, by myself. It seemed as if God asked me to do the impossible. Could He not see that I had just lost my mom; there was no way I could pick those bags back up? I wasn't up to the task. I did not know where to begin.

Being raised Catholic; I felt in my heart that there was a God. Or at least that was what I had been taught. Over the next couple of months, I questioned God. *Why? Why did you have to take Ma-maw, Pa-paw, Michael, Pete, Uncle Paul, and now Mom with cancer? What did our family ever do to deserve this? I will never see my mom again, what am I supposed to do? What about watching Adrian grow up, graduate high school, college and get married? Why, God?*

I could not find the answers to these questions so heavy in my heart. My husband questioned my belief in God. Did I know Christ as my personal Savior? If I died, would I know for sure that I would go to heaven? I did not have the answers to these questions either; I thought I would go to heaven when I died because I was baptized as a child. I had not done anything like murder, so I must be a pretty good person.

As time slowly crept by, each day a trial, I examined myself and my beliefs. I faithfully watched two evangelists on television each week. Through them, I saw that there was more to religion than just going to church. It realized that you were a sinner in need of a Savior to take your place. What I did not realize through this whole process was that God was watching over me the entire time. Through His providential will, I accepted Him as my personal Savior through the death of my mother.

Finally, the day came when I could not take the pressure any longer. It was a Wednesday night about 11:30 p.m. At the end of the weekly show, one of the evangelists urged the listeners to ask God into their hearts and HE would save them. I prayed that prayer. I was lost, I was heart-broken, I was a sinner, I was tired of carrying the bags on my own, and I was in a hopeless situation with nowhere else to turn. I realized at that very moment there was someone who would

never leave or forsake me, no matter what I had done in my past. A feeling came over me that words cannot explain. This night changed my life forever. A peace flowed into my heart that I had never felt before. The weight of my bags lifted from my shoulders. I knew in my heart of hearts that I would someday see my mom again. I no longer had to carry the bags on my own.

Yes, the battle has been rough. My faith has been tested many times throughout the years. One thing that I can say with one hundred percent assurance is that God is with me each step of the way. The Bible tells us that He will never give us more than we can handle.

There are still days when I question, *Lord I am feeling like the load is too much. Why now?* My faith is being tested now. My family has lost another loved one to cancer.

Aunt Betty passed away Monday evening at 5:30 p.m.; she went home to be with the Lord. As soon as my dad called with the news I immediately asked, *Why God? Why now? What lesson do you have for me now? What valley am I going to go through down the road that I will need this added strength? Only you have the answer, so once again I am going to depend on you and you alone to see me through this. Your Word promises that if I bring my burdens to you, you will give me rest.*

It is a wonderful feeling to know that as a child of God I will withstand trials and tribulations throughout my life. I know with every ounce of my being that because Jesus Christ is my Savior, I can handle any bag that life throws at me, because He is carrying the load for me.

Becoming One of the Few, the Proud

On May 23, 2000, I received a phone call from one of my closest friends, Chad Soloman. We had been friends our whole lives. Chad had recently returned home from boot camp from the United States Marine Corps. We talked briefly on the phone, and then he asked if he could come over to my house. Chad wanted to see my mom and dad, because they were like second parents to him.

When Chad arrived at my house, he stood a little taller, and he had a certain confidence about him that I'd never seen in him. The Chad I knew was shy, timid, and would never speak unless spoken to. Chad began to take us through the thirteen week transition from Chad Soloman, the young man, to Chad Soloman the Marine. I was captivated by Chad's description of boot camp. Up until that moment, the idea of joining the Marines never crossed my mind. Immediately after he finished, I began to ask him questions regarding how being a Marine made him feel. Chad looked at me and said, "If you want to know, you will have to join the Corps and find out for yourself."

The next day I went to the recruiting office. The recruiter's name was Staff Sergeant Daniel Vig. When I walked into his office, he stood up shook my hand and asked me, "What can the Corps do for you?"

I sat down, looked him into the eye, and said, "I want to be a Marine."

He smiled and said, "You've come to the right place."

I told him I wanted to go into infantry and nothing else. After finishing the paperwork, I went home and told my parents that I had just joined the Marine Corps.

On May 30, 2000, I had to fly to San Diego for boot camp. I woke up, packed my bags, called my friends and family to tell them goodbye, and then went to the recruiting office. I was nervous the whole flight to San Diego, because I didn't know what to expect when I got there.

We arrived at the San Diego airport around 7:00 p.m. Once all of the recruits arrived from all over the country, we boarded a bus and headed to the Recruit Depot. When we finally arrived at the depot, the bus stopped. A few seconds passed, and all of the sudden all hell broke loose. The bus began to shake as a drill instructor climbed into the bus, he was screaming so loud I thought my ear drums were going to pop. He was screaming at the top of his lungs telling us to get off the bus. We exited the bus and then we were shuffled to the famous red footprints at the entrance of the depot. The footprints symbolize the first steps you take in becoming a Marine.

Over the course of the next thirteen weeks we would not be able to eat, sleep, speak, use the bathroom, or breathe without asking permission first. There are three phases to boot camp. The first phase is known as the Drill Phase. The Drill Phase is simply four weeks of the drill instructor breaking you of all your civilian habits. We were taught how to march in formation, groom ourselves, shine our boots, iron our camouflaged utilities, and the basics of being a Marine.

The second phase is known as the Practical Phase. This phase is where you spend a lot of time in the classroom learning the history, values, and purpose of the Marine Corps. At the end of the practical phase, we had to take a test over everything we had learned.

The third phase was by far the most fun, this is the phase when you get to go out and actually put into use all you've learned over the last two phases. It was known as the Field Phase. Over the next four weeks, we did everything from qualifying on the rifle range, to learning how to survive in the field. At the end of the third phase is when you have to complete the Crucible. The Crucible is a series of obstacles that test your team-building skills and trust in your fellow

Marines. It is the final test of boot camp. The Crucible is a four day event with very little food, and very little sleep. The final evolution of the Crucible is a seven mile hike, with between fifty and seventy pounds of gear on your back. Now I know you are probably thinking seven miles, that's not that far, but remember we were starving and dead tired. When we reached the end of the hike, I saw all fifty U.S. flags lined up on the side of the trail, twenty-five on each side. Then I could hear the music playing. It was "I'm Proud to be an American," by Lee Greenwood. We stopped after passing all of the flags and we all got into formation by platoons. Out in front of us was a single flag pole, but there was no flag flying. When all of the platoons were finished forming up, they raised the American Flag on the empty pole. Once the National Anthem finished playing, our drill instructors presented all of us with our eagle globe and anchors. My senior drill instructor stepped in front of me and placed the eagle globe and anchor into my hand, then called me Marine for the first time. At that moment I became a United States Marine. I could feel the tears stream down my face. All of the blood, sweat, and tears over the last thirteen weeks were worth that single moment when that man in front of me was no longer my drill instructor: he was now my brother. I was now a member of the greatest brotherhood in the world, and no one could ever take that away from me.

Becoming a Marine was the single most life changing experience of my life. I had accomplished something that so few have. I stood taller, was more confident, and for the first time in my life, I saw a man looking back at me in the mirror. Life as a Marine taught me confidence, determination, pride, and most of all how to be a man. The core values that were instilled in me from day one—honor, courage, and commitment—will forever remain the center stone of my life. I can finally look back on my life up to this point and be proud and satisfied of what I've done, and most importantly, my wife and kids are proud of me.

Cars Do Not Flip Well

The car swerved. Wheels spun. One flip, then two, then nothing. Eyes opened, hands moved off of face and fear set in. It happened so fast that there was no time to think, only time for panic. Silence hung in the air as the accident began. A cry penetrated the silence, "Help, help!" There was no one else around.

The dark green blazer bounced happily along the road as if it knew the importance of this trip. It was my first trip alone outside of Columbus town limits. No stops were made as the scenery flew by in a flash of bright greens and browns. The leaves danced around the tires as the sun smiled down at me through the windows. It was going to be a great day.

I pulled into my grandpa's car lot trying to find a place to park amongst the cars for sale. There were all different models, colors, and sizes competing with each other to be purchased and taken home by a new family. I walk down the thin concrete sidewalk surrounded by grass and weeds. After the short trip, I walk into an imperfect square, concrete office. The room was cool with very sparse furniture. A huge wood desk sat against a wall next to the door, behind it was a huge, black leather chair worn from use. Behind the desk sat another smaller desk next to a huge safe filled with keys to the cars sitting abandoned on the lot.

After talking with my grandpa, whose hands were covered with grease and smelled of smoke and gas, I sat behind a clear cabinet filled with model cars. I looked around and filled my senses with new smells, sights, and textures. Everything was covered in dust and oil, in want of a scrub down with soap. I pulled out my laptop, movies and headphones as I waited for my dad's car to get fixed.

While waiting, I looked around the seemingly unfinished room. Nothing matched but it all fit the décor of an auto shop. Looking through a window to the next room I could see the dirt and grease that caked the floor. Cars were lifted into the air on metal platforms. Men talked to one another, their voices discernible above the sounds of the metal machines. I watched as my grandpa dealt with customers of all sorts of. They talked, laughed, and smoked cigarettes.

Waiting for my dad's car felt like waiting at a stop light that never turned green. I could not keep still as I moved from seat to seat. I ended up on an old, faded brown couch. My grandpa came through a door that emitted all manner of strange noises and smells. The couch wanted to keep me captive as I tried to rise from the sunken cushions.

"The car is done," my grandpa said in his scruffy, kind voice with a smile of crooked, yellowing teeth.

The sun smiled down on me as I made the journey home. I drove in solitude, not another person or car in sight. I began to really take in the scenery. A drive-in movie theater on a low hill was on my right. The drive-in had a bright sign that displayed the movies that would be playing that weekend.

As many people know, one of the first rules of driving is to keep your eyes on the road. I broke that simple rule. When I focused again, I noticed that my passenger-side wheels were almost off the road and that low hill seemed like a mountain. I broke the second rule of driving and panicked. I swerved hard to the left. I could hear the tires screeching in my ears, terror caused my heart to stop beating. I pulled my wheel back to the right with all my strength and swerved back into my original lane. I closed my eyes and put my arms over my face like a child as the tires fell off the road. I rolled down the hill, metal crunching and whining in protest as the glass broke free from its hold. My head bounced back and forth like a paddle ball about to snap loose from its string.

Tyfanni Jewel

Silence came next. Slowly, I uncovered my eyes and looked around. My dad's once nice car was a pile of metal. Tears streamed down my face. Glass was everywhere. The only thing that tethered me to my seat was a small strip of fabric and piece of metal that might have saved my life. I felt a sting in my left arm and noticed it was covered in glass and blood. I groped around awkwardly from my sideways position in search of my cell phone. It was like looking for a needle in a hay stack. My next best solution was to scream for help.

I breathed in as much air as my lungs could consume. I let it all out in one gasp, "HELP!"

Fear gripped me and would not let me go. My breath labored as I tried to remain calm. Out of nowhere, an elderly couple came to my rescue. As they called 911, I got this weird feeling that my dad would be more worried about his wrecked car than my health. I prayed a prayer of thanks, glad that I was okay. My tears trickled to a drizzle.

The fire department came and used the Jaws of Life to help me out of my car. The crunching echoed in my ears; the grinding metal gave me Goosebumps. I was placed on a gurney and driven to the ambulance. A neck brace was placed on my neck, making me look up at the beautiful sky that had once been my welcome to this perfect day.

Today, when I drive close to a yellow line, I freak out a bit inside. And sometimes my mom, who rushed to the hospital after my accident, will swerve a bit when she drives. I take a deep breath, stare at her, and ask her to pay attention because I made a huge mistake.

When push comes to shove, cars do not flip well.

Choo Choo Number One

I tore open the diarrhea colored outer bag of the new-style MRE as Adam and Billy started a verbal pissing contest, spouting off all they knew about “hopping” freight trains. I had hitchhiked the length of the U.S. times five, survived the elements with only that which I could fit in my Alice-pack, perfected a method for “earning hella presidents an hour” (as I heard and thus picked up in California) with a piece of cardboard and a felt-tip marker, and acquired a taste for dumpster food as an alternative to spending beer-money on grub, but my hobo training was yet to be complete. Anxious to find out what all the fuss was about, I was as ready as I could get, determined that—no matter what—that day was to be etched in my memory as the day I hopped my first train.

My instructors were several years younger than I, which was unusual for me, being that I had learned very little in my life from those less experienced in the art of living. But, it was exhilarating proving the teachings of some of my favorite philosophers: Knowledge and wisdom are not automatic with age. Sometimes the pupil makes the best teacher. In this case, my simultaneous student-teachers were snot-nosed non-conformists (a Texan and a Californian) who each believed that—because he grew up next to highly traveled tracks and thus had the pleasure of meeting, drinking with, and listening to the disturbing ramblings of old train tramps as a teenager, and of riding a dozen trains before he could legally buy cigarettes—he was an old-school expert on train riding.

“My favorite ride is an empty boxcar,” stated Billy, brushing his mid-length, black, bangs to the side with his fingers.

“Yeah—unless you want to play dice or cards on the trip. Empty boxcars shake, rock, and vibrate like a speedboat in a storm. I prefer a forty-eight. You ride in a bucket at the end of the car that’s deeper than a short person is tall. Worthless as a condom in a convent when it’s raining, but no rail worker anywhere has the time to check every one for stowaways. Plus they’re so heavy with a stack of shipping containers, empty or full, that they guarantee a smooth ride every time.”

“O.K.” I responded, pulling my green package of beef stew from its brown box. “But which of these are forty-eights? I know what a boxcar is, but—”

“We haven’t seen any container cars on these tracks yet,” interrupted Adam, who was sprinkling tobacco onto the rolling paper he held with the thumb and forefinger of his right hand. “I have a feeling we’ll have to hop a grainer. They’re usually ride-able, but their porches are out in the open. We might as well jump up and down and yell, “Here we are—right here.”

“So,” I began as a car drove over our heads for the first time since we ducked under the bridge to scope out the situation. “That there is called a grain train, right?”

“Yeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeesss,” Billy joined in. “And, from up here you can see those train cars are all un-ride-able. See? Their porches have no floors. Those are called suicide cars. I think we might be screwed.”

“Shut up, you pessimistic pretty-boy. Us two are getting on a train today. End of story. If you want to hitchhike instead, be our guest.”

“And good luck with that,” I chimed in, continuing to study one of the porches Billy had whined about. As I vaguely recalled from playing on and around the increasingly inactive tracks of grain-dominated Indiana as a child, there are oddly shaped, stationary parts of a grain car, including components of the break system, spread across the bottom half of the open porch on either end of the car (floor or no floor). I took interest in the fact that aside from being stationary,

Lloyd Dobbins

a few of the metal parts immediately below where a floor would be also happened to be roughly level across the top. As I investigated the situation, I vacantly elaborated on my initial statement. “I swear to you I sat at that on-ramp for eight days before I ran into you guys. Nothing but old people in R.V.s.”

With his tangerine dreadlocks, Irish complexion, chaotically precise constellations of ragdoll freckles, ragged patchwork clothes, and lucky socks (one red, one blue) Adam always seemed cartoonish to me. But, having travelled with him before, I knew I could take him seriously despite his appearance. So, naturally, I listened more intently when Adam spoke. Plus, he was obviously funnier than Billy.

“You can keep pretending you’re an expert if you want, Billy. But, you’ve never left California. I’ve never taken sex advice from a drag queen, so why would I listen to you about trains? You may think you know everything there is to learn about Union Pacific, but this is the Santa Fe line—my stomping ground. So why don’t you shut up for a cotton-picking second? You’ll never learn a G.D. thing with your nose in the air and fingers in your ears!”

I laughed so hard I dropped my long, brown plastic spoon in the dirt. My adorable, little, black and white pit bull puppy had been so silent and motionless I nearly forgot she was there, but the second my spoon hit the ground, there was Ruca licking the beef broth off the indentation that makes a spoon a spoon.

“You guys want some stew while we figure out what we’re doing?” I asked. “I hope you’ve got your own spoons though. Ruca just stole mine.”

Billy’s face drooped in a frown as Adam grabbed the brown spoon from beneath my eager puppy’s face. The redhead wiped both sides of the eating end on his pant leg and asked me, “What else did you get in that there MRE, G. I. Joe?”

“Well, I’m so glad you asked, Adam. The reason I like the beef stew meal is because it comes with M&Ms and chocolate beverage mix. Add a chocolate pound cake and you have all the makings for what we called in the Army, ranger pudding.”

The shade where we rested and ate my last MRE was provided by the only bridge that crossed the two mile section of tracks where the eastbound trains had been stopping for their final inspections before leaving the city. Behind us was a trailer park with a few Mexican flags displayed openly. On the other side of the tracks was the rest of Barstow’s eastside, hustling and bustling to profit off the “snow birds,” who were mostly headed toward the gem and R.V. show in Quartzite, Arizona (our destination as well). A dozen beer cans served as tell-tale signs of the bridge’s prior use. A piece of ¾ inch plywood—plush against the concrete of the support wall while covering a large section of level ground—told us it had most likely served as camp for a hobo or two.

“We’re going to be here forever, aren’t we?” came the nasal whine of Billy just before the “Choooo, choo!” of a train whistle signaled the grain train’s impending departure.

“Shut your cock holster, Billy!”

“Why don’t you both shut up and grab either end of that plywood?” I screamed in my best drill sergeant voice.

“What? Why?” I heard spoken in sloppy-sounding near-unison.

“I’ve got a puppy. You two grab that board and follow me. We’re gonna make our own floor. I call it insta-porch.”

“Holy shit! He’s on to something!” Adam punched Billy in his shoulder and then gestured toward the board with open hands. “Ladies first, Billy.”

Burned into my brain were the motions of shouldering my pack. I had flung a hundred pounds worth of useful items onto my back so many times in the Army I could do it in my sleep while drunk on mouthwash. Once it was in place, I grabbed Ruca’s leash with my right hand, which was literally shaking. *I’m gonna ride a choo-choo*, my mind shouted as I crouched, straightened my left leg in front of me, and slid down the sandy slope toward my first train. Alongside my practiced feet ran an enthusiastic puppy that didn’t and needn’t know what all the excitement was about just yet.

The ease with which Adam broke the plywood, which was larger than the space where we wanted it, into place with his combat boot-armored foot worried me. The flimsy board was about to be the only thing between us and a gruesome death. As we settled in for the ride, our packs as seat cushions, we were all alarmed by another train approaching on our left.

“Oh shit. What should we do, hide?” I asked softly but urgently, with ulterior hope that conversation would distract me from, and possibly quiet, my heart and the rapid, nerve-racking pulse that throbbed throughout my body.

“There is no place to hide. That’s why we never should have gotten on this stupid grainer,” answered Billy. “You know, Adam? If we had hopped dirty-faceⁱⁱ like I suggested—”

“Oh, stop your crying. Sure, if we had gotten on the front of the car instead of the back, we’d be fine this time, since this train’s headed our way. But this ain’t the last train that’s gonna pass us before we get to the Needles yard. And I seriously doubt they’re all gonna be facing the same direction. Plus, all the conductors and engineers I ever met were cooler than you any-damn-way. So, don’t sweat it so much. Having a hobo on your train is good luck. But of course you know that because you’re such an expert on train riding. Boy, I sure am so terribly sorry this train’s not up to your standards, Princess Billy.”

I laughed as silently as I could, technically sitting behind Billy because he was turned facing Adam, who was standing (on metal, not wood) with a hand on a ladder rung, peeking one eye out the right (our left) side of the train while he continued to speak.

“You need to just be grateful we’re even on a train, Billy. We had very little choice, we took what we could get, and we’re not going very far any-damn-way. If we were taking the highline from Seattle to New York, you better believe we never would have hopped the first available train. But guess what, Billy,” Adam said before a short dramatic pause. “We’re not! We’re barely crossing one state border on this piece-of-shit train. Thank God.”

As Adam lectured Billy, the nearing train decelerated gradually. The closer the passing train got to us, the slower the wild rhythm of the wheels on tracks got, and the louder the motor growling became. The louder the motor growling became, the closer the crew members’ ears were to where Adam’s voice matched the crescendo of “Train Cacophony in Drop D.” I opened my mouth to speak (after Adam finally stopped for air) when the loudmouth hurriedly sat on his pack. The sound of splintering wood stopped three hearts, and silence on our part lasted until I was assured we were still safe (as we were going to be).

“O.K. New rule. No forgetting that, when riding on an insta-porch, all sudden movements and redistribution of weight are strictly prohibited.”

“Shhhhhhh,” said Billy, who was sweating so intensely that he was like a peculiar rain cloud, the cause of a pattering of droplets on the thin, essentially intrinsic plywood beneath us.

“You shut up,” Adam argued. “The reason I sat down so fast is because that train is almost here. Just be still and patient. This guy’s creeping like a Sunday-driver. And, for God’s sake Billy, don’t shush me or I’ll duct tape your semen-scented mouth shut.”

The instant the lead engine was visible to me where I sat all the way on the other side of the grain car with a nervously shivering puppy in my lap, the volume of the growling doubled. The large black train engine towered, rumbled, and crept as the burly, old conductor discussed the weather, or some such thing, with the engineer who apparently wanted to finish his beer before they got up to the crew of our train.

“What?” I asked at a volume much higher than the apparently pointless whisper I had been speaking in. “Is that what all that fuss was about? You know there’s no way in hell they saw or heard us, right Billy? And, it probably didn’t matter because Adam was right. They are cooler than you.”

“Alright! I get it, assholes. I’m paranoid. Whatever.”

The passing train came to a stop, and we were all excited by a loud hiss. The long, lazy whistle of a kettle blowing off steam was followed by a sudden jerk that had “dominoed” down our train from the lead engine and continued until it reached the last car. The successive sounds of the knuckles connecting the cars being pulled taut sounded a bit like, “Chunk, chunk, chunk ...” And we were on our way as the “Chooo, choooooo!” of the whistle marked my induction into the same exclusive club as Dylan, Hemmingway, and Kerouac.

“I’m a train rider, monuckas! Let’s celebrate.”

“Ha. Celebrate?” Billy asked with a gaping smile and raised eyebrows. “I wish. But you know none of us are holding. Unless—”

“Open the top of my pack and reach your arm in, Billy,” I said as I grabbed onto the hot, metal ladder in front of me with the hand not holding Ruca, found my footing, and stood shakily. “Hurry up, Billy.”

“Is this a space-bag?” asked Billy.

“You sneaky, lyin’-ass S.O.B.!”

“Space-bag what!” I sat cautiously and snatched the silver, plastic bag full of five liters of “chillable red” flavored wine from Billy and held it above my head by one of the upper corners of the square-shaped bag. I then slapped the bag of wine hard and loud thrice with my right hand before placing the nozzle in my mouth, twisting the release valve, and taking in the hugest, longest gulp of wine I could. After swallowing, I cleared my throat and tossed the wine past Billy’s head, right into Adam’s lap.

“Hey, thanks for teaching me how to hop a train, you guys.” I chuckled and continued with a smile. “No offense, but I can’t wait till I get a chance to do this by myself—just me and my Ruca.”

“Yeah, I’ll never ride with Billy again either.”

“Damn it, Adam! I have had it up to here—”

“Shut up and swill that space bag that’s obviously not a microphone, Billy,” I said before licking my smiling lips. “To hopping trains.”

“To riding the rails.”

“To warm wine.”

“Chooo, choooooo!”

Krkrrraaack!

“Stop moving, Billy!”

Community College Day

You wake up at the crack of noon, even on a school day. Your body has class at 9:00 a.m., but your mind cannot possibly begin to comprehend anything before noon. You begin your daily routine with a quick shower, a look in the mirror, *oh scary!* is your thought. You do a quick shave or apply some quick make-up, maybe both, just to look half way presentable. You search your room for the nearest clean, or half way decent smelling, outfit to throw on just so you can make it to class on time. You rush out of your parents' house, apartment, whichever, again without eating breakfast. That is going to be hell on your stomach later, but the café will have some Bosco Stix you can grab, your lucky stand-by breakfast.

You drive the dreary road to the lovely, red brick building that has somehow taken over your life. *Man, life was so much easier in high school*, you think to yourself as you are jamming to the latest tunes on the local radio. You circle the parking lot for the hundredth time, finally seeing that golden parking spot. Too bad it is a half mile trek to the building, or so it would seem. You check your watch and realize you have just enough spare time to score some grub from the café.

The smell of fresh taco salad and the chatter of fellow students tantalize your senses. You see others from your class and know that you are safe. That girl from the front row, with the funky sweater is there, so you know for a fact you are not late; why would she be late? As you go through the line, you swipe your card in a hurry and rush out the door, making sure you are not late because funky sweater chic is nowhere in sight.

As you find your room, you are hit with the subtle smell of dry erase marker. You find a seat towards the back of class; maybe you can catch some sleep without the professor noticing. The class drones on and you are sort of listening, they are saying something about chemicals, and flammable. Wait, what class are you in? Oh yes, that's right, chemistry.

After class you make no intention of sticking around any longer than you have to. Your car is awaiting its ride back home, and you must give in to it. There is an Xbox waiting in your room and Halo has been calling since 3:00 a.m., when you decided that at least some sleep would be necessary to make it through today. Maybe a nap is in order. Then until you realize there is that to-do-list awaiting you when you get home. So that is what they were yelling about as you went out the door! Another day in the life of a college student, but you would not have it any other way.

Nathan Smith



Untitled
by Tammy Burton

Control

Despite everything that happens to me, my beliefs are my metamorphosed foundation I survive on. Challenge changes my foundations, but my principles in those morphing surfaces of spirituality let me absorb those challenges like a fleshy sponge. Challenges threatened my beliefs, and have even toppled some, but there is one belief that is as a part of me as my organs: and it is control. I don't care if I have a periscope, window, or binoculars to see what's coming my way, because as long as I have my hands firmly fused with the yoke of life, I will be fine. Control over me in the turbulent "stuffs" of life is the key to everything, and is one of the most important spiritual values that I have.

I can't think of a better place to start than at the beginning. When I was young, I was in the hospital. Hospitals smelled like salty vegetable soup, and when they didn't, the dry sterile air with the scent of bandages and plastic tubes seeped into every canal of my body, freezing my tiny limbs to the marrow. White light, which lacked all warmth and volume, bathed the rooms in a sickly light; a sickness that pushed through my pores and into my body. Ever since my stay in those places, with bodily invasions by needles, prodding by strangers, and constant shivering, I fervently value the qualities of life that keep me away from those ironically dark places. Every trip to a medical facility haunted me for months afterward, regardless of the reason for going. Dealing with those situations that were out of my control were the seeds for becoming concerned with how to maintain some aspect of control regardless of the situation, which would compound itself later in my life as well.

Then I escaped from those dark places, and I began to grow away from them as I grew less vulnerable with time. I had room to grow at that stage of my life, and like a little bird, my mind yearned for sustenance; this is when I was fed with one of the most important governing forces in my life: computers. It was all about secrets, a metal box with a softly glowing screen and a panel with dozens of buttons! I tapped on keys, vainly expressing myself with random strokes on a keyboard. What I was really doing was searching, and trying to find deeper meaning to a strange machine in the corner of the living room. Eventually, a broken computer found its way into the hallway next to my bedroom, and it was there that I began to learn to tell the computer what I wanted it to do via commands. In essence, I was having a conversation with the machine, joining together with it to achieve a common goal; it is for this reason that computers have always been an important part of my experience. What the real meaning behind my interest in those machines was (in retrospect) the fascination I had for a computer's ability to take control of variables in order to come to logical decisions and problem solve. Computers also fueled my desire to control the unknown in order to better understand how things can be conquered in order to extend my reach of control, and ultimately better myself. Controlling objects helped me understand myself in subtle ways, and would have effects on me in the years to come.

School was alright when I was drawing idly. I won't even go into what people did to me there, that's not what is important; but what is important is how it affected me socially. I hid. There are ways to stay hidden in the classroom, mainly by not drawing attention to myself in class, which included not answering questions presented to the students, and sitting on the bench at recess. But sometimes, there was no avoiding the trouble that came with hostile territory, embarrassing gym exercises made it difficult for fat children like myself to avoid drawing attention. I was like a white mound of pudding that my peers wanted to poke and smear in disgust. I still don't understand why so many people wanted to arbitrarily hurt me, but it shaped my attitudes on social interaction thereafter.

Despite everything that was done to me, I would not call myself a victim, mainly because I found ways to deal with my social problems, such as drawing comics. Drawing comics became a major expressive tool in my youth, because I found it especially important to use pictorial representations to portray my inner feelings, like the need for escape, the courage to fight my enemies, and the ambition to rise up; I wasn't aware of these themes at the time, but they were precursors to my developing personality. As for my social life, surviving in a toxic environment was difficult, but not impossible; in fact, it helped shape some qualities I have today that help me succeed. The major effect my experiences with public school had on me was my desire to be able to control myself since there was nothing I could do to quell the social cancer that constantly ate at me. Creating things also played a major role in my appreciation of control; drawing and creating my own worlds and making representations of the one I lived in provided a method of control that helped me come to terms with my surroundings. My life, as it were, was saved by my ability and desire to control my actions around other people and stray from peer pressures and other social stigmas that plague the majority of my classmates. Control would later implement itself in higher education as well, when I decided that control was more important than any other virtue I had.

Success is something that I used to think happened to me haphazardly, but upon closer introspection, I found out that I was, virtually, in complete control over myself the whole time. I have always been hard on myself, just as many of my peers and teachers have been hard on me. Such attitudes toward me often culminated in my conclusion that I was incapable in some way. Initially, I took those conclusions in stride, not paying them much mind; this was an indication of my acceptance of perceived reality, which kept me from becoming egotistical. As time wore on however, I became angered by the voices of condescension and self-doubt. Subtly, I began to push back against those downtrodden ideals and work towards goals I consciously did not think that I was capable of. Eventually, the realization that I had been achieving greatness through my own actions and not through chance alerted me to the power I had to direct many aspects of my life, and ultimately take the yoke of my life away from the illusions of chance.

Control is my core link in my "sacred chain." Upon even closer inspection of myself, I can see that my need for control is also branching out into a desire to control others; this had the potential to become a dangerous trait, but I had previously acknowledged that people have the right for self-governance (which is revelatory in itself, given the forceful nature of many aspects of our society, history, and political trends). Upon coming to terms with that, I became interested in debate and opinion, which is why I voraciously enjoy discussion of any sort. Discussion is an opportunity for me to transplant my ideas to others (which is not control, but a healthy way to let people know what I think), who in turn, lend me their opinions; this provided another link in my sacred chain: open mindedness and a hunger for knowledge. All of these things compounded in my still incomplete "circle" of sacred beliefs that help me aspire to be a better human being.

The realization that control is sacred to me encircles all of the events that have dominated my life. Stretching all the way back to my introduction to computing as a boy, I can clearly see that controlling a machine laid the basis for me to know how to control myself; despite all of the obstacles that I may encounter, I am still at the helm of my own personal "keyboard," which lets me respond to anything in my own way. I also know that my control also allows me to defeat opponents (mainly myself) by tackling my issues subtly or covertly. As I learn to better control (or compose) myself I will find new things to add to my sacred chain, and ultimately, get one step closer to actualization, and perhaps more.

Immortal Dreams

“Keep away from people who try to belittle your ambitions. Small people always do that, but the really great make you feel that you too can become great.”

Every time I hear or see these words of the great Mark Twain, I am enraged with the thought and vision of Mrs. Lemon. The name was apt for this woman, reflecting the bitter and sour taste on life that she always had. She carried all the characteristics of a witch; the only thing she lacked was the huge mole on the end of her oversized nose. She screeched with the voice of a crow, only to shriek negative remarks on all things spoken. I was fortunate enough to only have this old and senile substitute once throughout the course of my third grade school year, but once was all it took to set a fire deep inside me.

I remember it as clear as ever, walking into the dark and musty classroom, relinquished of any sort of visual to spark imagination. This was not our normal classroom and I had never been in it before. I never found out why we changed rooms, just for that one day, but it suited our substitute all the more. Looking back, I realize that it was God’s way of warning me what the day had in store.

I took my seat along with all the others and prepared for a normal day of class. We had been working on the usual multiplication and times tables that every other third grader in America had been working on, but today seemed to be unique. Class began and it started to take an unusual pace; Mrs. Lemon went around the room and began to quiz every youthful mind about their dreams, at the same time devouring and shooting down every dream and goal each kid whispered. Mine was very clear, more vivid than any other thing in my life. It was all I thought about, all I worked for, and surely all I wanted. Everything I did was somehow related to my life-long goal. I was so eager to speak the words that I longed to one day live that I didn’t realize the terror and disapproval that Mrs. Lemon was lashing out with. Finally the spotlight was on me and I shouted my dream with anticipation. I wanted to become a quarterback in the National Football League. I saw myself on the podium, just like Peyton Manning or Drew Brees. Idolizing these players gave me insight and incentive to work toward my goal. When the words left my mouth, they exited with a crisp sense of pride like nothing I have ever felt. It took Mrs. Lemon no time at all to laugh in my face and tell me that this would never happen. She gave me every reason why I would never succeed at my goal. She snickered, “Kyle, you will never be big enough; you won’t be able to throw the ball as far as they can; and you can’t run quick enough.” All these things she said to me that day were transformed into a tiny chip, that same chip that I have been wearing on my shoulder since that life-altering day.

After class, when I had arrived home I began to think more deeply into my shattered dream. I began to doubt myself and the abilities that God had given me, and finally it hit me. Why should I let someone belittle my ambitions and tell me what I can or cannot do? From that day on I did everything in my power to make my dream become reality. I would throw football all by myself; I started doing pushups and sit-ups before bed and drank protein shakes to get bigger. All these efforts remained as I grew into a young man. Slowly but surely, I matured and continued to work on my dream. I attended St. Peter’s School and continued on my journey. Those were vital years that contributed to my growth as a man. Finally, the time came to decide where to attend high school. I ultimately chose Columbus North with the dream of playing quarterback and getting one step closer to my ultimate goal.

I began working at my goal with all the passion I had, while keeping the engraved image of Mrs. Lemon in my mind. The image always seemed to inspire and motivate me to do one

Kyle Kammann

more push-up or one more sit-up. I kept working hard during my freshman and sophomore year as I watched from the backup position. Being able to see what talents it took to succeed at this level helped mold me into becoming the athlete I am today. Finally, I got my chance as a junior and I didn't hesitate to show what I had prepared for my entire life. I went on to become one of the most successful quarterbacks to come through Columbus North, becoming all-time scoring leader and breaking records. I began to see myself in the position that I had always wanted, just like Payton Manning and Drew Brees. I adored these two men and envied them and how they played football. Although their football skills were amazing, as I matured, I began to envy more than their laser-rocket arms. These two men exuberated what it meant to be a humble and well-grounded athlete, giving credit where credit was due, and never speaking too highly of themselves. This quality is the one that I will carry with me for as long as I live, whether my dreams are realized or not.

Mrs. Lemon left an image inside my brain that has never gone away; it never will. As a third grader I grew distraught and angry over how she tried to belittle and manipulate my dreams. Throughout the course of my life I became successful and grew into the man I wanted to be. I never thought that I would be thanking Mrs. Lemon for having a part in where I am as an athlete, but if it wasn't for her and her doubt I never would have worked as hard as I did to prove her wrong. To her defense, she wasn't the only person who told me I couldn't do something, but all these naysayers sparked something inside me. Something that made me work harder and do everything I could do to succeed."

"Keep away from people who try to belittle your ambitions. Small people always do that, but the really great make you feel that you, too, can become great."

Although, Twain says to keep away and avoid people that belittle your personal ambitions, I personally seek out these individuals and use their doubt to power my goals and aspirations for life. Thank you, Mrs. Lemon.

Independence for the Still-Dependent

The family we were staying with was very religious, but only had one strict rule: to attend church every Sunday morning. Nobody saw the lack of discipline to be a problem, especially for a couple of teenagers who had no choice but to stay there. The experience started with my brother, Dustin, and I getting our homework finished every night, showering, and heading to bed by 10:30 each night. All of the eight people living in the house got along and respected each other's privacy. There were home-cooked southern-style meals provided every night by the pastor, along with a movie and time to talk about our day. The house had three bedrooms and a basement that equaled the area of the house, so there didn't seem as though there would be a struggle for privacy. There were a lot of religious paintings and pictures on the walls in each room, each portraying the Lord's face in a different way. Often, the family would have a debate over what Jesus looked like, or if Lilith was really Adam's first wife, so I had many things to distract me from our situation. I was beginning to feel better about our situation; however, I knew that the food, movies, and jokes could not fill the void of my own family's absence. For me, seeing my mom every other day, only to receive money, was heartbreaking at times. Nevertheless, I had Dustin and we both had this substitute family, so I just had to learn to cope. I soon realized that I had, in a sense, gotten what I wanted all along: I was not living at home, my mom was never around to supervise (the substitutes never checked to see if we had our homework done), and there were no rules to follow!

Until I was seventeen, I was like any other teenager around; I couldn't wait to move out and live on my own, to become an adult. My dream was for Indiana University to accept me into their sea of crimson and cream independents, filled with big thinkers and go-getters. Well on my way, I started my junior year of high school on a good note, taking college courses and performing community service along with my peers—with whom I was always competing for top grades in the class.

The night my family's house burned down was a traumatic experience for the four of us. Through some form of magic, nobody was in the house that night. My brother, Dustin, and I had asked if we could have a friend stay the night, but none of the friends we had asked were allowed to come over, so we begged to stay with a friend in town. My parents were going out of town to visit a sick grandmother. Dustin had asked my grandfather to take our dogs to his house because he was not comfortable with leaving them home that night, though we had left them home for days while on vacation before. We lost everything, but thankfully not each other. Needless to say, our family had to find another home while our house was being rebuilt. My brother and I decided to stay with a friend while my mother and step-father rented a hotel room just outside of town.

Too busy being an adult, I lost track of test dates, forgot to do homework, and started pulling all-nighters for all the wrong reasons. I fell asleep in church, I took naps in school, and I got light-headed from yelling too many times. My soft, bouncy, brown hair had turned to straw, and I was gaining weight since I had started going out instead of eating with "the substitutes." I did not know why, but I began to argue and fight with everyone in the house—everyone seemed to be fighting and the three bedrooms plus the oversized basement appeared smaller each day. At school, I had been trying to hide my carelessness by blaming my bad grades on the house fire. At home, I justified my moodiness with the house fire. I knew that I had a serious problem, but I knew I couldn't blame that on the house fire; I needed to work on my mentality, to get it back

Jessica Famin

where it was supposed to be. My sanity was being stretched like a rubber band, and the way to bring it back to its original shape was nearby, the answer was staring me in the face.

One Monday, I went to my English class and immediately put my head on my desk. It was hard to get myself on a better sleeping schedule after living like a vampire for a few months. Ms. Hightshue came in and started class by talking about the vocabulary tests we had taken the Friday before. I knew I had gotten a bad grade on it because by then, I just did not see the need to study anymore. I got my test back, with a surprising 54% on the front, threw it in my already unkempt binder, and put my head back on the desk. After class, Ms. Hightshue called me back to her desk to talk. Though I wasn't entirely failing her class, she knew that I was not reaching my full potential. She asked how I was doing, how my house was coming along, and if I was going to move back in with my mom before the house was finished. To be honest with her, I hadn't thought of the possibility of living with my mom before our house was finished, but I was too busy being an adult—I didn't know if I wanted to give up my freedom just yet.

Surprisingly, that day Ms. Hightshue did not yell at me for my laziness, she did not scold me for my carelessness, and she was not condescending when she was helping my rubber band snap back into place. She was the closest thing to a mother figure that I had had in months. But, I could not take her home with me; Ms. H. was still just my teacher. After leaving Ms. Hightshue's room that day, I realized just how much I loved, missed, and needed my mom. She had never judged me or mistreated me; she was always there to help me if I stumbled. My mom was always kind and loving, and she always had a warm smile waiting for us when we came home. Her hugs were the kind of hugs that made everything seem perfectly fine, and her pep talks never failed. Sitting on a messy, foreign bed (even my blankets smelled like the substitutes' house now) I realized that my mom was just the person that I wanted to make rules for me, because I was not ready to grow up.

That night, I called my mom and asked if there was any way that our family could be together before the house was done. Soon after we were reunited, my grades were back to normal and my hair returned to its original color. Dustin and I have become best friends, and we each have a newfound respect for our new house and every person, thing, and feeling inside it. I'm proud to say that I'm not a stereotypical teenager anymore, I have learned to respect and appreciate my mother for all she is. I have realized that she devotes her life to caring for my brother and me, so she deserves a lot of appreciation in return. After our house was finished, I decided that I was not ready to move out on my own and go to an Ivy League school; I am living at home, going to a community college, and trying to make up the nine months of lost time to my mom. It's long overdue and she deserves it. As for the substitutes, it is hard to say that their family is broken now; they live paycheck to paycheck, and fight with each other all the time. Over the last two years, they have shown me that I should be very thankful for my family and thankful that nobody was hurt that tragic night; nobody has to tell me twice.

La beauté est dans l'oeil du spectateur

Today is the big day. Today is my birthday, December 11th. To most people today is just an average Sunday, sitting at home, sleeping in till noon, and just lying around the house all day. For me, however, today marks my freedom. My chance to do something I have wanted to do for a long time but would never get the permission for it... I once heard a saying, "Age is nothing but a number," and although this may be true, I think, psychologically, age has everything to do with maturity. It is the foundation that we build upon whether we build positively or negatively is our choice. Now, I have always been told I act very mature for my age and I think of that as a positive thing. I began my first job at sixteen, I pay for my gas, I pay for my schooling, and I pay for almost anything that I need. So as you can imagine turning eighteen meant quite a lot to me. Now that I have turned eighteen, I do not need permission because I am old enough do it alone. "Old for what?" you might ask, Old enough to get a tattoo. Although my parents did not approve, it was ultimately my decision. I had known since age sixteen that this tattoo had become something I wanted to do.

I can remember that day so vividly that every time I think about it, I practically relive it. I woke up around ten o'clock in the morning and almost immediately busted with energy. This energy felt like an adrenaline rush I had never experienced before. I began climbing out of bed, stumbling as I tried to unravel myself from the covers. I rushed down the stairs and immediately got into the shower. As I took a shower, nothing could keep this tattoo off my mind. I thought about the way it would look, "How painful would it really be?" and who I would send a picture to showing the finished product. After showering, I began the daily things I always do, brush my teeth, fix my hair, put on my makeup, but this time I did all those things with a sense of euphoria that continually washed over me. The clock read eleven-thirty and my grandma said she would pick me up at noon. So, the waiting game began. Minutes passed by and it seemed like hours. I just wanted to leave and get there already. The clock on my phone finally said noon and I looked through our big glass window and spotted her gold Ford Focus pulling onto the side of our road. I felt more than ready for this.

We drove for what seemed like days, and finally made it to the parlor. Its location was set in a run-down area of Indianapolis and I will admit I seemed a bit frightened at first. As we pulled in, there was a heavy-set man standing on the corner of the building smoking a cigarette. He had dark brown hair and a matching beard. On his chubby face also sat a pair of glasses and he watched us as we pulled in. I knew right then he had talked to me on the phone about receiving my tattoo. He was the artist. We stepped out of the car and began walking toward the front entrance. He said, "My shop is actually on this side (pointing to the right of the building) and you can go on in through that door." So my grandma, my middle sister, and I all walked into the door he pointed to.

Upon entering the shop, my eyes immediately noticed the photos on the walls of beautiful tattoos, which he had done. Some were males that had a full sleeve while others were females who had a huge and intricate side piece. Either way, they were all gorgeous and spoke to me in different ways. While I looked and admired the photos, the artist had entered the shop and now sat at the end of this small place in front of a desk. The desk had a printer, a stereo, and a credit card machine all sitting on it. The parlor seemed rather small and only had three rooms on the right. He directed us into the middle room. He said, "Hi, I am Casey Hill. Now which one of you is getting the tattoo today?"

Makaili Shoutz

I instantly spoke up and said, "It's me! My name is Makaili by the way." We shook hands and then got straight to business.

He asked me where I wanted the tattoo, what I wanted, and about how big. I first showed him the picture I had taken of the saying that I wanted. It read, "Beauty is in the eye of the beholder," but in French. After I showed him the picture on my phone, I raised my shirt on my left side and ran my finger along the top of my hip bone to show him where exactly I wanted it. He then got some tracing paper and a pencil and held it up against my body. He lightly traced the shape of where I wanted it and then asked if I had a certain font picked out. This part rendered itself very difficult for me because I wanted it legible and in cursive. I had looked online and could not quite find the particular font I wanted. After scanning through some pages of fonts he had given me in a binder, I found one that I liked and he agreed that it complimented the quote nicely.

We waited for about twenty minutes, and he got it all drawn up and asked me if I liked it. Waiting for him to draw my tattoo felt exhausting. I was excited and nervous and had a million things running through my mind. So, I replied with a yes and he began putting the outline on my hip with a non-permanent ink that rubbed on. He told me to look into the mirror and tell him if there was anything I did not like about it. I slowly raised my head to look in the mirror and what I saw expressed beauty and spoke exactly the way I wanted it to. My grandma asked, "Are you sure you want to do this?"

I replied, "I am positive."

She then said, "Well if you can handle this, you can handle anything."

I knew I could do it and no matter how much it hurt, I told myself I couldn't have just half of the tattoo.

After we made some slight adjustments such as, slightly repositioning the tattoo so that it would fit the contour of my hip, he began tattooing my body. Although the pain felt excruciating, I just kept thinking about my great grandma, who had died from cancer, and my friend James who had recently died in a car accident. I told myself if they can suffer through all of that then this short amount of pain I can endure, too. Although I was not close to my great grandma or friend, they still both hold a special place in my heart. After Casey had finished, I got up looked in the mirror and had the biggest grin on my face. This tattoo symbolized so many things for me and it will continue to be with me forever just as James and great grandma and my freedom will be, too.

Learning From the Storm

The day began like any other summer day for me, close to noon. It was the middle of summer vacation from elementary school, and I didn't know what to do with myself. The sun was shining, our dogs were barking, the birds were probably chirping, and surely there was some other kind of summer activities going on that I wasn't paying attention to. I was somewhat content with my laziness. After all, I earned it after all that difficult elementary school work. Still I felt that there was something better I could be doing.

Before I had a chance to think about what to do with the day, my parents asked me if I would be okay home alone for a little while. They needed to go to the grocery store and they knew that I wasn't a very big fan of shopping. I had been left home alone before so this wasn't a big deal. Everyone, including myself, thought that I would be fine being left alone for a short time.

There I was, home alone, bored, and technically babysitting three dogs. At least that is what I told myself. Everything was going fine until I looked outside and noticed the blackish gray clouds and flashes of lightning fast approaching. It was as if an ocean of darkness was rushing towards me. If at that age I had known the word ominous, I surely would have used it to describe those clouds. I was old enough to know that dark clouds meant a storm was coming, but young enough to be afraid of a thunderstorm. To cope with my fear I tried to drown out the increasing sounds of thunder by playing Nintendo and watching TV. Of course, these distractions could only work for so long, and they certainly couldn't work once the electricity went out. Even though the clouds hadn't completely blocked out the sun, without power in the house, I had nothing to focus on besides the storm and my own fears. I had always been afraid of thunderstorms and as far as I knew, so had my dogs. My only real concern besides the storm was the fact that the only way to get the dogs to go outside in this weather was to go with them. This wouldn't have been important if I had been paying attention before the storm picked up, but by now I had waited long enough that I knew the dogs probably needed to go to the bathroom. Even though I was afraid to go outside, I wasn't eager to clean up after three dogs turn my house into their personal bathroom. I really only had one choice. At such a young age it was no small feat for me to go stand outside in a storm, even for a short amount of time. I think I felt like I was showing some maturity by attempting to face my fear and act slightly brave for my dogs. I mean, surely I was braver than my dogs.

So I coaxed the dogs out back and into the thunderstorm. For a moment I felt proud of myself, standing out in the rain, watching over the dogs. The feeling was fleeting because it was only a few minutes later that the dogs wanted back inside as much as I did. It was then that I remembered that I had locked all the doors in the house out of some seemingly unrelated childish fear. I'm not quite sure how I managed to lock the door behind me, but I do know that I was suddenly more aware, not only of the rain pelting my face, but more aware of my own fear. In this moment not only did all thoughts of maturity leave my brain, but I think that all thoughts period left.

I think some higher brain functions must have shut down in my panic; maybe it was some sort of survival instinct. The situation I found myself in felt like a puzzle I could solve if only I was able to concentrate hard enough. I realized I needed to check all around the house for some other options to get inside. After walking around the house countless times, checking every door and window for a way back inside, I was starting to get desperate. I realized the windows simply couldn't be opened from the outside and I had definitely locked every door in the house. The

Jeff Gersh

darkness of the clouds and the intensity of the storm seemed to be growing at the same rate as my panic, fear and sense of desperation.

After unsuccessfully racking my brain for a solution, I couldn't help but stare at the rusty, old, lawn furniture lying around. Some of the lawn chairs looked like they would fall apart if I even picked them up. The lawn chairs were made of ribbons of plastic woven around a flimsy metal frame, but after years of being used, the plastic was unraveling and the frame was bent and twisted. There was an old, black, wrought iron table I could barely move, let alone use to break a window. Was I really scared and desperate enough to break a window and let myself back inside? Was it even possible?

I knew that breaking a window isn't as easy as it looks in action movies, especially considering the fact that many home windows are made to not shatter. Luckily for my own sense of pride, and especially, luckily for my parents' wallets and sanity, I knew that I shouldn't break into my own house. I don't know how long I had been stuck outside, but eventually I was getting used to the storm. I don't know if it was the fact that I had run out of options or maybe my panic was subsiding enough to think clearly, but I realized I could walk down the street to a friend's house. Not surprisingly, choosing between standing out in the rain with my dogs and going to a friend's house wasn't very hard. My friend only lived three houses away so it was a quick walk. I honestly don't even know if I made it to my friend's house because, before I knew it, I noticed the rain had slowed down. The only reason I know that I had thought to leave is because I remember walking back to my house.

As I was walking towards my house I saw my parents not only were home, but they were walking around outside looking for me. As I walked up to them they told me how scared and confused they were to see the dogs outside and all the doors locked with no sight of me anywhere. I can only imagine how they would have felt if I had broken a window to get in. Even though the sky was still dark I knew the storm was over.

It took a few days before I put any deep thought into everything that happened. At first I just thought that I stumbled into a situation that forced me to confront my fear of thunderstorms. But over time I realized there was a lesson to be learned from the fact that I got over a fear by facing it, no matter how unintentionally. This helped me to realize that sometimes the best way to learn from a situation is to be fully immersed in it.

Life Turned Red

Family Guy on the T.V., stuck on the menu setting. As I come out of unconsciousness all I can hear is Stewie practicing karate, “High-YAH, Cong-POW, Pah-Tooy!” I look up and see my best friend. Her make up smeared across her face. Her hair is a wild mess, frizzy and poofy. Her foot is in my side, and she is a stealer of the blanket we shared last night. I slowly maneuver my body in to a sitting up position, rub my eyes and yawn. Eww. Beer breath. I stand up as slowly as I can, attempting to not make the slightest bit of noise. I begin to carefully walk over all of the sleeping bodies acting as if they are land mines, trying not to step on their flailing arms and legs. Tiptoeing down the hallway I see the stained up carpet. Spots of brown and yellow from spilled drinks and spit cups over the months of nonstop parties. I finally reach the bathroom. As I meet myself in the mirror, I think, “I look like a damn mess. Work in thirty minutes. Thank goodness it is right down the road.” I start trying to fix myself up the best I can without being at home. Run the water in a trickle to avoid waking someone up. Use toilet paper to wipe off the left over mascara under my eyes, and brush my teeth. I feel like 007 trying to sneak around as silently as possible to gather mine and my friend’s purses and shoes. I gently shake my best friend to wake her up and we escape the apartment without anyone knowing.

Phew. It’s freezing outside. So, we run to the car, start it up, and blast the heat. It wasn’t but five minutes after we started thawing out that we began talking and laughing about the madness of the night before. We lived for this. The fun, the freedom, the party, and the idea of being grown up without rules.

Not one minute late, I pull into a parking spot at work. Walk through the heavy, glass doors and begin the day’s shift. While I fold the clothes the customers carelessly threw around the night before, I lose my mind in thinking. I had such a good time last night and cannot wait for the boy who makes my heart pound to walk through the door later in the day. He was my main purpose for last night’s party, and the night before, and the night before that, and on and on. He and I met at work and hit it off like crazy. I have never had this much fun and felt this close to anyone. The late nights and the forever long talks, and the best part of it all was that no matter how much time we spent being together, it never got old. I still had the excitement as if it were the first time talking to him all over again.

I didn’t know where this life was going or what I was planning to do with myself, but it didn’t matter. I was living, enjoying myself, and it felt wonderful.

Time went on and I ate up the simplicity of my days. Three months of work, high school, and fun. Soon, things began to change. I didn’t feel as good. I was tired all the time. If I had twenty minutes between school and my shift at work I would sleep fifteen of them away. I was in tune with my body, I didn’t know what was wrong with me for sure, but I had a vague idea. A trip to the tanning bed, a day with my best friend, and a walk through the CVS later, I found myself sitting in a public restroom, pregnancy test in hand, thoughts filling my head and spilling over. The test result was positive, and surprisingly, so was my attitude. I was not scared, I was happy. I couldn’t pick up my phone fast enough to dial the number of the guy I had called my boyfriend for the past three months.

It happened fast. It’s against the “rules” and I feared the condescending eyes. But, I was up to the task. I was ready to be the best mother I could be. It was a rough nine months of hugging the toilet while trying to finish high school. But soon, the day came. I met my beautiful ivory-skinned, red-haired, blue-eyed daughter. Lying there in the hospital bed I glance over to see her tiny body getting cleaned up by the crowd of nurses. I wasn’t able to hold her due to my

operation, but her daddy carried her six pound seven ounce body over to me. We shared our very first kiss with tears streaming down both our faces. In that moment, this itty-bitty thing I had never met before had the power of changing the rest of my life from this day forward. I had no words.

Months went on, and I lived by my own code of honor: Never to be any less of a mother now than I would be if I were thirty years old. The person on that couch after nights of partying stays in that moment. I have no regrets for prioritizing my daughter's needs over my own. A day in my life now is filled with the very same things as I had before: the freedom, the fun, and the happiness. Happiness is a mound of red curly hair bobbing up and down as my daughter climbs into bed with us in the mornings. Fun is rolling around on the floor, body parts clashing as we tickle each other until we run out of breath from laughing. Freedom is thanking myself for independently raising her to be a strong, loving and beautiful individual. I am different. I don't look as smokin' as I may have looked before. I don't have the time for all the nonsense and parties. And I cannot blow a paycheck on the 3-for-\$16 tans, the size small clothes, and the Bud Light beer.

Now, as I walk through Wal-Mart, a squeaky cart makes its way down the baby aisle. I pull diapers and wipes off the shelves, and search for size 24-months clothes. My hips snag the corners as we turn to get to the next aisle, and my stomach touches the handle bar on the cart. Finally, we reach the register. Sixty dollars. And I can no longer think of a better way to spend it.

Long Hours and Fast Times

Slamming onto the touch pad at full speed, I lifted my head to breathe. Not thinking about how my lungs were burning for air, or the sharp pains running through my forearms and thighs. One question etched into my thoughts... did I make it? I was in the State meet trying my hardest to swim at least a 1:19.29. Earlier that year I had found out that I was close to qualifying for the Sectional meet. The fastest swimmers in four states surrounding Indiana would swim in it. For swimmers, making this meet is like going to the Super Bowl. Of my teammates, only two boys and two other girls went. My coaches even told me, if they had been asked a year ago, they couldn't have imagined I would ever come this close to qualifying for Sectionals. Once I knew that I was nearing the time I needed, it became what I wanted more than anything.

For most teenagers the sole purpose of summer is to get a break from everything but also to work the occasional job for gas money. My friends and I are not like most teenagers. Yes, we are still the kids who want to hang out and have fun; however, we have another life that probably only our families and maybe close friends understand. It is the life of a truly competitive swimmer. On this specific summer weekend our team was not worried about what parties we were going to or what odd jobs we could do for the week. Our focus was on the task ahead: State. The state meet was held at West Lafayette's Purdue University.

State is the most important meet for many swimmers. At this meet I had qualified for the 100 meter and 200 meter breaststroke. I also swam the breaststroke leg in the 400 meter medley relay, after having swum my 200 breast earlier in the meet and getting a best time I needed to move on. An excellent swim, but the 200 was not my focus, as I needed to keep my thoughts on my 100 breaststroke. Soon facing me would be two of my biggest challenges: making me mentally ready to swim and keeping focused on just racing.

When any swimmers have a conversation we understand what is being said without really thinking about it. I don't mean just the slang we use in talking about events, or how we refer to our sets in practice, or even discussions about the feeling you get when you swim. This is about the races. The way our communication warns us to get ready, and when it tells us to step on the blocks before the race. We use whistles and beeps, a second language to us. You don't have to think about what the sounds mean. Just knowing and reacting automatically is our skill and a necessity.

Before you swim you have to be mentally and physically ready, so that's what I did. Focusing on my race, I thought about the whistle, take your mark, and beep for my reaction time. I thought about the feeling of cold water hitting my body with a pullout and dolphin kick immediately following. I thought about kicking to come up for my first breath and gliding gracefully into my first stroke. There were my turns to consider; straight back off of the wall followed by another pullout. Then for a short time, not thinking about my race at all, just thinking about my muscles. Swimmers do a warm up before each swim. I get in the diving well and swim till my muscles feel loosened up. Now my focus turned to my race again. My coach reassured me.

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“Power then speed baby, power then speed.”

“Yup, I got it.” I shake my arm and legs like swimmers do, more as a pump up now than to actually serve a physical purpose.

“Go get them girl.”

I knew what I needed to do and Coach had faith in me. Saying that I was ready would have been an understatement. I got behind the blocks a few heats before my race. I concentrated solely on my race and how I would swim.

I watched the heat of girls in front of me at the blocks waiting for the heat before them to finish. About one minute and forty-five seconds later it would be my turn. The time passes quicker than you would think. The heat ahead of me dives in but it's my race that has begun. I pushed the goggles onto my face and took them off again a few times. It's a habit I have. I stand there and shake out my arms and legs. It's slightly cold. My suit felt smooth and dry on my wet skin. It dug into my hips and shoulders. Looking over at Coach helped me feel a little less nervous. I looked away and out over the pool. I smiled, knowing this is my race and knowing what I'm going to do. My legs didn't stop moving until I heard the first long whistle. I put my foot on the step to the block and set my right hand on my thigh. The official blew three shorter whistles. Stepping onto the blocks; right foot at the front end with my toes over the edge, left foot at the back with only the front of my foot touching the block, I leaned with both hands on my front leg. The official to my left picked up the starter's microphone and said the words we know are going to sound rhythmically at any moment; “Take—your—mark... BEEP.”

I dove into the water as fast and as streamlined as I have practiced. There is cool, crisp, water surrounding me all of a sudden. Pull, dolphin kick, breast kick, tight hands forward, and stroke. I pulled deep, kicked hard, turned fast, and headed back to the start. I was not in the lead but not in the back of the pack either. Close to the end, I was pushing and pulling as hard as I could manage. Suddenly I felt the pads. I knew it was a good swim. I could feel it, but was it good enough? Still fighting to catch my breath, I strained to find Coach to see the look on his face-happy. Could I have made Sectionals? I looked towards the score board. I had beaten a senior on our team; I had gotten my best time; I had not made Sectionals. My time was 1:20.01. I was close, but close doesn't cut it. It was an amazing time thus far, but I wanted more. I wanted to be at the next level.

Coach came over to me with only a smile and a pat on the back. He told me I had a good swim. My stomach felt like I had just seen a horror film or had eaten a spoonful of wasabi. From loss of air, the time drop, and the realization that I would not be swimming in Sectionals this year, vertigo was inevitable. I'd worked so hard yet not achieved my goal. There were two girls going to Sectionals and I had worked harder than both of them. Maybe it just wasn't enough to work hard, but I had forgotten one thing. I still had a chance. Of course, there were always time trials. I could swim my race again. Could I make it this time, after swimming so hard three times already today? I wasn't sure, but I wanted to find out.

I went and told Coach I wanted to swim time trials and get my cut. “Yup, I'll be there.”

I could feel my body straining to keep my excitement at a lower level to conserve energy. So that was it. There was one more chance to attain my goal. It was one chance to show that my hard work really paid off. One shot to make this season count and to make myself better. As it says in one of my pump up songs by Eminem, “You only get one shot... this opportunity comes once in a lifetime.”

I have many, I guess you would call them ‘rituals’, for my meets. For example, I don’t like having anything solid in my stomach when I swim. The only problem is that you have to keep up your energy and keep hydrated. I have to drink a lot of Gatorade and water throughout the meet. Breakfast had been much earlier that morning. We have to wake up early for warm ups. Deciding to go out and grab a protein and carbohydrate smoothie at the Smoothie King nearby, I hoped it would be enough.

I went back to the pool and sat on the bench thinking about nothing. I played music loudly in my iPod. I listen to only two different songs before I swim. The songs are “Headstrong” by Trapt and “You Only Get One Shot” by Eminem. Coach finally arrived at the pool. He asked me if I was ready. I said yes. My race was so close yet so far away. I had to just sit and wait, and wait, and wait.

After swimming my warm up and changing into my competition suit, I went back onto the deck. Fired up and ready to go, I waited and stretched. All of a sudden it was my turn. I gave one last look towards my coach. He knew I could do it and so did I. It had come down to this last race. This race decided if I was going home to freedom for the end of the summer or another week of training. I knew that one more week of training was what I wanted. Knowing exactly how to swim my race, I was sure of swimming it the best I ever had.

I heard the long whistle. I was ready. Three short whistles are blown. I stepped up. “Swimmers—take—your—mark... BEEP” The words running through my head were power then speed, power then speed. Head down on the turn. It was the end and I knew I couldn’t back off. I had to finish harder than I ever had before if I wanted that time. Reaching my last stroke, I touched the pad with everything left in me.

I had to have gotten the time. I knew it. I turned around to see my parents and my coach. Their reactions were of course appropriate for the occasion; jumping up and down with excitement and cheering! I looked at the score board. It read a 1:18:75. Being so stunned, I couldn’t even speak. I just smiled. My heart throbbing in my head drowned out all but the faint sound of cheering and the loud sighs in my breathing. I could not believe I’d done it. I had worked so hard this past summer in practice by doing an extra sixty push-ups every day. Another week of training was mine, with only four others on my team. No one could ignore my speed now. I can still remember the feeling of knowing I had made my first Sectional cut. You feel like you could run through the halls of the college screaming and jumping up and down until you collapsed from exhaustion. Not only because of how fast the swim was, but also why the swim was so fast.

Shiny Purple Costumes

Curling hair, taping the bottom of dance shoes, caking on makeup. Usually it's a comforting ritual that prepares us for the upcoming task, but that calm is disturbed when we are in an unfamiliar environment. This year is a trip year, which means we, the all-girls show choir, are leaving the country for a competition with two other choirs from our high school. In the unfamiliar classroom, we stare into the mirrors rushing to place our mocha eye shadow in the exact same manner as the girl next to us. I look in the mirror at the five foot six inch athletic body staring back at me, slimmed by the tight fitting, sequined, purple costume. As always, I apply a dark layer of cover-up so that I won't appear ghostly on stage. Next is the bright red lipstick and blush, which smears across my face as another frantic girl blurs past me. I touch up my make up once more and move on to helping the other girls get ready in time. Before I realize what has happened I find myself standing behind a musty smelling, purple velvet curtain. Although I can hardly breathe, like everyone else, I've painted on my bright white smile for the judges like we practiced. I wish we could walk out on the stage already but the group ahead of us hasn't finished their numbers yet.

We wait, and wait, and wait for the group before us to finish. As we stand there, taping out feet, fidgeting with our curls, and making sure everyone's bra straps are safely tucked behind their vests, I think about the rehearsals. The long, early morning rehearsals that I ran to make on time, after early morning swim practice and before school each day; rehearsals that drilled the dance moves and every last *Pas de Bourrée* into my head. On the first day this year I hadn't even known what a *Pas de Bourrée* was, much less how to do one. Every day this year, I practiced and practiced with the other girls, cringing faces and clenching fists because of what lies under all the Band-Aids on our feet.

We look at each other with a sense of knowing. We had become a team. We know it will soon be time to show how hard we had worked. I certainly wasn't the only girl in the group new to show choir. However, with each grueling week of practice before school, during class, and after school, I got better and better. I feel a real smile cross my face and my skin grows hot. The songs could be difficult but singing comes much more naturally to me than the structured, difficult, ballet-like dance moves we each had to execute in perfect unison. I remember the way I had been constantly pushing my girls and myself forward during rehearsals. Still, I've got to focus on the challenge ahead. We could go on at any moment.

Finally, the group before us is finishing their last number. Even though we can't quite see them we can hear the upbeat music of the finale. Behind the stage scenes all that can be heard clearly are the thumping noises of the group growing louder as they dance back and forth across the stage, as if the risers might break at any moment. Finally it's our turn to file onto the stage. While we wait for the judges to finish making their comments on the last group's performance, we stand patiently under the bright stage lights. It's the kind of bright where all of the little particles of dust can be seen flying around. When we look out towards the audience all we can see is a blurry cloud and a few unfamiliar faces in the front row. Past that, there is nothing but

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milky darkness. The hot stage and warm lights dry mouths like the Sahara, making it a struggle to swallow. I shake and beads of sweat start to form on my face. My cheeks are sore, and I can feel the scratchy costume against my legs as I shift my weight. Occasionally a pale face or two pop out from the darkness beyond. A baby cries out, papers shuffle, and an old man on the right clears his throat. They feel no pressure as they sit in the dark, eyes focused away from them. A voice seemingly coming from nowhere introduces us. A note is played on the piano. It seems very distant. The introduction to the song begins and we prepare to sing. The sound seems muffled as if it were being played outside of the auditorium instead of right next to us. If the audience listens closely enough they should hear a slight whooshing sound as we all inhale in unison.

Mustering up our confidence from each other, we all begin to sing on cue and begin our routine. All of us perform in unison in our shiny, sparkly, purple skirts and tops, as if there is nothing more important in the world at this moment, as if it is a battle to be won rather than a choir competition. Each note goes over and out into the lobby above. Even as I focus on the dance I can feel a weight on my chest. My whole body is tingling with nervous energy, and I am sure that every step I take isn't quite good enough. I start to ease into it. I'm relaxed and focused again. By the beginning of our second piece, I am singing calmly and clearly as a true smile creeps across my face. I am passionate about singing and in that moment it is more important to perform than to worry about what the judges think. I smoothly complete each jazz, ballet, and show moves the choreographer had shown us, remembering how far I have come. I'm exhausted and dripping with sweat, but I can breathe again. My jitters are gone. I can still feel the music vibrating through my body and the fluidity with which we all dance together. Each hand is distinctly pointed, each step light, and every face covered in steamy sweat as each girl moves with accuracy. We are on a roll towards the end.

Suddenly the music stops, and we realize there is nothing left to dance. Nothing left to sing. We simultaneously take a bow and then calmly file off stage, smiles radiating with energy across each make-up covered face. As soon as we hit the last curtain we run to the hall and hug each other over and over. Some girls laugh and some cry as we grab our belongings and quietly scurry off to the auditorium to await the results. There is a tension we can all feel in each other but at the same time we are all so exhausted and happy with our performance. At last our director meets us with the results.

She is smiling so we all manage a deep breath. I recognize a deeper calm feeling building within me. We all glance at each other with a knowing look in our eyes. Most of us are new this year. We had all worked our hardest in practice. We have done our best, but would it be enough? As soon as our director reads the results we all jump up even though our feet hurt from our heeled dance shoes. We kept jumping as if the floor is too hot to stand on. "OH MY GOD! We did it!" I yell hugging anyone I can get my arms around.

I turn to my friend Katherine; "I can't believe we actually did it."

"I know! I can't wait to get back to school and tell everyone!"

"Me either. That trophy is going to look great in the choir room."

There is nothing we can do with all that energy and excitement but put it back into each other. Some of my friends are holding on to each other tightly while others shout out similar exclamations. “I can’t believe we did it!”

“Thank goodness I didn’t destroy my feet for nothing!”

Everyone laughs at this. We didn’t know what to do with ourselves. We hadn’t expected to do so well. Not only are we the highest placing choir in our category, but we also out-scored the other prestigious choirs from our school.

That night we all slowly drag ourselves back on the bus with droopy, sleepy grins that just won’t quit. Each of us is cuddled up on the brown plastic benches in our comfy pants and t-shirts. Decorated boxes full of brown heeled shoes fill the isles topped by neatly folded sequined purple costumes. Mascara runs down some of our faces from tears of joy after the competition, while others have bits of concealer or lipstick smudged, too tired and happy to care. It has been a good day. A year’s worth of hard work paid off in just a few minutes of performing.

Mother

There was always something to look forward to every time I came through the front door of my girlfriend Morgan's house. Not only having a great time spending time with her, but seeing her mother, Barb always greeted me with her smiling face, as I stepped inside. "Hi, Tanner," she said, smiling.

She was curled up on the couch in the living room with her faithful laptop sitting on her lap. "Princess says hello," as soon as she said that Morgan's six year old Shih Tzu came hopping off the chair and up to me. "Hey," I would say to Barb.

"Morgan, someone's here to see you!" she shouted to Morgan in her bedroom. She said this at least a thousand times in my lifetime, it never got old. As I left Morgan's house every night, Barb would say to me, "Bye, Tanner, be careful."

Barb worked at all three Brownstown Schools in Indiana. She worked in the tech department, and loved working there. It was her life. Each summer, Morgan and I would help Barb set up new computers for the new students at the Elementary School; we went through at least a hundred different computers. Whenever I got off work in the summer I'd come help Barb and Morgan at the elementary school. When I got there the first thing Barb asked me was, "Hi, Tanner, have you had anything to eat?"

"No," I would reply. Instantly, she would tell me, "Come on, I'll get you something from the cafeteria."

"No, really, it's ok, I'll be fine," I said, but she always insisted.

In my home life, things were a quite different than the one I loved being in with Morgan and her family. My mother often criticized me for never wanting to be part of the family anymore because I spent "too much time with *Morgan!*" she'd say.

How could I love being with my own family though? My mother and father would make fun of me behind my back, calling me stupid and worthless, or my favorite, "He ain't gonna amount to shit," as my father would always say!

My mother started blaming Morgan for everything I did; she was the root to every problem she had with me. I started telling Morgan about the issues I had with my mother and the fights we had because of something she blamed on her. Every time I would tell Morgan, I would realize that this wasn't a mother. She never even attempted to treat Morgan as Barb had treated me. My mother would deny ever doing anything mean or wrong to her.

I was never enough to my mother or even my father because I despised basketball, unlike my sister, who reigns as the golden child with a basketball in her hand. The spotlight was always on my sister, whereas I was to be known as the, *Other Bennett*. When I started dating Morgan and coming to see her often, her parents took notice and treated me as if I were one of their own. For once I could leave my prison and be loved. I would come over to find Barb sitting on the couch with her computer, greeting me with open arms. "Have you ate, Tanner?" she asked.

"No," I replied.

"Well, why not? It's past three already!"

"Well, we really don't have much to eat at my house," I said.

"Well apparently so! Look how skinny you are!" said Barb, instantly she got up and began making me a sandwich.

"What kind do you like?" she asked, pointing to three different bags of potato chips.

"Really, it's ok, you don't have to make me anything," I'd say.

“Tanner, you haven’t eaten, you’re going to eat,” she said, handing me a peanut butter sandwich.

“Thanks,” I said.

She would always ask how school went or congratulate me on a good finish in a cross-country meet that she couldn’t attend. “But I’ve got your picture on the fridge now, go look,” she said.

I went to the kitchen and saw the article with a picture of me running alongside another runner. There was never a picture of me on the fridge at home.

Other times Barb, Morgan, and I would head to the tennis court in Brownstown and usually stay till dark. Barb would always have her camera out, taking pictures of us. Wherever she went, Barb carried her camera, always wanting to capture an experience. But she would never want to be in one of those photos, which everyone noticed and laughed about. It’s what made Barb, Barb. Things always seemed to stay the same at home, but when I was with Morgan and her family, there was always something different about each day.

Life continued, as I wanted it to be with Morgan and her family. Her family was so happy and my life seemed hopeful, but nothing prepared us for what happened next. In December of 2010, Barb committed suicide. As I sat in the church where Morgan and I first met, I held her hand standing above the casket, looking at the one person who took me into their life, and made me her son. Morgan bent down to kiss her mother on the forehead, but pulled away.

She ran into the other room, I followed and grabbed her, not saying a word. “That’s not my mom, that’s not her.”

We came back to the casket and placed Barb’s cell phone into her right hand because she always had her phone on her. I took one last look at Barb; the one parent who made me feel loved as a person even though I wasn’t her child. She took me into her home, fed me and listened to me as if I were her own. I now knew how it felt to have a mother.

As I continue to go to Morgan’s, almost ten months later after that life changing night, I can still hear Barb’s voice. The last thing she ever said to me, as she had always said before I would walk out the door, was “Bye, Tanner, be careful.”

Out of the Blue

Sitting at a small wooden desk with a cubby built inside, I was listening to the teacher harp about math. Fractions, yuck! I was trying hard to focus on the blackboard and what the teacher was saying, but failing miserably. I tried to look around the room, but it was an impossible task. It was like trying to move in a straitjacket. I had an unbearable pain in both sides of my neck! I tried telling the teacher about the pain I felt, but she just thought I was being foolish. When I got off the bus later that afternoon, I ran down the alley as fast as I could sprinting up the deck steps and swinging open the screen door to tell my mom what I was experiencing.

My lymph nodes were severely swollen; I could hardly turn my head in either direction. It was like having two baseballs shoved up under my skin. Sitting inside the lab at the doctor's office just staring out the little square window, the room drowned of any color and life, was when my family and I found out that I had Epstein Barr virus. Epstein Barr virus? What is that? That was the question I pondered as the doctor explained it to my mom. It seemed like the doctor was speaking gibberish. "Epstein Barr virus, there was no way that was a real word!" Once we left the doctor's office and got back into my mom's gold "granny" car, as I used to call it, she explained to me in simpler terms what was happening. All I could seem to think was, *Why me?*

Most people have never heard of Epstein Barr virus, unless they're in the medical field. Epstein Barr virus is an extreme case of mono, except it takes longer to get over. With Epstein Barr virus there is a chance of having setbacks. When diagnosed with Epstein Barr virus your immune system basically shuts down, you become weak, tired, and you run a fever. There isn't medication; you just have to pray that your immune system kicks into gear. I got very sick, very fast. It was like being hit with a brick wall. It came out of nowhere and when it hit, it hit hard! I averaged a fever of 102 to 103 degrees for three weeks. I was sleeping eighteen to twenty hours a day. My mom would have to wake me up to feed me and then I would go straight back to sleep.

The first time I went to get my blood drawn, I was terrified. As I looked at all the needles and antiseptics, the nurse came in with three large tubes that needed filled with my blood! I had never had my blood drawn before. I had had shots, but nothing of this nature. Heart pounding, body shaking and hands sweating, I was a nervous wreck!

I had setbacks every winter for years. Eventually, I became a pro at getting my blood drawn, and it no longer bothered me; I became immune to it. As soon as the needle punctured my skin and blood started pouring into one of the many tubes I had to fill, I would just stare mesmerized. But one year my Epstein Barr virus was worse than I had ever dealt with. It was the winter of my seventh grade year. This was a time when all I cared about was being popular and being noticed by the cute football player, but instead I was stuck at home in bed. I missed months of school. I staggered out of bed only to get some food or go to the bathroom. The doctor thought I might have had cancer when my results came back from my previous blood test, and he noticed my blood count was unusual. My lymph nodes were horribly swollen again, and my groin was enlarged. My parents scheduled an appointment at Riley Children's Hospital. I was noticeably surprised when we showed up there. I was used to a small doctor's office and Riley was a huge adjustment. The doctor's office was neutral in color. I kept my attention focused on the blue, green, and tan tiles on the floor. The doctor walked in holding a stack of papers.

"The tests came back," said the doctor.

"And?" my parents said in unison.

"It's negative," he said.

My parents instantly began to cry, and at the time I had no idea why. When I was finally able to go back to school, I was ecstatic. I had missed all the things that other kids take for granted. The homework, the school lunch, and my ugly blue locker. Coming back to school after missing almost three months, always behind in all of my school work, was really hard on me. I had no idea what was going on, everything was in a foreign language! My grades had slipped tremendously. I had gone from A's and B's to C's and sometimes D's. At school, there was a rumor going around that I had cancer. When people would ask me, I was confused and terrified. It was like everyone knew something that I didn't, a secret about me. Why would anyone ask me this? Those rumors were how I found out why my mom and dad were crying when the doctor told us the test results.

When the air turns crisp, and the brown crinkled leaves begin to disappear, I become more anxious than a transfer student entering a new school. Although I have not had a setback in years, every time snowflakes begin to fall, I always get butterflies in my stomach, and am scared that it is going to happen again. I haven't had to deal with this virus in six years, thank goodness! And my immune system is better than ever, despite the occasional flu and cold. Most kids would think lying in bed all day and sleeping would be the dream life. Well, it is not all it is cracked up to be.

Trust me; I speak from experience.

Sixteen

Everybody was, is, or is going to be sixteen at some point in their life, be it physically or mentally. You don't know who you are yet, or where you're going, but you're certain you know everything about the world and how it works, that there is no need for compromise, security, or anything of the like in life. Nothing bad has happened to you yet, right? And you've done some stupid things...things sixteen year olds do like take things for granted, and drive cars fast. The car I drove like a teenage idiot was more than just a car. It was a physical collection of memories. It had been around nearly since I was born. I remember when my mom spanked me for the first time in that car. I remember when I let my ice cream cone melt all over the back seat, and I had to help my dad scrub the sticky chocolate mess out of the gray leather seats. I remember my mom falling off a step-ladder and breaking her ankle, and how upset she was when she couldn't drive stick shift on her daily commute to Indianapolis anymore. I remember her passing her car, a 1995 Volkswagen Passat GLX VR6, loaded with every single option available, except for a moon-roof, down to her three sons. That poor car. It was in for a rough life from then on.

My brothers and I all learned to drive stick shift on this car. I remember how many times I stalled the car when I was first learning...ninety percent of the clutch pedal travel did absolutely nothing. It was that first ten percent, near the floor board, where the clutch engaged, and you had to pull up on this pedal slowly, very slowly, and give it gas or it would stall out. This was complicated by the car still having the original clutch when I got it. It had already seen twelve years, two-hundred thousand plus miles, and two teenage boys. How it even worked at all is still beyond me. So yes, the clutch was a bit touchy, and would slip from time to time. But after a week or two of gear-grinding, hair-pulling, stalling in the middle of a four way intersection, I got the hang of it. And I knew since I could drive this manual transmission car I was now a race-car driver.

Unfortunately, not everything in the car worked on magic alone. The front passenger side window didn't work at all. To get the rear defroster switch to work, you had to wedge a piece of cardboard between it and the dash. It didn't have a horn anymore. The transmission would grind and groan sometimes when I shifted into reverse. If I was the transmission of a car driven by three teenagers, though, I suppose I'd groan too. About a quart of oil and coolant each would disappear each month. Some people consider this a flaw, as a sign of needing an engine rebuild. This was not true. My car was not flawed. It was aged, yes, like a fine wine or scotch perhaps. But flawed? Absolutely not! This car was my car. My first taste of absolute freedom. Perhaps even my first true love. She was fairly easy to take care of, never left me stranded, and was a blast to throw into curvy road. Until, I crashed her.

I remember that night vividly. It was a terrible night to drive, even for drivers much more experienced than me. It was the middle of December, and there was a literal blizzard going on outside. I was at home with my mother and father, watching the news on the blizzard as it unfolded. However, the reports of ice and snow covering the roads bored me. I was determined to go on a drive, and enjoy the rare opportunity to drift my front-wheel drive car around some corners. So I told my parents I was going to go rent a movie from the store. I went out to my beautiful, majestic, four door sedan, formerly green but now mostly covered with a white fluff. I scraped off the windshield and the headlights, and hopped into those perfect gray leather seats. Let me elaborate on why gray leather is perfect. Cloth sucks because it stains easily, and most of the time simply isn't as comfortable. Black leather gets hot enough to burn your skin off in direct sunlight. But gray leather is perfect. If there's sunlight at all, the seats stay right at a perfect room

Noah Benjamin

temperature. And even on the hottest days in summer, they won't give you third degree burns. I put the handbrake down, shifted to neutral, put my key in, and turned it furiously. There was no drama, just as always. Sounds of cranking, induction, compression, power, and that steady, high, loping sound of the engine idling on cold days. I gave it a few minutes to get ready, to let the engine get up to operating temperature, before I thrashed on the throttle and clutch like I always did. I headed out of my neighborhood and out into abandoned, wind-worn streets. On the main roadways a few snow trucks joined me. I took State Street down to the video store, picked out some movie that doesn't stick out in my memory at all, and headed back home.

On the way home, I had a decision to make. Do I do the reasonable thing and head home the same way I came? Or, do I veer off to the right to hit up my favorite country roads? Rally racing is all about going fast on snow and ice. How hard could it be, right? In the back of my mind, something screamed, "Why are you doing this? Losing traction is never anything but terrifying." My sixteen year old mind silenced this objection quickly, as I veered off to the right, and traded my well lit and salted asphalt roads for something that might've been a road twenty years ago.

I reached my normal speed on this road pretty quickly, right around fifty. The snow at this point was blowing hard. It was as if somebody had tied a blindfold tight around my eyes, I could see just enough to get a general idea of what was out there, but all the details were blurred. At some point I saw a Chevrolet truck with a snowplow hooked to the front headed down the middle of the road at speed. It was a massive truck, and didn't show any signs of moving over to make room for me or slowing down. I already knew that something was wrong, but I didn't know what to do was. Anyone with any sense would've stopped right then and there, and let the truck pass. I didn't, I veered toward the far side of the road, where a whole row of about eight power poles was, maybe an arms' length from the edge of the road. Suddenly I realized that the truck was almost headed right at me now, I hit the brakes. The back end slides out a bit, and I panic. I begin sawing at the wheel, trying to get everything back in line. And then everything starts happening very quickly. The truck whizzes by, shaking the air around me. Then, suddenly, I begin under-steering, the back end of my car now pointing towards the power poles. I slam the brakes to the floor; they begin screeching, and fully lock. And this is when I go into an irreversible slide towards the power poles. I had hit a patch of ice. I watched helplessly as my front passenger side wheel well headed directly toward a power pole. Impact. I exchange kinetic energy with the pole; the pole wins. I come to an instantaneous halt, and the loudest sound I have ever heard fills the inside of my car. Crunching. Crushing. Metal bulging, bending and finally failing. Something flies out of the steering wheel and punches me in the nose. Smell of powder, gasses. Of death. I sit there for a few minutes, trying to take in what just happened.

Later that night, I watched as my first true love was dragged onto a flatbed truck. The passenger side front wheel was totally bent off. My dad said it was totaled, not fixable. When we sold it to another Passat owner a month later for parts, I took the stick shift knob and front badge as a reminder, a reminder of my first love, the car that saved my life, and taught me so much, for instance: to drive fast on snow and ice, you need winter tires. Sometimes, the path less taken is taken less because you're in the middle of a damn blizzard. The laws of physics, surprisingly, still apply even if you're a teenager. Most of all, I learned that some boundaries are better left untested. Pushing your limits is always dangerous. Make sure you have room to spin out; you might not be as lucky as I was.

That Gut Feeling

I rolled out of bed at 6:15 a.m., like every other day, ready to go back to the sixth grade class I had been going to for about eight months. The day was normal, I ate my instant oatmeal and told my parents good-bye and headed off for school. But this day would soon turn out to be a not-so-normal day after all. The sun hung high in the sky, and there was a soft breeze that seemed to sweep over the small town of Columbus. As the children filed into the classroom, my teacher began her usual lecture and the class had started.

Throughout all of elementary school I had a very close group of five girl friends; Shelby, Amanda, Alexa, Sara, and Jessie. We were constantly together and had developed a sister-like bond since we had first started hanging out in kindergarten. Since we weren't all lucky enough to be in the same class together, we counted down the seconds until we were let out of class for lunch and recess, my favorite part of every school day. The little hand on the clock finally inched its way to the three, and the bell rang at 11:15 a.m., dismissing us from class. I could feel the excitement building as my classmates put away their supplies and started gossiping about lunch. All the girls met at our usual table in the cafeteria, back in the far right corner. The topic of discussion was our elementary school cheerleading squad, in which, we were all involved in and highly concerned about.

"I just don't think it's fair the fifth graders get the front row for the new dance," whined Alexa.

"I didn't pick up on the dance too well anyways, so being in the back doesn't really bother me," said Jessie.

Before we knew it, our thirty minutes of lunch time was up and we were free to go outside to the playground for recess. As soon as we all cleared those big blue doors we broke into a run to go all the way behind the playground. The mulch crunched underneath our feet then flew up behind us as we all raced to get back there first. Once we got to the grass, Amanda announced that she had an idea.

"Hey guys, let's do an elevator stunt. It will be fun!"

When she said this all I could think about is my coach saying, "Under no circumstances are you girls to attempt any of these stunts outside of my supervision."

When Amanda asked me to help put her up, instead of telling her not to do it, I just said I didn't feel comfortable doing it and didn't want to get in to any trouble. I immediately knew this wasn't a good idea and felt my stomach start to do backflips, but I was too dumb to speak up and stop them. Sara and I stood biting our nails as we watched Shelby, Alexa, and Jessie lift Amanda slowly up into the air. A look of satisfaction swept over Amanda's face as her feet settled into Shelby and Alexa's hands. Once she got up there, I felt my muscles tense up. I knew if a teacher spotted them lifting her we would get into trouble for sure. Both Shelby and Alexa had a sparkle in their eyes and were smiling from ear to ear. Jessie on the other hand, who was behind the stunt spotting Amanda, was gazing off at all the kids running throughout the playground ahead of her. We were always told to keep our eyes on the girl in the air at all times, so this made me feel uneasy when I noticed her distraction.

Wham! Out of nowhere Jessie wandered away from the stunt and Amanda dropped straight to the ground as though somebody had pushed her backwards. It all happened so fast. I could hear the screams of pain coming from Amanda as she lay, curled weakly on the prickly grass. She had her right arm cradled and covered up with her left arm and I could tell by her

shrieks of pain and tears rolling down her cheeks that something was very wrong. Sara ran to get the nearest teacher to help us decide what to do and to try to calm Amanda down.

When my eyes met Shelby's, I could tell she was upset. Alexa immediately started sobbing, while Shelby and I stood watching in disbelief. Jessie, who had caused the accident, was down on the ground beside Amanda trying to comfort her, although it wasn't helping. Amanda's arm looked as though it had been bent like a piece of wire. The sight of her arm made me sick to my stomach. I just stood there thinking that the whole incident had not really happened.

"What did you girls think you were doing?" Mrs. Green yelled. "You all know better than to do this kind of stuff."

Even though I was not one of the girls who dropped her, I had an immense feeling of guilt flow over me and could not look my teacher in the eyes. I knew I should have attempted to stop the girls from doing the stunt in the first place, but instead I chose to be quiet and let one of my closest friends get hurt. My stress escalated as the teachers carried Amanda back into school. The five of us stood in the grass staring at each other, not knowing what to do next, all too scared to be the first one to speak up.

"Do you think we should walk down to the nurse's office to check on her?" Shelby finally asked.

"Yeah, probably," Alexa replied, and we all started the walk back up to the school. We reached the nurse's office and saw Amanda crying, bent over a trash can with a pale white face. She did not notice all of us standing at the door, but the nurse did and she told us it was best if we didn't see her right now. Before we were shoed off by the nurse, I was able to get a peek at the arm that had been causing her so much pain and the sight of it made my stomach hurt. The bone was visibly broken through the skin. I felt my hands shaking as I walked back to my class.

The Bad Beginning

The beginning to my high school years was not the best way to start. I spent the first two years of high school not realizing what was really important. This may be because I had never really had anyone who was a great influence in my life when it came to school. My older brother, Josh, is ten years older than I. When he was in school, he was not what you would call a good student. He was in and out of detention all of the time. It got to the point where they were running out of ways to discipline him. He eventually dropped out his junior year. It has been mainly downhill since then. He ended up in the Juvenile Center and even jail, so someone could see why I would not have a good basis to go on in high school.

Behavioral issues were never a problem for me. I was very outgoing and tended to be the class clown that always tried to raise people's spirits, I often used that as a way to cover up how I really felt on the inside. Unlike most of the students I hung out with, I was not naturally gifted with intelligence. It seemed like all my friends would come home with A's and B's, while I was bringing home grades A through D-. I went all twelve years of school without a single detention, but all that said was that I was a good kid. Colleges often do not even take that into consideration. I was missing the big point. My grades were what mattered most, but my ignorance was keeping me back. When freshman year started I was doing okay, but after the first few weeks I had gotten into the habit of procrastinating. When report card time came around I knew this would not be one that was going up on the fridge at home. I was failing two classes, which was an all-time low for me. I had never been a student to get failing grades. At this point I was lost. I did not know what my priorities were. When my mom asked where my report card was, my heart sank into my stomach. I knew I could not get out of it, so I lied and said that I had forgotten it in my locker. I knew it was wrong to lie, but if it kept me from seeing the disappointment on her face, I was all for it. Not only did this hold off on the punishment I was about to receive, but it also gave me one last weekend before I had no life outside of school.

The weekend seemed to fly by and it was time to give my report card to my mom. I grabbed my report card and walked to her room. My heart began to pound as I neared her door. This was the first time I had ever failed a class and I knew she would not be happy. I walked into her room and handed her my report card; she stared at me blankly. Her facial expressions were not of anger, but moreover, sheer disappointment. She shook her head and did not say a word. I left the room knowing she was very unhappy with me. If there was one thing I hated, it was letting my mom down. I continued with school and still never managed to pass those two classes that year. I lacked motivation and perseverance needed to succeed that year in school.

The following year on the first day of school I went to my two freshman classes and sat down in silence while everyone else gossiped about their summers. It was the first time I had ever felt alone in school. I no longer had my friends to talk to or to sit by in those classes. The embarrassment of being with lowerclassmen was enough to light the fire that I greatly needed to pass those classes. After that day, I talked to my girlfriend, Michaela, about how I wanted that school year to be different. I told her that I would need her help to keep me motivated in school. Michaela was in the same grade as me, and was also a very good student. She was in the top ten of our class and attended many school related activities in which she excelled in. She was the kind of student that I wanted to be. She told me that she would do whatever it took to make sure that I stayed focused and did well in school. After that conversation, I started doing much better in school. The sense of actually doing well again, gave me this warm feeling inside that let me know all my hard work was paying off. When teachers began pulling me aside and telling me

Jake Bolin

that I had done a complete turnaround from where I was a year ago; it drove me to try even harder. Hearing my teachers say those words made me feel accomplished like I was actually on the right track.

With all of the excitement from succeeding in school, I started looking into the future. At first I wanted to do something in the health field, so I began taking advanced health and biology classes. I enjoyed them very much and performed well in both classes. I still love health to this day, but I realized that the only reason I was actually interested in biology was because of the teacher. For a while I felt lost wondering what I was going to do with my life after high school. I was on a good track and was ready to start figuring things out. I started looking into many different career options, and for some reason, the thought of business struck me. After thinking about it, I decided to take marketing and accounting classes. I enjoyed both very much so I decided that was what I wanted to do in life. I went from being an immature student to someone who now has many high goals in life. It is amazing how one person's influence can turn your whole life around.

The Last Goodbye

My hair was sweaty and my knee pads were wet. I was ready for a short nap on the ride home. I removed my volleyball shoes and threw on my sweatpants after a long day of volleyball. I got in my mom's Four Runner and immediately fell asleep. I was abruptly awoken when we arrived at an unfamiliar place. Feeling dazed and confused, I asked my mom for an explanation. She reminded me that it was my grandpa's ninetieth birthday. The thought of my grandpa brings back very mixed feelings. It was ten years earlier when my grandpa was first diagnosed with Alzheimer's disease. When he was diagnosed, he began to have trouble remembering who I was. Being the youngest of three, I had spent the least amount of time with my grandpa.

Returning to my grandpa's nursing home instantly made me have a flashback to the last time I was there. It was two years earlier, and my family of five had come to visit him. This was the first time I was going to see my grandpa since his Alzheimer's really started to act up. I entered the nursing home unaware of what I was getting myself into. The smell of what I liked to call "old people perfume" immediately grabbed my attention when I entered the plain looking building. I followed as my mother led me through the white hallways until we eventually ended up at my grandpa's door. I was expecting the worst but hoping for the best when my mother began to enter his room. Nothing could have prepared me for what I saw. The lively grandpa I use to know was lying, silently in bed, motionless. His eyes were dazed and his mind looked blank. He lied there staring at a blank television screen. My parents walked slowly in to my grandpa's room. My brother, sister and I followed shortly behind. It took a couple minutes for my grandpa to realize who we were and why we were in his room. He stared confused, yelled and cussed for a while. But he eventually remembered my mother, his daughter. My mother went through my family, one by one, and tried to help trigger my grandpa's memory of us. He had no trouble remembering my dad, but took more and more time to remember us children, until he got to me. My grandpa stared at me for what felt like hours, just confused to "who the hell" I was. My mother explained to him once more that I was her youngest daughter, Molly. But he had no recollection of me whatsoever.

He began to get very upset to why this stranger was in his room, and he began to shout and cuss all over again. He wouldn't calm down until this stranger, his own granddaughter, was out of his room. I had no other choice than to leave my family in the room and sit by myself in the hallway. I waited, for what seemed like hours, until my family was finally ready to leave. I pulled myself together before my family came out, but it was obvious I had been crying. My mom apologized over and over for her dad's, my grandpa's, behavior. But I knew there was nothing she could do about it. I just remember thinking how could my own grandpa not remember me, his youngest granddaughter?

A couple years later, I was back where all of this heartbreak went down. I was hoping and praying we wouldn't have a repeat of what happened in the past years. As I sat in the car waiting for the rest of my family to arrive, I begged and nagged my mom to not make me go inside. I told her I didn't think I could handle dealing with such harsh rejection again. She said she couldn't assure me that what happened last time wouldn't happen again, but reminded me that time was ticking on my grandpa's clock. I sat, mentally preparing myself and waiting on the rest of my family. Once my dad and sister arrived, I had no other choice than enter the "old person perfume" infested building one more time.

I walked the semi-familiar white halls once again, and followed my mom back to my grandpa's room. When we entered his wing of the building, I recognized his voice. He was

rambling to a nurse about who knows what. He was yelling and screaming at everybody and anybody. My mother instantly warned me that today was obviously not a good day for my grandpa, and the hopes I had that my grandpa would actually remember me this time were flushed down the drain. I dropped my head in pure disappointment. My mom went over to talk to my grandpa to try to bring him back down to earth before she reintroduced my family to him one more time. She wheeled my grandpa over to us, and suddenly, he lit up. My mom reminded him that he was turning ninety today, and it was almost as if something clicked in his mind. He looked at my dad like he had known him his whole life, asked him how he'd been and other small talk. My grandpa looked at my sister, smiled and said "Claire!" His eyes turned to face me and we made eye contact. I was hoping he was thinking, *Molly! My granddaughter! Oh, how I've missed you.*

My mom began to tell my grandpa who I was, but before she could say my name he said, "Molly!" I felt warm tears roll down my face as I watched tears roll down his. He remembered me! And not only did he just remember me, he was so excited to see me! He kept asking why I hadn't come to visit him earlier and I didn't dare upset him by telling him I had tried to. I continued to cry from excitement and relief as the rest of my aunts, uncles and cousins came in to my grandpa's room to help celebrate his ninetieth birthday. I had a hard time ever getting myself together and controlling my tears; in fact, I never stopped crying the whole time I was there. As we began to wrap up this birthday celebration, I was able to pull myself together enough to say goodbye to my grandpa.

I gave him a hug and whispered "I love you," and he responded with an "I love you too, Molly."

You Never Really Know a Person

I had worked at Wal-Mart a little over a year at the time. Each day was the same really. I'd stand at a register, greet, scan, hit total, and say goodbye. That day was a little different though. I took a restroom break, and what impeccable timing I had. I ran into a former relative of mine in that grimy and smelly restroom.

When my cousin Keith got married to Tara, I had absolutely nothing against her. She seemed nice and laughed a lot. She had a one-year-old daughter from a former relationship. It was no big deal that she already had a baby because Keith also had a young daughter named Alexis. Her baby's name was Shelby and she was cute as a button. She had blonde bouncy curls and blue eyes. It wasn't too long after they got married that Tara got pregnant with Mercedes. Just after Mercedes turned two, Tara had another baby they named Camry. By the time she was two, Kia was born. They were a bit crazy as a couple. In case it wasn't noticed, all of the kids were intentionally named after cars. They were a bit out there, but didn't have a bad relationship by any means.

Tara loved babies, which explained why as soon as the toddler years hit she was ready to have another. She seemed to love to be a mom. She didn't want to be the discipliner though. A lot of people show their love for their children by teaching them and disciplining, but not Tara. She felt it was really important to be her kid's friend. They asked and she gave. The discipline they did receive was from my mother who babysat them. They were brats when they were at our house, but it got much worse as soon as their mom would walk in the door. They would throw toys and yell. I specifically remember Shelby picked up the phone and started dialing random numbers. The entire time they would be acting up, Tara never said a word to them. I would never have described Tara as a bad mother though. She loved her girls and that's what I thought really mattered. She provided them with all the love that she had.

The first time I ever noticed a bit of suspicious behavior was when she lost custody of Shelby. The story she was putting out didn't make sense, and no one could figure out why she would lose custody of her. Everyone in the family let it go and didn't talk much about it anymore, but we did talk when we found out she was cheating on Keith. When the truth came out, she ran fast. She left her children behind for a new boyfriend who she instantly moved in with. It didn't take long for her to stop picking up the girls during her weekends with them. They would get upset because they felt like their mom didn't want them anymore, and as horrible as it is, I think that really is the reason she didn't make time for them. She would call Keith up and ask to talk to Mercedes. "Hey Hun, sorry but Mommy can't come pick you up this weekend, but I'll be sure to come get you next weekend, okay?" The same line was heard week after week. It became so bad that Mercedes, who was then almost seven, started to hate her. Camry would cry for her mom, and Kia started to look at other women as her mother figure. Tara lost the trust of my family, her daughters, and her friends. Person after person kicked her out of their house. We stopped hearing about where she was staying, and no one seemed to really care.

Courtney Linville

I was washing my hands at one of the tan sinks that you have to stand just right in front of in order for the sensor to recognize your hand. I looked behind me and saw Mercedes standing against the tiled wall. Kia came walking out of the stall. I assumed that they were there with their grandma. Kia looked at me and smiled with her nose curled. As I picked her up to help her wash her hands, I heard a voice behind me say, "Oh, thank you." She didn't recognize me from behind, which also made me question why it didn't bother her that a stranger was holding her child. As I turned I just stared at her. Tara was the last person that I expected to see out in public with my cousins. It was the first time that she had seen them in months. She had to rent a hotel room in order to have a place for them to sleep at night when they were with her. We could both feel the tension in the air; the moment seemed to last forever. She didn't mention a word about the whole situation. She pretended everything was normal, but she had to have known that I knew what had happened with those little cousins of mine. Just like that we were off in our separate directions.

I had always felt anger towards her for hurting my family, but at that point I was also irritated that she pretended I was ignorant and didn't know what she had done. It hurts me to know what those little girls are going through. One day their mom is in their lives, the next day she's gone. Day by day they don't know if she will pick them up or not. Although I had always been mad, it was then, after seeing her again, that I realized I had lost all respect for her. Of course when someone hears a story about someone doing something that they disapprove of they think the person is stupid, but a feeling of complete disgust came over me that day. Either Tara really changed over the years, or none of us knew the type of person that she really is.

Biographies

Adelea Willman

Adelea Willman is a junior majoring in Elementary Education and is pursuing a middle school endorsement in Language Arts. She enjoys reading in any free time she can find.

Alexandria Kelly

Alexandria "Alex" Kelly is a freshman majoring in Psychology.

Aubrey Gibson

Aubrey Gibson is a freshman majoring in Nursing.

Bailey Moss

Bailey Moss is majoring in English Literature. When she isn't busy being a wife and mother, she enjoys writing about the daily beauty and grime of our modern world.

Beth McQueen

Beth McQueen is a junior majoring in English with a concentration in Creative Writing and lives in Flat Rock, Indiana. She loves spending time outdoors, hiking and camping. She also loves reading, writing, rock music, concerts, nature, running, travel, and spending time with family and friends. She hopes to one day be paid to publish a poetry book or novel.

Chris Sims

Chris Sims is majoring in English who transferred to Bloomington in 2012. Chris writes science fiction and comic scripts. He enjoys spending his evenings putting junk together to the gentle hum of his computer collection in the company of his middle-aged tabby cat.

Courtney Linville

Courtney Linville is majoring in Business with a minor in Psychology. She lives in Franklin, Indiana, and enjoys taking trips with her family and friends and photography.

David Harden

David Harden is majoring in Education. This is her first publication.

Jacob Hopkins

Jacob Hopkins is majoring in Psychology.

Jake Bolin

Jake Bolin is a freshman majoring in Biology.

Jeff Gersh

Jeff Gersh is a freshman at IUPUC.

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Jessica Fannin is a freshman at IUPUC.

Katie Allison

Katie Allison is an IUPUC student who began taking classes in the early college program.

Kathleen Ford

Kathleen Ford is a freshman and lives in Edinburgh, Indiana, with her son Gabriel. Other than photography, Kathleen likes to attend concerts, discover interesting places, and go rollerblading around her town. She one day hopes to photograph exotic places for National Geographic.

Krista Currier

Krista Currier is a Psychology major finishing her fourth year of college and second year at IUPUC. She plans to work towards a Masters in Occupational Therapy after graduation. This is Krista's first experience in sharing her work with others, outside of a classroom. In addition to poetry, she also writes children's books and hopes to publish one someday.

Kyle Kamman

Kyle Kamman came to IUPUC in the early college program and currently attends Ball State University where he plays quarterback on the football team.

Lisa Siefker-Bailey

Lisa Siefker Bailey received her Ph.D. from Vanderbilt University. She started teaching literature and writing at IUPUC in 1997. She specializes in drama and focuses on interdisciplinary arts.

Lloyd Dobbins

Lloyd Dobbins is majoring in English with a concentration in Creative Writing along with another BA in Psychology/Addiction Counseling. He is owner and editor-in-chief of the contemporary art and literature magazine *Twizted Tungz*. He currently lives in Columbus, Indiana, with his pit bull Ruca.

Makaili Shoultz

Makaili Shoultz is a freshman at IUPUC.

Memory Ann Forwalt

Memory is a continuing adult student. She transferred to Indiana University from the University of Indianapolis in 2011. She hopes her educational insight will direct her in to the humanities where she can be more than just a part of the world.

Molly Reinhart

Molly Reinhart is an early college student at IUPUC.

Nate Smith

Nate is a junior majoring in Psychology with a concentration in Substance Abuse Counseling. He lives in Columbus with his wife, Jessica, and two cats. Nate is anxious to fulfill his college degree. He wants to pursue a Master's Degree in Mental Health Counseling.

Noah Benjamin

Noah Benjamin is a freshman majoring in Computer Engineering. He likes cars, Vonnegut, and McCarthy. He hates pretty much everything else.

Rain Hash

Rain Hash is a junior majoring in English Literature. She writes general/science fiction and hopes to write a first novel. In her free time she enjoys basketry, macramé, figure drawing, tool making, chicken raising, gardening, archery and hand-sewing as well as reading books on anthropology, astronomy, sociology and history.

Sherry G. Traylor

Sherry G. Traylor returned to school full-time in January 2009 after twenty-two years in nursing. Her goal to complete her Bachelors of English Literature will be fulfilled in Spring 2013. She has been an English tutor at IUPUC for three years, and offers private editing and tutoring services through her on-line business.

Suzy Milhoan

Suzy Milhoan is majoring in English with a concentration in Creative writing. She lives in Edinburg, Indiana, with her husband, Merle. Together they have eight children and soon to be twelve grandchildren. Suzy published two books in 2012: *The Healing Game* and *Where's My Family?* She enjoys time with family and friends, golf, tennis, reading, writing and listening to live rock bands.

Tammy Sue Burton

Tammy Sue Burton is a senior majoring in Psychology. A lifelong/self-taught writer, photographer, and artist. Her passion shows in her written works, paintings, drawings, and photography. She aspires to utilize her talents in the behavioral field. Writing short stories and children's books is one of her dreams.

Tanner Bennett

Tanner Bennett is a freshman majoring in Media Arts and Science.

Teresa Ray

Teresa Ray is majoring in English with a concentration in Creative Writing. She lives in Columbus, Indiana, and hopes to write novels, short stories, and poetry for publication.

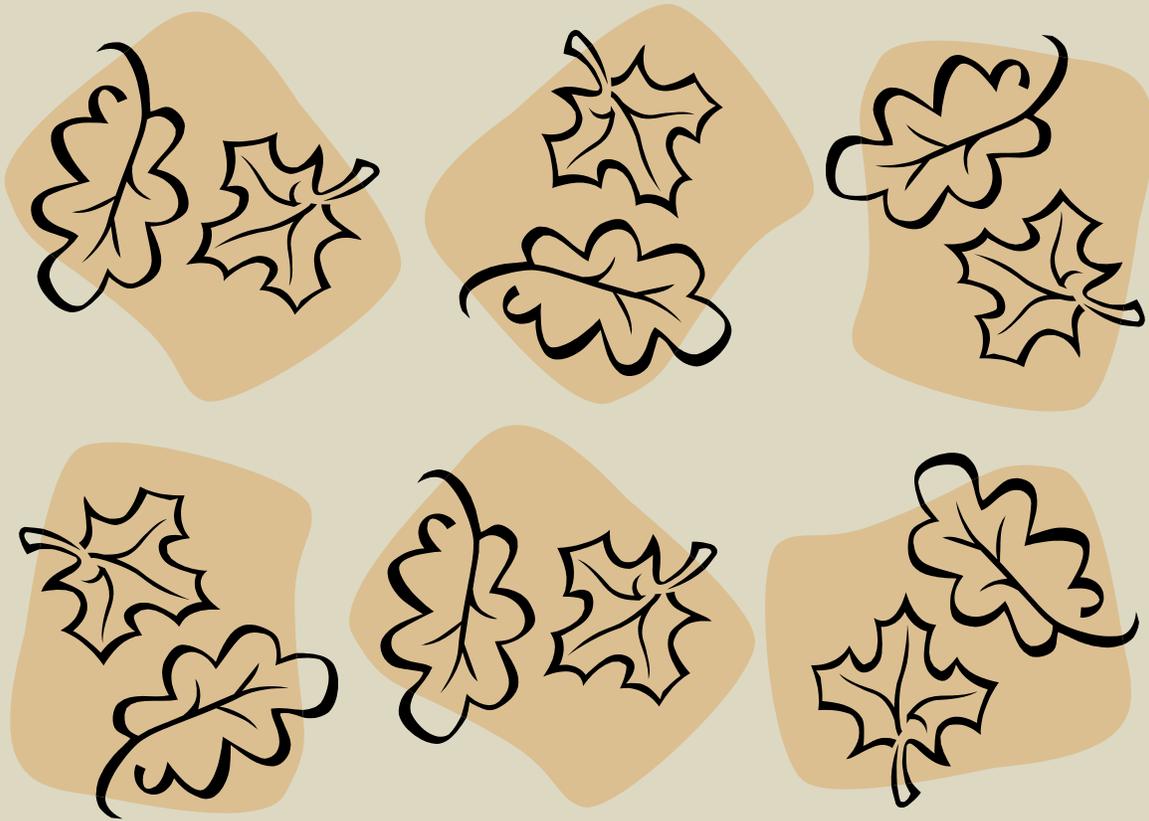
Tyffani Jewel

Tyffani Jewel is majoring in Education. This is her time to contribute to *Talking Leaves*.

Notes

ⁱ A wood chick was a demeaning name children were called who didn't have a father in their life.

ⁱⁱ Facing forward on a freight train. When going through carbon filled tunnels, whether a train rider is on the front or rear of a train car can be difference between a clean or dirty face.



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