

ELEMENTS

2015



ELEMENTS 2015

ELEMENTS is the literary journal for Western Illinois University

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1st Prize Cordell Larner Award for Poetry

Stargazing

By Kimberly Ackers

That star there,
that's no star at all
he said, leaning closer to me
as he pointed to the sky
through the smoke to the
brightest patch of light.

That's Jupiter, he said
resting his drunken head heavily
upon my shoulder. Isn't Jupiter –

Red? I hear someone ask.
No. That's Mars, I say.
No. Jupiter is red
too. I look up to the star,
to the planet.
Someone is lying.

The View From The Largest Window In Space

By Kimberly Ackers

From the Cupola

Earth passes by
Two hundred and thirty some miles
(below) us.

The sun
Flashes
across the mirror of the Nile.

The clouds part
for a moment
to show the fine webs of light.

A city.
Countries
pass
in minutes.
Through the window
Dawn and dusk
are the same.

Beautiful.

Night
is a constant.
Neil Armstrong's
words
echo
silently through the void.

I felt very
very
small.

Disinheritance

By Kimberly Ackers

Hestia sits by the fire
of a rusted out barrel
with the rest of the forgotten,
warming herself against
the cold of the tainted
unforgiving world.
The home she had
she left behind for whispers
of recognition, fame,
a chance to rise above her siblings.
The purity she swore to keep
was torn violently from her
when she held it in the palm of her hand
for the world to see. Now the fire
is burning low, and no one
will offer her kindling.
Now the fire has burned
down, Hestia mourns,
her altar to loneliness
gone. The doors
are locked, and home
is a hope forgotten.

2nd Prize Cordell Larner Award for Poetry

XV. Alpha and Omega

By Matthew Medley

You're so devilishly,
Handsome. Aloof, right?
That's half the appeal.
To peel the shell off.
Like a shrimp cocktail,
It starts in a liquor glass,
Leads into a larger experience.
No, no sauce required.
It was delicious.

XXXI. Crow Songs ~ *Regretting and Ramblings*
By Matthew Medley

I loved to look at birds.
Crows.
And I would get close to them.
So close
It was unnatural.
They're my-
"Children."
It's still what I call them.
Whatever mountain powers I inherited,
That my charmed Aunt holds in
Abundance
In the Ozark Mountains, with her deer,
Raccoons,
And songbirds,
I hold only with crows.
I find a beauty in the oil-slicked method of
Locomotion.
I find elegance in what others decry as
Painful shrieks.
But that's my calling card,
Ever the contrarian,
Holding decay and destruction
Under the lens of art.
My mind,
Never understood my fascination.
My children were,
Putrid.
Carriers of disease,
Hallmarks of something dark and

Amorphous-
Creatures of shadow and filth.
I agreed with her,
To some extent.
To some extent,
However,
They recognized me, for a year or so.
And they landed near me.
And they hopped a little closer
In response to my stony apathy.
And so I held my hand out,
And I touched it,
For the first time ever,
I touched a bird.
Quickly,
I saw it jerk back against what was
A light bop.
And my hand similarly recoiled.
I had touched my child,
Always flying so high above,
Just out of reach.
I had found what I wanted.
And it was dirty.
My hand felt stained,
And I realized that
My children were filthy,
Not because of choice,
But because of an inability
To clean their feathers.
I never regretted touching the bird.
I
Regret
That it was the bird I wanted to touch.

XXX. Calligraphic Accuracy

By Matthew Medley

Who are we?
Where did we come from-
I look back!
To pages upon pages.
Notes, about;
“Who he is,
What he loves,
What he hates,
Why does he hurt?”
Somewhere, I exist in more than
Memory.
I am a story.
Like Kafka’s Metamorphosis.
Where were you in that story?
I missed you.
Loved you.
Cried out to a woman who could never
Understand,
To lose a brother to
Wretched circumstances.
And she consoled me.
You were “never far away,”
She’d say.
But you were farther than I knew.
And too far from the boat,
That to try and save you would mean
Madness.

You needed to swim back yourself,
At least, part of the way.
“How are you feeling?”
The professional one-liner that
Never gets old,
Because the punchline is always
Different.
Counselors are the world’s best
Comediennes.

I wish you knew
How much we loved you.
That you would’ve known
Your cries didn’t fall on deaf ears.
Just,
Ears that couldn’t reply properly.
I wish I could see you.
To hold a piece of my heart,
And so much of my past,
Close to me once again.

What all did we used to say?
Lines,
Phrases of nonsense.
Garbled into poetry by youth,
Where phrases took on more life
Than the average adult reader does for
Middle-aged housewives and their
Crochet.
“Back to the camp!”
“You useless drips, you useless drips,”
To Bizet’s “Carmen.”
We loved tunes,
And nonsense.

It made us us, and not us.
I wish you would've talked to me.
I should've known,
I should've seen,
Or spoken.
I was as blind as you wanted me to be.
Strange!
Even in crises,
We understood perfectly.
I knew you were shielding me,
And I knew that's what you wanted,
So I continued that age-old game,
Of the Commander of the Light Brigade.
I wish the horses, would have taken you
To
More pleasant pastures.

You're still alive,
But hurting.
And hurt.
Not yet beyond repair,
Never beyond repair.
I wish,
To hold my heart close again.
But you're locked in another box.
I can't seek you out.
But there are others there, at least.
We really do love you.

3rd Prize Cordell Larner Award for Poetry

It was this moment I chose to tell you

By Jon Naskrent

At Ikea choosing furniture
for my first apartment,
you asked to which bed I was partial, sprawled
(but lady-like), pressing
the goose-feather pillow
to your round, pink cheeks.

We moved on, to the living rooms,
glancing at couches.
I sat in the black La-Z-Boy chair,
reclining backwards;
you chose the love-seat.

And then to the bathrooms,
you pretended to bathe in the shower,
scrubbing your cardigan-covered chest,
wrapping the shower-curtain
around your body
like a wedding-day dress—
white, wholly white—
angling your head in such a way
it resembled a veil covering your breasts.

It was this moment I chose to tell you
I preferred the twin and not the Queen.

I think if Uncle Chris wanted to fly he'd

By Jon Naskrent

My Uncle Chris is an engineer and I've never once heard him complain about where he's at.

He builds all sorts of things—

wood-wrought bookshelves,

granite stone-tiered bridges to other places

and sturdy support beams which hold him up as needed.

I'm a bit jealous he can do it all—

The most impressive thing I've ever constructed is a trampoline.

It keeps me air-born, stretch-coils bouncing me up and then down.

I think if Uncle Chris wanted to fly he'd build an airplane, he's smart like that. He'd know where to put the motor and what to hook up to the propeller to keep it spinning.

He'd know how to angle the wings,

like an ice skater her skates.

He wouldn't be afraid of loop-de-loops

or landing on ice because even if he failed

and everything broke down

he could build something bigger and better and learn from his mistakes.

Me, on the other hand, all I have is my trampoline—

it's great. I built it to last and it's never once broken down when I've needed it.

Granted, sometimes I wish I had an airplane.

I've heard all sorts of reports that from up above the clouds

everything is small and can't touch you. I've heard that

you can even focus and learn to tune out the *squeaksquakhum* of airplane engines demanding maintenance.

Domestic

By Jon Naskrent

Patrick, I miss waking up to you
doing the dishes, clad in your boxers,
tooth-pick arms scrubbing pots
from last night's dinner.

I miss making you coffee—the bitter kind—
as you tell me about your evening—
she snuck out, you held hands on our roof,
the meteor shower was beautiful.

And I share mine—God, I love her,
the watermelons are stunted & won't grow—
your tree-trunk legs bulge,
reaching for Nutella on the top shelf.
We are d o m e s t i c men, scarcely dressed,
eating toast, discussing our lovelies.

1st Prize Cordell Larner Award for Fiction

Tattered Roses

By Emilee Cox

You find yourself a lonely island in a crowded room; the pulsing thumpa-thumpa of the music beats through the soles of your borrowed high-tops. The old sneakers you had worn apparently weren't cute enough for the party.

Countless hours have crawled by in the forty-odd minutes your best friend has left you alone. She disappeared beyond the stench of hormones and beer with a new gentlemen friend, leaving you at the mercy of the party. All around you drunken faces smile to each other, but never to you and none of them seem even remotely familiar.

In one hand, you grip a can of soda as if it is warding off the judgmental stares of all the unnamed faces of older strangers. Your other arm is tucked behind your back, a barrier between yourself and the unnerving pulse in the wall. The sleeve of the latter tugs from the rest and you glance over to find one of the strangers offering you an interested smile from his seated position.

"Hi!" He nearly shouts over the noise of the lively gathering. "My name's Chris!"

You wonder for a moment why anyone in this party would approach you. Everything you have known forces the idea that a terrible prank is about to follow, but the smile he wears curls from the corner of his lips and into his eyes so it causes you to second-guess. The wheel chair he sits in is sleek and narrow, easily maneuvered through tight spaces, and you chalk his friendliness up to the familiarity of living in Social

Outland.

“Hey.” You speak too softly to be heard, but you can’t summon the courage to repeat yourself.

His curl widens and he takes the liberty of rolling closer to you. “You looked lonely too. Do you mind if I stay next to you? Pretend like we’re friends?” When he laughs, you get the sensation that he has learned to tease himself; a lesson you sometimes envy in the locker room.

The instant you nod in agreement, your death hold loosens and Mr. Pibb is allowed to live. Having someone next to you sends a wave of comfort from your shoulders to the tips of your tightly curled toes. The borrowed high tops are a size and a half too small, but your sneakers weren’t cute enough for the party to accept.

“Do you like the music?” Chris attempts to continue his friendliness, but you get the impression that the party does not want people to talk.

You shake your head and shift your weight to the other foot. For the moment your voice is too unsure to challenge the encompassing beating of the party.

“I don’t either.” He speaks again, momentarily giving up the battle for your eye contact. “What music do you like?” This time he stares intently at you, hungry for every answer.

You take a moment to think, but the titles of every band you have ever listened to instantly scurry away from grasp. Taking your silence, the man next to you offers his own list of preferences. There are a few you have in common, and you find the courage in your voice. Carrying on a conversation in a crowded room is not something you have much practice with, but the more you exchange the easier it becomes.

A comfortable silence falls between you and your new acquaintance. You take a moment to look around at all the people again, and this time you don’t feel so at odds with them – you no longer feel alone. Your gaze darts back toward Chris for reassurance, but from the corner of your eye you see someone intruding into your comfort bubble. Chris notices

your concerned expression and follows your uneasy stare, but when he sees who is to blame for your anxiousness, he laughs.

“This is my cousin, Darren.” As Chris speaks, the stranger rests a hand on the other man’s shoulder and smiles toward you.

His smile reminds you of your older brother flirting with girls; like he would steal a car to see you happy. It makes little butterflies burst in your stomach and your newly gained confidence run for cover. With a stocky build and dark eyes, he seems so mature next to you. You suddenly feel foolish in the outfit you were given to wear from the back of Becca’s closet. An old pair of sneakers would go a long way, but they weren’t cute enough for the party.

“Remember,” Becca told you before the party. *“if anybody asks, we’re sixteen.”*

Unsure what to do, you lower your head and let your hair fall in front of your eyes. A few strands rest perfectly over the mascara smudge when your new contacts were nearly too much to bare. Your throat is dry and uncooperative, but when you shake your crinkled can there isn’t a drop. Even if you wanted to speak, now there is no chance.

Your partner, sensing your discomfort, nudges the new arrival. “Hey Darren, would you mind getting us something to drink?” Chris glances toward his cousin before returning his smile to you.

Watching as Darren disappears beyond the crowd, you are able to relax again. Beside you, Chris continues to ask more questions of polite interest, and conversing with him feels more natural than before. In no time at all, his cousin returns to hand you a plastic cup. You had no intention of drinking when the night began, but the risk of losing your company was too great. Tentatively, you lift the cup to your lips and take a shy sip. The fruity, smoky taste of a Jack Daniel’s cooler slides over your tongue, and you’re relieved it isn’t something much

stronger.

Comfortable with the beverage choice, you ease back into conversation taking gulps of the adult Kool-Aid periodically. Air fills your head and loosens your tongue; speaking to Chris and his mature cousin, Darren, is getting easier by the moment. When you survive the crowd, the hues of blue and pinks sway to the music and encourage you to follow along.

A tingling sensation tickles your scalp and your cheeks grow flush, hot. Your heart beats in your ears in time with the music and you can't hear anything else. Something begins tugging you downward, and when you look Chris is trying to say something but you can't pick his voice out of the roar.

"Are you feeling dizzy?" The recognition of those words makes your stomach flip over.

A strong tide rolls in on your mind, covering any coherent thought before it glimpses the light of day, dragging it back out to sea. You try to call out to someone in the party; you need to find Becca so the two of you can leave. For the moment, this is the only thought you can hold onto so you push one foot in front of the other, fighting against the current. The step is awkward in the borrowed high tops and you tumble to the side. Your own sneakers weren't cute enough for the party.

You brace yourself against the wall of someone's body, and a possessive arm wraps around your waist. The tide tries to force your eyelids closed, but you open your eyes wider in defiance. All around you gyrating bodies move to the pulsing in your ears; none of them glance toward you. Only when you emerge on the other side of the congregation do you realize you had been guided through it. Someone else is pulling your reins.

The hallway you seem to be floating toward grows darker and darker. Your constant blinking does little to force away the ebb and flow slurring your thoughts, so all you can think about is the darkness. Strength of will depleting, your eye lids drift shut for only a moment.

When you are able to pry them open again, you find the darkness has been cracked by a sliver of brilliantly green light. Shadows play all around you; their motions are difficult to track. The tide has gotten stronger, but your gaze sweeps sluggishly about the room to find any sort of anchored thought to hold onto. Creeping up from the back of your mind, the realization that you are no longer standing up confuses your already taxed consciousness. You claw for the memory of moving from the hall to a bed, but it is lost in the darkening sea.

With great difficulty, you send a message to your arm to move. In the darkness it's impossible to determine the appendage's motion, but all the same it won't respond. As if the whole limb were dead, the messages twitch along your muscles but ultimately die away before their destinations and your arm remains in place. Your other three limbs behave the same way, and a knot of fear lodges in your throat.

You try to speak, call for help, but a raspy clicking sound is all that comes out. The effort to speak drains your strength and the waves envelop you again. Your eyelids slide closed just as the shadows move in toward you. In the very back caverns of your mind, the sounds of harsh voices whispering at each other echo with the squeak of a wheel on hardwood.

The green light is all that breaks up the darkness of the room from the darkness of your own mind, so when you work your eyes open again your wavering gaze seeks out the source of the glow. Large numbers are displayed on a clock beside the bed and the bright light makes your eyes water. 12:42, an hour has passed since Becca left you alone with the party.

You try to call your best friend's name, but when you move your lips something stops the sound of your voice. The foreign texture of cloth scours your tongue and you try to spit it out. Only slightly more cooperative than your limbs, your tongue rolls and pushes at the fabric but is unable to eject the intruder from your mouth. A hard lump rises in your throat on

another tidal wave of darkness. The lump breaks against your voice box and a muffled sob seeps out from behind the gag. When the wave washes over you again, the feeling of hot tears is the last thing you let go.

Your body is floating on midnight water, when violent thrash rips your mind from peace and into the room with a crack of green light. “Get up! We have to go!”

For a moment, your brain has trouble locating your lips. A few unsure sounds tumble from your mouth; they are clear but incoherent. More light trickles in from the half-open door, dispelling most of the shadows. Still, you search for the saving green light and find 1:14 am brightly displayed. When you lift your head to see who has roused you, the only familiar face of the night is glaring at you.

“I have been looking all over for you!”

You attempt to sit up, but your dead limbs only slide across the tousled blankets. The ebb and flow begins to rise again and you want nothing more than to close your eyes and dream. The flood covering your thoughts is murky, making everything around you distorted and foggy. As you are forced closer and closer to the surface, a pain like tearing flesh throbs in the very core of your sex. For only a moment, a whisper of realization skitters across the water, but your mind refuses its message and so it sinks down below consciousness.

“We have to go!” Becca is pulling at your limp arm, compelling you from the bed.

When you sit up, the tide flows in again, covering all thought that had been exposed in the break. This flood brings whirling colors and sickening smells. At first, you feel as though an undertow has caught you, dragging you down where you can’t breathe and yet a rancid stench is what causes you to gag and sputter. Then, a current heaves you into clearer water, where the pungent smells can’t hurt you, but you lose the only life persevering thought you had to cling to. Things are suddenly too clear, you feel weightless - at the mercy of the waves swirling you round and round.

Another moment more and you wash up on some strange shore, the waves sending you tumbling to a running start. You become aware of solid pavement that doesn't have a pulse beneath the sole of your borrowed high tops. One foot moves in front of, then behind, then on top of the other, and you wonder how you started moving in the first place.

The form beside you whispers your name sharply, and for a single moment in time you are aware that your best friend is holding your weight with her own. But, the ebb and flow take the realization out to sea. You hear your name again and you stare in, what you believe to be, the direction of the source.

“Okay, just like before, we have to get through the window.” Cool metal prickles your skin and you snatch at the feeling, clawing at it for the chance to gulp fresh air in the flood. “You first. Come on, just one foot...” She manipulates your leg up and through the open window. “Now grab the top... there... now the other...”

You slide to the steady floor, and with one concentrated burst in unison, you manage to propel your body away from the window ledge. This place is familiar, though you can't remember why. A sense of safety wraps around you as the tide grows stronger. Unable to fight it anymore, the current takes you away.

As you float through the water, a giant, pulsing monster rises up from the darkness below. Its massive jaw snaps at you, intent to gobble you whole. Frantically, you swim away. You have no idea which way is the surface or if a surface even exists in this place, but you push your muscles as hard as you possibly can. The current around you shifts and the sensation of the monster at the nape of your neck makes you try to call out in terror, but the waves swallow your voice.

When you glance over your shoulder, the monster is gone but something is still after you – dancing shadows you can barely make out. No longer swimming, you look down in time to see one borrowed high top trip over the other and you fall through the earth. You want to scream, but there is no air

here. The ground rises to meet you and your stomach retreats to your throat. Just before impact, your eyes squeeze shut but simultaneously spring open.

The room around you is not what you expected to find, but after only a few moments, you remember you had stayed the night with Becca. When you sit up, damp strands of hair slide against your skin. You can't remember taking a shower, and the confusion unsettles you. The soft sounds of sleep omit from the bed across the room, so you launch your pillow into the air. On mark, your missal thuds against Becca's head and a disgruntled groan follows. Your best friend sits up, rubbing her eyes, but when she sees you're awake her demeanor grows suddenly chilly.

"Hey." Her voice is gentle, searching. "How'd you sleep?"

"Okay, I guess." You shrug away the question because you aren't really sure how to answer. "Why is my hair wet?"

"You had to take a shower before bed last night. You were pretty out of it so I had to help." Becca's cheeks get red and she avoids making eye contact. "Sorry..."

A few minutes pass in silence as you try to remember taking a shower or getting back home or anything about last night. The more you dig for some sort of clue, the more your stomach revolts against the idea. After a moment, the nauseous feeling in your stomach is all you can think about so you shake your head and give up for the time being.

"What... what happened last night?" Her voice was even softer now, almost cooing.

The sick feeling intensifies, and you do all you can to not think about the question too carefully. "I don't remember." One thought is safe. One memory is clear. "You left me for your little boy toy and I felt like a totally idiot there by myself." Anger, anger is safer to deal with in your current state. "I don't really remember anything after that."

Fuzzy pictures of plastic cups and shiny wheelchairs swirl around your mind's eye, like you're looking up from

under water. With a shake of your head, you dispel the half-memories and look toward Becca again. She is looking everywhere but at you, her secret all but evident on her face. Whatever she is keeping from you, your instincts say you don't want to hear it. The missing pieces appear to be more of a burden than the truth is worth.

As you move to stand, a series of sharp aches running through your body force you to stop. Your legs are heavy like their filled with sand, and your crotch aches like going over a curb on your bicycle without lifting from the seat. This new discovery only confuses you more, and you feel tears burning at the back of your throat. So many questions scream in your ear, but you shove them all back behind a door. You drop the key in the gutter and watch as the storm water washes it away.

Half the day is already over when you manage to sit at Becca's kitchen table to eat. The bowl of dry Cheerios crinkle you nose, but you nibble at one or two. After your show of eating, you pack all your things up and change into your street clothes. When you lace up your perfectly good sneakers, the stiffness in your toes reminds you of the borrowed high tops.

~ ~ ~

A month of school has gone by, and your first year of high school is turning out to be a lot better than eighth grade. It's a day like any other day after school: the house is empty, and will be until after five o'clock. So, you spend a little time playing tug-o-war with your dog. In an excited bound, the large canine heaves himself upward and throws his front paws against your chest.

The fall takes a lifetime: through the open door and down two flights of stairs. When it's over, you can't breathe. The very last step lodges itself into yours shoulder blade and forces your torso into an odd angle. You gasp repeatedly, but your lungs refuse your advances. Finally, a greedy helping of air inflates your body too quickly and a searing pain shoots through both of the organs and into your stomach. All you can do is hug your knees and wait for the pain to subside.

After a few moments, your chest feels fine but your stomach is only getting worse. You sit up slowly, the twisting cramps causing you to cry out. When you look down, a dark stain is soaking through your jeans. Confusion and intense pain hit you all at once until you feel as though you may throw up.

Frantically you dig into your jeans and pull out your cell phone. The tears and cramping make it difficult to see, but you punch the familiar numbers and wait for the connection. Another stab of pain hits and your sobbing only worsens.

“Becca, there’s so much blood!” Your voice explodes across the receiver. “I – I don’t know what to do. Please help me!”

A wave of icy water pours over you as you sit in the waiting room. Beside you, Becca’s older sister taps her car keys against the metal leg of her seat, but all you can hear is a pulsing beat. You don’t want to know the results of your blood tests or see what they found – or didn’t find – on the sonogram. The water swirls around you, sucking the air from the room, and you hop to your feet. When you’re swept out the door by the bone-chilling waves, the sunlight on your face is all you can grab to pull yourself from the current.

You push against the cracking door and shove the secrets back inside; you let the storm take the truth away. The spiraling wave slowly calms and you look down to make sure the ground is right where you left it. On your perfectly good sneakers, you spy a spot of splattered red that reminds you of roses. But, they are probably still not cute enough for the party.

2nd Prize Cordell Larner Award for Fiction

Just a Joke

By Kimberly Ackers

We sit around the makeshift bonfire behind Andrew's rental home, warming our hands against the heat of the flames. Jordan is sitting to my right and Andrew is sitting directly across from him on my left. It had been my suggestion to start a fire. I needed some fresh air and with winter coming, I knew I wouldn't be able to convince them to hang around outside with me for much longer. I'm surprised they even came out here with me in the first place. Andrew had only agreed because he said it was a good beer drinking atmosphere. He has a decent sized back yard on the edge of town lined with just enough trees to make us feel secluded. We each have PBR in one hand. Andrew has the case that he grabbed from his fridge sitting next to him. The guys already seem bored, but Jordan knows this is important for me, to feel my smallness in the light of the billions of stars above us. I love him for that. I love that he puts up with me.

Andrew pulls a pack of cigarettes from his jacket pocket and offers us one. We both decline. We had agreed to quit together months ago. We had actually quit a few weeks ago. A year tends to turn I's into We's and I appreciated the support. Andrew says "suit yourself" and lights his cigarette against the trash-fueled flames.

"Too bad we don't have the stuff to make s'mores. Those would be so good right now," I say, staring up at the stars.

"Too bad we don't have much for more than cereal and milk until I get paid," Jordan says jokingly.

“Ha, no kidding. I haven’t got much more than these beers and some ramen for the next couple days,” Andrew adds.

It’s silent for a moment. There is nothing but the sweet sound of crickets and the pop of sap-filled wood bursting open in the fire. I breathe in the heat of the smoke. Andrew takes a swig from his beer and pipes up again.

“So, in my philosophy class, my professor went off on this tangent about morality and money. It was kind of funny, because nobody wanted to answer his questions.”

“What was it?” I ask, taking another sip from my beer.

“Would you kill someone for a million dollars if you never got caught?” Andrew asks before he takes another drag and taps the ash into one of the empty bottles on the ground beside him.

“Hm, that’s a lot of money... Would I get to pick who?” Jordan asks. I can see his brow furrow, like he’s working out the mathematics of it all on a blackboard in the back of his mind.

Andrew shrugs. “It’s just some girl. You wouldn’t know her. Does it matter?”

“Eh, then probably,” Jordan says like it’s no big deal, like he’s some uncaring badass.

For a moment, I try to picture him standing there above his victim. He has a gun. I can’t imagine him with anything like a bat or a knife. I wonder if he even knows how to fire a gun. I imagine him turning his head as he shoots.

Andrew chuckles loudly. “Yeah, I know. There are some people I wouldn’t mind killing. Heck, you guys are lucky you’re my friends, or I’d wanna kill you too!” He lifts his bottle to acknowledge us.

I roll my eyes at him, hoping he notices. “I’m not sure I’d be able to do it,” I say, seriously. “I mean, maybe if I knew they were already dying, or that no one would notice they’re gone.” I kick a rock towards the fire. “But I’ve never even seen a person die. I don’t know how I’d handle it.”

“True,” I hear Jordan say quietly next to me, as if he

almost regrets his macho answer.

Andrew acts like he's ignoring us. He leans back in his lawn chair, digging for another question. When he's found one, he leans forward, his elbow on his knee and his fist under his chin as if his question will be something philosophical, something mind blowing. He doesn't disappoint. "How about rape? That was the next question. Would you rape someone?"

I can feel an angry heat rising in my stomach. I look next to me quickly, begging him in my mind to say no, to say nothing at all. I beg him to remember.

~

Mark and I had been dating for two weeks before he graduated. I guess that would make it about a month before everything happened. It was a nice change of pace to date someone who wasn't in the same grade as me. Mark seemed like a sweet guy. He had short blonde hair and the goofiest grin I had ever seen. We met each other in band. I was immediately attracted to his sense of humor and great group of friends. He was always bringing me along with him to hang out with his friends. I felt like he was showing me off, and it was so flattering at the time. I still see his friends from time to time. They're as sweet to me as ever. I wonder if they know what happened that day.

The passenger seat rattled underneath me. Mark picked me up from my parents' house to help him move his grandma into a new house. It had really just been an excuse to hang out with him. I hardly paid attention to where he was headed. I was too lost in pointless conversation and the ring of his laugh against the blurry background noise of the passing world. We just showed up to a house. I had figured it would be his Grandma's house, but he told me it was his aunt's. I guess he thought it would be nice if we hung out for a little before we got to work. His family was still at work, so we could wait there until they were ready to help. I had no idea what part of town we were in, though. *Why hadn't I paid attention?*

~

“And I wouldn’t get caught?” I hear Jordan say.

I want to slap him. I want to scream and ask why that could possibly matter. Did it matter that Mark had gotten caught? Did it matter that he hadn’t gotten anything more than a restraining order? He can’t be drunk enough to have forgotten, can he? My pulse quickens, but I wait. I hope he’s just dragging our friend along for the fun of it. I try to look at face to see whether he’s just joking or not, but his curly black hair and the shadows of the fire make it hard for me to see.

“Nope. Same as before. Some random stranger. She wouldn’t even know who you were,” Andrew says nonchalantly. Jordan sits there quietly, like he’s mulling it over. I can’t believe Andrew even asked a question like that. He should know better, too.

~

I grabbed my clothes and ran to the bathroom, hoping Mark didn’t see me as I started crying. I remember closing the door slowly, deliberately, so that I wouldn’t slam it like I wanted to. I locked it and sat on the floor across from it, avoiding the mirror. I didn’t want to see the girl that could have gotten herself into that situation. I felt ashamed. I leaned against the white wall in the fetal position. The floor was freezing. I fumbled my phone from my jeans pocket and held it in my shaking hands.

I did something stupid. I sent the text to Andrew. I hadn’t known Jordan then. Andrew was my closest friend. My protector. I was lost. I held my phone to my forehead, waiting for a reply for what felt like hours.

What did you do? It was short, simple. I stifled a sob.

I went with Mark to help him but we were alone. I told him no, Andrew... But he raped me. I re-read the word. It felt like a word I had made up. I hit send.

Where are you?

I’m still here. He picked me up. Can you come get me? I’ll be right there. What’s the address?

I don't know. I didn't see. I know we're near the Shell on the North side of town.

I'll head out there, just go outside and get the address. It'll be okay.

~

Jordan is still sitting there next to me, thinking of something clever to say. He finally settles for, "Well, I don't know. Maybe if it was for more money." I watch him laugh. The light from the fire makes his mouth seem larger, the curve of his lips sinister, and I can't stand it.

I blurt out, "Are you kidding me?" The harshness of the words ring out into the darkness around us.

He looks at me like he's confused. I think he had forgotten I was there.

"What, babe? It's just a game." There is an uncomfortable silence. He tries to fill it by adding, "We're just messing around."

I stand up. My body is numb, shaking. "I'm not feeling so good," I mumble to no one in particular. I'm about to get sick right here.

~

We sat close to each other on the couch while Mark played Call of Duty. He asked me if we should take turns, but I was fine with just curling up next to him while he played. Video games weren't really my thing. I was content looking around the living room at his aunt's knickknacks. I remember apples. She had a bowl full of plastic apples on the shelf above the TV, and I could see a large wood cut out of an apple hanging on the wall through the kitchen doorway. The whole house was filled with the light scent of them. It reminded me of when I had gone to the apple orchard with my parents as a little girl.

Then Mark paused his video game and looked over at me. He ran a hand slowly up my leg, letting it rest warm and heavy on my inner thigh. I felt myself tense up. He must have felt it too because he leaned closer and said softly, "It's okay,

babe. Just relax.” The old couch groaned as he moved towards me.

He moved towards the button on my jeans and I put my hand on top of his to stop him. “Wait, please,” I said quietly. His hands were so much bigger than mine. He kept fumbling with my button, then my zipper. “I’m not ready, Mark. Not here.” My words kept getting faster, tumbling together into nonsense. I tried any excuse to get him to stop. “Won’t your aunt come home soon? Do you even have a condom? That sounded like someone in the driveway. Please, can we do something else? Anything?”

He grabbed my jeans by my hips and began tugging them down. The fabric of the couch was coarse against my bare skin. “Just calm down, babe. It’ll be fine. I promise,” he said as he worked my jeans off to the floor beside us.

~

I stumble over a stick as I rush towards the backdoor of Andrew’s apartment. Andrew calls my name and I can hear Jordan rise out of his chair to come after me. I am in the kitchen in the back of the house, hovering over the sink when Jordan comes up behind me to wrap his arm around my shoulder.

“Are you okay?” he asks the back of my head. He puts away his tough guy act. His voice is quiet and tender. He rests his hand on my shoulder and says, “Please, hun. Will you talk to me?”

I take a deep breath to keep my voice from shaking. “Why didn’t you just say no?” I whisper.

“Oh, sweetie, it was just a game,” He says as he pulls me gently by my shoulders up to face him. “You know that, right?”

“But you should know better, Jordan. Why would you guys even bring that up?”

“Babe, I’m sure he wasn’t thinking. Seriously.” He tilts my chin up to look at my face. “And I should have just stopped that conversation before it went anywhere.”

“No, you’re right. You should have. And what the hell is Andrew’s problem out there? You guys are being ass holes!” I hear my voice rising with every phrase, but I’m beyond caring at this point. I’m about to start crying.

Jordan steps back. “Babe, he’s just drunk. You’ve known him long enough to realize he doesn’t usually think before he talks, let alone when he’s drunk.”

“That’s no excuse! Who jokes about that shit? And you? You’re not that drunk. What about you? It’s not like you could have forgotten I still get fucking panic attacks every time I think I see his Jeep.” I feel a tear fall down my cheek.

“Oh, hun,” he reaches up and brushes the tear away with his thumb. I turn my eyes away from him, trying hard to keep myself from crying any more. “I’m sorry.” He pauses, and drops his soft brown eyes to the floor. “It was all a bad joke, okay? Really, I just wasn’t thinking. I’m so sorry.” He kisses my cheek gently and lingers there, stroking my hair as he says, “We don’t have to talk about it anymore if you don’t want to.”

“I don’t want to remember any of it.” I whisper. “I feel like I can’t go a day without being reminded of how weak I was.”

“Hey,” he looks me square in the eyes as he talks now. “You are the strongest girl I know.”

“Then why am I crying right now?” I say, sniffing.

“Because your boyfriend’s a jerk who doesn’t know when to keep his mouth shut.” An apologetic smile flashes across his face. “I should be the one making you feel safe, not making you cry like this.”

“I’ll be fine.” I say, only half believing it.

“Of course you will be. You know why? Because despite everything you’ve been through, you’re still the most amazing girl in the world. Don’t you ever forget that.”

We both stand there silently for a moment before I wrap my arms around Jordan’s body. He seems confused, but he holds me close to him.

“Don’t ever do anything like that again.” I say. My

words are muffled by the fabric of his coat.

“I won’t,” he says into my hair. “I promise.”

~

I sat in the hall waiting for a trial I wanted no part of. My parents had convinced me to prosecute Mark after I had spent months hiding it from them, months trying to pretend it had never happened as I cried myself to sleep at night. I’m sure they realized something was wrong when Andrew’s sister dropped me off instead of Mark and I didn’t offer any explanation except that I didn’t feel comfortable with him. They hadn’t pressed the issue though and I tried my damndest to pretend that I was just fine anyway. My parents sat on either side of me on the little wooden bench bolted to the cold brick of the courthouse wall. We felt crowded, but I didn’t mind. I needed them close to me. Mark sat with his parents on the opposite wall farther down the hall.

I wasn’t sure whether not looking at him was admitting I was weak or standing up to him in some way. I wanted his parents to see me, to see what their son had done. I mustered up the courage to look over at their family while my parents were talking above me about the trial, and I saw his parents laughing with him. They were laughing. Was this some joke to them? Did they think that I was lying, that he was in the clear? Or were they proud of him? I turned away quickly and buried my face in my mother’s coat, muffling my sobs.

“What’s wrong, sweetie?” She asked, a hint of fear in her voice. They had never known how to handle me after they had found out. I felt like I was just one mess after another, and they were always left to pick up the pieces.

I pulled my face just far enough from her coat that my voice wouldn’t be lost in the fabric. “They’re laughing,” I whimpered, “They’re just sitting there laughing at me,” and I fell back into her.

My mom held my head tighter to her chest, saying oh hun, shush hun, it’s okay hun, over and over. I felt like a joke, a liar, like he had won. I felt like the smallest thing in the world

as my dad took my hand in his.

~

I stand here in the middle of the kitchen, wrapped in Jordan's arms. He had never answered the question though. Was a million dollars enough?

"Can I have a smile?" He asks, interrupting my thoughts. He looks worried. I'm not sure if it is because he thinks I am mad at him or still remembering what happened.

"There we go." He smiles back. "That wasn't too hard was it?"

I shake my head and wipe the tears from my cheeks.

"Good." He seems relieved. "Let's go back outside. I think we'll all feel better if we just sit and enjoy the fresh air. I can bring my iPod out and we can listen to music. Would that be okay?"

I say, "Sure." Jordan grabs his iPod from the counter next to the microwave, and as he leads me back outside, I imagine him where Mark was sitting on the couch, pulling me on top of him. I wonder if Jordan is capable of that. I wonder if twenty-one-year old me would do anything different from what sixteen-year old me had done. Could Jordan go through with destroying a girl for the chance to live comfortably? Would the girl blame herself for not stopping it?

We step outside into the chill of November. Jordan calls out to Andrew, "Hey, man, we're back. She just wanted to listen to some music." He waves his iPod up in the air as if to prove himself. We walk over to our lawn chairs and sit back down close to the fire. Jordan takes my hand in his and asks Andrew and I if there's anything we want to listen to in particular. Andrew shrugs his shoulders. He's slumped down in his chair with a new cigarette in hand, staring into the fire. He flicks his eyes in my direction for a split second with a look that says, *I'm sorry*. He seems ashamed. I just look at the ground.

Jordan looks at me and asks, “How about you? In the mood for anything?”

“No, not really.” My head is too full of questions and nightmares. I sit there quiet as he puts on some Blink 182. I sit there, quiet, as I listen to him drown out the sound of the wind and the fire. I will never be able to just forget some things.

~

Andrew sat with me in the back of his sister’s truck. I hadn’t expected her of all people to be the one to come with Andrew to my rescue. I made some bullshit excuse for Mark. Something like, “I think I need some air.” I sent Andrew a text of the nearest street names. Then I stood there outside Mark’s aunt’s house until they came.

I was pressed against the driver’s side door so I wouldn’t have to see his sister or sit too close to him. I was sobbing quietly. Andrew kept staring at me not sure what to say. His sister was sitting in the front seat, cursing Mark, threatening to castrate him if she ever saw him again. When she finally relented, I looked at Andrew and said, “Please don’t tell anyone. Promise me?”

I must have sounded pitiful. He reached a hand out to place on my shoulder but quickly stopped himself. Instead, he said quietly, “Victoria, it’s going to be okay. We don’t have to do anything until you’re ready. I promise. I’ll help you through this.”

3rd Prize Cordell Lerner Award for Fiction

Things Done

By Katelin Deushane

I first noticed the nosebleed when I was in the shower dying my hair.

I had never dyed my hair before, and I had been in such a hurry to get it started and over with that I was sure I wasn't doing it right. All that I knew was that this color did not seem to match the picture on the box—a beautiful, regal chestnut brown. Trevor always did have a thing for brunettes. Instead, the color I came out with was the picture of a dying willow that had fallen deep into the muddy waters of a swamp. So, at first when I saw the drips of red beading against the cold tiles of my shower, I thought maybe that was some of the dye that I hadn't mixed in, a clear sign of the mistake I had somehow made. Then, the drops came faster and faster becoming a strong enough downpour to rival the rush of water and dye, and I felt warmth dripping down my mouth, my chin, my throat.

“Oh! *Oh no*,” I stumbled out of the shower, slipping and sputtering on a noxious mixture of dye, blood, and water until I finally made it to the mirror.

Bruises old and new littered the lines of my body, as numerous and unappealing as trash on the side of an interstate. This combined with the strings of my wet hair clinging to the sides of my face like fat, ugly slugs and the blood that coated my skin made me look like the picture of a victim right before they became a casualty.

It took me a while to move away from my own reflection staring accusingly back at me—*look what you've*

done—and when I finally did, I found the sink was a bloody mess. My hands had slipped through it, drawing out images of people grappling for their life and of other people holding it back from them.

Familiar, in a way.

For a moment, I thought about grabbing the cleaner from under the sink, but my nose was still bleeding and it showed no sign of stopping so instead I grabbed a roll of toilet paper, pressed it against my nose and struggled into a pair of old pajamas. The hole in one of the pant legs brushed cool air against my skin, a somehow soothing balm despite the fact that my wet skin already felt icy from being beneath the whirl of the ceiling fan for so long.

Once I was fully dressed, I stumbled into the living room. The rest of the house looked no better than the bathroom, but it was a different kind of mess. Rather than there being blood, there was the stretch of dirt along the countertops, the discarded bodies of clothes that had been shrugged off from the lives that used to wear them, and dishes stacked and picked clean by various scavengers.

Again, came the thought of the cleaner, but, no, *no*, my nose was still bleeding, pooling into the toilet paper against my nose. I suppose I could have tried that old trick of putting tampons in my nostrils. They always said that worked and I couldn't see any reason why it wouldn't, but I thought of the image of myself like that, my pale skin flushed dark against the white padding, and of Trevor seeing me like that when he returned and...I just couldn't do it.

With a sigh, I sat down on the couch.

What else can I do?

I hadn't gotten a nosebleed in years. The last I could remember was when I was in middle school and at that time it had been a good experience because it had gotten me out of English class—my worst subject. Who cared if a word was a verb, adverb, or some other kind of shit?

What I did remember, though, was that nosebleeds had

to have an underlying cause. They didn't just start. Sluggishly, like an old librarian sorting through a card catalogue, my brain went over the events of this morning. I had managed to hit my nose against the swinging door of the shower before I went in—*stupid, stupid, stupid*—but it didn't seem like that could have caused enough of an injury to elicit this kind of reaction.

I couldn't think of anything else though.

So, what do I do now? Just wait? Wasn't there some kind of rule stating that if a nose bleed lasted more than five minutes than you should probably call your doctor? I couldn't remember how long it had been since it started nor could I remember the rule; there are too many situations where people are recommended to call their doctor.

I didn't even know my doctor's name.

Finally, I decided that if it didn't stop by the time Trevor got home I would do something about it. Besides... Trevor would have a better idea about what I *should* do.

So, I sat on the couch and waited, trying to ignore the numbers that glared at me from my phone and instead focused on the voice of Dr. Phil until Trevor arrived.

Lay it on me, Dr. Phil.

Like always I could hear him coming. I don't really know how since his movements had always reminded me of the action scenes in comic books. You could see the sound they were supposed to make, but instead there was only silence somehow more powerful than the sound itself.

Then, he was there, standing in the doorway, already shrugging off his uniform. I could see the glint of his bare chest as sharp as the ice you were trying to claw your way out of.

"What are you doing?" He scowled at me, throwing down his uniform on the couch beside me.

How to answer this? There were so many things I was doing. How could I possibly encompass them all? Simply, I said, "I'm waiting."

"On *what*?" He moved around our apartment, examining everything as if he hadn't just seen it this morning.

Eventually, he made it to the fridge, opening it up with tiny noises of disapprovals, like the soft swish of cat's tail along the ground before it jumped. "Jesus, Jaimie, did you accomplish anything today?"

Other than break myself I guess I really hadn't accomplished that much.

"No, sorry," I answered, staring down at the toilet paper in my hand. It was all red now—*when had that happened?*—and I floundered around desperately to get a new one before the blood could drip onto the carpet. Trevor would lock onto that splatter of blood on the carpet much more quickly than he would the splatter of blood on my face.

Why hadn't I cleaned up the bathroom?

"*Whatever.*" He turned back to me, holding up a can of what I was pretty sure was the last of the sodas. "I'll do it."

"Sorry," I murmured once more. Finally, I'd found another piece of paper to brace my nose against, and without a word I tossed the old one into the garbage can sitting beside me. At least there was one other thing accomplished.

Trevor fell onto the couch, leaning into the cushion as if he wanted to disappear into it.

Sometimes, I wished I could.

Slowly at first, then picking up pace and volume, he told me about his day. It was a struggle to focus on his words. They came in clips and phrases that I had heard many times before—Tom was a douche, customers are jackasses, his manager was a dick, and Trevor was the only one who seemed to be able to recognize all this.

The entire time a thought buzzed in my brain, an annoying mosquito who resisted the slap of my hand each time—*Is he ever going to notice my nose?*

Eventually, the words worked their way free and I flinched as they fell into the empty air, "Um...you know my nose is bleeding right?"

"*What?*" The scowl was back.

I tried to backpedal quickly, but it was like my brain

couldn't move backward without pushing more negative thoughts out of the way and when it did these thoughts fell, bouncing from my mouth to land flatly in the world, "I figured you would notice, but you haven't said a word about it."

"Well, sorry!" He leaned forward and placed the soda on the table before turning to face me fully and I was confronted with the full view of him, nothing but muscles and anger, "I wasn't aware I was supposed to keep track of every time you bleed. Next time you have your period make sure to tell me so I can synchronize my fucking watch."

"This isn't even that kind of bleed, you moron!"

The insult seemed to shock us both, and for a moment there was no sound except for that tiny voice inside my head shouting. *Shut up! Shut up! Shut up! Why are you still talking!?*

I didn't really know.

"*What?*" The word came like a distant gunshot in the night, like you knew there was danger but just didn't know when or if it would come again.

"I'm...just, you know, hurt here and all you care about is how your day went. Sometimes you're a real asshole, you know that?"

I turned away from him, my breath was coming in short and fast like it was trying desperately to keep time with my heart which was beating against my ribcage with a frantic urgency as if trying to warn me of the danger I was in.

Like I didn't already know

"It's just a fucking nosebleed!"

"That's not the point!" I was screaming now. I don't know how I got to this stage, especially with that voice inside my head still yelling, still beating at the walls of my brain to shut up—*just shut the hell up!*—and yet... "You don't care about anyone but yourself! You're selfish and cruel and—"

Pow!

It was quick.

I hadn't even seen him move, but suddenly I was on the floor, pain arching through me like some medieval monster

come to claim its sacrifice. The toilet paper that I had been holding to my nose this entire time was curving away from me, somehow unfolding perfectly into a bloody road leading to my body's memorial museum. The funny thing was that I think my nose had actually stopped bleeding. Not with the hit, but some time before.

I wondered if it would start again.

“Jaimie!”

Trevor was down beside me and without a word of protest from me he managed to pull me into his arms, apologies pouring from his mouth as easily as the complaints about me and his job had come a few minutes before.

Silent, I could only nod to each one. My thoughts were sluggish and disorganized, dissolving rapidly in the expanse of my brain like salt in a glass of water. Only one thought managed to stay solid long enough for me to grasp ahold of it.

Look what you've done.

1st Prize Lois C. Bruner Creative Nonfiction Award

Corporation

by Kirsten Dillender

Every morning I swipe my white plastic badge against the electronic reader, the high-pitched beep-beep synchronizing with the ominous *schnick* of the tinted glass doors unlocking. Usually, I sidle around to the back door employee entrance with the other obedient sheep. Sometimes I go through the cheery façade of the front door entrance, the one employees aren't supposed to use—especially in winter, when the wind chill plummets to below zero and the front door is so much closer to my car. In back, you can peer through the doors to see the windowless concrete hallways beyond. You can taste the reluctance to start another miserable day in the clouds of cigarette smoke left behind by those sucking in one last drag, anything to help them through the eight and a half hours to come. In front, you pass through a well-lit reception area plastered with seasonally-appropriate décor and a complimentary coffee station. A sheet of stark white computer paper is taped to the wall behind the coffee maker with big, bold words: **APPLICANTS ONLY.**

The secretaries giggle and gossip over doughnuts, but they can sense an outsider the second they hear the beep-beep, *schnick* of the front doors.

“Ma’am this is the last time we’re going to tell you. The front door is for applicants and upper management *only*,” the head secretary splutters, setting down her lipstick-stained Christmas coffee mug with an authoritative *clink*.

I stride past briskly, always running late, procrastinating

coming back to this place I despise. “I’m sorry, I’ll make sure to use the servant entrance next time,” I call out over my shoulder. I smile to myself at the raised eyebrows of the interviewees sitting on the well-maintained couches in the waiting area. *They might as well know what they’re getting into*, I think.

I badge in to the inner hallway with walls made of tiny beige lockers where we’re supposed to store our possessions. The person with the locker above mine always spills soda that leaks down into my locker, so I end up leaving my phone and purse in my car. I’ve complained to everyone from my supervisor to the operations manager for my program, but by this point, my locker is too sticky and congealed to even open.

I badge in once more to the inner sanctum—a huge, windowless, concrete coffin with rows and rows of tiny workstations, each complete with one computer monitor, one phone, one mouse, one keyboard. They are anonymous, one person’s indistinguishable from the next. We aren’t allowed to bring in any personal objects. You don’t need a picture of your family to answer a phone.

Each morning is the same—I clock in, plug my headset into my phone, and log in to my systems. We are allowed five minutes from the time we clock in to the time we begin taking calls before we receive disciplinary action. On good days, you have a few minutes in between phone calls to talk to your neighbors. On bad days, the calls are back-to-back, and you leave with a sore throat and a headache from talking nonstop.

You learn a lot about people when you work so closely to them day-in and day-out. Karl has a gorgeous fiancée that he lets walk all over him because he’s afraid he can’t do better. Caitlin got knocked up by her boyfriend, though she got fired for taking extra breaks for pregnancy induced bathroom visits, so I don’t know what ever happened to her. Brittney was promoted to supervisor and has a high enough salary now to afford a mortgage on a trailer, where she lives with her cat, dog, and two bunnies. I myself fell in love here, as unlikely as

it seems, to someone far too intelligent to be working in a call center.

We all have good days, and bad ones too. Sometimes the day flies by, and sometimes we leave early because we've already hung up on three people and we know we'll get fired if we don't stop. To some corporate manager in New York City we're just another number, one of a few hundred chairs that need to be filled to meet production demands; mere cogs in what attempts to be a well-oiled machine. They try to strip us of our humanity so we mesh neatly with the gears around us, but they can't cut off our need for connection. We hang on to our work friendships and rivalries, grasping at anything to keep us relevant.

2nd Prize Lois C. Bruner Creative Nonfiction Award

Black Hole

by Sandra Sepaniak

The first time I woke up, I was covered in a strange, sticky substance that stained my sheets, my pillow, and even my skin orange.

I was trembling violently and sore, but I couldn't open my eyes yet. My sense of touch was starting to return — I could definitely feel it when the nurse jabbed a syringe filled with medication into my thigh. I could feel so much padding on my chest that I could hardly move it. I could also recognize the pitch that my heart rate monitor was making — B-natural, until I took a deeper breath and it went up to C.

“¿*Mamá, qué pasó?*” I asked. Even I could tell how raspy my voice sounded in my second language, though my mother's figure was still a brunette-topped blur across the recovery room.

“You're all done,” my mother said. “It was bigger than they expected.”

“Really?” I asked. “How big?”

She then showed me the photo the surgeon had taken of the tumor previously lodged inside my chest. It was pink, covered in blood and swollen — disgusting in almost every sense — but what stuck out the most was the ruler they had placed against the mass. Lined up with it, the largest part of the tumor measured in at 15 centimeters, or almost six inches.

Even with my incoherence, I remember shouting in my own mind, “Fifteen centimeters!” We had previously thought it was a mere nine centimeters.

I was starving. It only took me about five more minutes to realize that I hadn't eaten since midnight the night before and, at 1:30 p.m., I was feeling it. Toast brought by the nurse with butter and strawberry jam never tasted so good, and even though the water in Geneseo — a town of 6,500 people surrounded by thousands of acres of corn and soybean fields — had a reputation for tasting terrible, I had never been happier to have a little Styrofoam cup of ice water.

I remember going into the bathroom next to the recovery room to change into my street clothes soon after. As I was changing out of the ugly, diamond-patterned gown that seemed to be standard issue at every hospital in America and into my purple shirt with the Western Courier logo on the front, I noticed my chest. My breast, now bereft of a baseball-sized tumor, was sagging.

In my own mind, I looked damaged. Like I was 60 years old and all the collagen in my skin had abandoned me. Bandages covered most of the area, but the way my skin looked red and sore and how it pulled at itself was hard to miss.

Tumors can be difficult to find, especially for those who don't know what to look for. Even more, many college students aren't in the habit of looking for them, while others might think a tumor is normal tissue. Such was my case. I didn't know what to recognize, so I thought my breast was normal.

What Susan G. Komen and Avon's Breast Cancer Crusade and all of those other organizations neglected to teach me was how breast lumps feel compared to normal breast tissue. The Breast Cancer Foundation website said in their self-examination guide to look "for any lump, thickening or hardened knot."

How was I supposed to know what a lump felt like without any further description? Mine felt like there was a rubbery ridge directly under my nipple. Because of this, I had gone weeks or months thinking that was normal, even though it didn't feel like the body fat breast tissue is similar to.

Reality set in when I went to my family doctor with

an odd pain in the right side of my chest that had persisted for weeks.

“Have you been feeling any pain in your left breast?” Dr. Amber Peterson asked during an exam.

“Nope.” Her question had planted a seed of doubt in my mind that sprouted a few seconds later. Why would she ask about that? Sure, my left side was bigger than my right, but that had been the case since puberty.

It was only near the end of the appointment that Dr. Peterson told me that she felt a big lump in my breast and wanted to schedule an ultrasound. Then, for the fluttering pain in the right side of my chest, she prescribed me a bottle of meloxicam and sent me on my way.

Telling my mom the news over the phone was harder than I expected it to be, mostly because I couldn’t gauge a reaction from her or myself. We were both too shocked for it. I spent the afternoon in an uncertain sort of daze, silently wondering about her diagnosis in the line at the Walmart pharmacy.

When forced to wait, the mind wanders. However, I had plenty of things to occupy me, with a summer internship at the Moline Dispatch and Rock Island Argus sending me all over and keeping me busy with writing.

The span of days between my appointment and the ultrasound dragged on. I could have been trying to contact aldermen for a story about lodging undocumented Honduran children or interviewing flood victims in a low-lying East Moline neighborhood, but my thoughts always returned to what was in my chest.

At no point during the phone call after the ultrasound results came in the following Friday did Dr. Peterson use the word “tumor.” To this day, I think she was just trying to keep me from being even more frightened than I already was.

I was 21 and facing something that I thought couldn’t happen to me. In the Dispatch’s newsroom bathroom, staring at myself in the mirror and focusing for a second on the

dirty beige floor tiles, I broke down crying, trying not to sob into the phone. I needed to avoid reacting in Dr. Peterson's presence. Part of me feared the worst, thinking I was becoming one of those stories that appeared during Race for the Cure commercials or Breast Cancer Awareness Month infographics.

I couldn't handle the news. Any time I sat still for more than a few moments at my desk, I started crying again and had to do everything I could to stay quiet. Finishing my day's work as quickly and carefully as I could, I left around 2 p.m.

Gauging a reaction from my parents was difficult, not only when we first discovered the lump or when the results came back, but throughout the entire ordeal as well.

The only time my mom actually cried in front of me was when she came home around 3 p.m. that day in her boss's powder-blue Mini convertible, on its way to the airport. She saw me crying first. Wrapped up in a hug with her against the thick fabric of her polo, I broke down in the driveway, even though the wind was bringing in a storm and we were both in short sleeves.

I was worried that my body would be wrecked by scars, destroyed by treatment or any other number of calamities. It was only when I met Dr. Calvin Atwell — a surgeon well known in my hometown — that my fears were reined in.

Dr. Atwell only ever seemed to wear blue scrubs when I saw him, but he was in his 50s and had some of the bushiest eyebrows I had ever seen. I was so drawn to look at them rather than his face every time I saw him that I had to force myself to look at his eyes to pay attention.

"How're you doing today, Sandra?" he asked after I had dressed in a paper gown that opened in the front.

"All things considered, I'm okay," I answered.

"Mind if I take a look?"

Showing my breasts to men I didn't know became routine after a few trips — I was only on the third doctor's appointment, but I was already getting used to it. Each time, I'd wear a paper gown that opened in the front and lie down on my

back. If I happened to be wearing a dress that day, I'd wear a pair of cotton shorts underneath them. I also learned how to get undressed in under a minute, with how fast Dr. Atwell liked to get in and out of the exam room.

"I'm going to recommend that we remove this, just because it is such a large mass," Dr. Atwell said after he finished examining me. He didn't immediately use the word "tumor," either. "I agree with Dr. Peterson that it's probably fibroadenoma, which isn't cancerous. There is a 1 percent chance of this being a phyllodes tumor, which can pose a risk for sarcoma, but I don't believe that's the case. So how about we schedule the surgery for next Tuesday?"

I stared at him in shock for a few seconds, stammering as I tried to process all of the information he had just given us. I noticed then that the nurse, Laura, was standing in front of the door. I squinted at her slightly. Was she trying to keep him from leaving?

"I, uh, that would be great," I said. "Is there anything I need to do in the meantime?"

"Not for now," Dr. Atwell said. "We'll just need you to not eat before midnight before that. You'll be able to go back to work the next day if you really want to."

Ultimately, I decided against the idea of returning to work so soon, but as my mother and I went out to the car, we stared at each other in surprise.

"Next Tuesday," I said.

"That was faster than I expected," she answered.

I stayed quiet for a moment longer while she pressed the button to ignite the engine. We were both going to Culver's afterwards, if only to get some cheese curds and process everything that was happening. "Next Tuesday!" I said, still shocked.

"Yep."

I was in the 1 percent.

Two weeks passed between the first surgery and the day that the results finally came back from the pathologist. There, we found out that the tumor was a combination of a phyllodes tumor and a hamartoma; something that, according to the internet, was even rarer. Hamartomas only showed up in a maximum of 0.7 percent of women, benign though they were. The real danger remained in the phyllodes tumor.

How we found this out involved several different pathologists and two weeks of waiting. The mass was stained with a special ink and sent off to a lab in Peoria, who decided a second opinion was necessary and sent it off to a specialist who worked for Massachusetts General Hospital and Harvard Medical School, who sent back a report, half of which seemed to be in Latin.

It was so indecipherable that I had Google search the whole document word by word. I had no idea what “biphasic neoplasms” or “hyalinized ovoid lobular structures” were, nor did I know what “stromal hypercellularity” meant. Only one line stood out in plain English.

“Thank you for the opportunity to review this unusual case,” the last line in the report read. “Please call with any questions.”

As I read the last line of the letter, I began to understand why some patients liked nurses better than doctors.

It was Laura who was able to finally explain what my diagnosis meant — it was something that they called “borderline” or “intermediate grade” as a phyllodes tumor. Not quite cancer, but not quite enough that we could’ve just left it alone. The cells were somewhat mutated, but not enough to be classified as something that would have required radiation.

My mother and I were quiet when we walked out to the car together, both of us too frustrated to speak at first. Finally, when we piled into her plum-colored Nissan Maxima, I looked out the windshield.

“Hold on a second,” I said.

The scream that followed was long, loud and left

my entire throat feeling hoarse and itchy. The five seconds I spent letting it escape weren't long enough, but they left me coughing and gasping for air anyway.

"I know," she answered. Finally, she handed me the letter and I stared at it until we got to our destination — a soul food restaurant in Geneseo — whereupon I immediately ordered a fuzzy navel and tried to let the schnapps help me forget how "unusual" I apparently was.

College students tend to think they're invincible; that nothing bad can happen to them. Such was my case on a more subtle level. I was by no means the kind of person who would play chicken or take pills just to see what they would do, but I had never been faced with the fact that one day, I'm going to die.

After the results came back that my single tumor was actually a combination of two types; and that one of them was borderline cancerous, that realization became very clear.

The rest of my summer was marked by drives to an oncologist in Iowa and the hospital in Geneseo, along with trips to an imaging center for MRIs and chest x-rays, all to make sure that my ordeal would not drag on with undetected problems.

Between those, however, I tried to focus as much on my internship as I could. After all, I was earning slightly above minimum wage writing articles every single day, and I absolutely loved it. Sometimes I made mistakes — there were a few times that I had to make corrections because I hadn't made information clear enough or had misidentified someone — but I loved learning how the business worked there.

However, I often found myself leaving before 5 p.m. in order to travel to the oncology clinic in Davenport, and that in turn made me feel guilty. The fact that I was the youngest person in the waiting room on any given day did not help at all.

Dr. Costas Constantinou — a friendly, middle-aged oncologist with a Greek accent — was the one who ultimately

decided I needed a second round of surgery to make sure the phyllodes tumor would not come back with the threat of sarcoma. Though I was assured the form of cancer associated with phyllodes tumors did not spread to the lymph nodes, it still could reappear in the healthy tissue that was touching my tumor. He was careful to explain all of this to me slowly and in a way that I could understand — a far cry from Dr. Atwell and his apparent love for Latin and urge to get from one consultation to the next in less than five minutes.

The process was repetitive: prepare for more surgery, attend more consultations, have more phone calls with pre-op questionnaires, fast for eight more hours, and keep waiting for the operation itself. At the very least, I knew what would happen the second time around. More needles, more pregnancy tests, more soreness — lather, rinse, and repeat as necessary.

Nobody ever seemed to talk about the terrifying realization that there was something that could kill them growing inside their bodies, let alone their breasts. During the long lull between the two surgeries, I began to understand why.

“You know, I talked to Aunt Mary, and she said she’s been thinking about you a lot,” my father — a baby boomer who usually dealt with my situation by not bringing it up — would say after a meeting with one of the doctors. Aunt Mary was switched out with a number of other friends and relatives I hadn’t seen since a wedding two years prior, combined with praying and requesting for thoughts and more prayers at Masses, and the panic began to set in.

I was told that I was “strong,” that I was handling this “maturely,” but really, I was scared out of my wits and trying (and failing to a certain extent) to not let my anxieties eat me alive. I wanted that borderline cancerous-grade tumor gone, and even when it was, I wanted to make sure it could never come back. It scared me half to death to think that I had something so rare; something that would grow again or turn cancerous if I left it alone.

For a while, I pretended to be strong and tried to hold

it all in. The internship ended in mid-August and I moved into the dorms at Western Illinois University in Macomb — another, slightly larger Illinois town surrounded by corn and soybean fields — with my parents dumping all of my stuff on me one evening, thinking I could take it from there. I was able to put everything away for the most part and had put on some Bastille to keep the room from being too silent, but it slowly began to hit me that for the first time in about four months, I was alone.

I paused iTunes. I sat down on top of my black and gray-striped comforter. Even the air conditioner was silent in my ears.

That was when I began to cry. I don't know how long I wept, but I was opening a door and letting every emotion I had held in all summer fly out, screaming. My face turned hot and purple-red, I coughed repeatedly, and I sobbed and wailed louder than I had in years. There was something oddly liberating about being able to go behind a closed door with nobody else around and crying until my lungs gave out.

It must have been at least an hour before I finished. I was scared, of course, but I was also being treated like I was made of porcelain.

It became a game almost, measuring the difference between each reaction when I told my friends, my ex-boyfriend, or even explaining to my professors at the beginning of the year why I might be gone or unable to do physical activities for a few days early on.

My favorite reaction of all, however, came from my best friend in the world. Jasmine, or “Kato,” as she went by to avoid confusion with the five other Jasmynes that she knew, treated everything like business as usual, unless it was to acknowledge that I was feeling scared. With her living in Denver, we only communicated over the Internet or through text. When I showed her the picture of my tumor after it had been extracted, however, her first reaction was two words that made me laugh through my anesthesia-induced haze.

“Whoa, meat.”

If I could platonically marry that woman, I would pop the question in a heartbeat — I ended up laughing until I could feel my breast moving against the bandages. She would later ask me to send it to her again so she could look at it, as she hadn't saved it the first time.

The second round of surgery was initially more painful and tedious than the first, but I liked the result better than before. After the first round, my breast resembled a mountain range.

The second time, I was surprised I even had anything left when I looked at it. I was still covered in the same orange-colored antiseptic from the first round, but I could hardly feel anything left beneath the layers of padding.

“I got nothin’ left inside of my chest, but it’s all alright,” I purportedly sang to my mom after they brought me back to the recovery room. It was a song by the band fun., but I apparently had thought that the play on words was good enough to repeat.

Of course, the first thing I did after singing to my mom was call Kato. We joked, she noted how I sounded like I was from Chicago, and I asked her how her shift at Starbucks was going. Later though, I told her how I was down to being the same size on both sides of my chest.

“They took out everything around the tumor,” I said. “I shrunk up a lot.”

“Damn, girl, do you even have a boob left?” she asked.

I paused for a moment and tried not to laugh. “No, I don’t. There’s just a black hole there now, waiting to suck in wrongdoers. I have the best superpower ever.”

I was content with that much.

3rd Prize Lois C. Bruner Creative Nonfiction Award

No One's Girl

by Alyson Eagon

"I know why your parents named you Clint!" I shouted excitedly at my dad.

He laughed, "Oh, yeah? Why's that?"

"Because, you're from *Clinton*, Iowa!" I was sure I had figured it out.

"I'm actually not from Clinton," Dad said.

This baffled me. I was in kindergarten at the time, and assumed that everyone I knew in Clinton was from there, too.

"Your dad is from New Jersey," he said, speaking of himself in third person as he often did. He spoke of himself as "Your dad" and "Daddy" as if to reassure himself that he was, in fact, a dad.

I was more confused and less interested in the fact that my dad came from a foreign place called New Jersey rather than the only place I knew. I couldn't picture New Jersey.

"That's where your Grandmom and Grandpop Eagan live."

"What's a Grandmom and Grandpop?" I asked. I knew "grandma" and "grandpa," but this mom and pop stuff was over my Midwestern head.

"They're your grandparents," Dad said, as if I should know of their existence, but I'd never heard mention of them. I never did meet them.

~

My dad seemed so cool to me. He had short brown hair, and a goatee. He had a few tattoos; I favored the one just above

his breast, done in blue-green ink, of a genie-type woman who curled up into a circle. He played guitar and sang. He played Marcy Playground and sounded like the lead singer. He sang The Wallflower's "One Headlight." That was my favorite. There was also a lot of Nirvana. You know, 90s pothead music.

For a few years of my childhood he lived in Clinton, on Second Street. His apartment was conveniently located just across the street from Jewel-Osco and Movie Magic. We had a little routine, on the weekends he came to get my brother and me. First, we'd walk to Jewel and get Jiffy Pop and Macaroni, and then we'd rent movies at Movie Magic. This movie store was truly something magical in my eyes. The letters atop the small store were illuminated in bright purple lettering. Their mascot, a bunny with a top hat in his hand, smiled behind the letters. The neon purple, white, pink, and black all blurred together when I walked in and looked around. We always picked a comedy and a horror. I still remember what the cover of *Joe Dirt* looked like, sitting on the shelf of Movie Magic: David Spade, mop in hand, and a mullet hairdo. I wanted to get Veggie Tales.

My dad said, "That's for babies."

I wanted to get Mary-Kate and Ashley. He let me get that.

I was happy to correct him when he asked, "Where is the third one?"

"What do you mean?"

"There's Mary, there's Kate. Where's Ashley?"

"No. There's only two. That's Mary-Kate. That's Ashley."

We watched *Tommy Boy*, *Joe Dirt*, *Big Daddy*, *Jeepers Creepers*, and *Thirteen Ghosts*. I can't be quite sure how many visits there were before he disappeared. Those are the only movies I can be sure we rented, but they also remain my favorites. When Dad was busy filling the apartment with the stink of weed, my brother Kyle and I happily sat in front of the TV on the pullout bed watching VHS tapes of *South Park*

and *Beavis and Butthead*. Dad explained to us that he had recorded them while he was at work, “That’s why there’re commercials.”

Dad specialized in making fun of people for being idiots. He reminded me of David Spade. They were both funny in a sarcastic, dry way. There was one particular scene from *Tommy Boy* that we favored, in it David Spade’s character frustratedly tries to assist passengers on a plane:

What about seat belts? To fasten, take the little end and stick it in the big end and...

You know what? If you guys don't know how to use a seatbelt, just ring your call button and Tommy will come back there and hit you on the head with a tack hammer because you are a retard.

~

My hometown, Clinton, Iowa, borders Illinois right where the Mississippi cuts through. Living in such proximity to our neighboring state gave me the illusion that Iowa and Illinois together made one large state. Clinton is small, with a population of about 20,000. The air is perpetually tainted with a stale stench that leaks from a factory, which is slowly swallowing the town.

As kids, my younger brother Kyle was my little sidekick. We were close in age, only two and a half years apart. Kyle and I have the same father, Clint, while our little sister’s father is our stepdad, Bill. Anytime I had a fun idea, but was too chicken to go for it, Kyle would. If I asked him to jump off our deck, he would. If he felt like jumping off the roof, he would. He would ride his skateboard down or on anything and everything. He was the kind of kid who would never think twice on a dare. We idolized shows like *Jackass* and *Viva La Bam*, and my brother was just as wild as Bam Margera or Steve-O. He and his friends even developed their own spinoff: *Jackass Junior*.

~

In the fall of 1999, we collected cool-looking leaves.

Dad gave me a plastic bag to keep them in. He took me to the store to get a bike. Kyle had already had a bike since he turned three, being an active kid. We went on bike rides, Kyle, dad and I. He explained to us that he had his license taken away, "For doing something stupid." If we wanted to go somewhere we either had to walk or ride bikes.

That winter, I woke up in the middle of the night, staying at Dad's place on Second Street. I couldn't breathe because I had such a bad cold that snot was blocking my throat and nose up. My dad's friend Angie had been staying, and she was a nurse. She got me to stop crying and ran to the store to get me medicine.

Angie was overweight, and had medium length, crimped hair; brown with blonde streaks. She was always smiling or laughing. Angie wasn't my dad's girlfriend or anything, but she was so nice to Kyle and I. She bought us Christmas gifts. After Christmas, because we never saw our dad on the actual holiday. We always waited for him to call, but he always disappeared during holidays. Angie bought me a nail-art kit. I wasn't sure how to use it, but I attempted to glue a piece of leopard print fabric to my nail. Kyle got a train set.

Kyle and I were at our dad's on New Year's Eve, when everyone was making a big deal out of Y2K. I should've been scared, at only five years old; I saw a lot of news reports suspecting all of our computers to turn against us. But my dad was so nonchalant about it. He made jokes, and I felt safe spending the new millennium in his apartment.

Not long after the summer of 2000, Dad was gone. Then, every once in a while Mom would hand me the phone, "It's your dad." We would talk for a while. I'd ask where he was and he'd tell me, "Daddy made some mistakes." It was always so vague, and it made me feel immature. He could just tell me. It's not like Kyle and I were in the dark about any of the stuff, my mom was not hesitant on the subject. She told us Dad was a drug addict. She told us to always "say no", to make

sure we didn't end up like him. He was "a loser." I felt that she was being too one-sided. For years I was convinced that it was my mom's fault my dad had left. I couldn't know the truth, I was only two when they divorced. They each acted as if the other was solely to blame.

My dad seemed so cool to me, so laid back. I couldn't understand why everything hadn't worked out. My dad talked about my mom being crazy, and I could see what he meant. She was often hysterical. She screeched everything at me, and cursed until her throat was raw. She cried and laughed at the same time, at something as minuscule as my brother not getting ready fast enough in the morning. She would lose her keys and yell loud enough for the neighbors to hear, "Where the fuck are my keys?" I have never heard a person make noises like she did. It sounded like she was trying to kill herself with her own voice. As if she could yell herself to death.

The next place Dad lived was just across the bridge, in Fulton, Illinois. We got to meet his new girlfriend, Becky. She was lanky and pale, with frizzy hair. Becky was crazed, and nervous. She was addicted to heroin. Dad had been excited for Kyle and I to meet Becky's kids: Dylan, Nick, and Sydney. Dylan was my age. He was big and annoying. Dad had warned me that Dylan was crazy. He had cracked Sydney over the head with a chain and was now on medication, and had been seeing a therapist since. Nick was Kyle's age. I never talked much to Nick. I was expected to befriend Sydney, who was just a year or so younger than me. I called her Cindy for the first day I knew her. Dad had to explain it to me a few times,

"Alyson, its SYD-KNEE. Not Cindy."

Sydney. Sydney. Sydney. I'd have to keep repeating it in my head to remember it right. I hated that name, it was so confusing. Why couldn't it just be Cindy? It was almost Cindy.

In the back of this house in Fulton, was the perfect bike riding hill. The driveway offered a nice, steep path of smooth blacktop. Sydney and I were riding our bikes down the hill side-by-side. She started turning in front of me.

“Sydney. Hey, move. I’m too close to you!”

She wasn’t listening, and just as I was about to repeat myself, my front tire hit her back tire. She swerved a little, and kept going. I flew over my handlebars and landed on my left eyebrow. I got up and everything was blurry for a few seconds. My eyes filled with tears and I ran inside. My glasses had fallen off, but they weren’t broken.

“Dad! Dad!” I ran inside.

“What happened?”

“I fell off my bike!”

He looked at my face and started laughing, really hard. I was angry. He wasn’t taking this situation seriously.

“You got a nice goose egg. Look.” He had me look in the mirror, he was still laughing.

I looked at it, there was no bleeding. Just a big bump forming into a bruise. I felt silly with my eyes all puffed up with tears. I couldn’t help it, I started laughing too. He gave me aspirin.

Once, Becky made a homemade chicken noodle soup. I love chicken noodle soup. The next morning, we were eating chicken noodle soup, again. I tried to make a joke,

“Chicken noodle soup, again?” I paused, so that I could emphasize a “Yes!”

Before I could do so Becky went off, “Don’t you complain in my house about the food that I cooked for you!”

My dad was pissed. “Hey. Don’t yell at my kid like that!” He started bashing on her cooking.

I watched Becky pour a pitcher of red Kool-Aid all over Dad, during a bad fight. We were told to go outside. It was raining heavily. We loved playing in the rain, anyway. We were in the driveway, when a cop car rolled up. They looked at us suspiciously. We explained that we were waiting for them to stop fighting, *the parents are inside*.

On one visit to Dad and Becky’s, we didn’t even make it across the bridge to Fulton. We stopped at the Walgreens pharmacy drive-through. They ordered their medication. We

waited ten minutes. We waited ten more minutes. It was taking much longer than usual. The cops pulled up behind us. They had been trying to claim someone else's prescription, Becky's cousin or something. I remember having a father's day card on me. I had put a dollar in the card, because Dad was always talking about being poor. The police had to take Kyle and I to the station to wait for Mom to get us. I looked at the card on the floor of the van as I exited, wondering if he was going to read it.

At the police station, they brought us to a room that had different toys in it. They told us to go ahead, pick one. I grabbed a doll. Mom and our stepdad, Bill, talked about this shitty situation for a while afterward. When they showed up to get us, they asked what'd happened. I told them, and they shook their heads. Mom asked things like, "What kind of a person is he?" She asked me in a heavy tone, as if it weren't a rhetorical question. I just didn't know. I didn't have an answer. That she expected there to be one, made it all seem worse.

The next place Dad lived was on a farm, somewhere in Illinois. He was still living with Becky. They had cows, a llama, chickens, geese, cats, and cornfields; all of that farm stuff. There was some sort of agreement between them and the actual farmer. They didn't really run the farm. There were originally two llamas, but Dylan and Nick had killed one. "They fuckin' snapped its neck." Dad told us. They were always doing destructive and disturbing things. Dylan and Nick would walk down to a big shed and trap the geese in cages, torturing them. They'd climb up the silo until Dad saw and yelled "Get the fuck down!"

We couldn't use the toilet there. It was completely filled up with shit and piss. It was broken, but they were still using it. The last person to use it was supposed to empty it all into a bucket. I peed outside. I was in the shed by myself one day, when the llama attacked me. He jumped on my back. I screamed for help as loud as I could, but it seemed to take forever before my dad noticed. When he came out and saw me,

he started laughing, and I think the llama got bored and walked off before Dad stopped laughing hard enough to help.

It was at the end of this visit, that Dad mentioned causally to mom that he had Hepatitis C, from using dirty needles to shoot heroin. Mom immediately became concerned that we had somehow contracted the disease just from being in his presence. When she found out about the toilet situation, her concerns were only amplified. We went to see my doctor, and his idea was to have me tested, because he thought that if I had it, we could then test Kyle and my mom. “No reason to test everybody.” I was angry about this because shots scared me, and I wasn’t worried about having Hepatitis. For weeks my mom worried, but of course when the results came back, I was fine.

After that, Dad ended up in prison for a long time. I was twelve, when my mom and stepdad took us to see him in Peoria. I was happy to see him, but it felt weird. Seeing him through glass, wearing an orange jumpsuit. His head was shaved, his teeth looked worse than I had remembered. He seemed different, almost wounded. He sounded different, but maybe that was just the prison phones warping his voice. He didn’t look skinny anymore, he’d gained a belly.

I didn’t see him for six years following that prison visit. I heard from him occasionally, mostly through letters. Mostly from prisons. He only wrote me when he was locked up. He always wrote me, and occasionally wrote Kyle. This was because Kyle hated writing and reading. I wanted to be a writer. Dad loved hearing this because he said that’s what he’d always wanted to do. He told me he was really good at writing in school. Once, he sent me a story he was working on. I tried to read it, but it was really sloppy and long and it didn’t make any sense. I couldn’t figure out what it was about.

When he called, Kyle was usually outside playing. I was usually inside coloring or reading or writing. He always interrupted me when we talked, so that he could go on a tangent about himself. It didn’t used to bother me, because I

was interested in what he had to say. But the older I got the longer he talked about himself and the more I started to see him as selfish. I held my breath as he talked on and on, and I waited for him to ask me about me. Usually he didn't. Usually I had to quickly interject when there was a pause available. It felt like there was a little seed of anger growing in me, that had been there all along, but it was just beginning to sprout. I stopped writing him back. Sometimes, he called and I didn't want to talk.

~

Dad was usually unemployed, but he had various odd jobs. He was always happy to tell me about these jobs, and I could hear a sense of accomplishment in his voice when he told me he was employed.

"I got a job working at a fireworks stand. Haha yeah, it's pretty cool," he told me once, over the phone.

"Oh, cool! Do you get paid a lot?"

"It's something. I get paid under the table."

I asked him what that meant, and he explained that he was being paid illegally, but that also meant he got paid a little more. I pictured a shady man shoving cash to him under the fireworks stand.

The mention of a job at a fireworks stand only heightened my association of Dad to David Spade. In Joe Dirt, the movie we watched together so often, Spade helped a friend running a fireworks stand. Spade made sure that his buddy was selling "the good stuff," not just snakes and sparklers. I assumed that my dad would run his fireworks stand in a similar manor.

~

Not long after I turned thirteen, Dad moved to Florida, where his parents (my grandmom and grandpop) had moved from New Jersey. He was in Florida for a handful of years. During this time he was disowned by his parents, and then re-owned. He kept getting clean and then using again. They only wanted him when he was going to really change. I had spent

my whole life hoping he would change. He promised me that he was done with drugs, so often. Then I'd read a letter from jail, "Hi Hun, Daddy messed up." I hated that he called me "Hun" and that he referred to himself as "daddy." He wasn't my daddy.

I referred to my mom and stepdad, Bill, as my parents, because they were my parents. I called Bill "Dad." I had to train myself not to refer to Bill as "Dad" around my dad Clint.

I caught myself saying, "I like country music like my dad."

And Clint said, "I don't like country music."

When I told him I was talking about my *other* dad he said, "You know you only have one dad. I'm your dad."

I just kind of agreed with him. He said the same thing if I said anything beginning with, "My parents." This was a confusing predicament, and when I became older I found solace in referring to each of my "dads" by first name when I wasn't speaking directly to them.

~

I was nineteen the next time I saw my dad. He came up to Illinois to stay with a friend. Kyle and I visited him briefly. He was staying with Angie. "You remember Angie." We did remember Angie. She was just as warm and friendly as I'd remembered, but now her hair was short and bleach blonde. For Christmas they gave me a framed picture of my grandma; Dad's mom, who I'd never had the chance to meet. He let me know that the gift had been Angie's idea.

After all this time, it wasn't the same. We sat around Angie's couch, smoking weed. That was something that remained consistent; Dad's homes always smelled like weed. I don't remember seeing him use any drugs, but that smell was familiar to me before I knew what it was. Now that I was an adult, and apparently Kyle was too, we were part of the club. He knew we smoked. Kyle and I had both begun smoking pot, separately with our friends, in eighth grade. That was how long it took for me to get curious enough, and lax enough, and

rebellious enough to pick up the habit.

It was fun sitting around smoking with them, but it felt dull. My dad didn't seem so cool anymore, and he was looking at us like we were judging him. We were judging him. At least, I know I was.

I gladly accepted his peace pipe, but the whole way home I bitched, "Can you believe he was offering us drugs and alcohol? Did you hear how much he talked about himself? What a sociopath."

Kyle didn't have anything to say about it. I'm sure he was just glad to have him back in our lives.

~

When I was a little girl, I often wore a shirt my dad had bought me. A black, long-sleeved top with sparkly red lettering that read, "Daddy's Girl" and I wore it with pride. I knew I wasn't a mommy's girl; mom liked Kyle best. I looked up to Dad. He was this cool guy who could sing, he did whatever he wanted, he thought everything was funny, he was going to teach me to play guitar one day, and he thought Mom was unfair. At home, Kyle wasn't punished for doing wrong, because Mom didn't know how to control him. At Dad's, he was strict with him. I'd never seen anyone make Kyle do anything before.

I've come to realize that my dad isn't who I thought he was. I'm older, and he lives closer. I sort of wish he would've just stayed away, and written occasionally, to keep the illusion up. The illusion that he was this cool guy, who wanted to be our dad, but couldn't take us away from Mom. He abandoned us. He taught me that nothing was a sure thing even if it felt like a sure thing. That sometimes caring about someone isn't enough to make an effort to be a part of their lives. That maybe I shouldn't make such an effort because, what's the point?

So, sometimes when he calls, I don't answer. Because I don't feel like hearing about his problems. Sometimes I do answer, and I listen to him talk about going back to college. He tells me he's scared that he's been out of school too long. I just

encourage him to go ahead and do it if that's what he wants. I don't much care whether or not he goes to college, and I don't expect him to. Just as I don't care any longer if he's really been staying clean.

Sometimes he calls and says, with a slight attitude, "Yeah, I've been trying to get ahold of you. I don't know what's going on."

He's only made a point to contact us when it's convenient for him, and so I will only answer when it's convenient for me.

More and more, I find myself mentally exhausted in his presence. I've thought about disowning him from my life, but I couldn't bring myself to do so. He doesn't know how to be a dad, because he never really figured out how to take care of himself. He's not the man I always thought him up to be, as I assume David Spade would not be so similar to the comedic personalities of his movie characters.

I've been disappointed my entire life, but I've never doubted that my dad loves me. Dads are important, and even though he was absent for so much, I'll always love him. I cannot kick someone I love to the curb. When he's out, he's out. When he calls, I might be mad. But my memories are precious. While he may not always have been a dad, I will always be a daughter. Though, I am not a daddy's girl. I am no one's girl. I am my own.

“Basquiat”

Photograph by Queen Hibbler



Goat Barn

Serigraph by Mason Karr



Life

Photograph by Heather Jensen



“Lactose Bonding and Ventrical Failure”

Serigraph by Josh Niles



Professor Wurth Asked Me to Write a Poem

by Jon Naskrent

Professor Wurth asked me to write a poem.
She told me to fill it with images, metaphors,
or sounds, and that one had to be prominent.
She told me something about enjambments
but I don't remember. It was only in passing
and frequently interrupted.

She likes to say that poetry isn't for old, dead white
guys
and I agree with her.
I think poetry really isn't for any dead people.

This is the part where,
to be most effective,
I'm going to paint a picture:
In a coffin lies a corpse. The corpse is rotting.
It smells like mold growing in the kitchen
beside the sink from that time you cooked
curry on the stove-top two months ago.
It looks a bit like old socks left in the washer,
still damp from the rinse-cycle. Still dirty
because you still haven't purchased any bleach.

In its Tempurpedic™-never-made-with-springs-bed
the corpse moans a little bit. A breath leaves
its toilet-paper lips at first quietly, like a Winter draft
fluttering under the door,

and then hugely, like Tropical Storm Mummy has finally made its way up to Western Illinois (where, thereupon, it dies suddenly).

Of course, like the mummy, we'll preserve it. We like to bottle foreign noises. We like being able to hear *Nrgghhhhhhhhhhhhh* on demand. We like to hear old, dead white guys lying in their coffin. We like to remind them that it is no longer corpses for whom we're writing.

I Will Never Be A Writer

by Rebecca Gonner

I will never be a writer
I can't handle the silence,
The quiet waiting, the stillness
That beckons inspiration,
Like a frightened animal,
To the food in the palm of my hand.

I will never be a writer
I can't handle the blank slate
The stark perfection staring at me
Daring me to stain it with my thoughts
To make permanent my mistakes
For all to see.

I will never be a writer
I can't handle the endless questions,
Self-doubt standing at my shoulder
Peering at every mark I make,
Constantly wondering and never knowing
~~Am I~~ is it good enough?

I may never be a writer
But I will always write

Kurt Vonnegut Once Told Me

by Anamile Zuniga

When sticks with microphones ask of memories I refuse to answer.
The answer is sad.
It's no longer relevant to the now
Two of the females I loved are dead,
So it goes.

A life riddled with irony they tell me
With eyes closed I can see bodies on the ground
Stacked up like the flapjacks I would be having,
If I were anywhere else.
So it goes.

Prisoner to Dresden.
Prisoner to the hate.
Prisoner to the war.
Prisoner to my brain.
So it goes.

From all the words you heard me say do not fret for my sanity
My humor left unscratched by the atrocities,
And now I make you laugh in guilt from ugly things.

Science fiction,
It reveals the truth of what we will be.
Mix it with satire and the truth is shown of what we are
The shadow and the light
The cat and the cradle
So it goes.

Damon McArthur



"Your characters have lives of their own inside the minds of your readers."

I Just Wanna Get Wet

by Patrick T Gibbons

The doorknob was warm and inviting in my grip. The bass and hollers from the party inside trailed out through the porch's wooden floorboards. The vibrations consumed my lower half, preparing me for what lingered beyond the door. I drew a deep breath, exhaled, and let myself in.

“Yo! What’s good?” I wasn’t two steps through the threshold before Brendan came forth to deliver a thug-hug. His swampy armpit caressed my collarbone as he invaded my personal space, declaring “You’re my boy.” The gesture was warm-hearted, but I wanted to be anywhere else.

“For sure, man” I replied. Brendan was loaded. He’s the calmest and most reserved guy I know. You can throw any question at him and he’ll give you a wise and level-headed answer. But when he’s drinking, he completely uncloaks himself. Judging by the spilled beer draping his shirt, he’d been on this level for at least an hour.

His sluggish arm was still nested across my clavicle as he began directing me towards the kitchen. Holding his drink like an Olympic torch, Brendan rambled on about the monumental details of his night thus far. All around us people were consumed by their games and conversations, ignoring the world outside. They celebrated their existence by shortening it.

“Where’s Logan?” I tried to convey over the music.

“Huh?” Tilting his head, he managed to slur the single sound.

“WHERE’S LOGAN?”

Pulling his hand from my shoulder Brendan pointed to the backdoor and I was off. Slithering through the crowded kitchen, I spotted a plastic jug of vodka. Anything would do. The sticky floor held onto the soles of my shoes with each step I took. I reached for the bottle and slid it into my backpack. Before fleeing I looked back on the bobbing sea of drunks. The booze brought out platonic love in each of them. I wanted no part of it.

In a confident stride I stepped onto the back patio. Under a light three bodies puffed clouds of smoke into the decaying night. Logan was the furthest from the door. The other two swayed amongst him like ghostly sailors, beer slipping down the back of their palms from every full body chuckle they expressed. I found space for myself to the left of Logan.

“Do you have anywhere to be tomorrow?” I asked.

He passed the roach directly through my eyesight. It burned like a meteor across my vision. “When did you get here? I’ve been looking for you all night.”

He extended his right hand to me. My hand met his with a slap, followed by a slide, returned for a pound, separating with a snap.

“What are you doing tomorrow?” I repeated.

“Nothin’ bruh, what’s up?”

“You and I are taking a ride. It’s a trip but it’ll be worth it.”

The drunken pair headed back towards the party, flipping the butt into the darkness.

“Whoa whoa whoa, guy. We’re not heading anywhere. You just got here. There are too many people you’ve got to say hi to before you just walk out the door.”

“Have I ever given you a reason to doubt me? All we’ve been through and you’re not going to follow me for one night?”

We stood in silence for a moment as the party danced on beside us. I looked Logan in the eyes and knew he was

ready to leave. “You’re driving” I said, lobbing my keys to him. The last thing I wanted was another responsibility on my hands.

The street was an array of cars and empty cups. The scene looked like a rug needing to be shaken clean. The ambient glow of porch lights and lampposts illuminated my ’98 Grand Prix. A yellow surfboard was strapped to the roof. The sound of our footsteps bounced back at us from the asphalt. At this distance, the party sounded like a radio muffled beneath a winter coat.

I took off the backpack and sat down in the passenger seat, resting it in my lap. No matter how much time you spend in your car, sitting shotgun always makes the experience foreign. The radio dials looked misplaced. The carpet wore each burn hole like a fresh wound. I fumbled beneath the cigarette lighter and returned with the first cassette I found.

“So what are we gonna do with a surfboard?” The rummaging gave Logan an invitation to speak.

“Take a really good guess.” I rewound the tape; the gears spinning like a choir of pigs.

“I don’t even know where I’m going,” he exclaimed.

“Get on 90 East towards Chicago.”

“What’s going on with you tonight? You’re acting like you’re worlds away.”

“My brain has a lot to take in right now, man. I just wanna get wet.” I said.

I pulled the vodka from my bag. The liquor seeped to the core of my chapped lips like lava. I motioned the bottle to him.

“I’ll stick to driving,” he said.

“We’re going surfing. I saw a storm report and an eastern swell is coming in. The waves should get up to at least four or five feet. Ocean swells last a day or two, but in the lakes you’re lucky to get a few hours.”

“Why do you know this?” He asked, almost amused.

“Don’t worry about it.”

Eventually we got on 94 North. The streetlamps led us like breadcrumbs across the state line. The engine and stereo howled together as we drove, not speaking a word.

A half hour before sunrise we took the Sheboygan exit. Its downtown streets were empty and charming. A predawn chill sat alone on the vacant sidewalks, guarding the closed stores.

“So what the fuck is wrong with you? You kidnap me from the party, feed me some horseshit about going surfing, and then don’t open your mouth for a hundred miles except to treat me like your chauffer.”

“Wanna get some breakfast? That diner at the top of the hill looks open.”

Logan glared back.

“Let’s discuss it over pancakes.”

We sat in a booth along the far wall. I was facing the kitchen. The bench fabric looked like it hadn’t been reupholstered since the Nixon administration. We were one of three sets of customers in the diner. An old man sat at the counter looking for an answer in his oatmeal. The bare white walls made the restaurant feel like it belonged in a hospital. Logan was in the bathroom when the waitress came. I ordered two black coffees and two tall stacks. It felt good to be in control.

“So spill it,” Logan said faster than he could sit down.

“My parents died tonight,” I said. My eyes got heavy. My stomach began to knot. It was the only thing on my mind all night, but it wasn’t until the words left my lips that it became real.

“They were helping my grandmother move back to Hoffman last night. An eighteen-wheeler blew a tire. They swerved to avoid it and rolled into a ditch.” My voice began to tremble. The tears were coming. “The old man and my grandma died on impact. My mother’s hooked up to an army of machines, keeping her alive to reuse the organs. I know I should have gone to see her, but I don’t want my last memory

of her to be as a vegetable.” In a full state of sobbing I stood and rushed to the bathroom.

Ten minutes later Logan walked through the bathroom door wearing the backpack. He found me with my back to the wall, sitting across from the sink. The floor was cold and damp. I was studying the large chunks of grout missing between the grey tiles. I hugged my legs into my body and never looked up to see him. He sat down beside me and we finished the vodka to the sound of a dripping faucet.

“What happens now?” Logan asked.

“We’re gonna go surfing.”

When the car rolled to a stop in the parking lot, I could hear the crashing of Lake Michigan through my cracked window. I stepped out of the car and pulled two wetsuits from the backseat. I threw one to Logan as I changed out of my faded black hoodie.

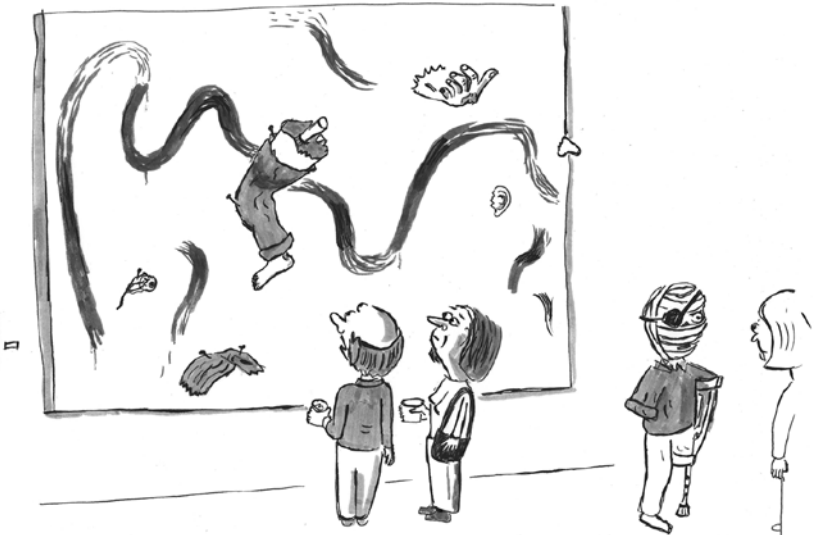
“Why surfing? I don’t even know how?”

“I know,” I answered. “That’s why I want to teach you. What if I die and you never learn?”

“But why now?”

“I know there’s going to be a lot to deal with when we get back. Let me have this. Being out there, in the water, it’s better than anything. None of it matters. All of your problems stay stranded on the sand. There’s no cell phone to summon you. It’s just you and the surf. One of the most natural feelings there is to experience. It is pure perfection and I want to share it with you.” For the first time all night I smiled. I tucked the surfboard under my arm and started for the beach.

Damon McArthur



"It's great, but you can tell; he's found something that works and now he's just cranking them out."

For the Dreamers

by Dakota T Carlson

Put your dreams in a box,
Store them away.
Lock it all up,
Throw away the key.

Be realistic,
This is as real as it gets.
Do what you do,
Pretend to live for it.

Pay the bills, play by the rules,
The American Dream.
Stand for something,
Fall for everything.

Eat, sleep, work, repeat.
This is your life now.
There are no streets paved in gold,
Welcome to the world.

Fight for nothing,
The blood, the sweat, the tears.
Break even,
Never the rich, never the poor.

Wash the week away,
'Til another comes around.
Pray for yourself,
Fear the end.

Pity your neighbor,
Ease the mind.
Establish your name,
Stand in the sun.

Rest easy at night,
Wake with a smile.
When a new day begins,
Another dream ends.

The Orbs

by Alyson Eagan

Oreos out the window
Plastic men in the sky
Propelling passive fantasies
Seized bodies are too shy

Black
&
White

Reflective greens
Helicopter dreams
4 am scream

The ceiling fan falls
Into my ears-
Or the train calls hard-
And I deafen

Reach- remote- click-

Black
&
White noise

Color TV save me

The Zoo

by Evan X. Edwards

“This place sucks,” Marla grumbles as she rolls a stray pebble with the tip of her scuffed, suede boot.

“It’s the zoo, the zoo is cool,” Sophie responds flatly with a pursed grimace.

“The zoo sucks. The zoo is animal Auschwitz.”

Marla stares into one of the habitats at a gorilla sitting contemplatively on an artificial rock. “Look at this poor fucker. He’s planning his escape *right* now. He’s going to bend those bars, rip our tits off, and knock over a few 7/11’s just because he’s sick of eating yams all the time. He’s a gorilla! He just wants a banana!” Sophie growls like she belongs in one of the enclosures.

“Marla, this is our first date-date in like a month.”

“Yeah, I know, and we went to the zoo. You know I hate the zoo.”

Sophie pinches the bridge of her nose. “You said you hated aquariums.”

“It’s the same principal, there are just a lot fewer dolphins.”

Sophie throws her hands up like she’s trying to catch the sun. “Fine! Be a bitch! I’ll just go buy a turkey leg and eat my ager.”

“Whatever, Soph. I’ll just be in the lizard house slitting my wrists.”

The corner of Sophie’s mouth curls into a concerned half-frown. “Do you want a Turkey leg, Marla?”

“I can’t take it to the afterlife with me”

“Whatever, I’m buying you a turkey leg. I’ll meet you by the iguanas.”

Marla shuffles off toward the reptile house. Her treadless boots make a sound like sandpaper on a marble countertop.

Marla squints at the torpid humidity of the reptile house. Her eyes are slits through which her burning indifference pours out like green, milky venom. She feels like she has a lot in common with vipers, so she walks over to one. It’s brassy spearhead scales glisten with the years of work evolution has put into the sinewy creature. It’s destiny is to eat rats and make more snakes. Instead, it’s sitting under a bright red heat lamp like a day old Big Mac.

Marla has a brief fantasy where she picks the copperhead out of it’s terrarium and flings it at a crowd of high-schoolers on a field trip. She also thinks about letting the gorilla out and knocking over a few 7/11’s with him. She imagines the headlines “Girl with hair like black cotton candy, or possibly a bunch of Halloween spider webs, travels at high speed down Illinois freeway with silverback gorilla wearing aviator sunglasses.”

A bead of sweat and sebum rolls lazily down Marla’s forehead and into her eye. She snaps back to reality to rub the irritant away. She looks to make sure she didn’t wander off to another exhibit while she was spacing out and sees a little boy staring at her curiously and eating a Tootsie Pop.

“What’s the matter kid?”

The boy turns the tootsie pop over in his mouth a few times. “Were you thinking about lizards, lady?”

Marla raises a thick, dark eyebrow in anticipation of mischief. “Yeah, I was thinking of throwing snakes at people. I was thinking about how that might be pretty fun.”

The boy’s expression doesn’t change. “Yeah, I think about that sometimes, too. But, my mom would yell at us if we did that.”

Marla’s head cranes back and a smirk creeps across her right cheek. “You’re probably right, kid. We probably shouldn’t

then.”

The little boy’s mom walks over then and mumbles something about not bothering people and gently takes the boy’s hand. “See you lady!” Marla waves goodbye and a huge turkey leg materializes in front of her face.

“Did you make a friend, spooky?” Marla looks down and sees Sophie looking up through her moon white bangs with two turkey-bearing arms. Sophie stands on her tip-toes to kiss Marla on the nose and Marla takes one of the ludicrous turkey legs. She immediately takes a bite of the glistening, golden brown flesh.

“I guess I did.” She kisses Sophie on the forehead with her mouth full of turkey.

“Oh! Disgusting! EW! You got chewed up turkey on my forehead!”

Marla starts laughing and bits of gobble-foul go everywhere. “Just be glad I wasn’t throwing snakes!”

Which Direction is the Sun?

by Alyson Eagan

He's smiling as I sit on his lap,
Smiling, too.
He looks a million years younger,
A teenager.
Shirtless, to show off his tattoo.

His face says, "I love my daughter. I am a dad."
Skepticallity lines my face, not even a year old,
But I knew.

It looks like I'm the only one he sees,
His whole world.
But he left and didn't come back
For a million years
And now that relationship has morphed
Into something less crystalline, less beautiful.
Awkward and unfull and absent.

I still try to sit on his lap and let him revolve
Around me like a sun.
Making me warm and making me beautiful.
But after a million years the sun dies.
He's not a star.
I look up in the sky and pretend to see my father.

Ervinday Holiday

by Megan M Ervin

Where the pace of travel ascends
a coaster of hills, so steep.

Where the smooth path ends,
the toasted gravel greets.

Where the last road bends,
at the family farm we meet.

Where the longest drive suspends,
there is freedom for our feet.

Where to, as children, we fled,
the barn, so noble it seemed.

Where a swinging rope to attend,
the whiskered hay, into which we leaped.

Where the home of the host is a fence and a shed,
a surefooted bull, surely a beast.

Where quilted pastures overextend,
a small patch of woods for hide n' seek.

Where cows grazed, a stream was etched,
our journey covered us with mud like concrete.

Where into the trough we were sent,
an ice cold bath that's hard to beat.

Where the sun would swoop down west,
the day ends so sorrowful and sweet.

Where the hay filled barn was our bed,
ghosts and giggles prevented our sleep.

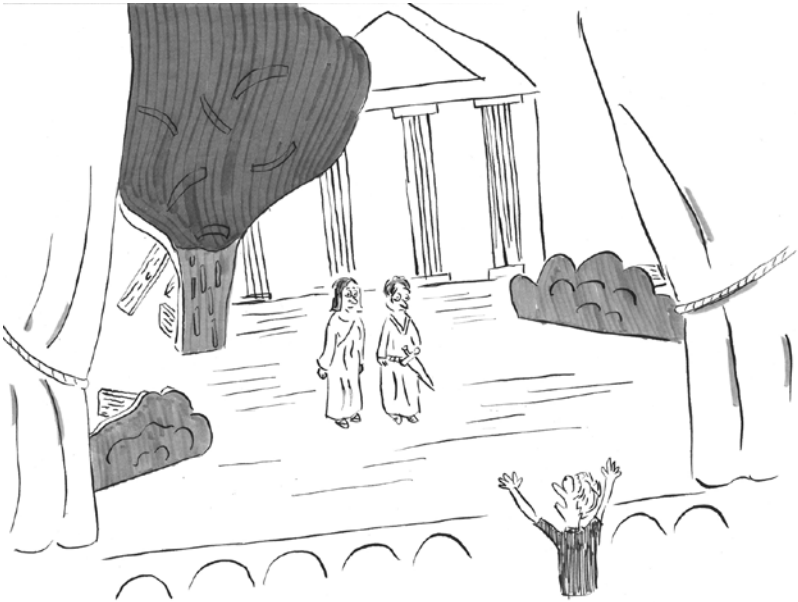
Where the story of 'Toebones' played in our heads,
for our toes, we'd pray to keep.

Where in the morning we would dread,
time to leave, beep beep!

Where children's pleas for more time to spend,
only left more time to weep.

Where Grandpa's last wish, 'My Dear Old Friend' ...
a broken promise, the land was leased.

Damon McArthur



"Stop! It turns out that all of life is a stage. Go home and be with your families."

Spies in the ICU

by Hali B Pace

There are two rules on the ICU floor; no family under the age of thirteen, and only hit the emergency call button if you're dying. At the ripe age of eight I had broken that first rule multiple times already. My father had spent the better part of the summer propped up in his hospital bed playing Rumi with anyone dumb enough to wave. His room too white and too sterile for an eight year old, I spent my summer playing spy in the hospital halls. I would hide behind curtains and emergency carts, stealing rubber gloves and gauze pads. No one paid me any mind, I was a quiet kid.

Staying in the hospital wasn't all bad. People trapped in bed for weeks on end had a tendency to gossip. I considered this gossip part of my duties as a spy. "Intel" Nurse Jamie called it.

Nurse Jamie was a stout women with a mess of blonde hair. She constantly looked as though she was on her second twelve-hour shift. Her eyes were red and surrounded by puffy purple lids. Her body so swollen from fatigue that she appeared to be pushing her way out of her scrubs. While most nurse's scrubs were immaculate, Nurse Jamie had a thin layer of black fur covering her from head to toe. I guess it could have been dog hair, but I've always assumed she had cats. She didn't own a single pair of scrubs without red specks on the chest. I thought it was blood, Lulu said it was wine. Lulu was my only friend in the ICU. Lulu was fifteen. Tall and frail, Lulu stayed in the hospital for almost perfect two week intervals. My dad

always said Lulu would be healthier if instead of treating her, they treated her mother's Munchausen.

Somedays, when Lulu's mom had no choice but to go to work or run home, Lulu would play spies with me. We would bounce from room to room avoiding nurses and gathering intel. If we were lucky some of the more long term patients would be so happy to see us they would give us quarters for the vending machine.

We had just finished our rounds and were sitting on my dad's floor when the call alarm sounded. I jumped, unaccustomed to the sound.

"That's the third time today," my father grumbled through a mouth full of Doritos. "Boy had better learn not to cry wolf before it's too late." The alarm continued to sound for what felt like hours. Annoyed my dad rolled over and declared it was time for his nap. I stood up and adjusted his wires before turning my attention to Lulu.

"Why do you think it's still going off?" I asked.

He's probably just messing around. Mrs. Lewis says he's a convicted murderer. Probably doesn't get much attention in the hole."

"No way! You made that up!"

"Nope, Mrs. Lewis says he killed somebody. Then he got shanked in the hole for stealing someone's applesauce."

"I don't even like apple sauce. . ."

"Right? Any way's I swear I'm not lying, feel free to ask Mrs. Lewis if you need to."

I peered across the hall at the drawn curtains; could there really be a serial killer in there? Is he going to die? Should I be relieved? I felt like I should be, but looking down at my own father I couldn't seem to gather any relief from the thought of the murderer dying.

"Do you think he'll die?" I wondered out loud.

"I hope so. Waste of space if you ask me." Lulu paused, "Wanna play spy? Everyone's so busy we might actually get to see a murderer if we play our cards right." I looked up at my

dad's monitor, how would I feel if the murderer was my dad? I shook the thought away with a wag of my ponytail.

"Sure let's go." The murderer's room was directly across the hall from my dad's. The curtains were drawn so tight you couldn't tell how many people were in there. With our ears pressed firmly to the cold glass doors we could vaguely hear the commotion from inside. People were yelling and stomping around the room. The glass fogged where my fingers sat pressed so hard I was worried they'd go through.

We sat there for what must have been hours. Lulu had relaxed, laying her back against the door. On the other hand, I couldn't afford that luxury. I sat perched on my legs that had long since gone numb. I was determined not to move. Not to miss a single moment. Suddenly a shrill tone came through the glass. It echoed through my ears, stopping my heart cold.

"Someone probably kicked the wire." Lulu assured me. And true to her words the shrill tone disappeared nearly as quickly as it started. The hospital was silent as hundreds of souls held their breath for the damned. Shortly after that doctors poured out of the room; too tired to pay us any thought. When we were sure the room had cleared we climbed to our feet.

Lulu stretched, "Ok one of us will stand guard while the other runs inside. You can go first." I nodded. Taking one last deep breath I pushed into the murderer's room. I jumped behind the curtains, ready to see the face of the killer. But I froze. Something was wrong. Where was the steady ding of the heart monitor? I suddenly became too aware of my surroundings. The room smelled like sweat and antiseptic. So much so that my nose and eyes burned from the assault. The lights were off. The only light in the room came from the muted TV in the corner where Tom and Jerry still played. The dull light illuminated softly off the young man's face. He was barley older than Lulu. He was so thin and pale you could see the bones in his arms which lay draped out on the bed. His blankets has been discarded, and so had his clothes for that

matter. Towels lay all over him, soaked in blood. Nearest to me I could see where his ankle was handcuffed to the bed, even though it was clear he wouldn't be leaving this place.

I approached his bedside like I had my father's so many times. Blonde hair lay in curly heaps around his head. Atop hollowed out cheek bones a set of soulless green eyes stared back at me; I closed them. Shuddering from how cold and clammy his skin was, I turned away. As I walked out of his room I turned off the TV; I suddenly couldn't stand to look at something so pure.

I felt my legs pull me half-heartedly from the room. Without a sound I crossed the hall to the wall pump full of Germ-X. I furiously scrubbed all the way past my elbows, as though I could scrub away shame.

"Well?" Lulu prodded. I turned to her. She looked younger to me now. Like what I had seen had caused me to age past her in years.

"He's dead." My words seem to slap Lulu in a way I never would have with my hands. She gaped at me and her eyes filled with tears. Then she cried.

Sometime later Nurse Jamie would come into my dad's room and find me curled up in his bed; back turned away from him so that if he woke he wouldn't see my silent tears.

Jamie came and knelt beside the bed. She gathered my hands in hers like I wished my mother could.

"A boy died today." I told her, somehow completely oblivious to the fact that she had been there.

"Oh baby, it's ok to be sad when people die."

"Lulu said he was a murderer." I cried.

"He was still a person," She assured me, "When people die it's good to be sad. Rather you knew them a life time, or you met them as their soul slipped out between their teeth." I stifled a sob as I recalled the boy's bleak green eyes. Nurse Jamie brushed my hair from my face. "Do you know how I get through working here?" She asked me, "I just remember that when it's all over, when the rooms been cleaned so thoroughly

that you question whether they were ever there. When it's all over a new patient will take that room; and this time we'll try even harder. We'll be even more prepared. And that person will get to go home. They'll go home to their mothers, fathers, sisters, brothers, husbands, wives, sons, and daughters. They'll go home and live long happy lives. People die baby, but people also live."

Weeks later as I left that hospital hand in hand with my father I felt thankful for the prisoner. Because of him the doctors and nurses worked even harder, they were prepared. And we, my dad and I, got to go home.

Ulrich's

by Evan Edwards

A draft
Of Lager.
A Kiss
Of Whiskey.
Two Kisses Really

The oakey, smokey taste of Jack,
Coats my throat in winter clothes,
While Coltraine coos "Theme of Ernie"

The light is dim, and yet
Cascading
With
The atmosphere
Of neon lights and fizzing beers.

Frying foods in amber oil,
Crackling hard, the sound of rain
On a tin roof

The girl behind the bar,
A Valkyrie.
My money, norsemen off to die

The jukebox, a siren
Whom I pay to convince
Myself to crash against the rocks

I leave a huge tip really
Must be the Tennessee
Sloshing in my eyes

Daniel's drunk and writes his number
On his receipt
And hands it to her

Though this room is lacking light
It pours out from her

The girl behind the bar.

Her mead hall.

Her feast.

Spare Change - Spange

By Megan Ervin

Check the time.
Continue to drive,
go ahead and pass on by.
With only one thought in mind,
be sure not to look them in the eye.
I'm sure they'll survive.

Don't be late, you won't survive
Life requires you be on time.
To keep your haughty eyes,
impress them with your drive
and the smart thoughts in your mind.
Surely they won't pass you by.

Keep your \$2.00 – they will get by.
You are the one that has to survive
Their story doesn't even enter your mind.
They don't deserve your time.
All they need is a little drive,
for you to look them in the eye.

What will you say when you look God in the eye?
Will you try to lie to get by?
Money is what fuels your drive...
This false idol will not help you survive.
The change in your pocket won't buy you more
time;

Just a little something to keep in mind.

Consider what is going through their mind,
Letting go of their pride to look you in the eye.
Fell upon hard times
Once like you they got by
With a salary to survive
Yet, you question their drive.

So slow down to a Sunday drive
With God's heart in mind.
We need each other to survive.
It's not about me, myself, and I.
The Golden rule – words to live by
It might be wise to stop next time.

We are only here for a short time, so have faith and let
God drive.

Don't boast about what you can buy, instead possess a
noble mind.

Be wise and offer a kind eye, love others more than
yourself to survive.

How to Behave at Parties

by Sam T. Jensen

Invited to a party but don't know the first thing about how to act in a party atmosphere? I was once in your shoes. Now, I can probably buy your shoes! It takes more than showing up to really make an impression. Follow these steps to make sure you get the most out of your party experience!

1. Don't bring uninvited guests. Chances are they weren't invited because they're squares - they aren't cool enough to hang* with your crowd.**
2. Always engage in conversation, say things like "I'm interested in what you're saying" and "that is so engaging" to ensure the conversationee is aware you are pulling out all the stops just for them.
3. Fraternize with the host, tell them how much you love their home and how it totally does not remind you of that house that all those dead kids were found in the basement.
4. If snacks are provided, don't act like you've never had a Skittle before. Politely ask everyone to turn around and dump the candy in your backpack, slowly eating from it as the night goes on.
5. Play games. Some recommendations for fun party games are How Many Golf Balls Can Todd Fit in His Mouth? or Whose

Butt is That? or my personal favorite: Albert Einstein or Todd's Butt?

6. Some parties get so out of control, the police arrive. If this happens, remain calm and tell the officers that you are "not drunk" and your "dad is the mayor" and you "didn't even know Josh owned a gun."

7. Do not leave your drink unattended. Poisoning is a common party antic, so duct tape your cup to your hand to avoid losing it. If you see someone else's drink unattended, go ahead and put some poison in it so they learn from their mistake.

8. When pizza arrives, claim your slice by shouting "dibs!" It may sound like gibberish, but in party lingo, it means "I am going to eat this" and others will be impressed.

9. If you want to introduce yourself to someone at a party, stare at them for a long time until they make eye contact with you. Then look away very quickly. Repeat this until you're told to leave.

10. As the night comes to a close, remember to thank the host for a pleasant evening and give them your address so they can send back your socks, if they are found.

*be

**company in which you associate

Ode to the Commode

By Evan X Edwards

Sitting on the toilet again,
Shitting still, and holding a pen.

Porcelain Throne which dutifully sets.
stalwartly swallows my feculent scats.
shamelessly guzzles each gilded piss.

You Marvelous Object,
Invention of man.

Doomed to serve the feces in all.

White Knight.
Stained Yellow.
Holding Brown.

Flush.

The deed is done.
In service to none.

