


2008

et cetera

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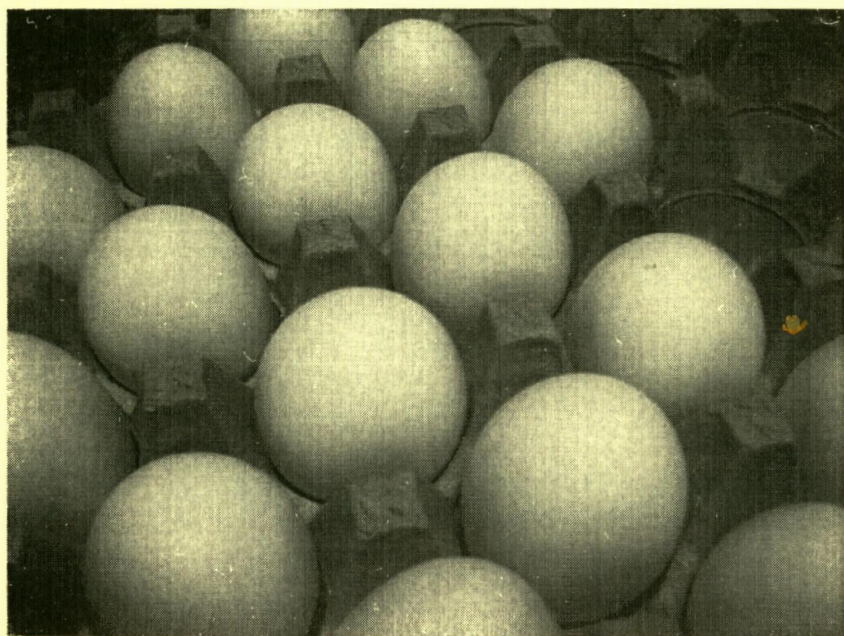
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Marshall University, "et cetera" (2008). *Et Cetera*. 27.
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**Et Cetera:
Marshall University's Creative Arts
Annual**



Home Cooked for Your Imagination

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Marshall University's Creative Arts
Annual**

Home Cooked for Your Imagination

Marshall University
English Department
Et Cetera Literary Guild
One John Marshall Drive
Huntington, WV 25755
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Et Cetera: Marshall's Creative Arts Annual accepts work in the categories of poetry, short fiction and creative non-fiction, b&w photography and artwork. Submissions are accepted from all majors, graduate and undergraduate students.

Publication Information

Et Cetera is published through the Et Cetera Literary Arts Guild of Marshall University. The guild consists of both graduate and undergraduate students from all majors. It is a nondiscriminatory group open to students of all ages and works to promote student publication. All of those interested in joining the guild should contact advisor Tony Viola at viola@marshall.edu.

Submission Policy

Submissions are chosen based upon creative and artistic merit. Those wishing to submit material to future issues should email an electronic copy to marshallec@gmail.com and fill out the appropriate paperwork by spring semester of that year.

Et Cetera supports freedom of speech in art, but reserves the right not to print anything offensive, hateful or distasteful in nature.

Thanks

Thanks to those making ***Et Cetera*** possible: Dr. Steve Hensley, Dr. Janet Badia, Dr. Chris Green, Prof. Art Stringer, Dr. David Hatfield, Prof. Marie Manilla, Prof. Lisa Stuchell, Dolores S.Thompson, MU Poets' Society and MUSE, Java Joint of Huntington, WV, the Et Cetera Facebook Group, Kris Clifford, Aaron McVey, and, of course, our ever patient and helpful advisor, Dr. Tony Viola.

Writin9 is a stru99le a9ainst silence.

~Carlos Fuentes

To Our Readers:

Et Cetera: MU's Creative Arts Annual has existed on Marshall University's campus for 50+ years, but would have dissipated after the millennium if not for creative writing students and professors dedicated to giving artistic voice to the students at Marshall. Not many realize the long history of *Et Cetera* or the hard work involved in producing the magazine, but the effort and determination is worth it. These magazines are artifacts, part of Huntington's and MU's history.

While collecting back issues for Drinko Library's archivist, we found that - contrary to our own beliefs about cliches - over time, the more things change, the more they truly do stay the same. For example, a 1955 issue includes a creative nonfiction piece written by a woman who recalls U. S. soldiers occupying her home in Bruck, Austria in 1945; a piece exploring the sometimes indecipherable language that is Appalachian dialect in Southern Ohio; and a poem about the latest trend - psychoanalysis. Later issues of *Et Cetera* include pieces written about various wars of the 20th century, Appalachian folklore and culture, the state of language and writing, and the social ills and balms at the forefront of the moment. Our sincere hope is that back issues and future issues will be archived online for all of the MU community to enjoy, and that Huntington realizes the robust and diverse regional voice produced in the Marshall Community, a voice

too strong to ever fade.

The 2008 *Et Cetera* Editorial staff took special care to be as inclusive and professional as possible, which shows in the range of writing showcased in this edition. Although many entries were submitted by English majors, some placing and published pieces were written by non-majors. We're grateful for the amount of submissions we received, and apologize that we can't workshop and publish them all (keep trying!). We aim for quality and wide readership appeal, hoping anyone who picks up a copy of *Et Cetera* will find something they enjoy.

The cookbook layout of this issue was the result of a last minute fiasco with publication. We had difficulty getting information from last year's staff's publisher, and decided to go local in order to get copies of the annual to those published within it to them by the Majors' event at Java Joint. The contact at Goodall Printing informed us that perfect-bound books would take longer to print, and asked if we would be willing to go with plastic-bound books, which would be friendlier to our budget and make the issue look like a cookbook. Kelly thought we could head the sections as local dishes, went to work looking those dishes up, and *voila!*

Due to digital difficulties, we were not able to include the black and white photography submitted by Delores S. Thompson. We are legally bound to inform readers that the stock photo on the cover was found at www.hooverstock.com.

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Apple Butter Fiction

1st Place

Parfait

Grant Vandervort

Randall watched the kid with the Kool-Aid mustache tear across the waiting room to the stack of magazines on the end table, then back across to his scrawny mother, bone scrawny. She must be here for the china-man to stick needles in her face to help her quit barfing out her food, Randall thought. Acupuncture, that's what the laminated chart on the wall said. Randall looked at the other charts on the walls then picked up a brochure. The pictures inside the alternative medicine pamphlet showed other people with needles in their faces and behind their ears, another woman had crystals in her belly button. Her hands were covering her breasts and what appeared to Randall to be some sort of smoking shrub was being waved above her head. The kid ran back over to Randall's corner and sat down near his chair and stared up at him with a gaping mouth and slowly started to pick his nose, guiding his soft little finger gradually up his nostril with the precision of a mid-flight refueling. Randall imagined knocking his stump against the joystick and crushing the little shit's fingers like packing peanuts, crunching him up with his electric chair.

"Randall, why don't cha' come on back," the receptionist said as she disappeared from the glass window, then

reappeared in the doorway and held the door open for him to roll past, the little electric motor whirring beneath his torso.

He was guided into the back and through another door. The room was very dimly lit for a doctor's office; it was to help patients relax before the treatment. Two chairs were against the far wall, a standard examination table on the left and the tank, the big black box, on the right wall. A man in a white lab coat popped his head through the door. "We'll be with you in just a few moments Randall," Doctor Schaffer said, closing the door behind him.

Sitting there alone in the room Randall looked down at the cut off jean shorts with the fat stumps peaking like white ham hocks. His girth made him slouch down on himself, in profile he looked like a melted bowling pin. He scratched at the stumps with the pincers on his right prostheses, two hooks he could clap together. They weren't of much use, scratching the chronic itch of amputation, holding a cigarette, lowering slices of bologna into his mouth. The left arm ended right above the elbow, with this he nudged the joystick that guided his electric chair and also depressed the handle of his toaster to light his smokes off the heating element. He had been kicked out of the rehabilitation center for bad behavior' sexually harassing the employees. He never progressed far enough to learn to use prosthetic legs, or his left arm. In fact, he barely learned to use his right; his lack of mastery left him with a crude pincer.

"How are we doing today?" Doctor Shaffer said. He walked into the room clipboard in hand. An unfamiliar woman with light red hair followed behind him.

"Same old shit. Nothin,' but shit Doc," Randall said.

"Well, that's why you're here," said Dr. Schaffer tapping the clipboard on the corner of the tank. "Getting rid of the, uh shit."

"Hey," Randall said pointing his chair at the red head. She was tall, almost all legs. She gave him back a closed smile and slid her hands into the front pockets of her white lab coat. It appeared to Randall she would be better suited wearing that white coat behind the cosmetics counter.

"Oh yes this is Ms. Crawford. She works at the University and has been studying under Dr. Maxwell, he is the one responsible for obtaining the grant that is funding this operation- and your ability to be treated here," said Dr. Schaffer.

"Yeah."

"She is quite interested in the possibilities of the tank and especially for its therapeutic benefits for someone in your condition... someone with the extent of your condition."

"You mean not having any goddamn hands or feet," Randall said grinning at Ms. Crawford.

"The evidence presented in some of Dr. Maxwell's work has given me quite a bit of optimistic excitement. Combined with pharmaceutical and talk therapy patients with anxiety stemming from physical trauma have made giant steps in acceptance of themselves," Ms. Crawford said. "Oh, and please, call me Kate."

"Kate, alright Kate, Dr. Kate," Randall nodded while digging in his ear with his hook.

Dr. Schaffer interrupted Randall's eyeballing of Dr. Kate. "While she is familiar with some of the subsequent findings

from the shared work between Dr. Maxwell and myself, she has no hands-on experience with the equipment...."

"Or with the particulars of your condition," she interrupted.

"You mean how I got like this," Randall raised what was left of his arms and kind of waggled the stumps of his legs in demonstration. "How I got to look like a fuckin' human potato." Randall gave a big snort, "Excuse my French."

"Acute staph infection resulting from recurrent pneumonia from poor lifestyle decisions, Randall's rather isolated rural home and the disillusionment from his addictions delayed his seeking medical treatment until the point that multiple amputations were necessary to saving his life," Dr. Schaffer said while staring at the space between them."

Randall listened to that fancy little explanation. The way doctors talk. Dr. Schaffer must have felt the need to leave out the details, the ugly words, maybe trying to save Randall some face in front of the pretty young medical student. Randall gazed at the big black tank. It looked like a coffin. He wished it was a coffin. He wished Dr. Kate would pick him up, cradle him like a mutilated baby then toss him in a box, drop him into the grave, that warm darkness.

"So how have the meds been working? The combination of the anxiety and mood stabilizing medications you've been prescribed have been getting favorable attentions in recent journals," Dr. Schaffer said.

Randall just shrugged, a funny vertical tick, like the clicking of a ballpoint pen.

"You have been taking them I assume?" Randall just stared at the tank.

"I understand that the last session was promising?" Kate asked.

"Yeah, I felt pretty good afterwards I guess, real relaxed, you know, didn't hate the damn world so much. Still away from that synergy shit and the theta-whatever-wave, the godly shit Doc preaches about. And, and shit it was a hell of a lot better than the first time. I damn near drowned in the thing. Thought Doc might 'a been trying to put me down like a lame mutt." Randall looked himself over again and thought that he might have appreciated it after all, but drowning, the sensation, the sensation of drowning when you have no limbs to flail; Randall clenched his jaw.

"There was a slight miscalculation of the concentration of the magnesium salts in the isolation chamber affecting the buoyancy. The lid was not closed however Randall did get quite a nose- and mouthful before I was able to drain the chamber. This tank, because of the special needs of our patients, has been equipped with an emergency fluid release in the event of such an accident."

"Well how does the patient alert those on the outside when completely enclosed? I mean typically a person in the tank just lifts the lid. The bi-amputee's cases I've studied were still capable of lifting the lid as a person of average capabilities could."

Dr. Shaffer beamed a little, "Getting ahead of me a bit. Yes, well coming up with a device allowing a patient, Randall in this case, to alert me or the technicians without

compromising the integrity of the sensory deprivation has posed a unique challenge."

Randall had wiggled out of his prosthesis and was stretching his neck from side to side; his eyes fixed on her legs. He liked them, wanted them, and wanted his own. He imagined having his old thick white trunks back pressing his hairy knees inside hers. Looking down and seeing his grease stained paws, lifting her up on the examination table her ass crimpling the stiff white paper.

The Dr. continued his explanation of the improvisations he had designed for the safety of the man stump sitting behind him. "The initial idea was to attach an electronic sensor to the muscles at the end of his arm, slight contractions of the muscles, the same that manipulate the prosthetic arm, would activate a light on the outside of the chamber. In order to avoid extra tactile sensations that could detract from the experience of insentience a local anesthetic was injected into the sight were the pad was attached."

"Clever," added Kate.

"Well, unfortunately there were complications. The numbness affected his ability to consciously contract the muscles; we did extensive tests with it outside of the tank of course. Randall was able to activate the sensor under his own will but not on every attempt and alternately there were instances when he set off the 'alarm' without intending to. The next and successful system was significantly more expensive, although the concept is quite simple. An audio sensor tuned to the frequency of the human voice is located on the topside interior of the tank and by Randall vocalizing, yelling, the same alert light is illuminated. He can yell for help

even through the sound proof barrier." Dr. Shaffer walked over to the chamber, lifted the lid and said, "Test, test."

Randall watched the blinking light.

"Are we about ready?" Dr Shaffer asked.

Randall felt small and stupid as the two unstrapped him from his chair and rolled him onto the table. Dr. Kate gently worked his flannel shirt off, unbuttoning it then rolling him over facedown and lifting the shirt off his nubs. Dr. Shaffer had already undone his fly. Now on his stomach Randall felt the shorts come off, felt the last of his dignity being slid away. A wench of sorts was moved into the room from a storage room. Red canvas straps formed a harness. It made Randall think of a show he'd seen on television, a beached orca was rescued by some liberals and was held in a large sling over the side of a ship. People took turns dumping buckets of salt water on the creature to keep it from drying out. He thought of the bandages and the salve the candy stripers had rubbed on his wounds as he laid there in the hospital, a lump in a gown.

"Okay, you know the drill Randall," Dr. Shaffer said. Randall noticed that he dropped the science talk once his pants came off. Now it was buddy talk. Sweet talk. Dr. Shaffer and Kate took him under the arms and rolled him up to a seated position. Randall lifted his arms above his head and part of the sling was positioned under his armpits. Another attachment of the harness cradled his underside. He was lifted by the wench off the table and guided to the middle of the room via the rollers. on the bottom of the crane. A large counter weight hung from the opposite side of the horizontal beam that supported him. Randall swayed slightly as the wench stopped in the center of the room.

"Right back," Dr Shaffer said over his shoulder as he darted out the door.

The apparatus hovering above the tile floor looked like some sort of unreal scale, a balance scale with a chunk of human on one side and a cube of stacked iron plates on the other. The metal weight hung slightly lower than Randall.

Dr. Kate and Randall both facing each other, stared diagonally at the panels of the dropped ceiling, their gazes intersecting at some unknown site between them. His eyes made their way to her feet, crescents of fair skin beyond the toe of the shoe led into the hem of her pants. He raised his eyes further and found her eyes looking back at him. He couldn't place her expression, but he was familiar with the faces of bewilderment. It wasn't that they were scared of his appearance; it was that they were scared of potentials. They became suddenly aware of their own extensions, their own vulnerabilities; they saw themselves as that awful swaying mass.

Dr. Shaffer flashed into sight in the doorway but continued by without entering.

Kate, Randall's Dr. Kate, still kept her eyes on him, but when Randall looked back from the doorway he noticed she was biting her knuckle and had leaned slightly against the counter. Randall hung there naked and lifeless, save a dull heartbeat. His body drooped into the red canvas, his form like a fleshy water balloon, his penis the twisted knot dangling below.

Coming back into the room Dr. Shaffer and Kate rolled the suspended gurney to the edge of the tank and lowered Randall to the surface of the ultra-dense water. He became

almost completely submerged at first but Kate held his head to keep his face dry, his airways clear. His body then rested on the water, half in the solution the buoyancy was correct. The two clothed bodies regarded him for a moment, his torso, him roating serenely on the flat water. They gave him warm closed smiles and shut the lid.

The sound of breathing, the rhythm, the sound of his own breathing was all he could hear. He was slightly aware of his own form. His body clipped and rounded at the pelvis with his half arms extended out to each side, he felt like some sort of self aware aquatic bird, a penguin. The texture of the water subsided, the temperature painstakingly calibrated to his external body temperature. He moved his wings, his flippers through the water then ceased, allowing the ripples to settle. The darkness, the silence, was blinding, was deafening. Randall tried to relax, and in time became relaxed, beyond relaxed he became the nothing. Time became nullified in the absence of everything, everything that was his nominal form. Then a sensation came, sensations in the absence of stimulation, an illumination that began as a visual distraction. Pulsing light within the darkness spread about his eyes, not his eyes but his Eye. A collection of color seemed to wrap itself around his head, or what he imagined to be his head; a band of colors like the blurred, distorted prism of a street lamp as seen through tear-soaked eyelashes. The optic entertainment bled into something else, something more real. The grass, the grass was between his toes, Randall could feel it. He could feel the stippled surface of the pigskin in his hand, the laces there between his fingers, the release, the run, him running. The run across the field that bi-pedal freedom of, of ... The

colors' what Randall's mind told him were colors returned and the whirl, that selfless whirl through...what? Then the trail under his boots and his blue-tick hound with paws bounding off the back of his calves, the leaves and twigs escaped focus, but the smell, the smells. Randall whirled. He heard the bark of his dog, the recoil of the gun and the warm breach in his hands. Before the lid came open and the white coats reappeared he felt her, her from a long time ago, beneath him, her fingers through his, and the warmth.

He was rinsed with fresh water then dried by hand by some unfamiliar orderlies. Then redressed and brought into a new room, sat in his chair and waited for Dr. Shaffer and Kate to enter. They came in with several stacks of tests, evaluations of his experiences. Kate had shed her white lab coat but that was not what made her look different to Randall. Randall did not know why she looked different really. He also didn't quite know why he felt different. The questionnaires were read aloud to him while Kate bubbled in the answers, placed marks on the gradient scales for the subjective questions. Dr. Shaffer studied him while bouncing a silver pen between his fingers. The interrogation into his 'tank time' took a while but Randall didn't seem to notice.

Outside the office building Randall toiled his chair out onto the sidewalk and was jostled by the drop of the curb as he looked out over the top of the trees, ignoring the rough paved trail in front of him. The bus, the one that provided wheel chair accessibility, twice-daily, approached its stop and laid on its air brakes as Randall rolled past. He didn't move in his usual mechanically paced speed; instead, he sort of be-bopped down the street, prodding the joystick forward

rhythmically. Once or twice he paused then pressed hard against the horizontal axis and executed tight rotations on the sidewalk; quadriplegic double axels. He had made it several blocks when he decided to go for some frozen custard; he hadn't had any since, well since.

The lady at the counter seemed sweet to Randall. She greeted him with a forced closed mouth smile but there seemed to be something about him; Randall deflected all the social awkwardness, wearing a shield of something. He waited in the sun for the custard to melt a bit then clipped the paper bowl in his pincers and let it slide down his gullet. Some of the treat oozed out the sides of his mouth, a trivial loss. He craned his neck and saw a glint of color above some trees and power lines. He hadn't looked up in a while. Randall saw a kite.

It took him a while to reach the edge of the park but time seemed a different thing to Randall, just as Dr. Kate seemed different. Along that roll to the green park Randall wondered if she was a happy person, wondered what she went home to. It wasn't till he was jostled by another curb that he realized he wasn't fantasizing, brooding about her legs, her ass. Randall felt slightly confused about this but all was forgotten when he saw the strings stretching skyward and the waves of grass, the people moving effortlessly across the fields. Their sprinting legs seemed a delight, a novelty, an appreciation not objects of envy, of hatred.

Randall's wheels slowed a bit in the thick spring grass but this was almost welcome as it facilitated more wondering, more wandering of the eyes. Resting under the shade of an oak tree Randall saw two small kids chasing what looked like a

large dragonfly. The flying insect came closer and closer to Randall's shaded spot until he realized it was a model airplane. The flying machine came right up to his face and he clasped it right out of the air with his pincers as gently as a mother's tweezers grasping a splinter. The children came in closer and the smaller one stopped farther away as the older one approached cautiously. The littler one came up slowly, using his sister as a shield.

"Mister, why you got a claw?" asked the little boy. His sister hit him without taking her eyes off Randall.

"I was sick, I used to be a boy like you."

"Nuh-uh."

Randall explained to the kids that he used to be just like them: hands, feet. The girl came over to Randall with her hands behind her back then reached out for the balsa wood airplane. Randall offered it forward.

"No," she said, "you hold it."

Randall held the thing tight as the girl wound the propeller and its rubber band crank, her tongue pinched between her teeth as she prepared the craft's propulsion.

"Now," she said, "let it fly."

He did as he was told and the fuselage left its hooked hanger and took into the cloudless sky. The kids sprinted after without a backward glance. Randall watched the plane lift into space.

Randall raised his gaze upward into the bows of the large oak and began to rotate his chair in a circle to see the chapped, peeled bark and the canopy of leaves from all angles. He was admiring the natural vertical extent of the plant when the tread of one of his wheels took hold on a large root

protruding from the Earth. The electric motor gave a painful squeal and Randall felt his heart palpitate as his chair tipped skyward and he fell onto his back.

The leaves overhead fluttered chlorophyll green to grey, as they flipped over in the wind. Randall just laid there for a minute then opened his mouth to call out to someone, the children maybe. Before he could speak he felt a moist pat on his forehead. Next a splash in his left eye then a mouthful of chalky fluid, squinting with his right eye he could see a branch full of pigeons about thirty feet up. Randall's tongue lurched as another bombardment of droppings crashed into the back of his throat. He could feel the seeds and remains of berries suspended in the shit. He began to gag consciously at first then uncontrollably. Randall squirmed and flailed but he was held tight by the seat belt, his uvula shuddered and some undigested custard rose up to mix with the asphyxiating layers of caca. As he gurgled then spit and took in a fresh new breath Randall could swear he felt the grass between his toes.

2nd Place

Sometimes Mirrors are Necessary

Amanda M. Koncelik

I noticed him as soon as he walked into the cafe. It was difficult not to. The place was empty except for myself, equipped with a glass of wine, and a book on travel. My typical Tuesday evening. I was on my third glass and wavering in between the point of common sense and the point where socially acceptable action is hazy. The room looked like I was viewing it through a mirror covered in plastic wrap. I kind of liked the lines blurred.

He sat down on the red leather couch at the other end of the room. I watched him set up his laptop. He was quick, using a few defmed motions. Like a robot, only softer. I heard him order some kind of sparkling water and wondered if he was European. Maybe he just spent a lot of time in Europe. He had blonde hair and green eyes. Not usually a combination I found attractive. I'm pretty stereotypical when it comes to the tall, dark, and handsome type. But the wine and the circumstances allowed me to expand my pallet tonight.

I'm not entirely clear on the details of what happened next. What I do know is that a glass of White Zinfandel later, I walked over to him and sat right down. Just "plop," like a bottle of juice from a vending machine. As if we had known each other for years and this was a welcome and expected

movement. Our conversation, as I remember, went something like this:

"You know, I don't really enjoy watching golf, do you?"

"Do I know you?" He slid a few inches away from me.

"It's so boring. Everyone is so subdued, like emotion is banned from the green or something. How can you even distinguish between who is being competitive and who is playing because they were forced into taking lessons when they were four?"

"I'm sorry but if we've met, I really don't remember you."

"You know, the room is spinning ever so slightly. Do you mind if I lean on you for a moment?"

"As a matter of fact, I do mind. You should probably have someone call you a cab."

He collected his laptop and just left as I fell, leaving my face to land on the warm spot where he was sitting. I watched him pay and then leave the cafe. He didn't look back, only shook his head, perhaps in disbelief. At that point, I decided to take a nap.

It had been three weeks since the breakup. He hadn't been perfect, although he did fit the tall and dark profile I liked. His eyes. His eyes were the best and the worst feature about

him. They didn't lie. But I didn't like what they said. I refused to believe they were accurate.

His exit hadn't been exciting or explosive. We both knew it was coming to this. He claimed it had nothing to do with my weight, but I had a difficult time believing him when four days later I had seen him with one of my coworkers, who stood 5' 11" and weighed 120 pounds. She was breaking into runway modeling. Who wouldn't choose that over a 5'4", 115 pound monster?

I still cried when he left. I begged him to stay.

"But I love you," I had insisted. I really did. It hadn't been that empty phrase with the subtext of 'you're just really good in bed' or 'I simply don't want to be alone.'

"Can you hand me my socks?" He had pointed to a plain pair of black socks, balled at the end of his bed.

I did. "I can learn to like golf."

He had looked at me with the amusement that a parent looks at a child when they have just said something really cute but equally as dumb. "I'm sure you could."

"I will take up running with you. It could be a fun couples' activity."

"You wouldn't last."

"I'm starting to get some job offers again. I know it's been a dry week or so, but it's picking back up." I had hated the sound of my own desperation.

"That's great. The phone bill is due soon."

"I can't say anything to make you stay, can I?"

"I was never really here sweetheart. Take care." He kissed me on the cheek and then just left. He didn't look back. I didn't see him again until the day I saw them together.

As much as I hated getting up in the mornings, I did take up running. I didn't last more than half a mile. I liked to watch all the other runners with their iPods and jogging shorts and fancy sneakers, and I wondered if they saw me as serious like them, or more like the little girl at the mall who wants her fmgemails painted too. The one who follows her mom into the salon and sits on the ground with her fifty cent nail polish splattered in an unskilled attempt at beauty. It didn't really matter. Everything about running was about appearance anyway.

Once outside and after the embarrassing stretching regime, I took off. It always felt weird, that initial push forward, bounce, the first act of committal. I started out easy, thinking maybe today was the day I could finally break new ground, finally get past that silly pink mailbox with the lopsided flowers hand painted on. Next came the shortness of breath, the simultaneous awareness of all my faults. It wasn't just the fact that I had to grasp at breath through my mouth or the

reality that today the pink mailbox would be as menacing as always. It was the pulsing of my feet on the concrete, rippling through my stomach, my arms. And then came the understanding, the acceptance. I hated that the most. The quintessential moment when came the thought:

I understand why he left. Of course I do.

Once I rounded the corner back to my apartment building, I slowed. The process was finished, at least until tomorrow. Another second chance. Life was always about second chances.

I forced myself to take the stairs back to my apartment. After all, it's all about gaining appearances. Of beauty. Of control. Of health. In that order. I burst through the door, turning down the air as low as it will go. Shut every door, every curtain, every open space. Grab a glass of water before collapsing on the ground.

I expected my tolerance to be higher by now. It wasn't.

As usual, clothes become a suffocating trap that must be ripped open as quickly as possible. I stripped down, intending to take a shower as soon as my pulse returned to normal. Then I decided to set up the coffee pot so that it would be ready when I got out. I always tell myself that normal people do not prepare coffee without clothes on. There is probably some health code about it. But I don't care. I don't want to put my clothes back on.

I look at myself in the mirror, examining each curve of the surface before me. The same whisper took over me, like the unsteady push of wind just before a storm.

I understand why he left. Of course I do.

Dang it. I was late again. I forced myself into my size four daisy-dukes and tied the knot on my plaid belly shirt, then rushed out the door. Keys. I rushed back in. Double check my make-up. It will work. Back out the door. Drive twenty miles per hour over the speed limit, praying the whole way I wouldn't get stopped.

I found my pocket of space for the day just as a cow was being led in with a rope. It was all I could do not to laugh, but I had to remain professional. The cow, who was putting up quite a stubborn fight, was finally put into position while a photographer rushed over to me. Her thick hair was pulled back with a cloth scrunchie of all things. She looked at me with disdain, as if I expected special treatment just because I was a model. I apologized profusely, and she told me to stop wasting time and get into position. I did.

The idea was to portray a ridiculously happy atmosphere over the great taste of some product resembling butter. The final picture was supposed to convey a light, warm, overly optimistic view of some country life. The studio itself was anything but a pastoral paradise.

The lights were everywhere. They were so hot. Burning right through every flaw that one thought invisible. They

were better than mirrors for exposing weakness. Next of course was the Holstein. She had finally settled down, at least for the moment, and she stood lazily. She was fat with plump udders, which seemed an unnatural shade of pink. Her coat was slick and clean, the white almost blending in with the walls, and the black splotches looking like black holes. And then, of course, there was me.

A nervous looking intern handed me a wicker basket. I wondered if the photographer knew that this would not actually hold milk, and perhaps a galvanized bucket would better serve the purpose. But I doubted she cared. I didn't argue. I tried to practice different ways of incorporating the basket: one hand or two? Fingers wrapped on the basket hanging loosely? Should I start skipping and swing it along with me? Would I have to hold the rope of the cow also? Maybe I would be riding it like a horse?

After I had worked up a steady fountain of sweat that no doubt caused my foundation to run, the photographer finally started giving orders. I would not ride the cow like a horse. I would pretend to be leading it through a pasture, and I would rest the basket in the crease of my elbow. She asked me to try to convey uncontaminated joy. The smile had to seem natural, not forced like cheesy yearbook pictures. My body language had to be soft and still but give the illusion of movement. And of course, the eyes were key. If my eyes didn't radiate, lighting up my face, the picture would be lost. I knew. Every time I blinked, five pictures were lost. Each movement of

mine must be in line with the overall development of the scene.

She started shouting orders as she clicked shot after shot. There was no pause in between, just a steady, dizzyingly fast series of clickclickclickclickclick. It sounded like a machine gun. Every time, I wondered if the aborigines were right. With each second, I felt sucked and emptied.

I tried so hard to silence the bombardment of doubts. Suck it in. Stand up straight. Ignore the feeling of that zit on my chin. The foundation will stay. Don't hold the rope too tight. Don't strain your muscles too much. Don't pass out. Breathe. Move my face a little this way. Don't let the basket drop out of frame. Ignore that slobber on my thigh. She can edit that out later. Don't take in that breath. Can we get this cow a mint?

Although I had trained my eyes after countless hours in the mirror, I knew my smile was empty. Oh, it would be good enough to fool even this militant photographer. Butter was her life. I wouldn't dare melt that. But the smile was forced, painful, empty. Each click turned into the same mantra.

I understand.

I kept watching for him to come back to the cafe. I sat in the faded, rough, dirt brown couch in the back corner. I watched the wooden stools, the elongated tables, but especially the red leather couch. I ignored the dark walls, the

lighting that barely allowed sight, and the horrible music that was played too loud.

I went faithfully every Tuesday, and started going two and three times a week in order to try to see him. While I developed a great relationship with the bartender and successfully gained another two and a half pounds, the mystery man did not return. I didn't blame him after what I had put him through.

Despite the failure, I continued to look. I had worked up his whole back story. I had decided that he had spent a whole summer touring Europe. He had hit all the hot Western spots; he had his breath taken away by the Eiffel Tower at night; he had tried to seek out the Pope in the Vatican; he had ridden the tunnel from England to France and back again; his taste buds had melted at the food in Greece.

But he had not neglected the beauty of Eastern Europe, either. He walked down the quaint but independently beautiful cobblestone streets in the smaller towns, which felt more true to Europe than the monster cities. He had seen the dazzling performers light up the streets after dark in Poland: men on stilts, women throwing ropes of fire like they were braided licorice, and cascading beautiful music. But his heart had stayed in Kosice. He spent two afternoons in front of the cathedral, watching the fountain pulse in beat to a rotating selection of musical notes.

I wanted to talk to him about all his travels. I had never gone out of the country myself but spent hours reading about

the beauty one simply couldn't find here. I always thought my reflection might be more pure if I looked in European waters.

And then, one day, I stopped going to the cafe. He wasn't going to come back, and his story was complete. It had turned into self-exploration, a dangerous escapade I was not willing to take on. The place had joined the ranks that unconstructively reminded me of my unforgivable faults. I started going to the gym instead. I had bills to pay and very few photographers wanted a model that was over a size two.

It was a Saturday, and I was alone. I had gone for a run and had just gotten dressed after a long shower. I had run down to the newsstand on the corner and bought every pop culture magazine I could get my hands on. I carried them all back, a heavy paper bag in each arm. As soon as I collapsed through the front door, I dumped them all over my living room floor. Twenty-three. Twenty-three magazines spread over my awful grey and green flecked carpet.

I was looking at all of them. The successful ones. The one percent that actually make it big, with huge contracts and paparazzi and followers. I ripped out every picture that represented who I wanted to be. I sat cross-legged on my floor, studying the expressions, the poses, the bodies of these women. I didn't understand what they had that I didn't. I was perky. I was solid. My hair was just as shiny as theirs.

I went to my closet and tried to find outfits that would mirror what I was seeing in these ads. Maybe I just needed a new look, a new style, a new portfolio. I pulled out every

sparkly top, stiletto heel, and feather boa I owned. I stood in front of the mirror, piling on blush and lipstick until I couldn't feel my face. I had to look like them. Then he would take me back.

My clothes were all out of fashion. They didn't quite fit right. My cheekbones were out of proportion. I started to get really angry. Why wouldn't I transform?

Something in me snapped. I picked up each of the pictures, yelling at each pair of eyes. I ripped them, balled them up, threw them across the room. I couldn't take it anymore.

I went to my fridge and pulled out a cake he had bought when he was still with me. He wasn't coming back to eat it. And I understood now, more than ever, why that was the case.

I looked at the cake. The dried up chocolate base and the chunky slimy coconut topping. It was perfect.

I looked over at my freestanding full length mirror that he had bought for me as a six month anniversary present. It would work. As much as I loved the cherry wood, the beautiful carving along the base, the clear reflection, it couldn't serve its purpose anymore. It would adopt a new one. I took it out from its place and put it in the center of the room, in the middle of the model carnage I had just created. I looked at how ridiculous my outfit had become: two feather boas, one red and one black, a gush of pearls and diamonds competing for space on my neck, and a white evening gown

that softly fell over my legs like ocean spray. My bare feet peeked out of the bottom. It was difficult not to laugh but I had been trained to remain professional.

I took a piece of the cake in my hands as a bit of the coconut mess ran between my fingers. I threw it as hard as I could at the mirror. It made a hollow smack as it hit the glass, then bounced onto the pictures below. It left an ugly mark as the remains slowly started to slide down. I picked up another and repeated the motion, screaming as I did. It was oddly freeing. My face, my outfit, were suddenly obstructed by large splotches of cake remains. The shrapnel landed among the faces of those models I hated so much. Now we were on even ground.

3rd Place

A Country Scene

Wesley McClanahan

The sunlight slowly edged across the porch, eating the shade an inch at a time-savoring the meal. The sun reached Chris's eyes and he raised his book higher, keeping it out of his eyes. He stretched out on the front porch swing, the kind you can buy cheap and stands on its own without hanging, re-reading a worn out copy of a shoot-em-up western-the only kind of book found laying around the trailer. On some mornings any reading at all served for a distraction. One bare foot rested on the porch, pushing the swing back and forth, back and forth, and in Chris's other hand a forgotten cigarette smoldered. Beneath the swing an old black and white border collie slept, head on its folded paws. The dog looked as though it had lived a hard life-his right ear was gone and he walked with the permanent limp of an old wound. The dog was also named Chris.

The porch was small and roofless and falling apart; the cracks between the irregular boards gaped wide and made walking over them tricky. The weather was just warm enough for sitting outside without shoes or a shirt; leaves already covered the hills and had turned the rolling green surfaces orange - Summer, picking up the folds of her skirt as she left, curtsayed and nodded a greeting in the direction of

Autumn and her colorful petticoats. Chris knew he may not get another chance to sit on the porch comfortably and read a book for a long time, so he decided he would enjoy the moment for as long as he could.

Chris stopped swinging, pitched his cigarette away and touched his eye gingerly, bracing himself for the pain. He hissed as his finger touched the skin and he laid the book tent-wise on his chest so he could glance at his watch, a cheap plastic thing he had found, and saw it was eleven. He should have been sitting in 9th grade history learning about the founding fathers, but his dad didn't want him going to school with a shiner so he ordered Chris to stay at home until it healed.

Chris could hear the old man snoring through the screened bedroom window of the trailer sleeping off a night of cheap beer, and he counted himself lucky just to have a few moments alone. Before picking his book up again, Chris took a look at the hillside directly across from the porch and marveled at how beautiful the hill looked compared with the overgrown and trash-ridden lawn around the trailer. He pitched his cigarette into the grass and continued reading while holding the book open with one hand so he could reach under the swing with the other and pet the weathered collie.

Chris's dad had thought naming the dog Chris hilarious, so he did. They had found him huddled in a ball under the trailer two years ago and Chris's dad, who could be gentle and caring when sober, decided to give him a home.

"We need us a guard dog anyways," Chris's dad explained. Chris wasn't much of a guard dog - he played with other dogs and people more often than not - but made a pretty good

alarm. No animal, vehicle, or person could get close to house without the dog barking or whining until Chris or his dad came outside to see what the commotion was about. Chris loved Chris, and Chris loved Chris just as much. Most days the two remained inseparable, and the dog would follow the boy all over the hills whenever Chris felt like getting away from the trailer for awhile. At that moment though, the dog contented himself with sitting under the swing and letting Chris pet him, with his head between his paws and his tail lazily ticking back and forth like a pendulum.

The sunlight finally peeked over the edge of the book and found Chris's eyes, making him squint. Chris was tired of reading anyway and thought about going out into the hills for awhile, when he felt the mass of fur and muscle under his hand stiffen. He looked down and saw the dog staring at the hillside; his tail frozen and his one ear pointed straight up. Chris followed the collie's gaze, scanning the birch and oak covered hill, but didn't see anything other than a couple of cardinals chasing each other through the leaves.

Probably a squirrel, Chris thought.

The young boy and his dog remained frozen in this tableau for a full minute before the dog looked up at Chris and his tail wagged again, but his one ear remained upright and alert. Chris reclined again and placed the book over his face, shutting out most of the sunlight; he swung there trying to convince himself he should get up and do something when the dog began barking.

Chris removed the book and put it aside as he sat up. The collie stood at the edge of the porch, staring at the hillside again. Chris still couldn't see anything, but now he could

hear something. He heard the crashing and crunching of dead leaves and guessed a fairly large animal, maybe even a person, was coming down the hill. An agonizing couple of minutes passed in which Chris, an imaginative boy, could hear but not see what was coming. His mind created all sorts of possibilities, like bears and escaped criminals, and he wondered if he should risk sneaking into his dad's bedroom and getting one of his rifles from his closet. Chris really didn't want to wake his dad up, so instead he waited and watched with one hand shielding his eyes, wishing the little trailer wasn't quite so isolated and tucked away at the end of the holler.

Finally, Chris's eye caught movement at the top of the hill and he saw a deer rolling down the hill through the leaves and the trees. It looked young and something was definitely wrong with it. The deer tumbled down the hill, glancing off trees and outcroppings, like a drunken star falling from the sky. The dog barked again, twisting his body back and forth in anticipation, and Chris shushed him for fear of his dad hearing. The deer slid on its side through the leaves for ten yards before flipping end over end one last time, landing in the shallow creek at the bottom of the hill.

Chris stood up and felt in his pocket for his knife-its weight comforted him-and took a quick glance at his dad's bedroom window before he began walking cautiously toward the creek, mindful of his bare feet and the hidden tetanus shots lying in the grass. The silence rang too loud after the noise of the past few minutes. Chris pushed aside the chest-high weed growing by the edge of the creek and saw the deer lying on a little sandbar with the creek running all around its

legs and head. The deer looked like a young whitetail, probably a year old, and looked as if it only weighed about fifty pounds.

It's only afawn, Chris thought.

In the middle of the deer's body, conspicuous as a desert tree, stood the broken shaft of an aluminum arrow.

Someone's huntin' out of season, Chris thought.

There isn't much law around now and even less of it then, so many people did hunt deer whenever they felt the urge. Chris had never hunted himself, but had seen his share of deer before. He guessed someone had shot this one and didn't bother tracking it, leaving it to die without claiming it. He had never seen a deer this close though and wondered if it was still alive. Turning, Chris looked for the dog and saw with amazement that he still stood on the porch, perched on his haunches and watching with obvious interest. Chris looked back at the deer and decided it was probably dead.

Chris made his way carefully down the short embankment and jumped to the sandbar in one big step. Standing over it, Chris wondered at how he could have thought the deer was dead. Its chest heaved-the soft downy white pulsed up, down, up down-and Chris felt an urge to touch it but didn't. Looking into its eyes, Chris felt a pang of sympathy and wished he had brought the rifle after all. The deer's eyes shone blacker than coal, yet in them Chris could see life. The deer stared at Chris, too far gone and not afraid anymore, and Chris stared back. Slowly, afraid it would still try running away, Chris reached for the arrow shaft.

Probably only hit the stomach, damn thin9's been tryin' to die for a lon9 time, Chris thought.

Chris stepped into the rocky creek bed and bent over the deer. Grabbing the shaft he immediately noticed the warmth of it. He felt the pounding of the dying deer's heart through the aluminum-felt it thrumming in his hand faster and faster. For a moment, Chris stared into the deer's eyes, feeling its heart in his hand and his in his chest beating as one, and everything else stopped-only the melding of understanding between boy and animal remained. The throbbing in his hand rose to a fever pitch before it stopped all at once, without ever having slowed down. The fawn lay motionless--dead.

Chris stood there for a long moment, not letting go of the arrow. He could see ticks, their fat and sluggish balloon bodies gorged with blood, falling off the deer's skin and into the creek-survivors abandoning a sinking ship-before the slow current of the ankle high water carried them off. When he finally released his grip from the arrow, Chris noticed his fingernails had left small half-moon shaped indentions in his palm.

Chris took his knife out of his pocket and opened it slowly. He had never gutted a deer before and when he finished felt ashamed of the crooked, sloppy job he had done. He let the entrails wash down the creek and then washed his hand in the water, trying in vain to get the last of the blood from under his fingernails. Chris decided to leave the deer in the creek until his dad got up, because he had no idea how to begin skinning it.

After rinsing off his knife and putting it back into his pocket, Chris made the short jump to the embankment. He looked up with a start and saw his dad, fully dressed in his clothes from last night, sitting on the front step of the

porch-smoking a cigarette while scratching the dog behind his ear-and Chris's first thought was to wonder how long his dad had been sitting there. Father and son and dog all stared at each other for a long moment before Chris's dad pitched his lit cigarette into the pile under the porch. He walked over to Chris and looked down into the creek. After another long moment he said, "Let me show you how to skin it, boy."

Honorable Mention

Be the Buck

Amanda Layne Stephens

Fourteen-year-old Danny misses his pocket knife. Digging into his Jeans pocket, he doesn't wrap his fingers around the four-inch bronzed stainless steel handle (seven-eight-inches extended) containing wire cutters, a screwdriver, and a three-and-one-half-inch serrated blade. He imagines the sharp click each tool makes when unfolded. Instead, his fingers press into the squashed stick of mint gum still in its silver wrapper and the ridges of the apartment key to 735 Eleventh Avenue and Sixth Street where he lives with his mother and six-year-old sister, Caroline. He knows Cabell County schools have the same penalty as his former school in Wyoming County for carrying weapons on school grounds: expulsion.

Gazing out the classroom window, faintly attuned to Mrs. Turner's ramblings about *Mere the Red Fern Grows*, Danny's rock-gray eyes become clouded with the perfectly cut angles of two-story brick houses (sometimes three), tiny square plots of grass tamed down to a mere two-inches, and strange waves of ordered bricks for streets. The Southside neighborhood of Huntington has a stately suburban presence, but it isn't rustic like his home town in Mullens.

Danny rubs his shaved blonde head, prickly as a hedgehog, trying to find something from the Southside reminiscent of

the hundreds of acres he and his father roamed behind their home in Mullens. Danny didn't have a backyard; he had his own Appalachian jungle. He focuses on the dogwood trees queued along the sidewalk. Their long, swan-necked trunks represent a small faction of the fleet of trees that made him invisible even to the summer sun. Spotting a branch bent down toward the grass, ready to create an avalanche of green leaves, Danny slides his hand into his pocket again. He grates his fingers along the jagged edge of the key.

He isn't just missing the knife's various gadgets or its unmistakable addition of weight it adds to his pocket. It was his father's. He gave it to Danny before he left to serve as an officer in Baghdad as part of the infantry unit. He died three months into his deployment in a suicide bombing. Two years have passed. But Danny's memory of their last meal together as a complete family before his father left for Iraq remains as present in his mind as the knife not being in his pocket.

They had dinner at Dick's Swiss Burger, a local restaurant in Mullens. The fans whirled above them on full blast' the doors were propped open, but it was still hot. That's just southern West Virginia in July. Hot. Caroline, who was four at the time, sat in a red booster chair with a sweaty French-fry in one hand and clutching her neon pink stuffed tiger in the other. The tiger had been a present Danny's father had bought her while in Basic Training at Fort Jackson in South Carolina. Danny's mother sat beside Caroline, her shiny forehead and nose framed by curly shoulder-length blonde hair. She looked down at the monstrous golden brown bun with a quarter-

pound of meat and cheese as if she expected it to eat her instead. She usually loved Dick's burgers-they all usually did. Danny's meal also laid untouched, save for the half-eaten dill pickle pushed over to the side of his plate. He sat on the other side of chapped red booth next to his father with his sweaty legs sliding across the leather whenever he moved. Only Danny's father had managed to eat his burger and without getting grease or mustard on his dark green service uniform. Their waitress sped past them, popping her gum and forgetting to refill their soft drinks.

His father asked Danny to come with him outside.

Danny gazed at the restaurant's name stretched out on top of the short rectangular building in neon red letters beside the cartoon of a large blond-haired man taking a bite of a burger dripping with white cheese.

His father asked Danny if he understood why they untangled the fawn from the barbwire by the creek behind their home.

He stared at his father's decorated uniform, thinking how hot he must be. But he never let on that he was. The gold metal wings and colored symbols glinted in the evening sun sinking into the mountains. Danny hated how the tiny gold "U.S." insignias on each lapel reminded him why his father was leaving. It was America's fault. But he knew his father wouldn't leave him and his family unless he thought it was the right thing to do.

"Saving the deer was the right thing to do."

The officer bent over and placed his big paws on Danny's shoulders.

"You're right. Parents can't always rescue their children, Danny. Someone had to take the chance and do what the doe and buck would have done.

"Mom will take good care of you and Carrie while I'm gone. But you've got to help. I need you to be the buck. I know you're only twelve-years-old, but I'm going to a dangerous place, son. A place where bombs drop and where guns fire. Good men and women die or are injured every day. I need you to protect your mother and little sis while I'm gone, you hear?"

His father reached into his pocket, pulling out his utility knife they used to save the fawn. He handed Danny the knife with both hands, sandwiching Danny's small hand in between the bronzed handle and his.

Danny's lips quivered. He had to look away. *I can't cry. Not now. Not now.* He looked up again at the blaring red letters on top of the fast food place; the lights all smeared together into a smudged plane of red light. Carefully, he slipped the knife into his front jeans pocket. Danny had been prepared for the shame, but not relief when the hot, sticky tears sprinted down his face. What was he supposed to do now?

Danny checks the large, white-faced clock on the cream wall: 2:50. *Only ten more minutes to go.* He forces himself to pay better attention to Mrs. Turner's lecture, which has turned into a class discussion.

"How does Billy show his determination?" Mrs. Turner asks.

She stands at the blackboard, chalk in hand, ready to write down the class's responses. Her mascara-clotted eyes stare down the rows, seeming to sort between each blink for the studious faces that did the reading and guilty faces that didn't.

Danny has already finished the book. He surveys the other students to see if anyone else wants to answer. He doesn't want to come across as an Einstein; he would never make new friends that way, but he really enjoyed the book. Most of the class is hunched over on their desktops with their hands propping up round, sleepy faces; passing notes back and forth; or doodling in notebooks--except a green-eyed tomboy sitting a few desks over. Hiding behind the honey brown sway of chin-length hair falling into her face, she folds a scrap of notebook paper into an airplane.

Danny raises his hand.

"Billy doesn't give up. He saves his money to buy Little Anne and Old Dan, he stands up to bullies, and coon hunts every night to prepare himself for the hunting contest."

Mrs. Turn writes Danny's response in list form on the board, drawing all the loops and curves of the letters in billowy cursive.

A tiny aircraft sails across the room and hits the teacher in her thick calf.

She turns, bends down to the hardwood floor and picks up the plane.

"Someone thinks they're funny. Okay, who's the comedian?" she asks.

The bell rings. Danny grins with the entire class in unison.

He watches the culprit slither out of the room and into the web of students in the hallway.

Danny heads to the elementary on the other side of the middle school grounds to pick up his sister.

He finds Caroline dragging her pink stuffed tiger around with her as she chases a boy around the swing set. The chaperone yells: "No running!" But the little girl with her strawberry blonde hair trailing behind her like a streamer proceeds to fly after the panting boy anyway.

Danny smiles, glad for the pint-sized reminder that not everything has changed. He lounges on a wood bench inside

the playground, enjoying the warm September breeze before their walk home to the apartment a few blocks away. *She can chase the boy for a few more minutes.*

Ivy entangles the redbrick duplex, invading the gigantic white-trimmed windows in front of the lower and upper apartments. The landlady's orange Persian stirs in the downstairs window. Danny sees its fluffy tail swaying above the ivy.

"I want to pet the kitty," Caroline says.

"Maybe later," Danny says, "We have to eat dinner first. Then, maybe we can go to the park."

Danny has already planned to take his little sister to Ritter Park, not far from the apartment. They could walk there. His mother, who works the nightshift at the hospital a couple days a week, gave him permission after asking her nursing coworkers if the park is safe.

Danny unlocks the apartment on the second floor.

Unpacked moving boxes clutter the living/dining room; a small television sits on the floor in front of a burgundy couch, and a round dinner table stands in the corner. Taking off his book bag, Danny throws it on the sofa and fishes out his pocket knife from one of the cardboard boxes marked "Danny's stuff." Placing it in his pocket, he plops down onto

the couch next to where the phone and answering machine sit. The machine blinks a red number one, showing a new message:

"Hey, Danny. It's mom. How was school? Are you liking the neighborhood okay? I left some money on the counter to order a pizza. Make sure Caroline is in bed by nine this time Danny, NOT ten. Caroline, baby, mind your brother. Love you!"

He sighs and erases the message. *School was okay, except for the pretty tomboy. She was amazing-especially her eyes. The neighborhood sucks.* But that was not what he would tell his mother. His father would not have liked that. But that still does not change Danny's feelings. If he could, he would gladly drive him' Caroline' and his mother two and half hours back to Mullens. He hasn't really made any friends yet anyway since the move about a month ago.

He understands that moving to larger city means better pay for his mother. But what's to like about a neighborhood with houses built so close together that he could not walk between them without grazing the next one? And he is supposed to be the man of the house, but how can he when there is not a house? The apartment has four rooms: All white. All blank. All boring. No porch or backyard with a hammock or woods where he and his father explored. That's why he wants to go to the park-to escape the stifling smallness of the apartment and the bombardment of houses packaged together like sliced cheese on every block.

His stomach rumbles. It doesn't want pizza. Danny leaves Caroline alone watching cartoons on the floor and rummages through one of the brown boxes marked "Kitchen" on the beige tile floor in the kitchenette. He removes the blender his mother uses to make them strawberry smoothies with in the summer and the toaster his father would never get rid of - no matter how much it burned the toast - because his father, Danny's grandfather, had given it to him. At the bottom, he finds the electric skillet. Danny remembers helping his father make fried bologna sandwiches for the family after returning from a hike in their forest.

Three slices of bologna sizzle in the skillet: two sandwiches for him and one for Caroline. Danny cooks his bologna until its edges turn up slightly toward the white popcorn ceiling. He allows Caroline's to stay in a little longer because she likes her bologna crispier.

Danny takes the knife out of his pocket. He unfolds the blade. *Click*. He cuts three slices of tomato. The stainless steel handle feels good in his hand --- cool to the touch, solid, dependable. Tomato juice and gooey seeds squirt onto the kitchen counter. After placing the bologna and tomato onto six pieces of white bread, he then opens the wire cutters. *Click*. He uses them to snip the top of the new bottle of mustard, making sure to cut the tip of the triangle where the hard plastic is more malleable - just like his father had taught Danny when he snipped the rustiest sections of the barbwire off the fawn first.

It was May, two months before their last meal at Dick's Swiss Burger. And, at first he and his father didn't know what the weird thrashing noise came from, but they did know where. It was hard to miss the wiggling holly bush on the other side of the stream.

Danny waited while his father went to scope out the vibrating shrub. His father looked like a modern fairytale hero jumping and stepping from stone to stone over the creek against the backdrop of rhododendrons, with long, hunter green leaves and pink blossoms dangling over the embankment.

His father bent back a couple of the bush's branches and then motioned for Danny to join him.

Danny saw a White Tail fawn tangled in the holly bush. She must have fallen in on her side. The little form lay engulfed in a bed of bright green branches with prickly leaves. The white spots on the baby animal scattered in all directions as she inhaled and exhaled in sharp rhythms. As Danny looked closer, though, he saw her legs entangled in barbwire. She struggled and kicked as the wire ripped into her flesh.

The officer told Danny to take off his red nylon jacket, lay it over the part of the bush near the fawn's head, bend the branches back, and lean on them with his bodyweight so that he could cut the wire and Danny could stroke the fawn to calm her down without getting pricked by the leaves.

Danny used the soft tips of his fingers, making sure to avoid all the calluses on his palms from helping his dad carry firewood. He glided his fingers down the frail, soft neck.

The whites of her eyes slowly receded, becoming less bug-eyed, and her breathing slowed.

His father removed the branches first. Then, he pulled out the wire cutters from the folding knife. The sun peeking from behind the busyness of beech trees, oaks and evergreens silhouetted his broad form. His steel eyes faded into his gray face, appearing as a shadow from underneath his camouflaged army cap.

"Keep petting her," the officer said, "but pay attention. You need to learn how to use a utility knife. Whenever you cut barbwire cut the orange portions first. That means they're rusty and the easiest to cut."

Danny watched his father snip an orange section near her knee and two other rusted sections wrapped around her hind legs.

She began to squirm again.

Danny rubbed her neck and told her it would be okay. His dad was going to save her.

His father cut the last three non-rusted portions of wire from her legs.

Danny's father reached into the bush and picked up the fawn by the legs-the way he would pick up a golden retriever. He laid her onto the grass.

They stepped back from her. She stumbled onto wobbly legs like a baby with skinned knees and darted into the thicket.

Danny and his sister enter the park near a pink bridge with little fuchsia Breast Cancer Awareness ribbons painted on it. He recognizes the ribbons because his mother wears one on her scrubs to work in October for Breast Cancer Awareness month. As they step onto the paved track surrounding the park, he sees a sign that reads: "Ritter Park Directory." An old man in knee socks and red short-shorts zooms by as Danny finds the playground on the map. He also sees different hiking/biking trails in red, blue, and green lines. Tracing his index finger along each colored trail, Danny wonders what it will be like to hike the trails in a new place without his dad.

Soon, Danny, holding Caroline's hand, veers off the pavement, lined with oaks and maples, when he sees a dirt footpath by a wooden bridge. The path leads them to a metal slide by a large pine, a redbrick shelter with green picnic tables and swing set with three swings by a creek bank.

The playground is still crowded. A red-haired toddler runs away from his panting mother with his dirty fingers stuck in his mouth. Kids Caroline's age take turns riding down the

slide. They swat at the pine's swooping branches like kittens as they go down. And a group of high school boys hang out in the shelter, checking out young women as they jog around the track.

"I wanna go swing!" Caroline trots off to the swing set with tiger in hand.

Danny watches her swing, her fingers wrapped around the rusted chains, for a few moments in her earnest attempt to swing up to the trees. Then, he strolls over to the bank and peers into the creek. Searching underneath flat gray rocks in the muddy water is the tomboy from school. A red bandana is tied on her head. The bottoms of her khaki pants are rolled up, showing off her slender, toned legs. *She must be a runner.*

"Have you found any crawdads yet?" Danny says.

Danny has hunted under many a rock in the creek behind his old house to find the red shelled critters.

"No. But I found two last week about the size of my fist!" she says without looking up, still probing underneath rock after rock and throwing them behind her and to the side.

"Maybe they're hiding today," she says.

She moves out of the water and climbs up and out the bank. Her legs glisten in the sunlight.

"Hey, you're the new kid, right?"

"Yes. I'm Danny. Thanks for reminding me."

"No problem. I'm June. I've seen you around school and walking with your sister home after school. I live across the street from the grade school."

"Really?" His voice cracks. "I've seen you around, too."

Danny looks down. He scuffs the dirt with his sneaker and smiles.

"Maybe I should tell Mrs. Turner you made the paper airplane. She'd be easier on you. That old coon hates me."

Danny and Caroline follow June across the wooden bridge by the playground. She offers to take Danny and his sister on a nature trail after he tells her that he enjoys hiking. They climb up a hill above the walking track. Danny takes out his knife and cuts down a low hanging tree limb so that the three can pass. She says that hiking is among the more fun things to do at the park anyway unless you were Caroline's age or able to drive, and that the path leads back to where they entered the park near the pink bridge.

"I bet they don't have a Breast Cancer Awareness bridge from where you're from," June says, hiking along the path covered with decaying brown leaves.

"I'm from Mullens; it's a small town with not much else besides a state park." He tries to think of a good comeback, but instead blurts, "Well,- I bet Huntington doesn't have a Dick's Swiss Burger."

"A Dick's Swiss what?"

"Oh, it's just this fast food place that me and my family used to go to. Nevermind."

"You sure do come from a town with weird place names, you know that?"

His feels his cheeks grow hot, and he almost stumbles into a tree stump.

"Danny, your face is all pink."

"Shh, Caroline.I"

"No. I wanna go home now. I miss momma."

She slams her tiger down onto the leaves and picks it back up. Fragmented leaves stick to its pink body dusted with dirt.

"Mom's not home yet, sissy."

A mixture of coral, purple, and gray smudges the sky. The sun mingles between all three. Danny stares at the skinny

trees growing on the incline. It always has amazed him how, with one push, he could probably send them toppling over the hill. He spots a squirrel falling to ground from one of the skinny trees and scamper away. But the ferns and thorny bushes always look fastened to the ground. Looking down the hill, he could barely see the blue T-shirt of a woman walking on the track below through all trees. He almost feels like he is back in his Appalachian jungle. All that's missing is his father.

June leads them down the mount for a few yards where the trees grow taller and sturdier with their thick, dark brown trunks. She stops in front of a large sitting rock with green moss growing between the names hearted in_faded spray paint. Eight empty beer bottles set beside the rock. Danny counts seven more in the patches of grass surrounding it. He isn't too surprised to see the bottles because he has seen them in the woods in Mullens.

June looks at Caroline. "This is Lover's Rock where high school kids usually come to... study... yes, study."

She winks at Danny.

Just as he is about to try and hide his smile from June again, Danny hears leaves crunching behind them. He puts his hand on top of his jeans pocket, feeling the bulge of the knife. Turning around, he sees a man approaching them, staggering some as he plops down on a tree stump about twenty feet away. The man pulls a lighter out of his navy windbreaker and lights a cigarette.

Swirling pockets of smoke create a temporary veil over his face. When they clear, Danny notices the man is smiling. It is not the kind of smile his elderly neighbors in Mullens gave him. Or the shy, fidgety smile he couldn't help but to give June. This man gives an unsettling smile. A disturbing smile-the corners of his lips curl up like a joker's from a deck of cards. It's the kind of smile sweaty men in baseball caps and stained t-shirts sometimes give his mother at gas stations.

"Hey, let's get out of here," Danny says to June in a quiet voice. "That man is not *ri9ht*."

Danny takes Caroline by the hand and shields himself with his body in front of her.

"Are you kidding? He's harmless. I thought you were from the country, Danny-boy. Haven't you seen a drunk in the woods before?"

"Not one like that."

"Oh c'mon, we're almost done with the trail. All we have to do is walk up back the hill and follow the path to the rose garden. The pink bridge is right by it. You can hold my hand if you want."

June extends her hand. Danny looks back toward the man and sticks his hand in his pocket to feel the knife. The man's looking away from them now, coughing and muttering to himself.

Danny takes June's hand. Her skin feels as soft as a rose petal.

When they turn to leave, the man gets up.

"Hey," he said in a smoker's scratchy voice, "Do you want a friend?"

What does he mean by that?

The man walks faster and faster toward them, weaving on and off the footpath and clumsily brushing low-hanging branches out of the way.

"Maybe you're right," June says. "Run!"

"Sissy, don't let go of my hand."

He and Caroline follow June, who races to the mud-caked hill, weaving through thorns and briars.

"Run faster, sissy!"

Reaching the incline, Danny places Caroline in front of him. He puts his hands on her back, trying to force her up the hill faster. But she is already tired. Her face is sweaty and beating like a heart. He sees June grabbing onto broken limbs and rocks-whatever she can-to get up the hill. His muddy sneakers slip in the mud. Sweat forms at his temples. He hears the man gaining on them. *Crunch, crunch, crunch*. The sound of

his heavy black boots on dead leaves. Danny imagines him as a bloodhound that has not eaten or hunted for days.

Danny gives up trying to get his sister up the hill. He can't get her to climb fast enough. He picks her up with one arm, snuggles her to his chest, and tries to grab onto plants and rocks as he climbs. She's getting heavier and heavier. He puts her down. Rests for a second. Then resumes. He sees June peer down at him from the top, the sky all around her - smoky blue in color - but still much brighter than the dark green pit he's trying to get himself and Caroline out of.

"June, June! Help me get Caroline up the hill!"

She stands there like a ghost.

He picks his sister up again - tries to run uphill with Caroline in his arms.

"Wait!" Caroline says, "I dropped Tiger."

Crunch, crunch, crunch.

"There's no time for that Caroline! June! June! Help!"

Danny feels a hand grasp his shoulder.

June darts away.

"Bitch!"

"Lookin' for this?" the stranger asks.

Danny feels hot breath on his neck, smelling of beer.

Caroline shrieks.

Slowly, Danny turns around to the tall figure, looking down at him with glassy brown eyes with Caroline's tiger in his dirty paws. But before he could mouth the words "Oh my God," the man punches him in the face.

Danny falls backward, struck with blinding pain. Green and blue colors flash. He rolls over. Dirt and blood fill his mouth. His nose is surely broken.

"Let go of me and gimme back Tiger! Danny! Danny! Help!"

"I'm coming, Caroline," Danny whispers, trying to sit up.

Danny opens his eyes. Everything is fuzzy. A dark figure steps over him and thrusts a thousand needles into his left rib. He wails, shaking his head from side to side while blinking, still straining to see. The sound of his sister's screams fade as the man carries her off down the hill.

Get up. Got to get up. He rolls over onto his right side, clapping his left side with his hand. After squeezing his eyelids shut for thirty seconds, he takes a deep breath and opens them. His vision is clearer. Danny sees something glimmering

in the leaves near his feet. *The knife.* It must have fallen out of his pocket. He crawls to it. Picks it up.

Holding onto a skinny oak, Danny staggers as he tries to stand. His legs feel uncertain and wobbly like the fawn's after she was freed.

He takes one step. *Buck. Be the buck.* He sees his father's face. His steel eyes pleading with him to go on. Then another - *be the buck*-bracing himself on trees and branches.

He finds Caroline's tiger thrown in the mud, its pink body drowning in brown-; Further down the hill, Danny sees the man on the ground crouching over her squirming little body.

"Stop it! Stop it! You're hurting me!"

Danny sprints toward them, ignoring the branches cutting his face as he whips through them, the throbbing pain in his side, and blood dripping from his nose. *Buck. Be the buck.*

"Get your fucking hands off my sister-you filthy piece of shit."

Click.

Deer Jerky Poetry

1st Place

I Will Scream for Esther Greenwood

Amanda Layne Stephens

I.

Critics have often said Esther's voice is dull, muted,
Her mental breakdown, distant, incomprehensible--
A "cotton swab" to her "Thumb stump."

II.

Esther, don't worry, I've got my megaphone--
It's white, a microphone cone-talk-box-geometric-sermon-
radio-show
Because I see you scratching at the glass,
Your cardigan-covered sleeves rolled up,
(Your blonde curls have been unscrewed for quite some time.)
And your head bumping into the window like a bee--
Buzz, buzz, it was, it was

Crazy the first time you saw the turkey gizzard
Dangling from so fine and clean a boy,
Hey, Buddy--
Making you depressed,
Little girl, child woman.
And the diagonal streaks of crusted blood that marked your
cheeks
From the diamond man who came to cut your brilliance,

Who thrust himself upon you and called you that nasty name--
A whore

Your Daddy--the bee man--who left you to stew in your own
foul air.

I'm sorry. No one told you about the ugliness of life,
As if they dusted sex and dead fathers underneath their
"Welcome Home" mats
In their high-heeled, red-lipped denial.

But I will scream for you because you screamed for me,
Esther, Plath,
You screamed to me.
I guess you could say I'm returning the favor.

III.

"A writer?"

Yes.

"A writer?"

Yes.

"You want to be a writer?"

Yes--

In the margins of lab reports,
On the treadmill behind balding heads, sweating pants,
And clothed in soap and steam--1 am

A drop in the pot,
But this drop is hot.
A drip from the spoon,

Herbal words brew.

Parted lips--
Pucker up mugs.
Mouths hot,
Kissing flames blue:

Cough, cough,
Water, water, water!
Smooth tongue waves
Ski down pink scorched slopes.

Drink the candied venom
And shut the fuck up.

2nd Place

**labels overrated hwen it cums to
rBGH whoremoans**

(after Robert Head)

Charles Berger

i heard Monsanto attackt Ben & Jerry's
saying that recombinant bovine
somatotropin is safe. Said a
spokes-man: "the cow-
s like it n besides it's only can-
cer."

(i think ice cream shud cum with
2 for 1 free chemo coupons no biohazard stickers just
to be safe they might not buy it.)

Monsanto are

Roundup-brand-weed-killer-soybean-
cotton-pig farmers. Their brand SEMINis makes
okra, cucumbers, watermelon,
carrots, pumpkin, raddish,
leeks, onion, broccoli, cabbage,
fennel, lettuce, eggplant,
peppers. In the late 60s
they dumpt
toxins into the landfills sumhwer in south
Wales the groundwater &
Air are stil poisoned there

3rd Place

Portrait of a 67-Year-Old Anorexic

Amanda M. Koncelik

The wrinkles on her face waltz
With the folds of her curtains.
In the reflection, she notices
How the ruffles on her shirt
Carry on the 4/4 time of the pillow
On her windowsill.

No one understands how she
Still keeps count at every teatime.
But her dress still falls over her small
Waist, her hips the crescendo
Hitting the repeat sign of her toes
Signaling the chorus.

One hundred and twenty five in her choir
Stretching over five feet eleven inches
Of wooden church pews.
Her slender fingers, now strumming
Her feathery chords, keeps the steady
Beat while the dips of her chin
Race to write the unsung lyrics.

Years of practice.
She was never made perfect.

Honorable Mention 1

Train Ride

Cory Wilson

The train arrives at four fifteen
I ripped the pages up
The station is twelve blocks away
I have no time to walk
Faces stare upward and down
Reflecting different glare
For all the wheels that turn and yearn
The bus is still not there

The ride inside the dirty can
With holes punched in for air
Was more than warm and smelled of mold
I ripped the pages up
Suddenly the brakes grabbed hold
And dropped me on my knees as prayer
And unbeknownst to me
A business man had hurried home
The child was in the way

The train arrives at four fifteen
I can't afford delay
I beg the driver open door
So I may go my way

The words upon the corner tree
Say three blocks to go
So westerly, I point my feet
And briskly walk with flow

The train was just as late as I
In fact, it was more so
So sitting on the rod iron bench
I delved where only I could go
The canopy then broke my spout
I ripped the pages up
The train, at last, with smoking mast
Had pulled into the depot
There was not long to go

Amongst the squeals of steel on track
And clicks, and bangs, and bumps
The whistle sounded over land
I ripped the pages up
The song which rose and pierced young hearts
Remained in steady beat
It sang them all a lullaby
Wrote for dangling feet

So here I sit on lowly route
I ripped the pages up
The clouds to east, foreboding gloom
Keep me from the sleep to seize me
I watched the rise of mountain sides
And valleys fall below

The train arrives at twenty till
I have not long to go

Honorable Mention 2

Listening to J.J. Cale's "Cocaine" while driving with my Dad

Garrett Shane Bryant

I was small, going fishing in the beat up old truck.
Turning tight corners and staring through the dirty window,
feet dipping into a pile of hammers and hoses,
I spat the shells of sunflower seeds
into an empty Mountain Dew bottle.

We listened to the song, not because of what it said,
But because of what it did.

My Dad drove fast, but not so when the windows were down.
We'd swing along the rich green hills of Eastern Kentucky,
trash sliding back and forth in the rusty long bed.
Poles and a cooler filled with quarter pops,
we never cared if we even found water.

Wind up my sleeve, lapping at the sweat on my back.
My hand a lonely surfer, riding the breeze to shore -
when I cupped my palm it felt like a breast pushing back.

I don't remember what we talked about,
but that wasn't the point then and it's still not now.

On the long stretches we saw the summer sun rise back up
out the pavement in short mirages leaving dark, d_ry puddles.
My problems were few and his were many,
but with the stereo loud and the wind squinting our eyes,
those best times of his life taught me how to know mine.

Paw-Paw Muffin

Creative Non-Fiction

1st Place

Best Friends: Panty Rockets and the Virgin Mary

Rebecca Childers

A Panty Rocket flew past my face, legos bursting out of their Aladdin-covered elastic hold into the moldy swimsuit pile behind me. Jill had been my best friend since the first day of Kindergarten a year before. But when I had arrived at her house that morning, she had locked me in the damp basement and left me. Two hours down there had been just long enough for me to get pretty creeped out by the decaying hamster bodies lying in the window above her Aunt Ruth's bed and hanging by curly Christmas ribbon from the branches of dead plants. I had been about to climb on top of the detergent coated washing machine and try to swing my thirty-five pound body through a hamster free window to the un-mown grass outside, when I heard the muffled buzzing of a spit-filled plastic Saxophone coming down the steps. Jill then came into view playing the dramatic intro, followed by her brothers Ian and Griffin and their best friend Gunther. They carried a toy construction hat full of our invention - Panty Rockets -and pelted me. The friendship was over.

The next day, in first grade, during recess Jill made a grand announcement. She put her navy Mary Jane onto the grimy metal bleacher, her Cinderella panties peeking from under her dress code required skirt, and said she was going to

now be best friends with Laura, the new girl at our school who lived across the street from her. "Look, Rebecca, I found you a new best friend, too," she said pushing me towards Lupita Lopez, a shy girl in a beautiful dress. I started to cry.

I hated Lupita. At the time, my lies about my hundreds of neighborhood boyfriends, and magic wands made out of animal cracker crumbs had made me fairly popular. The class had yet to discover the appeal of the tiny, perfectly figured, brilliant daughter of two surgeons who had immigrated from Mexico, and I felt hanging around her would ruin my reputation. She did not feel the same way. Ever since the first day of Kindergarten at our small, Fundamental Baptist School (though neither of us were Baptists) she had liked to come up and kiss my cheek. I always responded with an "Oh Yuck" as I had learned to do from Bobby in my favorite cartoon, *Bobby's World*, when Jackie gave him a friendly peck on the cheek.

Both of us now alone, Lupita and I actually became good friends. While relaying gossip one day (Matt likes you, Andrea likes Cory) we realized we shared a love of romance. Every day at recess, and in after school day care, we would dance. I was stuck being the man, because I was taller, and my long brown hair could be wrapped and tied around my face to resemble a beard. We had a whole routine worked out. I would start "Madam, would you like to dance?" And she would respond with "Yes, my prince" or "No, fair sir, my carriage awaits," and then curtsy as she had learned in a weekend etiquette program, and then spend ten minutes trying to get me to bow correctly. The whole scenario

we put ourselves in, but the damage we might have caused to the house.

Around the third grade Lupita and I made up a language. A really intelligent one, with words like "moo-moo" for armpit sweat, and "chink-chink" for a cute boy. We practiced on the phone every night for about four hours. By this time we had already completely separated ourselves from our class's social system, so no one actually listened when we spoke our brilliant new language, but we felt sneaky. This was a very linguistic year for us. Around this same time Lupita agreed to teach me Spanish, if I would teach her French – another product of my lying phase in Kindergarten had been the claim that all Childerses, my family, were from Paris. She would teach me ten Spanish words at recess, and I would teach her ten French words. My diary from the third grade records the progress of our lessons.

Today, I talked about the BYm in Espaiiol. Lupi learned to say "Dis lovre thert groefparence: The rose is so lovely my prince." Rick so likes Andrea. . . .

I read in the paper a couple of years ago that Lupita went to Cannes with an orchestra. I hope she found a teacher better than me, or she probably got cussed out by a romantic Frenchman. But at least she wouldn't understand a word he said.

Towards the end of the third grade, other people at the school began to take an interest in Lupita. Before this time the pairing of her name with a Childers had given her the stigma necessary for people to not notice her three thousand

dollar dresses and ability to quote Shakespeare at a moment's notice. I was being raised Pentecostal, a denomination frowned upon at my school. But this year Lupita's parents had decided to give the school a generous donation (Lupita said her parents told her that people would hate her if she told how much). The teachers suddenly woke up and took notice of her, also treating me a little better for a while, even though in contrast I wore clothes my Granny had made for my sisters six years before, and was at the "I like to read books with the funny covers" stage. From pieces of small town gossip and the pasting together of images of those days I realize the donation had been given basically as hush money to keep the family in the well-reputed private school after her brother Gilberto had been seen hanging out with the boy thrown out the year before for a pot selling racket.

Lupita decided to cement her new fame with a big birthday party in the third grade at her mansion. While the "girls only" slumber party portion of the evening was cut short after a calling parent discovered we were without supervision, the first part of the night with our whole twenty-member class present succeeded somewhat. It took me years to quit pretending to get mad and saying "those crazy boys" when I thought about that night, but in all honesty it was the closest I had knowingly been to a school scandal when two particularly mischievous guys took off their sweaters, revealing white undershirts underneath, and sang "Surfing USA" (we were taught only to sing h y m n s) at the top of their lungs while standing in the middle of the marble kitchen table and pretending to surf. Now, I feel guilty about my Christian

school-clogged judgment that these two would grow up to become hoodlums; one is currently enrolled in a Seminary, and the other has gone on to be a drug salesman.

After the party, everyone couldn't stop talking about the grandness of her house, or the "pagan" statues of saints hanging from every wall and placed in every corner of all rooms, including the pantry. Lupita began to get invited to do other things on the weekend besides play princess with me, including going to shop and to hear sermons about hellfire for idol worship at the other girls' Baptist churches. My family became even more stigmatized when the other mothers began to realize they had let me go to her house all those years, and taught me not to think twice about loving the Lopez family, Catholicism and all.

In the fourth grade, I stayed home sick one day and Lupita wandered into one of the high school classes out of boredom. The school building held all grades: Kindergarten through twelfth. When the seventy-five year old senior English teacher noticed that Lupita spent her free day (Wednesday, because ballet was so often cancelled) reading the classics and had actually already read the complete Spanish version of *Les Miserables*, word spread of her brilliance quickly. She had been getting straight As since Kindergarten-but so had I, so the faculty had nothing to rave about until then. She started to get invited to teachers' houses and functions put together for high schoolers, and I accompanied her to all of them. She never considered me a tag-a-long, so neither did I. It did not become obvious that the faculty did not want me at these events until one day a teacher came by our classroom

and said she wanted to take a picture for the yearbook. She pointed at the table where Lupita and I sat. We both giggled excitedly all the way to the hallway and put our arms together and smiled. The teacher's assistant then said, "No, we just wanted the picture of Lupita. Girl with stringy brown hair, get out of the picture. Honey," she looked down at me, "you've got to learn to hang around people who are like you."

The next year my four hour phone conversations with Lupita were cut considerably shorter because of her having to completely memorize her textbook word by word "to help her get into medical school." Also, because of added horseback riding, and cotillion lessons on Fridays we could share gossip and pretend to be jilted lovers only on Saturday afternoons, after her Mass. I began to lose my pull when it came to telling her to just blow off whatever idol worship condemnation teachers threw her way, and one day during a math lesson, they won, if only temporarily.

The year before, Lupita had somehow avoided our teacher, the former missionary to the Catholics of Nova Scotia, Miss Davis. But while our current teacher explained $3+x$ to the class' Miss Davis knocked on our classroom door and called Lupita into the hallway. After she had been gone for over an hour I got curious, and asked to go to the bathroom. My teacher turned me down, even though others around me were permitted to go. About two hours later, Miss Davis came into the room followed by Lupita, whose face was swollen from crying.

"Meet a new child of God!" Miss Davis proudly announced into the room.

"I thought you were already a child of God," I whispered as Lupita took her seat.

"I have been blind," she said dramatically, "I now must witness to my family."

Lupita came back the next day saying her parents were going to send her to St. Joseph, the nearby Catholic School. I imagine the reasons weren't only to get her out of the school, but to also be separated from me, her non-Catholic best friend. She was very upset; frightened about being surrounded by the "heathenship" she had just been converted from. In an attempt to change her parents' minds, we did what we could to try to prove she was Catholic again, and that I was too. On the rare occasion that I got to go to her house, we would make a grand show of kneeling on the prayer couch in front of a Mary statue and sitting and reading the Apocrypha by candlelight.

At school, it hurt me to see Lupita turning into one of the people we had so carefully avoided. She put a Baptist hellfire pamphlet in my desk once, as many other students had done. When writing a letter to someone in the school for an assignment in English class one day - I wrote mine to her, and she wrote a thank you note to Miss Davis for showing her the light.

In May of that year the most popular girl in my class, Faye, had a slumber party. I remember the month because I

had been going to school with these same people for six years and had been to every birthday party. But this year only six of the eight girls in our class were invited. I wasn't and neither was Denise - the girl with one black and one white parent who lived in a trailer in the same part of town as me. We were left out, until of course, we got the phone call from Faye's mother the night before: she and Faye had made an invitation for every girl in the class, but just that day, two invitations came back in their mailbox! Denise and I both knew the pink cards were hand delivered with a sucker and a smile by Faye during snack break two weeks before, but we pretended we believed it and showed up at the party the next day.

Lupita greeted me at the door and told me how happy she was to see me there, and how bored she would have been without me. All of us girls danced in our bras to Britney Spears when we were without supervision. I thought back to the undershirt performance of "Surfing USA" and justified the sinful behavior. A couple hours later, after food and presents, Denise and I were asked by Faye's cousin to help her make treat bags for everyone. We did this happily; unaware we were missing out on hours of prime gossip time, probably about us.

By four in the morning Faye's best friend had fallen asleep in Faye's bed upstairs. She was the mediator, the one who always said, "Girls, girls, God wants us to all be friends." I never liked her. Denise, my fellow reject, had her eyes glued to the TV in the playroom. Everyone else wandered around bored, looking for something to do. I don't remember

who or what started the fight, but I remember being pushed into the drab guest bedroom, the one Faye had said her great-grandfather had died in two weeks before, and told me I couldn't come out until I wasn't mad anymore. The wrinkled sheets and dried up coffee cup started my sense of dread. And then I heard a harmonica. Thinking back, it must have been coming from the TV, where Denise sat, trying to find something for a kid to watch during late night programming, but at the time I thought of the spitty saxophone and the painful panty rocket assault. I burst out of the death room screaming.

I saw Lupita sitting in a chair on one side of the door, a Faye wannabe sitting on the other side.

"We are guarding the door, so you don't come out," the wannabe said.

"Rebecca, you still look mad," said Lupita accusingly.

"You're not better than me," I said, "why do I have to sit in a room, when you guys are mad at me too."

"Faye said you want to ruin our fun," the wannabe responded.

My gaze stayed on my best friend. She said, "Rebecca, we will have to call the soldiers on you if you don't go back into the room."

"The soldiers?"

"The soldiers. This is Faye's party so she's the Queen, and she says she'll call the soldiers on you."

I don't remember what I said, but it must have made Lupita angry.

She knew our height difference well from our dancing days. So she jumped on my head from her chair. I ran backwards trying to knock her off by smashing her into walls. She fell to the ground. Then she began to bite my ankle. I put my hands on her head and jerked her mouth away from my leg and hit her in the arm. She hit me in the stomach. I hit her in the stomach. She pulled my hair. I pulled hers.

We had never been the fighting type. We had always just quit talking to each other when we disagreed, and then we had a make-up script when we weren't mad anymore:

"I love you, I'm sorry, you're my bestfriend."

"Me too, you're my best friend."

"It was my fault."

"No, it was my fault."

"No, it was my fault."

We had kept trading this phrase back and forth until somebody got sick of it. We traded punches now. Finally, Lupita broke away and ran to the kitchen. She grabbed Faye's mom's apple chopping knife from the countertop. I knew what it was because between Lupita's clenched fingertips I

could see the handle, its red plastic and fake seeds. She chased me, screaming "I am gonna kill you, you're ugly, and poor, and you aren't a Baptist." I had been running as fast as my chicken legs would carry me, but when she said this I turned around and stared. This caught her off guard and she banged into a table and dropped the knife.

I ran to the phone, but she got there first and called her parents. She talked in Spanish for a minute, then she hung up and started crying. By this time two Faye wannabes, a Lupita wannabe, and Faye herself thought it safe enough to approach us. Lupita said, "They said everyone would hate me now, I have tried to kill someone. I am going to St. Joseph next year to be forgiven and forgotten."

Everyone started yelling at me. "Why don't you leave, it's your fault. You weren't even supposed to come here!"

They were so caught up in their blaming, they didn't notice when I went to the grandfather's room and cried the rest of the night, using the death sheets as a tissue.

2nd Place

Flips

Whitney Thomas

"Have you ever thought about being a lifeguard?" someone asks. With this question, I feel the walls of my stomach collapse into each other, forming a kind of vast, heavy, horrible ball of nerves. I get queasy. I feel my heart speed.

"No, not me," I finally sigh, "I'll never be a lifeguard. Couldn't do it."

"But you're such a good swimmer! Why not?"

"I-Just----can't," I say, cutting them off.

And that's the end of that.

Firstyear Junior Girl Scouts. Ten years old.

My mom is our Scout leader and Connie, my good friend Rachel's mom, is her assistant. One day we are doing crafts. We have just finished our lesson when Mom brings out the pompoms, googly eyes, and tacky glue. On craft night we are allowed to make anything we want. I hurriedly grab some fluffy, massive pompoms and a few of the smaller

ones. I find a large eye, and a small eye, place them against my puffs, and decide I don't like the idea of two different-sized eyes. I pick up two large ones instead, am satisfied, and then begin to think about what I want to make. I think about mice and kittens and dogs. I go to work, unsure yet of what I'm about to make, and slowly and steadily begin to piece together some sort of creation. I work and work. Soon, I realize the tacky glue is all over my fingers, drying them together.

Mess. I think. Then my mom speaks, and I have to pay attention.

"Okay, girls, we can finish our pompom creatures after discussion. Form a line, get your snacks, and then settle down. We have a lot to discuss today. Like the big trip next week...." She teases us with "like the big trip next week." She wants to get us excited, and she wants to get our attention.

The method works; all eleven girls are listening intently, except for the Brownie Scout sisters Marlena and Marissa, who are still fiddling with their pompom masterpieces. Marlena is a good four years younger than me, and her sister a year younger or so than her, so I know their attention span is not as good as mine. I beam in my ability to pay attention.

Oh, snacks. I think. *I hope it's those vanilla sandwich cookies with the icing in the middle. Or the flaky wifer things that come in vanilla, chocolate, and strawberry, all crumbly and delicious!*

Yum! And the jug of blue snow cone flavored juice! I hope we have that! I like the red kind, too, though.

I get in line and it's sandwich cookies and red drink. I forget my napkin and have to go back to the line. During this second trip, my mom says:

"Okay, girls, sit down now. We've got some business to attend to," and, after a brief period of time, all of the Scouts settle in their seats and are at least somewhat paying attention. My mother then tells us that this coming Friday we'll be going to Ogelbay for one of our outings. She tells us that we will be hiking, cooking, and swimming.

"We're going swimming?" Marlena asks excitedly.

"Yes, dear, of course," is my mother's reply.

"Swimming, swimming, swimming!" Marlena and Marissa yell, kicking their legs underneath the table, as if trying to keep afloat.

"I'm glad you're excited, girls, but we have to talk about this some more."

And they eventually settle down again and listen.

We arrive at Ogelbay at five or so in the afternoon and are assigned our sleeping rooms. I'm with my good friends Danielle and Rachel, also Junior Scouts. Evening turns into

night, and we have a meeting in the living room around the fireplace.

"Early to bed tonight, girls," my mom says, "We're going swimming early tomorrow," the room breaks into cheers. We eat dinner-hot dogs and corn chips-and then it's to bed.

"Bed, Girls!" Connie says.

I get to my feet and shuffle in my socks across the slippery, hard tile floor... fie...fie...fie...fie.... (Even now, I still don't pick my feet up when I walk.)

And then I lie down and rest.

All eleven of us wake early the next day, eager to get our outing started. We are all extremely excited about swimming. I'm glad that I'm going to be able to show off my new swim team skills as well as show off my new Marshall County Sharks bathing suit. Everyone gets ready and then we make a line (of sorts) with my mom leading and Connie bringing up the caboose. Most of us are jittering impatiently to each other, talking about how much we want to swim. We walk down the path and very soon the indoor pool comes into vision. My mom opens up the double doors into the building and we hurry inside. Each of us picks out a table and removes our outer clothes. I am off to the side, frantically searching through the swim bag I brought. Gigi, another Junior Scout's mom, made one of these bags for both my brother and myself-mine is maroon with big pink paint letters stamped

on it spelling my name, with another stamp of a grey cat in the corner. My brother's is blue.

I dig through the fathoms of the bag, feeling around for the prize I search for. I touch the towel, and pull it out knowing I will soon need it as well. I feel my L'Oreal Kids fish-shaped shampoo bottle, smelling of tangerines and "guaranteed to eliminate tangles and wash out chlorine," and then...I find it! I feel a rubbery band and then a hard, misshapen plastic half-sphere.

Goggles! I think to myself. I then remove my outer clothes, shove them into the bag, and attach the band of the goggles around the back of my head, just under my long, thick brown ponytail. I am about to turn and get into the pool when I remember that I want to cover my fat legs, and so I hastily grab my Lipton towel, (something my parents had won with proofs of purchase), wrap it around my waist, and trudge over to the pool's stairs.

I do not hesitate for a minute. I take one step forward down the stairs and feel it-water. Warm, inviting. Much warmer than I expect. I always anticipate a cooler water that's more unpleasant than pleasant, only appreciated once you're pruney from adjustment, but this water is different-this is GOOD water. I immediately dive under the surface and, like usual, begin to pretend I am a mermaid.

Dolphin kick. Dolphin kick. Dolphin kick. Push the water back, dolphin kick. ...

Kayla and Lisa, a Junior-Scout/Brownie-Scout sister combo, are a few arms' lengths away from me in the water, doing flips. I know I can do more than they can in a row, and so I, of course, join them.

"I can do three in a row!" Lisa exclaims, her voice a dare.

"Oh, I can do four!" I boast, and take in a deep breath, resuctioning my goggles to my face.

One... Two... spin your arms, spin... three... one more... hold your breath... four!

And then... *asp!* I take in all the air I'd missed. Lisa and Kayla raise their eyebrows shortly, and then give me a slight applause. By now, little Brownie Marlina has noticed the commotion, and has realized what I have just done.

"I want to do that! I want to do that!" She demands. "Teach me, teach me!"

Kayla and I reluctantly agree to teach her flips, while Lisa makes her way out of the pool for mini-pretzels. Marlina learns how to flip, and is completely preoccupied with her new discovery. Kayla and I, bored, leave her to her flips.

A good while later Kayla realizes something is missing. "Where's Marlina?"

"Last I checked she was still doing flips near the wall over there," I answer.

My mom overhears this and with some kind of divine motherly instinct goes into hawk-mode. She frantically scans the decks of the pool, looks around and around, checks near the tables, and glances under the surface of the pool. Other Scouts start searching now, some out of curiosity, some out of concern.

"Under the water...oh my God! She's under the water!" Someone shrieks.

And then: "I don't think she's moving!" from a frantic other.

And finally my mom screaming at the top of her lungs: "My God! Whitney! Get her out of there! PULL HER OUT OF THERE!"

I don't worry about fixing my goggles back over my eyes. I freestyle fast towards Marlina's body. I dive under the water, opening my eyes underwater, unprotected for the very first time in my life. First, I'm concerned because the chlorine bums. I close my eyes tightly, locking out the disgusting water, but then I remember what I was told to do. I open my eyes, try to focus. Marlina is bent into a motionless cannonball floating unmoving in the chest-high water. I place one hand behind her neck and the other under her knees. I lift. She is dead weight, even under the water, and when I finally lift her above the surface she's too heavy.

"Help me...!" I whisper.

Time freezes. I can't really hold her. I watch my mom and Connie race to aid me. Connie, usually tan in the face, is white as a ghost, and my mom, usually fairly composed, has quarter-sized pupils. Someone throws a towel down on the concrete around the pool and my mother and Connie gently but quickly yank Marlana out of the water and then lower her to the floor.

All the Brownie and Junior scouts are watching.

Watching, as hell breaks loose. Watching.

CPR. Mouth to mouth. Breathe, breathe, push, push, gasp, heave, breathe, push, push.

CPR. CPR.

She is so tiny.

Breathe, push, breathe.

"CONNIE CALL AN AMBULANCE!" My mother heaves. Connie springs to her feet, disappears out of sight.

She's dying. She's dying. She's dying. I think. Why did I have to teach herflips?!

Breathe, push, breathe, push, push, push....

"Ambulance on its way!" Finally.... Water spurts from Marlana's mouth. She's coughing.

She's alive!

An ambulance takes Marlana away. My mom follows the ambulance in her van. The other scouts and I are left with Connie.

We leave the pool. We sit on the cold tile floor of the cabin. We stare blankly at the walls, the ceiling, out the window, at the fireplace; rarely at each other. I'm lost in thought.

Oh my God. My God, my God. I pulled her out. Pulled out. Pulled her out. Flips. Flips. I killed her! Why did I have to teach her flips?!

Slam. Ten Brownies, plus an adult, jump. My mom reddens, apologizing for slamming the door. Our eyes are dinner plates.

"She's going to be okay, girls," my mom breathes. The dense, haunting tension that had been lingering in the room lifts. "But we still need to talk about today."

An extremely long, uncomfortable pause. Shuffles. Chair sounds. Rustles.

My mom takes in a deep breath, "Although most of your parents may not like this, you all need to understand what happened today," my mother begins. She pauses again. I wonder what she must be thinking. She is our Scout leader, after all. "Marlana almost drowned today, and that means from here on out, we have to be careful about watching each

other. This is no light matter. She's going to be fine, and I know it's scary." I'm sure my mom is struggling for words.

Later, my mom pulls me off to the side. "Whitney," she says, "I'm going to tell you something I didn't tell the other girls." Her expression is grave. She sighs. "The doctors told me that if Marlena would have swallowed as little as a spoonful more of water that she could have died. Her lungs were almost completely full of water. She would have died." My mother is white and staring off at something distant. This is the last time we ever mention what happened.

I have nothing to say. I stare blankly at my black and white diddy-bops, not moving. I think about what happened. I was scared. I could not believe it.

And I do not forget it.

Last weekend I went home to watch my brother walk into his junior prom. I was minding my own business, not really paying attention to who was lining up to walk in, but then I noticed Marlena's sister Marissa.

You've got to be kidding me! I whisper to myself. I had known Marlena was in Kenny's grade, but it hadn't clicked. I look around some more. *Yes, there is her mother; my, she has aged.* I let my eyes dart about the crowd near Marissa. Standing behind Marissa is Marlena, as skinny and tiny as I can remember. There she is-grown up, glittering, proud-and alive. She lived to see her junior prom! The flips almost

killed her, but there she is, plain as day, wearing a cerulean dress that reflects like the pool of water I remember so well.

Looking back, I understand now what I learned that day. I know now that life is no light matter, and that serious accidents cause serious consequences. I learned later that Marlena had been doing the flips we taught her how to do, and had somehow managed to hit her head - hard - against the side of the pool. She had been knocked unconscious, mid-flip, in a cannonball squeeze, and left stationary to inhale chlorine. To drown.

This was no light lesson for a ten-year-old. I had been responsible for her accident. I was the one who taught her. I still feel **guilty** for choosing to teach her flips when she was so much younger than me. I had no idea what could happen. And I regret it.

Understand why I can never be a lifeguard? I cannot imagine reliving that horrific day over and over again every day of my life, even if I do save lives. No, I've already saved one life from drowning, and that is far more than enough.

One rescue is enough to last a lifetime.

3rd Place

Two Sides of a Buffalo Nickel

Erin Waggoner

In the year 1983, several things happened in America. The space shuttle *Challenger* made a successful flight, indicating the United States' first space walk in nine years; on this craft was Sally Ride, the first woman astronaut to launch into space. Sunny's Halo won the Kentucky Derby. Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* won the Pulitzer Prize for fiction. With noise-free compact discs in rotation, vinyls were a thing of the past. With his *Torch Song Trilobyte*, Harvey Fierstein won a Tony for best play, accepting gay theatre into the mainstream. Dramatist Tennessee Williams died, the global phenomenon El Nino was disrupting weather patterns, and Motorola was authorized by the FCC to start testing cellular phone service. These were all important parts in the history of that year, and would also play an important part in the next twenty-plus years of my life, which started that same year on the first day of spring.

Growing up a poor Southern woman is anything but fancy but it wasn't the worst upbringing, either. Half the time, I never knew if I was coming or going, and honestly, I still feel that way at times. My parents never graduated college, so my dad was working odd jobs, trying to find his niche, and my mother brought home the daily gossip from the salon she

worked at as a hairdresser. When I was born, they were living in a one-bedroom house that was almost the size of my first apartment (in other words, we were a can of anchovies personified). Obviously, I don't remember much about that point in time but it's good to know I started with humble roots. I suppose that's where my story really starts: in the ghetto of a Kentucky town bordering the Ohio River.

After day care, I would ride on a lawn chair (that was bolstered with rubber bungee cords) in the back of my father's potato chip truck, while he finished delivering his round of chips and candy. Sometimes, when he was making his deliveries, I would sneak a Reese's into my mouth before he returned to the truck. If he knew, he never said anything.

There is a huge difference between children that are bad, and children that are busy. Children that are busy are often misinterpreted as bad kids. I was one of them. Just like any healthy kid, I was curious and always had to keep moving, doing something. I'm still like that today, even though my mellowed attitude can attest to seeing more than a kid my age should have seen, or experienced.

We moved into an apartment atop my mother's work, and we lived in the heart of the downtown area (which oversees the stage set up for the annual Rosemary Clooney festival now). At that time, production on the hill wasn't booming, so downtown was still the place to go if you needed something. I don't remember the first time I stepped foot into a **Wal-Mart** but during those days, Sam's store wasn't **available** to shoppers looking for a penny to save, and we

were definitely saving every penny possible. I do remember that my mother loved the store, and that some of the clerks knew her by name because of the three checks she would write there a day. After I finished kindergarten and my sister was born, we moved into our first house, which was right next to Cargill (a fertilizer company, I think; never actually knew what went on there). In my little pigtails and wide smile, I began to make friends with the neighborhood kids.

In fall, I had to start school at the county because the small, ghetto suburb wasn't in the city's limits. I did well at school, was great at spelling. My first grade teacher was a wonderful woman, and even though I wasn't that concerned with learning, I did fit in quickly with the other students. I started Brownies (I didn't get to be a Daisy), and stayed a Girl Scout on through high school, completing my stint (even though the other girls were the rich kids, and my tomboyish personality weren't acceptable to girly-girls). My leader was also a wonderful woman, and she was the reason I stuck with it so long, even well after our mean, adolescent years. I just didn't fit in with the group but I stuck it out because I was expected to be a mature adult even when I was two.

All I remember doing when I was a kid was cry; every time somebody yelled at me, or got on me for the most mundane thing, I would cry...but there was a catch. I would get yelled at for crying, so I would hold back the tears until I could excuse myself (like a proper adult at two), and find a dark room to let out my emotions. Mom and Dad never were too perceptive of things (or so it seemed) but at least they acknowledge the fact that I was treated unfairly as a child by

I11

I11

my paternal grandparents, aunts, and uncles. I never quite understood why I was the kid that had to be the adult. My sister was always loved on, and my cousins were praised but I was the kid that sat in the corner and just wished I could receive love and praise.

In retrospect, the most daunting memory I have of those early years was a debate on where I would sit. It was during the holiday seasons, and the family was gathered to eat a feast of ham, turkey, stuffing, yams, and all the good things that come with Southern food (even if we were bordering the North). I was sitting on the floor in the living room with my plate, trying to enjoy my slow-cooked green beans, when somebody came in and told me to sit on the couch like a normal person before he or she left the room (I can't remember the people involved in the incident). Well, I was scared of getting in trouble (like I always seemed to be), so I hopped up on the couch next to the adults.

"What are you doing on the couch? Let the older people sit there," somebody else said. Then, that person left the room, and the other person returned, yelling at me for still being on the floor. After a few more bouts of dinner teeter-totter, I gave up, and just couldn't enjoy my meal. I always looked forward to those holiday feasts but since then, I just couldn't get into the spirit. If we gathered together for holiday or birthdays, I would usually go into another room, or sit outside, despite the fact there was snow on the ground.

All of my grandparents were raised in Appalachia, so my family is purebred Appalachian. My paternal grandmother

was a Hatfield (of the infamous Hatfield/McCoy feud), and Papaw was bred like any other Appalachian boy. Even though their marriage didn't work, he used to say: "I told her I couldn't live with her; I never said I didn't love her."

My maternal grandparents were a different story. Mom's father died when she was a sophomore in high school, so I never had the chance to meet him. From the stories that people tell, he was a great man and extremely handsome. I always took it as a compliment when people would say I looked like him...then, I would remember I was a little girl. Girls weren't supposed to look like boys. My gender confusion is a different story altogether, though.

Granny never remarried, and continued living on the farm they kept until her death my sophomore year of high school. The funniest bit of information on her? She could pass for the Quaker Oats man, and her children reminded her of that quite often. My mother says that she and my aunt (two years older) hated that farm, and they would often get in trouble doing silly things (much like me and my little sister). They still laugh about the time they put butter on their slippers, and ice-skated around the carpet. Unfortunately, they were caught and got the patented "silent treatment." My mother does the same thing when she gets angry, and let me just say for the record: take it from somebody who has experienced both, the silent treatment is worse than being lashed with your dad's belt. It still bothers me to this day when she does that because she won't talk to anybody in the house when *one* person does something wrong, and since my

younger sister is on a rebellious kick at the moment, it's happened quite a bit.

That's when I saw a pattern.

My mother and father were raised so differently, and they combined their efforts to raise me. I was the first child, the test subject, and they represent two sides of a buffalo nickel. One side (my mother) is the calm buffalo; she represents the quiet, nonviolent way of raising a child, grazing the pastures with the other buffalo. However, my father is the Indian; he takes his violent childhood into the field, and yelling is his chanting. Don't misunderstand me; he is *not* a violent man (he's actually a bit of a crybaby). We were not abused children but his quick, hot temper sometimes made him act before thinking. He is the chief overlooking his tribe, and doing what needs to be done in order to protect his land.

Since children study their parents with such interest, it is no surprise that they use the same model of parenting. My father tells stories of when he was in trouble, and the many ways that my grandmother would punish him. One that I find amusing (although, he surely didn't at the time) is when she tied him to a clothesline in their backyard. He claims to have been an ornery child, which is where I get my ornery streak from, and my unborn children will adapt this same temperament from me. These life lessons go from generation to generation, and will continue well into the new millennium. When my father gets mad, he yells, and when my mother gets angry, she gets quiet. So, where does that leave me when I become a parent? Is it possible to be both

sides of a buffalo nickel at once? I've always had a pacifistic point-of-view, and tend to make love, not war but I wasn't always that way. When I was younger, I was so curious that I took my sister's cat, filled up a plastic trashcan with gasoline, and trapped the cat beneath it. The poor critter was stuck under there for days in the side yard, and it's a wonder that it was still living when my father found it. He said that it was the hardest bath he ever gave. Since then, I've had a cat curse (and rightly so); every cat we've had since then has either died or ran away. Recently, my father stepped on the runt of kittens my sister brought home, and it died a few days later. We've tried time and time again but with the same results.

Family reunions are interesting. My father's side doesn't have them anymore but when we did, the family would gather on my grandmother's side on one of her sisters' farms. The family had names like Leona (Granny), Orpha, Juanita, and Harry: great Appalachian forenames. There never was a family reunion for my grandfather's side because his family got the hell out of Kentucky, and never looked back; there were scattered in all four corners of the country, some in the middle. These reunions at the farm were boring to a kid that was expected to be an adult: not being able to run around with the other kids, yet not really allowed in the adults' inner circle. The great uncles would take the kids to see their pigs (which was the highlight of the day), while the adults argued over football or cooking. I don't really hold good memories from those days. However, my grandmother's Jam cake is still unbeatable (God rest her soul, I'm keeping the cake), and well worth the trip.

My mother's side is *still* all about family. Even though we lived in the same area as my father's family, we saw more of my mother's than his. Aunts, uncles, cousins...they would come back from wherever they migrated, either to the "holler" or the farm. Both of my maternal grandparents were raised in the rolling hills of Elliot County, and there are family cemeteries that hold the legacies of family members past. As a matter of fact, one such cemetery is in the "holler," complete with a bonafide caving log house and outhouse with moon, stars, and years of impious perfume. Where the paved road stops, the gravel road ends, and the dirt road ceases to exist, the holler was a good time for anybody looking for people that knew how to cook. These were the people that Southern hospitality was named for, and they never let you down. Pickled corn (yuck!), chicken and dumplings, country fried chicken, all the fixin's, every vegetable a person could think of, a large variety of homemade pies, cobblers, and Uncle Raymond's fried apple pies and stack cakes (yum!). Yes, ma'am, this would make any person say "ya'll" any day of the week. The men would play horseshoes, while the women gossiped about their respective families, making sure to update on each other until the next get together. These good-hearted folk sported old-fashioned names like Alfreda, Alletha, Clell, and Betty Pinerva (okay, so that wasn't really my grandma's middle name; I just made it up as a kid, and it stuck). At least the mantra "Erin is a baby, oh yeah" has been passed on to the younger children. My Uncle Rob pegged that traditional tune, and Paige (his young daughter) is currently the baby. Oh, yeah.

The funniest part of these reunions was the tables. Since we were all in the middle of nowhere (literally), there were no tables, so these country bumpkins improvised. They took a couple of two by fours, and supported them between headstones. Yes, we ate on our dead ancestors' graves. Thankfully, somebody thought up the bright idea to build a shelter, especially since the rain seemed to enjoy making an appearance at most reunions. Who knew I was related to falling water? I always liked to think that it was the tears of old ancestors that weren't allowed to taste Uncle Raymond's fried apple pies anymore. That would certainly make *me* cry.

With all these experiences behind me, and many more to come, time can only tell what will happen with my growing family. My older cousins have children of their own, and my sister and I are in prime ages for children ourselves. Most of the family have stayed in the area but some have moved away, including myself. It's not that I want to forget my Appalachian heritage. Quite the opposite really, since I know I'll keep coming back for fried pies, good laughs, and great people, even though I may perceive my childhood unpleasant as a whole. It is just time for me to move on and embark on new journeys, starting my own branch in the family tree, and telling the tales of my Kentucky birth rites. With me embarking on a career and my sister just getting started, we both show signs of taking both sides of that buffalo nickel, and sharing the wealth that our parents invested in us.

Honorable Mention

He(a)rd Writing

Erin Waggoner

Writing is more than an expression of self; it is also an expression of others. When others read what we write, they take their own experiences and self into the equation and tie our writing into their own lives. We write emotions: our own emotions, the emotions of others. In order to write, inspiration has to come from somewhere. Be it a couple arguing in the street, a dog peeing on a hydrant, or an intense melancholy at a family member's funeral. Others understand emotions mostly because they have experienced themselves what it feels like to question sexuality, cry over a breakup, and be apathetic when something calls for complete attention.

In this sense, writers are a herd. We write emotions, even in genres that wouldn't normally be considered emotional. One wouldn't be biting fingernails if they didn't feel the intensity of wondering what happens next in a thriller, hiding under pillows if the sight of blood sloshing wasn't disturbing, or even crying when a main character dies. Writers know this, even bad writers (if such a thing even exists); one element a story almost never forgets is the action itself. We are a group obsessed with the human experience.

When composing, be it poetry or prose, our inspiration drives our muse and we take different things from the same experience. Seeing a couple fighting on the street, one person will focus on the facial and body expressions, another will focus on the actual dialogue, while yet another focuses on the lookers on. From this, diverse stories come from the same event.

People-watching is a favorite pastime for writers; it's where a lot of stories stem. Examining everything, much like a scientist, is something writers use to knock off writer's block. We don't just write what's happened to us but rather what we've heard from others, be they familiar people or strangers. Below I have composited a list (much in the style of Jack Kerouac's "Essentials of Spontaneous Prose") that are important to writing in this he(a)rd mentality:

Find: Writers work 24/7. Inspiration can come at any time; through dreams, observations, personal experiences, and more. Reading billboards while driving down a highway, scanning the ingredients on a cereal box at breakfast, even doodling on a napkin or notepad. Our minds are always active, and a writer's most important tool is the mind and senses (or lack of).

Observe: Your surroundings, not just the physical attributes of the setting or place but the people, the expressions, the words and phrases, the accents, body

movements. Much like a cell under a biologist's microscope, the writer examines details that passers-by might miss.

Method: Carry a notebook or pocket-sized memo pad, it's useful for jotting down those random spurts of prose, poetry, and observation. Plus, it helps keep things fresh for later, in case we forget that exact perfect word that we'd heard earlier.

Afterthought: Just observing something isn't going to give you everything. Sometimes, you can pull out spontaneous prose/poetry immediately after an event. Sometimes, in order to perfect the piece, a writer lets the experience fester until s/he understands or feels more confident about it, just like in real life.

Now and Later: Not everything viewed at a specific time will be helpful with what you're writing. However, you shouldn't dismiss what you've observed just because it doesn't work in your current composition. This is where the notebook comes in handy, even abandoned pieces from the past. It just means you aren't meant to write about that now...but what about later?

Perfection: When writing initially, don't worry so much about grammar and the perfect word but about the content and what you mean to say. You can always go back to revamp a piece later. Some writers don't like to disrespect their muse by revising or editing (and there is a difference between the two). However, close-reading your own work to find the perfect word, the perfect sentence structure, even the perfect name sometimes helps writers feel more confident in their writing. Whatever works for you, go with your gut but don't dismiss the other method; even Jack Kerouac and Allen Ginsberg revised their "written in one sitting" works. Just because they wrote something in one sitting didn't mean it was finished.

Et Cetera Picks Ramp Pudding Poetry and Cornbread Cake Fiction

This Is the Poem about Morning

Garret Shane Bryant

No ending. No punchline. This is the gunshot, the beginning.
The sun under covers, sparklers in the street.
From here it will happen, the light syrup is seeping over
hillsides.
Shake my head, bump my shoulder on the corner.
Lift the morning's palm to take its precious seconds.
Tum them into moments.

They happen and I'm here to take note.
To let them know they mattered. To tell them that the fact
that they happened,
though small, was something important.
A sun rose, clouds rolled, a garbage truck carried away
someone's yesterday.
Somewhere someone conceived a child, another buttered
toast,
someone told a story, someone tugged a shirttail, someone
died.
Fulfilled and with a finale, a satisfied glance up with their back
on the ground.
A period at the end of their sentence, the paragraphs that
were their days.

Unlike what this poem will have.

It will leave the room quietly, leaving the door ajar.
An uncomfortable little silence.
There will not be a moment. No "get-it?" sentence.
No pun or twist like the box office sleeper. No crescendo to
signal its arrival.
It will be without a look to the heavens, no breath will leave
lips.
It's before anything was begun and just a split of a second after
there was nothing.

It's a scribble on a napkin to a time unnoticed, past before it
could matter.
A nothing that needed our attentions,
just another drop of water left lying on the lake.
It will end with a weak thump.
A handful of clay on the cold, damp ground.
Spit on a sidewalk.
A wet towel on a linoleum bathroom floor.
Here it is.
Was.

Dear Florida

Mallory Markowicz

I called for you then, when hands circle,
Slowly - the rise and fall of hopeless hours where
Hope is often imagined - Like a sigh of resignation,
A body in a fresh grave, with aspirations of resurrection
that footsteps and age tread over.

You were my only witness, along with a closet light
that peered through the door ajar - Your words, bricks;
And my thoughts, mortar; together we built a monument
Unfit for prayer, only a standing memorial
To mock romances for years to come.

When you came back again, your feet knew the way
though, steps were timid. My breaths roll steady
with your song: *We sink, we drown,*
What's lost can never be found.
I reach for a hand that needed my grasp the most,
I pulled and I held close; a tired martyr -
Skin, cold to the touch and
In my head - Florida, sinking softly.

Untitled

Sarah Haught

One Glance. One Call. One Might.
Two Hugs. Two Kisses. Two Night.
Three Movies. Three Hours. Three Dates.
Four Get.. Four Weeks. Four-nicate.
Five Tests. Five Positives. Five Pounds.
Six Appointments. Six Doctors. Six Towns.
Seven Doughnuts. Seven-Eleven. Seven A.M.
Eight Inches. Eight Hours. Eight Medications.
Nine Relatives. Nine O'Clock. Nine Months.
Ten Fingers. Ten Toes. Ten Commandments.

I11

I11

ill

Eleven Pawnshops. Eleven Days. Eleven Attempts.
Twelve Candles. Twelve Carats. Twelve Guests.
Eleven Outfits. Eleven Booties. Eleven Bibs.
Ten Thousand. Ten Houses. Ten Bids.
Nine Rooms. Nine Shrubs. Nine-to-Five.
Eight Steps. Eight Tumbles. Eight Crie .
Seven Nightshifts. Seven Calls. Seven Sms.
Six Women. Sixth Street. Six Gins.
Five Boxes. Five Hundred. Five Years.
Four Moves. Four Jobs. Four Daycares.
Three Birthdays. Three Cards. Three Promises.

Two soon. Two Real. Two Forget.
One Divorce. One Child. One Parent.

au9ust ni9hts with Jack(s)

Aaron McVey

uttering words about whatever
the burlap glow of the citynight
stings away at a soul,
but who ever KNOWS?
the Whiskey. it hears with ears of
clear and soundwaves bouncing
ofbarscene beers

and no Entity of Reality will
ever know, but
mememe
the bumbling bee

let McVey tell you or you
tell me
on an August night in
a dilapidated dustysusty
stairwell
or hotel rooms or cigarette streets
outside outcast bars
(that don't like nobody!)

causein truth nobody likes them
BEEcause, McVey, hey, JA McVey
knows it
Ayy Ell Ell

let it be heard, observed
i have jumped in
muddy waters on a countless
cliffside night
and plucked the secrets from
refridgerated depths, microwaved depths,
bald roadworn tire depths

III

lal

(count the appliances the
might Guyandotte has accumulated)
and i had recognized the Truth
(inbetween green smokes and whiskey blokes)
yet Truth Schmooth causein
honest Truth is just for meeeee

and the bumble bee
has a different truth
all his own
and so
does
you

Peasants' Dance

Whitney Thomas

Dance, my cousins, rejoice and sing
To melody of pipe;
Forget the harvest, just be free,
And let your fear take flight.

Rhythm wound and ever feeding -
Music to Silent soul -
Breathe the notes, feel the beat,
And let your spirit roll.

Though naked feet do bleed from stone,
Let melody heal scars.
Keep excitement up and lifting,
'Till peasantry meets stars.

Let your spirit fly to freedom,
Extinguish mortal flames.
Be calm in all atrocities;
Cousins, enter the games.

Gallop, skip, and keep on dancing.
Duck your head, my brother!
Over, under, and out again,
Don't quit; here's another.

Kiss your maiden, sweet and sloppy,
Fill the chalice with wine;
Drink 'er up dry, drain the second,
Toast your cup to sublime!

Every noble watches from wealth
Our never-ending tale
That echoes our eternal dreams
The pride with which we wail.

Though we be poor and peasant beings,
We still enjoy the life,
That God has so bestowed on us
And canceled all our strife.

Keep them closed for we are One,
Keep the pace long set.
Tangled and tied; Father and Son -
Never should you forget

Look among and out at each face,
Memorize every line;
Reach out your hand, touch your cousin,
Feel friend - always benign.

Dance my cousins, rejoice and sing,
Glory be all around.
Blessing and all Supremacy,
Join the dance we have found.

poem w/ teeth

Charles Berger

i pray the prayer of 1000 other promiscuous
young men: please God don't let her be
pregnant

I pray the prayer of the damned

but I wish that you had been

& Huntington is full of festering sores:

sometimes we call them
people

sometimes I wish I were
someone else or
dying or
dead

don't
think I care much
which

The not-so-quite-adequate self walking
Adjacent to the wind
That she's smart almost a
Consolation prize

sometimes I almost love the smell of life

Whatever it is
& the death
& the dying that gives it
meaning

No prophylactic then

I Hemingway your face
My teeth & tongue & scalp
Against the wall behind me.

My Father Who

Wesley McClanahan

My father who listens before he speaks,
Who time and labor have hardened
 like the sculptor's chisel,
Who plays it safe and doesn't take chances,
And who sometimes dances when no one's around.

My father whom I love and am a little ashamed of,
 like a birthmark,
Who at night before he lays
Down to sleep prays,
Never making a sound.

My father who resists change
 like a creek-smoothed stone,
Who takes delight at the sight
Of a humming bird's flight,
But has never left the ground

My father who is poetry carved into a rock--
 a coal dusted philosopher stone,
Who I had never seen cry
'Til his own mother died,
And a single tear hit the ground.

Guilt

Mary Hill

Of condoning one another's behavior
Understanding the action
Wanting to console
Not knowing how.
Like awkward chess or sex with no flow
On the high wire
Incredible feat of falling
Looking for balance that is not contradictory
Past fears and phrases in my head
Modifying the tone
Changing the thoughts
With hope and action:
Small splendid moments of fearlessness.

In the bottom of a well
Sudden movement--
No more talking
Time is up.

We All Have Fleas

Sarah Jenkins

"All in," I said, sliding my pile of quarters, nickels, and dimes into the center of the table.

"Let's see 'em," Dave said.

I held my breath as I spread my cards down on the table, face up. Two queens and three nines.

Caleb looked over at me from across the table as he threw his cards face down onto the old wood slab and scowled at them.

"Dangit," he grumbled.

I grinned and collected my winnings as Dave whistled from his dealer seat.

"Looks like she's done it again, Caleb; you're almost out of meter change. Stella, how is it possible that you've beat Caleb three weeks in a row, and you're still friends?" Dave asked.

"Easy," I said, grinning at Caleb and collecting my winnings. "I let him sleep with me."

Hank laughed from the kitchen where he stood in the doorway on the phone with his girlfriend. She always called from work at the same time every Thursday night. Hank is competitive, and when he answered the phone one night a little too drunk and told her that she would have to part with her new puppy, we quickly learned the check-up calls were going to be a regular part.

"Hank, you almost done? Caleb's out, and we're gonna start the movie," Dave called out loudly, as he shuffled the cards. We weren't anywhere near done for the night, but someone had to get Hank off the phone.

"Okay, baby, I know. I know. I love you, too. I know. Okay. Love you. Bye." Hank shook his head and sighed as he hung up the phone and came back to the table.

I've known these guys since I was fifteen. They're all friends with my older brother Nick, and I used to sneak out with him to his poker nights. The first time I came was five years ago. Nick's been overseas for three. At first they tolerated me, *oh, okay, it's Nick's little sister*, but I figured out how to be when I'm around them.

"I'll sit this one out. You suckers need a chance to make some money," I said. I got up from the table and walked into the kitchen to get everyone another drink. I smiled to myself as I heard Caleb get up from the table, too.

"I'll sit this one out, too, boys," he said from the other side of the swinging door. I heard his heavy steps on the kitchen linoleum as I turned my back to open the fridge. I bit the inside of my lip as I felt him come up behind me, putting his arms around my waist and leaning on me. Caleb pulled me into him, and I acted like I was annoyed as he bit my ear.

"Come on, Stella, you have to give me a chance to win my pride back," he teased, grazing his lips across the back of my neck. I thought of Caleb's girlfriend; wondered why she trusted him.

I leaned into Caleb and grmned a lie that said *we really shouldn't* and turned around to hand him a beer as he let his hands slide around my waist. We walked out of the kitchen a few minutes later.

"So I said to the lady, if she wanted her steak medium-rare' she could cook it herself, because she told me, she had *told me*' that she wanted it rare. And then I threw her whole dinner on the floor and walked out," Dave was saying as he began to deal us back in for the new round.

"That's what you did?" Hank asked, bored.

"Well, no," Dave said. "But that's what I should have done. Jake said he had a guy like that once and -"

"Jake?" Hank interrupted, "Is that the guy from Al's party? He seemed pretty cool."

Dave glanced at me as he dealt the three flop cards. I noticed and raised my eyebrows impatiently.

"You know, we should ask him to play sometime," Dave said, betting a nickel. His eyes were down, staring at the middle of the table where his nickel landed.

"Was he the one with the Yankee's hat?" Caleb asked. He was studiously concentrating on his cards.

"No, he was the one with the hot girlfriend," Dave said.

"Oh. Oh, yeah. Okay. I remember him. Yeah, his girlfriend is hot. Plus he has that new Yamaha. I say we count him in," Caleb said.

As Dave dealt the turn card I noticed that they all looked at me, and then pretended that they didn't. I was surprised that it took the guys this long to replace my brother, and then I decided that this conversation had been for my benefit. They had already settled on bringing in *Jake*, and all I had to do to stop it was say no.

"I call, and I raise," I said. I flicked a dime on the table and told them that a fifth player would be a nice change of pace.

I met Jake the next Thursday at Hank's house. He was already there when I arrived, and he was leaning against the kitchen counter with a beer in his hand. He needed a haircut, and his tan was dark for fall. He looked too comfortable in someone else's house.

"You're Stella," he announced as I walked in.

"You're Jake," I announced back, walking past him.

He raised an eyebrow at my apparent lack of interest; and said, "It's nice to meet you. I hear you're the best player. Guess I'm gonna have to cheat."

I looked at him and shrugged. "You can cheat all you want. You still won't beat me."

I heard Caleb and Dave laugh from the living room, and Hank turned around so we couldn't see him smile. Jake stayed where he was, watching me as I walked over and put some chips in a bowl. I ignored him as I threw the bag of chips in the cabinet and got a beer from the pack. He still hadn't budged from his stance when I needed to reach around him, and didn't move till I said "Excuse me. I need some dip."

He grinned victoriously and slid over about three inches. His work boots sounded heavy on the floor, and the

laces clicked against the linoleum. I smelled his cologne mixed with smoke and sweat, and saw his smooth skin. "I bet you do," he said, and walked out of the kitchen.

I had to sit beside Jake at the table that night. His crispy white tee-shirt was tight on his brawny arms. I beat him twice, but we had to quit when Hank's girlfriend came home early. I was irritated at Jake's easy manner, and even more annoyed at his disregard for my input with matters that I'm usually consulted on first. The Lakers' bench points, why Dave's truck is making that noise, the best way to shoot a rubber band. The guys didn't seem to notice that I just stopped talking altogether during the last hand, and that topped it off. I picked up my jacket to head out the door with Caleb when Jake called my name. I turned around, but only long enough to let him see it in my eyes that I didn't *want* to turn around.

"Yeah?"

"Good game," he said.

I rolled my eyes as I watched Jake put his jacket on, getting his keys out of his pocket. His boxers peaked out of the top of his faded Levi's, and I let my eyes fall to the floor, but I stayed there, waiting on him. Caleb was already outside,

at the door of his muddy truck. I could see him from the dark hallway, through the screen door. Jake walked over to me as we silently made our way to the back of the house. He got in front of me and walked through the door first, barely letting his hand stay on it long enough for me to walk behind him. The cold November air hit us as we walked to our cars, and I smelled burning leaves, and heard the train running through town on the other side of the hill. I made a point not to meet Jake's eyes as he slowed his pace to stay beside me.

"So, Stella, what's up with you and Caleb?" he asked. He nodded his head to where Caleb was pulling out of Hank's driveway. I waved and smiled at him as he drove by.

"Not much," I replied.

"Really? I doubt that," he said, leaning against the hood of my car. I stood there with my hands in my pockets, looking at him.

"You can doubt it all you want. I don't really care," I said.

"I doubt that, too."

"Well, congratulations," I said. "Now move." I stepped to get in the car. Jake slid over a little, but he was still leaning against my Jeep, smiling as I shut the door. I glared at him through the dirty glass and reached into my empty pockets for

my car keys. I looked out at him as he laughed and shrugg_{gg}ed, and then he pulled something out of his jacket. I squinted in the darkness and cursed under my breath as I saw my keys dangling from his fingers. I sighed and opened the door. He stayed where he was.

"Give 'em to me."

"What's the magic word?"

"Jake -"

"Say it again."

"What?"

"Say my name again."

"No, give 'em to me," I said, but I grinned despite myself. He shrugg_{gg}ed and held out his hand, his palm open and my keys facing up. His grin was big, and goofy.

I reached out to snatch the keys but he was faster than me. He grabbed my hand and held on, not letting go as he pulled me out. I stood firm for a second, but just as I thought I could get out of his grip, he pulled me into him. I laughed before I remembered I was annoyed, and I stood there against him, looking at him. His eyes were sad with playfulness mixed in, and his mouth was serious, smiling with a solemn face. I realized I had stopped stru_{gg}ling. There was something in him

that seemed alone. I saw our reflections in the window beside me.

"You have a girlfriend," I accused.

"I know."

"Then let me go."

"I don't want to."

I have made guys cheat before, I'd been here before. It's genetics and tight tee-shirts, long blonde hair and a girl who can talk about the game and not care when guys walk out on her. That's what they like, I can read them all.

I never like myself when I do it. I always think of the other woman, at home, trusting; faithful. Women should know better. I pictured Jake's beautiful girlfriend waiting up for him in her pajamas, on the couch, and I leaned into him as he kissed me.

"I don' get it, Stella," Hank said, handing me the bottle.

"That's okay," I told him, reaching over for the Guinness.

"But you do this all the time. I don't know why you do it," Hank said.

"There's nothing to know," I replied.

We were silent for a moment, an unusual quiet that overcomes the chaos of close friends; a hush of things rare enough to be respected, but frequent enough to be necessarily overcome.

"Hey-you guys remember last July?" Dave interrupted. "When we had all those leftover fireworks and stuff?" He took a swig from his beer.

"Yeah. So?" asked Caleb. He was sitting on the ground the farthest away, and he wouldn't look at me. We were in the old Kroger parking lot, and it was getting cold. Probably two cars had passed since our watches read midnight.

"I was just thinking about when we had all those sparklers, and you could write stuff in the dark with them. I remember because that's when Stella was seein' that one guy, what's his, oh yeah, James, and he wrote "I Love You" in the sky with his sparklers, and then, Stella, you broke up with him, like, the next day. Do you all remember that? " Dave smiled, content with his narrative.

"I remember it," Caleb said. He looked at me, relentless. "Hey, Stella, you remember it?"

"I forgot it before the sparks had disappeared," I said, and took a loud drink.

Things went faster than I wanted, but not as fast as things I've done before. I woke up at Jake's apartment a week later. He had come to poker night again, and I couldn't resist. He had a way about him that made me want to just not be alone. He was like too many that way.

His girlfriend's name was L_yn_n. She lived with Jake, but was at home in Iowa for her sister's birthday. I stayed still between Jake's sheets as he talked to her on his cell phone. I had watched him as he stretched for it when it rang, staying in bed, but talking softly because he thought I was still asleep. It only takes a few whispered conversations before people know what goes on at the other side of the phone.

I listened to the heater kick on as he told her he had to work late that night. I was wearing his shirt, and I traced the outline of the cross tattoo on the back of his neck as he hung up. He turned over and looked at me. Then, suddenly, he said "Steamroll!" and rolled over top of me. I laughed as he caught a hold of my hand on his way off the bed and dragged me down to the floor with him. We laid there on the rug,

listening to the Friday morning street noise. He told me to lift up my head and I did. He slid his arm under me for a pillow. I looked over at him and felt sadness for Lynn, because I knew that if I was with Jake, she would feel abandoned.

"Babe, I'm telling you, I've only had a little bit to drink. No. *No*. Maybe. Okay, yes. Yeah, alright. Baby? I gotta go, okay? Okay. I know. / *know*. Love you, too. Bye, hon." Hank clicked his phone closed and put his hands over his face, slowly sliding them back down as he sighed.

"You done?" I asked, as I slid an opened beer his way.

"Yeah... Jake, your bet."

Jake looked at his cards, and I watched as he moved them in his hand, putting them in order. I looked at the guys around the table as they got their cards. I could read these boys blindfolded. Hank's the easiest. His hair isn't long, but he plays with it as he gets the card he's been waiting for. It took me a while to figure out Caleb. He always wears a Tar Heels hat, and when the best hand comes, he gently tips the bill of it, just enough so that it's out of his eyes. I realized he does this so he can look around the table, to see how everyone reacts to their own hand.

To make sure I was right about this, one night I squinted my eyes for three good hands in a row. Then, the last time, when he went all in, I didn't squint and took him for all he's worth. He stopped watching me then, but he doesn't know what I do. Dave is a fidgeter; constant leg-movement from him under the table, but if you really pay attention, they get faster when he's losing. It's a little early for Jake, but I know there will be a tell. Something he'll do when he doesn't even know it. Like play with the gold chain around his neck, the one that's got the promise ring from L_yn_n.

L_yn_n was a stylist at a hair salon on 23rd. I went in once to see her, when I was still cheating with Jake, a few weeks after she got back from Iowa. It was a cool Tuesday evening, and my presence in the shop was added only to the receptionist and Lynn, so I waited. The speakers overhead distracted me from staring at L_yn_n, something I caught myself doing. The receptionist answered her phone with her click-clack fingernails, and then the only noise was the heat and the dryer. When the lady in L_yn_n's chair left, I was instructed to go on back to the third chair against the wall.

I saw her, Jake's girlfriend, the girl he whispered to on the phone when he thought I was asleep, and she was beautiful. Her appearance was impeccable, and she had a kind smile. I

sat down and looked at Lynn in the mirror behind me as she asked me what I wanted done. I smiled and lied to her that I should just get it all chopped off; my cheating boyfriend liked it long. That had gotten her attention. Then I told her never mind, to just trim it, but she had stayed still, frozen with a comb in one hand and scissors in the other. "My boyfriend says things to me sometimes," she had said quietly. "He says that I'm beautiful. I know he's a liar. I lie to him sometimes' too, but it's not the same."

I had looked sad and understanding as she bit back tears. I told her that all men are dogs, and that they can't make up their mind which tree to mark, so they go around peeing on everything.

"I think he cheats on me," she said. It was surprising how easily she revealed such private matters, but I understood that when you are alone, you'll talk to anyone. But then she stopped talking and we remained silent.

She trimmed my hair and put some layers in the back, and when she was finished, she held up a mirror so I could see.

I understood the routine. Jake would tell Lynn that he had to work late. We would spend all day together. He stopped answering Lynn's calls. We talked about our

childhood pets and we went to free concerts in the park. Sometimes we would go back to his cluttered place, but usually mine. He would cook afterwards in my bare kitchen, and I would sit on the spotless counter and notice things, like the way his shirt hung off his shoulders.

He was still seeing her after a month, and I hated her for it. He would need to spend time with her, obligatory couple outings, and I would have to wait in the empty parking lot for him to come to me after he'd been with her. I resented her more each time.

After two months, I told him about Nick. An older brother who was more of a parent, he had only joined the Army to go to school for free. It was just what people *did* around here. He didn't want to wait tables like I did for the rest of his life. A month after his training was completed, he was shipped out. He calls a lot, but it's significant, the emptiness that has been created between us. I told Jake about my mom shutting herself down, even more so from when my dad left. The factory closes, and the people who worked there disappear like the noise, and there is only empty.

I told Jake how Nick started to raise me when he couldn't stand it anymore. When he would come home to find me sitting outside, suspicious of what might meet me on the other side of the deadbolt. And Nick would tell me that

mom was okay when she wouldn't come out of her room, and I would believe him.

At this point in my story, tears didn't hurt.

Then Nick started to take me with him to poker night, I explained; anything to get me away from the horrible example that was becoming our mother. The guys taught me how to play, and I was their spotlight, and they took me in. I was younger than them, but not in a way that made them forget that I was a woman. They had accepted me, no problem. Nick was a protector to everyone then, and so with his friends, I was safe. And then Nick was shipped out, again and again with promises that each deployment would be his last. But he was ambitious, so people took notice when he excelled. I told him about moving out, away from the mom who had forgotten that it was her job to be with her children. I told him about the pain that contained me when it was hard to live in an empty house.

I told him that Hank and Dave and Caleb were my reliable nourishment. Constant, loyal, no matter how many mistakes I made. And there were plenty of mistakes; oversights in the forms of ball-players and coworkers, old friends and seemingly new ones. Errors I committed knowing full well that when I was done, those three would have an empty seat for me at their table. And, for a long time, an empty one beside that for Nick.

Jake listened to all of it. He held me when I cried. But when he still didn't leave Lynn, I knew I would have to do something.

I went back to see Lynn. It had been a while, but she remembered me. We talked about work, in quiet politeness, and then she asked me if I was seeing anyone. I told her that I was, some loser, and asked her how her relationship was going, if she was still in one. She looked away, and I knew she was breaking down. It's exhausting going on with your life when you think the *one* person you could trust is slowly vanishing.

She said I was her last appointment, so I asked her if she wanted to go get a drink after a long day. She seemed relieved to have something to do other than to go home to a desolate house.

She immediately started to drink once we arrived at the sports bar. The noise was suffocating to her, I noticed it immediately. She was already accustomed to the restraint of being suddenly alone. This made her one-dimensionality more obvious. It caught me by surprise; Jake shouldn't have needed a reason to gravitate towards me, but she had given him one.

L_yn_n talked about insignificant things, things that don't matter, reality shows and manicures, and I wondered how Jake could stand her. Still, even drunk, her face didn't change. She was constantly breathtaking. But I could tell that she wasn't used to the atmosphere, and told the bartender to cut her off after a while. She was nearing a point of no return, and I would need her to be convincing.

After about an hour, I started slurring my words as I talked to L_yn_n. I was loudly making up past relationships, exaggerating the cruelties of mankind. She was nodding her head in agreement, and I veiled my delight as I downed my last shot and took out my cell phone.

"I'll tell you what I'm gonna do," I slurred. "I'm gonna end it with that sonof-abithch. Where's my phone? Oh, here it is in my hand." I laughed, energetically.

L_yn_n looked at me, her eyes wide in astonishment, her head bobbing up and down as she tried to take another drink. I dialed a number and listened to my voicemail-box ringing in the other end.

"You have no new messages," reported the automatic voice. "Hey," I said to my cell phone. "I'm done. You're over me. I mean I'm over with you. I mean it's over with us. I can do better, and I'm shick of you." I laughed at my speech and said, "Good bye sir."

I clicked my phone closed and put it in my purse. Lynn clapped and took the bait, but nothing happened until she had a few more drinks in her.

"ME next!" she finally shrieked, pulling out her phone. I watched as the train wreck unfolded in front of me, and I tried not to smile, clenching my teeth. She had trouble seeing her phone at first, and I waited patiently as she finally found the 'Call' button. I watched her face as she listened to the rings. One, two, three.

"Hello, Jake? Yesh, this is L_yn_n. Lynn-boo. Hi baby. I'm just calling to tell you that I don't love you anymore. I have loved you for a long time without any love back, and it makes me very shad. What? Yes, I have been drinking, but that doesn't. Mean. Anything. I don't want you anymore. Okay baby? I *am* lishening. Are you lishening? Lishen to me. We. Are. Done. Goody bye."

I sat there, amazed at myself, amazed at L_yn_n. I looked at her. She seemed sad and alone but victorious as she leaned back in her chair and exhaled. A few minutes later a guy came over to hit on us. L_yn_n frowned at him, and told him that all men could crawl in a hole and disappear. He looked at me for support, and I shrugged, telling him what had just happened.

"Hey, now," he had said. "Don't go shootin' all the dogs just 'cause one's got fleas."

"So, anyway, I told her it was over between us, and that she would have to move out," Jake lied as I leaned into him. I traced the veins on the top of Jake's arm, his dark skin prickling at my touch.

"Okay, uh, that's nice, but, we need to start playing some cards. Hank, get off the phone and come on," Dave yelled, dealing the flop.

"I know, baby. I love you, too. Uh-huh. Okay. Love you. Bye," Hank said into the phone.

"Deal me out of this one," I said. "It's still early, and you're gonna need some money for the rest of the night."

The stereo was loud, Johnny Cash's *Hurt*, and the heater in the hallway kicked on. The sudden crackle in the vent gave me chills, and I watched as they predictably sat around the table; poker-playing dogs, every one of us.

I got up and went into the kitchen for more popcorn. I smiled as I heard another chair move out from under the table, and waited for him to follow me in.

"How do you win so many games?" Caleb asked quietly, sneaking up behind me. I turned around as he gently pinned

me against the counter. He moved his lips over mine, teasing me.

"I cheat," I whispered, and I wanted to taste him.

On Looking up a Mountain

Cory Wilson

What icy wind brought me here to the edge of the world? I am not young, and I do not feel old, but the cold is in my knees. My fingers ache to curl around my walking stick. It falls heavily towards the snow. The trail can be seen winding its way towards the peak as the first golden ribbons drape themselves over the eastern slope. It has not changed, but I have. A deep breath fills my lungs, but the sigh is broken with a cough. I close my eyes and grip the staff. I can feel the warmth of the sun on my face. I lift my foot and start onward.

The rock below is cold and grey. It passes my feet in spurts; speeding and slowing down with each awkward step. The minutes pass and become hours, but the burning peak is far away, still. Were I myself, and by "myself", I mean 23, I could run this slope and be back before my wife noticed I was gone. By now she must know. My coffee is cold on the counter. The paper is resting against the storm door. She needs me. I walk on.

The morning yawns. I feel it pull and push my beard across my wrinkled face. My nose and cheeks burn to match my heart and muscles. Each step is closer. Each is harder. The air is getting thinner and difficult to take in. *I must rest soon.* Looking up, I see a small outcropping before the main climb. "I will rest there," I announce to the mountain, awaiting its disapproval. It gives none, and after prying my body with

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both hands on my staff, I am on the platform. The sensation of floating fills my legs as I glide over and sit on the large rock. The sun is high in the sky. I cannot linger, or I will not make it in time. The water from my pack is cold. Everything is cold. I shake it in my freezing hand to break the ice forming near the surface, and take a drink. I feel it run down my throat and I remember summers past.

My childhood leaps up into my eyes to block the view of the distant hilltops. The field is hot. The sweat is suffocating. I push my way through the forest of hay and feel each tip tickle my palms. The dark ripples in the stream are a trickle to my ears, at first, but then reveal themselves at the edge of the field. The light bounces off the water. I squint my eyes before my hand rushes up to cover them.

My mouth is watering. I unscrew the cap off the bottle and take another drink. I don't feel the wind on my nose. The stream never disappears. It lengthens and daisies bloom at its shores. I step between the white petals and over the yellow centers. My eyes are on the ground, avoiding the flowers, when my father's voice rises over the stream. I lift my head and drive a daisy into the brown sand with my left foot. He is sitting on one of many large roots of a sycamore, exposed by the rushing water. He sits above a deep pool at the tip of the bend in the water. The fishing pole is tan and striped black. I cannot see the line, but I know it is in the shaded water. He motions me to join him, but I hesitate. I am cold again. I wince my eyes open toward the sun. The same sun I squinted

at so long ago. I am old again.

The rock is holding me, or I will not let go of the rock. I am not ready to get up, but I do. I face the peak and step, then drop my staff onto the rock, then step and so on and so forth. It is so far to go. *I wonder if she is worried?* Time passes as time will when you are trying to get something done; too fast, but I am almost halfway there. The day is still clear, and apart from the few clouds that pass between me and the sun, it is a splendid day to climb this old mountain.

I have lost my staff. The mountain has taken it from me. The ache in my fingers remains as I clutch the shelves between the rocks and pull myself up. My feet constantly search for a hold, swinging back and forth and lifting up and down. *I do not remember this part of the trail.* The thought let's the cold a little further into my body. I cannot help but shiver, and the tremor loosens my foot. I slip and my knees crash against the rock. "Please, not now," I pray to God. "Not when I am so close." The peak is less majestic, and more attainable. If I survive this mistake, I will be there within a few hours. "Please, God," I repeat, "It isn't fair!" I squeeze what strength is left in me into my hands and onto the rock and pull with all my might. The tattered tennis shoes slide and scrape against the granite wall, sprinkling gravel and sand below. My breath is held. I am ready to fall. At last, my foot stops. I exhale

between my teeth. "Thank you."

All I can do is lay in the snow. I am tired. I am so tired. I want to sleep. I want to shut my eyes and return to my wife and son. I want to hold my baby boy in my arms and kiss the love of my life.

The air in the hospital was filled with cheap cigar smoke. My nerves were shot. I needed the nicotine. I sat in a plastic chair and stared at the red cherry burning at the end. My father was asleep next to me. It was late, but I could not sleep. I didn't have the heart to miss the moment, even though the nurse had brought a pillow and blanket and placed it next to me. I took another puff and held the smoke between my cheeks before letting it out, slowly. The waiting room was dim. The hallway light cut through the fog like a knife jutting through the window in the door. Before long, I was pacing through the blade; back and forth, shaving the time off the clock. It was after four in the morning when the nurse finally came in. My father stirred with a grumble.

"Sir?" she asked.

"Yes?"

"Congratulations." It was a calm statement. A smile crept across her face and bridged the distance to mine. With an ear to ear grin, my life was forever changed. I kissed my son on the forehead for the first time and my wife on the lips as if I'd never kissed her before. I felt as if the past years of my

life were erased. The pallet was clean. I never smoked again.

The air is getting thinner, and the light is begging to fall. The snow is not so cold, now. In fact, it is quite comfortable. Were it not for my haste, I might linger a little longer and feel the sun's warmth pass over me and over the mountain to flee from the night. Two hand prints and some packed snow is all that remains to tell the tale of my short stay on the ledge.

It is hard to walk without bending my back. I arch my neck to look forward. *Almost there.* The sun is over the tip of the mountain, but I can chase it. *The climb is the hardest part,* I remind myself. *It's all downhill from here.* The trail is smoother than before. The crunch of snow and ice beneath the soles of my shoes reminds me I am moving forward, so I listen keenly. If the crunching stops, I will fail. I look up the mountain. The blue canvass is no longer dominated by the white and grey. The peak is entering the picture at the bottom of the frame. The empty sky is more beautiful than I ever remembered. It is more black than blue, yet more colorful than a rainbow. With renewed energy, I surge forward. The shattered rock and snow passes below my eyes as it did at the beginning of the ascent, and in no time I am standing at the summit. *Thankyou.* A small tear forms at the corner of my eye and begins the perilous journey towards my lips only to be evaporated and frozen on the path along the edge of my nose. But the trail is blazed and soon more tears follow.

I take out the water bottle and drink. I am tired and thirsty, surprised I have made it. The sun is falling to the west. I watch it disappear with the last drops of water in the container. Within minutes, the stars are thrust into the sky. I am crying, again.

"Why?" I stutter between sobs. My hands are freezing against my beard, but all I can do is bury my face in them while keeping my eyes fixed on the stars. Snow is falling from some unseen cloud. Tiny snowflakes drift down from the heavens to reflect the moon like diamonds. "Please hear me. Why?" the whisper was a shout in my heart. "It was not time." The snow is piling on my feet. I do not move them, and the stars still backdrop the moon. The coughing is more frequent. I wish I had water left to drink. The empty bottle rests to my right.

"Do you hear me? It's not fair!" The snow between my legs is speckled with red. It is cold, and my fingers ache. I am tired. I lay back and look up to the stars. The snow swirls high above with the wind like a trail extending downward to connect to the peak. "I loved him so much," I manage while gripping the snow, squeezing it between my fingers. The pain is less. My knees don't hurt at all. My eyes are getting heavy. I should have rested longer on the ledge.

What icy trail brought me here to the top of the world? "Hear me, God, for I am closer. He was too young. Now, carry me swiftly. I've made the trip shorter." The snow is falling, and I am not crying anymore.

Conversations With Avians Letter 1:

Colors of the Four Stanzas

David S. Robinson

Dear Zeus,

Today, I walked along a path in the park, and I stopped to converse with a robin. He said, "Consider *if* you will, my dear, a poet sitting at a blank sheet *of* paper."

After some thought I replied, "Surely he will sense the open compliance *of* his medium, such that he has the freedom to move in any direction he pleases."

Then the robin said, "And consider *if* you will, my dear, the weather."

I replied, "The clouds are in large force, but the sun also shines in places. The air is not violently tormented, nor is it lifeless—a gentle breeze flows."

The robin said, "Is it not completely neutral, in such a way that the slightest *of* changes could lead in any direction? It is as a blank sheet *of* paper. Now consider, my dear, the poet who writes the poem *of* the year

and its weather—its seasons. What might he think *of* such a day as this?"

And so I thought on this and made the following observations. I hope you find them enlightening. . . .

Mae lived in a Grey world, a world where black, white and all colors of the visible light spectrum were fused together in an attempt to make perfect harmony. With the Grey comes a straight face, or rather, the unbearable seriousness that is commonly accepted as necessary for progress. Progress in what? It was obvious, she had come to realize, that "progress" led further into the Grey, deeper and deeper and darker and darker until it would become black, and the victim would be lost in the abyss of his or her own existence in and, thereby, his own contribution to the Grey. That was what she saw as death. It was a serious world—a Grey world----one that she grew tired of quickly. As a result, she was now a twenty-two-year-old girl who preferred to be as colorful as possible.

So on Thursday, March 20, she skipped down the damp, moderately populated sidewalk with her pale brown hair, sporadically highlighted with blue and green streaks, bouncing freely in the moist air. The ashy sky was recovering from a recent downpour, and cold, pale raindrops fell in declining frequency to the hard cement. Mae was skipping in defiance of the cold. She was enveloped by this Grey world, both

figuratively and literally (in the visual sense of the present weather), and she loved her independence of it.

As she bounded down the walkway, Mae's rainbow umbrella, now closed, bounded with her at her side. It was a testament to her entire appearance. All colors present. Along with her colored hair, she wore a green shirt, a black jacket with yellow and purple buttons, pink sneakers and jeans that, having been made specially for her senior showcase in the university's art department, were covered in elaborate designs of flowing, spiraling white lines.

Her cell phone rang. It was Augustine, her brother.

.. first, summer is a delightful season, is it not? Of course, people in our way of life recognize it as a jovial time of warmth and freedom. I think that to be quite appropriate. It is so full of sun, it inspires one to relax; to take a step back and observe the world the way it is, and to enjoy things the way they are now...

Mae slowed to a walk to answer her phone. "Hi, big brother, what's up?"

"You realize, little sister, that your shiny voice completely clashes with the news show I have on." Augustine went on to

explain that the news broadcast was covering the story of a bank CEO that had thrown himself off of an interstate bridge.

"The Grey claimed another, did it?"

"Come on, Mae. Enough of the Grey."

Augustine continued, going on about dinner at their apartment that night. But as he did so, a man in a dark grey suit barreled past Mae, knocking her slightly off balance. She stared after him, feeling annoyed but not mad. He was only a victim, after all. She became aware of more people in her vision. Men in business attire with somber, listless eyes driving down the road at lifeless speeds. Women walking dogs and children down the sidewalk, burdened by deteriorating bodies and dull brown hair. Suddenly Mae felt like picking up the debate with Augustine again, because the Grey and its victims were real. But she wouldn't be rude; she would let him finish his sentence concerning spaghetti.

"...and I think I'll probably put a salad together too."

"Okay, sounds delicious. But, Augustine? I'm not dropping this thing about the Grey."

"Alright, Mae. Go ahead," Augustine said dryly after a heartfelt sigh.

Mae ignored the dramatic reply made by her brother. By now, it was part of the routine. So she went ahead, going through her well-rehearsed speech about the Grey-the system that claimed the lives and souls of everyone that participated. Almost everyone participated. It was

unavoidable, because the Grey was the system that made up the society. When she finished, it was Augustine's turn. He would lecture her about choice, about how everyone chooses to be who he or she wants to be. There is no system-no Grey-that controls what people do. "You are free, Mae. I am free. People are free." He always used the same lines.

But then something happened that was not part of the routine.

Mae gazed down the street, and was mesmerized by the scene in front of her. Amid the cold cement, the pale glass and the hard steel of a dark, solitary bus station sat a girl. One does not, of course, enter into a trance every time one sees a girl sitting in a bus station. But Mae, who was so focused on color, so finely tuned to pick out anything that seemed to deny the Grey, was intensely intrigued by the mere sight of the figure. She was crying as she sat by the glass wall. Vibrant red hair fell in front of her tear-soaked face and her arms, clad in pale green shirt, were clasped tightly around her legs in an apparent attempt to keep her freckled chin safe from the world around her. She was young, perhaps seventeen. Young and frail. She was colorful. And not only was she dressed colorfully, in contrast with the dull environment, but her tears were a beautiful display of emotion, something the Grey had a great lack of.

Mae's enchantment broke as she heard Augustine end his retort. She thanked him for his sagely advice and told him she would see him in about an hour. *Love you. Bye.*

Her focus was now all on the crying girl.

Taking her time, Mae approached her. Color like this did not show itself often, and she wanted to take it in. She noticed a worn, brown notebook sitting on the bench beside the girl. That stood out, as well. Was she an artist? A poet, perhaps? She timed her approach so that she felt content with her observation as she sat down on the bench. "You know," she began without an introduction, "I know the weather isn't the best it could be, but the sun will come out tomorrow."

"Did you come up with that yourself?" asked a timid and forcefully sarcastic voice from behind the mess of red hair.

"No, I'll be honest, I didn't. The weather man told me this morning that it would."

A slight chuckle. "Okay. Well, do you have a name?"

"Mae."

"That's pretty," said the girl, looking up for the first time. Her hazel eyes took a second glance at Mae's eccentric hair. "My name is Novia."

"Novia, I know I might seem nosey, but to be frank with you, I think the avoidance of 'nosiness' is an excuse we have made to avoid feeling guilty for not being concerned for one another. But I won't pry. I'll just simply ask, are you ok?"

Novia delicately brushed her hair out of her face. "No, not really."

...autumn is a beautiful season, for its part, but efter some observation you will realize that it is weak on its own. It cannot withstand the coldness ef winter, so it will always 9ive in to the demands ef the ice that overshadows it. It is beautiful, yes, but it is a stru99lin9 beauty. . . .

As Novia fmished explaining why she had been crying, Mae realized that a villain had entered the story of her day. She smiled inwardly as she realized how perfect it was, an absolute embodiment of the Grey and its oppression. Augustine would soon see. The smile was short-lived, however, as she realized the tragedy of the realism present in the situation. Novia was indeed a victim of the Grey, but she was a victim because of her own sister, Dede.

"I want to break away. I know what I want to do, but I feel trapped."

Mae put her hand on the victim's shoulder.

"Listen," said Novia, hastening her speech as she glanced at her watch, "she'll be here any minute. But thank you so much for listening. I know... I know it's weird because I don't know you or anything, but thank you."

Mae could feel Novia's sincerity. She told her that it was no problem. Remember, avoidance of nosiness is an excuse, anyway.

"I feel guilty though; I've been talking the whole time." Novia picked up the notebook and, clicking a pen with which to write, she said, "Do you think I could have your number? I'd love to talk with you more sometime."

Mae smiled, noticing that Novia did not admit how socially inappropriate it was to ask a complete stranger for her cell phone number. Mae gave it to her, and Novia gave her own in return.

Novia stuffed her notebook back into the bag as a sleek, black car eased up to the curb, and a darkened window slid down. Inside, Mae saw not an example of color nor an example of a victim of the Grey, but an agent of the Grey itself.

Dede's raven hair fell over eyes as sharp as hawk talons and onto a crisp, white suit jacket. This woman was not depressed like the victims of the Grey, but she was hardened. In a droll voice she said, "Are you fmished running away, Novia, or shall I come back in an hour?"

Mae gave Novia a small wave goodbye as she watched her climb into the car. She was on her way to her apartment before Dede's car turned at the next street.

... cold is a killer, and winter is the An9el ef Death. Winter, the icy, dull Grey, controls whatever it can, leadin9 everythin9 in a

*downward spiral towards itself. It is hun9ry
for power, hun9ryfor dominion....*

Augustine was a good cook, and Mae was still thinking about the delicious spaghetti dinner as she and her brother cleaned the dishes.

Augustine, just barely a decade older than Mae, was well on his way to becoming an accomplished doctor. His career gave him a mind to stay in shape, and as a result he looked more like a carefree surfer than a hard-working doctor, with curly, blonde hair, blue eyes, and bronzed skin on an athletic body. He was wise, and Mae idolized him. She attributed his wisdom to his avoidance of the Grey and she attributed him to her own wisdom. Sometimes, however, she knew that he didn't quite see things the way they really were.

"Speaking of clothes, what the hell are you wearing?" Augustine asked as he came into the kitchen with the salad bowl. They had just finished a conversation about Mae's internship at the studio.

Mae gave him a disappointed look. "Colors, Augustine. Colors."

"Yeah. Would that be to fight the Grey?" he said jokingly.

"Very funny. But speaking of the Grey, I have a story to tell you," she said as she turned her back to the sink to face her brother. The story took a few minutes, and it required her to follow Augustine back and forth between the dining

room and the kitchen of his apartment a few times, but she told him about her encounter with Novia. She told him about how she was a young, aspiring writer. About how she loved poetry and literature and about how her dream was to write for a living and be her own person. Then she told him about how her parents, following a divorce and their own selfish rampages, abandoned her. About how her only real option was to live with her sister, a successful stock broker. She told him about how Dede had told Novia that she needed to make something of herself, that being a writer was worthless to the society and its economy. She told him about how Novia, now an eighteen-year-old high school senior would periodically try to get away, but she would never get far before calling her sister.

"And, Augustine, if that doesn't sound like the oppression of the Grey, then I don't know what would," Mae finished as she followed her brother into the living room to sit in more comfortable chairs and in the presence of a warm fire.

"Okay, Mae," he said as he sat down. "Let's pretend for a moment that I was to believe your claim that there is a system that is conspiring to ruin the happiness of everyone. But what if I were to ask you if I had a chance against it?"

"Of course you do, Augustine, but not everyone does."

"So you believe most people are powerless. But not you, and not me."

"Right," said Mae, after brief hesitation. She sensed a change of view coming, as well as the embarrassing humility

that would come with it. She elected to look at the unstable fire instead of the steady gaze of her brother.

"Mae, why would you and I have any more power than anyone else?"

Mae took a quick glance at her brother and started to respond, but quickly realized that the question was rhetorical as Augustine continued.

"We on't. I'll admit, the world is a cold, dark place, but we aren't controlled by it. I'm not happy because I'm smart enough to avoid the coldness of the world, but because I have chosen to be content with my life. That is what everything comes down to, Mae. Choice.

"Now think about this girl that you just told me about. I told me about Nova to try and convince me that she is a vic of control, but I'm going to use your own example against you. She has the capability of choice; you can see that from the way she runs away from her sister.

Choice relies heavily on strength, though, and anyone can see that Nova is not strong enough to go through with her choices on her own. That's where you come in, Mae. You're proud of your individuality, your colors, and your strength. So use it."

Me tried to regain a stubborn composure, but she knew that, in a way, her brother was right. As humiliating as it could be, she was not one to fight when she knew she had been bested. Obviously, Augustine did not have an accurate

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view of the Grey. No, it would take a lot more on his part to convince her that there was not a system. But he was right about Nova. She was not a hopeless case because she was exhibiting her own capability of choice.

For the second time that day, Mae thanked her brother for his sagely advice. She was more sincere about it this time. *Love you. Goodnight.*

Mae decided to go to her room early. She sat on her bed, covered in a purple comforter and orange pillows, and looked across the green walls covered in her own paintings. She recalled the setting in which she first saw Nova. It would make a perfect painting. The elements of design had been unmistakable, what with the linear perspective forming a vanishing point right where Nova had been sitting. And the fact that her colors had made her stand out against the gray, rainy weather was perfect.

She looked at her phone. Nova was on her mind. She knew Augustine was right, and she knew she would have to do something. She found Nova in her contacts list and called her.

"Wow, Mae, that was quick."

"You know, I decided that you were right. You talked to much today, and I want it to be my turn. Are you free tomorrow evening?"

Nova giggled. "Someone thinks an awful lot of herself. But no, I'm not busy. I like coffee shops."

"You would. What writer doesn't? Have you been writing this evening?"

After a few moments of discussion about each other's artistic interests, Mae decided for the impartial Novia that they would meet at a coffee shop a few blocks from Novia's house. Mae would be finished at her studio early in the afternoon, so they decided to meet after Novia was out of school.

"I'll need to be back by five, though," said Novia after the plans had been settled. "Decie gets back at five-thirty and I should try to finish my chemistry homework before she gets back."

See you then. Bye.

Mae knew what she wanted to do. She knew how she wanted to help Novia. She would have to talk to Augustine, and tomorrow, she would make her move to help her new friend and, thereby, her move against the Grey.

...lastly, there is spring. Personally, spring is my favorite season. It is the beginning of life, when the cycle of nature renews itself. Spring is justice. When winter is at the peak of its o/lanny of snow and ice, the warmth of spring will melt away the harsh gray of winter. It will boil the icy resolve away until it can do no more harm. . . .

On Friday, March 21, Mae ignited the fuse to her plan without hesitation, and just as she had hoped, Decie answered the door when she arrived at Novia's house at six-thirty in the morning.

"Hi, is Novia still here?" asked Mae when Decie did nothing but stare at her eccentric hair.

"Who are you?"

Novia rounded the corner in the hallway behind Decie with a look that was simultaneously both curious and nervous.

"Hi, Novia!" Mae shouted, ignoring Decie.

"Who is this?" asked Decie, turning to her younger sister.

"Um, this is Mae. I met her yesterday."

"Yesterday?"

"Yes, I was sitting with your sister when you picked her up at the bus station yesterday. I don't believe I introduced myself. I'm Mae, like she said," said Mae with a smile.

"Decie. So is there a reason you're here at six-thirty in the morning?"

"Actually, Novia, I was wondering if you'd like to get out of here and stay with my brother and I for a bit." Decie's jaw dropped slightly and Novia's eyes narrowed, but Mae continued, "Or at least just get out of here. I'll get you a

hotel room. You can meet my brother and we can spend some time together. But you need to get out of here."

"Okay, you can leave now," said Decie.

Novia just stared and muttered a soft, "Um..."

Decie whirled in Novia's direction, obviously starting to become flustered. "Novia, come on, go get ready for school."

"Yeah, Novia, get ready, and get a suitcase together, too."

"You need to leave," said Decie, sounding angrier. Mae ignored her.

"Novia, I think you need freedom to do what you want with your life, and I think you need people who will support you through it."

"Novia, you need to go get ready for school, now," said Decie, glaring at Mae.

"You need to choose for yourself, Novia. I'll be at the entrance to the park across the street," said Mae, giving Novia one last smile.

Decie slammed the door in Mae's face, but she remained on the doorstep. She hoped that whatever discussion might take place would do so in the hallway so she could still hear by pressing her ear to the door.

"You have a responsibility, Novia," Mae heard Decie say. After Novia made no reply, or at least none that Mae could hear, Decie continued. "You have a responsibility to your

society, and that is to contribute to its economy in a direct and stable way."

Silence, followed by the sound of a door closing. Mae sighed. Maybe Augustine was wrong.

She crossed the street and sat in a damp bench placed immediately inside the stone gateway to the park. She was not sure how long she would wait, but in the mean time she decided to watch the sky. The rain was past, and blue sky was breaking apart the grim masses of clouds to the east. At least she could take comfort in the cycle of the weather. Cold dreariness may have its day, but warmth will inevitably come again.

"In the end, Mae, your option sounded so much warmer," came Novia's voice from the gateway.

Mae looked in her direction and felt triumphant relief as she saw her colorful friend standing there with a suitcase. "I'm glad you thought so. Well, I don't have to be at the studio for a couple of hours. Care for some coffee before school? I know it's a bit earlier than what we planned..."

Novia smiled.

Later that day, when Novia was out of school, she and Mae went back to the park to enjoy the mild weather. Sitting on a blanket in the middle of an open field, Mae read a novel while Novia simply watched the sky. After a while, a robin landed a few feet away from the pair, and Novia watched it until it left.

.Then she pulled out her weathered notebook and started to write.

..• .it is in this completely neutral weather,
Zeus, that I give you this analysis Of the four
stanzas the malte up the paem that is theyear.
file the &bitt 4nstructed, I have thou9ht Of
the duections a poet can take with a blank
sh,et. ~~of paper~~ an openly compliant medium.

So I believe that I tinderstand now, Zeus,
h• " it is that you wrote this paem Of theyear.
RO must have sat down at your blank paper
aill a day such as this, and thou9ht Of the
ons you could take, for a day such as
tljis Will allow a y direction. Four directions.
P.i,iit mmzas. You wrote your *paem*, Zeus,
you created theyear.

.And I must say, If i n d it to be beautiful.

Sincerely,

Novia

