Scribendi is the publication of the winning entries of the Utah State University Creative Writing Contest, which is open to all USU undergraduate and graduate students from all departments and disciplines. This year, the contest received 158 entries from students in 25 different areas of study across 4 colleges. With so many excellent entries, the judges’ task wasn’t easy, and we want to thank and congratulate not only the students whose work emerged at the top, but all the entrants for raising the level of the competition. We urge all the writers in our USU community to continue to cultivate their sense of craft, their appreciation for good language, and their spirit of artistic camaraderie.

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

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

Russ Beck Star Coulbrooke Brock Dethier
John Engler Kacy Lundstrom Susan Nyikos
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STAFF
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—Charles Waugh, Contest Director
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In the coming light, the tape recorder began to draw on its own shadow, reeling its dark copy across the bedroom desk and back into itself. Hollis regarded it as the night backed through his window to claw the western swale on its slow path for home. The old man rose in the dark to dress for the festival. His stale gray Confederate officer’s costume hung thin in the armoire, ribboned and sashed and exploding with shirt buttons. He fed the buttons into place across his bony torso and cursed each in turn as they punished his arthritis. He slid from the mattress lip to his wheelchair, hawk-faced and fully clothed, taking care not to wake Wendy. On her last visit to the house, nurse Pawson prepared a standing I.V. for the old man’s wife. It drained into Wendy’s elbow as she lay stiff in bed, pale as a fetus. Hollis breathed the bed-sour balm of the room and crept his chair towards the tape recorder where he tensed its red key until it clicked into place. He swallowed and let the recorder spin a while before beginning in a whisper.

My name is Hollis Edden and I lost my legs on Vinegar Hill. I’m writing you on behalf of my wife. On behalf of her condition. It ain’t that I’m ungrateful for what you done or what you’re willing to do. I know about hospitals. I trust your care. When the Barn come down some fifteen years ago lot of us were still inside her. As you know. Hospital’s changed but sure enough you got staff remembers the day. Lot of us from Redfall were treated up in your county, myself included. Rhett Wilkins spent a week up there in traction. That’s the younger Rhett. Couldn’t been more than fifteen years old at the time. Has his own business now, family too from what Maddie Wilkins says. Bless her. She had to raise that boy alone. Course we all give the poor woman enough casseroles to feed a family of seven for a decade. Surprised little Rhett didn’t plump up round as a steer like his daddy.

Medical report says it was Rhett senior what saved his boy’s life. Earnest Stahl’s the man pulled them out. Said he hardly recognized Rhett senior but sure enough there beneath his body was his boy out cold but still breathing. Earnest told me one night we was drinking too much, this was the night his boy married Gladys Oakridge the second time, he says the front of little Rhett’s pants was wet, along with one of the legs of his daddy’s overalls where the boy had clutched onto his father. Says to me, Can you imagine being so scared you piss yourself? Told him no I could not.

Stahl died round three months later. Something in his lungs he caught going in after people, digging through all that dust and rubble. Took a toll on him for years. Finally killed him in his sleep. Not sure how I’m supposed to feel bout a thing like that. Far as I know my lungs is fine.

Looks like Wendy’s caught what did Earnest in. Few weeks back said she felt outta breath. Spent a lot of time sat down looking miserable. Now they say she ain’t breathing right. Like her lungs is a boat taking on water. Least that’s how they described it. I’m a rancher. Never was too keen on boats but that’s how they say Earnest spent his last days. With the lungs 1 that is. Not
on a boat. Say he was too outta breath to tie his boots up. She weren’t on the 
hill when the Barn when it come down. Wendy. Up in Yarsborough visiting her 
sister. But it was the infection what took my legs, so, far as I know I walked 
something down from Vinegar with me and put it in her lungs.

Damn my hide anyhow.

The cassette spun in the recorder, swallowing the old bedroom. It 
recorded a creak under the carpet as Hollis turned his chair away from the 

oak-tan desk, and the saw grate sound that followed the old man’s fingernails 

through his two-day stubble. He looked to Wendy, his wife of thirty years, 
sinking into her half of the mattress so deep she took his half with her. The old 
man let the white noise of the recorder 

fall him up with its sandpaper scratch until his throat seemed to turn with the machine’s moving parts.

The bedroom wore its age with dark cobwebs branching from the 
ceiling like crow’s feet. The custard walls slipped away into corners thin and 
dark where shadows like razors edged back and back. Hollis grimaced that 
they might stretch a path beyond the borders of the room to a place every 
shadow come and gone lay in wait to return. The sun lifted then through 
the cottonwood in the yard to warm the rain-cooled gutter lining the eastern 
eaves of the house. The old man thought well of it, like the sunlight could hum 
through the gutter until it shook the house into new vigor. To Hollis the house 
breathed, gave with the breath, and her brick walls leaned more than they 
ought.

In the bed behind Hollis, Wendy’s mouth cracked to wet her chin with 
saliva and blood.

I help Bart Lascow’s boy Doug get where he is. When he come to me 
talking about running for governor, I lent him a hand. Felt wrong not to. When 
Bart died and I didn’t I guess I felt I owed him. What I done for Doug wasn’t 
much at all, but it seems feeling in debt to another is a disease easy to catch. 
Once elected, the boy speeched about reaching out to those a 
afflicted by the 
Barn. Used my name. I’m sure you heard about it. Maybe it’s good politics. 

Despite it, I don’t want any part. Nuts to nurses like Laurette Pawson coming 
in to look after Wendy. I’m her husband and I’m right here.

Nuts to Doug’s service to civil veterans nonsense. It ain’t right. I am no 
veteran. I buried two sons that were veterans, and I’d be a cheat to accept any 
convenience what compares me to those two boys. Far as I’m concerned, Doug 

Lascow can sit down in hell trying to take a man’s wife out of his charge. I got 
hersick. I’ll fix it.

Hollis sighed. Look. We got a shared heritage, our two counties, links 
back to the festival on Vinegar Hill. Some of you maybe come down for the re-
enactment. Maybe we shook hands. Some of you maybe, I pulled out the Barn. 
So I ask you. Don’t come round here. Please.

The day is Tuesday. June the 11th, 1981. Thank you.

The Daughter

Hollis scratched the wood grain on his desk in rhythm with Wendy’s 
breath. In the dark behind him, she rasped like a broken harmonica. He didn’t 
hear Jenny coming through the front door, pressing across the foyer on feet as 
light as fox pads. Hollis punched the eject key and the recorder spat its tape 
onto the desk. At once he thought of his father’s wheat fields, of the summer 
owl he chased there as a boy, and the time he saw the bird perch in the gables 
of the oathouse to vomit a cluster of thin bones.

When she passed the foyer, the dark kitchen wood 

floors 

red creaks 

under Jenny’s feet and down the spine of the house. Hollis scowled that the 
squeaking walls might wake Wendy. He looked again to his wife, undulating 
sleepily under the sheets. Beyond her leaned the standing mirror, shoulder-
broad and dark on the far wall. Hollis saw himself there, costumed in Con-
federate grays, brass decorations gleaming down his breast, his thin hair still 
clinging to sleep.

He dropped the tape in his lap and pushed through the bedroom for 
the hall. The sun spilled through the east window behind him exaggerating 
every shape and shadow like pulled taffy. Hollis traced his wheels through old 

depressions in the carpet as Jenny made a second pass for the kitchen, five-gal-

lon plastic bags drooping from each hand. Twenty-one, she was old enough to 
remember her father before the wheelchair. Hollis knew this, and he held him-
self at the top of the hallway as Jenny’s shadow 

flashed on the peach carpet.

She hefted an armful of groceries to the island counter that cut the 
foyer from the kitchen, pirouetted to the refrigerator behind her, slid the milk 
and medicine bottles sightlessly into place. The crown of her head married 
the height of the fridge as she spun from the counter on flamingo legs. Hollis
remembered how she made him feel short even before the chair.
He shot for the front door, keeping Jenny over his shoulder.
Morning, General. A smile shaped her words. Or is it Lieutenant?
Hollis gripped to a stop. Hell if I remember. Feel right foolish in this
get-up. Certain I look it too.
Jenny stepped around the counter and into the foyer. You look the
same as last year, dad. How’d you sleep? Did you dream?
The old man pursed his lips and shrugged.
What you got there?
Hollis snatched the cassette up, fought to pocket it on the front of the
uniform. It’s a letter to the suits, he said.
About mom, she said and she pushed her hair for her ears, revealing
darkened eyes on a face without make up.
Told them where they could stick it.
Jenny sighed and her hair rushed back into her face. She rolled her
eyes to the kitchen.
Mite early for shopping, said Hollis lowering his hands to his lap.
I went for these last night. Mom was running low. I refilled her pre-
scription since you had the festival. Got those TV dinners you like.
She waved one at him before inserting it into the freezer at waist
height, clearing away elk jerky and ice-packs to make room. Hollis dipped his
chin. He felt small in his costume, thin. The uniform’s shoulders lifted off his
own and dropped in right angles at the sleeve hem, an escarpment of gray
wool. The trousers rivered with folds streaming down the chair, bunching into
his boots where his legs postured like show props.
Jenny began to breathe in shudders. Dad we need to talk, she said.
Hollis looked to the door.
Mom needs this, she said. Yes she needs family. But this too.
She pressed her lip against her teeth and pinched at her throat. Hollis
hunkered into the chair and pulled at the fabric over his right knee.
Daddy, you’ve saved your share of lives. She wiped an eye. You can’t
give her what she needs.
Hollis squeezed a chair wheel until his arthritis lit a fire in his wrist.
Don’t wake up your mother, he said and he pushed out the front door to the
sunning porch. From outside he heard the plastic grocery bags expanding over
the kitchen counter. They crackled like arcing electricity. The sound fooled the
old man. Despite the heat, Hollis’s bones prophesied of thunder. His sinews
spoke in tongues about storms.

The Horse

Hollis fingered the cassette in his shirt pocket. He spat tobacco from
his porch for half an hour before Walter Shoar arrived with a gray horse trailer
hitched to the back of his sunblasted pickup. Hollis remembered Walter’s truck
as brown, but as it dug through the graveled drive, passing Jenny’s red Camero,
he took it more for the color of blistered skin. Walt braked the pickup with a
jerk. The horse and trailer lurched hard against the hitch.
Jesus, Shoar, spat Hollis.
Walt ground the truck out of gear and killed the engine. What’s that,
Edden? Walt had his elbow out.
Walt, you deaf sumbitch, how you ever convinced me to give up Otis
I’ll never know.
Walt slid out the truck. The door batwinged behind him. He went
aft of the trailer, and slid back the bolt. A bend in the gate-metal put enough
pressure on its hinges to throw Walt aside as he released the catch, and Otis
back-peddled out before the man regained his feet.
The stallion, tawny with a ribbon of black mane, swung his muzzle
firm hard from his nostrils stretched wide enough for walnuts. He
turned from Walt to draw a circle from the drive to the low boughed cot-
tonwood in the yard. Regarding the tree, he settled and pointed for the house.
Walt closed up the trailer and walked Otis to the porch stairs where he stood
profile to Hollis. The old man raked his eyes over the animal.
Least you’re feeding him, Walt.
No thank ye, Edden. Walter fingered something from one eye and
unhatted himself. Hollis locked his chair in place and lifted his feet from their
stirrups in turn.
Alright, he said setting his left leg onto the porch. Saddle me up here,
Walt.
Walter threw Hollis’s arm over shoulder and lifted the thin cripple for
the horse. Hollis clutched the saddle at the horn and cantle and pulled. Otis
stood cold for the old men toiling over him until his master settled over top and Walter tucked his friend’s dangling feet into the saddle stirrups.

Say how you sit up like that, Edden, without no legs? Walter said it stepping for his pickup.

Hollis put the reins in one hand, clutched his thigh with the other. What you mean no legs? They’re here aren’t they?

Dead from the knee down, Hollis hugged Otis with his thighs as Walter nodded blankly and sat into the truck, digging his key in the ignition.

Just think it’s something, Walt said. I couldn’t ride a horse legless. Course you been legless a while now. Suppose you hardly notice it.

Hollis knocked his hat back, let it hang across his throat by its tassels. I ever tell you, Shoar, about summer on my daddy’s farm?

Walter closed the door on his pickup and scraped the engine until it chugged.

There was an owl come by. Had a name for it. Escapes me now. Ever tell you what it was?

The truck back-fired. Walt looked to his friend. What’s that you say? The old man shook his head and hawked at the phlegm in his throat. He spat a wet lump of quid over his knee to the ground.

Lord, Edden, said Walt. Like something passing a pellet. Disgusting habit. Not for me. No sir.

Hollis pounded his chest. Feel something sticking in there, he said. Probably all your nonsense catching in my craw.

Walter squinted at his friend. Say I hear Wendy i’nt doing so good. Sorry to hear it.

Hollis frowned. In his head he traced his steps back to Wendy, still in bed. Walt, he said. You think it possible an infection could pass from one man’s legs to another’s lungs?

Hmm? Nah. We’ll get there in time if we leave right yet, Edden.

Hollis turned to the red and splintered front door of his home. He pictured it disappearing into a vacant frame that yawned for an exposed and cavernous throat stretching down to some thrapple of the house. The old man shivered and sniffed from Otis’s back. Then he clicked in his mouth for the horse to get on.

Fiction

It was twenty minutes by horse from Hollis’s plot to Vinegar Hill. The old man waved at Walt driving down Jameson Row into town before turning up Buckley for the festival. Hollis tarried the long way about, clipping Otis along Bodie Hall’s fence line to eye his friend’s cattle and tomato garden. From there he led Otis into to Betsy Idlesaw’s short cherry orchard and waved to the woman rooted to her rocking bench. He rounded the Centenary Methodist church at Appleman’s Bend, eyeing its graveyard in the back lot, littered with familiar stones and knee-high crosses.

Otis stopped alongside a pair of adjacent stones in a row, both of them cut with the same date. Festival drums spiked through the chaparral around Appleman Stream, staccato and fierce as bursts of thunder. Vinegar Hill swept north, a gunshot’s distance from the church where Hollis hung over his horse and turned his failing ear to the festival. He lowered his hat to the saddle horn and saluted the stones until Otis rolled restless on his haunches.

Cleared them of weeds this morning, said Joseph Holliday. He came from the church in a grass stained apron, sleeves rolled up to the elbow. Joe didn’t wear his minister’s collar when he gardened. How’d I do?

Not bad considering. You people weep every time a tree comes down. You’re all so loud, suprised you noticed. Been at those drums all morning.

Make you miss the campfire, red man? said Hollis.

Joe smiled. No. Worship dirt, you get dirty. Worship a white god and whities pay you for it.

Hollis dug the cassette tape from his shirt and passed it down to the minister. He said, Jenny won’t have no part. Walt Shoar’s deaf as a stone and half as able. Laurette Pawson still come to church?

Joe nodded.

See she gets that. Tell her to hand it up the Hospital chain of command.
Joe pinched the tape in his dark and leathered hands. And Wendy? he said.

Hollis looked away.

Last I checked, old timer, you didn’t have a spare nurse to replace Sister Pawson. State’s paying her, innit? Not like she’s costing you any.

Hollis didn’t answer.

There’s plenty on the hill owe you their lives, old man. You needed Laurette cast off, why come to me about it?

Hollis shrugged in the heat and turned his eyes to Vinegar Hill peeking over the tree line. The sun burned off the morning clouds and beat on the horizon until it lost its shape in the heat wave. In the sun-distorted light, festival goers moved across the hill amorphous and small as drops of water.

It’s good of you to come see your boys, Hollis. Buried my sister’s kid here. That plot there. But she doesn’t visit anymore. Because of the owls.

Hollis turned from Vinegar Hill. What have owls to do with it? he said.

Joe poked the cassette tape at a gnarled cottonwood leaning into the graveyard. Buried in the tree, Hollis saw the sleeping owl, dark and upright on its branch.

Joe said, She’s scared of them. They’re bad omens to the Hopi. Messengers from the Place of Fright. A man once killed his enemy in the sanctuary of the chief’s lodge. An owl appeared, said his people would no longer have any luck, that the tribe would fail. Been decades since we left the West, but my sister can’t seem to shake the old traditions. Like she’s cursed with them.

Hollis dug into his pants pocket for the tobacco tin. Which is it, Joe? Preacher or shaman?

Joe shook his head. The colors all seem to run together lately.

Yeah? How’s the high-and-mighty look on mixing gospel with wampum?

Joe shrugged and bent to pull a weed beside the gravestone. I’m sure he’s fine with it. Believe in the one thing too much you give it power over you. Likely to let it scare you away from what matters. Like with my sister. Might do you a bit of good to muddy up your own traditions some, old man.

Hollis packed his cheek with tobacco. That so?

Joe nodded. Barn’s a pretty big deal round here, innit? Used to be you’d all go up and play soldier and hold hands around it or some nonsense.

Never was certain what it was yall did up there. Just a Hopi immigrant who never meddled in the affairs of the local white folk.

Hollis spat his chew.

Joe smiled and continued. Then the thing came down and everything turned serious. People soured and certain old codgers quit coming out to church. Makes me wonder if you’re not all thinking about it too much.

Lot of people died, Joe.

Don’t I know it. These graves didn’t dig themselves.

The old man looked on the churchyard, hanging his eyes over its many familiar plots. Earnest Stahl and Rhett Wilkins. Roger Idlesaw and Bart Lascow. Elizabeth Shoar. His sons. A waist-high fence of weatherworn pickets slanted on the perimeter. These tasked themselves over the dead to stand without turning away. Hollis admired them before he clapped his eyes on the grave where Joe buried his nephew.

He was in Nam like your two, Joe said. Survived two damn tours then goes to the festival the one time and ends up wearing the Barn for it. Figure he chased some white girl up there.

Hollis spat his chew.

Joe smiled and spat. Ah hell, Joe.

The minister stood, putting the old man’s thigh at his chest. What do you want it to mean, Hollis? That you failed? That God’s got it out for you? That it’s your fault Wendy’s sick and you’re gonna make it right by turning away the only help she’s gonna get? The Barn was a hundred years old, Hollis. Things get old. They fall down. That’s the way of it. You want to punish yourself for that then you go ahead but dammit old man if I’ll let you punish Wendy for it.

Joe ripped the cassette tape from his pocket and threw it for Appleman Stream. It ricocheted from the cottonwood’s trunk where it splintered to pieces and dropped into the running water. The owl shook on its branch. Plastic cassette shards glimmered in the water like little mirrors and Hollis imagined his fractured reflection in each of them as the stream bore them away. He spat and Otis pulled grass into his mouth.

He’s got the right idea, Joe said and he leaned to his trowel clearing
weeds from his nephew’s plot.
You woke it up, said Hollis rocking his chin to the owl clawing back and forth on the branch. Now he’ll take your luck away.
Shouldn’t be too difficult a task. Not for folk like you or I.
Not for folk like you or I.
Ennit.
Hollis straightened his back for the sun. The heat stoked through his spine in a way it hadn’t in many years, like a hand that shakes a sleeper.
Whadda know about infection, Joe?
Same as the next man I figure.
So what do I—. Hollis stopped himself and bit his wad of chew.
You asking? Joe shouldered for the horse. Go home, Hollis. Be with your wife. I’ll call Laurette and let her know she’s expected.
I’m expected yonder.
They’ll get on without you. You dressed the part. That’s plenty. The Barn ain’t ever gonna look any different than you remember. Go home.
Hollis frowned, squinting in the heat. Roused from sleep, the owl turned its head to stretch its wings, all the way, until Hollis figured them primed to snap off. The old man felt the stretch in his own shoulders. It dove from the tree and winged over the stream, awkward at first, until the dull haze of sleep traded back for instinct and the bird ascended. The old man thought on the summer owl he’d chased as a boy, the bones it left in the oathouse, and the day he ran it to the end of his father’s fence and beyond until it led him through the valley to a home he didn’t know and a girl his age skinning jack-rabbits in the front yard.
Joe twisted up from the graveyard. What? You scared to go home? Git I said.
Musket fire rang from Vinegar Hill. Hollis regarded the chalk white plumes rising in vanishing curls until his arthritis flared and he had to turn his neck for relief. Before him the gravestones tilted sunbaked and bright and from each Hollis felt heat directing back to him. He hugged Otis at the ribs with all the intensity of a man about to fall and swallowed and counted every stone. The owl glided idly over the summer fields, bending a lazy swoop to clear Vinegar Hill. From afar, Vinegar and the owl shimmered in the heat like spirits listless and lost. Just a breath, Hollis thought, and they’d drift out of sight for good.

**SECOND PLACE GRADUATE FICTION**

**Promises**
by Kathryn Sirls

Alexis gazed at the star-filled sky. The crescent moon above her glowed white, while the grass beneath her tickled her neck and the grasshoppers around her chirped rhythmically. The air danced coolly over her skin this high above the city, up on her favorite hill that gave the best view of the lights below. She gasped, breaking nature’s stillness, when an intensely blue shooting star flashed across her line of vision.

“Did you see it?” she whispered.

At first there was only silence, but after a moment Miles responded.

“Mm.”

Alexis, with years of experience deciphering her friend’s mumbles, interpreted this one as a decidedly unenthusiastic, *Yeah.* She turned her head to gaze at him, lying on the grass beside her. “Did you make a wish?”

Miles gave a barely audible sigh. “No.”

“I did.” She waited a bit to see if he would ask her what she had wished for, but when he didn’t speak up she continued: “I wished that you would change your mind.”

He sighed again, this time quite audibly. “Lexi, stop.” He grew quiet again, and then as an afterthought reminded her, “You don’t have to go through with this, you know.”

A quick flashback, sepia and crackled like a silent movie from the 1920’s, flickered through Alexis’ mind. The two of them, arms around each other, his head resting on hers, each of them wearing hopeful smiles and lightly shedding wistful tears. Her fingernails ran up and down the back of his sweater and Miles’ voice rang in an echoing resonance from years past, his voice muffled by her soft hair: *You promise?*

Almost as quickly as the image appeared, it was gone. Alexis fought hard to keep her voice under control. “Yes, I do,” she finally answered him, her
voice surprisingly steady. “I promised you. I’ll follow you, no matter what you decide.”

She could hear a small breath escape his lips. It might have been a sigh relief—or distress. She couldn’t tell. “Thanks,” he said quietly. “But I want you to know that I won’t mind if you break your promise. It was a stupid promise, anyway.”

She shifted uncomfortably in the grass. It had been a stupid promise. “Still . . .” She let her voice trail off, her hand searching for his beside her. “If I broke that promise, it’s not the only one I’d be breaking.”

She could tell she’d caught him off guard. “What do you mean?”

Alexis turned to look at him again, and when his cobalt eyes met hers she offered him the best smile she could muster from within herself. “Do you remember what we agreed on ten years ago, when we first met? Way before the ‘stupid’ promise?”

Miles nodded slowly. His eyes shifted, suddenly not locked with hers anymore. “Where you go, I go,” he recited, as if they had only first spoken the words yesterday. “No matter what.”

They’d made that pact ten years ago, only seven years old. Still in their thin hospital gowns, knowing they’d be going their separate ways—going home—the following day, they’d stood, hand in hand, and vowed to never go far without the other.

“Where you go, I go.”

The world as they knew it was already turning out to be a scary place. Neither of them wanted to try and face it without the one person who truly understood, understood everything. The fatigue, the bruises that wouldn’t go away, the pain. For Miles, the pain was a big one, something he felt nobody could really comprehend unless they experienced it, a hot finger that moved relentlessly through bones and joints. And the treatment, for Alexis, was almost worse. But when Alexis was, time and again, too tired to play, chances were that Miles was as well, and so they created new games together that wouldn’t involve getting out of bed.

“You start a story,” Alexis suggested one day, lying near Miles in his bed. “Then, when you get to the middle, I’ll finish it.”

Throughout the years, they decided that the many stories they’d created in the hospital together could form a book of short stories, which they could perhaps publish someday for other hospitalized children to enjoy.

They experienced the entire recovery process together. When Alexis’ hair fell out, so did Miles’. When he found her crying over it, he’d assured her that she was so pretty, she didn’t need any hair. In response, she learned how to crochet so that she could make hats for them both. With the help of her aunt, she’d made them matching yellow ones.

“Yellow like sunshine,” she’d told him.

To everyone else—friends, parents, grandparents, teachers, neighbors—acute lymphocytic leukemia was a generic term that only translated as
severe illness. But not one of them truly understood what it felt like to have your body die away, to lie in bed at night and dream not of birthday parties and trips to Disney World, but of a future without pain. To wish on a star, pray to a god, not for new toys but for simple knowledge that tomorrow was a guarantee.

Miles got it. He knew.

A moth suddenly flew too close to her face, and Alexis swatted it away. She then laid her hand down in the grass again, and found Miles’ limp fingers. She took his hand in her own and squeezed. He didn’t squeeze back. Still, she didn’t let go. “I’m supposed to babysit tomorrow evening. I made the commitment weeks ago.”

As she glanced at him out of the corner of her eye, she spied one of his eyebrows going up. “Well,” he mused, “then I guess you’re going to be breaking your word to someone, no matter what you choose to do.”

She ran her thumb over his. “Why don’t you come with me?”

He sighed in exasperation, and Alexis thought that he might respond angrily. He didn’t. She thought that perhaps he would pull his hand away from her, tell her to go home and leave him alone. He didn’t. Instead, he spoke very softly: “You know I can’t.”

“You can.”

“It doesn’t work that way, Lexi!” This time, he did sound angry. Tears in his eyes, he sat up and moved closer to the backpack that lay in between them, refusing to meet her eyes. “We can’t just pretend that nothing’s wrong and try to live like normal teenagers, doing things that normal teenagers do. Like babysit.”

Alexis looked at him sympathetically. Anyone else might have thought he was being melodramatic, but she knew what he was going through more than anyone else could have. And so she knew better than to think he was being dramatic, or sulky even—she knew better than to think he was being anything but truthful from the perspective in which he currently saw the world. “That’s not always true. You know that.” Her heart sped up as he moved his hand towards the plastic bag. “You once told me that every battle is worth fighting,” she said, her voice calm and collected as though she hadn’t noticed his hand’s movement. “And that every battle won is a step closer to winning the war.”

“Did I?” he asked after a moment. “I guess I used to believe that.”

Alexis’ heart sank at hearing him say that. Those words that he had spoken to her years ago had meant a lot to her. Now, hearing that he didn’t even believe them anymore made her feel like she was truly losing a part of him. “Just what don’t you believe in anymore? That the battles are worth fighting, or that winning them moves you closer to overall success?”

“I don’t believe in either of those things,” he spat. “There is no end to this—remission is temporary.”

“Not always,” she whispered.

She remembered his smiling face, his encouraging tone, when he had told her that every battle was worth fighting. It had been during her relapse when they were fourteen, and those simple words had given her so much hope. Strength. He probably hadn’t even realized it. But it was his presence and his words that helped her get out of bed in the morning, helped her keep fighting.

It hadn’t been easy, either. As new freshmen in high school, it suddenly felt a bit more difficult to be so pale and thin—so fragile-looking. Sometimes she felt like people were afraid to touch her, as though they might accidentally break her. It wasn’t as easy to hide her thinning, stringy hair with a crocheted hat. After shaving it off, she resorted to wearing a wig, but people still stared. Faux hair hadn’t made her a normal, healthy person, hadn’t helped her to fit in. People were still uncomfortable around her.

What made that time even harder for Alexis was the fact that she and Miles lived on opposite sides of town, meaning that they didn’t go to the same high school. Seeing him after school helped, as it reminded her that she wasn’t alone, but it never made her school days any easier. She had showed up at his house one afternoon in tears because there wasn’t a single boy in school who had asked her to the freshman dance—not the popular jocks, not the long-hairedstoners, not even the academic nerds who probably knew a thing or two about being outcasts. Nobody wanted to go with the “cancer girl,” and Alexis had sobbed that she would probably never date and probably never be kissed.

And so Miles had kissed her. He had patiently listened to her for half an hour and then, almost as an afterthought, decided to take action against her dismal emotions. He interrupted her in the middle of a sentence by quickly placing his lips on hers. It wasn’t romantic or well timed, and didn’t even
become anything passionate—in fact, it was rather clumsy and awkward. But Alexis remembered it because, after that moment, she had been kissed by a boy.

Of course, he took her to the dance. He had wanted her to go without her wig, but she couldn’t bring herself to. The stares she wound up receiving that night, though, stemmed not from her lack of hair: everyone wanted to know what the sick girl was doing with a cute, mysterious boy from another school. Nobody there knew that they had been best friends for seven years. Nobody there knew that he, too, was a cancer survivor. All they knew was that he was with her, and happy to be there with her. And it put Alexis on top of the world.

What was wrong with her now, that she couldn’t offer Miles the same comfort and joy that he had given her during her time of need? He always seemed to know just what to say to make her feel better when she felt down, beautiful when she felt otherwise. Worthwhile. He made her feel like she was important enough, at least to him, and that continuing to fight the cancer was worth it. Why couldn’t she find the right words to help him feel the same way—help him understand the same things about himself?

She had tearfully told him so once before when, a year after her cancer had again gone into remission, he had a relapse of his own. He had become much more ill during his relapse than she had, though, and spent a vast majority of it in the hospital. He missed quite a bit of school, and had to give up the lead role he had acquired in the annual Shakespeare play. He couldn’t remain in the advanced math classes he had once excelled in. During his illness he lost many of the things he had worked hard for, and despite his efforts at treatment his body seemed to fall apart more and more every day. And Alexis had seen he was growing tired.

His voice weary, he’d confided in her from his hospital bed the words he dared not tell anyone else. “I’m done, Lexi. I wish this thing would just hurry up and get it over with.”

Tears had immediately sprung to her eyes. She understood what “it” was. “Don’t say that,” she implored, her voice no more than a whisper. “You’re going to be fine. Everyone here at the hospital is going to do whatever it takes to save you.”

He’d turned jaded eyes on her, and Alexis had no trouble reading his expression. Maybe he would be saved—but maybe that’s not what he wanted. “I’m not losing you to this,” she’d told him, definitively making the decision for him. The look on her own face communicated very clearly that she didn’t care whether he wanted to give up or not. She’d not allow him to.

Even after he did recover, once his cancer was in remission again, she could see that it had taken a toll on him. He still looked so sick, and he didn’t seem to have it in him to try re-building what he’d lost that year. He became very solemn and grave when it came to the subject of the disease that had almost killed him.

“I can’t do that again, Lexi,” he had told her emphatically. “I won’t.” And that was when they had made the promise. The stupid promise. She had wrapped her arms around his waist and leaned her head against his chest, in a simple act of thankfulness that he had survived. A moment later, she felt his arms around her shoulders, pulling her closer, and his head rested on hers.

“If the cancer comes back again,” he had said, slowly and thickly, “I’m going to kill myself before it has the chance to take me over again.”

“Don’t say that,” she had instantly responded, feeling like a broken record every time she was around him.

“I’m serious.”

She knew he was. “You can’t leave me here.”

“Then you’ll have to come with me.” After a pause, he added, “I know I’d go with you.”

Tears had stung her eyes, but, still, the notion of the two of them escaping pain together seemed beautiful in her peripheral mind. “Let’s just promise, then. If either one of us relapses again, we’ll . . . we’ll do it together.”

“Are you sure? You’d want to do that?”

“Yeah,” she had whispered. “If your cancer comes back, I’ll die with you.”

She had felt his breath on her head. “Promise?”

Alexis sighed at the memory. Stupid promise. Stupid teenage whims. Back then, the thought of playing Romeo and Juliet had seemed romantic and pretty. But now . . .

Now, here they were. Three days ago, Miles had shown up on her doorstep, his eyes filled with tears, his expression alive with frustration and
hopelessness. And she had known.

A cool breeze slithered over the grass, and Miles grabbed the zipper on the backpack. Alexis immediately placed her hand over his, as if to say, *Don't.* She mildly squeezed the top of his hand and picked it up, moving it away from the backpack. Surprisingly, he didn't resist—he allowed his hand to be moved away, and Alexis breathed a quiet sigh of relief. She grabbed the bag and sat up, thinking about its contents, the cocktail of barbiturate drugs that rested inside. Alexis still didn't know how Miles had gotten a hold of them, and she hadn't asked. His mom being a pharmacist might have made it easier.

She knew she'd never allow him to kill himself. She would wrestle the pills away if she had to. She knew she couldn't tell him that, though. He would resent it, and she had a terrible fear that if she simply tried to stop him he would find a way to do it by himself when she wasn't around. Not dying had to be his idea. She had known that two nights ago, when they were up here for the first time. He had changed his mind then, only to tell her the following day he was ready to die. That night, again, he had changed his mind. But here they sat, yet again, with the same bag of pills, pills that she would keep until he had decided for good that he didn't want to follow through with suicide.

She gazed down at him. He wasn't looking at her. He wasn't even looking at the backpack. His eyes focused on the sky, his mind seemingly elsewhere.

She took a shaky breath. "You know I love you, right?"

He blinked, and his eyes slowly shifted towards her. "If you love me, then you won't want to see me suffer again."

"I want to see you live again. After the cancer goes into remission again."

"What if it doesn't? It could kill me anyway."

"But it hasn't. Not yet. You have no idea how much time either of us might have. But here we are, sitting with a lethal dose of pills."

At first, he didn't speak. Alexis could see that he was fighting tears. "I can't do this again, Alexis."

She reached out and brushed wetness from the corner of his eye. She wished she had words for him, words that would give him hope or offer him solace. She had nothing, though. She knew what he was about to go through for the third time, and understood that no words could take away the pain of that reality. Her hand rested on his hair as his a single tear fell down the side of his face. She thought about what faced him in the coming months. The pain, the weakness. They weren't even going to attempt chemo this time—Miles would have to undergo radiation therapy.

As his tears fell, one by one, his face remained calm. He was trying not to show emotion, she knew. Beneath his exterior, though, she was well aware of the myriad feelings he experienced. She moved her hand to his and squeezed again, doing her best to offer encouragement despite the fact that she couldn't find the right words.

This time, he squeezed back. Alexis smiled softly—it was a good sign.

Slowly, she tucked her arms through the backpack, heaving it onto her shoulders. To her relief, he didn't protest.

"Come on," she said softly, tugging his hand as she tried to pull him to his feet. "Let's go back to my house. If you still want to die tomorrow, we'll come back up here."

Just as he had for the past two nights, Miles slowly stood. Alexis put an arm around his shoulders and began walking with him.

For the third time, they made the long walk back down into the city.
Third Place Graduate Fiction

Great Shangrala
by Kärlek Wolfgang Jänislampi

One bright day while I was walking about I happened to come across an old man named Lars. He wore the kind of colorful clothes you might see upon an elf in a fairy tale. His boots curled up a little at the toes. His beard was very white and long. His jacket seemed to be of some old dyed wool and his hat had feathers in it. I asked Lars where he came from and so he told me that he came from a lovely place. He said that in this place, no one fought and everyone loved one another. I begged him to tell me where was such a place. He said that it did not matter. However, he said he had something to say which mattered very much indeed. I soon found that what Lars had to say is so wonderful that now I share his story with you. May you not forget this legend - the legend of Great Shangrala.

Somewhere far away stand some tall rocky mountains. They rise so high that they reach above the highest clouds in the sky. Even more so, these mountains are so high that they tickle the stars in the sky so that any one may hear laughter in the heavens the whole night through. Somewhere among these mighty mountains, there is a beautiful green valley full of wild forests, silvery rivers, and gentle green hills. This valley is known by the name of Friedland (freed-land). Now Friedland was a peaceful and happy land where everyone loved each other. The Friedlanders, for that is what the people in Friedland were called, shared all they had with anyone who was in need. Most Friedlanders raised plants or herded woolly sheep and goats in the fields and hills. Others hunted reindeer and elk in the wild woodlands. Still there were others who tossed out nets and hooks to fetch up fish from the silvery rivers. Even a few folks spent their days traveling from village to village playing lively music and causing all others to hop to their feet in dancing. There were also folks who baked the most delightful breads. Some made warm clothes and blankets. Some felled trees to make very fine, sound houses. Whatever any Friedlander did to enjoy his days and make good use of his talents, it was certain that he did it well. Not only did he do it well, he had so much fun doing it that he didn’t even care to be paid a single penny for his work. So it was in the happy valley of Friedland. No one needed to be angry or fight another, for everyone only thought about making life happier for everyone around.

In the very heart of Friedland there was the Herz Forest. The Herz forest was preserved by the Friedlanders because it was there that Great Shangrala was found. Great Shangrala was a hidden paradise with only one path leading to it. Many Friedlanders followed this narrow path through the Herz forest to Great Shangrala. Once they arrived, the beauty of it all never failed to astound them. Everything at Great Shangrala seemed to glow more colorfully and brightly. The air there smelled even sweeter than vanilla flowers. The birds there never tired of singing their most cheerful songs. Of all that
there was to enjoy at Great Shangrala, Makitree stood out above the rest. He was the largest and oldest tree of every tree in Friedland. He stood noble like a giant king, watching over all of Great Shangrala. A spring called the Fountain of Gladness poured out from beneath his roots. Everything at Great Shangrala was exceptionally delightful.

Greater treasures than Great Shangrala’s were nowhere to be found. Whenever a Friedlander drank from the Fountain of Gladness, he was immediately struck with glee. He laughed and danced till he fell to the ground, and soon was up and at it again. He could understand the quiet speaking of animals and plants. Makitree had the kindest voice of them all. He told whoever had drunk from the Fountain of Gladness that the forest had the answer to any question. So long as he remained in Great Shangrala, he would understand the answers the forest gave. As soon as he left on the path toward home, he would slowly forget how to talk with the forest. So happy was he to learn so much, though, he also forgot about his worries. He would play like a child all day and night in the Herz forest. On the next day, he came so gentle and so filled with answers that he only wanted to help everyone feel as happy as he.

Because everyone knew Great Shangrala and could journey there whenever they needed answers, Friedland was always a land of harmony and love. The answers from Great Shangrala were enough to solve every problem.

All this was wonderful, but one day a fierce dragon named Angasta came into the valley of Friedland. He looked all around the land and soon sat himself right down on the path to Great Shangrala. His body was so large that it covered more than the whole width of the path. It seemed impossible to creep past him. He was so sad that he wanted to make everyone else just as sad. No one knew where Angasta had come from. All they knew is that he wished to frighten away any Friedlander who was on his or her way to Great Shangrala. And that is just what he did. Any chance that a person came near him, Angasta spit out a flame so hot that the person turned himself right around and took to his feet in running home. Even the mighty hunters, who thought it was a fun sport to wrestle giant bears, sprinted home in absolute terror after being threatened with the fire of Angasta’s breath. The bravest of brave men could not stand up to him.

No one reached Great Shangrala to find answers to their many questions. Angasta blocked the way. The questions folks had became more and more. In time, the folks of Friedland forgot how to be happy together. They took up bickering and pouting because they were upset. Few Friedlanders enjoyed their lives as they quickly began to forget the answers they had already received in Great Shangrala. Family arguments turned into village disagreements and even battles between villages soon became common. During these battles, many Friedlanders were hurt and killed. Many Friedlanders died young in the wars. Many orphaned children died without homes and families to help them. The people began to say that without the treasures of Great Shangrala, there was not any reason to hope for joy. Soon it was that all those who remembered Great Shangrala and the wisdom taught there passed away. Sadder still, no parents even cared to pass on tales of Great Shangrala to their sad little children. The only memory stuck in their heads was of an evil dragon that lived in the heart of the Herz Forest. They told frightening tales about horrible Angasta and how he would burn anyone to cinders who wandered near him. Children listened to these scary stories. They grew up afraid of Angasta. They were even afraid of the forest. The wonders of Great Shangrala were forgotten as well as the love and friendship that once filled Friedland. Even the stars stopped laughing at night.

Now hold on to your faith! This cannot be the end of the marvelous legend told to me one day. No wonderful story can be complete without its happy end. Deep in the lovely Herz Forest, there lived a peaceful man named Karl. He was born in the forest and was left alone to grow up with the forest animals. He loved every single one of them. He was raised by the forest and taught to love everyone – no matter what they said or did. He did not know much of other Friedlanders except for the brave hunters and lumberjacks that came through the forest. Some of them thought that Karl was strange, for he wore no clothes on his shaggy body. His yellow hair and beard grew so long that it all hung well below his waist. Although some thought Karl to be strange, they all said that he was the kindest man they had ever met. He always offered fresh berries and roots to anyone who was hungry out in the Herz Forest. Besides that, he was always playing such delightful music on a flute that he had carved out of a tree branch. He loved to make anyone happy.

One day while Karl was playing cheerful tunes on his flute for the forest animals, he heard Makitree call to him. It was a soft, yet powerful voice.
Karl had never heard Makitree's voice before, even though the quiet talk of the animals and plants was no foreign language to him. Right then he halted his music and started down the easy path to Great Shangrala, where he had never been before.

As Karl strolled curiously along the pathway, Angasta noticed that someone came near. He puffed up his scaly chest and blew a hot blast of flame at Karl. This fire was so hot that Karl's forehead began to sweat and his long beard curled up somewhat in the heat. Karl paid no heed to this big tantrum. He continued walking along the path toward Makitree as he exclaimed, "Please let me pass, I'm on my way to see what good is at the end of this path." Now the black monster became even angrier. He shook and clawed at the air. It was such a terrible sight; Angasta knew not why this little man was not even a bit frightened of him. All other folks nearly died on the spot for fear of his fiery breath. Karl did not even stop breathing. He simply looked right into the dragon's eyes and loved him like a brother. He said, "It must be hard to be so very angry." This caused Angasta to become even more so terribly angry that he quaked and screamed violently. Karl continued to love him and pay no attention to his viciousness. He saw a lizard that needed just as much love as anyone else. He smiled kindly and said at last, "Well, I don't know why you are so upset, but I love you anyway." Then Angasta could endure no more. He swelled up and burst with a mighty explosion. Boom! He fell into many, many pieces. Each piece was so small that every single one was caught in the wind like dandelion seeds. The pieces were blown off to a faraway place. No one had ever been so full of love and confronted Angasta with no fear at all. He really had no power if someone would not fear him. So he was gone forever and the path to Great Shangrala was opened for all.

Karl was not even affected by Angasta's life and death. He walked slowly to Makitree. He laid his flute against a mighty root, knelt down, and drank out of the Fountain of Gladness. He was quite thirsty after standing in front of a fire-breathing dragon. Then he sat down to listen to Makitree's wise and kindly words. Makitree told Karl that Angasta was only testing everyone to see if they would reach Great Shangrala even when it was not so easy to do. He said that he was pleased that Karl loved every creature and kept going even when it seemed impossible. He told him many other things that made Karl feel peaceful. As soon as Karl had heard the last earful of Makitree's good words, he smiled and laughed so loud that the birds in the branches of Makitree stopped singing for a little while. Makitree told Karl to play a song so long that everyone would hear its sound. He said that the wind would carry the music far and wide, even to the ends of the earth. Karl picked up the flute and played the most excellent song you might ever have a chance to hear. While he played, he walked down the path away from Great Shangrala. Now he had a song to play for everyone. He wandered for days and nights through every village in Friedland. His glad song of the discovery of Great Shangrala was spread by the wind. It carried his happy song to every ear in the valley, even to the ears of the sleeping little babies in their tiny cribs.

After folks heard the happy song, many took the narrow path through the green Herz Forest to also find Great Shangrala. They came in large numbers to the sacred place. They drank from the Fountain of Gladness and danced about. Makitree told his best stories and some good jokes too. Folks were caught up in laughing and dancing together in the Forest of Joshua for days and nights. They danced until their legs could no longer hold them up. Peace was remembered in Friedland. Every weapon of war was buried in the ground to be forgotten forever, just as their wars would no longer be remembered. Folks were filled with love for each other again. Happy festivals carried on in every village. Joyful songs filled the air so full that there was no room left for sorrowful crying.

Many times later, other monsters of all sorts came at different seasons to stop the Friedlanders from visiting Great Shangrala. These vicious beasts stopped many folks. Others remembered Karl's example of unconditional love. Those who remembered walked right on through the scary demons to open the path again and again to the paradise of Great Shangrala. It was not easy or pleasant for them to face the monsters, but the Friedlanders learned to love not just smiling brothers and sisters. They learned to love even screaming monsters. They learned to keep on their way to Great Shangrala no matter what stood in the way. They were even happier than ever. Their joyous singing and laughter was so strong that it reached the stars in the nighttime sky and tickled them.

Can you hear them laughing?
“I can make love to you now,” he said.
“But I want to love you in a house.”
“As a wedding gift,” he said.
“You have to marry me first,” she said.
“Marry me,” he said.
Rachel laughed, pushed playfully against his chest. Called him a liar. He could see it on her face when she understood: a flutter of doubt, then shock. She nodded, he kissed her, and they made love like they did the very first time: the furniture rattled, they kicked a lamp off the bedside desk, flung themselves over the edge of the bed and landed in a panting, laughing pile on the floor. She kept saying his name, “David. David.”

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David still feels like a tree. Not made from the same rich wood as back then; his body creaks when he moves now, groans like an old cabin fighting heavy winds. His skin, roughened from his years of construction, feels a little like bark. Deeper inside he can feel knotted lumps from where his bones have splintered, twisted and snapped, and then mended back together. Mossy, hoary hair clings to all his limbs. But he thinks, better this old wood than nothing. He whispers the words as he thinks them, still lost in the memory.

Two days ago, Rachel died; the same heart condition that took her mother. No one had expected it to happen for a few more years. But she died in a natural way; quickly and, from what the paramedics said, painlessly. David tries to not think about how he found her, in the afternoon, sprawled on the kitchen floor. The funeral starts in sixteen hours. It will only be the second time anyone dressed up in their best suits just for her. They did it once to see her get married, and now again to see her dead.

He waits in the living room for their sons to come home. The boys promised when they left Grand Junction that they would be here around now. Normally he would let them drop their bags in the entry and wander around until finding him in the wood shop out back. Or find their mother. They’ll want to meet him here, waiting by the door, he thinks. He paces slow circles around the room, straightens the pictures and small baubles, dusts the furniture, sweeps the floor, and straightens it all again; everything gets his attention.
except the painting above the fireplace. He won’t look at the painting. It’s ugly, terrible, too abstract and complicated for him to make sense of. That, and Rachel painted it. The one time she painted anything in this house. It takes up half the wall and he wishes it could disappear, just until all this finishes.

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He remembers the first dog Rachel ever brought home from the shelter: a skinny mutt that shed coarse white fur everywhere; happiest looking creature he’d ever met. He remembers their fourteenth anniversary at a carnival in Grand Junction, how she had tasted like tequila when they kissed. The time he made her cry on the drive to her sister’s house. Every time he had made her cry.

He remembers waking her up that first week after they moved into the house.

“You always sleep in. Wake up.”
Rachel groaned. “It’s only eight in the morning.”
“Wake up.”
“No.”
He jumped on the bed, wrapped up the blankets and her body in one scoop and began to toss her around on the mattress.

“Ow. Shit, ow! Stop. David, stop damnit.”
He stopped and gently set her back down on the bed. She peeled the blankets from her face looking reserved, but not angry.

“You hurt me,” she said. “That hurt. You can’t beat me up like that, not this early.”
“In the morning?”
“This early in our marriage,” she said.
He frowned, “how long do I need to wait?”
She reached out of the blanket and stretched. “At least six years.”
He looked out the window and tried to fake a thoughtful expression. He still feels proud of how he designed their bedroom. Rachel could see the sun rise every morning, no matter what season. She only asked for one thing in the house, “sunlight in the morning.” He had given her sunlight. They already knew about her heart. It wasn’t a problem to them. Doctor Bertrand had given her a few more decades before they expected any complications. The problem just waited, very patiently.

“David.”
“Yeah?”
Rachel crashed onto his body, pinned him against the headboard.
“Come on,” she said, “I thought you wanted to wrestle.”

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The boys ring the doorbell and let themselves in without waiting. David rushes over to meet them in the entryway. Ben has bags under his eyes and stubble crowds his face and neck like charcoal. Steven looks cleaner. He’s young, six years behind his brother, still a soft college kid; when he sees David his lips shake a little and he forces them into a smile. They’re both dressed in carpenters pants and heavy boots, though only Ben’s show the stains and scuffs to prove the labor.

“Dad, Pop,” they say, the only greeting they ever give him.
David grabs each one and gives them a stiff hug. “You look flushed,” he tells Ben. “Did you eat enough on the drive?”

“I’m alright,” Ben mumbles. David helps the boys lug their bags upstairs to their old bedrooms. They don’t look like the boys rooms anymore; he and Rachel turned them into guest rooms after Steven left for college. But even now, years later, he only thinks of them as his son’s rooms. No change of furniture or transient guest could deny that.

And this whole house and everything inside it, he thinks, is just as much Rachel’s as it is his own. For the rest of his life he’s going to share his house with someone who isn’t even around anymore.

“I could use a shower,” Ben says.

“Sure, go ahead. Steve and I will stay busy,” David says. “Let’s get a fire going,” he tells Steven.

“Pop,” Steven says, “summertime, we don’t need a fire.”
David pats him on the back, walks them both out to the yard. “Almost nighttime,” he says. He can smell the temperature drop, feel the way it clears out the air. “I always liked a fire at night, it helps me relax.”
They chop logs together in the yard, making small conversation: How is Idaho Springs? Good. Still mountain biking? Yes, getting old won’t stop me. How is college at Mesa State? Fine. Catch any girls yet? A few, let them go again. With every swing of the axe the knots in David’s back tug apart. Two days of trying to fold his body in on itself had tangled the muscles like a cluster of roots. He had barely moved the day after Rachel died.

“How is Idaho Springs?” Steven asks.

“What?”

“You winced on that swing. That’s the third time you winced. You should let me chop some pieces if your back is bothering you.”

David goes back to chopping. “Thanks. But no. Just some knots,” he says between swings. The muscles continue to unravel painfully. He tries to focus on the motion of chopping wood rather than the effect. It happens so quickly, splitting away half of a whole thing.

Clean shaven and wearing fresh clothes, Ben joins them while Steven sets up the fireplace in the kitchen. He frowns at the fire, but Steven waves the question away. “It’s getting late,” David says. “We should get started on dinner.”

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He remembers Rachel watching him build the house; she fret over all the little things like the bricks and size of the rooms, but never tried to change his plans. He remembers going camping, catching salmon in the river for dinner and making love in the tent when it started to rain. All the good and nasty things his parents ever said about her.

He remembers the road into South Dakota. The black night and snow falling like a churning rain of stars. Dull white in the air—illuminated to the brink of blinding by the headlights—then nothing, another part of the drifts on either side of the road. Three hours from Rachel’s father’s house they stopped at a gas station to stretch their legs. She had taken Ben to the bathroom; David stayed outside to watch the snow. His legs felt fine, plenty limber after his morning bike ride through town and up and down the canyons north and west of town. Through the ride he kept that cozy, lingering warmth of his bed, a good breakfast, and Rachel’s body. It was snowy back in Idaho Springs, but not bitter cold like here.

Rachel crunched back through the snow, wobbling from the weight of Steven in her belly. Ben hop-stomped behind her, following the pattern of her footprints. Her ears burned red from the cold, and her eyes were rubbed red from crying. She hadn’t cried in the car, probably just in the bathroom. “Feeling okay?” he said.

She stuck her tongue out. Not at him, just her way of disagreeing.

“It’s real pretty out here, with the snow and all,” he said. “Hopefully the road won’t turn icy or snowed in.”

“How long are we staying at Grandma’s?” Ben said.

“Grandpa’s,” Rachel said.

“We’re coming back the day after tomorrow.”

“I don’t wanna go back to school,” Ben said, climbing up the car door into his seat.

Rachel leaned into David, buried her head in his chest and whispered, “I don’t want to go anymore.”

“We need to go,” he said.

“I don’t want to. We’ll get there and they’ll hold the funeral and everyone will keep looking at me like I’m about to die too and I don’t, I don’t want to deal with that. I don’t want people to look at me like I’m going to die.”

“That’s a long ways off,” he said, then tried to bite the words back, clamping his teeth down against his lip. “Besides, think of your dad. You should be there with him.”

“Dad,” Ben shouted through the window, “the car is getting cold.”

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After the food, David pulls out some cards and their old bags of pennies and nickels and sets up a game of five card draw. Ben grabs a growler of beer from the garage, one of the selections from the local breweries that David always keeps on hand. The beer tastes malty and a little sweet, with a hint of coriander, just right for a desert. A single yellow light shines on the table; the fire makes a fitful work of the shadows. Conversation switches, slowly, to Rachel.

“Hey, what are you going to do with all the old star clocks?” Steven
asks. Rachel had an unyielding fascination with old, ugly clocks. She collected one style in particular. They have tiny, dark faces surrounded by spears of wood and brass and iron alternating in pattern and size, each one an awful mockery of a star. She filled the house with them: two in the kitchen, two giant pieces in the living room, one in every other room and hallway, one on each porch. When she found extras she’d send them to neighbors and family and friends as gifts.

“Oh god, get rid of them, Dad,” Ben says.

“No way,” Steven says. “I mean, not all of them. I’ll take one home if you don’t want them all.”

Ben snorts. “You’re kidding me.”

“Take one if you want,” David says. “I don’t mind. But I think I’ll keep the rest of them.”

“Ugh.”

“They aren’t so bad,” he says.

“Do you remember,” Steven says, “when mom brought home that humongous star clock?”

“With the deadly brass frills on it? Oh yeah,” Ben says. He winces and flexes his hand in memory of the gash across his palm.

They tell stories about Rachel, the strange and humorous parts of their life. The boys trade tales about getting in trouble and facing up to her, and how many times she wrapped up their bleeding cuts and scrapes. David tells about how they met, at a dive bar in Denver. Steven lets some tears show. Eventually they stop talking altogether. The beer diminishes. David and Steven each lose two dollars of coins to Ben on a game called Aces-Deuces before they finally give up. Steven looks glazed, leaning on the table, either half asleep or stuck in some memory. Ben fiddles with his glass, tries twice to down the last three drops. David watches the fire burn down.

“You know, Dad, you’re taking this awfully well,” Ben says. “You okay?”

David frowns, “your mother and I both knew about her heart. It’s hard to let something like that hurt you much. After a while you build some walls, just so you’re ready when it happens.”

“But, have,” he looks uncomfortable, like he doesn’t want to bring it up, “have you cried? Or, or lamented or anything?”

“Yeah,” Steven says. “Ben and I thought we’d get here and find you on the kitchen table with a bottle of vodka. Some big weepy mess that we’d need to clean up.”

“No,” David says. He’d thought about it, that first day.

“Don’t you think mom deserves that, at least?”

“What do I have to cry over?” David says. “She’s had doctors telling her when she would die for decades. Your mother wasn’t stolen from me—ripped from my arms by a gunshot or car crash or a weird, rare disease. No bizarre circumstance. Then she just left, like walking out the door.”

“So that’s it, that’s all she gets?”

David pounds his fists on the table. “Do I need to cry? Do I need that to prove the last thirtyfour years weren’t just a bunch of bullshit? I can barely breathe being alone in this house and I’ve spent two days in limbo setting up funeral arrangements while everyone else comes by and wants me to look miserable for them. If I wanted to cry I would have spent the last ten years bawling because every day she had that tiny chance that her heart might just stop. But we didn’t let it get to us. I’m not going to turn into some teary little shit over it now.”

Steven frowns, wide awake again; Ben looks down at the table. David’s shoulders clamp up again, cabled together by the muscles.

“I’m sorry,” he says, “I shouldn’t have yelled at you.”

“So, okay, Pop,” Steven says.

David shakes his head. “No, it isn’t. I’m not angry with you. I just thought I knew what to expect from all of this. But I don’t know. I’m lost, here.”

****

He remembers Halloweens; Rachel dressed up as a witch, a mummy, the 1920’s, a teapot, a rag doll, Madonna, the president. He remembers the hospital when their first son was born in the winter. The hospital when their second son was born in the spring. Celebrating her fortiﬁth birthday. The ﬁrst time she put down a dog and couldn’t eat for two days.

He remembers the ﬁrst time he took Rachel mountain biking, long before he married her. She crashed twice, scratched up her arms and bruised her thigh. They came out coated in dirt and sweat. He could see her smile; her teeth looked sharp and white against the smudges on her face. She didn’t
stop smiling. While they drove home she bounced giddily until he grabbed her thigh and held it against the seat. She wanted to know when he’d take her again, if he’d take her tomorrow, if they could go somewhere new. It became their hobby, their thing together. She kept riding with him until she died. Just two days before it happened they had ridden together.

He remembers when she told him, “I don’t like the idea of you crying over my body. Leave it to someone else. Couldn’t you think of any better way to celebrate me?”

“Who says I’ll want to celebrate when you die?” he said.

“You’d better celebrate,” she said. “I don’t plan on living for god knows how long with a bunch of people waiting for me to go just so everyone can throw a pity party when it happens. You should love me more than that.”

“What about grieving?”

“Grieve nothing,” she said, “celebrate everything.”

****

They hold a service at the city cemetery. People talk, a priest talks, David talks, his sons talk. Some friends play Amazing Grace with a guitar and mandolin while Betty, Rachel’s sister, sings. They lower her body in. David scatters a handful of dirt onto the casket. He invites everyone else to do the same. Then he invites everyone to his house, to talk.

People fill the rooms, all in black, figures with no detail moving around his house. They slide from place to place, in and out through the hallways. The afternoon sun only makes them look darker, more shapeless. He squints at them, tries to imagine his wife filling the black space of their bodies. It isn’t difficult; he’s seen Rachel make all of the same movements; any place these people can find to stand, he watched her stand there first. With a little effort he makes them all look like her, fills the house with just her. Then shakes the image from his head and moves on.

Their perfumes smell like a thousand flowers and a thousand fruits, coated in musk, ripening in the summer heat. One by one they come to him, with tears and heavy handshakes. He trades stories with them, mostly about the good times. He reminds them that he’s okay and that he really appreciates how much they care, that Rachel would feel loved. He can smell them walk away.

He finds Betty at the fireplace in the living room, looking up at the picture. “I haven’t seen this for such a long time,” she says. She pulls on her a’s and o’s, Dakota style. “Been years.”

David hums a throaty agreement. “Sometimes I’m surprised we kept it up,” he says.

“Really?” she says. “Chel loved this painting. She told me once that it felt like she was supposed to have painted all her life, and when she did this, it made up for all the lost time.”

“I always thought it looked kind of awful,” David says. To his surprise, Betty smiles at him. He didn’t lie, or mean the statement as a joke. The painting—an abstractionist pile of shapes and stumbling lines; a cacophony of all colors, bright in some places, dark in others; with gradients that blur against gashes and jabs of black and white—looks hideous. Even when he tries to constrict areas into tiny portions still nothing looks uniform.

“I imagine it’s harder for you,” she says, then raises her arm to point at a tiny coil of yellow amidst some black speckles and green matte. “That’s me, that little twist. I’m there in that crimson bridge, too.” He follows her hand left, near the edge, to a jot of red cutting through a funnel of green turning into white. “You’re on there, too. Didn’t she ever show you?”

“No,” he says, “she never did.”

“That’s a pity,” Betty says. She embraces him, kisses him on the cheek, and smiles. “I always liked you, Dave. She made a good choice.”

“Thanks,” he says, and lets her leave. The catering arrives, people walk around with piles of cheese and fruit slices on tiny paper plates. Ben and Steven help set up tables and chairs in the back yard. The conversations begin to drift. The painting hangs over it all.

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He remembers the canvas. Five feet tall, fifteen across, a monster of taut white cloth; the only canvas in Rachel’s mother’s house the old woman never started to work on. She bought it almost a decade before she died. He couldn’t blame her. It seemed to eat ideas, as if nothing you could create would ever actually fill the space. Just imagining trying to paint it made him
think of madness, a half finished canvas on one side of the room and a shaky, babbling artist on the other. Rachel had it shipped to their house after the funeral, it sat in the living room for three days waiting on a separate shipment of brushes and all the acrylic paint bottles her mother had opened but never completely used.

Rachel hadn’t painted in years. As a girl her mother had ground the basics of the art into her bones. She always had a keen sense of color, of proportion and visual perspective. But her mother was the career painter, not Rachel, and she gave it up once she moved out of the house. He only ever saw her paint during the holidays, at her parents, when the mother and two daughters would retreat to the art room and spend an entire evening at easels.

When they returned from South Dakota the shelter had given her a week off for emotional rest. When the brushes and paint arrived she snatched them from the door, headed straight into the living room and unleashed herself on the canvas. It took her a week and a half to use up every drop of the paint her mother left behind. She used her vacation days for the extra time off, ignoring everything in the house while she worked. He brought plates of food into the room for her and she would blink and stare at him, muttering, “What? Who?”

He had gone out to shovel the driveway when she finished. Smearred with paint up to her elbows, across her cheeks, gobs of it resting on the bulge of her pregnant belly, she walked barefoot into the snow. Her eyes looked distant, still not entirely returned from the place in her head where she had found the painting. She wrapped her arms around him, kissed his cheek and whispered. “This is a way to grieve.”

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The painting begins to make sense. Here, a gradient, a moment of transition. There, a gentle curve, something loving which he can trace down one side and across the length of the bottom like it underlines the other, smaller moments. A flick of colored pain on the right, the flutter of black stress above; one heavy pole of blue that stays motionless while everything else swims around, somehow all the other shapes behave relative to that one point.

Celebrate everything, he thinks to himself. David slips out the living room quietly. In the bedroom he changes shoes, tosses off the coat and tie. He sneaks back through the house and into the garage on the other side. Grabs his mountain bike, throws it in back of the truck. Grabs his helmet, gloves, and backpack, throws them in with the bike. He opens the garage door, pulls out of the driveway, and leaves the funeral behind.

The weight of the funeral falls off his body like losing a thick coat. Rachel never liked formality. She would have wanted everyone to show up to her grave in bright colors, a congregation of summer flowers. But who at his house would believe him if he said so? Who else knows Rachel as well as he does? This is why everyone else came to mourn, to give him their sadness. One by one they walked up and handed him the few memories they had of Rachel, and then left without taking them back.

David flies down the trail. The path splits and merges, lilts and tumbles over slow rises and sharp drops between the gnarled arms of pine and juniper. He smells sweat; smells pine and dirt and clean air. He floats over a rocky patch, clears the next in a single leap; hops the small logs felled in his way. The path carves switchbacks down the mountain face.

In the blur of leaves and tree trunks, flowers punctuating the green and brown in whips of color; he finds an evocation of his late wife. He finds her in the turns, the change of inertia pulling on his chest. In the rush of air and thrust of his muscles, he finds her. Celebration is communion, he thinks.

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He remembers Rachel. Happiness. Making love. Thirtyfour years of marriage. Sunlight in the morning. He gave her sunlight, every single morn-
Frank Bernacelli sat on the edge of the queen-sized bed, dangling his legs off the side and trying to reach the brown shag carpet with his toes. Ten years ago he could have sat with his feet flat on the floor, but time and age had withered his body into someone he didn’t recognize. Cold November sunlight streamed through the double windows, easing the dim atmosphere that the wood-paneled walls created. His wrinkled, oil- and grease-stained hands held the mechanical contraption he’d spent all morning trying to fix. He held it carefully and tried not to get grease marks on Beverley’s prize-winning, Grandmother’s Puzzle patterned quilt. She preferred to display it on the wall, but since her death Frank had kept it on the bed. It made him smile to think he was still sleeping with her.

“Time’s up,” he said to Beverley, marking his youngest grandson’s improved time.

“Dad?” He could hear Sharon calling. She’d check his den first, then the kitchen, and then the bedroom. The house he’d built for Beverley wasn’t terribly large, and he knew she’d find him sooner rather than later. Frank heard his six-year-old grandson Landon race down the hall to the bedroom. Within seconds, he zoomed through the open door and jumped up on the bed to sit next to Frank.

“How’d I do?” Landon whispered, knowing full well Frank had kept the front door locked on purpose.

“Seven minutes, forty-two seconds.”

“Awww, man.” Landon looked disappointed. “I’ll never beat Callie’s record!”

Frank chuckled and put an arm around his grandson, balancing the clock motor on his denim knee with his other hand. “You’re getting closer, son. You were at eight minutes last time.”

“Yeah, but she can do it in seven! Hey, what’s that, Grandpa?” Landon asked just as Sharon came into the room wearing a worried look on her face. It was the same one that Beverley wore whenever she found him working on a project she hadn’t assigned.

“Hi, Dad,” Sharon said, breathing a sigh of relief and moving toward where Frank sat on the bed. He could tell it worried her to find him anywhere near the bed at eleven a.m., but he didn’t make any excuses. Some days he wished he were sick so that he would have an excuse to spend all his time in the bedroom. He always felt closer to Beverley in here. Llacey, full length night gowns still took up the top drawer of the dresser and red heels, hot pink gardening clogs and an assortment of Payless clearance rack slippers took up half the closet floor. Her “take as soon as you wake up” synthroid prescription still sat on the nightstand even though it had expired four years ago.

“Landon, please go check on Buddy. I need to talk to Grandpa.” Sharon said as she came closer to Frank, holding his face in her hands and examining him to make sure everything was okay. Motes and beams, Frank thought, and let her proceed with her bi-weekly ritual.

“Buddy’s not here.” Frank said.

“Where is he?”
“Gone.”

“Gone where, Grandpa?” Landon asked as Sharon reminded Frank, “I told you we could find a home for him if you couldn’t take care of him anymore.”

“No need,” Frank said, moving his daughter’s hands off his face and standing up without her help. He started to slowly make his way out of the room, carrying the clock contraption with him. “I buried him out in the backyard, in his favorite spot under the peach tree,” he told Landon.

“Grandpa, you killed Buddy!”

Frank laughed and Sharon quickly silenced her son. “Grandpa did not kill Buddy. I’m sure it was an accident.”

Frank shook his head, shrugging his withered, stooped shoulders that showed evidence of his forty-year construction career. “Natural causes. Happens to the best of us.”

Sharon and Landon followed Frank down the hallway to the kitchen. Landon grabbed his jacket from off the kitchen floor and messed with the lock on the French doors leading from the open dining area into the backyard. He pulled it open with a grunt and disappeared. Sharon hovered behind her father as he took a seat at the head of the giant oak table. He set the clock motor down on the vinyl tablecloth, not caring about the mess. Sharon moved into the kitchen, crinkling her nose and flipping on every light she could find.

“It is so dark in here, Dad.”

“You had Shane put in new light bulbs last week,” he reminded her.

She rolled her eyes. “It’s not the light bulbs, Dad. It’s this house.”

Frank didn’t say anything, hoping she’d notice that the look on his face said he disagreed. When he and Beverly built this home in 1973, it was everything they’d dreamed of. Beverly loved the new-fangled citrus colors and had insisted on Sunkist orange countertops in the kitchen and lemon yellow walls in the bathrooms. He drew the line at lime-green carpet. Beverly had her way about everything else, from the chrome faucets to the octagon print on the linoleum. He’d made the walnut cabinets himself and still cursed every time he passed the laundry room and saw the gash in the door from that tragic installation day when he realized he’d made them an inch too deep and couldn’t get them through the doorway. He’d had his son James help him measure, but they were still off. Maybe Sharon was right, though. The house had gotten darker after Beverly died. Looking around, Frank noticed that the orange juice counters had faded into wassail and the walls looked more like apple juice than lemonade.

Sharon heated up some of the soup she’d brought with her in the microwave. “Last night’s leftovers,” she said. “Callie and Tyler stuck their noses up at it, but its mom’s old recipe so I thought you might like some. It’s Creamy Chicken Noodle.”

“I’m not sick,” Frank said.

Sharon sat it in front of him with a spoon. “Of course you’re not sick, Dad,” she said, sitting in the chair to his right that used to be Beverly’s. Sharon shifted unconsciously; Beverly had worn her rotund shape into that oak chair so deep that no one else could ever be comfortable in it, a result of three square meals a day and a game of Uno every evening before bed. It still frustrated Frank that inevitably she won every night except Sunday. Beverly simply couldn’t condone beating her husband on the Lord’s Day.

Sharon leaned on the table with her elbow, resting her head in one hand and covering Frank’s hand with the other. “Dad? How did Buddy really die?” She was worried, he could tell. Beverly’s forehead always had those same three wrinkled lines when she felt something was not quite right.

“You think I killed him,” Frank concluded, looking at his daughter’s aged face. There were traces of her five-year-old self—the scar on her chin from when James dared her to fly, the greenish gold eyes that always held a question, the rosy cheeks that made her look as if she’d always just rushed in from somewhere cold.

She shook her head. “I don’t think you killed him, dad. I just think that perfectly healthy six-year-old golden retrievers don’t usually drop dead.”

“It was my fault. Wish I’d gone with him.”

He could tell Sharon didn’t know what to say to that by her uncharacteristic silence. It was when the fourth wrinkle appeared that he knew he’d gone too far.

“You…you said he died of natural causes,” Sharon said.

“He did. Naturally, when a dog drinks a quart of antifreeze, he dies.”

Sharon sat so quietly that Frank worried she had slipped back into that Little Mermaid silent phase she’d hit at age four. No, that’s not quite right, Frank thought and coughed. That must’ve been Clarissa, Sharon’s oldest.
girl. He picked up the clock motor and started turning gears.  

“Oh, Daddy,” Sharon sighed. “You never forget to put the antifreeze away.”

“I did yesterday. I didn’t kill him on purpose, Sharon.” Frank said gruffly, slamming the clock onto the counter and spilling a little bit of soup as the table shook. How could he tell his daughter that he still hadn’t managed the art of multitasking that Bev had mastered in their first month of marriage? She could make dinner and knit an afghan and play social director for the neighborhood’s Republican Women group all at the same time. He’d been boiling water on the stove in the kitchen and tinkering with the truck in the garage, barely fifteen feet away, when the smoke detector went off and he’d set down the green liquid in order to stop the fire on the stove. Once he’d stashed the fire extinguisher back under the sink, he decided he really wasn’t hungry anyway and went back to the garage to finish tuning-up the truck. He got there in time to see Buddy lapping up the last of the liquid he’d knocked onto the cement when he rushed away to save the kitchen. Frank stayed with the dog, stroking the honey-colored fur. As Buddy’s breathing disappeared, Frank whispered a message into the dog’s ear. “Tell her I’m coming soon—I’m doing my best. And tell her to stay away from that scoundrel Bill Passey. She’s still mine.”

“I haven’t had the chance to fix the truck yet, and I need to go into town tomorrow for more parts,” he said, trying to stop Sharon’s tears. “The truck wasn’t really broken and he had all the parts he needed for the clock somewhere, but he knew it made her feel better to help. “Is there any way you or Shane could give me a ride into town?”

She nodded and rubbed her forehead with her hands, letting out an exhausted deep breath. “Dad? I think you should come live with us.”

“No.”

“Please, Dad?”

“No.”

“Why not?” Sharon asked, exasperated.

“Why should I? I’m perfectly fine.”

“I don’t like to see you here, all alone.”

“I’m not alone. I’ve got your mom to keep me company. She’d wup you good if she knew you were trying to get me to leave her.”

Sharon rolled her eyes. “Come on. We both know you can’t take care of this place all by yourself. Mom’s gone, Dad. I just don’t think it’s safe for you to be here alone anymore.”

“I like living on the edge.” Frank chuckled, taking a bite of soup. “Pleh,” he said, spitting it out into his kerchief. “Sweetheart, you should stick to Campbell’s. No wonder your kids are so skinny.”

“If you’re trying to offend me so I’ll leave, it’s not going to work.” She smiled and chuckled, calming a little.

Frank shrugged and took another bite of soup. “This definitely isn’t incentive for me to come live with you,” he said, pursing his lips as he made a show of swallowing. “Besides, Sara Lee and Marie Callendar make decent personal chefs.”

“Are you eating apple pie for dinner again? You’ve got to start watching your blood sugar.”

“Life’s short, dear. Especially if you eat dessert first.”

Frank regretted the words as they came out, even though he couldn’t help it—Beverly believed in dessert first and served it with every meal, despite her life-long struggle with diabetes. The disease had eventually destroyed her feet, her eyes, her kidneys and her sweet demeanor to the point that she’d told Frank she was tired of being somebody else and died two days later. Frank closed his eyes at the memory, clutching the heart of the clock harder and shifting a few of the gears that he’d been careful not to touch just a few minutes before.

Sharon let out one long sigh and stood up. “I wish you’d take me seriously.”

Frank didn’t say anything, just continued to eat the flavorless chicken soup as Sharon completed her weekly inventory of the fridge. He was glad he’d taken the time to hide his 24-pack of IBC rootbeer and frozen pies in the garage refrigerator that morning. He told Sharon he’d unplugged it two years ago, but that was where he kept all the good stuff: orange dreamsicle ice cream bars and ding-dongs and chimichangas.

After she’d finished playing parole officer, Sharon updated the calendar. “It says here you’ve got a doctor’s appointment on Thursday. That’s only a couple of days away—would you mind if we waited and ran your errands then? That way you don’t have to go to the doctor alone. I think it’s a good idea
for me to come with you.”

“That would be fine,” Frank said, although he was less than excited about the prospect of his daughter talking to his doctor. Dr. Sadisbury was a laid-back sort of fellow, and Sharon was strung so tight he knew that once she found out his doctor sported Hawaiian luau shirts to work every day, she’d be calling Blue Cross Blue Shield and checking the yellow pages to find another doctor.

Sharon went to the door, wrestled with it for a moment, and then let in a sudden blast of cold air as she blurted, “Landon! It’s time to go!”

Within seconds Frank heard the crunchy, dry corn flakes sound of Landon’s footsteps on the unraked leaves and soon enough the boy appeared, sporting cheeks as red as cinnamon bears and ears that were turning the color of raspberries.

“Quebec City Alleyway” by Bernadene Ryan
Second Place Graduate Art

“Wow, Grandpa,” he said, stomping on the woven rag rug to get rid of the fall leaves clinging to his clothing. “You sure made a nice cross for Buddy. How’d ya make it?”

“Simple, son. I used a saw.”

“You used the saw!” Sharon cried out, her eyes widening and the fourth wrinkle dancing on her forehead. “I thought we agreed no power tools!”

“No, you and James agreed no power tools. I was crossing my fingers.”

“Landon, tell Grandpa goodbye and go wait in the car,” Sharon said, standing frozen with her hands on her hips while Landon gave Frank a big hug and ran out the front door, haphazardly slamming it behind him.

“When James comes up from Arizona for Thanksgiving, the three of us are going to have a pow-wow about this. And we’ll put your hands out where we can see them.” Sharon tried really hard to sound commanding like her mother had, but Frank gave her a smile—the same one that always melted Beverly—and she closed the space between them, put her arms around him and kissed his cheek. “I’m sorry Dad. I don’t mean to be so mean.”

Frank nodded. “Neither did your mother.”

“Is that the motor for Grandpa’s clock?” She said, pointing to the mess of bolts and gears and grease that covered the paisley print tablecloth.

Frank nodded. “It broke this morning.”

“I’m sure Shane could fix it,” she said, touting her mechanical engineer husband’s skills. “Let me take it home and show it to him.”

“No,” Frank said. “No. I can fix it.”

Sharon pursed her lips, one side hinting at a smile. “Okay,” she said in surrender, “but no power tools. Promise?”

Frank put his arm around his daughter’s back and crossed his fingers where she couldn’t see them.

“I promise.”

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“Ms. Richards, I’m telling you, your father is just fine,” Frank could hear Dr. Sadisbury dealing with his daughter through the bathroom door. The nurse had banished him to the well-sterilized chamber with a cup and instructions to “just leave it on the counter and wash your hands.” Frank hated
peeing in a cup every six months, even more than he disliked getting his blood drawn every three, but this had been his life for the last ten years and would continue to be for the next...Frank didn’t like to think about the monstrous amounts of time he had left. Every doctor’s appointment was a disappointment. Apparently Sharon didn’t like the “just fine” diagnosis either.

“But, Doctor, how can he be okay? He’s so sluggish. Half the time when we go visit, the front door is still locked and he’s still in bed and it’s past noon! I know you are a professional, but I’m his daughter and I’m telling you, something is wrong.” Sharon’s voiced raised and quivered.

“I know you’re concerned, ma’am, but I’m telling you, your father will be fine. His bloodwork is a little above normal, yes, but it’s not outrageous. Believe me, he should consider himself blessed. Most of my patients his age would pay big bucks to get the kinds of numbers he gets!” Frank could just picture the doctor’s substantial belly shaking like a hula dancer in the red flowered shirt Dr. Sadisbury was wearing under his white jacket today.

Frank wondered if he should open the door and rescue the doctor, but he hadn’t washed his hands yet and didn’t want to face the nurse without doing so. That’s probably why they put the obnoxious watermelon-scented soap in here, so that they can smell whether you’ve followed instructions or not, Frank thought. He turned the faucet on quickly to wet his hands and then turned it off and applied some of the liquid green, rancid candy-smelling soap to his hands. He rubbed his hands together and shuffled toward the closed door, putting his ear to the white wood to better hear Sharon’s response.

“...happy pills.”

He didn’t hear the soft words that came before, just that, “happy pills.” Dr. Sadisbury’s chuckle came next. “Sharon, your father doesn’t need happy pills. He’s fine. I’ll ask him if he wants to adjust his medicine, but he’ll tell you the same thing I’m telling you. He’s fine.”

“He’s not happy about it.”

“About what?”

“About being fine.” Her voice grew quick and intense as she lowered it to a serious whisper, still loud enough that Frank could turn on the faucet and hear every word. He rinsed off the inch-thick foam covering his hands. “Don’t you see? He wants to be sicker. He wants to find out he only has three months to live. He’s going around, fixing stupid things that don’t need fixing, endan-gering himself. I think that not wanting to live is a pretty good reason to give someone some Prozac!”

Sharon rambled on, telling the doctor about Buddy and the cross and last week’s incidents of cleaning out the rain gutter and sharpening the blade on the lawn mower. She was about to go into last month’s burning of the weeds covering the field next to the house when Frank decided to open the bathroom door. Sharon stopped talking as soon as she heard the door squeak.

“Frank, I think we need to talk,” said Dr. Sadisbury. “You can wait in the waiting area,” he said to Sharon as if he were putting her in time out for tattling, motioning to the door that separated the examination rooms from the toothpaste-colored waiting room. Dr. Sadisbury marched Frank down the hall leading past the examination rooms and into his office, which was covered in waves of paperwork and stacks of medical books that formed cliffs around the desk.

“I need to tell you something, you know, doctor to patient confidentiality. Frank, your daughter is crazy.” Dr. Sadisbury sat behind the desk in a mahogany-colored leather swivel chair. He swished back and forth and asked Frank to sit down. “But I think she might be right about something.”

“What’s that?”

“Not wanting to live is a good reason to give someone Prozac.”

The doctor stared at Frank for a moment. “Well?” he asked.

“Well, what?”

“Do you want to live?”

“You think I’m suicidal? I’m not.”

“I’m not saying you’re suicidal. You’d have managed that by now if you were. But are you happy, Frank? I’m speaking as your friend now.” Dr. Sadisbury stopped rocking back and forth and leaned forward, placing his elbows on his desk, moving some papers out of the way and revealing a small Zen garden. The sand had spilled onto the cherry wood surface.

Frank stared at the tiny white rocks and thought for a moment. “No.”

“So do you want some so-called happy pills?”

“No.”

“That’s what I thought.”

“You think I need them?” Frank asked.

“I think you need a new wife,” Dr. Sadisbury said, standing up.
Frank shook his head and smiled. “One is enough for me.”

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The ride home was painfully silent. They were one mile away from home when Frank heard Sharon curse and pull over to the side of the two-lane country highway— he winced, knowing she’d just remembered they were supposed to go to the hardware store. “Don’t bother,” Frank said. “I’ll just take the truck. You can get back to your family.”

“Didn’t you say your truck was broken?” she asked, searching Frank’s face as if she was looking for a certain three-letter word in a word search.

“Oh yeah. I fixed it.”

“When did you fix it, Dad?”

“You told me it was broken on Wednesday.”

“No, the clock is broken.”

Sharon shook her head and pulled back onto the road. They spent the last three minutes of their ride in silence. Sharon humphed as she pulled into the driveway and put the Envoy into park. “So what you’re saying is, I found a babysitter for Landon and a ride home from school for Callie and told Tyler he’d have to walk to work, and you didn’t really need me to take you to the doctor?”

Frank shrugged. “Sorry.”

She folded her arms over the steering wheel and rested her head on her wrists. “What happened to you?” she mumbled tearfully.

Frank said nothing for a few minutes. Then he uttered a “thanks,” got out of the car, and walked into the house through the front door, which he’d left unlocked.

He sat down at the kitchen table where the clock motor still sat and started tinkering. He removed a few gears and found that the mainspring had snapped. He’d figured that might have been the problem and had already searched the hidden caches of odds and ends that Beverly was always trying to clean out of her house. He knew there was a box in the garage with what Beverly had often collected and banished in frustration, so he went to do a little digging. As he opened the door to the garage, he smelled the antifreeze dried onto the cement floor and the engine oil he’d left unscrewed. The springs were in a box way up in the corner of the far wall, and Frank knew he needed a ladder in order to reach it. He’d climbed to the fourth step by the time Sharon appeared in the garage.

“Dad? What are you doing? Get down!” she said, rushing over.

“Oh good, you’re still here. Can you hold the ladder steady while I get this box down?”

“You really should try and be more careful.” Sharon didn’t look happy about helping, but she complied. Frank handed her the wooden box marked “Frank’s Big Boy Tinker Toys” in Beverly’s calligraphy and climbed down.

“What are you doing, Dad?” Sharon said, following him into the kitchen.

“Fixing Grandpa’s clock.” He said, sitting down and placing the box in his lap so that he could dig through it. He liked the musical sound the nuts and bolts and nails and springs made as he swirled them around, looking for just the right piece. He increased his tempo as he found more and more nails and no springs.

“Here, Dad,” she said softly, taking the box from him and spilling the contents onto the table cloth. She sat in Beverly’s chair and together they sorted, Sharon classifying each piece into a category which she would no doubt organize into containers later. Beverly would have done the same thing.

“Ah-ha!” Frank exclaimed as he held up a mainspring. It was bent on one end, useless for its original purpose but just right for the clock if he cut it down.

Frank looked at his daughter, who had already seen his need and went to find him some scissors. Within seconds, Sharon returned to the table with Beverly’s kitchen shears.

“Not those,” Frank said. “Those are Mom’s good German ones.” Sharon disappeared into the garage, coming back a few minutes later with his wire cutters. “Fixing the clock won’t bring Mom back, you know.”

“Didn’t say it would.”

“Some things you just can’t fix.”

“This one I can,” Frank said, cutting the spring and popping it back into place. He weaved the pieces together, popping and snapping and folding and molding with the same ease and concentration of a mother braiding her
daughter’s hair. Soon, they heard the faint tock, tock, tock clicking and Frank smiled. “See?”

“How did you do that?”
Frank shrugged. His hands bore black smudges and white and pink scratches and it would take his fingernails a few days to recover. None of those things mattered.

“I always loved this clock,” Sharon said, as they moved into the parlor where the skeleton of the grandfather clock rested. “It was something I could count on, you know, steady. Like Mom.”

“But not like me.”

Sharon didn’t say anything. Frank placed the motor in the clock, wound the hands so that they showed the right time, and closed the glass cover just as the pendulum clanged for the first time. He looked at his daughter, who smiled at him the same way she had when he’d fixed her baby doll crib that seven-year-old James had climbed into and broken.

“There are some things that you can fix,” he told her, reaching up to smooth her hair as if she were still his upset five-year-old. “And some things that you can’t.”

Sharon reached up and took his hand, pulling it down but still holding on. Together they watched the pendulum swing back and forth.

**Third Place Undergraduate Fiction**

*As Happy as a Clam*
*by Tessa Ryser*

A tandem bike leans against the wall of an immaculate, white garage. A quiet, grey Mazda 3 sits squarely in the center of that open space facing the bike. An independent, “sort of” divorced, successful American businessman, Hubert “Hugh” Whitey, sits inside that car and clenches the steering wheel, knowing what waits for him inside the God forsaken house.

Nothing.

Hugh stares at the off-white door that opens into the house from the garage. If he was honest with himself, he’d admit he hates that door. He hates his house. But Hugh doesn’t like change and he doesn’t like weakness. So when a passing thought makes him consider shutting the garage door with the car still running, blood floods to his face and he hits the dashboard, angry at himself. Suicide is silly and childish. Not to mention painful, and that goes against all of Hugh’s defense mechanisms.

So Hugh turns off the headlights, takes the keys out of the ignition, clutches his briefcase, and opens the car door. He steps across the pristine garage floor and enters the house which bites into him like a bitter, winter breeze.

Hugh sets down his briefcase with a hollow thump. When the door smacks shut behind him, Hugh imagines his house licking its lips. The living room and attached kitchen are muted with white leather couches, marble counters, and blank walls. Hugh was never much of a decorator, but a cleaner. All of the appliances are black, cold, and hard. Hugh polishes endlessly, but everything looks dull. The living room carpet muffles the sound of his footsteps. The walls stand thick and suffocating like a barricade of snow. Hugh muses that they must be soundproof as well and the neighbors probably wouldn’t hear him even if he shouted (or screamed).

The television stands like a beacon in the large, mostly empty rooms. And whenever he turns it on, it shines like a lighthouse. The refrigerator glows in the same way, but only when it’s open.

Hugh goes to turn up the thermostat. He picks up the remote and turns on the television. And then he goes upstairs to shower. The theme song from *Monk* follows him. His feet sink into the plushy carpet on the stairs. Hugh will turn on anything, anything to fill the stillness. Just the day before, he’d left his electric razor on for three hours just to pretend Olivia, his secretary, was shaving her legs in the other room.

After his shower, Hugh makes dinner: Pot Pie, Pepsi (no ice), and steamed broccoli with mayonnaise. He sets up his nice, mahogany TV dinner tray, and plops down on the couch to eat.

Loneliness doesn’t work for Hugh. Two months ago, Hugh spent his whole Saturday calling Realtors to hear price listings for a new house. He’d thought maybe his funk came from the house and not from him. However, admitting loneliness doesn’t work for Hugh either. In fact, he’s not lonely. He’s not. So Hugh told the Realtors to stop calling him back. After all, he, Hubert
“Hugh” Whitey (the second actually) is an independent, “sort of” divorced, successful American businessman, who lives in a nice, medium-sized, clean house. It’s true, he lives alone, and some may call him a “terminal bachelor” or “workaholic” but that’s not right. Yes, he’s still single at fifty-three years old, but he’s also well-off, self-sufficient, and even happy (it helps that he still has a full head of thick, shiny hair). He has his television, food, and sleep. He’s like a polar bear living and thriving in the Arctic tundra. Alone and yet, fine. At least, that’s what Hugh told Jonathan the Realtor who pretended to care and then rapidly lost interest as his hopes for a sale slipped through his fingers. And then Hugh hung up and went out to buy a bigger television.

Hugh flips his Pot Pie upside down onto his plate, mixes it up with his fork, and leans over the TV dinner tray so he doesn’t spill on the carpet. He watches Adrian Monk discuss his phobia of milk with his psychiatrist.

After two hours of television, flipping from one random channel to the next, Hugh cleans up, picking up crumbs on the floor and couch with his fingertips and walking them over to the garbage can under the sink. He considers getting out the vacuum, decides nay, and goes upstairs to read before bed. He leaves the television on with the volume on as high as possible. The sound of doctors yelling on ER follows Hugh up the stairs almost like a wife accompanying him to bed.

After brushing his teeth, he decides not to read tonight. So he lays out his slacks, jacket, and tie for tomorrow, and then crawls into the center of his king-sized bed and arranges himself face down on the mattress like an X, like a star, like a belly flopper really, posed for the inevitable smack. Hugh envisions himself at the top of the high dive, his toes curling over the edge of the board, breathing deeply, and then bounding and rebounding off the board into the air like Peter Pan, it’s a bird; it’s a plane, and then smack, smack, smack.

I’m unhappy, he admits. For whatever reason, I’m an empty, smiling shell. I don’t feel anything at all, except cold, sometimes.

He lets the thoughts simmer as he drifts off to sleep. So when he finally conks out and his lucid dreams merge with his thoughts, he’s still on that board, posed for the jump. And when he jumps and falls, he isn’t surprised that he doesn’t feel the slap; or the sting that’s supposed to spread across the surface of his skin. He flops onto the surface of the water, which now looks and smells like mushroom gravy, again, and again, and again. He tells himself,
fast, and makes a tuna fish sandwich for his lunch. The last thing Hugh does before he leaves is turn off the television.

As Vice President of Productions at a large, office supply company, called Paper, Pens, and Pencils, Hugh kept busy. He always liked the rhythm of the office, the memos and emails passed back and forth, the tide of people that came and went. Hugh was happiest when he felt productive and busy, when the tide was high.

But as the years passed, monotony had crept up on him, burying him like a blizzard no one knew was coming. He began to feel tired, dead, chewed; his chair hurts his back and squeaks too loudly, and all he ever wants is to go home to lie down and watch television. His personality crumbled like an old, dry cookie, until at work, he simply moved through the motions, like today. Hugh eats his lunch in his office, sends and receives memos, checks his email and all production figures, meets with the company accountants, and answers questions when directly asked.

At one point, another coworker, Jennifer Jones, comes to Hugh’s office to drop off some documents. “You’re not mourning Olivia are you?” she asks. “No,” Hugh replies curtly. “Good thing,” Jen says, and pops her gum, “I’m sorry, Hugh, but she was never right for you.”

Hugh used to make jokes with the company interns, but now he quietly passes by the water cooler and their obnoxious laughter on his way to the bathroom, not to piss, but to breathe. It’s not clean enough for his taste, but he sits down on the cold porcelain and rests his head in his hands. Work used to make Hugh as happy as a clam. At least, that’s what his secretary, Olivia would say, “You’re always so happy, Hugh, happy as a clam.” He’d joke back with her, and say in a sing-song voice, “Because the tide is high and I’m free from predation.” Of course, even back then, Hugh visited the hair salon once a week just so someone would touch him. The various hair stylists always raised their eyebrows and argued when he asked them to cut off a sixteenth of an inch.

Bonnie told him at his apartment on the same ragged couch they’d had sex on. They were both juniors at Berkley: he was studying business and she was studying chemistry. Bonnie had the typical blonde hair and blue eyes, but she always wore skirts and she hated animals. “Hugh, I’m pregnant, and I’m mad as hell,” she said. “We’ll get married!” he said. “I don’t want to get married,” Bonnie pouted, “I want a baby, but not now. I want to work in a lab.” “I don’t want it either,” Hugh mumbled. She gave him a sharp look. “But I’m sure it’ll be beautiful,” he said and reached out to hold her hand.

Hugh and Bonnie had been friends for two years and had dated for two months. He hated the fetus, but smiled at the doctors. She hated the marriage, but smiled at the wedding planner. “We’ll make this work,” became their teeth-grinding motto. Bonnie had a gap between her two front teeth. Hugh stared at the space and saw a baby with tusks like a walrus.

On their wedding day, Bonnie walked down the aisle in a strapless, white dress that wrapped around her figure like whipped cream. Her stomach hardly stuck out. Hugh stood up front in his white tuxedo, hoping she could love him enough to be happy married. Cameras clicked in tempo to the wedding march. Bonnie’s mother, Anita, sat in the front row, crying, holding her husband’s hand, who stared at Hugh like a prowling tiger. Hugh’s family wasn’t there. His parents had died in a car crash that only he and his sister survived, and his sister, Maureen, lived in South Africa and barely kept in touch.

Bonnie looked beautiful and she smiled which seemed like a good sign to Hugh, so he smiled back. Her veil hung down the back of her dress so her face was clear. Hugh thought maybe his world might right itself after all.

A single drop of blood fell onto Bonnie’s dress. Her smile turned into a confused frown as she brought her gloved hand up to her face and then held
it out in front of her to stare at the bright red. Observers crowded towards her, “She’s bleeding!” “Someone get her a napkin.” Friends came rushing out of the pews to help her; Hugh, himself, started moving towards her, but she held up her hand, and very firmly said, “Hugh, wait there.” She took a handkerchief from her maid of honor and held it against her nose. She threw back her head and swallowed. Hugh gagged, but walked back to his place. He expected her to leave with her bridesmaids, clean up, and then come back, but whatever anyone suggested, she refused. Shaking her head, “No, I’m fine. Sit down; it’ll stop in a minute. Let’s keep going.” The bridesmaids hustled back up to their places. Anita sat down, took her husband’s hand, and matched his glare at Hugh. Bonnie, with one hand still pinching her nose, used the other to signal the band. And then she resumed her walk down the aisle.

Hugh shifted back and forth uncomfortably while he waited, because if there ever was a bad omen in the world, it’s getting a nosebleed while you’re walking down the aisle. And it didn’t help that the woman he was trying to marry refused to start the walk over, almost as if she didn’t think she’d make it down the aisle twice. All of it didn’t bode well for their marriage, so Hugh really wasn’t shocked when Bonnie miscarried the baby and a much greater amount of blood stained their bed sheets. Bonnie had wanted to name the baby, Anita, after her mother. And if God forbid, it had been a boy, she reluctantly agreed on Hubert III.

Bonnie didn’t take the loss well, and Hugh was a little too relieved. They were divorced within six months. That was more than twenty-five years ago, and life for Hugh, it seems, has been fairly quiet ever since.

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Hugh walks out of the bathroom stall, wets a paper towel, and dabs his neck. He tells himself he’s getting a cold. He looks in the mirror and smiles real big, showing all his teeth. See, he’s fine. He’ll go to bed early tonight though. Hugh believes sleep solves everything. If you’re sick, sleep. If you’re hungry, sleep. If you’re tired, well, sleep. If you’re upset or angry, sleep. Sleep numbs while still letting him feel and Hugh always feels different in the morning. Sometimes Hugh sleeps on his desk at work.

Last weekend, Hugh’s most loyal secretary of twenty years, Olivia, married some guy. Hugh has to make-do without her today since she’s on her honeymoon in Thailand. Hugh left that wedding earlier than all the rest, after downing four glasses of champagne, because if he was honest with himself, which happens once in a while, he’d always wished Olivia would fancy him. She’s a husky woman, with thick red hair, and a laugh that echoes across the city. Hugh could never admit he’d liked her before and so he never asked her out. Why must guys initiate everything anyway? Bonnie had flat out told him she wanted to be his girlfriend. He had no objection.

At the wedding, Hugh imagined him and Bonnie and then him and Olivia riding his tandem bike together. The bike his parents used to ride during their college days. The bike he’d saved all these years. Hugh’s wearing a clean, white blouse and khaki trousers; Olivia’s wearing a pink and blue, flowery, flowing dress that whips in the wind. They’re both wearing light sandals and holding juicy, strawberry popsicles in their right hands. They ride through the park, over bridges, and under willows, until they stop to feed some ducks and dip their toes in the water…

Instead, Olivia married a man who looks like a lumberjack, plaid, thick trousers, and all, and yes, he’s name is Jack. All in all Hugh thinks maybe he was simply too metrosexual for her, and also, probably too clean.

Hugh leaves the bathroom to finish the day of drudgery. The only moment worthy of any notice throughout the rest of his day comes when he receives a phone call from his favorite smoothie place.

“Hello! Mr. Whitey? This is Molly from Smoothie King.”

“Oh.”

“I’m calling because we drew you’re business card first in our raffle! You’ve won a year-long pass to Cool Waters Indoor Community Pool.”

Oh. He’d forgotten about that, suddenly remembering the too chipper 16-year-old punk who’d pestered him until he put a business card in their contest fish bowl. Hugh felt surprised, flattered even. He never won anything.

“Wow, thank you. Thank you very much.”

“You’re welcome! All you have to do is drop by and tell them you’re name and they’ll take your picture and make up your pass.”

“I’ll do that. Thank you.” He hung up. He was sure he’d never go down to that pool, but it was nice to know that God was finally showing some slight favoritism.
When Hugh finally leaves for the day, he drives slowly, because he’s realizing that work no longer feels like his life, but that the time he spends at home, alone, eating microwave meals is his life. How horrible.

It starts raining and Hugh turns on the windshield wipers. The pitter patter soothes his distemper until he feels more regular, calm, cool, and muted. He drives around brainstorming where he could go besides home. The trees surrounding the roads start to bend under the force of the wind. Hugh passes a movie theatre, hair salon, grocery store, and gas station, but ultimately decides none of them are worth the hassle. And now that he’s calmer, he realizes how tired he is. So he makes the turn to go home.

The tandem bike leans against the wall of the spotless, white garage. A quiet, grey Mazda 3 sits squarely in the center of the open space. The headlights shine on the bike, and Hubert “Hugh” Whitey, a lonely, but independent, “sort of” divorced, successful American businessman, sits inside the car, clenching the steering wheel. He knows what waits for him inside.

Nothing.

He turns off the headlights, takes the keys out of the ignition, grabs his briefcase, and opens the car door. When he walks inside, the house chews on him like a cow chewing its cud. Hugh thought he knew himself, Hubert “Hugh” Whitey, but somehow, he doesn’t anymore. Somehow he doesn’t know enough. He used to before... before what? Before the house started chewing? Before Olivia got married? Was he ever enough?

The next day, Hugh has the same day. When he walks inside, the house gnaws on him like a dog gnawing his bone. And the next day, when he walks inside, the house gnashes into him like a lion into its prey.

Every day the same thing: The house chews and Hugh feels like cud. And he turns on the television. The television, the television, the television, and he eats, and he sleeps. Maybe he should sell the house.

On another day, Hugh walks inside and looks around at the living room and attached kitchen: white couches and counters; black appliances and tables. It’s not that Hugh doesn’t have ambitions. He does. He would like to marry again, have children, become head of the company, and retire. He’d like to eat the 6 lb. burger in one sitting at the local Dead Meat Grill, win a t-shirt. Eventually, he’d like to vacation somewhere, maybe take a cruise to Antarctica. But really, Hugh sees these ideals as out of reach—even the 6 lb. burger—because he waited too long (and life hurt a little too much).

Hugh sets down his briefcase with a hollow thump and goes to turn up the thermostat. He picks up the remote and turns on the television.

But the television doesn’t work. The screen comes on grey and fuzzy. Hugh stands still, holding the remote pointed at the screen, eyes wide. One moment later, he very quietly sets down the remote, and then goes down the hall to the bathroom.

If there ever was a place to feel vulnerable, it’s on the toilet, with your pants gathered around your ankles. At least that’s what Hugh believes. So when he gets there, and sits down on the cold toilet seat lid, he lets himself cry freely because of that damn, broken television. He usually doesn’t allow this; this pity, pity for his poor, numb, lonely self, but he knows he can’t stand the quiet that surely a broken television cannot dim. Bonnie didn’t love him enough, but she could have, maybe, if she’d given it a chance. He kicks off his nice loafers and peels off his socks, pressing his toes against the cold tiles.

He could have loved Olivia too, if given the chance. But Hugh can’t continue his life moping over all of his lost chances; he’ll die. He remembers how Olivia used to call him “as happy as a clam.” But clams don’t feel. Hugh watched a show about mollusks and clams over dinner one night a couple years ago. From what he remembers, they have a central nervous system, but their cerebral cortex and limbic systems aren’t developed like humans. They have avoidance behaviors ( mechanisms?) like shutting up tight in their shells to save themselves from predators, but no feelings, no emotions. So really, they’re content to burrow down deep and mindlessly exist. The saying doesn’t make sense.

When Hugh dries up, he flushes the toilet for good measure, and washes his hands. He goes into the kitchen to grab the phonebook, and picks up the phone piece that he rarely, if ever, uses and calls his cable company. The line is busy, but after waiting twenty minutes, he gets through,

“Yes sir, I understand you’re upset. But we had a satellite tower a couple blocks away get hit by lightning.” She sounded young.

“Fine, I hear you, what are you going to do about it?” Hugh spoke firmly, but tried to keep the meanness out of his voice. She heard it anyway.

“We’ve sent out a crew to assess and fix the problem. It should take twenty-four hours at the most.”
Hugh recoiled at the thought. “Listen, I pay my cable bill on time every month. I’m a good paying customer, so I need my cable back on by tomorrow morning at the very latest.”

“As I said, sir, we’re working on it. Lightning strikes aren’t under our control.”

“Fine, yes, I understand. I’ll call back if it isn’t fixed in the morning. Thanks for your help.”

“I look forward to your call.”

Hugh hangs up, stares at the hand piece, shuts the phonebook, and then proceeds to make his dinner. He eats quietly over his TV dinner tray, staring at the fuzzy, grey screen like a zombie until he can’t take it anymore. It’s so quiet he can almost hear the house chewing on his flesh.

He grabs his keys and heads out the door to go rent some DVDs. As Hugh drives through the rainstorm, he passes a large, brightly lit building and realizes low and behold it’s the Cool Waters Indoor Community Pool.

Twenty minutes later, Hugh has had his picture taken and his pass made; he’s purchased a new swimsuit from the desk girl and he’s set his locker combination. Hugh sinks down into a lap lane and sighs as the lukewarm water envelopes him (so much for “cool waters”). The pool is nearly empty. Another older man is swimming laps a couple lanes over and there’s a water aerobics class full of ladies near the shallow end. Some of them eye Hugh curiously. Hugh hasn’t swum laps in years. He’s surprised he’s even here.

He positions himself with his hands and feet ready to shove off the wall. Three, two, one, push! And he’s off. But Hugh doesn’t race; he paces himself in a slow, steady backstroke, watching the white spokes in the ceiling pass by. As his arms slice through the water, Hugh finds a sort of peace inside himself as he thinks about his breakdown back at home, and perhaps what he should do about it. He has options, of course. He could do something drastic, crazy, social, or all three: like go on a shark dive, recruit a psychologist, dye his hair a crazy new color, join a barbershop quartet, or go on a meditation retreat. Some online dating sounds plausible.

But he really doesn’t want to. He doesn’t want to do anything, but watch television maybe. Perhaps swim a couple laps. He’s fine, like a polar bear: King of the Arctic Tundra. So he considers answer E) none of the above: Nothing. He’ll do nothing, and life, as he understands it, will evolve on its own (or it won’t). Like his relationship with Bonnie that had evolved from nothing to something and back to nothing. The tide ebbs and flows.

Hugh continues to slice his arms through the water, apathetic, and yet content, more so than he’s felt in a long while.

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The next morning, Hugh wakes up and runs downstairs without his slippers. He dives for the remote and presses the button. The television comes back on and Hugh laughs out loud, clapping his hands with relief. Hugh listens to the news and two episodes of House while getting ready for work. He irons his tie and then plops down on the couch to eat his usual yogurt and almonds breakfast, thinking about his swim the day before.

He has a locker now... and a new swimsuit... maybe he’ll drop by the swimming pool more often. That’d be okay. Maybe tonight, if he goes back, he’ll feel again.

Maybe he just has to ease himself into life changes the same way he eased himself into the swimming pool. Maybe even, eventually, if he dared, Hugh would brave the Realtors again and finally sell the house, because the truth is, being honest with himself, Hugh knows he’s afraid to sell the house because he’s afraid the chewing is something that’ll come with him wherever he goes. He’d rather blame the house. But, hey, maybe this is the start, the beginning of an evolution in his life story that’ll make the house stop chewing. Make him stop feeling like cud. Maybe, just maybe, there’s hope for Hugh.

However, in the meantime, he’s going to plop down on the couch and watch mystery cases and ER dramas, feeling as lifeless (and happy) as a clam.
19.
I knew what I was getting into, because I checked the weather before I took off. Now my helmet face-shield is covered in blinding rain droplets.
There is little to see: It’s Sunday morning, nine something AM, and the highway rests. Fog stretches across this low part of the valley, and a few ducks bob in the river that meanders through an ice field adjacent to the road. I pass reeds choked by freezing fog.

I woke this morning imagining more slightly-above-average early-March weather. Then Google said twenty-eight with an attempt to warm to forty-three this afternoon, snow and rain in small amounts throughout the day. I’d stepped onto our front porch in jeans and undershirt and breathed the fog, exhaled my own visible heat. Suddenly less determined to ride my motorcycle to the old ruin, I stared across the street at the quiet fabric store, closed Sunday.

I couldn’t take her car. She needed it to get to the hospital.
I found a pair of cheap gloves and my leather jacket.
Now I tear along the river at seventy miles an hour. I reach to swipe my face shield knowing I’ll only smear the raindrops, but the water holds. I swipe again, then realize it’s a sheet of ice. I scratch it off.
I ride over the railroad tracks, past the stagnant river bend Maryssa and I’ve yet to catch fish in, and the road bends upward, up the northern edge of the Wellsville Mountain Range, which rise south of me, only moderately tall but steeper than any other range in North America. I’ll roll over this bench where the Wellsvilles die and dive into the next valley, toward what she used to call her secret place—the old ruin.

18.
Pupusas are thick pan-fried tortillas stuffed with queso and frijoles or chicharon. The oil from the heated cheese saturates the corn dough; cheese breaks through in spots and browns, sizzles, forms craters, crisp blooms with running tails. Biting in releases the swelling contents, a savory, sometime scorching introduction.
In the local pupuseria, Marisol, our server, brought them piled on plastic saucers of a texture forks grate awkwardly against, as if to remind: Eat with your hands.
Behind the counter, a short, flour-dusted woman patted dough into one hand, formed a pouch, stuffed it with beans or cheese or pork, then formed a ball she molded into a disk for frying—the pupusa. Silver fingers of hair—held behind a bandana high on her head—moved with her working arms.
Maryssa stared at a table of hispanic customers with her arms in her lap, legs crossed, body closed and buried in a thick green coat. Yearning for the
heat of the food.

“You’re staring at those people.”

She looked at me with nothing on her sunken face. She didn’t have to say she wasn’t staring, her eyes were just turned that way, and I didn’t have to say I know.

17.

One thing I hate about this hospital is its policy of locking the doors at 9:00 PM, which leaves me to enter through the emergency room at night, a forced reminder that this is serious. Another is the sensation I am doing something wrong as I move down the halls toward the ICU—past night shifters who entertain, thankfully, my desire to be invisible. One more is the door that says STOP, which I must push right through before I slide into her home away from home. I hate the beeping warning of the heart monitor, permanently indicating an arrhythmia or low pressure or high rate or any other sign of death it can come up with.

Maryssa doesn’t like my attitude.

So I stay away, mostly. I bring things when she calls for them and I sit for half an hour. I bring Binky the baby blanket. Hair serum. A crossword puzzle. Sometimes snacks she will swallow then purge.

16.

I wrote a song:

My girl is leaving by percent.
Keep track: she’s a hundred when we met,
Now she’s down by seventeen—
Lost a leg and her liver and her voice to scream.
She swears this was never what was meant.

Maryssa only lets me get away with calling her “My girl” because it’s a song, with catchy chorus and everything, and because it’s fiction. For example: She’s lost neither liver nor leg.

I worked on my song when Maryssa was gone—in the hospital or buying groceries. Soon enough I sung it around her without thinking, and when she heard the first verse, she said, “Down by seventeen? That’s way off.” I told her it was a work of fiction. Also, I explained that the song progresses verse by verse, first from “down by seventeen,” and then to “down by twenty-nine,” and finally, “off by thirty and some.” It grows progressively true, I explained.

15.

The first thing I see when my motorcycle crests the Wellsvilles is the alien peak ahead, the name of which I do not know and don’t wish to know, bathed in half sunlight. It sits at the north end of acres and acres of snow that had been alfalfa and wheat, and it rises almost to a point. It must be a horn, left over from the glacial age. The top appears to be rolling over itself like a shore-bound wave.

She once drove the dirt road on the mountain’s hip and came home proud to tell. It’s been hers ever since.

The rain and snow stop. The sight of that sunlit mountain eases the pain in my cold fingers. At highway speed I can’t gaze that direction, but I look briefly for Maryssa’s secret place at its base—the two-walled pioneer ruin. It’s the only rising thing in a vast, flat landscape. I can’t see it.

The highway begs my attention and I see, coming from the other direction, a cloud filling the entirety of this valley, bumping up against the Wellsville’s. It is not so much a cloud as weather filling the valley. The weather moves toward me in one full, dark mass.

I pride myself on comprehension of local weather, something I must have got from my dad. (This was to be counted on: at 10:16 PM my father rose from his newspaper or scripture study or evening Life cereal to find the weathermen on three different channels.) Having spent nearly all my twenty-four years in Utah, I know a few things, and one is the clouds, what they carry, how quick they move, depending on their height and their color and their direction of approach.

The weather moving toward me is too dark for winter. This cloud is the best indicator I’ve seen yet of spring. It will rain on me. It will rain softly, and it will rain cold. The cloud will come slow, and I will watch it drag along the mountain, and then it will be upon me. I will make it to the ruin dry. I will make it home wet.
14. I dragged my hand over a map of El Salvador; a plastic three-dimensional reconstruction hanging near the entrance to the pupuseria. Volcanoes spotted the land, bubbling, as if this were a mold made mid-boil. The craters atop the volcanic cones begged to be touched. My pinky fit in one cool recession.

I sat with Maryssa for lunch.

The woman behind the counter called to Marisol in Spanish.

"My mother tells me to leave you alone while you eat." Marisol was thirty-eight, a decade and a half ahead of us. "She says I talk too much when you are here." She stood with hands on wide hips, and a black apron hugged her curvy body. Behind her a boxy TV anchored to the ceiling played Spanish soaps. I memorized the plotlines: All the beautiful people were sleeping together.

I wanted to tell Marisol not to leave us alone, but Maryssa does it for me. "We like it when you talk to us," she says, a social gesture uncommon for her, for she's an Aspie—high-functioning autistic, the psychiatrists say. (High-functioning my ass, she says.)

"See?" Marisol responded to her mother, through us. "We are friends."

Healthy blood-potassium levels hover between 4.0 and 4.9, according to a recent article published in *Circulation: Heart Failure*. The authors define mild hypokalemia as levels between 3.5 and 3.9. (Some publications rank this range as normal, citing only levels below 3.5 as hypokalemia.) Potassium regulates critical electrical response—like neuron firing and heart beat—so levels below 2.5 (severe hypokalemia) are potentially life-threatening. I heard Maryssa's doctor say levels below 2 can induce coma.

Maryssa's anorexia and vomiting both deplete potassium levels. As does her now flip-flopping kidney function.

A nurse lets on that her 1.5 potassium reading is a record low for the hospital. I'd imagine five-foot-four and sixty-eight pounds is a record too.

The records held two weeks. The new record is 1.3. The new record is 62 pounds.

12. My girl is shrinking inch by inch.

Keep track, I can measure, it's a cinch:
When I met her she was five foot four,
Now she's two inches less and on her way to the floor.
She says if she's smaller she'll be missed.

Missed—as in “overlooked.” Invisible. People ask Maryssa, “Do you think you look good like this?”
Looking good is not the goal. Zero is the goal.

I turn into the town of Fielding. The peaked mountain looks less impressive straight on. I check the progress of the dark weather along the Wellsville Mountains—now directly behind me—and see it's still moving slow. No reason to watch the cloud any longer. I'm riding on to the ruin regardless.

_Turn right at the stop-sign_, I had told our friends when they saw photos Maryssa and I took at her secret place—they had to have pictures of their own. We look satisfied in the shots, the wind blowing our hair and the cut wheat beneath us. The ruin hangs over our shoulders. In one Maryssa is shadowed and walking straight for it. There is something about this skeleton of a building that draws her, and while we visited it all summer last year, I only thought of the parallels between building and girl days ago. I would have never called it the Ruin, for one. I would have called it the Old Pioneer House or something similar. Maryssa prefers Ruin, surely for practical purposes.

The asphalt turns to dirt and light mud. I think of what the impending rain will do to this road, and what the mud will do to my poor road-bike.

If there is one thing to be said for me, my choreographed spontaneity does at least suggest a sort of legitimate insanity. I imagine it becomes difficult to like a person who watches his life from a few feet back then gleefully catalogues and categorizes. That my plans tend to progress inadvertently to—well—ruin, is potentially redemptive.

And there it is, her secret place—until she blew the secret by bringing me to it. I come to the end of the snowplow route. A field of snow and ice stretches out ahead of me, the ruin a half a mile through tundra, maybe
I park and step into the snow, leaving my bike idling, for the battery died over winter, and if it shuts off I’ll have to run it down the dirt road and hop on like a horse thief to get it started again.

Serving us pupusas was not Marisol’s actual job. She came to help her mother and brother, and made only tips, “which are terrible,” she’d whispered one evening. “I feel bad to say this”—she’d glanced around the strip-mall space, where only one additional table had been filled by two men in dusty baseball caps—“but Hispanic people do not tip well at all.” Work for Marisol was forty hours at a corporation called Wescor, who manufactured medical components. She was the single non-white Wescor employee among seventy.

So, Marisol did not sustain herself with our tips. Our several dollars a week did not make the difference. Perhaps because of this, when she called Maryssa’s name each time we stepped into the pupusaria, I felt her smile was honest. Maryssa would blush, so unnacustomostrange making friends. Marisol’s delivery of pupusas felt like a gesture, a gift. Our payment was an attempt at balancing that. And at the pupusaria, Maryssa allowed herself to swallow food before 6:00 PM.

Pupuseria websites say the signature dish is 1,500-3,000 years old. Many sites claim archaeologists excavating Joya De Ceren in El Salvador found that in 625 CE, a tribe called the Pipil, had been eating pupusas for dinner when the Laguna Caldera volcano burst out of the ground and buried their village in several feet of ash. The Wikis agree. I emailed the excavator of the Ceren site, Payson Sheets of the University of Colorado at Boulder, to check on this.

“There were no pupusas at Ceren,” he replied. The Pipil were not even around when the Laguna Caldera erupted. They arrived in the region centuries later. Because the Laguna Caldera eruption only buried a few square miles, the volcanic ash in which the Pipil would build their homes when they finally arrived with their pupusas was likely ash left from other eruptions. Mixed with clay, the ash made for sturdy structural walls. I wonder if they considered the implications.

I bit into a pupusa. Three painted murals filled the opposite wall of the strip-mall space: two women picking red coffee beans from vines, baskets tied around their hips, one with eyes closed, another with eyes grey and murky and looking at me. Further down the wall, past the El Salvadoran seal, a beautiful volcano, a sharp chocolate cone, jutted from painted green hills like a manmade effect, like a silo over alfalfa.

Marisol put her thumbs on our table.

“Wescor laid me off.”

Maryssa did not hear. She was probably thinking of the burning in her bones or the stabbing in her failing kidneys, or the food she had just bitten into. And the warm pupusa halfway down my throat felt, suddenly, like something I’d stolen.

Only when I’m leaving the hospital do I see myself reflected in the glass doors. On the way in I’m focused on what I’m bringing—a snack she’s probably not supposed to have, or the generic aspartame beverages I’ve successfully gotten her to call Poison (“Bring two Poison Drinks, please”). I’m focused on the red rectangle Emergency sign and how I can’t help and don’t know how to.

How many times has she been in? I track this, in a way, by the exhaustion on my face as I leave. Seven times, perhaps, since August of 2009?—that’s when the regular electrolyte IVs began, when her potassium first started dipping and putting her heart at risk. Nine times, maybe? Fifteen? I feel I might see my image reflected in the door one day and realize we’re on number fifty-six. We’re on ninety-four. The count spirals away from me.

That girl is dying bit by bit.

Keep track: She’s a hundred when we met,
Now she’s down by twenty-nine;
She whispers from the floor, says, “Johnny, you’ll be fine,
You know I was never who was meant for you.”

Her ruin rises from the snow ahead. My shoes catch briefly on the
frozen surface then tear through to the ground, up to my mid-shin, dumping crystals of ice down to my sock. I step slower. The ground feigns stability and every step I'm convinced will hold until it breaks and more ice dumps into my shoe.

I try running to get it over with, but the frozen crust grabs my toe and trips me every time.

This is hopeless.

When I look up at the ruin it has moved backward.

From my vantage point the ruin remains just the square on my side, a wall of stacked rock with a door-shaped hole in it. But if I get to it I'll find a foundation of perhaps ten feet by fifteen, two opposite walls that rise chimney stained, the two others nearly gone, their rubble strewn heavily across what was the interior of the ruin. In the summer, tall grasses grow among the rubble, haphazard and wild, in high contrast to ordered crops that literally engulf the building, as it rests a good fifty feet into a farmer's cultivated field. Perhaps this for Maryssa is the ideal society: a home stripped to its bones, missing a couple walls, empty of people and unable to hold her. I want to scratch her name into the walls—alongside fifty other names, sure, but if she makes it to spring and comes here first without me, she'll find the place waiting for her.

My shoes fill with ice crystals and they melt into my socks. They pour in with each step.

Before I knew of her secret place, she found an injured hawk here, and she watched it hobble down the sagebrush hill of the unnamed mountain ahead. She watched it, and she called an operator, connected to animal control. She waited with the hawk till they arrived. I fear they simply killed the bird. But I can think of little to explain Maryssa better than the image of her sitting here on the quiet hill with that bird, talking with it as I know she would, saying that it was going to be okay, that it was a good and a beautiful bird.

I can still hear my motorcycle idling high behind me on the dirt road. I'm surely on someone's property, and the ruin lies three, four, five miles ahead now. I stop and stare at it, impossibly far ahead. I look at the cloud behind me. It's engulfed the Wellesvilles and the highway I came in on. I imagine soaking feet and frozen fingers and the thirty-degree ride home.

I cannot make it to the ruin or I might die, and I know it in an instant and I don't rethink it a bit. There's nothing else to be done.

I turn and stumble through the crusted snow to the dirt, dump the ice from my shoes, re-tie my laces, and take off on the bike with a roar, fast, nearly sliding in the dirt, toward the freezing rain-cloud.

6.

Oral histories of the pupusa-bringers, the Pipil, and their close cousin tribe tells of coming from Mexico to Central America to escape oppressors who required for tribute—among other things—“each day that they give them from each town two children.” The Franciscan historian Fay Juan de Torquemada, one sixteenth-century recorder of these histories, wrote, “The Indians that gave this account did not know whether they wanted these children for sacrifice, or to eat, or for service.”

I might call the customs of the Pipil death-centric: priests tore out the hearts of human sacrifices—mostly prisoners taken in battle—then threw the fresh organ north, south, east, west, then straight into the air over the temple platform. They cannibalized the body. One Spaniard recorded that “This sacrifice was public, and thus it was witnessed by great and small.”

When death is worshiped is it still feared? When the temples are built for the sacrifice, when the villagers are drawn to the pyramidal platform, is it their fear that brings them?

The entire display is some drama of control, a representation of an imagined power-over-death. Fear made edible. These destructive acts betray desperate hope for salvation.

The El Salvadoran poet Pedro Geoffroy Rivas gives the Pipil derivative for the word pupusa as pupusahua, which he translates as Hinchazon—swelling, inflation. The word carries an injurious connotation, like a sprained ankle. Why is this most celebrated of Salvadoran foods tied to that? Swelling. Like the bubbling, boiling, land.

5.

Maryssa sounded different on my voicemail. She told me her doctor had her committed, which is to say she’d been locked down. They’d decided to save her.

I called the hospital and a male nurse told me I couldn’t visit. “When someone is on suicide watch, their visiting hours are restricted.” He said
Maryssa had called to reschedule her appointment and admitted she felt like killing herself. At that, they sent the ambulance and brought her by force.

“The ambulance touch seems a bit overdone,” I said. He didn’t seem to agree. We hung up. I read a book.

An hour later, after the 9:00 doors were all locked, the nurse called and asked me to bring one of her medicines the hospital didn’t carry. I took it in but was not allowed to see her.

“Sometimes,” said a blonde girl of about one hundred and thirty pounds, “when people try to commit suicide, they are trying to get attention.” Because of this she couldn’t have the cell phone I brought her. That would allow people to call. That would be giving her what she wants.

“When Maryssa tries to kill herself,” I said, “it’s because she wants to die.” I smiled and left.

4.
She’s disappearing pound by pound,
And when she’s lost she won’t be found.
Now she’s off by thirty and some,
I can only see the bones the Bible says she comes from,
And when she screams there’s not a sound.

Enter catchy chorus:

Oh, my skeleton, I love you though you’re only bone and skin.
Oh, my skeleton, I’ll love you till your starving heart gives in.

3.
I can no longer see the dark weather, which means I am in it, and I’m flying on my motorcycle, seventy-five, eighty. Most of my mental faculty is taken up by my freezing finger tips. Do I squeeze my hands, flex my knuckles, to keep the blood moving? Do I ball my fingers into my gloves and use my wrist to throttle, risking inability to brake?

I hold on and I drive. I try to relax my hands. My jaw is clenched to the point of non-breathing, so I try to relax that too. I ride over the edge of the Wellsville Mountains and back into Cache Valley where my home and Maryssa are, and the rain stops. A strip of fog lines the valley floor like a soup, and the weather is cold, freezing, but dry.

The pain in my fingers grows like a slow crushing.
There is nothing else to be done, so I drive.

A hawk leaves a swinging branch and beats his wings against the cold, nearly crossing the highway in a hobbled swoop before he rises back over the river and away into the fog.

I hope Maryssa emerges from this winter like spring and we can go together to the ruin, that we can ride out together. I remind her these last weeks when she’s been trying to gain weight: This is for motorcycle rides and summer snow-cones. We’ll carve our names alongside the fifty others. I’ll feel better when her name is there.

2.
The mural in the pupusaria was half covered by a Pepsi cooler filled with Kolashampan, a Salvadoran orange soda. Perhaps this was why I at first did not notice the volcano was framed by a painted adobe arch. We view it from the safety of our architecture. As if those ash and clay bricks could save us from our compulsion for destruction.

We slowed our pupusa intake considerably over that next while because the only thing I could think of upon entering the restaurant was whether or not Marisol had found a job. And I knew she hadn’t.

Once I picked up pupusas in a carton on my way to the Intensive Care Unit, and Marisol’s brother asked where my wife was. I lied.

Because what if they discovered that not a single of the pupusas they’d served the skinny girl made it past her stomach? I didn’t have time to explain. They’d misunderstand and think her vain or selfish. I fear these full-bodied people would only have seen that she is starving herself, and I cannot let it be understood that way.

I imagined Marisol’s eyes, the color of the volcano, and how they would see that she will leave me. They would see that I am helpless.
That Maryssa could go in an instant. Maybe today.

“It is a very popular one,” Marisol had once said of the Izalco volcano, the one in the mural. “It is famous to visit.” I stood close to the painted adobe arch. I saw, only up close, that the villages have been included—red and blue
and yellow splotches, all of them dwarfed by the dark cone. They had built their homes at its base. Payson Sheets writes of the volcanic burial of pupusa-less Joya de Ceren fourteen hundred years ago: “Based on artifact patterns in the households, the eruption evidently occurred after the evening meal was served but before the dirty dishes were washed.”

Maryssa wanted to get out of the hospital. “I wasn’t going to kill myself,” she told me. “I said I felt like killing myself. If I was going to kill myself I’d say I am going to kill myself.” She’s telling the truth, I know, and if they were Aspie’s they’d have understood the literal difference between “I feel like” and “I am going to.”

For example: I told the nurses, “I’m going to take her home.” A security guard was called in to “explain the rules.” He looked like her father, gun on the hip and everything.

She said fuck and he leaned in the way cops do with their pointer finger jabbing and shouted, “Hey! You can’t say that!”

So I yelled, “You let the fucking Mormon missionaries go room-to-room in here and she can’t say fuck?”

He pushed me out of the door and I saw her rising from the bed, arms out toward me, a panicked scream growing from her wide mouth as the door shut. I didn’t see him tackle her to the bed and pin her down. I stepped to the desk and I decided to yell.

“I’m taking my wife the fuck out of here.”

Fifteen night-shift nurses, LPNs, CNAs, purple, green, yellow scrubs. Everyone turned and stared.

A second or a minute later I shouted at one security guard, “You cannot save her. I cannot save her.” The psychiatrists, I said, they tell us we can’t control anyone, and then a girl decides to die and they strap her down. The only thing she has left is her choice to get better or die, and you want to strap her down.

“That’s where your logic breaks apart,” said a man in scrubs. He arrived early, near the beginning of the intercom alarm that blared CODE GREEN, MEDICAL UNIT again and again.

“No,” I said. And more guards with guns on hips approached from the hallway. “No, you’re wrong,” I said. “You’re acting as if death is the worst possible thing. You’re working off that flawed assumption.”

I left un-arrested. Once I stopped screaming no one seemed very upset. I suspect some foolishly thought it all romantic.

But at least she knows now. I can try to strap her down to save her or I can try to love her, and at least she knows what I’ve chosen.

They released her the next day. She said she wants to go back, to begin refeeding through the stomach tube that now pokes out just below her skin-taught ribs. “Slow, though,” she said. “I can do one pound a week. I think I really can.”
I throw myself on our waterbed and tears run down my face; hot heaving sobs erupt from the molten core of my meltdown, and unable to calm myself, I shudder involuntarily each time I exhale. Eventually I wear myself out. I think there is nothing left inside—I understand vacancy, all feels empty. But then my husband Steve, barely home from work, joins me on the bed, says nothing, holds me, and I discover there is more—He stays silent, but my tears begin anew. I lie on a mass of water while other water spills out my eyes relentlessly. My husband caresses my back, gently hands me another Kleenex, followed by another until wet wadded tissues cover the waterbed in glubby mounds.

Two days before, on Wednesday, it began—the queasy stomach, the familiar nausea, the unwelcome sensation in my belly. I immediately battled a nagging suspicion that I suffered from morning sickness. “I don’t want to be pregnant.” The thought broke over me repeatedly, like salt waves over a crumbling sand castle as I turned the packet of birth control pills over in my hand. “It’s been only seven months since Stephanie arrived.” And I had two other young children as well: Douglas—3½ years old, and Andrea, our 15-month-old daughter. Even though we’d used condoms, I’d never had that first period, never begun my packet of pills. I felt overwhelmed, subsumed, trapped by my own body, for nearly three days I could think of nothing else, fretting.

Steve’s sister, Carol, worked as a nurse at Utah Valley Hospital; she had access to the lab and could easily run a urine test, so I sent a specimen to her. Carol ran the test early that day, but when she discovered the positive result, she didn’t call me; she knew I’d planned on the pill, not another pregnancy so soon. She didn’t want to tell the news. Finally, I called Carol. “I’m sorry, Bonnie,” she said, her voice small and quiet. “I know you wanted more space after Stephanie.”

Now I lay here, grieving, Steve by my side, and watch the sun’s waning September rays give in to sunset, then to dusk. Stephanie wakes from her afternoon nap. She’s hungry; she needs my breast and I need her—the symbiotic
greed of a nursing mother and a crying, hungry infant. Steve goes to get her as I try to will calm upon myself, to control my quaking body before I hold and feed my sweet baby.

Later, after Douglas and Andrea are bathed, cuddled, and in bed, I stand at the sink. I wash dishes, looking out the window into the night, Debussy’s Clair de Lune in my ears, trying to think of something else, anything else, but nothing works; another new supply of tears courses down my cheeks silently, dripping into the dishwasher. Why is this so hard for me? It’s not really that I don’t want another baby—I just don’t want another baby now. “How can I be pregnant without even one period?” And later, for the millionth time: “How can I give four little children the attention, the love, the care that they need? How can I possibly do this?” I have no answers, only questions, only tears.

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I grew up a tomboy who took advantage of the land that surrounded our farmhouse and the freedom of roaming Dad’s farm, the sagebrush-covered desert, the sprawled out homes, fields, and barns of the little town I grew up in during the 1950s. I played cowboys and Indians with the boys in town, ducking behind fences, running from woodpile to hay stack, bellying my way along the ground to get a cap-gun shot off against the enemy. I tightrope walked on wooden 2x4 walls between the calf and pig-pens, my arms straight out. Later, I shot magpies with BB guns, and targeted jack-rabbits with a single-shot .22 caliber rifle. My dad paid a bounty for these dead animals that easily decimated the growing garden. I rode my bicycle past the canal and far up into the canyon, the places where I later went to think, alone, as a teenager, the intoxicating feeling of space and places to go filling my expanding soul. I enjoyed tagging behind Dad as he burnt ditches, irrigated fields, and pulled implements across the broad expanse of the land, sitting next to him on the tractor, working our farm.

But when my mom came home from the hospital with our new baby, I found myself at her side all day every day. I didn’t want to go out and ride my bike or the horse; I couldn’t leave my baby sister, Tammy, alone. I begged again and again to hold the baby, and Mom kindly put my sister in my arms, allowed me to hold her, let me help with her bath, watched while I goo-gooed at her sitting in her chair, patient with my baby-itis. On Sundays at church, I stuck to Tammy like glue. I held her until she cried or needed her diaper changed. Tammy drew me in tight like a magnet.

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After I brought my third child, Stephanie, home from the hospital, it seemed that all I did was wash: I washed sticky hands, dirty faces, stinky bare bottoms, runny noses, little bodies. I washed diapers, plastic pants, burp cloths, receiving blankets, crib sheets, pajamas. I washed clothes: toddler undershirts, training panties, little boys’ pants and shirts, little girls’ pants, shirts, dresses, and tights. I washed Steve’s clothes and my clothes. I washed dishes and counters, the stove-top, the fridge door, and the wide area where my toddlers’ hands touched the walls and the sliding glass door—that dirty stripe that ran around the bottom of the walls in my home from about 14” to 26” up from the floor. Walls that sometimes closed in on me. When I felt tired, I played upbeat music: Scott Joplin rags, 40s Big Band music, Neil Diamond. Usually I caught a second wind. I read to my children before bed, and then while they slept I tried to catch up on all the things I didn’t get washed earlier. The next morning, I washed again. This cycle became my life, and soon I’d have not three, but four children, the oldest barely four years old.

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One night soon after the fourth pregnancy is confirmed, I begin to read an article in a copy of Time magazine that a friend gave me, and I can’t put it down. The article states succinctly that for each child in the home under the age of five, the average parent or adult guardian loses three thousand words from their vocabulary, and the claims are backed up with an impressive line of data to validate the authors’ position. No wonder my vocabulary has turned into a dictionary for beginning readers. I have three children under the age of five, and another on the way. Let’s see, that will be a total of 12,000 words to go missing from my word choices per year. And I have five-and-a-half years before this newly-expected baby turns five years old.
I need space.

My fourth child is the by far the easiest of all my babies. LeslieAnn hardly ever makes a fuss; she’s happy all day long nearly every day. She smiles, she laughs, and as she grows into a toddler, she fills our home with love. One night, late, I tidy up, re-stacking magazines, organizing my books, dusting the bookshelves, listening to Glen Miller, when I hear LeslieAnn, seventeen-months-old, laughing. I walk into her bedroom where she jumps up and down in her captive crib, laughs, and begs, “Dance, Mama, dance!” So I pick her up and we dance together, smiling, cuddling, and moving in rhythm to great 40s tunes until she settles and falls asleep on my shoulder, the scent of Johnson’s baby shampoo in my head.

I struggle against the full shopping cart, pushing it out the door of Smith’s grocery store, Doug holding onto the cart on my left, Andrea holding on to the right, Stephanie sitting in the seat of the cart, and LeslieAnn nestled in her car seat down inside the cart. It’s time for LeslieAnn’s mid-afternoon feeding; she whines. Doug teases Andrea because she just stepped into a big puddle; it’s raining: “Well, why didn’t you walk around the puddle?”

“Well, hold on behind Mom, then—don’t walk into the water, you dummy.”

“You kids, please don’t argue—watch out, Doug, don’t walk into that man,” I warn.

We’re all getting soaked; the rain has picked up. I push harder, trying to make some speed without losing the kids. Stacked tightly around LeslieAnn and her car seat are glass jugs of apple juice—the makings for steamed cider for tonight’s Christmas party for the primary teachers and their spouses. I’ve got to hurry to get the cider on the stove and heated up for the party; I should’ve been home at least an hour ago.

Finally reaching the car, I unlock the station wagon door, and order, “Hurry and get in, you guys, and make sure you fasten your seatbelts.” Doug and Andrea struggle to get up and into the car at the same time I pick up LeslieAnn in her seat and hurry to the other side, unlock and open the door, and try to climb in far enough that I can attach her car seat to its base in the middle of the back seat. I hurry back for Stephanie; she cries because her face is so wet. I pick her up and struggle to strap her into the other car seat next to LeslieAnn, shutting the door when I finally get the buckle to catch. I walk back around the car and shut the other door behind Andrea and Doug, as they both buckle into the seatbelt they share in the back seat. Pushing the cart around to the back of the station wagon, I hoist the heavy, wet gallons of apple juice, one by one, into the car until all ten of them are in, and shove the bags full of cookies in beside the glass jugs. I run the cart to the stand, and race back to the car, trying to keep my hair from being destroyed; I certainly don’t have time to re-do my hair before the party, that’s for sure.

I scramble into the car and shut the door. Whew. Breathe. Key in the ignition, windshield wipers on, wait for the car next to me. Finally we inch our way out of the parking stall and make our way to the street; I drive very carefully through the gutter so the apple juice jars don’t hit against each other, and make our way along 56th the three miles to our home. As I turn the corner onto our street and turn again into our driveway, the car travels only five miles an hour, but the shift from the steep hill down our street causes stuff to move as I pull into the driveway; I look into the rearview mirror just as the jugs collide, spouting an apple juice fountain: the brown liquid shoots up, out, sideways, every which way.

“Damn it!” I think—but don’t say: all my little kids are in the car. I turn off the ignition, a stream of swear words running rampant in my mind, and pull Doug and Andrea from the car, take LeslieAnn into the bedroom and put her, still strapped in her car seat, inside her crib. I go back to the car for Stephanie, helping her out of her car seat, and carry her into the house.

“Go downstairs and play.”

I trudge back outside; open the back door of the station wagon. Apple juice runs everywhere, broken glass dams diverting it one way, then the other. Six of the jugs are broken.
“Damn it! Damn it!” I curse. Something I never do. “Damn it to hell!” But I can’t move to clean it up. I just look at the mess, the rain coursing down my face, and continue to swear. For at least five minutes, I stand at the back of the car, spewing forth words I never say. The apple juice runs out the door, down the bumper, onto the cement and mixes with the rain headed for the gutter. Finally I walk to the back door, through the kitchen, and pick up the phone to call Steve.

“I’m going to hell!” I announce. “I’m going to hell, so have fun in heaven without me.” Silence.

“What happened, what’s wrong, honey?”

I tell him about the wild day, the fighting kids. Leslie, still hungry, cries loudly in the background. “I’m going to hell, and I’m not cleaning up that mess,” I practically scream. Suddenly Douglas and Andrea appear from the basement, stand behind the stair railing, eyes wide, silent. I walk away from them, down the hall to the bathroom and shut the door tightly on the long phone cord. “You’ll have to clean it up because if I have to, I’ll just keep swearing and I’ve cursed more in the last few minutes than the entire rest of my life put together,” I say.

In twenty-five minutes Steve comes in the back door from work. Hugs me. Hauls in the four remaining jugs of apple juice. Pours the juice into pots on the stove to heat up. Grabs a bucket of soapy water and heads for the station wagon. Cleans up the entire mess.

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Just before Doug, Andrea, and Stephanie come home from Silver Hills elementary, I walk out to get the mail while LeslieAnn, three-and-a-half, takes her afternoon nap. Aspen leaves shimmer in the breeze, the daffodils beginning to bloom below them in the warm sunshine. I sort through envelopes from the mailbox. One reads “Colleen Willardson” on the return address—Colleen, my best friend from high school. I rip the envelope open as I return to the kitchen and sit down at the table, hungry for news. I find an announcement of Colleen’s college graduation; she’s earned a degree in elementary education. I’m very happy for my friend, but I also taste tears that ooze out, rolling down my face.
Not once, not twice, but three times during the years my children are all at home I send for transcripts from my ancient academic past: Richfield High School, the single semester I barely tolerated at smug, uppity BYU, and the incredible two years I spent at Dixie College. I request that the transcripts be sent to USU and then visit with a counselor at the USU center in Salt Lake. “You’ve got a solid record here,” the counselor confirms each time. “A high GPA. With your general ed classes complete and your associate’s degree, you can start right into your major.” He looks up at me, smiles, re-adjusts his glasses. “Just fill out these papers—you’ll be accepted.” He continues, “You can begin when the semester starts.”

I drive home, excited at the prospect of returning to school, place the precious admissions papers on the counter, fill them out the next morning. But I never mail the application in. Not once, not twice, but three times I just let the papers sit there. In the quiet of the evening, when I have time to think, I consider my life, my children. I think about my days with them—helping with homework, encouraging piano practice, and driving to piano lessons, sports, swimming, and other activities. I know that if I go back to school the demands of homework, reading, and study will take much of my time and energy. In the end I decide that even more than I want to return to school, I want to give my kids everything that I have while they live at home. A choice I make repeatedly. Between my desire for quantity—as well as quality—time with my kids, and our rather tight financial situation, I decide and re-decide to wait to re-enter school. “Someday, I’ll go back to school,” I think. “Someday there will be space for me.”

Steve and I move to Logan in July, 2004 where he builds a new business. My life changes abruptly with the move. I have no children in school, no classroom or group to volunteer with, my children and all my friends and former piano students live in Salt Lake. For the first eight months, I don’t even have a church assignment; the busy, joyful life I had in Taylorsville turns immediately quiet, dormant in Logan. I feel empty, vacant, lost. My home is completely silent so I play CDs of Broadway musicals: My Fair Lady, Forever Plaid, Guys and Dolls, and others constantly, trying to cheer myself up.

I can’t get used to the continual gray of this Cache Valley winter. It’s February 2005, and I haven’t been able to see the back fence of our yard, only forty feet away, for nearly four months now because of inversion/fog/smog; I feel depressed and lonely.

The phone rings; it’s my dairy-farmer Dad. “Hello, Bonnie.” he says, “What are you doing?” I tell him that I’m cleaning house. Fog surrounds my windows; fog surrounds me.

“No,” he replies. “I mean what are you going to do in Logan?”

“Oh, I guess I’ll get a job, Dad, if I can find something,” I respond, washing the table. “But doing what?” I think to myself.

“Why don’t you go back to school? You’ve always wanted to.”

A long silence. What to say?

“We’re helping Scott with his education at BYU now, and I’m not sure we can swing it.”

“You’re my oldest child. I didn’t have the money to help you in school before, but I did help all your brothers and sisters. Now you have the time, you’re just down the street from Utah State, and I want to help you with tuition. Go get registered for classes.”

My heart leaps, my house cleans itself—I dance around with my washcloth, singing.

Steve and I move to Logan in July, 2004 where he builds a new business. My life changes abruptly with the move. I have no children in school, no classroom or group to volunteer with, my children and all my friends and former piano students live in Salt Lake. For the first eight months, I don’t even have a church assignment; the busy, joyful life I had in Taylorsville turns immediately quiet, dormant in Logan. I feel empty, vacant, lost. My home is completely silent so I play CDs of Broadway musicals: My Fair Lady, Forever Plaid, Guys and Dolls, and others constantly, trying to cheer myself up.

I’m not sure if my children understood how high they were on my priority list when they were young, but later on they do; when I finally make it back to school, when they are all adults, each of them voices comments regarding my never-ending passion for a degree. They cheer me on. Loudly.

“Oh, Mom! It’s what you’ve always wanted to do,” Stephanie exclaims. “I’m so excited for you. I remember you filling out applications and looking at class schedules, but then you never really went back to school. I can’t think of anything better for you right now, Mom.”

Andrea, a re-entry student and single mom who studies nursing at Westminster College offers, “Well, we’ll both be studying late into the night now. I’m thrilled for you, Mom. I know finishing your bachelor’s was your dream the entire time you were raising us kids.”
Unlike many of my friends, who think I am completely nuts for going back to school in my 50s. “You’ll be fifty-five when you graduate,” one friend complains.

“I’ll be fifty-five in five years whether or not I go back to school,” I respond.

But most of my friends don’t get it—my passion for more education. “Why would you want to do that?” people say. Or “I’m glad I don’t have that problem; it doesn’t sound fun to me.” I feel like saying, “Frankly, my dear, I don’t give a damn.” Instead I say nothing.

After my first trip to USU’s bookstore, I sit at home perusing my books, when the phone rings. “Hi, Mom,” Doug says, “What are you doing today?” I’m lucky—my twenty-seven-year-old son calls me almost every day just to chat for a while, see what I’m doing, connect with me; something none of my friends’ sons do.

“I’m looking at my books for school—I’m excited, and I’m scared to death.”

“Oh, Mom. You don’t have anything to worry about. You’re twice or three times smarter than most of the kids I went to school with at the ‘U.’ You’ll be fine. Trust me.”

“Doug, it’s been twenty-nine years since I took a class. I know how smart kids are today, Scott’s friends, for example. Do you think I have any brains left?”

“Trust me, Mom. You’ll be fine. Most students don’t care like you do; they haven’t wanted to go back to school for thirty years. They’re flaky teenagers thinking about the boy or girl in the next row. They won’t have a chance. You are hungry for it; you’ll be one of those people most students hate who raises the grading curve and makes them all look bad.”

“I don’t know, Doug…”

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I sit in room 214 of the Ray B. West building at USU; it’s the first week of December and I am about to take my first final exam in nearly thirty years. I’m a fifty-one-year-old grandma taking space in a class of savvy eighteen to twenty-two year olds attempting to face down my fear. I loved the class—everything from Beowulf to Paradise Lost to my favorite, The Duchess of Malfi—but the exam scares the heck out of me. Phebe Jensen, a passionate teacher, a wonderful lecturer, is tough—and I’ve heard stories from other students about how difficult her exams are. A blue book and a pen sit waiting on my desk, waiting for success or failure to be inscribed inside. A box-elder bug lands on the blue book, and I brush it away. Dr. Jensen gives some last instructions and passes out the exam. Silence pushes the normal classroom chatter out the door. Can everyone hear my heart thumping wildly? My mouth turns to cotton, perspiration forms on my forehead, my stomach twists into knots. I feel sick. Do I need to run to the bathroom? Everyone else writes furiously, and I haven’t picked up my pen yet. Only a few moments later Dr. Jensen walks over and stands in front of my desk. “What’s the matter, Bonnie? Is something wrong?” My condition must be visibly obvious. A wave of heat passes over my face.

I look up sheepishly. “I think I’m having a panic attack—I’ve never had one before, but this is the first exam I’ve taken in nearly thirty years—I feel sick,” I admit, louder than I mean to.

Dr. Jensen laughs. “Oh, don’t worry, you’ll get your sea legs under you,” she comments.

I put a mint in my mouth, take a deep breath, shove my shaking feet down hard into the floor, open the book, and begin to write.
Obscured by its place in the middle of a serpentine s-curve, the juncture of Old Coast Road and California’s Highway 1 is easy to miss, but not today, not when an elephantine Caterpillar Motor Grader is slowly roaring along the road’s edge, its brilliant yellow hue nearly a mirror of image of the sun above. Most travelers along the Cabrillo Highway hardly notice this road—every driver of every car I’ve seen seems to stare into the sapphire waters of the Pacific or pull into the parking area just before Bixby Bridge for a few quick photographs with the kids in front of the massive open-spandrel arch and the ocean. From where I stand on Old Coast Road I can see the entire span of the bridge bonding both sides of the canyon, can almost make out mist coming off the waves crashing against the granite rocks below.

The grader kicks the road into dark piles of damp gravel that receive my footsteps with an unexpected softness, slowing the pace of my walk. The road is flat and completely exposed, appearing to descend precipitously into a verdant canyon at the limit of my vision ahead. To my left are high hills of chaparral and lupine and heather; to my right, an abrupt ridge that overlooks a sheer drop to whatever lies below—I shudder to think of it. The heat of the morning sun seems to move in waves up my neck to the top of my head, warming my brow and inducing droplets of sweat that intermittently catch in my eyebrows and trickle into my eyes. This, combined with the ever-present roar of the grader’s engine, would surely be an annoyance were I in any other place, at any other time.

Fifty years ago, Jack Kerouac walked this same road under a blanket of early morning darkness, blind but for the railroad lantern he held in his outstretched arm. Wearing a new shirt, socks, and underwear, Kerouac—still possessed of the rough, romantic winsomeness cultivated in his years as a standout athlete and voracious reader at Columbia and refined through his years as a footloose seeker across the American continent (though he would soon enough sport the bloated and disheveled look of a drunkard)—arrived at Old Coast Road in an inky fog in a taxi hired from Monterey and walked the rutted road under the weight of his rucksack with his head down and eyes locked cautiously on the road in front of him. The experience terrified him—he could only hear the waves of the Pacific “barking” at him “like a dog in the fog” as the water crashed against the Santa Lucia cliffs nearby.

Kerouac was looking for the same thing as I am on this early morning in April: the poet and publisher Lawrence Ferlinghetti’s cabin, the place where, in 1960, Kerouac would have a breakdown brought on by alcohol withdrawal. He had come to Big Sur, California, to escape the pressures of fame associated with the notoriety of his novel On the Road, which, to his perpetual displeasure, positioned him as the figurehead of the Beat Generation, which rose out of coffee shops and lofts of bohemian enclaves in the late 1950s. More than
anything, he had come to Big Sur to escape his own demons—alcoholism and depression—an experience he detailed in his frankly related, achingly beautiful 1962 novel Big Sur. Kerouac didn’t make it to Ferlinghetti’s cabin that night, though he did reach a “dreamy meadowland” at the bottom of the canyon where he slept next to a creek. In the morning, he awoke to the high cliffs and steep canyons that surround the road that I’m now walking, amazed he had made it alive. As I ambled along the vertiginous and exposed canyon road, I can’t help but consider the difficulty of navigating this at night—one fast move to the right and I’m gone. Yet, I also can’t escape the fact that the Caltrans grader behind me is kicking up dirt long buried, that I may be treading the very earth that Kerouac walked half a century before.

In many ways, this is exactly what I’m doing. While I have traveled to Big Sur to see the setting of one of my favorite novels, I have come here more than anything to restore my own inner-harmony, and I’m quite aware that neither Kerouac nor I are the first to travel to Big Sur looking for something specific and restorative, something akin to healing. And why not? Big Sur is, after all, the place where Henry Miller “first learned to say Amen!” and Robinson Jeffers saw “life purged of its ephemeral accretions. … For the first time in [his] life [he] could see people living—amid unspoiled scenery—essentially as they did in the Idyls of the Sagas, or in Homer’s Ithaca.” Because of Miller and Jeffers, because of Kerouac’s book, I’ve long associated this incredible and forbidden place on the California coast with healing and harmony and discovery, all things that are in fact part and parcel to the myth that surrounds Big Sur.

Big Sur, California, is not a place that fits the traditional definition of a “place.” Indeed, when one greets a construction such as that which begins the preceding sentence—city, state—one is liable to view Big Sur as merely another settlement in California. It is not. Big Sur is a name given to the roughly sixty-five miles of wild and forbidden Pacific coastline that stretches from just south of Monterey to just north of San Simeon. Its parameters, however, are not defined, only understood. Here the San Lucia Range rises to meet the Pacific, where water steadily beats against high granite walls that have long kept the area free from maritime traffic and colonization, at once creating the unique symbiosis that makes Big Sur so unique: dramatic natural scenes and wild land adverse to settlement.

Between the San Lucias are deep canyons that run laterally east and west, many filled with redwoods, pines, firs, and even yucca. These canyons and nearby grasslands once provided hunting grounds for three small Native tribes, the Ohlone, Esselen, and Salinan, who originally populated the land. Spanish explorers later named the rivers and creeks that run through the canyons to the Pacific, though they, like the Mexicans who came afterwards, didn’t settle there, for the landscape proved too forbidding. Slowly and gradually, pioneers began to build settlements on the Big Sur coast, and many of the names of the first homesteaders—Partington, Pfeiffer, Castro, Trotter—can still be found in the landscape or the families that inhabit Big Sur.

In time, the isolation and ruggedness of Big Sur became something of an attraction that the wealthy and adventurous sought out, including the writers Jack London, George Sterling, and Jeffers. In 1937, Highway 1 was completed, opening the coastline to increased settlement and tourism. Because of the power of the landscape and its ability to inspire, artists colonies began to appear, attracting a bohemian population that would come to define Big Sur. Writers, poets, painters, thinkers—Henry Miller, Hunter S. Thompson, Joan Baez among them—moved into the canyons and frequented local spots like Nepenthe and Esalen. Soon, the small population grew larger, though perhaps not as large as it could, for those who considered Big Sur home were fierce about maintaining its sanctity.

Indeed, Big Sur has long been an outpost for those who wish to find solitude and peace in an extraordinary natural setting. In a 1954 article entitled “Big Sur, Utopia?” published in the regional magazine Big Sur, Yesterday, Today, Tomorrow, Jean Hersey articulates the draw:

Big Sur is all five senses come alive and alert. It is beauty to see—from the great rolling mountains, bright blue with lupine and azure but terrifies, to the clouds that sweep in over the sea and up the canyons; it is pink tide pools, sea anemones, peacock-colored seaweed, and little children playing naked in sunny gardens … some say that Big Sur is a state of mind: either you never want to leave this country or you can’t wait to get away. It has no halfway converts. Those who prefer conventional patterns of living do not like this region. … Some say that Big Sur accepts or rejects those who come to it. If it accepts you and you accept it, you will soon find yourself changing—because you will catch
something of the bigness of the landscape, something of the bigness of yourself.

I first came to Big Sur—the place and Kerouac’s novel—in Prague five years ago. I had traveled to Europe in order to escape the specter of a girl who had broken my heart and I thought only the distance of oceans could heal me. In lonesome hostel beds from Budapest to Bosnia I became enmeshed in Kerouac’s desire to outrun his own demons in the East by traveling, as he had done so many times before—and most famously in On the Road—to the West. I thought I could do the same by simply reversing course. Yet, Kerouac’s autobiographical novel Big Sur is not so much a sequel to On the Road as it is the other side of the coin. There is no lust for life here, only the desire to get away from it. As Matt Theado writes in Understanding Kerouac, “Kerouac’s overdue literary success destroyed him. He was ill-equipped for dealing with the strong response that his work … evoked from both fans and critics…[T]he sudden assault of celebrity status, heavy drinking, and the likelihood that he felt guilty about using his friends’ lives in his work combined to drive Kerouac to a breakdown in the summer of 1960.”

That summer, Lawrence Ferlinghetti, the poet and proprietor of City Lights in San Francisco, the man who would gain fame as the publisher of such Beat classics as Ginsberg’s Howl, opened his Bixby Canyon cabin to Kerouac, who planned to use the time to start a romantic poem about the sea. His first few days provided ample inspiration. “You see one single flower nodding on a cliff side far across the canyon,” writes Kerouac, who in the book uses his fictional nom de plume, Jack Dulouz, “or a huge knot in a redwood tree looking like Zeus’ face, or some of god’s little crazy creations going around in creek pools … or terraces of fern in the dripping redwood shade, and you think ‘A long way from the beat generation, in this rain forest.’”

Dulouz’s Buddhist inclinations, long suppressed due to alcoholism, begin to come back rather quickly. He contemplates the small animals that inhabit the woods surrounding the cabin, even going so far as to feed the mice and birds that frequent the porch so he can watch them eat. He begins to deeply interact with the landscape and he becomes invigorated: “So easy in the woods to daydream and pray to the local spirits and say ‘Allow me to stay here, I only want peace’ and those foggy peaks answer back mutely Yes.” Later, Dulouz says, “it’s time for me to quietly watch the world and even enjoy it, first in woods like these, then just calmly walk and talk among people of the world, no booze, no drugs, no binges.”

It is ironic then that Big Sur’s landscape leads Dulouz to his final “madness,” which begins after he inhales a large gasp of iodine while standing on the beach near the cabin. “I see myself as just doomed, pitiful,” writes Kerouac, “an awful realization that I have been fooling myself all my life thinking there was a next thing to do to keep the show going and actually I’m just a sick clown and so is everybody else … I’m left sitting there in the sand after having almost fainted and stare at the waves which suddenly are not waves at all … The sea seems to yell to me GO TO YOUR DESIRE DON’T HANG AROUND HERE”. Dulouz returns to San Francisco, commencing a routine of drunken days in the city and weekend parties at Monsanto’s (a fictionalized Ferlinghetti) cabin, each of which pushes him further and further from the satori he wishes to find in Big Sur.

The final section of the book ends with Kerouac’s description of a mental breakdown, which is brought on by delirium tremens and his apparent inadequacies—his exhaustion from fame, his inability to enjoy the nature upon which he once thrived—until he has one desperate final vision of death: “I see the cross, it’s silent, it stays a long time, my heart goes out to it, my whole body fades away to it, by God I am being taken away my body starts dying and swooning out to the Cross standing in a luminous area of the darkness, I start to scream because I know I’m dying … suddenly I see the cross again, all the noise of the voices ‘I’m with you Jesus, for always, thank you.’” The book ends with a kind of resolution, Dulouz telling the reader that everything will be alright, now and forever, though the darkness of the book’s tone and Dulouz’s fixation with death leaves one perhaps unconvinced this is true.

I traveled to Big Sur for reasons relatively less urgent than Kerouac, though they were certainly of great consequence to me. I had entered my first year as a composition instructor at Utah State University and my enthusiasm for the position and the written word had become deflated by my students’ apathy towards both of these. I had also become disenfranchised, disinterested in my own studies and wearied from the rigors of graduate school life. What’s more, my desire to become a college professor, a dream long-held, had become deflated by the harsh realities of the academic job market. On top of this, my
wife had lost her job, our main source of income, and we both felt culturally and spiritually confined living in a dominantly Mormon area of northern Utah. I slowly slipped into a depression, which made my battles all the more harder to wage.

It is a fact of my life that whenever I’ve felt down or angry or confined I’ve enmeshed myself in the freedom of travel, something I’ve taken from the Beat Generation writers, specifically Kerouac. When I was nineteen, for example, I dropped out of college because I thought I could find a better education on my own by spending a summer backpacking through Europe. When the boredom and confinement of living in my rural Wisconsin hometown became unbearable a year later, I set out for the mountains of Wyoming because they offered solitude, seclusion, and a fresh start. When I quit a career with my hometown newspaper a few years after that because I again felt ensnared within a life I did not want, I moved to California. In each instance, I constructed the place at the end of my journey as a restorative force, an imagined Arcadia that would revitalize my spirit, and in each case, my presumption was accurate.

Because I was in a place where I needed to heal again, Big Sur was an obvious choice, if for no other reason than other writers I admired traveled there to mend. Henry Miller was ready to give up on America when he stumbled upon Big Sur in 1944. He had been an expatriate in France and Greece, mooching off the people he met, following the inclinations of artistic tendencies he felt he couldn’t practice in the states. Big Sur changed Miller from a writer who had cultivated a hard-edged craving for sybaritic pleasures to a merry writer with a yen for sensual pleasures and a wisdom to know that hedonism was more than simply carnal urges. Miller stayed until 1962, reluctantly leaving to be closer to Los Angeles. But Big Sur forever left its mark on the writer and his work, and he knew it would, because he saw a transformation in people who traveled or settled there:

Nowhere have I seen individuals work so earnestly and assiduously on themselves. Nor so successfully. Yet nothing is taught or preached here, at least overtly. Some have made the effort and failed ... But even those who failed gained something. For one thing, their outlook on life was altered, enlarged if not “improved.” And what could be better than for the teacher to become his own pupil, or the preacher his own convert?

Robinson Jeffers came to Carmel, just north of Big Sur, after a turbulent period in which his mistress became his wife, his father and young daughter perished, and the Great War caused him to question his idealism. As Jeffers scholar Robert Brophy notes, “One must not underestimate the impact and influence of Carmel on Jeffers, Magnificent natural surroundings of mountains and sea, beaches, and cloud-scudded skies were all but overwhelming.” In 1919, Jeffers and his wife, Una, purchased land on a knoll overlooking Point Lobos and Carmel Bay, and Jeffers began to create, quite literally, a place where he could live his beliefs. He became an apprentice to a stone mason and contractor and began to construct his family’s home, Tor House, by rolling rocks up the shore to his property. Year by year he built the walls of the home and later his work space, Hawk Tower. This would prove a formative experience, one that would symbolize his poetry: the integration of the land and the imagination to form something powerful, unique, and whole. In an ars poetica entitled “Apology for Bad Dreams,” Jeffers describes a horse being beaten by its owner amid a beautiful coastal scene. And Jeffers finishes the stanza with this:

...What said the prophet? “I create good and I create evil: I am the Lord.” (44)

The Big Sur landscape offered Jeffers a representative archetype of the forces he had long been accustomed to as the son of an authoritarian father and artistic mother: intransigence and sensuality, good and evil. They were forces that compelled him to stay.

In many ways, these writers participated in creating the myth of Big Sur: Miller’s breathless invocations of the landscape and his life on the coast advanced the notion of Big Sur as an untroubled paradise; Jeffers’s poetic celebration of the landscape imparted the conviction that the Big Sur/Carmel coast was a place where one could find solace and poetry in an evocative landscape. This is the myth that Dulouz—that Kerouac—searched for but could not find, the thing that I had understood long before traveling to the place myself through my reading of Miller, Jeffers, and Richard Brautigan. But myths
by definition are largely untrue and Kerouac’s *Big Sur* stands in stark contrast to what Miller and Jeffers espouse in their works. Hunter S. Thompson too bought into the myth before moving to Big Sur in the early 1960s. In a 1964 letter to a friend, he writes:

Too many people, including me, have pampered this myth of Big Sur as a boiling vat of creativity, but it’s not so. The most interesting aspect of the Big Sur syndrome, in truth, concerns the “artist” who goes there to “create” and winds up a local windbag. Or else he quits real quick. The fine distinction is that the myth of Big Sur attracts talent, but the reality of Big Sur erodes talent.

The difference in interpretations of Big Sur comes down, to I think, something as simple as intimate experience. In his *Space and Place: The Perspective of Experience*, Yi-Fu Tuan writes that, “Intimate experiences are hard to express … They are also fleeting … and their meaning so eludes confident interpretation that they cannot provide the basis for group planning and action.” He further notes that a place’s history can embellish it with meaning, as can art that functions to honor the place: “Many places, profoundly significant to particular individuals and groups, have little visual prominence. They are known viscerally, as it were, and not through the discerning eye or mind.” In essence, one person’s experience in a place cannot be duplicated, for it is based on an absolutely subjective understanding, which, depending on the experience, can lend the place a sense of intimacy and permanence within one’s mind. Yet, when one subjective personal experience is interpreted as universal truth it enters the realm of mythical space, which Tuan calls an “intellectual construct,” a “response of feeling and imagination to fundamental human needs.”

In the context of the literature of Big Sur, Miller and Jeffers reflected their subjective experiences of the California coast in their work, creating a myth of place that may or may not reflect the experience all may have in Big Sur—Kerouac’s experience is certainly evidence of this. To put my point differently, Richard Brautigan’s novel *A Confederate General from Big Sur* ends with five separate endings in which five different scenarios take place. And then we are given this:

Then there are more and more endings: the sixth, the 53rd, the 131st, the 9,435th ending, endings going faster and faster, more and more endings, faster and faster until this book is having 186,000 endings per second.

This swirling prose is meant to emphasize that no ending is more important than any other; that only the reader’s perception of the denouement is of any real importance. In this, we see that a place or person or story can be interpreted differently and separately by everyone, and, conversely, the possibilities for these things are endless. In *A Confederate General from Big Sur*, it’s up to the reader to attribute importance and credence to the story of a lost weekend, and ultimately, all stories. And all places, it would seem.

As I reach the crest of the hill on my return to the top of Old Coast Road that beautiful spring morning, I peak over the edge of the canyon wall and wipe my brow with my bandana as I make one more attempt at trying to view Ferlinghetti’s cabin, which I haven’t seen with any conclusiveness during my hour-long walk. As I look over the escarpment, I begin to think about Kerouac walking up this road to hitchhike Highway 1 to San Francisco. I think about Kerouac and Neal Cassady, his friend and muse—the inspiration for the iconic Dean Moriarty of *On the Road*—flying down this road in a Jeep, the last time they would ever share in the pursuit of neverending kicks. I think about Kerouac losing his mind somewhere within my line of vision. How is it possible, I wonder, especially when writers like Henry Miller and Robinson Jeffer found so much here. How can one place, one incredible place, be interpreted so differently?

Within that same gaze I see the mountains framing the Bixby Bridge in the distance, the blue sky a mirror to the ocean in the horizon beyond, I am overcome with a sensation of contentment, and I tell myself this is a wild place, a good place. Though I don’t know that my eyes have set upon Ferlinghetti’s cabin while I stand at the precipice of the canyon road, in that moment, as I wipe the grime from my face, I resolve to believe that any of the cabins below are his simply because I want them to be. This place is an important part of my own literary history and it’s what I came to Big Sur to see. I need it to be Ferlinghetti’s cabin and the structure I see below is close enough to being the real thing—it probably is, maybe not. In the end, isn’t it my interpretation
that matters most? I have come to Big Sur hoping to find something of what Kerouac and Miller and Jeffers wrote of, and, as I look toward Bixby Bridge one more time and see the great blue Pacific glistening below, I believe I find it—a place where I can begin to create a myth of my own.

"Burrow" by Michelle Larsen
Honorable Mention Undergraduate Art

My dad stands in front of me wearing an orange vest strapped over a camouflage jacket. A matching orange cap stretches over his head. It has flaps that he can fold down and tie beneath his chin to keep his ears warm. Right now the flaps are up, and his ears are red like his nose.

We are hiking up a ravine that has no trail. It is not too steep, but I have trouble keeping up with my father while I try to hike quietly. I do not have a cap like him. I have a thick orange snow hat that has been rolled several times at the bottom so that it doesn’t cover my nose. My ears stay warm, but the extra padding muffles everything. I probably make more noise than I think as I try to keep pace and keep quiet.

Dad stops in front of fallen pine. Instead of walking around it, he sits on top and swings his legs around to the other side. I can barely hear the fabric of his pants scrape against the bark. He takes a few steps and stops, unslinging his rifle from his shoulder as he stretches. He breathes into his hands, one wrapped around the other, fingers thick and strong. He waits for me, but doesn’t look back.

The log is too tall for me. Not enough room to crawl underneath. I attempt to scramble over, but the bark comes away in rotted chunks which stick to my clothes. I don’t think to trek around the fallen tree, around its roots that are forced to stretch up towards a gray morning sky, or around the tip that is shoved sideways toward a sunless horizon. I find a series of branches that I can use as a makeshift ladder and start to climb. One of the branches cracks when I place my boot on it and push. The sound is loud in the early morning on the mountain.

“Quiet,” my dad says. He continues to wait for me and to watch the forest. I finish traversing the fallen tree and step next to my father.

“Your feet warm?” he asks.

I nod my head, but when he looks down at me I say “yes.”

He nods, looking at the mountainside. “Keep wiggling your toes.” It is hard to hear him, so I lift my bulging hat over my ears. “Your feet won’t get
cold that way.”

I do as I’m told, but I can’t get much movement in my extremities. Only a faint twitch through the layers of sock I was forced to don earlier. Sock over sock over long underwear tucked into a sock, all surrounded by a waterproof boot laced nearly to my knee. My dad thinks I’ll stay warm; he said so when he dressed me back at the house. My father picks up his rifle and continues his trek upward. His boots crunch softly on dirt, pine needles and twigs.

The air is cold, and my ears tingle. I rearrange my hat, dampening the sounds around me. Somewhere higher up on the mountain, my brother Nathan sits and waits after a half climb, half run up the ridge east of us. The idea is to have him in place at the top of the ravine while we hike towards him, pushing any deer up and out the ravine and into a bowl shaped area with tall grass and no trees. I imagine my brother sitting on the edge of the bowl beneath a massive tree that juts up into the sky. I imagine him cradling his rifle, ready to shoot the first flash of antler and fur. He is a younger version of my father. Ears red but pricked and listening. Eyes flashing, almost frantic. Almost shaking with adrenaline. “Buck fever,” my dad calls it. He and Nathan are ripe with it.

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My dad doesn’t want me and Nathan to play in the foothills near our house. He doesn’t say why, just that we shouldn’t play there, especially when it gets dark. We don’t listen to him. We always venture into the hills, through fields, across dirt roads, into the trees of twisted oak brush, labyrinths of branches and leaves that speak broken words in the dry wind, mazes of trunk and twig that writhe across hills, up the mountains, and into the canyon that splits the mountain.

One day, Nathan stops me with an outstretched arm. “Shut up,” he says.

We stand on the edge of a clearing, still hidden in the shade of the trees. I don’t see anything, but I hear a low sound, droning in the air. “Is it a snake?” I ask.

“Shut up,” Nathan says. He stands still, his hand still pressed against my chest. He is quiet.

I hold my breath and try to see past the trees in front of us. The droning fills the air and mixes with my own heartbeat sounding in my ears. I follow Nathan forward, wanting to hold onto his hand or his shirt. We duck under a branch and emerge into the sunlight and into the drone and buzz of hundreds and hundreds of flies. A burnt space smolders in the center of the clearing, a ring of black spreads past a ring of stones, lame in their attempt to contain the ash. Flies moan in the air. All around the clearing, they murmur and thrum to each other, hovering over chunks of white and red. Pieces of animal, unrecognizable, litter the space. Flesh and fur hang from trees. Bones, charred and stained, hide in the ash. Skulls and ribcages distress the tall grass, half decayed strips of flesh and muscle and sinew still clinging to their surfaces. One skull stares at me with an empty socket. Its lower jaw is crunched and broken, pieces of bone and teeth lie scattered about. And all around the flies speak. They croon to each other, a continuous sound that invades my ears and worries my soul. They sing to each other over the torn and shredded bits of animals that litter the clearing.

Nathan doesn’t say anything. His face is pale, but he is calm. He pulls me by the arm back the way we came, and I cry as he leads me home. The house is warm inside, but I feel cold. I fall asleep in my bed, blankets wrapped around me, cheeks sticky with tears.

Later, my dad tells us that there are bad people in the hills some nights. He says that they are confused people, and that they hurt and kill animals. He doesn’t use the word “sacrifice,” but Nathan explains the concept to me later. My dad doesn’t want me to think about the bad people or the dead animals, and again he tells us not to play in the foothills. “Don’t go up there,” he says. “Promise me you’ll stay away.”

I promise. I don’t want to go back. I still hear the flies buzzing. I can feel them in my stomach, vibrating and crawling, making me want to throw up. I promise that I won’t go up there.

We stay away, yet one night, after the sun goes down, Nathan and I watch a fire from the window in the upstairs room; cold night air seeps through the window pane. The fire burns a hole in the night, and I imagine the hole spewing people and animals into the dark that surrounds the fire in the hills. Bad people. Dead animals. Into the night to howl and to scream and to
haunt the mountains. They gather in the dark, around the fire, casting shadows that mix with the darkness outside the firelight. In and out the shadows swirl. In and out, between nightmare and firelight, mixing the two. I imagine the storm of flies that follows, invisible in the dark, yet loud with their song, their drone, the one that I can still feel inside me, the one that I will still feel years later when I am older and in the dark near the mountains, when I see a dead animal, a carcass, something rotting and dead staring up into the sky with empty sockets, when I lay in bed at night, struggling to find sleep.

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My dad shot his first deer when he was twelve. Nathan shot his first deer when he was thirteen. When Nathan kills his deer I am with both of them, my brother and my dad. The deer Nathan kills is a large buck with small antlers and gray fur. A mule deer. Not a whitetail. Mule deer are larger than whitetail. Large and gray instead of small and brown. Nathan’s deer is definitely a mule deer, and I am proud that I know the difference.

He shoots his buck early in the morning. The sky is thick with white that hangs low and clings to the tops of the trees. Small flakes of white fall and gather in creases on coats and hats and gloves. I can’t see the deer, but Nathan can. The buck walks and grazes, nibbles at the near frozen ground, is viewed through the scope on a rifle almost taller than its owner, through crosshairs that wobble and shake as Nathan shakes and breathes and shakes and breathes, while the sky drops all around him. The sound from the gun is lost in the low hung clouds.

My dad pushes us to find the deer with the snow falling all around. He throws himself down the hillside, toward the rock and the tree that marks where the deer stumbled then ran, confused and hurt and bleeding and scared, red on its gray fur and on the white snow. My dad pushes us, toward the deer, toward the trail of blood, and he looks at the sky and the snow that is falling and the snow that is on the ground. He looks back at me and Nathan, struggling to keep up. “Hurry,” he says and he looks all around.

“Hurry,” my dad says, and the snow falls at our feet. He is worried that the snow will become too deep for us to hike. If that happens, we will be trapped on the mountain while the cold preys on our limbs.

When we find Nathan’s buck, the ground is covered in snow. Inches layer on inches, white layers on white, the ground is covered and more snow falls. My dad drags the deer to a tree, an old pine, dead near its top, green and full and wide at its roots. Its branches are thick with snow and droop toward the ground where their tips stick into the snow. The ground is dry beneath the branches. The ground is dry and cold and covered in brown pine needles and broken twigs. My dad ushers us into that small space beneath boughs covered in snow. He clears a space in the needles and twigs, clears a patch of dirt to build a fire. He starts the fire with a match and a small, tight roll of newspaper that has been dipped in candle wax and tied tight with a piece of string. It crackles beneath a pile of twigs, and my dad checks our hands and feet, fingers and toes.

“Are you cold?” he asks me.

I shake my head, no, and shiver.

“Keep the fire going,” he tells Nathan. “Don’t let it get too big.”

He steps outside, leaving his pack, his rifle, and his gloves within our makeshift shelter. The fire burns, and the smoke is sweet. Nathan holds his own rifle curled against his shoulder. His hands feed twigs to the fire. They tremble along with his breath, though I wonder if he is cold I am.

Outside our tree, my dad works. I can’t see him very well. I can only see the shape of a man kneeling in the snow while it curls up around him and the deer in front of his knees. He kneels and works, his arms and hands move, and the knife tears and cuts. The snow curls up around him, piles on top his head and his shoulders, trying to entomb him and the deer in white, even as my dad uses his hands and knife to cut and gut the deer.

My dad finishes outside. He squats by the fire and rubs his hands over and over, close to the flames. His hands are frozen with blood and snow and ice. His sleeves are stiff and stained and frozen with red. He asks Nathan to pour water on his hands, and then he rubs them again, over and over, until the blood comes off, curdled and frozen, dripping and hissing in the small flames.

The deer outside the ring of warmth lies stiff and hollow and buried in snow. Its black orbs, dead and dark, stare at an endless wall, empty and white. The snow is endless, pressed so close. My dad laughs with Nathan, congratulating him on his first buck. They prepare to leave and venture out into the snow. My dad tells me to put out the fire as he and Nathan unbury the deer.
and lift it to their shoulders. I do as I am told and kick the flames with my boot, then bury the cinders and the heat with snow.

****

I am six when someone hangs my neighbor’s kittens on a chain link fence. I don’t know why. Nobody knows why. Nobody knows who, and nobody knows why. I come across the kittens while playing hide and seek with my friends and my brother. I try to hide in the bushes by the fence, but I hear the quiet wail of a cat. It paces back and forth beneath its murdered offspring that hang from small strings tied around small necks stretched long and thin. Feline faces are turned up, their eyes shut tight against the world, pink nostrils closed and empty. The cat, their mother, paces and wails, crying with its mouth but not with its eyes. There are no tears. The cat doesn’t know how to cry with its eyes, so it just waits and paces back and forth along the bottom of the fence. Why doesn’t it cry? I can cry. Why can’t the stupid cat cry? Why won’t it cry? No one knows who hung the kittens, but why can’t their mother cry? I wonder if the kittens cried, if kittens have tears, or if they just wailed like their mother and then choked with strings around their necks. The mother doesn’t cry. I don’t know who did it, but I can cry and the cat can’t.

Later, at home, after the police came and the neighbors came to stand around and shake their heads and be sad and worried that something like this could happen so near to their homes, my mother cradles me. I can feel the warmth of her breath on my head. She talks of happier things, trying to expel something inside of me, but I can only think of kittens and tears.

****

“You should watch,” my dad says to me. “You might be doing this in a few years.” He stands next to Nathan who kneels in front of his downed buck, his second deer in as many years. This is his first time field-dressing an animal. Nathan holds a knife out in front of him, waiting for instruction.

My dad begins, “Start at the sternum and cut…”

“Sternum?” Nathan asks. His tongue wets his lips.

“Yeah, the chest. Just below the neck. Cut from there to the tail. Just the skin. Don’t cut deeper than the skin.”

Nathan cuts. The knife is sharp and splits the hide easily. No blood.

“Cut through the stomach muscle. Don’t cut too deep.”

Again, Nathan cuts. Again, no blood.

“You have to remove the penis. Just grab it. Now cut around it. Good.”

Genitals fly into the bushes. My dad laughs as Nathan wipes his hand on the grass.

I try to watch and try to listen. But my stomach feels queasy and my head feels hot. I sit on the grass and close my eyes. I don’t watch, but I resolve myself to listen.

The directions come quickly and without repetition. “Cut around the anus. Yes, the butthole. Pull the intestines out, now the stomach. Cut there. No, that’s fine. That’s how it should look. We just leave them there. Something will come along at eat it later. No, we are fine right now. Nothing is going to bother us. You need to remove the lungs and windpipe. Reach into the chest cavity. The ribs. Not far enough. You have to reach clear up there. Wrap both hands around it and pull.”

I open my eyes and see Nathan reaching into the deer, arms swallowed clear to his shoulders. His chin rests on the side of the animal while he pulls repeatedly. His efforts move the dead deer’s neck and head, animated from the inside. A twitch, a jerk, an alien flop. He tugs again and the windpipe tears free. The body lies still. It lies hollow and empty.

Nathan’s arms and chest are covered in blood. The ground at his knees is stained with it, just like his sleeves and the front of his shirt. The gutted carcass drips its liquid onto the ground, onto the dirt, feeding the lifeblood of the deer to the earth’s surface, which drinks it like an eager child. It is too much for me. Nathan bloody and holding the pilfered organ, ripped from the animal’s neck. It is too much for me, and I vomit in the grass.

****

I come home from school one day to see my dad and Nathan skinning a pair of bucks that hang in the garage. This is unusual. My dad usually has his game taken care of by a processing plant. Drop it off and pick up the jerky
and venison later. I don’t know why he is skinning these deer here, why he is bringing this ritual down from the mountain and into our home. The deer hang from a rope, tied around their feet and secured to a hook in the ceiling. Their heads are not connected to their bodies. The heads lie on a tarp, leaning to the side, but propped up by their antlers. Nathan likes to bleach the skulls. He does so in the backyard, in the corner of the garden. The flesh rots off the skull week after week, until it is ready to soak for more days, more weeks, in bleach. Sometimes he forgets about the skulls in the backyard, rotting and soaking, and then winter covers them and hides them until spring when they are rediscovered and cared for, polished and hung on the wall.

My mom has locked the door that leads from the house to the garage, locked the blood and the smell and images from her house. She doesn’t want anything to get in, while Nathan and my dad work to remove layers of skin and fat. They create a globular pile of hide and fat and fur. A pile that attracts flies, excites them. Only a few, though, in the garage. They drone their song, sporadic and stuttered, weak without a thronging swarm. Yet the few are calling that swarm. Down from the foothills. Out of a nightmare. Vomited from the mouth of a kitten, from the wreckage of a slaughtered animal. My dad and my brother have invited them to our home where they will crawl and fly and drone.

When they finish skinning their kills, my dad and Nathan will quarter the deer and place each chunk in a game bag, a wrap of cloth. “To keep the flies off,” my dad will say. The quarters of meat wrapped in cloth will hang for a week or more, aging, until they are ready to be cut and packaged and frozen. Aging, and wrapped. Wrapped “to keep the flies off.” But the flies are there. Droning. Calling. Separated from aging meat by cloth. “To keep the flies off.” But they are there, calling to foothills, calling to the mountains. “Come and join us,” they say. “Come and join the feast. Come and eat and fly and sing.” And this time, I am unafraid. I want them to come and to eat at the gore inside the garage. I want them to come and clean away the blood, the fat, the hide, and the sinew. I want them to purge the slaughter from around me, and then purge what I feel inside me. I want them there, but my dad doesn’t. He collects the carnage into a bag and he’s wrapped the chunked carcasses with cloth. “To keep the flies off,” he says. To keep them away.
tight fists. She wildly flails her arms and legs, nearly knocking Charlie down. He begins to shake her arm and cries, “Grandma, wake up! Grandma!”

At first, all I can think is “Make sure the kids are safe.” I put Josh in his swing with a pacifier, but he spits it out and continues to howl. Charlie refuses to leave his grandmother’s side, and I don’t have time to fight with him. Mom has writhed her way off of the carpet of the living room so she is partway onto the hard tile floor of the kitchen. I take her clenched fists and drag her to the center of the plush carpet so that she can’t crack her head and elbows on the tile. Grabbing her glucose meter off the kitchen table, I attempt to test her blood sugar. I have to kneel on the palm of her hand to make her manicured fingers uncurl. Her whole body is tense and jerking. I barely manage to squeeze a drop of blood from her calloused fingertips; the skin is thick from a lifetime of needle pricks. The meter’s screen shows an hourglass as it calculates her glucose level. A healthy blood sugar for her is between 90 and 120, but the machine just shows “LOW”. That means she must be below twenty-too low to even register on the machine.

I unhook the long tube connected to her insulin pump so that she can’t get any more insulin and unclip the pump from the waistband of her classic “mom jeans.” I leave the short tube that is connected to a needle in her stomach so that she doesn’t have to re-inject herself later. When she recovers, she will try to reconnect the pump before she is ready for more insulin, so I have to hide it from her. I run to the desk drawer for the glucagon injection kit my father has stashed for us to use, but it’s gone. I ransack the refrigerator, where sometimes a spare is hidden behind the butter, but that too is gone. Both probably used last week. Growing frantic, I race to my parents’ bathroom. The sound of my nephews’ cries is slightly dimmer here on the other side of the house, but the vaulted ceilings make them echo enough to make my heart thump in my throat. The pounding of my pulse against my larynx feels like a boxer pummeling a punching bag. I untangle a mess of surgical masks and glass vials in Dad’s bathroom drawer, but find only a large bottle of 50% dextrose solution. Dad can inject it straight into her veins, but he has been a doctor for more than twenty years, and I have to try several times just to make myself jab that long needle into my mother’s forearm to inject the medicine intramuscularly like he taught me and my four older siblings. The phone is lying on the bathroom counter, and I quickly dial my dad’s cell phone. It goes straight to voicemail. He must be in surgery; his phone never gets reception in the operating room. I’m on my own this time.

As panic and frustration swell in my chest, I hurry to check on the chaotic scene in the living room. Mom is getting worse. She is moaning and her eyes are open now, but they are still and glassy. Her jaw is still tense and she bites her thin lips so hard I worry that they might be bleeding. Her dark, usually perfect, hair is matted to her head from her convulsions, and sweat glues her clothes to her body. A combination of sweat and tears has sent streaks of mascara running down her softly wrinkled cheeks. “When did she last eat?” I wonder. “Why is it so hard for her to eat on time?” I put a pillow beneath her head in case she starts convulsing more fiercely. Charlie’s face is red and wet from crying, and I hold him on my lap while I watch my mother writhe on the floor, unable to save her.

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Mom zipped the suitcase shut so hard that she snapped her fingernail, but she didn’t care. She stormed out of the bedroom and headed for the front door. Dad walked in just as she reached for the handle.

“Look, just stay here,” he begged.

“I don’t want to be around you anymore,” she spat back.

“Fine, I’ll leave and you can stay here. You can’t be alone.” I cringed at these words, having just been yelled at for half an hour about how she could take care of herself.

“How would you know? Get out of my way!” she shouted and pushed her 5’6” frame past his 6’4” and slamming the door in her wake. I think I was trembling.

Dad sighed deeply and asked in a tight voice. “Do you know where she’s going?”

“No, but she said...” my voice trailed off as my throat tightened with tears. My voice sounded thin and tinny. “She said she didn’t need us. She said she is sick of us always checking on her and she can take care of herself. She said she isn’t coming back.”

My dad didn’t respond. My heart felt like it suddenly weighed too much for my rib cage to hold up. Mom had gone out to do errands that morn-
ing without her cell phone, as usual. She was gone much longer than we expected, and we started to get worried that she had spazed while driving or in a store somewhere. My dad had called in a favor with another doctor so he could leave a surgery to drive all over town looking for accidents. Meanwhile, hours after she had left, Mom walked into the house and found me frantically calling every place I thought she might be. She exploded. She was a grown woman and she could take care of herself, she didn’t need us checking up on her all the time, we were so inconsiderate, we treated her like a child. She shouted and raged, pursing her thin lips until they were indistinguishable from her skin. Suddenly, she ran to her bedroom and started throwing clothes in a bag. I tried to convince her to stay, but she was in a panicked frenzy. She left so she could prove that she could take care of herself, and proving it could kill her.

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When Kathy was diagnosed with diabetes at the age of 15, her doctors told her that she would never have children and she wouldn’t live past 45. When she was 21, she gave birth to her first daughter and proved that though it was difficult and risky, her doctors were wrong. She could have children, and she went on to prove them wrong three more times, adding another daughter and two sons to her posterity. After each of her four children, Kathy was given a complicated medical spiel about the dangers of high risk pregnancies like hers and warned against having any more children. As a Type 1 diabetic, pregnancy was very hard and hazardous to her health, and with each successive child, her doctors became more adamant about the urgency of her sterilization.

“Mrs. Parker, having children is very dangerous for you. You should be grateful to have had one healthy child and have the procedure now to prevent any further risk,” a know-it-all intern told her after her first child.

After the second baby, a kindly doctor explained, “Your blood sugars were fairly stable during this pregnancy, but who’s to say they would be again? You know the dangers both for you and your child. Please seriously consider having the surgery.” But Kathy held out. Her husband, Adam, was a doctor as well, and he decoded the embellished lectures so that Kathy understood the risks and benefits. He was nervous for her health, but knew that it was her decision.

“Mrs. Parker, this is incredibly irresponsible of you. You are placing yourself and your unborn baby at risk. Your diabetes is twice as hard to control when you are pregnant and all of the regular risks you face are doubled. Your body simply cannot take the stress of carrying another child to term,” was the persuasive attempt after the first son was born.

“All right. You have two healthy daughters and two healthy sons. That’s more than many people without diabetes can have and you should count yourself incredibly lucky to have safely delivered them and have so little lasting damage to your body. Your kidneys are in good shape and your circulation is good. Count your blessings, Mrs. Parker, and let us do the surgery.” Finally, Kathy gave in. Believing four to be enough and following the doctor’s instructions to “count her blessings”, she allowed the doctors to perform a tubal ligation, permanently sterilizing her. Within months, she regretted the decision.

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We must have used the other shots on the previous week’s spazes, and Dad just hasn’t had time to refill the prescription yet. Medically speaking, what my diabetic mother is going through is hypoglycemia, an insulin reaction. It’s a kind of insulin overdose. Basically, there is too much insulin in her blood and not enough sugar. It could be caused by her not eating enough, by her giving herself too much insulin, or both. Physically, there just isn’t a high enough level of sugar for her brain to function normally. The brain is the only organ that requires that high of a level to function, so the rest of her body is fine, but her brain, the control-center for everything else, is temporarily broken.

For as long as I can remember, my family has called this being “spazed.” Usually when her blood sugar is just a little low, Mom just acts goofy, like a spaz. Her reflexes slow, her speech slurs, she twitches, and something in her voice changes. It is just a slight audible twinge of looseness. It’s so subtle that hundreds of grocery store checkers and even close friends have never noticed it, but it’s so distinct that her children and husband can detect it over the phone. In those cases, we simply ask her to test and eat something. A soda, or some candy. Once, my dad even fed her hummingbird food. It’s just straight
sugar dyed red after all, and as they were on vacation at the time, that was all he had immediate access to. But this spaz is not the kind that can be fixed with a handful of Skittles. I could try to force feed her candy, but she has lost the muscle control needed to swallow, so it would only choke her. I need a glucagon shot to save her. Unhooking her insulin pump will prevent her from getting any lower, but it won’t make her any higher, and every second that she remains this low causes irreparable damage to her brain.

I continue to call my dad, and he continues to not answer. If he can’t come help me, there is only one other choice. Mom has had 911 called for her before, but it’s incredibly embarrassing for her. She hates for anyone to see her so indisposed and incapable of controlling herself. Once, when she was pregnant with my older sister, she spazed after taking a shower. Hours later, after a nervous neighbor called the police, the paramedics kicked in her door and found her naked and unconscious. They gave her an injection, and when she came to she was surrounded by uniformed men and very aware that her pregnant body was exposed. My mom has had some bad memories with 911, but I can’t think of anything else to do. It’s a choice between saving her life and saving her pride.

My hands are shaking as I take up the phone again. I dial the three fateful numbers and hold the phone to my ear, when suddenly my cell phone begins to ring across the room. I hastily hang up the phone before it even rings and reach for my cell phone. Miraculously, it is my dad.

“Hey Lani, I saw your missed calls. What’s up?”

“Mom is spazed really bad and I can’t find a shot.” I rush the words, not wanting to waste any time talking.

“Damnit, I just put a patient on the table. Are you sure there isn’t one in the back of the desk drawer?”

“I dumped the drawer out.”

“Have you checked the car?”

The car! How could I have forgotten the car? We always keep one stashed in the glove compartment of Mom’s car since she’s totaled two cars by spazing while driving. I dash out to her white SUV and grab the orange case that holds the glucagon shot, tripping over one of Charlie’s toys as I run. Racing to mix it as quickly as I can, I shoot the sterile water into the vial of powdered glucagon and shake the mixture together. I carefully draw the liquid back into the syringe and flick it with my fingernail to pop the bubbles. Mom isn’t moaning anymore; she is completely still on the floor, which scares me even more. I keep thinking of her last visit to her doctor. He told her that someday soon she is going to spaz and just not come out of it no matter what we do. I’m praying that this is not that time.

I have to psych myself up to stick the needle in Mom’s arm even though I know I have to do it fast. After a few deep breaths, I quickly plunge the needle in and press the plunger. She barely even winces. Done. I get some blankets from the closet and cover her up since she always gets cold as her blood sugar rises. While I wait for her to recover, I check on the kids. Charlie has stopped crying and is sitting beside Josh, who has fallen asleep in his swing. Suddenly, I notice a large red mark on Josh’s forehead. As I examine it, I remember Mom’s position when I entered the room and realize that he must have rolled off of Mom’s lap and hit his head on the foot of the couch when her convulsions made her fall. I pick him up and cradle him in my arms, terrified that his fall might have caused some lasting damage. What will my sister Lindsey say? Our mom watches the boys every day while Lindsey works, but Mom’s inability to control her diabetes is putting them in danger. She has spazed while watching them before, but they were always safely locked into high chairs or napping, and those experiences were scary enough. I wished that Lindsey would find someone else to watch her kids, both for the boys’ sake and for Mom’s, but she didn’t think it was a big enough danger. This time Mom’s spaz has actually caused physical harm, and Lindsey won’t be able to ignore that. Josh squeaks a tiny cry and I realize I’m holding him too tightly. I loosen my grip but still clutch him to my chest, trying to protect him from a danger that has already harmed him. Dad will have to check Josh out later and make sure there is no damage. If there is, Mom will never forgive herself, and neither will I.

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Mom stayed away the whole weekend, but so did Dad. He was on call and just slept at the hospital, hoping that she would go home if he wasn’t there. Not wanting to stay at the house by myself, I went to my sister Lindsey’s.

“I hate her,” I said as we munch on Oreos.
“No, you don’t,” Lindsey answered calmly. “You just think you do right now. If you hated her you wouldn’t be so worried about her.” Lindsey hadn’t been there for the dramatic escape and preceding tirade, so she was much calmer about the situation than I was.

“Fine. I hate how she treats Dad and I hate how completely insane she is.”

“Me too. But when she does crap like this you just have to remember that you are going to be a better wife and mother than her. We don’t have to be like her just because we are her daughters.”

“I will never treat my family the way she does. I would kill myself before I got to point where I was as miserable as she is. That’s no way to live. She is determined to be miserable no matter what. If Dad is with her, she thinks he is annoying. If he is at work, she thinks she doesn’t matter to him. If he calls her while he is at the hospital, he is interrupting, well, nothing, because that’s all she ever does, unless she is babysitting. I couldn’t handle having that kind of useless life.”

“So decide now that you never will. Whatever Mom does, you will do the opposite.”

“Don’t let me be like her, Lindsey. If I talk to Dad in that snotty voice she always has, slap me. If I’m upset and unreasonable like her, call me out on it.”

“Okay, but you have to do the same for me. And we can’t ever get mad at each other for doing it either. We’ll correct each other because we love each other.”

“Deal.”

Adam rolled onto his side and faced his wife on the right side of the bed. She was breathing deeply but he knew she wasn’t asleep. He watched her stomach rise and fall with each breath and saw how her belly was swollen just enough to make the buttons of her pajama top pull slightly. The couple had recently discovered that Kathy was four months pregnant despite the fact that she had had a tubal ligation four years ago. They were understandably shocked, but thrilled because they had prayed for a way to have another baby.

They had investigated adoption and surrogacy, but both were expensive and they barely made ends meet with the four kids they already had. Adam worked as an anesthesia resident at a hospital in Portland, Oregon, and his pittance of a salary left less than no room for saving. Adam and Kathy were delighted that medical science had failed them in this instance, and since only 0.4% of all tubal ligations fail they felt very lucky. They knew the pregnancy would be dangerous, but they felt that the baby was blessing and the Lord would help both mother and child to be healthy.

Adam’s excitement about Kathy’s pregnancy was dampened by his intense worry about their finances. His salary as a resident was next to nothing, and they had already used half their savings in the year they had been in Oregon. He still had two years of residency left before he would be able to make any real money. Kathy had just been hired as a checker at a local supermarket when she found out she was pregnant and had to quit. She couldn’t work when she was pregnant—it was too stressful and made the pregnancy harder for her and the baby. Finances were strained enough with the two girls and two boys they had, but now another daughter was coming. How would they be able to pay for this baby? How could they possibly afford it?

Cautiously, Adam reached out and touched Kathy’s arm. “Honey, we need to talk.” Kathy looked at him but didn’t turn her head. The dark room was still and uncomfortably silent.

“I’ve been thinking about how we are going to afford this baby. You know we don’t have much left in savings…” Adam trailed off, but Kathy didn’t respond. He ran his thumb along a crease in the sheets.

“The only thing I can think of is reenlisting.” Adam had joined the Air Force to pay for his schooling, and though he freely admitted he would do it again, he had hated his experience. It was the only way he could pay for school without racking up tens of thousands of dollars debt, so it had to be done, but every day in the military was a struggle. Adam was a product of his generation; he had been raised in the “Question Authority” age, and the sentiment still rang true in his heart. He was never outwardly rebellious, but he was rabidly independent and hated needing help. He wanted to be able to do his own thing and be his own boss, but the Air Force wouldn’t allow that. The day he was released from active duty was one of the best days of his life.

“I could reenlist for the rest of our time here, and then we would owe
them another two years of service. We wouldn’t be free to go where we want for another four years—” Adam’s voice cracked as his vision grew watery. The stress of their financial situation suddenly became more than one person could bear and a few tears ran over his cheeks and into his sandy brown hair. “Honey, please tell me what to do. Help me figure this out. What do you want? What do you want me to do?”

Kathy stared at the ceiling for a moment while Adam wiped his eyes, trying to be strong. She took a slightly deeper breath and rolled over on her side, away from her husband. She was silent. Adam stared at her back, not surprised but bitterly disappointed and hurt. This was just another stab into scabbing wounds she had already inflicted. A knot of anxiety in his chest throbbed as he searched, alone, for some way to keep his family afloat.

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Charlie now leaves his post by his baby brother and kneels by Mom’s side. He leans down and kisses her cheek several times.

“Charlie, leave Grandma alone; she’s sick. Come over here with me and Josh.”

He kisses her one more time and furrows his little brow. “It’s not working.”

I realize that he is attempting to revive her. From the time he was just a baby, we’ve taught him to play a game where we pretend to die and he kisses us to bring us back to life, and now he is applying that logic to my mother. I gently pull him aside and explain, “Charlie, Grandma is sick. Kisses won’t help this time, but I gave her some medicine and she will get better in just a little while.” He doesn’t understand, but he nods and lies down beside my comatose mother, hugging her arm to his chest.

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When Mom came home, Dad didn’t. He told Lindsey and me that he was going to start looking for an apartment because if she couldn’t be happy with him around, maybe she could be without him. He would still call and check on her and run to the rescue whenever she fell apart, but he wouldn’t be at the house so she couldn’t say that he wanted anything but her safety. She wouldn’t be his cook or maid, so even in her twisted mind she couldn’t say he was using her. When Dad said he was moving out, I hated her even more. Dad was the best person I knew and the only thing that made living at home for the summer bearable. If she pushed him out, I would go and stay at Lindsey’s until it was time to move back to college.

The day after she came back was my 20th birthday. We had planned on going to dinner as a family, but I didn’t want anything to do with her. I didn’t want to talk to her or even see her. This was not the first birthday she had ruined by being completely crazy. I just wanted to spend the day with my dad and siblings. They were the only people who understood what it was like to be related to her. We were bonded together by blood and the sheer fact that we everyday survived being her family.

“Lani, you have to have Mom come,” my brother chided. “Maybe making them be in the same room will make her be nice.”

I looked at him sarcastically.

“Okay, not nice, but maybe it will make her realize that we won’t be a family if she lets him leave.”

“Fine,” I groaned. The birthday was ruined whether she was there or not.

At dinner, Mom and Dad sat on opposite ends of the table and didn’t speak. Mom’s gaze was icy and the smiles she gave me because of my birthday were fake and insincere. Dad was loving and tender, but his face was pained whenever he looked at her. I remembered asking him when I was younger how he could still be married to her. He answered, “I’ve tried not to love her, but I can’t.” For better or worse, he loved her and would never abandon her. Even if she deserved it.

After the birthday festivities wrapped up, Mom and Dad disappeared into their bedroom. Not long after, Dad came out and said he was staying. He told her he wouldn’t stay unless she wanted him to, and after several long, uncomfortable silences, she barked, “Fine.” Hardly a loving invitation to come home, but it was enough for my affection-hungry father. He would stay and endure her irrational treatment so that he could take care of her because he couldn’t not love her. “You and me both,” I thought.
The doctors were wrong about Kathy being unable to have children, but she paid a high price for her fifth child. After her healthy daughter was born, Kathy developed hypoglycemia unawareness. This new side effect of her disease made it so she could no longer tell when her blood sugar was dropping. She didn’t feel shaky or weak as she had before when her blood sugar dropped. Without these warning signs, Kathy had to rely entirely on her glucose meter to determine whether her blood sugar was at a safe level. She now needed to test two or three times as often to manage her diabetes, and even then it sometimes wasn’t enough. Hypoglycemia unawareness made the disease much more difficult to control and to live with and put her at even greater risks for complications. Through some bizarre twist of Providence and Science, she was forced to trade most of her ability to lead a normal life for the newborn daughter she was never supposed to have.

Cradling my nephews in my lap, I sit beside my mom and blot the sweat off her forehead with a towel. My hands are shaking slightly from the adrenaline rush of the crisis and I feel slightly nauseated. I’m terrified that this will be the spaz that does her in. I’m worried about little Josh’s head, and I’m growing increasingly angry. Furious. It doesn’t seem right to be so angry at someone who is currently incapacitated, but I am. This is her fault. These episodes are preventable. All she has to do is be careful how much insulin she gives herself and make sure she eats on time. Millions of diabetics do it every day, and many of them have had it far fewer years than her. She has had diabetes for more than 35 years, and yet she still acts like an inexperienced teen-ager, like she doesn’t know what will happen if she isn’t careful. She is careless and doesn’t think about the consequences of her actions, not only for herself but for us, her family. She seems like she is just tired of being diabetic, like after 35 years it’s just too much work. I know testing every half an hour is a hassle, but it’s not hard either, especially when this is the alternative. I’m thinking horrible thoughts about her and I hate that, but I’m so annoyed at her for her negligence. She not only put herself in danger this time, but the boys too.

That may be unforgivable, depending on Josh’s condition. I want to reach out and slap her unconscious face. I want to shake her limp shoulders and yell in her ears that she is doing this to herself and I hate it. I want to tell her that she better take care of herself because next time I won’t be there to stab a needle in her arm and save her, but I can’t. I know it isn’t true. I can’t not save her. She’s my mom.

She is starting to come around. She can’t talk yet, but her eyes are focusing on me now. A few minutes more and I may be able to get her to her bed. Mom slowly reaches out and squeezes Charlie’s hand; he is thrilled. He jumps up and down and kisses her cheeks, rejoicing that she is okay. Now assured of his grandmother’s survival, he turns to me and asks, “Can I watch a movie now?” I smile and turn on a cartoon for him. Mom is trying to sit up now, and I help her to her feet. She still can’t walk very steadily or smoothly, so I put her arm around my neck and together we hobble to her bedroom. She sinks into her bed gratefully and falls asleep immediately. Bad spazes like that always wipe her out. She will feel sick for the rest of the day and maybe even tomorrow, but she is better. She is better, and now I can turn my attention to my possibly traumatized nephews and our family’s greatest problem of all: how to save my mother’s life.

If this keeps happening, she’ll be dead within five years. Brain-dead at the least. She’ll rot in a nursing home garden because she has always said she couldn’t bear to burden one of her children in her old age. She’ll be a slowly decomposing vegetable. My dad and my siblings have thought up a million different plans to prolong her life, but nothing works. We got her a cell phone so we can find her and check on her when she goes out alone, but she always forgets it. My dad calls five or six times a day to ask her to test, but she just yells at him for annoying and interrupting her. I’m graduating in a month and I’m considering postponing college just so I can stay and take care of her until we figure something out. She acts like this disease is hers alone, but it is infecting all of our lives. She won’t take care of herself, so we have to. We can’t—won’t—just let her die. My anger has given way to desperation now, to a hollow pleading with the universe to make her change. I collapse on the floor beside Charlie and cry. He has already forgotten about the fear he felt before and is completely wrapped up in his cartoon. He doesn’t notice me beside him heaving wet sobs. He is totally unaware of the gravity of our situation, of his
grandmother’s approaching death. I weep and find myself incredibly jealous of his ignorance.

It has been a bad year for lambing. We thought no more ewes were pregnant, that all had given birth, alive or not. But the second weekend in April I felt, maybe one more. Maybe another ewe will give birth to beautiful lambs who will bounce just because they can. I saw no signs of a ewe in labor: there were no bags hanging out of the vulva. There was no ewe being antisocial or lacking an appetite. I simply felt that today would bring life. I set up a pen to put the new mother and lambs in if they were born. I made sure there would be clean water and hay. I gathered towels to help excite the new lambs to life. I went back out to the sheep and still saw no signs. I thought I was being silly. No ewe was going to give birth today. All the ewes that were pregnant had already given birth. So I left. I went along with my day following the plans I had already established the night before. Go running, do homework, go see some wildlife, come home.

I was gone for maybe five hours. I went to a local bird refuge. I wanted to see something wild, something to excite me back to life. It was windy so all the birds would be on the ground. If more birds would be stationary I could see something beautiful, like a nest of eggs or a fledgling. I was only one third around the refuge when I felt I needed to go home. It was a one way road. I could not turn around. I kept going. I didn't see any fledglings. It was too windy. I didn't want to get out of my car. I needed to go home.

A few hours later, I was out of the bird refuge. Another 45 minutes and I would be home. I could check on the sheep and confirm that I was being foolish. No ewes would give birth today. I arrived home, changed my shoes to boots, put on gloves, and checked on the sheep. I knew I was being silly, but I went prepared to help a ewe in labor. I walked out to the corral to check on my mother's sheep.

I remember when I had my own sheep. I was twelve. I was given what is called a bum lamb. Maybe the mother had died or she had a multiple birth and couldn't take care of this lamb, so it was called a bum lamb. My lamb was white. She would jump straight into the air for no other reason than to test her leg strength. I called her Baby. Her name was short for something, I don't remember what, but she was my Baby. I fed her from a bottle every morning, afternoon, and evening. I made her milk from warm water and a smelly white powder. I would pour it into a one liter bottle with a three inch rubber nipple. I had to make sure she wouldn’t drink it empty to avoid air in her stomach
which would kill her. I didn’t want her to die. I held the bottle at just the right angle so that the fake milk would always be at the rubber nipple. Despite her baaying, I had to pull the bottle away from her when it still had half a cup of milk. Bloat from air in her stomach could kill her.

I cared for Baby. I would take her for walks after school. I didn’t need a leash. I was her mother. Baby followed me everywhere. If she lost sight of me in the yard, she would baa until I answered with my own baa. “Baaaaaaby.” I would call my baby to me. She would come.

I kept her in an 8x6 shed. Straw on the ground and hay in a corner for when she would get hungry and I wasn’t there to feed her my fake milk. There was no door but a plywood barrier that covered the lower half of a doorway. I could look in without letting her out. She would baa with excitement when I looked in on her.

Walking out to my mother’s sheep, I noticed one was standing alone, baaying loudly. I knew they were well fed so she couldn’t be hungry. What is wrong with you silly sheep, go eat your food. She turned around and there was blood dripping from her vulva, but no wound. I knew it! Lambs. But I saw no lambs bouncing at her side. I looked around but didn’t see anything. I went inside the pen, walked over to the feed bunks, went to the back of the pen. I couldn’t find the new lambs. Bad sign.

I remember baaying as I walked out to Baby’s shed after school one day, expecting her to answer back. “Baaaaaaby.” She always answered back. My sister answered this time. She stopped me before I had gotten to the shed. “Heather don’t. I’m sorry. Baby is dead.” I wouldn’t believe her. I had been so careful. No air in her stomach, not too much feed in the corner, I walked her every day. I had been so careful.

My mother’s sheep followed me around the pen looking for the lambs. The new mother baaying. I was being careful to avoid a puddle. The wind earlier had brought rain and I didn’t want to get to muddy. I found the lambs. She had given birth to twins. They were lying in the puddle I was avoiding, their mouths and noses in the water.

Later my mother told me that Baby had been frightened to death. Our dog had gotten out of the kennel and jumped into her shed. The plywood barrier was too high. She couldn’t jump out. She panicked and died. The dog nibbled on her neck a little. When I pushed past my sister to see, I saw blood drops but no wound.

I picked up the newborn lambs. Their bodies were cold and wet. One was still covered in amniotic fluid. I had to get them out of the pen; I threw them over the fence. They landed with a thud. I wanted to hear one baa from the pain of the fall, they might be alive. But there was only a thud. When I turned around the mother was baaying through the fence, trying to get her babies to baa in response. Normally baby lambs recognize their mothers baa and respond. I found two placentas on the ground. They looked like plastic bags. There were some blood drops, but I didn’t see a wound. I stood there and listened to the mother call to her dead lambs. Why did you give birth in a puddle? I walked over to one of the placentas. There was fluid in it. I kicked it. I listened to the mother baa for another fifteen minutes before I called my mother to tell her. “A ewe gave birth today. I’m sorry, Mom. The lambs are dead.” She told me it was okay, there was nothing I could have done. She hadn’t given the supplement in time during gestation. The yearling ewes did not know what to do with their newborns. I told her that I knew that they were coming today. I had set up a lambing pen with water and hay. I could have done something. It has been a bad year for lambing.

We buried Baby somewhere in the pasture. Or threw her in the garbage, I don’t remember. My mother feeds her dead lambs to the carnivorous animals, the cats, all ten, and the dog. Nothing but raw meat for her purebred. Can’t let all that meat go to waste. The placentas are still in the pen with the sheep. Normally new mothers eat the placenta; it encourages their milk to come in. This new mother left her placentas on the ground. All those nutrients going to waste. Her milk hasn’t come in.

If they were wild sheep, maybe they wouldn’t need a supplement. They would have different nutritional reserves in their bodies for newborns. They would be resourceful sheep, scavenging hill sides for grass, making due in winter. New mothers would have instincts of what to do with new lambs. Lick them to excite them to life, because there is no one there with a towel. Not let the placenta stay on the ground, predators may smell it. But these sheep are not wild. We feed them fresh hay every morning and afternoon. They don’t have to scavenge. We shoot predators, so they leave placentas to rot. They do not have the nutritional reserves a wild sheep might have, so lambs are born too early. These are not wild sheep.
I think I knew Baby would die. That morning when I fed her the fake milk, I gave her a hug. I remember. I was anxious to get home from school. I wanted to check on Baby. But I knew what I would find. She was lying in the straw, her head tilted far back with flecks of blood on her neck, the rest of her body white. Her eyes were open, so was her mouth. I could see her horror.

My mom kept telling me there was nothing I could do. Despite the fact I knew they were coming, there was nothing I could do. That is just how nature works. She had not been diligent enough in her record keeping: in knowing what ewes were still pregnant. She couldn’t afford the nutritional supplement to give the pregnant ewes when they needed it during gestation. We didn’t know when to be home to help with the birthing process. There was nothing we could do. These sheep aren’t wild and that is just how nature works.
Wrestling

by Brian Brown

I pin my Audrey, my two-year-old angel, against my chest where she writhes, fighting to scrape a fingernail across one more swath of consciousness until at last, she gives, melts into slack-muscled sleep. Pouring her to her bed, I wish I could hold myself that way – still myself in that vise until I surrendered.

Instead I stare through shadows palely filling the room with half-light illuminating the contour of each shout, the texture of every flash of temper, the dismal pattern of my parenting swirling into a topographical map over my head without a single marked trail.

Sunrise Flight

by Brian Brown

I've never taken you to see the balloons on their Fourth of July sunrise flight. Never seen them myself, those great cloth sacks puffing, growing, swelling with life, with heat until it takes a whole host of ropes to hold them down.

But I have, through weary eyelids, seen you hover predawn alongside my wallowing, smile bright as day. You've waded murky sleep – a nightly fight – cast off the lines and sailed here to rescue me. You know to be awake is to be alive. Your three years have taught as much. You gulp down every wakeful moment, devour every hour, unsure how many more you'll get. Little do you know of the vast span of years ahead. One day the weight

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will grow too great. Like me, you’ll settle on some grassy pad, fasten the anchor and forget the taste of sky, the color of sunrise, the lift of that flame you once fed.

**Headlong**

*by Brian Brown*

On tip-toes two or three steps down from the top, reaching to tape a crayoned self-portrait to the wall, autographed in your clumsy caps, you lose your balance and fall –

that first startle of stomach-sinking weightlessness lasts and lasts until shoulders, elbows, knees thump down hollow steps.

Skinny arms and legs shoot out, try to brace against bare carpet as you barrel roll to the ground floor, the landing you glimpse with each turn of your head, the fixed point a living-room ballerina might spot pirouetting through *Peter Pan*.

How far down before I hear your cries, breaking on each bump? I run over to scoop you up just as you reach the bottom, insides still rolling, head spinning.

Cradling you as I have these three brief years, I marvel at all this sudden length in your limbs – the real head-spinner just beginning.

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“Caballer” by Michelle Larsen
Honorable Mention Undergraduate Art

**SECOND PLACE GRADUATE POETRY**

**America Now**

*by Brett Sigurdson*

*(An unsolicited sequel to the poem by Allen Ginsberg)*

America the Beats and the hippies are dead and you have nothing!
America a rainy day with wind blowing heavy on my window.
*America I’ve given you all and now I’m nothing.*
America when will we end the permanent war?
Your atom bombs have big teeth but they don’t bite.
America who are these businessmen who have money and buy your influence?
They have cash, but I have unlimited credit.  
America I work hard but I have to pay too much for it.  
*When can I go into the supermarket and buy what I need with my good looks? You’re money is worthless to me.  
But I need it more than it needs me.  
America we’re all immigrants, so what’s the big deal?  
America watching the news is too much reality. When can you show me that we don’t have a mouth full of knives?  
*America this is the impression I get from looking in the television set.*  
America is this correct?  
America we don’t have to turn Iran to dust with an atom bomb. They don’t need any more sand.  
America it’s them towel heads. It’s them bad towel heads.  
*And them Russians.*  
America I read a poem last week about your strength and I couldn’t help but laugh.  
It’s all steroids and cosmetics and people don’t tell you to your face but they’re laughing.  
Not with you, but at you.  
America does this make me unpatriotic?  
America I’m a pacifist and a socialist and a Buddhist not a terrorist.  
So was Allen Ginsberg and look what happened to him.  
He was gay so God didn’t like him.  
America do you believe that?  
America you’re overwhelmed with people who think they know spirits. They say they walk hand in hand with their gods but I don’t believe them.  
*America after all it is you and I who are perfect and not the next world.*  
America I’m sick of irony.  
When will you break down the wall and give me truth?  
I used to act, but it was all too fake for me.  
Like Fox News.  
America I went for a walk through a graveyard yesterday. It made me think about living instead of dying.  
When’s the last time you did that?  
*When will you look at yourself through the grave?*

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American I don’t shop at Wal-Mart.  
I don’t eat meat.  
I recycle everything.  
I love trees.  
I don’t watch TV and only listen to NPR.  
I drive a jeep that guzzles too much gas and I hate it.  
I ride a bike to the grocery store.  
I donated $25 to the Sierra Club once.  
I don’t consume more than I need.  
Except records. I love records.  
America, you would have me think that I don’t fit the puzzle.  
But who are you to judge?  
America sometimes I think things are better in Europe.  
It’s nothing personal.  
They just think Freedom Fries and Tea Bags are awful too.  
America let’s be straight. I don’t like the direction you’re heading and I’m not the only one.  
America I’ve never been to a protest, but I plan to.  
Maybe it’s the only way you’ll listen.  
America I don’t want children because I don’t want to raise them in a world like this.  
Does that mean anything to you?  
*America this is quite serious.*  
America, are you listening?  
Am I talking to myself again?  
Open your ears.  
Because I’m putting my shoulder to the wheel.
Nighttime Falling at Cache Creek
by Brett Sigurdson

Twilight’s ambrosial light reflects in cool ripples ‘round rock in the creek’s quaggy bottom.
Leafy tendrils of tree branch sway atop its rushing path,
Suspended, defiant and holy, drifting with time.

The boulder upon which I sit, etched by water’s Timeless touch, allows me audience
To the gloop and whir of water,
To the fly’s ceaseless humming,
To the rabbit’s cheeky recon,
(he knows that I have lettuce),
To the Sparrow’s placid chirp.
All moving under the mountains blessing all.

I am alone, still and silent as the rotting rope Tied to ancient oak branch over water’s Deeper depths, listening to my nature striving,
Straining from the clamor and movement of the shadows just behind

Was a time I wished to capture these scenes And coddle them tight, venture forth in my Arcadias,
Steal these places for my own,
All my curious days.

But against my better self I’ve strayed from here. Joined the cackle and din of traffic, my mind Muddled with work, my lungs
Steeped with smoke, my eyes
Colored with cynicism, my soul
(as good as he feels now)
Blackened by industry.
This moment but pause before moving in time.

Yet on this rock I sit, listen to water carve the watercourse And consider the rope, dangling unmoving
Upon its best days cast to the wind freely in motion, twirling
Above the splash and laugh of children borne back to the shore
Always here, always present, always nestled by nature

It returns to what it once was, always to be here, above the movement. As the Jake brake blows on a semi through the shadows, Calling me back to life, I sit still as ever and ponder:
Shall I be the road?
Or shall I be the rope

Burning
by Brett Sigurdson

Sitting on cool ground in backyard of perfect square Trying to write a poem, Smoking a cigarette—
Little twirls of brilliance and acrid profundities,
Floating through the air to fill the blank page.

I sit in quarter lotus, concentrating Miles curled in the grass, being, breathing his doggy breath Not caring about the kids kicking cans in the next backyard

Their words escape on the wind as The tomato plant leaves muffle their Spanish For the dearth of my own, I say their words:

Lo que es?
Lo que es?
Qué es!
Sólo que se!
I respond not to them but to the sky
O Gary Snyder, O Henry Miller, O Rimbaud
Why can’t I burn as you
To feel so hard
I set fire to the page

My cigarette ash stumbles in small piles on my book
Its red essence smoldering, scorching the page
The place where I wrote What shall I write?
I close the pages upon each other
And smear the blackening mark.

**Third Place Graduate Poetry**

*Little Chicks*
*by Kathryn Sirls*

Snow White and Cinderella
and Sleeping Beauty
once rested as little girls.
Little chicks covered golden,
protected by fluff pillow cloaks
and everyone who melted at
adorable little chirps.
Tiny beginnings to transform
into monstrous ends,
filled with robust roosters,
exploited eggs,
even slaughterhouses
for the lacking.
Prepare pleasantly, perfectly,
they were told.
Whatever rotten apples
come your way,
whatever abuses tarnish you
or spindles send you sleeping—
have faith in the rooster,
tall and cocky,
alpha who will battle
other roosters,
who will peck, injure
prying hands.
Trust, believe in him,
in fowl promises he makes.
There are no awakenings,
no escapes,
no goodness and purity
without the good graces of
the rooster.
Prim your feathers,
file your beaks.
Be delicate,
wait for Him.

*Song For a Sapphire Ring*
*by Kathryn Sirls*

You once said our union
shone like sunlight on a sapphire.
We were Grimm’s children,
sparkling twilight behind
thinning gray clouds,
glittering jewels in a
world of rocks.
My recollection is a
spectrum of azure memories—
cobalt oceans tossed by
seething squalls,
navy skies veiled by shadowy mists.
We were a lone indigo orchid,
eaten alive by overgrowth,
weeds uncontrolled.
Our ring circled my gaze,
dull blue, ever fading
to purple, green,
lacking radiance of a sapphire.
You crushed our jewel into
sharp, shiny shards,
irreparable,
before I had occasion
to wear it.
My futile attempts to mend it
were deep gashes in my skin,
from which I bled
melancholy cerulean
into the desolate blue chasm
that was me and you.

void
by Kathryn Sirls

I stay with you,
contemplating winter while summer lingers.
I lie with you
beneath damp sheets,
our bare apricot skin
pressed warm,
leg on leg,
hand on arm.
If the stars above us

granted wishes,
I would wish now
to cut your angel wings,
ground you where
my magpie
feathers flutter.
I would wish
to transform desire
so you’d trim
your own wings.
But your voice cuts
through my ears,
meteor words splashing
into salty-sweet
streams.
Tell me you love me.
I clutch your bare chest.
Band-aid words
will do for now.
I love you.
Your words crackle
like leaves past
their prime.
**First Place Undergraduate Poetry**

**Terrene and the Seasons**  
_{by Josh McDermott}_

It is alright, Terrene; It is already August.  
And I have been titillated by your sweet clover breeze.  
I have been drunk and vomited purple sugar in your grass.  
I have slept under Indian carvings and walked atop the bones of ancient human beings.  
I have parted the Red Sea of pale thighs and swam like a fish inside the gynoecium womb.  
I have belonged, and brought others into belonging, and seen five shooting stars with my best friend.  
I have overcome my nausea - my always dizzy – inside the depths of cool swimming pools where the water mixes with my sweat and I drip liquid off a healthy body.  
I have lived another day, another season, and cried at the sight of the sun setting over the bird sanctuary near Roberts, Idaho.  
So it is alright, Terrene. It is very very very alright.

**The Samba Dancer**  
_{by Josh McDermott}_

Ba! Ta Tik  
Da Deng! Cliff  
Poct Bip!  
De Samba Danser  
ShiPS-dose)HiPS(  
Douse  
','  
infsible audeeance.

Clicks on OOOOO!  
Hur Shoes! Hur Tap in pat Lisp!  
But my tung jus  
Slips_  
an’ I Thank A  
Gad ^  
Thur ant none Blouse-  
(bra brooms brazilian tea spoons).  
An’ Me- Eyem  
“"drown“”  
Cuz my feelings mound an’  
Crumple down onto my  
Boyish br’e’a’kin’ Beach,  
Good Gad,  
Dat Samba Danser gots  
Som .Fe.e’t.  
-Mets Mee ScreEcH!  
Ooo jewelree Wooman  
I haftA stand\ n’ leeev à  
‘fore I Catch |||Fire||| from yor  
Drip.ing Samba Gasoleen.

**The Noble Eightfold Path to Enlightenment**  
_{by Josh McDermott}_

I climbed the volcano  
Every other week,  
It was deceased:
Dry,
Geo-dust,
Shrubs,
Deer
(I OOOOWWWWOOOOEDDD
Them
From the ancient
Break
In crust
And they hopped
Through the crater
Like phantom
carnations
Of my dead loved ones.)

The panther lion (volcanic yellow)
Watched me from bumblebee black crags
Amongst the cliffs.

There was
Orange desert
Lichen on the tops
Of stones.

Saw from the tips
Of the Grand Tetons (Sumptuous Breasts)
To the Budweiser factory (Mormon Barley).

Folded my feet
Under my knees
And asked
Nothing
Of any of it.

Took peaches,
And ate them
In big peach bites,
Fleshy drips
Onto ash.
I fed ants.

The sunset
Was orange
Over Menan and Rigby
Like it always is:
Heart-stopping.
The snake river was silent,
The forests were hazy,
That blue kind of Ancient.

Held conversation with cattle-wranglers,
Rattling loot bones,
And slept in the cinders
Of Shoshone fires
With eager and
Biting (white teeth in so much tan soft)
Squaw Bodies (Sumptuous Breasts),
Now long eaten by
All the stink beetles
And rattle snake tails.

Prayed for nothing.
Saw it all.
Dropped from time
Like a dying child,

On that
Dinosaur Volcano.
"Cool Bathing" by Bernadene Ryan
Third Place Graduate Art

**SECOND PLACE UNDERGRADUATE POETRY**

**American**
*by Tim Clark*

My mango skin absorbs the sunset
And my fingernails claw the colors back letting the
Reds, yellows and hints of green fall to the dirt.
The same colors painting murals in La Victoria, where
Andre Jarlan's blood soaked Bible records the
Bullet hole memories forged by Pinochet.

His Bible, the same shade as the side of the mango
Facing the sun, the same sun that falls beyond
La Isla Negra's pebbles covering Neruda's bones.

**Poetry**

The darkness blinks with each flashing PowerPoint
Transition. A photo of Pablo in Italy disappears.
A hand rises from desk to air, and an “umm…”
Referencing the previous slide with a nonchalant
Misproununciation makes my tongue curl against
My teeth in the silence between response… “Pablo Neruda.”

**Longing for Innocence**
*by Tim Clark*

We joked about cows, dead and rotting two miles
Upstream from our waterhole, where we swam
From the snowcap runoff in June until the stagnant
Heat of August.

We had reached the age where we flung our trunks
To shore, abandoning our fig leaves, while
The muddy murkiness of the water protected us
From ridicule.

By mid-July we arrived barefoot and mostly
Naked, our cheeks hanging out long before
The trees guarding our oasis had lowered their
Shields to let us pass.

By September we wore shoes. The creek had dried
Down to a trickle. Our shirts no longer slung
Over one shoulder, and our hair no longer
Smelling of moss.
Anathema
by Tim Clark

We won a free soda underneath the cap,
So we take turns avoiding germs by drizzling
Carbonated corn syrup down our throats an inch
Above the lower lip, chins cocked high, parading
Down State Street.

I am one year older than Paul.

Spilling soda down our fronts, embarrassment
Fumbles in my mouth as I guess at the spelling.
“F-U-D?”
“F-U-G?”
Paul won’t spell it. He doesn’t want me to either.
I keep guessing.
“F-U-C?”
Suddenly I know.
“Fuck.”
Paul covers his ears, dropping the soda.
I notice a garden in bloom, and the fence
Keeping me out.

Third Place Undergraduate Poetry

White Peonies
by Tina Sitton

Your death is glass under my skin.
In echoing space, I pick out itching shards
until my fingers bloom scarlet.
Collecting silver jag-pieces in small piles—
my keepsakes of you.

The French call it “Acne Excoriée des Jeunes Filles”
—acne created by young girls—
they believed innocent girls wounded themselves
so not to be noticed by men.

All I have is injurious vengeance on the spotless
— you’re not here to blame.

The skin—once like the white peonies that grew
in our front yard, the peonies I placed
on your grassy square—is laced with red divots,
wilted, wrinkled, mutilated.
Even after the glass is gone, innocence gone, self gone.

Still, I pick to find you.
I pick and pick and pick to find you.

The Chinese Vase
by Tina Sitton

Elusive art — Art itself —
a fixation that can’t be held, spoken, or written.
A Thought as strong as vapor
slips slick through closing fingers.

Poetry is the red Chinese vase,
carved delicate, fragile thin,
that attempts to capture
—if just for a brief moment—
the Hummingbird in my breast,
the Badger in my belly,
and the Viper in my mouth.
Red is a primary color: pure, elemental, and versatile, a creator of more colors, with mixing and blending, producing a multitude of beautiful progeny; I think, then, that red is feminine.

Red is the color the eye processes longest. Is that why we are seeing red? —Humans are always angry, always holding grudges. Ruby red is the color of my billowing window curtains, but also the color of blood.

Liquid rubies seep into battlefields and make greener grass. Stop-lights are an illuminated red; they give a command saying if you enter, you’ll meet danger or even destruction. This warning should also apply to the red-light district, but is rarely read that way. Scarlet is sin, a line we shouldn’t cross.

But red is a dualist, and can mean love, ardor, and amour. Like the red paper hearts I made you on Valentine’s Day and scrawled upon my devotion, or the sanguine blush under skin stretched across my cheekbones after you gently touched my face, or the crimson rose petals blessing our newly ornamented feet.

A fiery red can be the moon, the stars, and the sky. Red sky at night sailor’s delight. Red sky in morning sailor takes warning. —I take delight. Do you heed the warning?

“Between Canyons” by Vincent Cobb
Honorable Mention Undergraduate Art
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