Acknowledgments

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. We received entries from all over campus this year, demonstrating that the passion for great literature runs deep at USU. 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.

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—Charles Waugh, Contest Director
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*Cover Art: Cache, by Brady Hunsaker*
I was buying a bag of Cheetos for Mom and Dad at Circle K when I overheard them over by the black-pack-aged magazines. I held two Arizona teas, a bottle of Coke, and a cold red Gatorade for Grandma. The hot day scalded our nerves and we needed to take a break from all the planning. Dad had gone to the flea market earlier that week to buy a saddle for Richard's burial. He'd chosen a mahogany stained one with supple leather—Richard would have liked it. Tears stung inside my nose. I fought the sensation, but the burning extended up to my eyes. I couldn't cry anymore. The mourning period was over. Grandma had sent me to the gas station to get me out of the house. She told me not to cry anymore, and that grief didn't offer any comfort to the dead. Her words were harsh, but loving. She stroked my back until she had to leave for her dialysis, which left her shrunken and grey. That's what defined Navajo women most: they had strong minds, but their bodies couldn't always keep up.

The cow bell clanged, pulling me from my thoughts. Two Navajo men walked into the gas station, and the security monitor recorded their movement between bouts of noiseless static. One rested his coal-stained elbows on the edge of the counter, depositing money from his Friday paycheck from Peabody Coal Company. I wondered if they knew my father. They didn't look older than forty, wearing sweat-stained tee-shirts and Cinch jeans. One man sported a black Stetson hat, the brim stained with salt and red-sand. The other man flipped casually through a Women's Health magazine before reaching for The Navajo Times on the counter. It shouldn't have flinched, but I did. The Navajo Times covered my brother's death. When nothing happened in a small town, a murder was a big deal. I didn't like how public his death felt. I didn't think that his life story and death coverage should be so accessible.

"Yellowhorse's kid passed—says he got jumped by a gang after school over by the Kayenta water tower," the one in the Stetson hat said.

My Cheetos fell to the floor. Chester the Cheetah smiled up at me as a barbed wire fist twisted within my gut. My stomach lurched as I fought the memory of Richard splayed out on the concrete wearing a black Native American Church pullover. His slick black bun sagged below his neck as his Adam's apple bobbed like a stick shift through broken gears. I could remember the blood spatter glinting in the flashing lights, pulsing red and blue, his head haloed by shattered forty bottles. I couldn't recognize him; his face was beaten in so bad he looked like ground beef.

Everyone loved Richard. He had a brand of confidence that rode along the bend of his shoulder, he bore it there. School served as another stepping stone for Richard. He breezed through it, occasionally reaching down from his cloud of progress to swipe my fingers. We were convinced he would graduate from college and become the next Navajo President because…Richard would.

The air conditioner sputtered on as I looked up at the security monitor to see if the men were still there. They had left. Pulling the drinks tighter into my arms, I approached Deb's counter. She had been the Food Mar-
ket attendant for as long as I could remember, always sniffing Prada perfume samples she couldn't afford.

A picture of her granddaughter fluttered, disturbed by the AC vent above her head. I'd seen the picture before, the little round-faced baby swallowed up by a Pendleton blanket and framed by a fan and gourd set.

Deb got a pixie-cut a while back. She wanted her hair to look like Jennifer Lawrence's new haircut on the February Cosmo issue, but her Indian hair didn't lie back fine like Jennifer's, instead her hair poked up in all directions like a cat in heat. Deb looked up from behind the monitor, her eyes welling with tears.

"Sher, Sorry about Richard. He was a good kid," she said, scanning my items.

I stared at her brown hands, fingernails long, white, and clean. Outside the window a stray dog wandered past, clumps of fur peeling from her back like most Rez dogs. When I didn't answer, Deb looked out the window, tracing my gaze. I didn't like it when people asked about Richard.

"No charge."

I nodded. A tear streamed down her flat broad cheek.

Pulling the items into my chest I walked out the door, letting the cowbell clank behind me. Richard's Ford Ranger smelled like horse sweat, sage, and sand. After setting the sack in the passenger seat, I popped open my Coke, listening to fizzle of the carbonation. It felt like a release, kind of.

I knew that Richard kept Camels under his driver seat. He didn't keep smoking as a regular habit; it served solely to relieve stress, and in a few months' time it would belong in the passing fads of Skoal and Dr. Pepper. Both vices cured after he mistakenly swigged a can of his own spit. The cigarette was his new fix, which I supported—for the smell. I shifted the car into reverse and pulled out of the Circle K parking lot. I fumbled for the Camel package under the seat and tipped one out of the package and into my mouth. I relished the feel of the paper stem between my teeth. Switching to one hand on the wheel, I reached for the lighter. Bringing the glowing coil to my mouth, I eased the tip of my cigarette into the orange center. The tip caught. I watched as white consumed orange until it darkened to a rusty brown. I didn't know how to smoke cigarettes. I'd only had tobacco at the Native American Church meetings. Fifteen-year-olds weren't allowed to smoke. Unless they snuck out at midnight and smoked a cigarette. I felt like an adult when I did. I loved holding the borrowed stem between my fingers and attempting to puff perfect rings.

I liked pursing my lips and swinging my hips, like I was Marilyn Monroe or something. It made me feel sexy. I longed to wear lipstick and be desirable, but I had a few curves, and none of them monumental. I had topography as flat as Kayenta. I longed to be thought of like Richard,
thought of as successful and a grown up. Richard had a magnetism that I didn't. Everyone at the grocery store knew his name. We'd get stopped down every aisle, people asking him about his schooling. The whole while, I just stood there. No one cared about what I was doing. They were too enveloped in Mr. Future Navajo President.

I wondered if Richard could see me now, driving sixty down the road in his Ranger, one hand on the steering wheel and the other tapping out burnt edges of my Camel into the ash tray like a real woman. When Richard did catch me smoking, he would stop me immediately. He told me that my brain still had to grow. He'd say he wouldn't want me to be a ch'izhii monkey for the rest of my life.

Flipping my blinker, I headed east out of town. I passed Bashas' where old Navajo women would go to sell spam and egg tortilla burritos served from red Coleman coolers out of the back of their station wagons. Stray dogs with protruding ribs meandered along the highway, their noses dirt red. Highway 160 sported one of the only Burger Kings within a hundred mile radius. The owners had pimped their sign out with a billboard that read:

Come Visit Unique WWII Code Talker's Display

AND

Navajo Culture Center

The Hampton Inn beside it displayed an empty Hogan to attract the tourists, who would stop further along highway 160 to take pictures of the sheep-herding people.

I slid my hands along the steering wheel. Looking up, I saw the picture of Jaylynn pinned to the soft velour of the truck ceiling. She wore her long, glossy hair in curls around her shoulders. Her turquoise squash-blossom necklace shone in contrast with the red velvet of her shirt. Jaylynn represented one of those girls blessed with topography. Last I checked, I had three text messages from her and two missed calls. I couldn't talk to her yet. I hadn't yet gained control of my grief; I wouldn't know how to handle her grief too. I knew it was selfish, but I didn't know what else to be.

As I drove, shattered glass flashed white in the late day sun. The shards lay half-buried in sand moraines comprised of tumble weeds, Sonic cups, and white Bashas' bags. Kayenta sandstone slabs drooped on the outskirts of town. Despite its two hotels, it was a small four-stoplight town that people only paused in long enough to wait at a red light.

“You're listening to KTTN 660, the voice of the Navajo Nation...”

A warm ache blossomed in my stomach and extended upwards into my chest. I hadn't changed the radio station since he passed. The Navajo host talked quickly; he had a lot of good quips. His Navajo was authentic—clinging to his syllables like fat on mutton in a forgotten stew. In rough translation he said something about how older women's breasts sag like sand in nylons and how his family had to buy their grandma a bra because her nipples kept poking out from beneath the hem of her shirt. I thought of how Richard would react. He would lean back shout, “Aye!” and snap his fingers. He would try to stifle his laughter, but it would overflow the cab, and I would join in. I clicked the radio off and parked beneath the windmill near the water tower where Richard and I shared our last conversation. A few miles west I could see my family's trailer. And to the East I could see Kayenta waverin in the dying heat of the sun. The streaked water tower bore mine and Richard's names, along with hundreds of other graffiti tags. The sliver paint had long been forgotten and peeled like an old scab. I thought about repainting it at one point but realized that would serve as nothing more than a blank canvas for gangs to re-tag.

I stepped out of the truck and headed toward the windmill. I jutted out from beside the watertower, standing tall and steely towards the sky, piercing the sunset sky as if it were a peach rind. The windmill latticed the whole way up. Richard used to climb it, taunting me from below for being afraid of heights. He exuded the bravery I didn't. Wiping my palms on the lap of my jeans I prepared to grasp the first rung. I began my ascent. Each step made the last feel like an eternity ago. My palms perspired, causing my hands to slip across the sun-warmed rungs. Looking toward the horizon I watched as a dust devil formed, the sand spun angrily, and a plastic bag became trapped in its endless circle. Sometimes it seemed like the only thing that changed around here was the direction of the wind. It seemed like only yesterday when Richard and I talked, and I understood a part of what he meant.
Eyes bulging, his hands white knuckled on the wheel. ‘I screwed up real bad.’

He was sneaking a smoke before coming home. He had parked beneath our graffitied names. I could see through the foggy window the red dash lights reflecting off his oily face. He stared into his lap. Puffs of smoke emitted from his mouth, the red tinted tendrils drifted off his lips and spiraled into a red lined cloud above his head.

I opened up the door, and smoke poured out of his truck.

“Rich, whatcha still doing up here?” I said as I slid into the passenger seat.

“Aye,” he sighed, “I gotta get out of here.” He took a long draw on his cigarette and exhaled the smoke out his nose. I’d never known Richard to smoke more than one cigarette a day, but according to the half empty pack in his center console, I suspected he’d had a rough evening.

“You’re getting out. You’re leaving me behind to go to U of A,” I said.

“What’s wrong?” I asked but wasn’t really sure if I wanted to know.

“What if I don’t get out of here Sher? What would people say? I’m more worried that I won’t want to come back if I leave.”

“Are you drunk?” I asked.

Eyes bulging, his hands white knuckled the wheel.

“I screwed up real bad.” He looked tired. His eyes were bloodshot. Palming back the loose strands of his bun, he took a deep breath.

“What do you mean?” I said. We never had secrets, Richard and I. We were tight all growing up. This wasn’t like him at all. “Rich?” I said, grabbing his forearm.

He ignited. “Don’t touch me!” I’d only seen Richard like this once. When we were little, he had gotten so mad that he threw his Tonka tractor through the thin wall of our trailer and left a huge hole that never got repaired. Settling into my seat, the silent tears streamed down my face.

“I’m sorry.” His face crumpled like wet tissue paper. He looked like a little boy, with glistening snot running down his swollen lips. “Dammit, I was supposed to do this right!” He slammed his hand so hard into the steering wheel that the dashboard shook. “Jay and I were…fooling around….” He paused. Snot dribbled down his chin, darkening his Levis.

“And she wanted me to stop.”

Dread filled my stomach.

“No Rich. You didn’t.”

The hole in the wall suddenly larger. As he sat before me, my view of Richard contorted.

“I choked her. Sher, I hit her, and I didn’t stop.”

A cold chill spread through my stomach.

Richard cried the remainder of the night. His sobs filled the cab with grief, and all I could do was listen to his strangled sounds. I couldn’t console him because he did something very wrong.

Staring at the sand devil, now I could see how easy it would be to get caught up in it. Quickly, and without thinking about it, I ascended the rungs. My hands touched the wood slats that Richard would sit on; they were old and splintered, but I knew they would hold. I sat myself down and swung my legs over the edge. Green glass bottles winked at me from the ground, tumbleweeds blew beside them, aluminum cans scuttled across the parched earth. And as the sun balanced on the horizon, I thought about the legacy Richard left behind. I thought about Jaylynn and her future, and my future…and if our fates intertwined for some reason. I didn’t know what to believe about anything. I felt the breeze shift. The swirling dust devil settled. The plastic bag deposited into a sage brush.

A hiccup emerged from deep within my chest. I braced myself on the wooden slats, watching as the sunset flickered on the horizon. Before night fell, I knew I had to get down from the windmill. I started my trek back down. Kayenta looked like a mirage as the light slowly faded out and house lights began to flicker on. Once on the ground, I noticed how the
night blanketed the sky a deep navy blue and how it made the silhouettes of trees look like ebony lace against the night.

I couldn't fight the grief, it came when it wanted to. The juniper trees and sage bushes blended into one another as the tears streamed down my face. More than anything I missed Richard. I missed who I thought he was. He knew better. Did he know the creases he'd impressed into our mother's face? It felt wrong to hate him, but at the same time it felt right.

Driving back home took exactly five minutes on the pitted dirt road that Dad paved with a tractor. When I walked inside, Grandma was on a floor mattress, blankets stacked on top of her sleeping form. I crawled beneath the still-warm covers with her. She stirred and wrapped her arms around me, encircling me with her warmth and her strength. I knew Grandma missed Richard too, but she wore her grief in a different way. I realized that there would always be grief, surrounded by a little hopelessness, but the reservation wasn't a state of mind; it was a state of life, and it was my life.
The Wind Cries Mary

Jordan Floyd

On the cold, sloping First Hill streets surrounding O’Dea Catholic High School, Samma first became Samma. Formless, out-of-tune, only a fetus...soon to be weaned on a trip...Samma spent three fall months meandering around First Hill before he found Marion Dowell and Abimbola Ebet. Everyone at O’Dea identified the two boys as a degenerate pair fortunately dispositioned with rich fathers, and in the case of Ebet, an equally rich mother who owned a lucrative investment firm in Bellevue. Mary called Samma a Socratic type of kid the first day they met on the St. James steps, and never failed to lick his lips each subsequent time he said it. Samma had never read Socrates, and neither had Mary, but the sentiment was still there, pulsing between the two like a warm, freshly plucked bass note. Prior to meeting Mary, Samma spent most of the time out of class on the St. James steps humming Tribe lyrics and attempting to make sense of the damp city emanating below puddles and moss — truthfully, finding Samma, whatever it meant. Marion Dowell, in all his eccentricities and pomp...the wind cries mary, the origin of his name...Mary, the St. James steps maestro, zulu chosen son taught Samma to jive with humility, and an ear to the silent guitar wail that resonated inside in...in...space, he thought.

Samma hadn’t attended O’Dea for very long. He transferred from Skyline High School in Sammamish and began a morning routine of driving along I-90 to O’Dea. The trip...well, it wasn’t jazz — far too linear. Samma emerged from the 5:45 a.m. suburban Sammamish darkness and barreled toward the I-90 on-ramp and then consistently found himself...nowhere really — just a void, until the southernmost reaches of Lake Sammamish caressed him — although, it was often too dark to see anything except a black liquid mass with the occasional yellow light skirting across its surface, and the lake’s driving touch, admittedly, resembled more of a junior-high-thigh-graze than anything. Eventually, he careened across Lake Washington and on into the bulging Seattle metro area. The whole ordeal reminded Samma of a saxophone... the road curved like the sax-bottom and the lamp posts looked like little buttons on its neck. Again, it wasn’t jazz, but the potential was there...that is, if it were touched by the right player, boss man, beatific type fellow.

Sonny called weed brownies space cakes because she’s white. Her momma got her some butter from a green door and she made a batch for Mary, Slush, and Samma the night before. Mary liked Sonny because she, too, jived to Hendrix. Most of the white kids at O’Dea jived to Hendrix. Samma met Sonny at the Rhythm Rug the night Mary performed a real funky piece about Lead Belly and daydreams. The place was erratic. Everyone who came wrote on the walls because somewhere in the history of the joint some degenerate poetry onlooker started the trend, and at the time, whoever was the manager probably didn’t care or simply didn’t notice un-
til it was far too late and the walls were already decorated with scribbled fucks and shits and bitches and skulls. Sonny came alone that night and sat next to Samma. She was out of place at the Rhythm Rug and she knew it. Most of the regulars repped Zulu, especially Mary who called himself a chosen son of the Zulu tribe. “The Zulu wind picks me up and cries and cries and cries – a thousand warriors press my lips with the cold tips of their fingers then begin beating a jive rhythm only I can translate!” Sonny pressed her fingers to her lips every time Mary shouted nigga into the mic, and leaned over to ask if Samma knew Mary after he sang a line about Grey Goose and a samurai style suicide with a kitchen knife. Mary and Sonny jive together, or at least, that’s what Mary calls it. “She ain’t no hoe, but I couldn’t picture my old-ass sleeping next to her unless I was desperate or tweaked-out or some shit – we’re just jiving…all just jiving.”

Sonny wrapped the brownies in a plastic-wrap and wrote the trio’s names inside hearts on the outside. She said her momma got her the strongest butter the green door had. They’d hit the three boys hard, she said, and have them jiving only thirty-minutes after we ate them.

Mary cried about Sonny that morning. She was Zulu sent, he said. But Mary said a lot of people were Zulu sent — “Straight from Uncle Cool,” which was his slang interpretation of the Zulu word for God, Unkulunkulu.

Slush and Mary’s eyes were tattooed red by the end of the day. Sonny fell asleep in her car at lunch with a sandwich in her lap. Apparently a group of freshman – the shitheads that smoke spliffs by the O’Dea school bus and write shit like “come as you are” and “Jesus don’t want me for a sunbeam” on their wrists – banged on her window and rubbed their asses on her hood, but she didn’t even stir. One of them, a real mouse-looking prick named Carson, told Mary in gym, but was too jived to care. “Ah, Sonny…Sonny…she…you know her – she’s just a little too fucking jived and needs to cool it down.” All three of the boys sat in front of Sonny’s car and rapped after school. Sonny was still passed out.

Samma didn’t say “motherfucker” correctly – that is, according to Mary. He believed Samma needed to say it more colloquially, and if Samma wanted to use it in any of his verses as a break in flow or some type of anaphora he needed to say it without a suburban drawl. Rapping was spiritual to Mary. He called it the pen of Uncle Cool. “All tongues are pink pens sitting in a circular holder just waiting for Uncle Cool’s fingers to do magic and jive.” Slush bought into the ideology, but didn’t show it. Slush rarely spoke and certainly never rapped out loud. He didn’t like his Nigerian accent – his mother’s gift to him and evidence of her hand in his early education. Mary told him it added to the flavor of his verses and lines, and it was certainly better than the suburban sound of Samma’s voice. “Samma sounds flat as hell, and slow, too. It ain’t no wind cries mary shit. But you got it, Slush. Nigeria…just north of the Zulu, my man. Your tongue reeks with soul!”

When the trio rapped it wasn’t all rap. Mary stuck to it, but Samma would trail off and take Slush along. Samma asked Mary about college. Both Slush and Mary were seniors. He knew their parents were rich enough to send them off to some place like Sarah Lawrence or Whitman. Mary spiraled in and out of conversation with Samma – sometimes answering his questions, “Yeah, Whitman. I got in and shit… it’s jazz,” and sometimes letting the words dry up and fall to the ground like fall leaves. Mary stopped, though, and broke into Samma’s buzz – spoke to him like Socrates down to Plato and Plato down to Aristotle. “Enough… little boy, little Samma-soul we got lots to teach you, and Uncle Cool the tabs will do a fine jive and get you on that sweet, sweet soul.”

Samma asked when it would happen. Mary said it depended on when Lep got back to Bainbridge. “He’s out running through trees in Alberta. The five got him cooped in a closet with his auntie with their dogs sniffing out other rats.”

These were pushers, Samma thought. There were more than green doors out in Sammamish. Samma knew this. “The fives stopped sniffing loud and now they’re on to other shit like tabs and bloomers,” Mary said.

Samma wondered if they ever did it in school, but Mary or Slush wouldn’t say. “This is shit you earn – you bloom on these steps or melt one with St. James and it’s something spiritual…yeah, boy, you’ll be snaking through the Saint’s cherry trees like muddy water and howling with wolves out in Enumclaw – the wind will cry Mary and you’ll jive, mutha-fucka.”

The trio pressed their backs against the front bumper of Sonny’s car, asses melting into the perpetually damp asphalt, and rapped – back and forth, tongue to tongue – like
There were too many people in the crowd with wire glasses and purposefully ripped jeans. They were Zulu, sure, but it felt too feigned for him to jive.
wipers, or maybe a new dent in the front bumper would tell Sonny's story, but he only saw a reflected, white glow from the ring above the front entrance of The Frye Art Museum sprawling across the hood. Mary walked near the front doors of the museum, Slush continued to pat Sonny's back as her sobs became stale, and Samma, standing still next to Sonny's car, drummed a soft beat of the hood, setting the scene, probably unintentionally... although, Uncle Cool saw the scene as it was – a ritual to Zulu and a dead Truman Capote, and to Sonny, who was shaken up by a residual, intense pulsing in her legs, a product of the whole two-inch by two-inch weed brownie she ate an hour ago. It all happened at the same time as Mary scrawling notes to himself about vowel inflection and tone crescendo on his hand-written poem while Slush drove the trio to the Rhythm Rug, which in turn, is chronologically when a homeless man approached Sonny insisting he watch her car for a dollar an hour. The man was met by silence from a strung-out Sonny, who just wished the four-toothed fuck would leave her be… to her parking spot in front of the Frye Museum because it was a place of beauty and beauty is what she guessed she wanted until sand started raining from her hips to her knees and ankles and feet, or at least, that’s what she thought happened, but the man kept insisting on the deal. “I'll watch it for you, it's only a dollar... don't you got a dollar to spare you privileged white bitch?” And so Sonny got back into her car and locked the door immediately, locked it three-times over in fact, which corresponded well with Slush, who parked his car at the same time at the Rhythm Rug three spots left of the door because that's just where he did it and Slush was a jazz fellow like that, probably a Taoist, well, that's what Mary said, and anyway, Mary was drunk by then because he had been hitting the flask pretty hard in the back seat, which wasn't unusual because he hit anything hard and was known to take eight bong rips instead of seven, and double-dose his bloom tea and habitually figure two tabs would serve him better than one, and Samma, truthfully, the sangoma of the ritual, heard Uncle Cool whisper and let himself keep drumming and drumming until the scene pulsed wide one more grandiose time... Mary, and Sonny crying, still crying, and sweet Slush and Samma drumming until... until it broke.

Slush lifted Sonny up from the curb and shouted at Mary to get back to the car. The trio, now toting Sonny along, loaded into Slush's car and drove to the St. James Cathedral. Sonny cried about the steps, saying they were too wet to sit on, and so they all went inside the cathedral. Samma had been inside St. James before, but he always went alone like Moses to Mount Sinai. The four of them filing into the cathedral's pew reminded Samma of when he was fourteen and pedaled his bike toward a Subway, or his house – he couldn't remember – and a group of three coyotes trotted next to him for his entire journey. He had been high for only the fourth or fifth time and he thought the sound of the coyote's friendly paws hitting the pavement was soothing, like a drummer gently rattling the hi-hat. Mary, Slush, Samma, and Sonny sat close to each other, touching shoulders. Mary rubbed his hand from Sonny’s knee cap up to her mid-thigh as if he was apologizing for being so distant before. “We’re just jiving,” he whispered. Sonny let her head drop to Mary's shoulder.

Sonny slept the rest of the weekend and didn't say anything to Mary or Samma or even Slush. Still, she came to school Monday donning a look that wouldn't lead anyone to suspect she had been so shaken up.

Samma believed the Zulu ritual worked. Samma, the sangoma, ritual leader, had healed her. It was a step toward Uncle Cool, and the moment when he'd finally say “Igama lami ngu Samma,” to which Uncle Cool would reply, “My son, come...come.”

Mary told Slush and Samma the five got Lep – found him holed up in a tweakers’ nest under the deck of a home somewhere in Bainbridge. Lep had it coming, he said, and it’s probably a part of some Uncle Cool grand design because he doesn't much like fake inyanga, and Lep probably was one. Mary found another rat in Auburn, though. She pushed out of her aunt's garage, and from Mary's inspection was Uncle Cool Zulu sent. “She got tabs, good tabs, and bloomers growing in regular pots and stuff. Her aunt thinks the bloomers grow because of the damp air. She’s from Phoenix or something and is too dumb to know. We've got it good, boys. Uncle Cool is looking out.”

The trio spent lunch on the St. James steps planning a trip to Auburn. Slush customarily drove to anything, really, and he would have driven to Auburn but Mary thought it’d be much more symbolic, conducive to Samma's growing umoya, if Samma were to drive the three to Auburn. Slush mouthed “okay,” and Samma grinned. They'd barrel along
the I-5 toward enlightenment and Uncle Cool that evening.

It may have been characteristic of Washington roads, at least in the Seattle area, to be linear like spider web filament pronged into some promontory near Pike’s Place or the Seattle Center. Although, more likely, it may have only been the perspective of the trio, or rather, Samma because after all he saw more of the roads on a regular basis. The thought crossed Samma’s mind while he drove the car south toward Auburn with Slush adjacent to him in the passenger seat, and Mary sprawled in the back licking his lips as usual. This was his umoya, which rang peculiar to him, but settled into his linear Seattle road mind all the same… all alright. Uncle Cool willed it because Samma took hold, yes, the steering wheel, grasping what fate owed him since his birth on First Hill months ago. Mary only spoke to give directions to Samma, and Slush stayed silent but in a friendly way, which Samma appreciated. They would have nodded to each other had it felt necessary, but the two didn’t so much move as to adjust their posture in a way that said, “I’m comfortable near you, man – thank you.” No, they were synched. Uncle Cool reached through the hood of their car in a way only a mystic deity could, and touched them – this was good Samma thought… it jived.

The girl in Auburn instructed Mary to have the boys stand out in the street shoulder-to-shoulder so she could examine each member of the trio before letting them in. Slush mumbled, “This is some played out bull shit,” to Samma as they got out of the car. Still, he lined up with Mary and Samma in the middle of the road, appeasing the pusher. Samma saw the girl peering out a second story window on the upper left corner of her house. Her fingers split the blinds in Hollywood movie sort of way. He could just make out two small white circles gleaming from between the blinds. The trio and the girl, at least from what they could see, remained still for, appropriately, a contrived and scripted amount of time. Samma guessed she would wait one minute and forty-five seconds before leaving her perch behind the blinds. He was right, well, he didn’t have a watch on him but he counted the seconds and his final count seemed to match up with his prediction – Hollywood, scripted, he knew.

To Samma, most pushers were fair people. In one way or another he figured they contributed to society positively, and although they sold drugs, they were probably loved by their mothers and fathers, sisters and brothers and Uncle Cool, too. He had never bought directly from a pusher and never actually kept any sort of drug on his possession. Of course, that was before Samma, and at present, Samma was thrust into a new, cosmic world, which required him to confront the Auburn girl and barter, negotiate, inflict harm or maybe even murder if the situation called for it. He prepared for the worst when he saw the house’s garage door rise and the Auburn girl manifest from behind the rusted metal. She was white, which came as no surprise to any of the three, but she was pretty, which did catch Samma off-guard. Her nose was plump and featured two gold rings looping around her right nostril in sequence. Truthfully, Samma thought her eyes were plain and brown, but he took particular interest in her strong jaw that, instinctually, he figured would converge into a pointed, fleshy vertex, but rather, it was more curvaceous and soft. It was a strange thing to love, but he did, anyway. And gained some comfort from it as he strode from the middle of the street in front of the house to the open garage.

Mary licked his lips when he shook the Auburn girl’s hand, and Slush nodded to her like a cowboy introducing himself to a Mexican damsel in a western movie. She spoke concisely, and without romance, which disappointed Samma. Fifty for two tabs, allegedly a good deal, and seventy-five for an ounce of bloomers, also a good deal she afforded because she thought the three looked like nice guys. She asked Samma where they were from and when he told her they went to O’Dea her brown eyes seemed to jump. “You’re some fucking rich kids,” she said.

Mary closed the deal for the trio, stepping in when Samma tried to explain he used to attend Skyline and wasn’t all that rich, and exchanged two hundred and twenty-five dollars of his dad’s money for enough tabs and bloomers to get us “all fucked up and jived.” He spoke with the Auburn girl after the transaction about his buddy Moe in Bainbridge who put him on to the girl. Apparently, she didn’t know Moe well, and didn’t give a shit who put the trio on to her because they were rich pricks. Samma watched her lips move when she spoke and felt a surface type of love in spite of her disgust. Her nose and chin said it all to him. It jived. When he realized this he turned away to leave, and Slush and Mary followed. The Auburn girl watched the boys leave from the opening of the garage. Slush gave her the same gruff, genteel nod through the passenger window, Mary sat
in the back shuffling the bloomers around in their plastic baggy, and Samma tried to not look over for fear of wanting to stay in the garage, chatting and drinking Rainier with the Auburn girl for the rest of the night.

... 

Mary told Slush and Samma to come to the St. James steps at 9 p.m. to drink bloomer tea, and if either wanted, to drop a tab. Sonny would join them, Mary said, and only because he thought her break down the other night made her more susceptible to the influence of Uncle Cool. “She got the jive in her. I can see it like a rose bud just waiting for sunshine... and oh, do we got it.”

Slush elected to take a tab. He pressed it to his wide tongue and laughed while it dissolved. He said tonight was his night. Neither Samma nor Mary knew what it meant, but it felt good to hear and so the procession kept steady. Sonny sipped bloomer tea from a pink coffee mug, which had the face of a pig painted on its side. Mary caressed Sonny’s knee while they all sat on the steps. She smiled from behind her mug at Mary, who looked at her and said, “Uncle Cool on the way – slipping down your throat, just slipping...slipping,” and it made Sonny smile more. She laughed even.

Mary pressed a tab to his tongue like Slush, but kept the pink flap outside of his mouth and tapped it interally with his index and middle finger. He said it was a symbolic of his mind running toward the trip and Uncle Cool. He read it somewhere in Timothy Leary’s books, and according to Mary, Timothy Leary, like Ken Kesey, was another white author a Zulu ought to read. Samma’s turn came last, and when he reached for the large water bottle that held the bloomer tea, Mary stopped his hand and told him neither he, Slush, nor Sonny could be around when he drank it. “The trip, all of its processes from drinking to fighting to coming down are yours and yours only, Samma. You have to be alone,” Mary said.

The three left Samma alone to sit on the steps of St. James Cathedral and sip bloomer tea from a plain black mug he brought for the occasion. In addition to the tea, Mary left a tab for Samma. Slush raised his eyebrows when Mary handed Samma the tab, but not so much in disapproval. Slush’s eyebrows showed surprise because Mary didn’t trust newcomers to Zulu like this, and in fact, he’d never seen it before – granted, he and Mary were the only two in their O’Dea tribe and they’d never ventured to offer admittance to anyone else, but the feeling was the same. To Slush, it touched him like the sudden wail of a baritone jazz voice, breaking from the harmony for a moment of splendor and excitement. Slush knew Samma had to be the real deal, a Zulu sent son... jive son, jive.

Samma squeezed the tea through his lips and let it lurch down his throat reluctantly. It tasted like a mixed assortment of moss. All of First Hill sloped below the steps, and the cathedral, like a tombstone littered with green lichen and celtic etchings, shot up from behind. He didn’t know if the tea was working. Mary never told him the
That was plausible, because it was a known fact... yes, fact... f-a-c-t that blood was purple, or was it blue?
Samma didn’t know, but the poem spewed out from underneath his teeth where the words built tents, and it was a funny idea to Samma, who all along figured words lived on his tongue, but no, in this moment he realized they lived in and around his ivory white teeth – they played basketball on the peaks of his molars, and probably fucked in the crevices of those same very teeth… words fucking and making more words, birthing shitty ones and good ones but they wouldn’t know it until it came time for them to spew from Samma’s mouth like they were now, and how unfair it was to give the words this kind of uncertainty, Samma thought, and here, yes here in St. James mother fucking brothel hotel and casino these words tried their luck to see if they’d make the cut… if Samma, oh Uncle Cool, high rolling Samma would deem them good enough to resonate around the room – which Samma could not see because his eyes were closed – but probably follow a linear path from wall to wall, pew to pew, pillar to pillar, cross to cross, candle to candle, altar to altar, painting of St. James to painting of St. James, and hell… no, not the place, but the expression, Samma thought – words inevitably found their way to mundane, vulgar expressions and that’s where they ended, began, lived truly, and so on so forth.

Samma sat in the St. James cathedral for three hours. His arms swung behind the pew and his head drooped backward in the same direction, so as to make him look lazily crucified by executioners who only took time to nail his hands and not his feet, and moreover, ignorantly attempted to nail them to empty cathedral air. Sometime after these three hours Samma wandered toward a small playground area where O’Dea’s pre-school students and faculty’s children played during their daily recesses. He spent the remainder of the night passed out and overcome by thoughts of seventies directors, his winding innards, and day-glo Uncle Cool.

The first pre-school instructor to arrive at O’Dea did not see Samma lying face down and contorted underneath a colorful, plastic fort. Samma didn’t know and never came to know the fort was a favorite of the children. They liked to play king and queen and kingdom, at least, that’s what most the children called it. The tab hit Samma the hardest, and the bloomers only served to fill the gaps in between times when the tab surged. Mary knew this would happen, and described it as a bass player and drummer setting the tempo – the downlow beat, he called it. The tab was just the jive of the whole deal, it rose above the downlow beat and wailed like a mighty jazz guitar cutting into Samma’s brain. Mary was sure of it all. Samma told Slush and Sonny he saw everything as it really was, and although it was general type thing to say, he felt it was sharp and telling. He never said this to Mary because it sounded pompous, and he liked letting Mary think the trip had blown him away. It did, he thought, but in a calmer, more conversational sort of way. However, Samma never told Slush, Sonny, or Mary about the morning after the trip. They knew he passed out, but they figured it was in the cathedral. They all agreed the clergy were too stupid to know he was fucked up, and probably just figured he was some wayward kid who needed a place to sleep. It made sense to the three. But Uncle Cool woke Samma up in the preschool playground with sounds of children gawking and giggling during their morning recess. One particular girl… Zulu sent, and quite obviously the bravest out of her class, approached Samma’s corpse-looking body and poked it. The tab and bloomer tea still hung around his head like a shimmering veil, but it was nothing contorting. Samma probably would have gotten up before the children came out for their recess, but he felt comfortable and didn’t realize where he was lying. The little girl’s single prod terminally woke Samma from his trip, and he realized now where he was. Samma turned over to look at the girl, which startled her and the rest of the onlooking children. She shot backward, curling her arms toward her tiny chest. She hesitated to speak. Samma stared at her. Their silence lasted for a while and extended out across the entire playground, and even to some parts on Boren Avenue in between the passing cars and puddles and moss. All of the children came to see what was going on, and all were astonished to see one of the older O’Dea boys laying underneath their colorful fort.

Samma and the little girl exchanged cordial phrases. Hello, she said. Hello, he said back. The girl identified herself as Princess Georgia, and Samma stumbled to reply. He muttered Jason – his name was Jason, he said. Princess Georgia responded with a smile that emerged from her face like the pointed bow of a sail boat breaching the water’s cold, oscillating surface.

The trio sat on the St. James steps after school. Samma said he couldn’t stay long because he needed to get home. Mary joked about his Dad, telling Samma he proba-
bly didn’t miss him anyway. He works too much, Mary said. Slush sat quietly between the two and laughed at times in the conversation when it didn’t make sense to laugh – he was jiving. Mary trailed on and on about peyote, which he believed was the next step for a Zulu. “We’ve bloomed on the steps and melted it, man. But this cactus stuff… desert stuff it’s the real deal. Uncle Cool Zulu, man.” It was an addendum to the process, although Samma countered, stating there wasn’t a definite process. There simply couldn’t be one – that’s not like Uncle Cool at all, he said. Mary agreed. The trio jived with synchronicity... First Hill and them, Sammamish and Auburn, and up north, Vancouver and probably further, further, and further until it all came together, all fully around to O’Dea – it was jazz.
And Thus the Hunters

Meili Stokes

I insisted on the unicorn hunts because I knew they might lead us to Jay. I wanted Cleo and Vee to know it too, but sometimes I thought they only followed to escape the yellow musk of Transitional Housing. The hunts always turned us feverish and sweaty against the February cold. By the time we’d ducked through traffic heaps, beyond the chrome curving of Benedict Concert Hall and the slouch of Rainey’s Pub, only the trees shivered, white and withdrawn as bones. This was my project, but Vee lead in an impatient march. Her short legs raced, but I knew the arrangement forced Cleo to keep her own steps a bit short of their natural spider-limb glide. My legs stomped too hard with all their awful rectangle heaviness. Blood pounded through them until they buzzed, and my skin burned hot against the ice and effort of the December hike.

Silence ballooned around us as we passed the red ribbons I’d tied around trees near different promising spots. Today, we couldn’t waste time. Something about the way I woke up that morning, clear-headed and timed just right with the rising sun, made me hopeful about the fifth spot, the place I last saw Jay. Vee huffed, but otherwise the woods kept silent. The quiet made my body loud. And large. Way too huge to be pretty or fifteen. I looked at Cleo. Snow puffed beneath each of her soft footsteps, a softness that always startled me, considering her height. I stooped beneath an evergreen whose limbs formed a dome and brushed against the red ribbon tied over sticky bark. Cleo crouched with her flat bottom pressed into her heels. I sucked in cold air. She looked lovely all curled into herself like that. She also looked hard. Encased. I always felt a weird distance around her, like she wore a thick skin she couldn’t shed. She wore the right clothes, even one of Vee’s old push-up bras, sweat-stained and stuffed with socks. There was something not quite out about Cleo. Not that she hadn’t, I imagined, shouted “enough!” to those who’d seen her infant penis and insisted, from then on, that she must be a boy. Not that she hadn’t declared her new name, her true name, and announced herself as the woman she knew she was. The woman that I knew, could feel, she was. Not that she hadn’t been thrown out of her home for transitioning. It was something to do with fear, I thought, that made her feel not quite out. Something to do with silence.

I shifted my gaze to Vee. “Alright, this spot is our best shot. This is where I last saw Jay,” I pinched a pine needle in my fingers to draw out the oil, then looped my arm through Vee’s, and reached to take Cleo’s arm too, but found it held out of reach.

“Oh, yeah. Yup. That’s where she’d go, if she was in trouble,” said Vee. “She’d go chill with the unicorns.” She angled her hips in a limp contrapposto, lips pushed out. I flinched at the sarcasm, but also wondered if she knew how often she imitated our vanished counselor. Not only in posture, but in the way she told stories, the way (in a good mood) Vee could beam out this infectious warmth. It was the stuff that used to make us never want to leave Jay. We never did leave, of course. She left us.
“I think if we clear our minds and just, sort of, be, we’ll get lucky this time,” I said. Vee rolled her tongue in the side of her cheek, and winked like she might be sorry.

“Sure,” she said. “Course, I can think of better ways to get lucky.” Cleo and I both snorted. We all knew she’d only ever kissed a few girls, lulling them with the husky bravado that made her seem older than fourteen, pleading with them to stick around for at least a free mental health evaluation as they cycled through the food center in the left wing of the resource center for homeless LGBT youth. Adjacent to the center loomed Transitional Housing where we three, and a dozen others, slept and would continue to sleep until we used up each of our 2-year stay limits. Back to the streets after that, or to some apartment. If we could afford one. I kept a couple hundred saved up from my shifts at the food center, just in case, but Vee blew through her money on donut holes for herself and for the girls she briefly befriended or wooed. I knew she only had some step-mom who called her a dyke one day and tossed her out of their trailer home with a pet rat and half a bottle of cheap wine. That, or pushed her out of a moving van with nothing but a pack of orange tic-tacs and some nail polish. Her story changed a lot, and I half-believed them all, inking them in my notebook. Cleo kept a wad of cash shoved between the peeled-back carpet and the cement foundation under her bed. At night I sometimes saw her dig up the bills and count through them over and over in the moonlight.

Vee and I were exchanging elbow jabs when Cleo hissed in her low voice, “look.”

A bunched village of juniper bushes grew to the left of us. They trembled. A branch cracked. Vee gripped my knee, her lips apart. The junipers stilled. We waited. A purple-ish shape pressed between the fronds. Another crack, and we felt the whatever-it-was vanish. Vee yowled a war-cry and broke through the low limbs of our evergreen hideout, spraying needles. Cleo and I leapt after her, clambered over the snow and shoved through the junipers. I screeched and when Cleo did too the sound broke me apart. We tumbled and huffed, yelping on occasion to keep the energy circling, until we neared some roads and the old, squatting pub. Cleo collapsed into the snow that bruised darker now beneath the creeping evening. Vee and I dropped, too, to gasp on our backs, hidden in the steaming indents our bodies made at the end of the fresh trail of massacred snow. Lying there, a memory crossed my vision and I saw the unicorn, part-made of light. Buried behind holly, turning its head towards me, its limbs began to whisper forward. My eyes cleared and I shifted onto my side in the snow.

“It wasn’t a unicorn,” I said. "A unicorn wouldn’t run from us. Jay said- “
“We know what Jay said.” Cleo’s voice rung out low and final. She turned away, a dark curve bundled in a black coat that clung so tight it became a part of her. She looked, to me, like the dark space between galaxies. I stared too long, then closed my eyes. Our triplet breaths formed clouds just out of rhythm. The earth moved quick and old beneath our backs.

…

Cleo kept a list, penciled above her bed, of all the black trans women murdered since 1970. She only talked to me about it once, both of us buzzing with the midnight coffee we’d snuck by shouldering through the food center’s window, our faces lit in the cool tones of my cheap phone screen.

“I need to name them,” she said, “and I use their real names, Lani. Not the names their parents gave them.” She paused for long seconds between phrases. I tried to look into her eyes, a color somewhere between indigo and soil, but they kept just left of connecting with mine. I wanted to cover her slender hand with my own, which pudged out too big, the color of wet sand. I wanted to cup her sharp cheek in my palm and transfer to her some of my warmth. She often looked cold. She always felt too distant to approach. I kept opening my mouth as if to say the perfect words, but each time they caved into uncomfortable yawns. Her long finger traced the nearest name.

“It works out to one killed every three days.” She didn’t mention Jay. I didn’t mention Jay. But I imagined Jay: broad, black, and beaming, adjusting her false breasts. I begged her, silently, to be anywhere but gone.

…

On Tuesdays, our shifts at the food center overlapped. The building opened at 11, so we showed up at 9 to mass-scramble the eggs and slice fruit until our wrists ached. Vee arrived a bit later, after crouching most of the morning on the carpet in front of a floor-length mirror. She smeared on a rim of blue eyeliner, rubbed it off, reapplied, and continued in this hypnotized cycle until a resource center volunteer dragged her to work. For a while she manned the bread and pastry table piled with day-olds donated by Honey Pot Bakery. When Ralph noticed her sliding an extra chocolate croissant or sourdough roll onto nearly every plate, and certainly the plates of those who looked in any way pathetic, he moved her to the napkins and utensils at the end of the line.

“Equality, Vee. We’ve got to make sure there’s enough for everyone.” Ralph liked to play with his Counselor badge when he spoke, as if we couldn’t already sense his authority. Vee’s laugh smashed through the dining hall and she tossed handfuls of napkins into the air shouting, “don’t worry, darlings, I’ll make it rain!”

Cleo stood today, as always, a bit too far from the serving table. She stared straight ahead, or inches above the heads of nearly all the kids shrugging through the line. Ghost-thin in her loose maroon sweater-dress, she might have just floated in from a gathering of winter gods. My left thigh itched beneath my leggings, and I snapped off my plastic gloves to scratch.

“You should talk more,” Vee said, approaching Cleo. “Both of you.” Her head reached my shoulder, and I slouched to not seem so huge.

“Building trust. That’s our job. Can’t do that just standing around.” I hid a smirk. Just yesterday she’d buried herself in bed, sobbing about how much she hated every human being. Vee either seemed, to me, like a sultry storm or a manic angel, depending on the day.

“That’s not true,” I said, stirring the grapes and apple cubes with a metal spoon. “Some people get uncomfortable when you talk too much. I only talk when it feels like people want to.” The door gusted open, bright light spilled in, and one of the adult volunteers led in two teens.

“Ho, ho, ho, yes. Newbies.” Vee grinned. She pumped her hips in a dance and pushed volume into her thick, black hair.

“Oh, god,” I muttered. “Don’t chase them off.” But I smiled, too. Us veterans of queer-kid homelessness already knew about the food. The medical center. The free showers. They could see us as a refuge, and they could disappoint us. They sometimes saw that we, and all we offered, was never enough. The newbies toed further in with eyes narrowed. Boys. Well, probably boys. Can’t assume. Vee bumped into me.

“All yours,” she said. I rolled my eyes and rammed her with my side. She liked to forget that I liked girls as well as boys. While we waited at the food line, with my gloves still off, I pulled a tiny notebook out of my jacket pocket and doodled a dragonfly and a unicorn and an open-
ing door. Vee grabbed my pen and added a pair of boobs.

My two years were nearly spent, but as a kid of the state, I knew I might receive a renewal of my stay at Transitional Housing. I liked it here. I followed the adult volunteers around with my notebook in hand until they started training me. You can join us, they said, no problem, once you turn 18. I wrote down their advice:

“Meet everyone where they are. Many have been kicked out of their homes. Some have relied on survival sex. We need to build trust slowly. If all they want is a meal, that’s okay. If they express interest in a health evaluation, a counseling session, emergency housing, you know where to send them.” I always nodded. “You’re a great resource, Lani. I think these kids feel comfortable around you.”

More than welcoming newbies, and definitely more than serving food, I wanted to join Flock Duty. It’s too dangerous, Jay explained when she refused my request. Too dangerous, Ralph repeated that cold-gut day Jay didn’t show up for work. Before, Jay and an alternating team of adult volunteers bundled up and flowed into the city, daily, to look for kids like us. They swept through alleys, loaded down with blankets and protein bars. I liked to imagine that finding a homeless kid felt like discovering an animal still asleep and pink in its burrow. They’d blink from their pile on the ground in the twitching city lights. Some might only hiss and turn their bodies away. When Jay told me this, my stomach lurched. Why? Everyone has a different story, she explained. What could Flock Duty do but drop a blanket and move on? Vee and I decided that we would dig them up and hoist them to their feet. We’d ease them across streets and towards the Resource Center. We’d yelp like dogs and nose them through the doors and demand they take a seat. We’d feed them our own food, like mother birds, and sponge the sweat from their bodies, and paint their nails, and rub their backs and arms until they grew warm and rosy. We’d tuck them into our own beds and bring them thermoses of name-brand chamomile tea and tell them the stories Jay used to tell. In the morning they’d wake up covered in the warm, clean fuzz of their own perfect bodies.

Jay used to find them all. She used to gather them in with her long, open arms, her voice warm like the hollow of a tree. Vee and I stood shy on the blotchy laminate while she lead them to plates of warm food and sat each down one at a time on the fat, split couches. With her, every kid melted. When she found Cleo, brought her shaking in a pair of black doc martins, magenta bruises striped up her arms, neck and cheek, they talked for a long time. Cleo’s brokenness warmed into a glow. I knew they kept a special alliance because of their shared trans sisterhood and I ached, a bit, with jealousy.

Ralph tried to maintain Jay’s momentum, but his eyes watered above an anxious nose that I knew made everyone uncomfortable. Lately, after devouring a meal, many of the homeless kids slipped back to their burrows.

“There’s no reason to draw any dark conclusions, Lani,” Ralph told me a week after Jay disappeared. “Jay’s a little wild. She could be anywhere, including somewhere totally safe.”

My hands throbbed. They moved like cotton as I used them to gnaw around a handful of snow. I wound back and shot the snowball into a lumpy snowman just as Vee placed the head.

“Watch it!”

We’d flung ourselves out far from the city again. I watched it glow a vague twinkle through the smog from where we stood in an empty clearing that sloped towards a frozen creek. Cleo shrieked, and I turned to see Vee pull her red fingers out from under Cleo’s coat. Without a pause, Cleo lifted Vee by the waist and tossed her face-first into a snow drift.

“Girl,” Vee coughed, emerging. She rubbed the ice from her eyes and nostrils.

“I’m sorry,” said Cleo, trembling. “You scared me.”

“Practically killed me.”

I kicked the snowman until it fell apart, then we all lounged sunk into the snow for a while. A grey bird dropped down from the sky. It pecked at the corpse of a gold and shriveled flower, turned to look at us in a twitchy way, then flapped low and gone. I remembered the way the unicorn always seemed to be both coming and leaving in a shimmer. I tried to feel, again, the peace in that ambiguity.

“You know what I think,” said Vee, “I think, we should stop wasting our time out here and look for Jay in the city.”

“What are you talking about?” I felt a hot throbbing in my throat.
There are stories about unicorns found in dozens of cultures in dozens of time periods all over the world.
and electric. Cleo kept her arms crossed tight to avoid any of Vee’s hand-holds or arm-loops. Her personal bubble bulged big and palpable, slightly bluer, I thought, than the surrounding city.

The last couple hunts had left me feeling hollow. We walked and we paused and we walked until we grew numb and dizzy, but arrived nowhere but back at Transitional Housing. I wanted the hunts to feel like a quest, as if the looking was really getting closer to that unicorn I saw, closer to Jay, and closer to something good. Or further from something bad. But as more time passed from when we’d known Jay’s warmth, her stories, and her smile, the more her absence sat in my mind next to thoughts of Cleo’s growing list of murdered women. My drive to hunt for unicorns fell into abstraction. I wanted to get back to that place where Jay was invincible and her stories might be true. I wanted to get back to where magic and us—all four of us—were the same.

“Let’s walk around all night,” Vee said. She crossed a street at a pothole where we should have turned. Cleo and I followed. “Let’s watch the city change.”

Against a blank brick wall stood two probably-boys. Our steps slowed. One boy slammed the other against a wall and we heard an “urhhf” kind of gurgle.

“I’m sorry,” the slammed boy said. The other boy muttered words we couldn’t hear. His skin gleamed slimy in the orange lamplight. A thick chain necklace glinted at his throat. He ground the other boy’s face against the bricks. I felt Cleo’s form tighten next to me, saw her whole body etch into angles.

“Oh, no. Nope. Hell no.” She leapt forward with those glorious, endless legs. Her skin flashed bronze as she flew like some wild, snarling spirit. Vee and I locked eyes. She whooped. I whooped. We bounded after Cleo.

“What do you think you’re doing?” She screamed. “Who the fuck! Gave you the right! To hurt another person?”

“Yeah!” Vee joined in. We circled the boys in a heat. I hissed.

The three of us huffed into the night, silent now. Both boys gawked.

“Is this some sort of joke?” Chain Necklace asked.

“Great job, faggots.” His voice shook with venom. “You’re gonna save the whole fucking world.”

The city felt electrified as we floated back towards Transitional Housing. Halfway there, I realized we were all holding hands. Nobody stopped smiling. I swung my arms and soon we all skipped in rhythm, locked hands moving in these exaggerated Kindergarten see-saws. Red rover, red rover. We leaped over the window ledge when we reached the food center, and snickered while the coffee maker made percolating sounds. Vee skittered to our room and brought back a bottle of sparkly-purple nail polish called Cosmic Dream. Cleo curled her fingers around the polish and told us she adored it, then set it down and pulled us against her throbbing chest. We stayed like that for long time.

“I have this gold nail-pen thing too. Draw us something, Lani,” Vee said after, shaking the long tube. I looked at her and she looked back in a vibrating way.

“God, you’re beautiful,” she said. Cleo made a sound like “mm,” and Vee drew in a breath. I took the nail-pen from her warm hand.

“What do you want me to draw, Vee?”

Her eyes grew big and she looked at Cleo, chuckling. I saw—or felt—a shimmering and the hair on my neck stood up like we’d arrived somewhere ambiguous, somewhere near danger and magic. Vee opened her mouth.

“A unicorn.”
Crack,
David’s sunflower seeds in the cab of a truck,
A Chevy Silverado encases 3 generations of 4 brown nuts,
buckets in hand, our lips reminisce the season
of ripened pinon pines and sift through the
cones that hide their little brown bodies.

Spit,
Turn tradition on your tongue,
language is an acrobat in your mouth.
Bite down hard and taste preservation.
Load the shells between your teeth and gums.

Swallow,
It’s hard to spit up tradition when swallowing seeds.
Call me “Sto”  
Stacie Denetsosie

When I look at my face it’s covered in ic—
it must seep out my Indian pores.
I wash my face so it doesn’t shine, and it’s not covered in sto—
I floss and brush my teeth so I don’t have ic—
Some assume I was a sto away in my mama’s womb,
but nobody knew, cuz’ my papa was a never home sto—
Word is he drank himself sick, ic, ic.
Lucky for me, mama’s a hard working sto,
We work hard to keep the ic off,
But the other day in a serious day daze…

Someone asked me why I looked so damn stoic.

Peaked
Stacie Denetsosie

You look down at your phone,
Face a-lit in the number glow.
You’re the sliver of a nose.
I see you in fragmented silver pieces.
And I never know where you are,
Perhaps Vancouver at a rave.
Or toes dipped in brisk grey beach sand in Oregon.
Your eyes are hard-flecked obsidian.
Dissecting, your dots on the map.
I’ve picked up my pins and tried to follow.
Remember our tent in Nevada?
When we were 13,000 feet up and
I had forgotten my sleeping bag?
Remember when the wind wailed so loud it
shook the stillness of our bones?
And I nestled into your chest,
And we were silent as the wind filled our porous parts.
In the morning we left the shelter of our tent,
Surrounded by nothing but grey stone
I wondered about the tired sunrise.
And if God had left his post,
Because it was as if he had accidently slid his
Sleeve across the horizon.
Elegy for Pa-pau and Ohio

Mason Lenches-Jhamb

I.
Our Pa-pau’s ninety-sixth birthday had arrived.
Jordan and I steered
the Avalanche into Lebanon,
Ohio, after crossing five hundred miles
of cattle crap farmland.

The Golden Lamb awaited us.
The oldest inn in the state.
We weren’t its most illustrious guests.
It had housed former presidents,
but the occasion pardoned us,
and most of them were dead anyway.

II.
I unhinged the red velvet rope that sectioned
off the room and stepped into the white suited past
of Mark Twain. It was his room, at least one he had spent
a night in.
White walls and creaky oak floors cried Huckleberry
and Sawyer’s secrets until I became deaf
with wonder or drink and collapsed,
into a moldy green leather armchair I swore still
held his musk.
III.
My eyes landed on Pa-pau,
who had reached such an age that time ceased
to worry about wrinkling him further. It certainly hadn’t snatched
away his brown tweed and golf hat of fifteen
years ago.
Our eyes met in the dim light of the Elks Lodge,
and his blue-eyed bewilderment spoke
before either of us could.

IV.
We sat as sunken ships in armchairs,
surrounded by ceramic clowns that made
me cringe and him smile.

All weekend he chewed and chewed his
Beech Nut tobacco, while I whittled my memory back
into him.

I couldn't count how many times he leaned
in, with a conspiratorial grin, only to ask me,
*Do you chew*, or, *So you write, huh?*

But the most frequent was, *Wow, he sure can play*
*piano*. Jordan spoke in another key, from another room.
He knew Pa-pau’s favorite, The Bells of Moscow, and played it with
a passion I didn’t possess. It was his way of saying goodbye
to a near century of a man. Pa-pau bobbed to the melody,
contented in his chair, a lip cemented to his cheek.

V.
At the door of the weekend and our visit, I held
him, the man of more time than any man could hope for, and whispered, *I’ll see
you soon.*
The Day You Went to Jail

Mason Lenches-Jhamb

The day you went to jail
we stood statuesque outside
my new apartment on the edge
of campus.

The exterior,
red brick, nude siding,
speckled with dirt and years
of shame.

The road wound
several feet below, obscured
by a thicket of green
that perspired in the dry heat.

I wanted to ascend
those six concrete stairs offering
their cold, turn left,
and I’d be at my door.

My eyes lowered to the cracked
asphalt, a spider’s web,
and I, trapped, suspended
between the said and unsaid.

I wanted a disguise,
so I slipped
on my sunglasses, the Medusa emblem
pair, in not so conversation, but
in disarming light,
I spoke words I couldn’t,
and that was all
your freedom.
I crush
OxyContin in a corner
of my room, on a corner
of my mahogany
desk meant for writing.
Light the color
of sepia streaks from the ceiling, sunset
in a cave with red walls and bamboo
blinds.

The pill—a pale grey 20mg—rests
like a long forgotten pearl
between the fold
of my expired driver’s license. Clammed
in my hand, I squeeze it shut,
and my DMV photograph greets
me now
with a sidelong smile across
four years.

But back, back beyond those years
I was eight, searching
for sleep among
sheep, who tired of jumping, and I tired
of making them. So I fled
that scratchy field
before dreams
in search of you downstairs.

And I found you, mom,
I found you in a white night-
gown unconscious
on the tile beside the toilet.
Your sandy hair dangled
into the bowl like a fishing
line at which you had fallen
asleep in the sun.

Instead of your catch,
a bile green eel stretched
from your mouth, licking
the linoleum and whispering
of what
I would find in your hand.
The Color White as a Social Construct

Alyssa Quinn

*Not inside* you said
so you let him cover you
all over.
Your hair clumped sticky-wet
and face slickened beneath
pelvis rhythm.

You had invested yourself
in the idea of whiteness,
so you let him shove
into ass like a knife,
twisting its edge—
you bled. Drop drop
drop in underpants—
he couldn't see.

But he loved
blood,
drilled fingers like metal. Red
and white—
colors you both believed.

Oh your tight pussy he
could not stop saying, like
he'd won something, like
his eyes were teeth to
scrape you out and chew.

These things mattered to him:
tight-scrunched muscle,
you as paper-blank and pure.
He wanted you to snap
like new elastic.

You did.

But not before letting him
slide dick between breast,
hard against sternum until
cloudy warm cum shot over nipples.

You: pressed pelvis,
sealed hymen,
chest dripping in his sperm.

And yet you claimed it:

virgin.
Dilemma
Alyssa Quinn

Four-hundred-and-sixty seconds to get from library to English building—a clump of deer grass rustles. Perhaps a slight scratch of paw, brush of tail against bush, little quiver of life?

I'm mid-stride, speed-walking, fists jammed in pockets, head dipped like a warhead to its target. If I pause, search for some small creature in the bushes, I'll be late to class, and there's a test today. It's on Wordsworth—William Wordsworth, Born: 1770, Died: 1850. Foundational Romantic Poet. Major themes include: Nature (capital N), feeling over reason, emotion over thought. Prompt: write an essay, 2 page minimum, single spaced—Analyze, Criticize, Theorize. (See grading rubric attached.)

For a half-moment, I stop on sidewalk, wrenched two ways. Not-knowing is an itch behind my skull. I take three steps back.

Behind the tuft of grass, a mouse, thumbprint-small, stares up. It locks its bright black eyes on mine. For the space of two heartbeats, we are both still.
I am not the speaker of the poem
   (do not be confused)—
the I is here and the speaker is there.
This works out for you (you, reader/student/professor/classmate)
because you can say “sh—the speaker.” You can
   separate (just like that).
You can scissor into syntax
(when the speaker says she razored steak knife through skin),
slice away syllables
   (when the speaker says scabs under denim sting worst of all),
trim anything tired, anything trite
(when the speaker says she cut because she couldn't breathe, had to open something other than lung).

And the I can take it, can nod nod nod,
because the I is not the speaker
   (who hates that she hurts, hates that she cannot just stop, just fix).

And you are not the You. Don't worry.
You are not the You she wishes would touch her
   (the You who never found the thumbtacks hidden,
   ready for quick clean lines ripped across thigh).
You are not the You who never noticed.

You are so cool, so articulate,
and the I is so
   composed,
body sitting calm and unbroken.
(The speaker knows the fastest path to fainting, for when
metal edges aren't enough, for when even hurting doesn't help:
squat, up, down, up, down, get blood beating up to brain,
get pulse pumping, then pop thumb into mouth, seal lips
around and blow hard, oxygen corked between cheeks.
Vision will fade, you will wake up shaking, grazed,
cradled in the cool palm of nothing, blissful brief forgetting
that the body is still solid, that flesh has not dissolved—)

The I will thank you
for your feedback.
1. When you want to die, keep walking. The roof of the dorms will seem like a gateway to heaven. It’s not. Keep walking. When people whisper ‘fag,’ ‘queer,’ and ‘homo’ behind your back, when friends decide to walk out of your life because you tell them about the guy you can’t stop thinking about, when they tell you an all-loving God doesn’t have the room to love you, just keep walking.

2. When your mother cries, hold her. A part of you will wonder why she has the right to cry about this, when her faith rejects and hates you. You’ll realize later that this is her journey too. Her dreams for you have shattered. She loves you, but she must watch as the world turns and walks away from you. Hold her, because no one deserves to carry all of that pain alone. Hold her, because the two of you together have the strength to survive this.

3. Allow his fingers entwine with yours for the first time. Feel whole for the first time as he holds your hand. You won’t feel condemned, or cursed, or even slightly like the abomination that you’ve spent your whole life telling yourself that you are. His hand will be strong, and it will feel right in yours. The world will be open to the two of you, and you will feel it. You’ll cling onto that hand, and you’ll make plans for a future with a husband and children.

4. Cry when he leaves. Cry because you loved him. Cry because that voice in the back of your mind that you finally learned to tune out, that voice that echoes the word ‘abomination’ constantly, that voice will be back. Cry because you feel empty. Cry, because there’s nothing else that you can do. You’ll look in the mirror, and you’ll fixate on all the parts of you that you’ve secretly hated from the beginning. You’ll see your bushy eyebrows and your slender arms. You will know that these are all the reasons why he left.

5. Let yourself be angry with God. Pray. Start by saying, “Heavenly Father, I hate you,” and feel it. The memories of a thousand church meetings will make you feel guilty, because hating God has been labeled as a sin. You won’t want to feel this way. Let yourself feel all of it. You’ve spent too long denying the way you feel, so for once open up your heart and release everything that eats away at you. Tell God how angry you are that he made you gay. Tell Him how furious you are that He’s created a church where believers preach hate against you. Tell him exactly what you feel, and then climb to your feet and walk away.
6. Make your relationship with God entirely your own business. Eventually the hatred will fade. If it doesn’t fade naturally, convince yourself to let it go. You’ve spent too long hating too much; just let it leak away from your soul. There’s a chance you’ll learn to love Him. If it happens, it will happen slowly, and it won’t happen because anyone else told you to love Him. It will happen because you choose to love.

7. Realize that as you let the hate toward God seep out of your soul, slowly the same hatred of self will leak away. Fall in love with the depths of your own brown eyes. Discover that your own laughter is your favorite sound. Take pride in the way that you are learning each day to become more and more true to the you that you’ve always wanted to be. Months later, stand on the roof of that dorm, and be amazed by the beautiful world that stretches out around you, filled with greens, reds, yellows, blues, and browns. You’ll be glad you decided to never jump.
Leather seats sucked our skin, so every move we made pried our flesh from the bus’s brown cushioned bench. Nine inches between foot and ground, the Velcro on her shoe scraped the outside of my calf as our legs swung, synchronized, back and forth. On the swing set, if our legs pumped in rhythm, people would say we were married—blush at the thought of cooties, but praise, congratulate us anyways, shout to the teachers, who’d smile and yell “Happy for you two!” Show love for this unplanned thing. But on the bus, our feet just swung. Back and forth, Velcro peeled parts of my calf as her legs flexed then relaxed, an odd crave surge with each scuff against raw skin; a slight break only when she asked me to scratch a spot on her back.

“Mhmm. Yes. Where again?”

Fingernail painted a deep blue from the sleepover we’d had two nights before, she tapped a spot in the air just below her shoulder blade that, in eight years, her bra would cover. She kept her finger there and tried to itch it herself, but couldn’t reach; she needed me to do it for her.

Her mother put the nail polish on the counter, told us we got one bag of popcorn, a soda each, and one movie before bedtime; said if we weren’t sure how to glaze cobalt coats of femininity on our chewed, keratin claws, that she’d be happy to help. Crusted crimson nail polish on an edge of skin overlapped her mother’s pointer-finger nail as she slid the bottle towards us; eager to watch us conform. We hid our hands beneath the table. Her palm found mine in panic; so I wrapped my fingers around her knuckles while her mother set newspaper down to prevent perverted blots on her pristine, conventional countertop. After her mother left the room, after she stained our nails with gooey gloss, we curled paper under our tongues, small, rolled up pieces from the bottle’s label. We let them melt in our saliva, then spat them into each other’s hands and watched the gel of polish ruin.

I faced my body towards her back and sat on my knees, raised my hand to lift the shirt her brother used to wear. I skimmed the shirt against her skin and lingered at the way her back looked. Smooth, like how a naked Barbie felt in the crook of my elbow, hair cut short because we didn’t have a Ken, so the ugliest girl had to be the boy. The itch intensifying, she urged me to hurry. I pressed my finger to her skin; a porcelain dimple surfaced, but I didn't scratch. I let the itch fester, never quite sure whether or not I could make it stop, never quite sure if I wanted it to.
Intense Garage Fire Kills a Sandy Father

Jeannie Woller

Deseret News. Tuesday May 18, 2004, 12:00 a.m. MDT: A Sandy neighborhood was stunned Monday after an early morning (5:08 am) fire inside a garage claimed the life of a father of five. Many neighbors were awakened by the screams of the man’s daughters as [the daughters] watched helplessly from a lawn across the street.

The sound of sirens sliced through the mesh screen of my window. I’d left it open so I could wake to early birds and sunlight through crooked blinds, but the man burned before the mourning doves could sing. I looked at the clock on my dresser across the room and pressed a pillow to my ear, smothering the shrieks I’d awoken to.

“It was a nightmare. I just wish we could have done more. It’s a very frustrating thing. It’s a horrifying experience to know there was someone in there you couldn’t help.”

My mother’s shaking fingers covered her mouth all of breakfast. She only removed them, hand hitting swirled wood of kitchen table, when she raised a spoon to separate cracked lips. A block away, the sizzle of painted timber and shackled roof slowed, extinguished in heavy air filled with girly whimpers wedged in cupped palms, and a slight smell of blistered flesh. A hose lay coiled on the grass of the house next door. Water leaked from its rounded mouth as the neighbor spoke to the local newspaper, describing his failed attempts to douse a burning man. Like using a squirt gun on a bonfire, his wife said, and closed her eyes at the memory.

Mom wanted to help, suggested we cook something, bring it over; then covered her mouth again, said never-mind through knuckles, and left the room, cereal bloating in milk still on the table.

Neighbors could see smoke and flames from their bedroom windows. It was a chilling scene as small explosions kept going off with the man still trapped inside.

Our legs bounced all day under school desks, the neighborhood kids and mine, as we itched to hear stories, see the burnt roof, watch it crumble into a tomb for the remains of the screaming girls’ carbonized daddy. When we met that afternoon, the ones who lived closest to the catastrophe spoke first. Mom hadn’t let me visit the house, she whispered to dad what if it was him in there. I was only nine, and those girls weren’t much older; so when us kids met, I ate every word. Filled my mouth with gasps and greedy desires.

“I heard the girls scream. It woke me and my sister up. My parents ran outside, but it was too late. The fire was higher than the trees,” one of the kids said, and our pupils lit. “My clothes smelt like smoke, I wanted to wear them to school, but my mom wouldn’t let me. She said she should wash them or something.”

We all sat on our knees, gnawed our fingernails and listened. “There were so many fire trucks,” said another. “There were like ten fire trucks, I could see it burn from my house. We had to keep my dog inside because my dad didn’t want her to inhale the smoke and maybe die.”

Each of us took turns distorting our experience. Every time the fire got bigger; the stakes higher. The flames burned our tongues long after it ended. The tang of ash blended with breath. Something inside us craved the explosion.

The man became separated from his wife and trapped inside the garage. His wife tried to open the door from the garage to her house, but it was too hot. The fire was contained mostly to the garage, but there is smoke damage throughout the house. Fire officials said the man’s wife and daughters would be staying with other family members for at least the
next few days.

When we finally walked over to visit what remained, two or three news vans still loitered on the road across from the cremated garage. Newscasters stood in front of cameras to capture the sublimation that still plumed from the blackened roof. Particles from the burnt man’s suit tie danced in a mist above their microphones. Our hearts pounded, we could taste death, lick it out of the air.

The man in front of the camera asked if we wanted to be on TV; filmed saying we loved them, clapping for them, because we missed them and understood how hard all this must be.

We didn’t even know them. Not one of us knew any of their names.

Still, we agreed.

“He was very good-hearted. A great guy, good dad, excellent husband. It’s such a tragedy, such a horrific morning.”

Mom was horrified when I ran home and told her we’d be on the news, the excitement scorching my face. She covered her mouth again, but I didn’t care. When the camera rolled, we wet our eyes, said we loved them, clapped, bowed our heads in silent prayer, where nobody could see us smile.
I have my dad’s smile. That is the one thing that makes having a smile like mine bearable. He died five years ago, and it’s nice to have something of his with me always. It’s too bad his smile was thin-lipped and lopsided, but I guess getting his smile was better than getting his big hooked nose. But then a big nose isn’t so bad. Noses are supposed to be awkward and ugly. Ever focus on only someone’s nose? And what about Barbara Streisand? Her honker became her signature. But a smile is supposed to be beautiful. It’s supposed to be what a person falls in love with, what captures people’s trust and loyalty.

*Kuchisake-onna* walks the streets of Japan, wearing a surgical mask. Her long dark hair billows behind her in the cool evening wind. As her large dark eyes dart about the streets, they reflect the moon in the clear sky. Her shining eyes finally find what they’re looking for. A little girl scuttles down the gray street with a purple backpack. In seconds, *Kuchisake-onna* is by the little girl’s side. The girl looks up.

“Do you think I’m pretty?” *Kuchisake-onna* asks.

“Yes.”

*Kuchisake-onna* slowly removes her mask and says, “Even like this?”

Every few months my mother and I have the same argument.

“Don’t smile like that. Poof your lips out.” Mom addresses me as if this conversation has never taken place before.

I stretch my lips out as far as they can go, making them look like a duck’s bill.

“Sophia!”

“I don’t have anything to poof out, Mom.” I’ve been resigned to the fact that I have a no-lipped smile for years now. I’ve also resigned to the fact that my mother will never stop bringing up the misfortunes of my no-lipped smile.

Her tone is high-pitched and scolding. “What happened to those lips you had when you were little? Why couldn’t you get lips like Shawna’s?”

Shawna is my mother’s older sister’s daughter. She’d always been the model of what I should have been. She’s five ten, tan, blonde, and has plump pink lips and straight white teeth.

Teethwhiteningreviews.com rates the top ten best female celebrity smiles. Jessica Alba tops the list with “golden proportions” that “look good at every angle.” Number two is Bridget Moynahan whose “smile
This case became known as the Black Dahlia murder. It was never solved.

At 10:40 am on January 15, 1947, an anonymous call came into the LA Police. Officers Frank Perkins and Wayne Fitzgerald arrived at the address given by the anonymous caller. In a grassy field in plain view from the street, Officers Perkins and Fitzgerald found a naked body severed at the torso. Small chunks of flesh had been hacked out, and the body was completely white and drained of blood. The deceased woman's mouth was sliced at the corners into a gruesome smile (Pacios).

This case became known as the Black Dahlia murder. It was never solved.

I am a girl who frowns. I don't mean to frown. Smiling simply isn't a natural reflex for me like it is for other people. Often when I'm walking outside on bright clear days, I find myself wrinkling my forehead and squinting to block some sun. I'm sure I look like I'm scowling at everyone I pass. Blocking the sun is the reason for my brooding looks when I'm outside, but when I'm inside, I have no excuse.

Last year, I had a Spanish teacher named Señor Schiffman. He was a stocky man with a cleft chin and a huge smile, which he always welcomed the class with. Almost every day I walked into class, he would say, “Sophia, you look so sad,” as his big white teeth gleamed at me. “Why don't you smile?”

I would just shrug, say something polite, and end the conversation.

Japan has a legend about a young woman with long dark hair who wears a surgical mask. The mask is not what is unusual about this woman, however, as wearing a mask is a common practice in many Asian cultures when one has a cold. What is unusual about this woman is what the mask is hiding, a mouth that has been slashed on each side to create a perpetual and bloody smile from ear to ear. Kuchisake-onna, or the slit-mouthed woman, now roams the streets asking lone children if they think she is pretty. If the children say no, she kills them. If they say yes, she cuts the children's mouths like hers (Foster 699-700).

I know of two school pictures before high school in which I am smiling with my teeth showing. One of the pictures with a smile showing my teeth was in third grade. The day I got the picture back, I was completely mortified by what I saw. My smile was huge and cheesy. The smile made my already chubby cheeks look even chubbier. I looked fat. From then on, I tried to pull off the I'm-too-cool closed-mouth smile in school pictures. With the closed-mouth smile, my lips looked thicker, my eyes weren't as squinty, and my cheeks didn't look as chubby.

In high school, I realized that the closed-mouth smile made me look awkward and insecure instead of cool. I resorted to the open-mouthed smile. I could never reach the level of stunning beauty, but a wide, toothy, lopsided, no-lipped smile could be seen as quirky, which suited me better anyway.

The Black Dahlia's legal name was Elizabeth Short, but her real name was swallowed up in the nickname given her while still alive due to her dark wardrobe. The name Black Dahlia fed the rumors of scandal and smut about her life, which soon filled newspapers and magazines after her body was found. She was a prostitute. She went home with a different man, married or single, every night. But other accounts (not so popular with the press at the time) say she was a good girl, just trying to get a break into the movie business. She was quiet and innocent (Harnisch 2).

One of the only certainties about the Black Dahlia is that she was beautiful. The pictures show a young woman with brown curls, light eyes, and a white smile framed with thick, dark lips. What was that beautiful dark smile hiding though? Was the gruesome smile carved into her face a better depiction of the woman she was inside? Or did the postmortem smile distort the smile of a pure young woman? What did Short do to get her-
Honorable Mention: Wild by McKenzie Lowry

My mother put me in dance classes for the majority of my childhood. I wasn't very talented, but I still enjoyed the lessons. Once when I was about eleven, my dance squad was in a competition. My instructor told us that we should try to smile as big as we could, and whoever had the best smile would get a prize.

I hated my smile, but I wanted that prize. The night before the performance, I sat myself down in front of the mirror and practiced my smile. Remembering Mom's advice to “poof” my lips out, I struggled to push my lips forward while stretching the scrawny things into a wide toothy smile. I couldn't do anything about my squinty eyes and chubby cheeks, but I managed to create a thin line of pink surrounding my teeth. I was pleased with myself and was confident I would win the smiling competition.

When my squad performed the next day, I smiled as big as I could throughout the whole routine, but the prize was given to Lynnette Richardson.

Many rumors float around of how Kuchisake-onna got her smile. Some say she was caught having an extramarital affair. Her jealous husband carved her mouth, saying, “Who will think you're beautiful now?” Another story is that Kuchisake-onna was a mental patient, and she slit her own mouth (“Kuchisake Onna”). Yet another story is that the woman went in for cosmetic surgery. Instead of the perfect smile she wanted, she got a gruesome gash of a smile (Foster). A poignant punishment for vanity.

No, I don't smile when walking into Spanish class. I avoid smiling in pictures. I do not smile in my sleep. I don't smile when I'm concentrating, and therefore, I'm not smiling as I write this essay. I don't smile when I play tennis.
unless I win a point. Sometimes, I smile when I read books. But I do smile when I talk to my best friend on the phone, when I sing, and to say hello. I also smile when someone offends me, when I don’t want people to know what I’m thinking, and when people ask me if I’m okay, especially if I’m not okay.

In our culture, a smile is a symbol of beauty. Women all over obsess over the perfect smile and will go to great extremes to achieve it. Lip injections, braces, teeth whitening, and veneers. We use these things to conform our smiles to that which is acceptable and beautiful to society. But a smile is not supposed to be fake, forced, or false. The very essence of a smile is supposed to be sincerity. But so often a smile is used to hide who we are, what we’re thinking, and what we’re feeling.

I look at Jessica Alba’s smile that is so acclaimed by the celebrity magazines, and I see thousands of dollars worth of hiding. Something sinister lurks within Alba’s smile, something almost as frightening as the slit-mouthed woman’s smile. Each of Alba’s teeth is so straight and so white that the smile is inhuman and almost unearthly. All those straight perfect teeth and those two thick lips are hiding a flawed and imperfect but beautiful human being.

Although I have always been self-conscious of my smile, I hide behind my smile more often than I care to admit. My smile is an amazing paradox because I use it to hide my negative feelings or opposing opinions, but if someone were to really pay attention to my smile, they would see that my smile truly displays my character, even as I use it to hide. My quirks, insecurities, imperfections, and desires—they’re in my smile. Maybe because my smile exposes so much of my character is why I despise my smile so much and also why I have a secret loyalty to and love for my lopsided no-lipped smile.

Works Cited


On the Noises in the Office, Late Nights
Terysa Dyer

I.
They intoned, “It’s haunted,
you know,” and we knew
only that they meant to quake
our hearts or prick our necks
at the back with a fright
when we worked there late nights.

They were the wise, the second-year vets.
We couldn’t reject what they said,
though we tried.

II.
The Ray B. West Building, 1918:
neither yet named so, nor yet
part of our Utah State University.
No classes for English.

No, a military barracks, training grounds
for fighters going rounds in the first
brawl for all the world. How many men—
for they were men only, then—
walked the first floors of these halls,
worked there late nights,
dreaming without the foresight
to dream of the violence ahead, of the ghosts
they would wake one day to find
in themselves by that war’s end.

III.
We worked there late nights,
ate gummy worms under fluorescent lights,
graded papers and wrote them
in a cycle that made our eyes see things
we dared not report to each other.

The stories they told, those wise,
those second-year vets, shined
like laptop screens in our minds.
But the fun of all-nighters and writing
parties dissipated when the rest of them
went home to quiet beds and I stayed
upstairs alone—yes, alone—grading
just two more papers—why not alone?
And the noises on the landing
couldn’t be my friends gone home—
I’m there alone—and the rain
on the office roof wasn’t falling—
not like my bravado—and maybe…

Once, alone, I heard someone call
down the upstairs hall and looked to find
my mind had tricked me—maybe
the stories they told us
to tease us,
to try us,
were true.
**“Census: Utah has Youngest Newlyweds” – Deseret News**

**Seasonal Fruit**  
*Terysa Dyer*

Young bodies bound with vows  
lie in their own houses now.

They hesitate, devout  
down to their underwear,

tremble with downtrodden wonder  
and unveiled virgin pleasures.

Wedding bells ring them home alone together  
where mission letters bind like fetters.

Strained sex does not inspire  
(just enough to procreate).

Speak,  
speak up.

Let Him know your needs—  
as if you could.

summertime seeps like dripping water  
rolls off the round bodies of red raspberries  
and through tilted little ladders of holes  
into the ditchwater sink bottom

but some drip-droplets cling to the dark,  
sweet things, bend into memories  
of lava tag on the playground with a little sister,  
later waving goodbye as I drive up the lane  
and she drifts toward adulthood, aged ten
What does it mean
to be a mother?
Are you full of fragments:

your nose  your eyes  your hair
repeated on a smaller scale
a human fractal?

When my mother felt me move
did she sense delicate fingers
grasping for her thrumming heart,

each beat the blink of a startled eye
closing to avoid pain?

They say we hear with
bones as well as ears,
like whales hear, those inner echoes
give us the sounds of our own voices.
I wonder then, did my mother hear me
stirring in her belly, the sound of the ocean in a shell?

Or was she too full to echo,
the spaces inside her made solid with me
baby coos stopped between belly and brain?

And did she know love
which set me going, fed on her
even then?

Did she fear the wet, bald creature
she called daughter, waiting to devour
in one push,

matricide in a moment?

But could I have lingered like
an unwelcome guest, afraid
to knock? I stained her
shaking thighs, slick,
Oil of Catechumens.

On that night she first felt me move
rocking like a cradle, did she fear
something shuffled toward Bethlehem?
Resurrection

Chloe Hanson

You,
moth in a mason jar, memory held
in a conservatory of bone,
you knock on the inside of my skull,
what a racket you make
echoing between ears,
your lightest touch striking like a fist
but I can’t keep you locked in me
you exist.

I fear I’ll find you
ordering turkey sandwiches for two, drinking
a pint with a floating slice of orange
what a din you’ll make inside me then,
as you compare hair, face, manner of dress
to that version of you who must suffocate soon.
My head’s screwed on too tight for breathing room.

I’ve driven a pin through your abdomen,
pressed you between mental layers of glass.
Why can’t I look at you like something already dead:
with limited interest? Why must you act
the part of Lazarus, why must you rise, miraculous?
Chloe Hanson

I look at children
and understand
why people
believe in God.

While dead deities lie
entombed in scientific tomes

heads back, mouths open,
salt-white, as if struck
at once by a breath

of hot ash, children
emerge from human flesh.

Though we know
how they are conceived,
carried, cut from their

mothers, we still wonder
at the life we make,
as if afraid to credit
ourselves, divine creators.

I too look away from
the red-hot epicenter
of my power,
dormant, now.
Perhaps for fear of what
I will unearth

when my body cools.

Honorable Mention: Mushrooms, by Christopher Davis
I will break down your bones
‘Til they dazzle and pop and rattle
I will make the bruise turn and twist
Purple to green, then fading out

Like our song in the background.

I will resurrect everything
You forgot you knew
About sunrise, about migraine headaches,
About eating in your car alone.

I will not hold the knife like they do
In some love poems, crouching adagio
Over your last words to me
In a small, nearly wordless text message.
I will not stay out looking for you
In forgotten emails or overgrown trails
Because I know you will not be there.

I will probably look you up on Google Maps.
I will not drive past your house, though,
Just say in your orbit. Circle the city blocks
Within a ten mile radius. The Nearness of You
Will drip through the car speakers.

With this poem I will shake
Your heart from its cage
Until you remember me too.
I was working on a sequence
Of math equations
When my mother called.
She told me you’d killed yourself
The night before, on your brother’s
Swing set.

The last time I saw you,
You reminded me of a supernova,
Bending, expanding,
Then smash
collapsing in on your
doomed self. I wish I could say
It wasn’t beautiful.

Leaving the library in a stabbing fury,
I mounted my bike, knowing my legs
Would be worthless.
The absence of tears was blinding,
*How dare you, why would you?*
I said to nobody, I guess.
I felt like a greeting card
That’s blank inside. Should I say something
To your mother? To myself?

Get well soon.
*My condolences.*
*Pay better attention.*
*Lock the kitchen drawer next time.*

I pedaled across the cement
Until it melted with the heat,
Turning into flat galaxies
As I rode. Trying to meet you again,
One more time.

Without ceremony or liturgy
Or a note
You left me
riding this bike
Under a sweltering blanket of
Madness, which I kept to myself then and
I carry it now. Do you know how supernovas
Leave us? In a blinding burst of light,
They stretch out, yawning massively,
*Goodbye, goodnight.* And for a brief moment,
A new star seems to appear.
Bad Habits
Chloe Hanson

“Repetition of the same thought or physical action develops into a habit which, repeated frequently enough, becomes an automatic reflex.”
- Norman Vincent Peale

“But better die than live mechanically a life that is a repetition of repetitions.”
- David Herbert Lawrence

Part 1: Fractals

fractal (def.) a complex, repeating pattern that remains the same across different scales

2012: I remember cigarettes. Loose, hand-rolled cigarettes that left tobacco leaves on my tongue and teeth. Nine-dollar packs of American Spirits from Nyla’s twenty-four hour gas station. Rolling tobacco sorted into separate glass tubs like canopic jars. I don’t remember the mixture I bought, scooping the brown mess into Ziploc bags, just the smell: the vanilla lotion my mother bought me every Christmas and the wet autumn leaves piled in front of my first college dorm.

I kept tobacco in the bottom drawer of my desk, hidden under the things I never opened: letters from credit unions and the scriptures my mom insisted I bring to college. The pattern remained constant: purchase, pack, procure. I didn’t buy for myself, though. I bought for Nate.

When it came to consumption, I lied and told Nate I smoked all the time. In reality, I’d only ever tried a Newport Light in my friend’s bathroom, window open, watching myself in the mirror as I took smoke into my mouth, lungs, and exhaled. Cigarettes tied us together in a small, insignificant way; I craved more. I needed to know how to roll those tight white incus bones of tobacco. I needed us to connect, to find interests and ideas I could point to and call them ours, self-similar and sweet and smoke-circled.

With each night we smoked, Nate’s Girlfriend dissipated, became a nameless, shapeless entity we never discussed. The smoke mimicked the moon: full and white, then waning to a gibbous, a crescent, as the breeze swept it away and made the sky new. We pressed tobacco leaves into waxy paper, licked and sealed the edges of each new roll, fingers forming the same practiced press and pinch. He told me I didn’t need to believe in God, that I was just a part of a predictable world, living and dying in beautiful insignificance. I didn’t understand, then, that the pictures of fractals he drew on the back of an unopened envelope, repeated designs getting smaller and smaller, patterned me in more ways than I knew.
In the natural world, the ridges in a Nautilus shell, the graceful breaking branches of trees, and the coiling clouds of a tropical storm paint the world in fractals. For me, fractals started as circles drawn within circles, lines with triangular protrusions that grew on their own into snowflakes, designs so small my hand could no longer shape them. They kept me occupied as I sat in class or called customers to ask about their service at a car dealership miles from Logan, Utah. The motion of my hand mirrored the hum-click of a missed phone call, the mumbled answering machine message, until someone broke the ordered repetition of sounds and picked up. I felt most comfortable sitting silent, listening to the familiar sounds of unanswered calls until it seemed unnatural to hear anything else.

At the time, I didn't realize my fractal nature: the bronchial tubes of my lungs like buds dividing from a flower stem, neurons fine white spider silk spun into intricate webs, coronary arteries and veins woven like tatted lace. Perhaps I pattern my actions by design -- pursue, persist, prod in order to make love neat and safe. Perhaps it started with Nate, lying side by side on my bed, reeking of smoke, where he first tilted my face with his fingers, lips a practiced press and pull like the movement of tides. Natural. But then, perhaps it started even before Nate, in those early years of lust and sexual realization. And perhaps it doesn't matter, because those little fractals that patterned my life became intimate in their sameness. Those moments with Nate, even after, when I tried to smoke alone, gave me the structure I craved.

2013: I remember a bag of stale tobacco in the bottom of my desk drawer, the smell unfamiliar with rot and time. For a moment, I lifted the bag to the light, pretending if I narrowed my eyes I could read the leaves like a tasseographic finding the future in a cup of tea. And I will admit I felt my fingers move, forming a ghostly cigarette, before tossing the bag in the trash.

Part 2: Shells

In August, the beaches of Crescent City, California, are cold and grey, as if the wind blowing ocean-salt into my eyes has also swept all the color from the landscape. I keep my chin to my chest, searching the sand. I take home shells from every beach I visit, their striated backs and pearled centers beautiful until I see them placed on a bookshelf or in a glass. Then they just look unnatural. Dirty. Wrong. There aren't many shells on this beach, though. Instead, the blue, deflated bodies of a species of jellyfish whose name I will later look up and forget litter the sand. At first, I think they are used condoms, and later, when I remember Crescent City, I will remember the lewdness, not the sad grace of the bright blue creatures washed up to the place where the tide's fingers no longer caress the sand.

Taylor decorated his room with black furniture and
white pills scattered on the surface like grains of gypsum, like coral sand. Schools of albino fish. Baby's-ear shells. When he asked if I was a virgin, I pretended to be experienced.

Before that night, “Ambien” meant a drug advertised on late-night TV. Taylor swallowed two or three at a time, followed with a glass of wine -- red, black in the dim light. He told me that if he wanted to go, he had a gun under the bed, that those pills and wine posed no danger to him. I feared death the way that some fear the ocean for the depths they cannot fathom, and yet Taylor accepted his mortality as a welcome intruder, a real presence that would leave him grey and windswept as an empty beach. As he slept, Ambien and wine crashing inside of him, I checked under the bed and in the closet. I pictured that cold black chamber, the trigger mottled with tentative fingerprints, the mark of someone who believed life meant so little. I found nothing.

Buried beneath a layer of sand, so small that I almost miss the flash of red in the grey wet mess, I find the remains of a crab, the shell speckled with gold, eyes black and flat, limbs torn off by water or wind, by time. Now, only the disk of its body remains, flat and smooth as a skipping stone. Most crustacean bodies are like this -- hard, unforgiving. But the hermit crab is soft and curved, pink, safe inside the womb-like shell. The tip of the abdomen has adapted to grasp onto the small column inside the pearled curves. The two seem designed for one another, coiling around each other. The body has become not two separate parts, but a whole, a home. I set the flat, red remains of the crab aside, opting instead to pick up the white, coiled coins of hermit crab shells. When the hermit crab outgrows its shell, it sloughs it off, leaves it behind. I keep these small spirals, remembering the word “hermit” comes from the Proto-Indo-European root *ere, “to separate.”

I stayed overnight to make sure Taylor kept breathing, and woke the next morning with naked skin stuck to one another with sweat, uncomfortable and intimate, one soft, pink being. And in that moment, I knew that I could not keep making myself so small, hoping to fit into him.

On my way out the door, he gave me a bottle of wine. Cabernet sauvignon, red-black in its green bottle. In his hands, the liquid shifted, the movement slow and intimate, gyrating. He didn't offer an explanation, and still I don't know why he gave me that bottle. I do know it sat in my closet for months, a secret, forgotten tie to him and to the pieces of myself I needed to lose. Perhaps I gave the bottle to a friend. Perhaps we tasted it together, wishing for a Moscato. Perhaps I threw it in the garbage or left it on a stranger's doorstep. All I know is that one day I couldn't find the bottle, and he was far away, on a beach somewhere or camping in some remote mountains. I imagined him sleeping, curled into himself, alone and empty.

Part 3: Reflection

I saw my face in the mirrored surface of the hotel walls, the way my eyes and lips turned up at the corners, an excellent impression of a smile. I've never liked looking at my reflection. It always seemed to me that if I looked hard, I could see something inside of myself. Like some stranger under my skin is becoming aware, for the first time, that they're trapped in my body. I looked at myself and saw none of that, only my contorted face dark hair swinging, pale arms bent at the elbows, the arch of my back. And him, of course, the guy I met in the Bellagio the day before, but I didn't look much at him. I watched my hair sway and wondered how high up we were in the Egyptian's slick black pyramid, wondered about how it would feel to slide all the way down the glass to the bottom and walk away unscathed.

When we'd taken our clothes off and gone through the necessary preambles, the kind that made me think he must watch a lot of porn, to think that things had to move in a prescribed order. All demands, he directed the scene: “why don't you put this in your mouth” and “get on your knees.” I asked him for a condom, remembering, drunk though I was, the prescribed etiquette. When he said “no,” I was supposed to walk away. I'm sure I never learned this lesson in health class, rather, I picked it up from TV shows or internet articles, somewhere in the pages I shared about faith and atheism, in the articles about women taking back their sexuality. I'm sure I already had the words in mind, some variation of “wrap it or wrap it up,” but when he said “no,” I said “OK.” And in the mirrored wall of his hotel room, watch-
On my wedding day, a bee stung me for the first time. It landed on my arm during the first photograph in the orchard under the weeping willow. At first, I thought a pin lingered in the silk and lace of my dress. The pain pushed in deep, a sliver sinking far into my skin. But when I raised my arm to look, I saw the hard pink spot, the stinger still visible, haloed in white. The spot itched for a week after, and even now, a bump remains on my right wrist, the venom still lingering.

At eight years old, I realized that Mormon girls live with a few specific expectations of themselves. First, they will get married (in the temple, which follows without saying and therefore doesn't even merit its own point on this list), and that they will remain virgins until marriage. To my knowledge, my mother never told me to save myself for marriage, but when I called in tears to tell her that James and I were moving in together, she told me she never wanted “this life” for me and she hoped I would come back to church one day. I didn’t have the courage to tell her I never would.

In Sunday school we glued school pictures over white, half-dried craft paint on a wooden block cut in the shape of the famous temple in Salt Lake City. We picked favorite temples in class, the teachers like wedding planners detailing the amenities, the grounds, the perks of each location. Most of us weren’t old enough to name any other than the Salt Lake Temple, though I suspect it remains everyone’s secret favorite. Our photographs went where the doors would be to represent our entrance. Over the door, the famous line “I’m going there someday” from a popular Mormon song for children, curled, intimate, around my photograph. Sometimes, even now, I find myself humming that song, a last reminder of a church that tried to make itself a part of me early, and instead left a sliver behind and fell away to die.

I found that wooden temple, my photograph dusty and wrinkled with age, while cleaning out my bedroom. I remembered putting it away, shoving it underneath elementary school award certificates and notebooks full of notes from middle school science class. The items I chose to keep held a sort of mystique to me, the temple in particular. I can’t say I remembered the way it felt to make that piece, but the lumpy paint, the haphazard glue job that let the photograph lift at the edges lead me to believe a certain lack of care came into play. Still, in that photograph, I smiled from the door to the temple, unaware that I would never enter. Those words “I’m going there someday,” seemed so appropriate. The quote mentions getting to the temple; it says nothing about entering.

Looking at that wooden temple, I thought of the weddings of fami-
ly members and loved ones. Each time, I stood outside and waited, unable to attend their ceremony. Unworthy. At least, that’s how I felt in the moment -- put upon. But I chose to leave the church, I chose to break its laws, even if I didn’t believe them. The church still sent me cookies with annoying messages of fellowship taped to the cellophane, and I threw each and every one in the trash untasted. Every wedding left me with half-moons of sweat under my arms and a sunburn, no matter the time of year, and the flowers at the temple were always blooming and full of bees. I wondered, at each of those weddings, if the first time a bee stung me, I’d find out that I had a severe bee allergy, like the kid in a movie I once saw as a child. I couldn’t imagine a more terrible way to find out anything -- with a prick of pain and then a horrible death.

On my wedding day, a bee stung me for the first time. I felt pain, hot and piercing, and yet, for all of that, a strange sense of calm, of some sort of inevitability. Like somehow I’d always known that I couldn’t go my whole life without being stung, that no matter what I did, that prick was inevitable, and what it left behind would be unforgettable. As soon as I lifted my arm to look at the sting, my mother started scratching it with her short, sharp fingernails. “This will make it better,” she kept saying. “This will make it so it doesn’t hurt.” And I told her to stop. The burning in my arm spread when she worried at it, and I feared it would consume me. I pushed my mother’s hand away and said “that won’t work for me.”

Part 5: Heat

The men waited on the beach. Archaeologists removed the remains, the skeletons of those men -- even plaster replicas -- too unsavory, too numerous, for the tourists who come each year to this ancient city, the smaller, better-preserved cousin to Pompeii. They don’t come to inspect the remains of the thousands who died when Vesuvius erupted, leaning in for a closer look at the empty eye sockets and delicate finger bones while that same mountain looms over their tour group. The tourists come for the well-preserved frescos, the floors of the bath houses tiled with tiny phallics for fertility and luck, with pictures of Neptune and tridents. They come to see the clay pots where citizens doled out food and wine. They come to see statues of forgotten Gods. No one comes for the flesh that vaporized in one second, leaving behind bones and empty eye sockets still turned to the sea, hands open, gesturing. For the volcanic mud that covered the city in three minutes, stopping the hot air from destroying buildings along with bodies. They do not come for the green bones that mean a woman wore jewelry that gilded her corpse in that one second, so quick that she didn’t even realize she was dying before she died. Though they know people lived here, they keep their eyes down to the cobblestones, they descend reluctantly into the lower chambers of the city where the plaster replicas of women and children wait, still embracing, lying down. To face them is to face Vesuvius, and to remember the prayers that went unanswered.

We arrived in Erculano in 2015. Our honeymoon took us all over the coast of Italy, France, and Spain, but we started there, in an ancient graveyard. Though the true skeletons sat in display cases in neighboring Napoli, the buildings were corpses, too, frescoed skin sloughed off by ignorant excavators, tiled portraits of gods and goddesses giving eyes to the remains of those structures, vacant and unseeing. The city sits at the base of Vesuvius, so close that the wind which carried ash away from neighboring Napoli to Pompeii would, in the event of another explosion, wipe out the town with “no problem.” Our tour guide tells us this smiling, in one breath making it clear that we should be afraid and that we should “live in the moment.” He tells us the Italians call living in the moment “carpe diem.” For the rest of the trip I am bothered by his translation, remembering that someone somewhere along the line explained to me that carpe diem means “seize the day,” and thinking of what a difference a day makes when the seizing could come down to just one second.
Back home, my husband James and I live on top of one of the greatest super volcanoes in the world. We live in constant danger of being vaporized in a moment, and yet, most of the time I can keep myself from thinking about it. But in Erculano, I can't help but judge the people who choose to live at the foot of Vesuvius, who can see the destructive power of the volcano from a scenic lookout point for a fee of 10 Euros. When I look my fears from a distance, I see the entirety of their destructive powers. But closeness gives me leave to look past the history of terror to the beautiful pieces, the things that grow from a difficult past.

In Erculano, I practiced looking at only the things closest to me. I focused on the tile, the trees planted from seeds of the apples grown in the city when the ash consumed it. I held hands with my husband in the ancient streets of Erculano, took pictures next to columns and bathhouses, admired the copper pipes running through the city like veins. We talked about how many people must have walked on these same cobblestones before, the streets now warped with age, with new grass coming through, new life. And we looked up to the volcano, pictured the people of the city looking to it years before we can even imagine. There was a strange peace to it, in a way, like everything happens in a predictable pattern of life and death and love. In those first weeks of marital bliss, we stood in a graveyard of gods and mortals alike, their stone eyes and plaster skeletons watching us. Our mortality loomed overhead, a reminder that our marriage, like Vesuvius, could destroy us in an instant. But there, holding my husband's hand, I felt safe.
Cordova sat on the general-issue mattress, laughing into the TV screen. Dumb laughs, like giggles from a Deadhead who’d crossed to the other side too many times and never made it back. The two empty bottles of Glenlivet in his trashcan hadn’t been there the week before.

I sat across the barrack room staring into my laptop. If Google hadn’t existed, I never would have known the difference between synthetic and down-fill sleeping bags. Or of the culinary versatility of the nine-inch, titanium backpacking spoon.

The first weeks home had been celebratory, but they’d quickly taken on a self-destructive arc. There was a darkness that partying couldn’t shake. No one said anything about it because no one knew what it was.

Ambien and alcohol were popular. Valium and Percocet pills, crushed and snorted.

We’d turned from motivated, bloodthirsty teenagers to shell-shocked cynics in one trip across the globe. We’d seen what happens when humanity turns.

Cordova had the frame of a fighter, all right angles and sharp lines. His gray eyes cut deep, and he always had an amused way about him, raising his eyebrows and laughing at me when he’d realize that I questioned his excessive drinking. I had seen him chew a cell phone to pieces and drive off base with half a fifth under his belt. It only pointed in one direction. But, fuck it. We each needed our own way out.

I completely dissociated. I stayed present enough to fill a pair of boots and make it to the occasional medical screening. Otherwise, I was gone. Where? The hills of Appalachia. The frozen tundra of Alaska. All the time I’d spent overseas with my head in adventure books had shaped my inner world. The stories helped me escape a version of reality that I constantly struggled to keep tucked neatly into a coherent context. Eventually, it just became easier to give that up. The making sense of things.

There was a tragic innocence to it. The boy lives in the adventurer’s world, a world where the intrepid never know what’s around the next bend. This preferable to his real world, a place where he knew it didn’t matter what was around the next bend. A place where EFPs melted through engine blocks as easily as they did bodies.

Suddenly, Cordova threw his Xbox controller onto the ground, sending it crashing across the tile in a half dozen pieces. He had infantile sensibilities but gorilla-like strength and giggled when he’d seen what he’d done.

“Oh Ooooooh,” he cried, standing up before throwing himself face first onto the bed.

I did a sort of eagle-like screech in response. We’d long ago devolved to communicating without words. What was the point?
We didn't socialize anymore, either. Our Friday nights were better spent in the surreal funhouse-ambiance of the barracks than in the post-deployment drama enveloping the greater Fort Riley area. We'd tried to blend in with the civilian population at first, wearing their clothes and frequenting their businesses. But we couldn't help but feel like wolves draped in lambskins, ten feet tall and covered in blood.

The locals had heard the rumors. They'd overheard drunken conversations of decapitations and brain matter. Of torture houses with skinning tables and bloody drill bits, fragments of skull matter and grizzle dried to antique metal shanks. They'd heard of the fields of decomposing corpses, hands bound and shot execution-style, glowing white-hot under the gaze of infrared lenses.

They'd read in the local papers that we'd taken casualties, whispering amongst themselves that we'd come home with ninety-three less than we'd left. That in an EFP attack, the wounded were considered the unlucky ones—well-placed shrapnel viewed as preferable to the slow roast of flames. And that after enough time, the tragic repetition of combat would cast a bleak pall over even the hardiest soldier's eyes.

"God, I'm such a fuck up," Cordova said, slamming his head into the pillow.

"It doesn't matter," I replied, not bothering to make the distinction between the broken controller and his life.

He laughed a muffled laugh, wrapping the pillow over his head and kicking his legs like a toddler in a tantrum.

Suddenly, the door creaked open. I turned to see Specialist Connelly slip into the room with a drink in his hand.

"Heeeeeeey, buddy," he said, standing behind me while rubbing my chest. Get the fuck away from me, I thought.

He'd been a dumb ass since he first got to the unit and now his dumb ass life was falling apart. Wife, custody, and money problems: a married man crashing in the barracks' rec room until he could make sense of it.

I didn't respond. He knew he was a piece of shit in my eyes.

"Hey, Cordova, buddy," he said, walking to the far side of the room. Even the contradiction of his rushed Florida drawl made him sound like a dumb ass. "Man, why don't we get fucked up tonight? Go clubbin' and try to meet us some of the local talent. Whattya think?"

Cordova screeched into the pillow and laughed his dumb laugh. A clear, nope, my life is already too messed up.

"Well, fine. Fuck ya'll two anyways," Connelly said, slurring a bit. "Course none of it's gon' matter with all the pills I just took."

I looked up and he smiled at me from behind tearful eyes. A sheepish smile, not the cocksure look I'd been accustomed to. His face went soft. "Just need a place to crash so building security won't find me."

"Well, fuck," I said, let down by reality again, "there's a nice cool floor right there." I pointed to the tile next to my bunk.

"Well, alright then," he said, nodding at the realization that he was right, nobody loved him and the world would be a better place without his dumb ass. He set his Jack and Coke on top of my locker and took off his glasses.

Cordova lifted his head and studied Connelly. Then he studied me, grinning in anticipation and disbelief.

Specialist Connelly lay down on the floor, exhaling deeply to dig for the courage. "Can I at least get a blanket?" he mumbled, his speech already regressing.

Fine. I stood up and pulled a fleece blanket off my bunk, dropping the pilled fabric on his head. A dying man deserves a final kindness. Even in my state, I felt that to be true.

I sat down and went back to my computer, picking up where I left off. According to the forum at whiteblaze.net, the cumulative elevation gain of an Appalachian Trail thru-hike is equivalent to climbing Mount Everest sixteen times. Fifteen minutes passed by.

And, maybe even more staggering, a thru-hiker has to take an average of five million steps to make it from Springer Mountain, Georgia to Mount Katahdin, Maine. Thirty minutes. Forty.
“Oh Ooooooh!” Cordova called from the other side of the room, rocking back and forth, giggling, but this time real nervous. He raised his eyebrows when our eyes locked. “Think we should do something?” he asked.

Probably, sure, I thought. But fuck it. Connelly’s out made as much sense as anything.
Apology
Terysa Dyer

I’m sorry you were a single mother. You hated taking a toddler to the grocery store, and I always made a decent Plan B. I’m sorry I’d been up all night, Sierra crying from her crib in my room. I’m sorry I had math homework to do, lying on my bed and working through the same problem in my 8th grade Geometry book over and over, though I’d already written the answer.

Books filled with silly monsters did nothing to pacify Sierra, nor distract her from what she really wanted: you. You’d been gone for 20 minutes when my forehead sagged down to the open pages of my textbook. I’m sorry I wasn’t awake to stop Sierra from toddling after you, straight out the front door and into the wide, waking world.

I woke up and knew. I hoped for the impossible chance you’d popped back home and grabbed her, or that I’d fallen asleep before you left and dreamed it all. But I knew.

I’m sorry for the voicemail I left on your phone after you didn’t answer it the first two times. The one where I cried, out of breath, asking in half-sentences whether you knew where Sierra was. I can only imagine your reaction when you got that message. Did you run to the car? Did you abandon the cart with the squeaky wheel, leave it filled with Kid Cuisine TV dinners and Hamburger Helper? I’m sure you broke the speed limit driving home.

I’m sorry you thought you were a single mother.

I called Sierra’s name until my calls came out in airy gasps between the sobs. After two laps around our building, I hunted between parked cars, thought every version of the worst as I looked at each road and each doorway in a different way than ever before. And then I met the deepest hurt a heart can feel when—after a tall police officer approached me on the sidewalk with Sierra in his uniformed arms—I stretched out my own arms and reached for her. Sierra was there, alive, smiling, looking down at me from her perch on his hip, and the officer shifted her away, shielded her from me, refused to let me reassure my racing heart against the weight of her small body.

He lectured me. He asked if I knew what the word “neglect” meant and tortured me with his own version of the awful things that might have happened, how lucky it was for me that he’d been there. All the while, he held her out of my reach. He wouldn’t let me grope for her and clasp her to my barely-budded breast until he was sure that I would never sleep so easily again.

In my room, in a heap on the floor, I cried down to the crown of her head until I heard the door slam open. I remember how you swooped in, how you ripped her from my arms and held her like I’d tried to sell her. I remember the angry, angry tears on your cheeks. Your primal lunge of protection for your baby,
and my primal cringe away. I told you then as I tell you now, “I’m sorry, I’m sorry, I’m sorry,” and I kept on telling you through body sobs and through your locked bedroom door how sorry I was.

I heard you crying on the other side. Were we both crying for the same thing? For each other? You locked the door and kept your baby with you, and I cried on my side until no more tears fell. I wonder the most about that door you locked.

I wonder why it took this many years for me to understand that I’m sorry I spent so many years feeling sorry.