



**The Mercury**  
The Student Art &  
Literary Magazine  
of Gettysburg  
College

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Volume 2016

Article 1

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2016

## The Mercury 2016

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## The Mercury 2016

Author Bio



# THE MERCURY

THE STUDENT ART & LITERARY MAGAZINE OF GETTYSBURG COLLEGE

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Article 1

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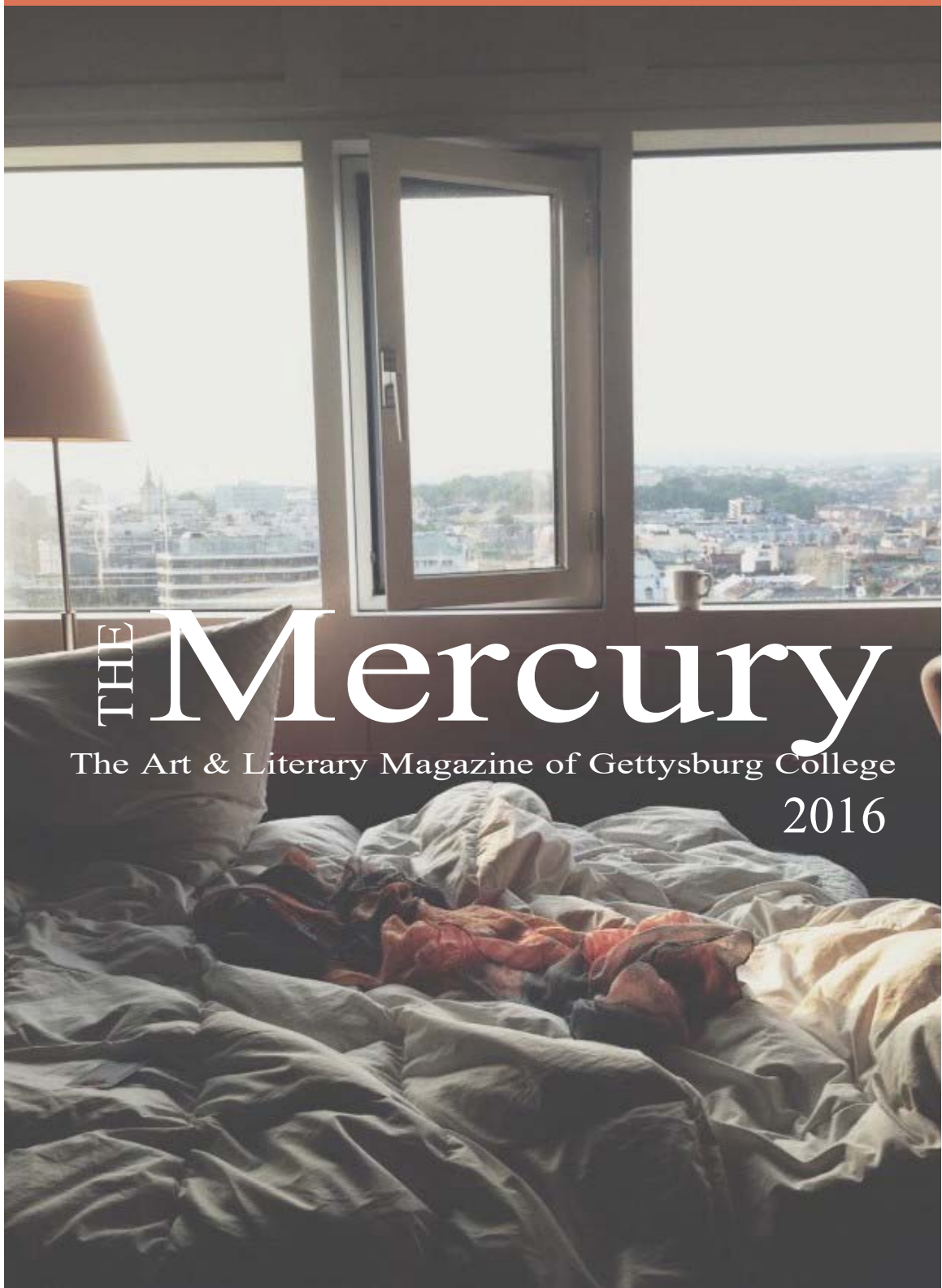
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# The Mercury 2016

## **Author Bio**



# THE Mercury

The Art & Literary Magazine of Gettysburg College  
2016

# THE MERCURY 2016

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## **COVER ARTWORK**

from "Morning View - Oslo, Norway" by Daniella Snyder

# THE MERCURY

## HISTORY & PROCESS

*The Mercury* is a student-run art and literary magazine released each April. It has been published annually since 1899 at Gettysburg College. All students of the College are invited to participate on the staff and to submit their work for possible publication. Editors are elected annually by the entire staff. Submissions are accepted on a rolling basis throughout the school year and are reviewed and chosen anonymously by the staff each year during winter break.

## EVENTS

*The Mercury* holds a publication reception and participates in campus events such as the Activities Fair, Get Acquainted Day, and co-sponsored events with Poetry Circle – another student run organization. In 2015, *The Mercury* hosted its fourth annual Write Night, an opportunity for students to read their work in a formal setting.

## THE MERCURY PRIZE

Each year, the staff awards a monetary prize to the best piece of work published in each genre. We would like to thank *The Mercury* Prize judges for 2016: Sheila Mulligan (Fiction), Karen Salyer McElmurray (Nonfiction), Hugh Martin (Poetry), and Carlyle Poteat (Art). *The Mercury* Prize-winning titles are bolded in the Table of Contents. This year's winners are Daniel Specia (Fiction), Claudia Pomponi (Nonfiction), Kathleen Bolger (Poetry), and Zoe Yeoh (Art).

## PUBLISHING

*The Mercury* was printed this year by The Sheridan Press in Hanover, Pennsylvania. We would like to thank The Sheridan Press, especially Kathi Ortman, for their support this year. This is the seventh environmentally-friendly edition of *The Mercury*, printed on paper from sustainable-harvest forests with soy-based inks. *The Mercury* is part of The Cupola: Scholarship at Gettysburg College, an online, open-access repository hosted by Musselman Library.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

*The Mercury* would like to thank the Provost's Office and the English Department for their contributions to *The Mercury*. Another note of gratitude goes to this year's magazine's advisor, Karen Salyer McElmurray, for stepping up to help us with the process. And a special thanks to all students who contributed to *The Mercury* by sending in their work or serving as staff members. Staff readers invested a tremendous amount of time evaluating and selecting submissions, and we greatly appreciate their dedication. We believe that these combined efforts make *The Mercury* an eclectic publication that reflects the creative side of the student body of Gettysburg College.

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# Queen of the Underworld

Kathleen Bolger

Tell me the story of how  
Persephone, Kore, the maiden,  
who wandered innocently  
through the valley,  
picking the most beautiful flowers,  
didn't scream when Hades  
appeared from the depths of Hell  
and grabbed her for himself  
because she wasn't scared.  
Tell me that she cloaked  
herself in darkness,  
trained the hellhounds  
for her lapdogs,  
and the cliffs of Hell  
still bear the scars  
from where she  
clawed her way out just  
to tell Demeter that  
winter is her favorite season  
because her worth does not  
hinge on the fertility of the harvest.  
I want to know that  
Persephone ate the entire pomegranate  
and spat the seeds in Hades' face  
when he tried to touch her.

# VI

## Claudia Pomponi

My dearest mother,

I would like to put this letter for you into a beautiful glass bottle, blue and green like the Atlantic Ocean when the sun hits it at just the right angle on one of the perfect summer days that have built my childhood. Then I would like to put it into that gorgeous body of water, watch it drift away and finally reach you, one day far in the future. I would want for it to peacefully float up to you, for it to be a beautiful sunny day, and for you to feel at ease when reading it.

I could not be near you when you read it, because it would break my heart to see the way your face would fall.

I could never tell you how bad it really was because the night I had to tell you I was going on medication for my depression I watched your face go from puzzled to devastated. You reached across the table, held my hand and said you were so *sorry*. You told me that you thought I was always your happiest child, so carefree and full of life. You said you always pictured me as being *perfect* and you were so sorry you never knew how I really felt. I looked down at our hands clasped together; yours so small, with your nails bitten right down to the skin, probably a result of all the stress I cause you.

Right then and there, when I saw your face like that and heard you blame yourself, I promised myself I would never tell you how bad it really was.

So if I had to tell you, I would tell you like this; in these letters I would send out for you into the sea.

Love you,  
C

\*\*\*

Dearest mother,

The first time was water.

I was fifteen.

I discovered the way water could become so hot to the touch that while it burned my skin, it numbed my mind; suddenly all the pain I was feeling in my head and heart went away.

One time you came home while I was upstairs in my bathroom, still in my clothes from field hockey practice, the water running so hot from my faucet the entire mirror was fogged. I stuck my wrists under the piercing stream and watched it turn my skin raw as I heard the downstairs door open and your familiar voice call up to me. I almost wished for a second that you would come upstairs and see what I was doing, find a way to help me understand why on earth I was doing it and make me stop. But you didn't. I turned the water off, sank down against the cool, tiled wall and cried.

There was something about heat, because the next twisted addictions were hair straighteners and curling irons. The first time I did it, I held it against the inside of my wrist and bit my tongue until I tasted blood. It seared the skin right off. I told you I had burned it on a pot while boiling water for pasta.

Maybe it was because you had noticed the mark that I decided to try to do it somewhere more shocking. Maybe I wanted you and others to notice so that maybe, *finally*, someone could help me stop this terrible habit. One night I took the hair straightener right to my face. Seared a patch of skin straight off my cheek and watched it bubble up into a huge blister.

I did this twice more: once on my forehead and once on my chin. The one on my chin was so bad that it bubbled and bled. It was Valentine's Day, and the next day you and I were leaving for a vacation in Puerto Rico. When I put my face under the warm, salty water it stung my chin. *That means it's healing*, you told me. Was I healing?

From then on, I stayed away from hair straighteners and curling irons. I thought that if one more of those mysterious burns popped up on my face someone might start to question. In reality, I wonder if I secretly *did* want someone to question. To help me. To stop me.

Love you,  
C

\*\*\*

Dearest mother,

The next time I was seventeen.

I took a heavy duty flashlight and smashed it against my forearm until it was red, raw, and starting to bruise. When you came home I told you I had fallen on my run. I ended up in the emergency room. It was Labor Day Weekend. I know the doctor didn't believe me because he looked at my knees and elbows and asked how I did not have any cuts or scratches from the fall. When I left in a shiny black cast I said I would never hurt myself again; it had been too close of a call.

I never did.

That's because I don't have to use a curling iron, a metal flashlight, or scalding hot water to intentionally hurt myself. Now, I hurt myself every week with all the needles I stick into my skin day after day like a pin cushion. By all the IV's that all the nurses poke into my arm. By all the mind-blowing migraines from my medication that keep me in bed for days on end. Maybe my body finally got the message. Now, because of my illness, I am forced to hurt myself almost every *single* day.

Let me take you to a moment that I will always remember crystal clear. I will tell you it like it is that exact day again, like we are both there, about to have our worlds changed for good.

I am nineteen years old as we are sitting in the small, bright, sterile room of Yale New Haven Hospital. Four doctors have preceded this visit. Two small procedures that went inside and tried to fix what they thought was wrong with me, tried to fix what was astray in my tiny, confused, and exhausted body. Both times when I awoke groggy from anesthesia I was met with a face that said *sorry, we're still not sure*. Two false diagnoses. Twenty-six allergy tests. Plenty of tears. Several months. Now we are here. It is June 20th, 2013. I have just finished my freshman year of college. I am in the pediatric specialty ward of Yale New Haven Hospital holding your hand. It is both precious and devastating.

The doctor who enters the room is bald. He is not dressed like the doctors I am used to in scrubs or a white coat. The strong scent of hand sanitizer follows him. He enters dressed in khaki pants and a navy blazer. Introduces

himself as Neil Romburg: he specializes in immunology and oncology. It is in that moment that my entire world suddenly comes crashing down around me. He has just shaken my hand one moment prior and now, with just a few words, he has taken my already fucked up nineteen-year-old life and smashed it into a million teeny, tiny pieces. It is then that I realize my body is failing me. He says words that I cannot hear or understand. A sound like rushing water fills my ears, and I stare at him. You do the same. We both seem oddly calm. We are mainly just confused.

He tells us that I have a severe immune deficiency. All of the antibodies in my body suddenly stopped working for me, which will now require a lifetime of injections of other people's to keep myself healthy and living. My body stopped fighting for me. He told us that it is serious and it is chronic. I will live with it for my entire life. The odds of me getting diagnosed with this rare disorder are about as likely as you finding these letters one day after I set them out to sea.

When he tells us this, he tells us other things too. Like how most patients go on to develop lymphoma, like how many patients with this condition eventually need a bone marrow transplant. Those words tumble and tumble around in my mind. The room is suddenly too hot and too cold at the same time. A nurse comes to get me and take me to another room for blood tests. She looks at me with a bright face and takes my hand. *You are so beautiful*, I remember her saying, *so beautiful and tall. You should be a model with all that beauty*. My mouth makes something that sounds like a laugh. I wash my hands in a metal sink and stare into the mirror. *Lymphoma. Lymphoma. Lymphoma.*

When she brings me into the next room there is another nurse waiting with the same bright face I will become too used to seeing. The face that looks at me with a smile, waiting to give me a compliment and make small talk while they stick a big needle in my arm. The face that will look at you the same way but with something else behind their eyes, something that says, 'I am so glad this is not my child sitting here.' Something that breaks your heart every time. Something that leads you to tears in the Hershey Emergency Room two years later and makes me promise to myself that I will never do or say anything that would lead you to tears. It was too painful to watch.

I squeezed your hand as I watched my blood flow into little, plastic tubes. *Three. Six. Ten.* I lost count after twelve.

Love you,  
C

\*\*\*

Dearest Mother,

It was after this hellish diagnosis that things really turned again.

I sat outside the next day on the patio with the warm sun blinding my vision. I am not sure how long I had been sitting there. Minutes? Hours? It was the middle of the afternoon. I was still in my pajamas. I heard the familiar squeak of the door opening behind me, but made no move to turn around. In a moment you were at my side, holding a small bottle. I looked at it questioning, but did not ask. *It's holy water*, you explained. Someone at work had given you two bottles that they had lying around. After they heard the news of my diagnosis they thought they would be better in your hands than theirs. Little did we know that the second one would come in handy exactly a year later when my oldest sister grows a rare, lopsided tumor on her left knee.

You tilted my head back and I closed my eyes. Your hand smoothed my hair; a sensation so small and familiar that it almost makes me feel as if it can fix everything. Fix me. You said a small prayer, something I cannot exactly remember the words of now and poured it lightly over my forehead. The water reached my lips. It is when I tasted the saltiness of it that I realized I was crying.

This is when water started to come back to me.

Many of those days during that long, slow summer were spent sitting on an Adirondack chair at the beach, my eyes glazed over as I stared at Long Island Sound for hours on end. I sat there with bandages on my arms and legs, wanting to drift away into the middle of that sparkling blue. I wanted to leave all these problems back on dry land. I did this almost every single day. Often you would find me sitting there, book open in my lap. *What did you do today?* you would ask me, your face smiling, hopeful, trying so hard to help me. *Nothing*, I would always reply. *Nothing at all*.

Even now, I am sorry. So very sorry for the way your face would fall when you would have to watch me sit there, so isolated, physically and mentally. I wonder how many times you stood behind me, watching my still, small

figure staring out into nothing, before you actually approached me. Ten times? Zero times? Either way, I am sorry that I forced you to constantly try so hard--so hard to bring me back to life.

Love you,  
C

\*\*\*

Dearest Mother,

Now I will take you back to another moment, this one not so long ago. Again, I will place us there like we are in yet another day that is going to change so many things. I am twenty-one when they find the tear in my knee that will require surgery. Like several times before, you are at my side in the doctor's office. Once again, it is June. June seems to be the month my body finally gets the attention it *strives* for. You do not know this, but I have the number six, in roman numerals, tattooed on my side. Six for June. Six for all the hells we have gone through together. Six for strength, and six for love.

Here is the part that breaks my heart the most to imagine telling you: when you get to this part of the letter I hope you are feeling strong, feeling how thankful I am for your love and strength. I hope that you are able to take it.

It is one week before my surgery, and I sit in the bathtub. Your bathtub. You are downstairs making dinner. There is probably music playing, and there is most definitely a glass of wine at your easiest convenience. My mind is so lost. I stare ahead at my red toenails peeping above the bubbles. *Russian Roulette* is the color I just painted them.

I now think the darkest thought that has ever crossed my mind. I think of how easy it would be to go under this warm, delicious bath water and never come back up. To leave my life in the most luxurious place of this home. I keep staring at my feet and I think how sad it would be if you had to come in here and find me with my perfectly painted, bright red toenails.

I take a deep breath in.

I do not do it. Because that is when I realize what I am doing; I am playing Russian roulette with my fucking *life*. I could leave my life, leave my pain and hurting heart behind, but I would also be leaving behind a whole



group of people who would then hurt more than I ever could have. Especially you. You would always hurt the most.

The next morning I sat on your bed while you got ready for work. I have done this since I was a child. Sometimes we don't even talk. Today, I tell you that I think I need to start going back to therapy. You look at me and your mouth forms a perfect "O" as you simply say, *Okay*. No questions or inquisitions.

Days later I sit in Maryellen's office and tell her these things. I tell her about the bathtub, and as the words fall out of my mouth I feel as though I am sitting across the room watching someone else say this. Surely this cannot be me saying these awful things, *right*? But it is.

I saved myself when I did this. Maryellen saved me. Kyle saved me. My friends saved me. But more than anyone, you saved me, even if you do not know it. I could never have saved myself if you were not there all along holding my hands and telling me that it was going to be okay. Because you are my mother, you are automatically always right, so I believed you, and it saved me.

Love you,  
C

\*\*\*

Dearest Mother,

I am six years old and it is a perfect day in Rhode Island. The sun is shining, the water is sparkling, blue and stunning like the aquamarine diamond earrings you will give my sister for her twenty-first birthday. The waves are monstrous today because it is the day after a storm. *Days after storms always bring the best beach days*. These are words we have all grown to live by. I am dipping my toes near the edge while you keep a close eye on me. You do not go near the water because it scares you. It always has. It is funny that none of us have inherited that fear. We are three little fishes. I venture further in and overestimate my strength as a wave rolls towards me. It knocks me down, and I am suddenly being spun in a cloud of sand and white foam. You have thrown your fears aside and jumped in after me, pulling me out and smoothing my wet, matted hair out of my face. I cry bitter, salty tears and you tell me that it is *okay*.

*You saved me. You saved me. You saved me.*

I love you,  
Claud.

# Family and Football

Daniel Specca

I bent over the rusted, chalk-covered barbell and gripped it tightly with my calloused hands. The powdered chalk and dust particles floated about the musty garage, illuminated by brave beams of light venturing through the cracks in the seasoned door. The morning was quiet until my speakers switched on and the work of an artistic genius broke the silence. *Since birth I've been cursed with this curse to just curse and just blurt this berserk and bizarre shit that works.* The brilliance was motivational. I stared without blinking at the four, forty-five pound plates stacked on the left side of the bar, and suddenly he was there. He lay unmoving, faced pressed into the corner of the slippery porcelain as water continuously showered his body. His limbs splayed out like a discarded rag doll, a small trail of blood running from his forehead. My heart kicked into overdrive. My grip tightened as I contracted my quads, glutes and traps and ripped the barbell up to my waist, legs now straightened. I lifted just as I had that March afternoon three years before. This time the burden was much lighter.

The iron weights crashed into the concrete floor once I released my grip. I turned away and gasped for air, though I wasn't out of breath. The episodes were getting worse. I pulled open the refrigerator door, searching for a Gatorade. Heart still racing, thoughts of seeking help flooded my mind. A glance over at the kitchen counter where my daily pill regimen fit for a ninety-year-old cancer patient dismissed the notion. The last thing I needed was another pill. I was a pharmaceutical company's wet dream, with a pill for what seemed like every hour of every day. A pill for this and a pill for that, I took pills to cure the side effects of other pills, and pills to make sure I wouldn't become addicted to those pills. I threw up some yellow Gatorade in my mouth.

I could see my breath on the walk to the athletic center. I cherished the silence of Pennsylvania mornings. At this hour all I could hear were my footsteps. I dug around in the potted plant where Coach had left the key to the side door. Only two people who cared like we did would break the rules so blatantly. My butt met the plastic desk in the film room with a thud, and I yawned as I fired up the projector. When thoughts of my warm, blissful bed crept into my mind, I forced them away with memories of my father arriving home long after his family had turned out the lights. I thought of

him rising long before the sun and making lunches, cranking the heat inside frozen cars, putting the coffee on, and taking on the herculean feat of forcing me out of bed. Watching closely, I learned to work like an army ant and love like a labrador.

With a rediscovered zeal, I watched my opponent for the upcoming weekend. I studied their formations and tendencies, watched for any cues or tells, examined which moves saw success against them in weeks prior, and mentally prepared for a war. I didn't look up as the custodial staff arrived for the morning, but I could feel their puzzled looks landing within my peripherals. They wondered why anyone would care about a game so much. I couldn't believe that they didn't.

The day went by in a haze. I smiled and nodded as my professors droned on about research methods and chlorofluorocarbons and shit that happened 300 years ago. I killed the corner of a Poland Springs bottle in order to swallow a pill that would help me write a paper that was due in two hours. "The History of Overpopulation", it was entitled. I began to type, *People really like having sex with eacho-* I deleted it with a smirk. After attaching the document to an email and sending it to my professor with a whopping 14 minutes to spare, my stomach growled. The short walk to the dining hall left a bead of sweat running down my temple and a few blotches on my shirt. *Whatever*, I thought without a shred of anxiety, thanks to Wellbutrin. I slid into a booth across from my roommate. He was a skinny, half-Italian Bostonian whose neck I imagined wringing at least forty times freshman year. Two and a half years later, he was my best friend and my lifeline who knew me better than my own mother.

"Dude," he said in a firm, pointed tone.

"What?"

He widened his eyes as he glanced to his right. I casually looked over and immediately understood. He was always quick to alert me if a particularly handsome young lady was on the premises.

"That's why I keep you around," I chuckled, really only half-joking. At the same time, he would transfer to Franklin & Marshall before disrespecting a woman. We sat and chewed bland chicken breasts smothered in barbecue sauce, and washed them down with mixed flavors of PowerAde. I experimented with grape-cherry and, of course, swallowed three pills before I was finished.

"Want some fake happiness?" I asked while offering him the orange bottle. He caught my joke in stride, though not even a hint of sarcasm accompanied my words.

"Nah man, already nice and happy," he winked and lifted an imaginary joint to his lips. Boy, did he love that green stuff.

Before I knew it, an hour had gone by and it was my favorite part of

the day. I hustled over to Musselman Stadium and entered our uncharacteristically lavish locker room. A few of my more cultured teammates were dancing around to the latest hip hop, already suited up. Knowing my limits when it came to dancing, I stuck to the lyrics and joined in singing the ever so elegant, *I LIKE ALL MY S's WIT TWO LINES THROUGH DEM SHITS!* There was no better way to prepare for two hours of potential brain damage. I looked up to see a blue and orange sign above the locker room door and immediately became stoic.

“Prepare. Compete. Execute.” I laced up my cleats and focused on its first instruction. I chewed a mouthful of wild berry Skittles and used a week-old PowerAde to swallow six pills. Two prepared me mentally and four dulled the pain of my bumps and bruises. Before taking the field, I looked fiercely at the lone picture hanging in the back of my locker. A thick, black goatee and a pair of bushy eyebrows surrounded two eyes identical to the ones that I saw when I looked in a mirror. I heard my father’s voice. *You are the closest thing to a gladiator that there is. These shoulder pads are your armor. Once you buckle that chinstrap you have no friends. The time to be friends is after the final whistle. Until then it’s time to win.* I snapped my helmet into place and entered the Coliseum.

After warm-ups, special teams practice, and a half hour of position-specific drill work, it was time for a short scrimmage. The starting offense lined up across from the rest of the defense and me for a five minute battle. Six plays into the block, I was winded. I was limping slightly from a less-than-pleasant helmet to the shin, and clutching my shoulder thanks to a re-aggravated labrum tear. But there was no time for pain as I aligned myself in preparation for the next play. Slightly late from trying to catch my breath, I crouched into my stance and dug my gloved hand into the turf. Before I knew it, the ball had been snapped, and I was out of position. I scrambled to gain control of my gap, and in doing so I overran the ball carrier. He faked a pitch, stuck a foot in the ground and scampered for seven yards before being brought down by our outside linebacker. I knew exactly what was coming.

“[Redacted Surname]!!” I turned around, ready to take my licks. The same coach who generously left me a key was about to rip into me like I was the biggest gift under the Christmas tree. “What is your fuckin’ job?!” he screamed.

“Make him give the ball,” I replied, with a thorough understanding of what I should have done during the play.

“So *do* your fuckin’ job! You’ve got ten other guys out here counting on you to do your job. Grow a set, and get it done!” he implored, loud enough for the cheerleaders — who were practicing 50 yards away — to

hear it. Anger was the vinegar, embarrassment was the baking soda, and my mouth was the clay volcano ready to lose a 4th grader the science fair. But then, just as it always seemed to, that deep, buttery voice clicked on in my head. *You cannot imagine the amount of stress you're under while your financial stability depends on a 19-year-old who is having trouble with his girlfriend to be in the exact right place at the exact right time on a football field.* I closed my eyes and unclenched my fists.

"Yes, Coach."

I finished practice with unparalleled effort and ferocity. There was nothing I loved more than the game, and there was nothing I hated more than mediocrity. I raised my helmet into the air, surrounded by 94 others doing the same. We ended the workday with our closing ritual.

"BULLETS ON THREE! ONE, TWO, THREE!"

"BULLETS!" I bellowed, pledging my allegiance to my brothers in arms.

The majority of the team ran for the showers, ecstatic with thoughts of food and girlfriends and that sweet green relief. A few strolled towards the sideline and sat on the cool, metal bench in order to reflect on the day and shoot the breeze. I pulled my helmet back onto my head and put in my mouthpiece. As I jogged over to the blocking sled, my coach caught up with me. Was he going to apologize? Not in my wildest dreams.

"Does 'Maryland Late' affect you?" he asked, making sure I understood the play call he had just installed.

"Mno, isf enyfin—" I stopped talking and spat out my mouthpiece. "No," I repeated, "If anything, I need to rush more vertical to influence the tackle up field."

"Good," he said, and jogged off to go eat with the other coaches.

As much as I hated him, I loved him even more. He was the best football mind I had ever met; I could listen to him talk about the game for hours on end. He knew exactly how to get the best out of me on the field, too. I always told myself that if he got another job, I would go there with him.

I turned my attention to my post-practice delight: a one-man blocking sled with an iron base the color of unripe cantaloupe and a water-logged pad heavier than most people who used it. It looked older than the inside of Weidensall, probably because it was. If getting screamed at was my dinner, the sled was my dessert. I set it on the goal line and got to work. Again and again, I fired out of my stance and drove it as far as my lungs could tolerate – usually around 7 yards. By the time I had moved it to the fifty yard line, my teammates had gone inside and the sun was beginning to set. I turned it around and began the grueling trip back. As my body fatigued, my mental toughness began to give way. I wanted to stop and I

wanted it bad. I forced myself to think about the day's practice, to bring myself back to the embarrassment and the anger that all stemmed from being winded and unfocused. I heard my coach's words over and over. *Do your job. They're counting on you.*

My father lay motionless on the cold tile floor. There was no pulse and no heartbeat. I had a job to do. He took care of me, now I had to take care of him. He was counting on me. I felt his ribs crack under my desperation-fueled chest compressions. I breathed into his lungs with everything I had. The 9-1-1 operator on the other end of the phone was useless. My hysterical mother was useless. Everything was useless unless it was a heartbeat. I looked down at my best friend. My hero. With eyes slightly open and pupils rolled back, he would make a noise every so often. I hated that noise. It taunted me. *Do your job. He's counting on you.*

I dropped to my knees in front of the sled and rested my helmet-covered forehead on the turf. I gasped for breath as I watched tears and sweat roll off of my face and into the artificial grass. After several minutes I gathered myself and stood up. Sweat bubbled from the seams of my cleats with each heavy step towards the locker room. My shoulder throbbed and the piercing pain of turf toe accompanied me on my walk. I stood with my head bowed in the icy shower water until the last black bead from the turf had been rinsed from my body.

The week went by in a blur of kids in shirts covered in pink whales and tuition checks with too many zeros. It was Saturday and time for a blood bath with Susquehanna. Game day was extra beautiful because it meant a day without any pills. There was nothing to suppress my natural and rage-filled killer instinct. I didn't blink once on the walk to the field, my eyes fixated on the battleground. As if I needed it, Kanye threw wood on my fire as he drawled through my headphones. *Never gave in, never gave up, I'm the only thing I'm afraid of.* Very true.

Pregame rituals meant something different for everyone. Some sat quietly wearing headphones, undoubtedly listening to the same songs as they had for years. Others wrote initials on their wrist tape with flawless precision. Quarterbacks rubbed water on slick new game balls to enhance gripping ability. Receivers leaned in close to mirrors, making sure to paint on their eye black perfectly. Offensive linemen warmed up knee joints, praying this game wouldn't be their last. A group of specialists queued up a Brian Dawkins highlight video on the projector, letting the Hall of Fame Free Safety's bone-crunching artwork inspire them. I acted as if it were any old day of the week. I laughed with my neighbors as we quoted TV shows, and spat out rap lyrics whenever they crossed my mind. Aside from my game day gloves and cleats I might have been gearing up for another



practice. This was the calm before the storm. I saved every last bit of fire and focus for out on the field. I donned my game jersey and let the G on my chest fill my heart with pride. And finally, I stared into my father's eyes. *Find what you love, and be the best at it. Whether it's football or flooring, find it and let it kill you.* I felt a tug deep in my gut as I got ready to obey him.

"He's holding me, sir! He—he's holding my jersey! 64! Every play, sir!" I implored the referee to throw a penalty flag. "I've got places to be man, he can't hold me like that!"

The official nodded without even looking at me, only half listening as usual.

"You're getting away with murder over there, boy," I barked at their left tackle who wore number 64.

He shook his head and waved me off, fully aware of what he was doing.

"Better keep that shit up too, man. You know what'll happen if you let go!" I taunted him, knowing he couldn't block me legally.

A text message conversation with my cousin after his game the previous weekend taught me that it was easy to get in 64's head. I was coming for his heart. I lined up for the next play, adrenaline flowing through my veins. 64 waddled up to the line of scrimmage and squatted down in his stance. I studied him carefully. He had too much weight leaning backward. *It's a pass*, I thought as I elongated my stance, ready to get off the ball and into a pass rush as quickly as possible. I saw his eyes peering in towards the ball. *Dumbass doesn't know the snap count.* I had a good feeling about this play. The center fired the ball between his legs, back into the waiting hands of his quarterback. I was out of my stance with a step in the ground before 64 knew what hit him. I took three big steps up field and he kicked backwards, trying to keep up. As he punched his hands toward me, trying to get a hold of my chest, I violently chopped at them with my right arm, staying free and mobile. He opened his hips too quickly while trying to keep up and had all of his weight going backward. It was as if he had opened the gate to Heaven. In my case, Heaven was the soon to be cracked ribs of his quarterback.

I planted my foot in the ground and spun inside of 64, creating a dream-like path to the waiting passer. "Oh SHIT," 64 yelled, anticipating the coming events. I tore towards the quarterback like a dog after a cocky backyard rabbit, salivating as each step brought me closer to my prize. He didn't see me while looking for an open receiver, but at the last second turned his head my way. It was too late. I launched myself into him. The crown of my helmet connected with his facemask and my right shoulder with his chest. The sound of pads crunching together gave me chills. His



sharp exhale of agony as his head and body were forced into the turf was the sweetest sound I'd ever heard. I popped right up and threw my arms up toward our sideline, causing my teammates to roar with approval and create some precious momentum. I looked back at my prey, still motionless on the ground. *Won't be the last time, either.*

My teammates and I sprinted excitedly towards the locker room after laying a 21 point beating on the Crusaders. We jumped around, banged our helmets against the walls, and soaked in that sweet, sweet feeling. Our stern, reserved head coach forced his way to the middle of the pack and began to jump up and down, and the celebration roared on. After we calmed down, he congratulated us on a job well done and urged us to go celebrate with our families. I showered and changed back into my street clothes. The adrenaline had not yet worn off, so I could hardly feel the plethora of new injuries I'd acquired. After shaking hands with each coach and sharing a victory smile, it was time to celebrate.

I started the long, slow walk towards the crowded pavilion, alone, eyes fixed on my sneakers. I closed them for a moment, and immediately smelled worn, black leather and faint cigar smoke. The heated seats warmed my butt as I chewed the last bite of a Yodel and giggled. My dad took a sip of his Diet Pepsi with a twinkle in his eye, and a smile slowly crept up his face.

"Mrs. Potter again!" I implored, wanting to hear my favorite song.

He peeked at me through the corner of his eye, sporting a sly grin.

"Annnndd...change!" he said, looking at the stereo, both hands loosely resting on the steering wheel.

Just then our favorite song from the Counting Crows' greatest hits album began to trickle out of the speakers. I hugged myself in a fit of laughter, as my dad had somehow changed the song without touching anything. (Of course, he was just using the buttons on the steering wheel, but it was still awesome.)

"You were AWESOME out there, man! How 'bout some of those blocks, huh?!"

I beamed from ear to ear, only ever wanting to impress my dad.

"You were LEAN. You were MEAN. You were a blocking MACHINE," he said, curling his arms down, flexing his biceps.

I copied his movements, my eight-year-old physique not quite matching what, at the time, looked like a Superman cartoon. We sang along with the Crows, twanging and drawling out our favorite lyrics. When the song ended he reached over with one of his massive, olive-colored, hair-covered hands and rubbed my head.

"I'm so proud of you, buddy."

I arrived at the pavilion for the post-game tailgate and took in the scene around me. My teammates were dispersed throughout the festivities, surrounded by family. I focused in on a few of them and my heart sank. I watched as they hugged their fathers tightly. Each time it was the kind of hug that lingers on for a few seconds longer than usual. I could see the pride in their eyes. They discussed intricacies of certain plays and basked in the love of the game. They each wore the same smile. It was the smile that so clearly illustrated the unspoken bond between father, son and football. I was tired of being strong, as tears flooded my eyes. I felt a stinging in my nose and my lips began to quiver. Clenching my jaw, I turned and walked home.

By the time I made it home, I had fought off the tears. Crying was for wusses. Jaw still clenched, I trudged up the steps to my room. Before I could reach for the knob, the door burst open.

“LET’S GOOOOO DUDE YOU FUCKED THAT KID UP! NICE FUCKIN’ WIN! 4-0 BABY!” My roommate wore a grin from ear to ear. He looked me in the eye and immediately understood. We shook hands and he pulled me in tight. As I threw my arms around him, the flood gates opened. Tears rolled down my cheeks as his shoulder muffled my reluctant sobs. We stood there in the hallway for a minute; he held on until he felt me let go. Still wearing a smile, he said, “Shotgun o’clock, yo!” and ran into the room to grab two beers. The last thing I wanted to do was talk, and of course he knew it. We jabbed holes in the aluminum and poured the cheap liquid down our throats. Taking seats on the couch, we sat in silence as he flipped on ESPN. I turned and glanced over at him. I felt lucky. A smile started to work its way across my face. A real smile, that wasn’t induced by drugs or pills or a TV show. I was with my family now, too.

“Proud of you,” he said, without looking at me.

# Las Vegas

Brynn Hambley

When you left, the world turned white,  
blank and unfeeling, cold like your eyes.  
I had long since seen rainbows pass through my skin—  
I was red and blue and green and yellow until  
you washed it away down the storm drain,  
where it turned brown and sickly: its true nature.

The things you said cling like snow on my lashes;  
my replies still caught in the back of my throat,  
stinging with want of air they will never breathe.  
Your voice has long since turned to ash,  
my ears to coal miners, my mind to a volcano  
ready to erupt, screaming into the world you left.

I was just a chain in a necklace you rarely wore anymore,  
going rusty in your jewelry box as the days flew by and by,  
faster and faster, running like water through my hands,  
like the neighbor's dog as the leash slipped from my grip—  
the hole you left was cold like space, so I slipped through.

You left, and I felt nothing.

# Between

Carley Grow

Removed by the request of the author

Removed by the request of the author

# Language of the Common War

Anika Jensen

A spontaneous overflow of smoke to the lungs and powder to the teeth,  
spitting black tar dust onto my knee accidentally.  
I vomited daffodils at the edge of the trench.  
We are not your Vatican ceiling.

The blunt end of my rifle ended life whose face had more color,  
more property than a sand-toned silence.  
He did not raise his arms to divinity;  
the blood bubbled in the back of his throat.

He couldn't breathe,  
he couldn't breathe,  
he couldn't breathe.

La Belle Dame holds a rifle to my head,  
a Grecian Urn shatters in my brain.  
The Rime of the Ancient lie of war:  
War is always, war is courage, war is hell.

War is there, sitting at the wrong park bench with the wrong toy gun  
that one man wants so desperately to be real.  
Excuses are piled higher than the bodies of the battles  
that should not be.

# Provence

Jenna Fleming

Happy comes in blinding bright flashbacks to moments that should be so fresh but feel as if they happened inside a dream world, memories that seem like secrets whispered to me late at night by some other fairy girl who really lived them, thoughts planted like ephemeral seeds inside my head and left to grow into fantasy, watered by nostalgia, sunkissed by imagination. Those sweet Provencal days were sparkling prisms of brilliant white, soft yellow, gentle pink—each a whole spectrum of joy squeezed for me into one rainbow. Instantly unforgettable. Muted a little at first, chastened and calmed and quieted by the cold, it came to blossom vibrant before my delighted eyes, a radiant citrine diamond shine I could never have expected to kindle from embers into sparks, igniting finally to luminous flame. It was a light so bright it scalded me, my skin bearing its scars for weeks, my heart forever.

The all-encompassing, overwhelming brightness of the little city I called home shot straight through the carefully carved crystals of what I thought I knew, showering sparkly jewel toned reflections across the weeks, red and blue and yellow. I found whispered echoes and secret flashes scattered like confetti along the cobblestone sidewalks, tangled into my hair, hidden between my fingers, stuck in my shoes at the end of each day. The light brought me shadows, too—deep gray moments of a different kind of clarity, the barest of hints at incomprehensible complexities I couldn't yet see, the most delicate suggestions of mysteries tiptoeing around the edges. For the light and the dark I am likewise thankful; together they pushed me half a miniscule millimeter closer to an incredibly flawed, unintelligibly perfect version of understanding. In and along those uneven streets, I started to learn how to look, to see how to listen. That charming city between the mountains and the sea taught me to speak differently, to breathe clearly, and to laugh more quietly, its irresistible embrace discordantly tender, lovingly brash.

The sacred waters of Sextius gurgled unending from the fountains around every corner, bubbling lazily from deep underground, falling in sprinkles from the sky. Imbibed straight from the spigot, those sweet springs sated a thirst I'd hardly known I'd harbored. In shocking, drenching, cleansing splashes, the blessed waters brought me peace, however fleeting, and within their droplets I felt ancient knowledge beyond my

own understanding, resting on my skin a moment then rolling right off, just a little of their cold clarity all I needed.

The wide Gallic sky, reflected empty and blue over the treetops, was a constant companion and a constant reminder, my ever-present source of wonder at the vast simplicity of the land. At first its purity, unblemished by the finest trace of fluffy cottony white, took me aback, a startling sign of my solitude and strangeness. As days became weeks, this bluest blue gained a fond significance, a singular remembrance, its fidelity and persistence urging me onward.

The stark Provencal sun burned me bright red, chastising my folly, searing away my arrogance, scolding my assumptions. At the same time she warmed my shivery shoulders, thawing out and melting away the stubbornness I no longer needed. This sparkling, spectacular yellow star burnished each day, rounding its edges, polishing its memory, lending me a miniscule drop of her own liquid gold to take away with me, warm and rich and lovely.

The square-stacked houses, lined up haphazardly like so many rows of slowly tarnishing teeth, were the backdrop for my exploration, eked out almost painfully at times. When the unrelenting, shocking chill of the whipping winter winds had at last planted a goodbye kiss on each of my raw pink cheeks, the beautifully blossoming trees giggled down drizzles of dry, prickly, sneezy, cottony pollen, burning up my throat, gathering in piles of soft slippery carpet beneath my feet. Here I found a thin cushion for the silly heartbreak that entrenched itself so stubbornly within my chest, bitter fuzzy flashes recalled far too many times over during the solitary cozy nights in my chaste little white bed.

I did fall in love in Provence. Romance came to me among Arlesian ruins and within Alsatian wines, around scandalously smiling cigarettes and under white china cups of café crème, in the cool purple morning clouds and under the blurry nighttime city glow. The greatest attraction was, however, joyously unexpected—without my even noticing, a passing flirtation caught fire, violently flaming into an epic passion, and I was and am caught in a torrid affair with that foolish funny francophone language. Latinate melodies cradled absurd sprinkles of prepositions while languid malleability softened impossible pronouns, blending together in an enticingly hopeless challenge. Countless senses and tenses and rearrangements, liaisons and conjugations and past-proche-parfait confusion all made up for me a constant struggle, a constant joyful surprise. Native patience dealt kindly with my special brand of graceless hesitance and loving labor, leading to something like a careful confidence, wildly daring and perpetually uncertain, an enchanting, exhausting, extraordinary daily freefall.

Somehow there were fourteen, then ten, then three more walks



home along the stony streets, three more lucky days in my beautiful little city in the sun. Suddenly, incredibly, tragically, it was all over, only not really. This kind of love is not something forgotten, each lesson in seeing rightly, living plainly, trying and being and knowing, not something replaced. The crepes and café and wine and sunshine are for me eternal; in burying part of my heart beneath an ancient stone belltower I gained a slice of light to keep with me always. Provence remains, with its windy winter and pollen-dusted spring, with Gabriel at the pizza parlor, amid fickle Provencal heat and cold Provencal shade, in the sweet sky and the clear air.

# The Cemetery Tree

Andrew Nosti

The shadows stretch and slither  
across the frost-encrusted ground.  
Sunset casts a final ray of light  
upon that hallowed mound.  
The wind whispers through the branches,  
and makes an eerie sound,  
that besides the caw of the crow,  
marks the only noise around.

Oh, those branches, those heavy branches,  
that stand so stark and bare.  
Oh, those leaves, those withered leaves,  
that tumble through the air.  
Underneath that winding tree,  
oh yes, that is where,  
you can find that fateful stone  
that holds her final prayer.

Her name across it, etched in rock,  
rings a hollow tune.  
Whether cast in sunlight of highest sun,  
baking hot at noon,  
or resting gloomy in the darkness,  
alighted by the moon,  
that name sits etched upon the rock,  
etched upon it, oh! too soon.

The roots dig deep, they hug the casket  
that holds my broken dreams.  
And across time, across the years,  
it never truly seems  
as if the tears, running hot and free,  
will stop pouring out in streams.  
But those tears always fail to smother  
my sobbing and my screams.

That tree, that tall, strong tree,  
in that cold graveyard.  
Its trunk stands thick.  
Its bark proves hard,  
but something has left that tall, strong tree  
battered and bruised, crippled and scarred.

A deep dark cut slices through its wood  
as black as darkest night.  
Oh, that cut, oh, that scar,  
what a ghastly sight!  
For a tree so strong, a tree so tall,  
still had not the might  
to defend itself from whatever force  
gouged it in its plight.

The tree lives on, despite its wound,  
fixed upon that slope,  
reaching blindly through the darkness,  
wishing it could grope  
something that could teach it how  
it could ever cope  
with a world of empty shadows,  
drained dry of all its hope.

Now propped against that tree I weep,  
sitting quite alone,  
piled upon the tree's dead leaves  
atop my autumnal throne.  
I sit and stare straight at the name,  
the name upon the stone,  
the only name I've ever loved,  
the only name I've ever known.

Years will come and years will pass,  
with me beside that tree,  
but only it, the crows, and the stone  
will ever hear my plea,  
my wish that, just one last time,  
I could wake and see  
the woman underneath that stone,  
the better half of me.

But wishes prove worthless,  
only whispered in vain,  
so here, alone, is where I stay,  
here is where I remain.  
Throughout all time, both day and night,  
through sunshine and the rain,  
here is where you'll find the tree and me,  
and our never-ending pain.

# The Perfect Smile

Aubrey Link

Since my birth there was something *curious* about me—at least that is what they told me. I was an oddity, obsessed with the twisted aspect of human nature. My fascination surrounded the black pitch of the earth, my thoughts the thoughts unpleasant to the rest of the world. Was there a part of the human brain that inspired cannibalism, murder, or torture? Were the hearts of murderers spotted with black? Was the blood of the insane tinted ebony? These questions led me into the field of medicine, a profession rarely entered by a member of my gender.

During my schooling, I discovered my inclination for dentistry. The joy of ripping a tooth from its socket was unparalleled by any of my past experiences. There was a certain euphoria attached to removing the faulty, impure pieces that marred the perfection of the mouth. It was at this time that I learned of my obsession with perfection, my desperate pursuit of it. Everywhere I looked I studied people, their mouths in particular. I judged smiles and open mouths, searching for *perfection*.

Once I graduated university, I took on an associate, a loyal pet that I could rely on for discretion. He appreciated my tendencies. His disfigurement had forced him into the fringes of society where I found him. In return for taking him under my wing, he looked to me as his personal deity, whom he loved and served faithfully. He had a towering build, extraneous length of limbs, and the ribs of a skeleton. When he came to me he had the teeth of a shark, pointed and sharp like daggers. I saved him. Yes, I saved him, by filing those abominations into *almost* perfection. It was one of my most successful procedures and made me even fonder of my dependent friend, whom I affectionately renamed “Molnar”. Worship blazed in his small, glowing eyes.

In my small section of Philadelphia, I opened up a discreet office which, to my pleasure, evolved into an excelling business that was ahead of its time. I had it opened under Molnar’s name to prevent any legal disputes based on my sex. Molnar followed me as I walked the dark, cobblestone streets under sentinel street lamps, always searching.

“Molnar,” I whispered, leaning toward him like a co-conspirator. “Look at that lateral incisor! Perfection! Such a shame the rest of the mouth doesn’t match.” He looked at me with admiration and understanding in his beady eyes. That was the day of the first incident, the night Molnar began

his midnight procedures. The next morning, the very tooth I had remarked about appeared on my lab table, gleaming like the most precious of pearls against the worn wood. That was when I began my collection, held in a glass of the finest crystal on my shelf of trophies. It was a hobby of mine to sort and arrange them in an attempt to recreate a flawless ensemble, but the different sizes failed to produce the desired result. Putting together pieces of multiple puzzles that might fit, but never match.

I was beginning to lose hope. Even the rush of an extraction failed to pull me from my malady. Even the satisfaction of removing faulty, infected teeth reminded me of impurity and furthered doubt of my dream's existence. Molnar started to go on more ventures in an attempt to lighten my spirits, producing enough gleaming ivory gems to fill three glass goblets. He started to stink of the semi-sweet chemical he used on these expeditions and grew sloppy, leaving occasional blood stains on his chin or in his hair from the night before. I fiddled with his gifts more and more yet I could not get PERFECTION.

As I grew more desolate, Molnar stumbled into the office on his unbalanced legs. "I've found it, Mistress, I've found it!" he cried out, his grin revealing my excellent work. I knew at once that he had found my dream, and I rocked to my feet, grasping his thin arms.

"Where, Molnar, where?" I said, my heart racing at the speed of a drill. He smiled, offering his long arm to lead me into the dusty streets.

"Excuse me, Mister Dens, this is my associate, the one I was telling you about," Molnar began, but his words faded as the man turned, revealing the glory of his mouth to the world. It was a perfect, harmonious occlusion! The pearls were a perfectly shaped anatomy—even the molars had a cusp of carabelli! They were brilliantly white, complete with square tapering arch form, my favorite. I tightened my hold on Molnar's bony limb. He truly had found it! My eyes could not move. I was transfixed in my own personal heaven.

Something in either my or the man's expression made Molnar stiffen, but he remained silent. Though I could not look up from the man's mouth, I could guess that his eyes held the stare men usually wore when they saw me. I was not unattractive and had been told I would make any man a wonderful wife if not for my distasteful inclination for my profession. Yet I could not deny that I was in love—in love with his teeth.

Over the course of the next month, he called on me at the office at least twice a week. My attachment and joy was only renewed every time he smiled and revealed the breathtaking masterpiece that had been bestowed upon him. Soon I told Molnar that his nightly deeds were no longer necessary. I had found what I had been searching for and I feared that if Mr. Dens discovered that Molnar was behind the mysterious attacks, he would

leave. Then I would never see those stunning, impeccably constructed treasures again.

I could tell Molnar was hurt by this, but I made it up to him by requesting more of his assistance in procedures and by sending him on important errands. Though as Mr. Dens' attachment grew, so did the odor of alcohol lingering on my companion's breath. I would have spoken to him about it if I had not been so infatuated, so irrevocably addicted to the sight of those precious white stones nestled in pure gums.

The more time I spent with the object of my obsession, the more disconcerted Molnar grew. He feared I was in love with the whole man, not just his teeth. When Molnar began to threaten to leave me, I was afraid that I would not have the strength to choose my faithful companion over my fixation. As time went on, it became clear to me that I could not live without them. Molnar realized this I think, and something snapped within him. The thin thread of sanity he had once grasped onto was now fraying at an alarming rate.

Then the tumultuous evening came when Mr. Dens made a fateful decision. He offered his hand in marriage and made the folly of doing so in front of Molnar. That thread split in two the moment Mr. Dens' knee made contact with the floor. It all happened in a flurry of calculated movements, forcing me to think Molnar had meditated upon this moment for a long time before he acted on it. His thin, but strong hand grasped one of my instruments, a pair of forceps, and he plunged it into his enemy's throat. Sprays of blood cloaked my procedural chair with every brutal connection of the gleaming forceps and Mr. Dens' neck as lightning flashed from the storm raging outside. Mr. Dens' eyes went wide and glassy. Molnar stood over him with the exhilaration of a victor.

"Molnar! What have you done? How are we ever going to get rid of this mess?" I said halfheartedly. In truth, I was not upset with him. I bent down and studied the corpse, relieved that the maxilla and mandible were still undamaged. Pulling up the cold lip, I discovered that my perfection was still untouched. I smiled at Molnar as something very important dawned on me. *It could be mine now.* I ordered Molnar to help me lift the body. We placed it on my chair and began my operation. With caution, the utmost caution, I performed a Lefort I Osteotomy, removing the upper jaw just below the nose. Next, I claimed the whole mandibular for my own.

Molnar disposed of the now useless carcass in a cavity in the ground, an appropriate place for the rotten and insignificant. I did not ask where, only insured that it was taken care of so that my office's involvement would never be suspected. While he was gone I polished my prize, finally in my possession. It was beautiful, the most beautiful thing I had ever seen. I placed it on the center of the shelf on a pedestal of silver, the item of

utmost reverence. In the middle of my study of it, Molnar came back and started to obliterate all traces of the incident. He did not disturb me until it looked as if nothing had ever happened. Everything looked exactly the same as before, except for the new ornament.

“Thank you, Molnar,” I said. I turned to face him and waved him forward with my hand. Placing my palm on his cheek, I felt a rekindling of my fondness for my strange minion. He smiled with eyes wide and full of devotion. “It is alright, my friend. Better actually. They are mine now,” I said. He nodded and stepped back, sensing he had been dismissed for the night.

As he reached for the door, I called his name one more time. “You know, Molnar I think this pair would look even more exquisite if it had a companion. Don’t you?”

He grinned like the prince of darkness himself and replied, “Of course, Mistress.”



# Disorganized Speech

Ela Thompson

The white birch,  
    bare at the end of fall,  
        stretches over raw umber grains.  
Black eyes peak out between its papered bark.

A Wet Moon hanging in darkness  
    like the smooth, curved horns of a bull.  
        The night fog billowing up like kicked dust.  
With a blank face, you insisted the moon was the wide grin of a cat.

\*\*\*

In the rain, you said, the lightning spoke in quiet  
    brain whispers, connecting you to earth.  
        We saw a strix owl, the omen of death, perched in the wide oak  
staring at us with perfect, round, lightless eyes; you called him your black-  
eyed angel.

In the early morning at White Pond, the bullfrogs sung  
    in deep throaty chords. You lectured them on the nature of god.  
        We were lonely together, on the porch, sitting on damp cushions  
as mosquitoes bit at scalp and hand and foot, causing our flesh to swell.

\*\*\*

There were figures, I'm sure you saw,  
    dancing their own tempoed ghostly walks  
        through the white veil over the mirror.  
The dead could be trapped there, between glass and stare back.

Fear lodged in our brains, an unwelcomed guest.  
    It was polite not to talk about it. Only you spoke  
with a god tongue, only you spoke like you knew.  
    You drew your angel, again and again, as if he were made of ripples,  
with so many lines and shaky hands.

\*\*\*

You said the white tree was a hand,  
and hands were more mouth than mouths were,  
your gesture cut short by a look  
and a whisper at the dinner table.

I wish you had advice for me, Uncle of mine,  
but prophecy swirls in your head, disordered.  
Everything resonates in colors and voices unseen.  
Instead, spin me a memoir of a life that didn't happen;  
translate into words the things the moon showed to you.

# Square and Compasses

Peter Rosenberger

George walked along the cobblestones. The towering trees on either side of the road were natural sentinels. The evening sun gilded the leaves with a sliver of warm gold. Every now and then, an outcropping in the trees would spring up, and George could see down the stone walkways that led to apartments hidden from view.

His eyes followed the line of trees and bushes as he walked. His footfalls drummed a steady rhythm, and the sea of green hues was mesmerizing. The deep, earthy clang of metal on stone rung out, and George squared his shoulders. The whole walkway was behind him now, and he stood looking out at a massive clearing.

In front of him were the beginnings of his father's greatest dream. The King's Circus. A family of architects was not unfamiliar with their designs coming to life, but seeing the foundations of the King's Circus being laid had been hard for George's father to describe. An image of his father hunched over the drafting table in their study, working by low lamp light late into the night, flashed into his mind. John Wood had slaved over the design for decades and barely lived long enough to see the project started.

George looked and sighed. The road he had just walked along was one of the three that pierced the circle of buildings. The Circus, with sections in varying degrees of completion, looked like a broken stone eye socket looking down on the city of Bath. The green, untouched northern section of the city was the perfect location for the Wood family to work, and the King's Circus would be their most stunning project yet.

The site was alive. Rushing builders and skittish horses moved across the site under a cacophonous cloud of clattering stone and wood. Builders ducked out of the way to avoid horses and carts pulling meter-thick blocks of stone and wooden planks that stretched taller than the tallest man working on the build.

The lines of his father's designs crawled steadily into existence. The white stone of the one completed corner stood out as vividly on its green and brown background as his father's dark charcoal drawings did on their crisp, white parchment. Charles, the man responsible for maintaining the builders' supplies and ordering materials, was walking towards George.

"The next shipment will not arrive until day's end on Friday," Charles said. Charles was a small man with dark hair and eyes. He was

fantastically mediocre at both of the two important assignments with which he was tasked.

“Dammit,” George exclaimed.

Charles’s eyes widened. “John will be here.”

“I am well aware!” George stalked off and left Charles standing, designs in hand, in a sea of builders, stone, wood, and dust. George had promised to spend Friday afternoon with his mother, Beatrice, and his sister, Matilda, in Prior Park. He had already rescheduled once and he would not be able to get away with rescheduling again. John, his older brother, would be on site all day Friday, so it wasn’t that George didn’t think the shipment would be handled. It was just that the project was already moving faster than he could keep up with, and he worried he would be further boxed out if he missed this shipment.

George started toward the west of The Circus, heading home, but John intercepted him. John Wood, the Younger, was a spitting image of their father. He got both the name and the appearance. He was tall and strong, with a head of rich brown curls and eyes a slightly lighter shade of brown. A few freckles spotted his nose and cheeks. He wore a crisp, white shirt, somehow untouched by the dust that lingered in the air of the work-site, and, around his neck, he wore a sky blue cravat lined with thin, gold stripes. A small, gold stitching of the Square and Compasses of the Masons was embroidered in the center of the tie, above his Adam’s apple. The cravat was given to John Wood, the Elder, when he became a master mason. When John, the Elder, died, the position at the head of the family business and the title of master mason were given to John, the Younger, and he now proudly donned the blue and gold tie every opportunity he got.

George remembered overhearing a conversation between John and their father when he and John were just teenagers. George had been in the small drawing room off of their study, slaving over a new design, when he had overheard his father telling John about how one day the tie would be his and how John would have to continue the family’s legacy.

George would often sneak into his father’s room, pull the tie from the top drawer of his father’s ornate dresser, and tie it around his neck. He would straighten his back and adjust the cravat, letting the light from the window above the dresser catch its gold details.

“Don’t pay any mind to the next shipment,” John said. “You had plans with Mother and Sister, correct?”

“Indeed, Brother,” George replied. He kept his gaze on the ground as he spoke.

“They are quite looking forward to it,” John said.

“I know.”

“It has still been very hard for them lately.”

"I think the afternoon will certainly help," George said, turning back up the street. He left John behind him, just as he'd left Charles, and brushed the dust off his clothes with a scowl as he walked back down the street.

George sat with his mother and sister on a stone bench at the bottom of Prior Park. The three of them looked up across the clearing and over the roofed Palladian bridge to the mansion resting atop the property.

It wasn't hard to tell that John Wood, the Elder, had designed Prior Park. He had yearned to turn Bath into a city to rival those of ancient Greece and Rome. If the smooth stone and simple columns that held Bath together belonged to anyone, they belonged to John Wood.

Prior Park was finished in 1742—13 years ago—and it belonged to Ralph Allen, one of Bath's greatest entrepreneurs. Ralph Allen and the best gardeners in Bath designed the expansive garden that spilled down from the top of the hill and the Palladian mansion that sat proudly at the top. The gardens at Prior Park looked natural, but they consisted of imported trees and plants planted with precision. The thin, winding paths that curved through the dense gardens were eerie, and even the least imaginative visitors could find themselves seeing things in the shadows.

"The last time we were here, we were with Father," Matilda said somberly. They hadn't spoken in a few minutes, only walked and taken in the views and fresh air. George wished the silence had continued.

"I was just thinking that as well," Beatrice muttered. "It doesn't help that his beautiful building sits looking down at us either." John Wood, the Elder, had been buried for months, but his wife and daughter were clinging to their mourning like children to their mother.

"We would have to move to an entirely different city if we didn't want to see Father's work," George joked.

"Quit that, George," his sister snapped. "You just don't understand."

"Just don't understand?" George replied quickly through gritted teeth.

Matilda stood up from the bench and walked away from George and Beatrice. The bench edged the back of the stone platform they stood on. It was only a few meters wide, and it was surrounded by shrubs on the sides and a small pond in the front.

"There is no need to ruin this fine morning with silly squabbling," Beatrice interjected. "We all grieve in our own way."

"Some of us not at all," Matilda said as she took a step further from the bench.

"What was that?" George asked, leaning forward.

"I think you heard," returned Matilda, turning towards him.

George shot up toward Matilda, fists still clenched. He was a step away from her when he turned away. He paced and rubbed his temples with his palms. Matilda let out a victorious sigh.

George spun back to her quickly and barked, "Even the mere insinuation is enough to send me over the edge."

"Please, not now," Beatrice murmured.

"No, I think it's time we aired our grievances," Matilda said. She took a step towards George and her maroon muslin gown brushed against the stone bench. They were standing in front of where they'd been sitting. Their mother still sat in between them.

"If you think your lingering over Father's death shows anything other than your immaturity, you are wrong." George's snarl was stretched across his face menacingly. "You think it impossible for me to love him in life and be able to move on after his death? It's been eight months!"

"Impossible? No. Not impossible, but close. And it has been eight months, but you moved on three months ago. The new year came and thoughts of Father flew from your mind!"

"What choice did I have? Do you want to continue wearing your Indian fabrics and drinking your expensive wines? We are builders. And if John and I sat around and cried for months like the two of you," George gestured sharply, "then nothing would have been built!"

"You might as well have stayed at home with us anyway," Matilda snapped venomously. "Your brother is the builder. Not you."

Beatrice shifted uneasily in the silence that followed Matilda's words. George took a quick step forward and slapped his sister with the back of his right hand. She crumpled and clutched both her hands to the bright, red mark that immediately appeared on her face. George turned and sped off, his head down, toward the east exit of the park. He didn't look back as his mother called his name.

The sun was starting to dip behind the buildings on the streets when he reached The Circus. His feet throbbed as he finally stopped in front of the worksite. He had been walking for hours. Along the way, George had passed the South Parade buildings. Their original design had been his, and his father had liked it so much that he used it when he built the buildings. George was only twenty when he drew up the plans.

As he approached the site, he hadn't noticed what should have been a deafening silence. No clattering of carts and horses, no sliding and scraping of stone on stone, and no shouts rose up around him. He reached The Circus from the other side of the street this time, and as he took an arching glance around its north half, he saw the thick wooden support pillars that formed the grid where the tons and tons of stone would be laid and

mortared. They were shooting out of the ground like rigid corpses rising from their graves. His eyes fell back on the lone finished building standing on the west corner. Charles was standing, talking to Henry, who had just arrived with the day's stone shipment. George started toward them.

As George walked along the uneven street of dirt and loose stone, he saw Henry motion to his three men, all in carriages loaded with stone blocks. Henry jumped up into his own carriage, and the four men turned from the site and started off toward the West.

"Where are they going?" George asked once he rounded the street. Charles whipped around in surprise. His eyes were bloodshot and his clothes were covered in more dust than usual. His brow furrowed when he saw George.

"It's bad," Charles choked out after a moment.

"What is bad? The stone? Henry always brings us proper shipments. I don't believe that for an instant." George paused and looked around. "And where is everyone? They were told to expect a late finish today to unload the shipment—the shipment that you just turned away?"

"They're gone. George, he's gone." Charles fell back into the wall of the lone finished building and slid down until he was sitting, feet out, in the dirt and dust of the unfinished road. He stared off into the distance blankly.

"I can see that they are gone, Charles. But why are they gone?"

"There was an accident," Charles said without breaking his steady gaze. "I sent everyone home. He was just checking on the second building."

"Who?"

"It didn't look right. He shouldn't have gone in. It was the stone from the second level. It all fell. It was the supports. They weren't all notched properly. He should have noticed."

George felt faint, and he grabbed onto the rim of the empty cart next to him. He remembered clutching his sister when they heard about their father.

"Who?" George managed to ask again.

"John," Charles said, finally breaking his eyes from the horizon. He looked up at George. "He was alone in there, George."

"Where is he?!"

"He's gone, George. They took him to the surgery, but it was too late." Charles reached into his pocket slowly and pulled out the blue and gold cravat. "I was the last one with him." He handed the cravat up to George. "He wanted you to have it."

George almost dropped it when he noticed the small reddish-brown rivulets that stained its light fabric. It never looked this dusty. He

would have to clean it. The last few rays of sunlight bent around the roof of the building on the corner. For an instant, the light hit the tie and shimmered brilliantly on the gold Square and Compasses.



# Unfaithful

Brendan Raleigh

I refused your crown,<sup>1</sup>  
and, in response,  
you lopped the head off  
of my helpless, already-rotten corpse.<sup>2</sup>

Now you call me “usurper,”  
“traitor,” “murderer” –  
condemn me  
like a widow who  
would renounce and deride  
her late and once-loving husband  
to secure herself a spot  
in another’s bed.

At Drogheda and Wexford,<sup>3</sup>  
I slipped my soul into the very corruption  
which, for all my life,  
I had sought to combat –  
oversaw the slaughter of thousands  
for your glory and safety.  
I surrendered my soul and my redemption  
for you.

Now look:  
not two years after my death,  
not two years after you paraded me through  
the streets of London on your shoulders  
and called me a “hero,”  
my head sits alone on a spike  
atop Westminster Hall.

It is placed there like a trophy

1 In March 1657, parliament offered Cromwell the title of king.

2 Cromwell was beheaded two years after his death in order to please the newly-rethroned Charles II. Cromwell’s reign was between Charles II and Charles I, who was beheaded before Cromwell took over.

3 Two sieges which Cromwell led in Ireland, in which around 6,000 were killed, including 1,500 civilians.

as if you fought me,  
bested me,  
and split me open  
for love of the monarchy  
you'd betrayed and beheaded  
just ten years before.

But I know this:  
it is no more than  
a single match, lit  
and thrown into the oil-soaked record rooms  
of the past eight years –  
an erasure of my reign  
and a portrait, open for all to see,  
of England  
groveling, once more, to a king.

# I Believe

Jessica Hubert

I believe in the power of a hot, gooey, creamy bowl of macaroni and cheese. Hold on; don't stop reading yet--bear with me. Macaroni and cheese has a power that most people don't understand. It's not just a food that tastes really really good, it is also medicine, a conversation starter, and much more.

Food has always been used for making a person smile when they are down and to relieve any emotional tensions. For example, when a family moves into a new neighborhood and doesn't know a single person, odds are if you walk into their house, there are four or five casseroles or pies clustering their counter given to them as house-welcoming favors. Or, if a loved one passes away, there are always cookies or cupcakes strategically placed in corners of the room for people to pick at. Food has a way of connecting all of us in some unspoken bond. It provides a pathway for people to connect with each other, whether it is talking around the dinner table or sharing what they did today while drinking coffee and munching on a scone.

My favorite exit on the Road of Food is the delectable cul-de-sac called Comfort Food. Now, this street has a bad reputation for being unhealthy and full of decadence, but I don't care. I believe Comfort Food soothes the soul in a way that other foods can't. The residents on the street are some of the best people you could meet. On the left is the Potato family. The family to the right is the hostest-with-the-mostest come barbecue season. And the Noodle family lives at the end of the street with my dear old friend Mac 'n Cheese.

This past summer, I visited Comfort Food quite a bit. My grandmother was as fit as a fiddle, they said, and suddenly passed away. She was one of those grandmothers that constantly tried to feed you. After I just ate breakfast she would ask, "What do you want for lunch?" She made the best grilled cheese sandwiches and chocolate chip cookies. My family thinks, breathes, and obviously eats food. When I visit them, my schedule revolves around the next meal. When the heart of our family passed away, we ate and ate. I tried to swallow all the counterfeit grilled cheeses and cookies, but they were never satisfying. People tried to console me with hugs and kisses, but I didn't want any of that. All I wanted was my grandmother's chocolate chip cookies and a grilled cheese. Comfort Food is the best place

to visit when you're feeling emotional. No one judges you for what you eat; they just offer you the sweet goodness of a bowl of cheese covered noodles.

Grilled cheese with tomato soup, spaghetti, casseroles, cookies, chocolate, hamburgers, hot dogs, beans, ice cream, meatloaf, corn on the cob, macaroni and cheese. All of these foods connote some sort of a memory. Grilled cheese and tomato soup equal a book and blanket on a rainy day. Hot dogs and hamburgers equal fireworks and flags on the Fourth of July.

Comfort foods have magical powers. They are medicines in times of need; they are time portals to memories long past; they are carpenters of friendships. I believe in macaroni and cheese and cookies and chocolate and whatever foods make you feel like a million dollars. I believe in the power of macaroni and cheese.

# An Earthen Levee

Brendan Raleigh

Arrows glance  
off a suit of plate.  
It is unpierced,  
but, beneath it,  
small, steel barbs  
scrape and tear through skin  
with every motion.  
The arrows and gashes  
go unacknowledged  
until death  
manages to seep through.

\*\*\*

A man stands at the base  
of a skyscraper.  
He pulls a cigarette from his lips,  
taking in the poison and trading it  
for a thin film  
of composure.  
He blows smoke out into the city air.

It is a cold day  
and crowded.  
A day ago,  
all that would have left his mouth  
was water vapor.

A day ago,  
the wind would have blown  
right through him.

\*\*\*

Large brown eyes,

like a young girl's,  
stare back at the leaves,  
and perhaps through them.

Little hunks of cloven keratin  
crush puddles of leaves.  
Along with the eyes,  
they are ignored, as they must be,  
and a shot is fired.

\*\*\*

A levee was constructed  
along the river  
from the dirt and sediment  
that had washed over  
for many years.

The residents nearby  
cannot tell if,  
with each wave,  
the levee is reinforced  
or eroded.

You said the white tree was a hand,  
and hands were more mouth than mouths were,  
your gesture cut short by a look  
and a whisper at the dinner table.  
I wish you had advice for me, Uncle of mine,  
but prophecy swirls in your head, disordered.  
Everything resonates in colors and voices unseen.  
Instead, spin me a memoir of a life that didn't happen;  
translate into words the things the moon showed to you.

# Why God Died

James Murphy

As much as he had tried to hide it, Jacob was beyond nervous. He'd sat through his wife's labor for nearly ten hours at this point, and it had started to bother him how calm she was. As an engineer for NASA, Jacob hated sitting still; the six coffees didn't help and his chronic leg bouncing was starting to annoy both the doctor and his wife, Laura.

Eventually, he cracked. "Just get out of there already!" he said, spilling the coffee on himself as he stood up.

The doctor looked up at him confused, but Laura looked at him as one would to a puppy begging for food.

She reached out and gently touched his arm. "Honey, please."

"Sorry." He scratched his head nervously. "Yeah, I'll go clean up."

He picked up the coffee cup and nearly tripped on his feet on the way out the door. Laura giggled as he left. That was his charm—one of the smartest people in the world but with the emotional intelligence of a ten-year-old—and she loved every bit of it.

Jacob splashed his face with water. *Alright, I'm not doing a very good job hiding it*, he admitted to himself. He took a paper towel from the dispenser and dabbed at his shirt. Even after nearly eight years with Laura, he still bumbled and fumbled around in her presence. Just the thought of her transformed his usual over-intelligent jargon to something that closely resembled the sounds a newborn makes.

They were high school sweethearts. She was a volleyball player and he got straight A's. She was a year younger than him; he'd noticed her in one of his electives and was consumed by her since. She was lean and blonde; to him, she was the personification of perfection. It took two years for him to finally ask her out and when he did, he was shaking and sweating so much that he contemplated apologizing and running away. He'd paused halfway through to formulate his words and catch his breath and he thought she'd laugh and walk away, but she didn't. Instead, she smiled. "Go on," she'd said to him gently. "Spit it out!"

She'd seen something in him that her friends couldn't. A sort of genuine loyalty and care that she'd struggled to find thus far. She loved his nerdy obsessions and awkward mannerisms. So she decided to give him a chance. And never let go since.

After high school Jacob went to MIT for engineering, and the following year Laura got a scholarship from Fordham for volleyball. Laura had an unparalleled ability to remain calm and collected in any situation, and put it to good use helping Jacob get through the stresses of an MIT degree and the post-graduation PE exam—all to achieve Jacob’s dream of working for NASA. Even after he got the job, he remained grounded, knowing full well he never would have made it through MIT without Laura. He still referred to her as the best thing that ever happened to him.

Two years after Laura graduated from Fordham, Jacob presented a ring. She’d patiently waited through his nervous stuttering, and when he’d finished, her face looked like it was going to split. She jumped in his arms, screaming, “It’s about damn time!”

The bathroom door opened and slammed into the wall. A nurse poked her head inside. “Mr. Clarke? It’s time.”

Jacob dropped the paper towel—the coffee stain wasn’t coming out. “Oh my God!” he said and ran out, pushing past the nurse. On the way to the room he passed an older lady rubbing the creases out of a banner. It read: “John 3:16 - For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son.” *Stupid*, he thought. *Why would he die for people he’s never met?*

Thirty minutes (and two more coffees) later, Jacob held his little girl in his hands. They’d agreed upon Grace as the name, and although Jacob, as a man of science, hadn’t been too fond of a religious name, he looked at her and couldn’t think of a single word in all the English language that better described her presence. A few tears escaped his eyes. They cascaded down and landed on Grace’s forehead. *This*, he thought, *is the best thing that ever happened to me.*

Grace let out a watery gargling noise. Laura giggled. “Hey honey,” she said, “she sounds like you!”

Jacob—now awake—wipes away the tears brought out from the ancient memory. His emotionless face is a bad indicator of the despair he feels realizing his reality isn’t just a bad dream. He is still in a one-man space shuttle traveling nearly 20,000 miles per hour out of Earth’s atmosphere, and it is still a one-way trip.

He looks at the clock mounted up above and exhales in relief. 8:43 pm—he still has time. In a perfect world he would have slept longer, but this is not a perfect world. Quite far from it. It’s because of this imperfect world that he finds himself so far from his usual life. From Laura and from Grace.

Jacob throws his fist to the steel wall. “Goddammit, they fucked up!” he yells.



Without gravity, his hand touches the wall as a feather would hit the ground. He tries a few more times, each punch weaker than the last. Eventually, he gives up, weakened from the exertion.

“Why...?” he whimpers, letting his head fall into his hands.

Jacob unfastens himself from his chair and begins to float upward. Grabbing a handle on the wall, Jacob pushes himself towards the medicine cabinet near the back of the ship and takes out a bottle of sleeping pills. He already took one earlier but his nerves wouldn’t allow for a long sleep. Jacob takes another and returns to his chair. Strapped back in, he lies back and closes his eyes.

“Please, just let me dream,” he says, wondering who he’s talking to.

“Planetary Mining,” the teacher said, obviously infatuated with the subject.

The class of fifth graders remained apathetic in their desks. Such an incredible breakthrough in science and resource accumulation clearly meant nothing to them.

The teacher continued, “A recent and controversial development—relatively speaking—is the process of literally cracking open a planet and removing the ruptured piece to extract minerals and other natural resources for our use.”

He turned around and drew a crude portrayal of the process on the board. “The creation of the A74 spaceship, also known as ‘Fissure,’ made what was once thought as science fiction a reality.” He paused, disappointed in his student’s reactions. “Can anyone tell me which planets we have mined so far?”

In the crowd of bored students, one hand shot up. The same hand that always did.

The teacher sighed. “Does anyone besides Jacob know?” Nobody spoke up. “Okay then, yes, Jacob,” he said.

Jacob perked up in his seat. “Mars, Ceres, Pluto, Mercury, and I believe Venus is next on the list.”

Unsurprised, the teacher nodded. “That’s correct. Project Apology, the first crack, sent Fissure to Mars almost one hundred years ago. The resources acquired provided Earth with energy for nearly sixty years. With a surplus of resources, world governments decided there was no need to conserve. So global energy consumption skyrocketed and rapidly accelerated. We began to deplete our resources faster than ever, and as we started running low, we set out for more planets. Dwarf planets Ceres and Pluto came next, followed by a Mercury. And, as Jacob said, Venus is in the works now. Given the size of Venus compared to the two dwarf planets before,” he smiled, “she should last us awhile.

“Unfortunately,” he continued, “our planet-cracking technology is far more advanced than our space travel technology, so Pluto is the furthest we can take Fissure into the void.”

Jacob raised his hand.

The teacher pointed. “Yes?”

Jacob cleared his throat. “What happens when we run out of planets to mine?”

“Well,” the teacher cracked another smile, “I suppose we’ll take a whack at Earth.”

At 10:00 pm, Jacob’s alarm goes off. He jolts awake, drowsy from the second sleeping pill and disappointed his dream was not of Grace or Laura. Jacob looks at the clock, and a pit forms in his stomach. Ten o’clock—he’s almost there. Jacob slaps himself lucid and takes out his wallet to pull out a photo of his family. A professionally done failure of a family portrait that became an inside joke between them all. As he stares at the photograph, he can’t help but smile. Grace was missing her two front teeth and decided to stick her tongue out between the space, he had blinked at the wrong time, and Laura was trying to push Grace’s tongue back in her mouth. The photographer nearly deleted the picture, but they wouldn’t let him. They loved it.

Jacob begins to laugh and a single tear drips down his face. As he laughs harder he begins to taste the saltiness of the tear. Jacob looks out the small circular window to his right and sees a shooting star. *If only*, he thinks. He slouches back in the chair and shuts his eyes, drifting into a memory.

“Look, Daddy, a shooting star!” Grace hopped up and down. “Make a wish! Make a wish!”

Jacob smiled. “Hmmm...I wish for—”

“No! You can’t tell me!” Grace said, her ears plugged with her fingers. “Then it won’t come twoo!” The missing two front teeth made it hard for her to say some words.

“Twoo,” she repeated, trying to say the word right. “Twoo, twoo, twoo!” Grace crossed her arms and pouted. “I wish I wouldn’t sound like this.”

“Oh no!” Jacob ran up to her and threw her over his shoulders. “You can’t say your wish! Now you’re gonna have a lisp for the rest of your life!”

“No!” she yelled, hitting Jacob’s shoulders.

He ran around laughing as he joked with her. “How are you ever gonna get a boyfriend with a lisp like that?”

“Ew!” she said. “Boys are icky!”

Jacob lifted her off his shoulders and held her in front of him. He smiled. “Good answer. Boys are bad, stay away from them.”

The screen door opened and Laura walked out holding a tray of marshmallows, graham crackers, and chocolate. “No fighting you two! This is a celebration!”

Jacob put Grace down in a chair in front of the fire and grabbed the tray from Laura. They kissed.

“Yuck!” Grace cried.

“Oh hush, you,” she said to Grace. “I haven’t seen him all week, give me a break.”

Grace covered her eyes.

“What are we celebating?” Grace asked when her parents sat down.

“Well,” Laura looked impressively at Jacob, “your father’s invention got approved by NASA today.”

“What did you invent?” Grace said with a mouth full of marshmallow.

Jacob was slightly embarrassed and played it down. “I didn’t really invent it, I just altered it a bit so we could use it.”

Grace was getting impatient. “What is it?”

“Basically, it’s a sort-of miniature black hole that we can use to clean up the debris left from the planetary mining operations. We’ve been getting into a bit of pollution trouble for leaving the leftover planet materials floating around.” Jacob sat up more confidently in his chair, obviously very proud. “All we have to do is use the energy expended from...say a particle accelerator—or even a space shuttle exiting the thermosphere—to self-destruct an artificial ‘star’ we’ve created. It’s safe, too! The mini black hole collapses on itself within seconds due to Hawking radiation.”

He paused, waiting for a reaction from his family.

Grace squinted her eyes. “...What?”

Laura, however, was used to this. “In English please, honey?”

“Right.” He skewered a marshmallow and stuck it in the fire. “So we would send an unmanned space shuttle up to a debris field, self-destruct the star, the black hole would suck everything into it, and, in about three seconds, it’d be gone.”

He pulled the marshmallow out and stuck it between two graham crackers. “Well, that’s the theory, anyway; we’re still a few years from actually completing it. As of right now we can only destroy the star manually—so if we were to do that now it’d mean someone would be sucked in with it, which isn’t worth it.”

Grace stayed silent, so Laura spoke up. “I’m so glad you’re finally

getting recognition for your work.” She nudged Grace.

“Yeah that’s cool.” Grace said. “I still don’t really get it, though.” She perked up. “But, Daddy, when are we gonna finish the tree house?”

Jacob laughed. “Soon, sweetie, I promise.”

The tears dry up and Jacob opens his eyes. After wiping the crust off he peers out the window and sees what he’s been traveling towards: the remains of the sixth planetary mining operation. He leans forward and taps a few buttons on the controls. Outside, the ship slows down to a stop and latches onto the falling rock. A few seconds go by and the ship is yanked around, pulled down with the falling rock.

Jacob unfastens himself from the chair, floats over towards the metallic locker, and puts on the spacesuit inside. He looks out the window. This time he has a full view of Earth and the nearly seven thousand-mile hole in the side of her.

“Son of a bitch,” he mutters monotonically. “They’re so stupid.

The control room was in absolute silence.

“Holy shit,” someone said.

Planetary mining operation 6 was the controversial decision to crack open Earth for its resources. The deserted Africa and war-torn parts of the Middle East were routinely removed and taken to space to begin mining. Everything was in order up until a few moments ago, when the control room got word that Fissure had lost hold of the piece of earth, sending an estimated two-hundred and fifty trillion metric tons of rock hurling toward Earth, accelerating with every second.

It was too big to nuke, too heavy for a kinetic interceptor, and there wasn’t enough time to melt it. Jacob knew there was only one option, and so did everyone else. The entire room stared at him.

“Jacob...,” the director said, unable to get the words out.

“I know...,” he managed to mutter back.

Reality hadn’t quite set in; he was still in a state of shock. Even on the phone with Laura and Grace before he left, he was hardly able to get out what he wanted to say. He barely comprehended what he’d agreed to do.

“Help me,” he kept repeating to Laura, whispering and wheezing the words so painfully she’d have nightmares about it forever. Mortified and speechless, one thing stuck in her mind like a throbbing headache. “John 3:16,” she murmured incessantly. It was the gospel reading she had heard a week earlier with Grace. Jacob was an atheist and knew nothing of the verse, but even with everything going on, it sounded somewhat familiar to him.

Grace grabbed the phone from her mom. Laura was too weak to fight back and collapsed to the ground in tears.

“What do you mean you’re not coming back? Daddy, you have to come back! Work gets out at six, I order you to be home by six-thirty!”

“Grace, I—” he began to say, but she cut him off.

“You’re always talking about how much work you have! What about that black hole thing? You still have to finish it!”

Jacob’s knees wobbled; he reached out and grabbed the wall to keep himself from collapsing.

“And we still have to finish our tree house! You promised we’d finish it—you promised!” She was crying now. “You can’t die yet, I’m too young to not have a daddy. We don’t have to finish the tree house, just please come home, Mommy’s crying on the floor.”

Jacob wanted to appear as strong as possible to Grace, but knew he didn’t have it in him. He took a deep breath and told Grace that he loved her and Mommy. As soon as he hung up, he burst into tears.

Luckily, there was already a one-man ship prepared to travel to Fissure for general maintenance purposes. With a slight tweak of the coordinates, Jacob was gone within the hour. Right before he took off, he searched the Bible verse Laura had given him before: “For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son.” Still in disbelief, he thought nothing of it.

After initial launch Jacob left the chair and grabbed a sleeping pill—he was going to need it. He popped one into his mouth and strapped himself back down to the chair, desperately trying to dream of a better day than this.

The time has come, and all Jacob has to do is exit the spaceship and detonate the star. Within a second, he, along with the spaceship and the entire chunk of Earth, would be sucked into the black hole. A second after that, the black hole would be gone. Earth would live to see another day, as would its billions of inhabitants.

Jacob looks at the picture of Grace and Laura again and smiles. “Love,” he says.

He opens a communications link between him and NASA and begins to type.

‘I’ve arrived at the destination and will be removing it in a few minutes.’

He pauses. That isn’t what he wants to say.

‘I’ve never been very good at expressing my feelings and I don’t have much time, but there’s something I need to say. Laura and Grace, I love you more than you could possibly know. Everything I do, I do for

you two. But that's not all. As I sat in this spaceship traveling thousands of miles to my death, I cursed humans. The thought of never seeing my family again, of never seeing my daughter graduate college, get married, or even have children of her own made me sick. But it made me think that I wouldn't be the only one. We're an imperfect people—we make mistakes—but we learn from them.'

Jacob, not knowing what else to say, takes a deep breath and finishes.

'And as I sit here now, seconds away from dying, I've come to an understanding.'

Closing his eyes, Jacob thinks about what his wife told him over the phone.

'I think I now understand why God died. It was Love.'

Satisfied, Jacob sends the message. Seemingly at peace, he floats over to the hatch. After taking one last look at Earth he shuts his eyes and opens the hatch.

# Hemorrhage

Emily Pierce

I was thirteen  
and they saved me,  
one week after I'd  
faced my fear  
of routine procedure  
and hobbled away  
whispering, "That wasn't so bad."

I was thirteen  
and my mother did not cry  
in front of me,  
because when your daughter goes pale  
and insists she is *fine*  
but you know she is not *fine* ,  
you can't let her see.

I was thirteen  
and we were watching the ballet  
from our living room.  
I tasted blood—  
*my blood*—  
so they cauterized me  
and took me under  
and I remember saying,  
"Mama, just so you know,  
Giselle dies at the end of act one."

I was thirteen—  
was that all?—  
and they saved me;  
my voice sings on,  
my spirit sighs,

and I am not Giselle,  
for my heart beats a steady dance

even as you broke it,  
even if these pages drip red  
and I run to my mother's arms  
when you cross my mind;  
please do not dance yourself to death  
for my sake.



# West Bank Contemplations

Anika Jensen

We could see the flag through the bus windows, a marker atop the mountain more grand and bizarre than any blue stars in Jerusalem, when we were still half an hour away, and it grew with each mile we crawled. I hastened back to thoughts of the “Free Palestine” t-shirts we saw in the Muslim Quarter that morning, green and red and white hung from wire racks between a falafel shop and a coin exchange. Printed on them was the masked face from “V for Vendetta,” I think.

“We want the Israeli settlers to see our colors from their windows every morning,” our tour guide said. “We want them to see us and know that we cannot be ignored.”

We got off the bus. The sun was a pain I had never endured in my mid-Atlantic summers and the heat its arid counterpart, conniving together to buckle my knees and send me begging for water. Into the valley the cliffsides plunged, wrapping around the isolated plateau that held us in its calloused hands. The earth, after five days, continued to mesmerize.

“Come, let’s take a picture below the flag. We can use it on the website.” The tour guide (though I don’t remember his name, the world would simply call him “Arab”) grinned with straight teeth. “Everyone do a thumbs up.”

“This is some heavy propaganda,” a classmate on my left whispered. “I wonder what the college will think of this.”

Our program leader, Israeli born and Israeli to die, was laughing calmly, speaking rapid Arabic through his smile to the tour guide with one tanned arm around the man’s shoulder. The two had lived the wars growing up, one skipping school to buy lollipops as a bomb-watching snack, the other nursing bullet wounds. The wall was their horizon, the rockets shooting stars, but side-by-side, above the conception of a city, they forgot all that.

It was called Rawabi, a white metropolis rising from West Bank stone, and it would house its first residents in July. They served us coffee on our way into the administrative building, where families were choosing bathroom designs, and sat us on opulent upholstered sofas. Mr. Masri, the founder, was plain and thin, but his suit fit him well. He spoke hurriedly.

“They tried to stop it, of course,” he said. His lips barely crested his coffee cup before he took another sip. “They cut off the water. We got it

back.”

There was a vast window to my left with a vision that scanned the metropolis and the sloping of the hills behind it. It was not yet noon, but I began to wonder what the city would look like at night from this vantage point, glowing and full, as Masri’s dream intended. A community of lights below its banner. I recalled, unexplainably, a childhood memory, standing nine years old in a Philadelphia hotel with my nose pressed to the window while the sun stretched its eyelids; I wondered whether a city was more beautiful at dawn or dusk.

“I had a vision,” Masri interrupted my thoughts. “It was so complete; you can’t ignore something like that.”

I put my hand to my chest; beneath my fingers was the familiar six-pointed star that rested each day on my skin. It was weathered with fading color, a birthday present from my mother years ago. I had questioned and regained my faith with the star around my neck, had worn it to services and holidays and memorials and graduations, had tugged on it and chewed on it and tried my best to get the knot out of the silver chain. But it was always present, always tapping gently into my chest to remind me that I had the freedom to choose, and I had chosen Judaism.

I never meant for it to be political, but sitting in front of Bashar Masri and his beautiful city, I shuddered.

We had celebrated Shabbat just a few nights ago in the warmth of tall candles and an open summer door, and the melodic prayers had brought me joy and peace. We had watched the sun dwell above the Western Wall and seen men weep in the Church of the Holy Sepulchre and heard the echoing call to prayer bounce from the Mosques to the rooftops with evocative articulation. I could pick up parts of Arabic conversations in the streets and markets, and I could bless the bread and wine in Hebrew; the word for “house” is the same in both languages.

Everyday we were hearing “intifada,” “occupation,” “settlement;” every hour we were debating the two-state solution with another stranger.

Mr. Masri had to run to a meeting, his secretary interrupted, but he was glad he could sit down and talk with us. “Please keep us in mind,” he said, turning to leave. “We’re thinking of hiring interns.”

Before we boarded the bus again, I thanked the tour guide in Arabic and took a final breath beneath the colossal flag. I was the opposite of this city: Jewish, American, cynical. Yet in my brain was growing a belief in its meaning, this ivory metropolis on a mountain backdrop, and for a moment before I blinked and my eyelashes sliced my nirvana I saw Masri’s vision in full: in the streets were children unafraid, men and women in color, homes with running water and stone bathtubs, and coffee shops. A desert oasis beneath green, red, and black.

My mind returned to Rawabi later that day when we struggled through the traffic in Ramallah, the capital, and later the next morning when we looked past the Golan Heights into Syria. I had many allegiances--to my faith, to peace, to equality--but I feared I could not express them. The year had been spent studying Middle Eastern intelligence, and before we left Philadelphia International I was confident that I would leave Israel and Palestine having formed a more comprehensive political ideology. If anything, however, I was more muddled than before. I believed in human rights and in two states; I loved Judaism. I was the great Israeli contradiction.

We talked to a group of Israeli students in a settlement one afternoon, asked about their lives and their schools and their futures. They opposed two states.

"What about the wall?" I asked. It was over a hundred degrees, and I was sweating through my shirt. "What do you think about the wall?"

Without hesitation one of the students, dark and bearded, answered, "I hate it."

I didn't comprehend and asked him to explain.

"It's ugly," he continued, cross-legged on a colorful beanbag. "Why should we have such an ugly separation? It's that kind of visual hate that creates violence. I don't fear the Palestinians, you know; I don't love them, but I don't believe in being separated by the wall. This is why there is resentment where there needs to be connection. It's ugly. There can be peace without a wall."

I wondered on the plane ride back home if there would be peace in Rawabi, if its people could agree not to love its settler neighbors but live without separation. Masri's vision, I realized, was not simply a city; it was unfathomable, deeply desired coexistence.

We drank wine on the beach in Tel Aviv and smoked hookah on Ben Yehuda street; we heard bombs rip through Syria from the Golan heights, and we danced with a bedouin family in the Makhtesh Ramon while the dusk settled into the sand; we passed through the checkpoints and glanced Gaza over a wall, celebrated Shabbat with strangers. We strolled through color and texture in the Shuk, yet nothing was quite as vivid as Rawabi, the stone city.

Since we departed from the airport in Tel Aviv there has been death and terror on both sides and no conclusion. The politicians have debated it mindlessly in their search for alliance instead of peace; my family, my long line of steadfast Jews, has reached no consensus, only its boiling point. The world has not yet decided.

For now, it is my hope that Masri's vision is realized, and that its great flag can fly beside Israel's blue without fear of fire.

# The Fall

Ela Thompson

You were a head of squirrels' nests,  
with blackberry stained lips,  
half pursed in smile. I remember  
    how you sang  
        like a whippoorwill,  
with your tongue pressed against your teeth  
so the sound of your breath  
formed a harsh whistle of heavy air.

Now, your back is to the cliff's edge.  
My arms pressed against your bare back,  
sticky summer skin stuck between  
stringy bathing suits.  
Your feet placed carefully;  
one step too far back,  
    and you'd fall headlong  
        into Hog's Mouth,  
the sensation of cold, spring water  
like so many needles pricking a thumb,  
only rapid and all over.

*The devil's beating his wife*, you said  
off the cuff one afternoon, your rosebud  
lips forming the shadows of letters,  
when the sun was high and the rain  
was falling from a near cloudless sky.  
I can't shake this feeling—  
you got up one morning on the wrong side  
of the tracks, and I watched you  
    fall from grace  
        and out of my arms.

# The Golden Spiral

Peter Rosenberger

I take a deep breath and settle into the wooden bench against the wall of the train station. The station itself is locked and empty, which is odd because it's ten in the morning. Maybe it's closed because it's a weekend. My big suitcase, my small suitcase, and my backpack look like black Tetris blocks that fell onto the cobblestone floor from the ceiling of incandescent light. I quickly shrug my shoulders twice, slide my hands through my hair, and let them rest on the back of my neck as I take another breath. This hands-through-hair/deep breath ritual is a standard for me.

The mixture of artificial light from the station ceiling and natural light from the sun as it peaks over the stone fades. Bath Spa Station, its stone and metal walls that don't quite match, and the scurrying people disappear too, and I'm back standing a few yards from the line of people waiting at a ticket counter in Paddington Station, London.

"What are you doing?"

"It's just a habit," I said with a faint smile. My young interviewer escaped from her mother for a moment.

"I was watching you for a while," the girl replied. She must have been six or seven. "You did it like five times."

"I'm just checking my pockets. I don't wanna lose anything." I looked back up at the board of scrolling red and green train times and scanned frantically. The lines of locations and times are bleeding into each other like a digital jumble of polygraph readouts. I shrug my shoulders and tap two of my canine teeth together. *This little girl is probably better at catching a train than I am.*

The girl's mother located her daughter, scooped her up, and apologized. I gave a quick nod and smiled before looking back up at the big board. I finally caught the ticker line for Bath Spa and saw *5 MIN* scrolling after it.

Before heading to the open ticket booth, I touched my right hand to my right hip, my fingers pointed down, and, with my pinky, I felt for my wallet in my back pocket, and, with my thumb, I felt for my phone in my front pocket. I did the same thing with my left hand, touch it to my left hip, and felt for my keys in my front pocket with my thumb. *Phone, keys, wallet? Check.* I stepped up to the counter.

Back in the maw of Bath Spa Station, an inky black, dime-sized fly

crawls between two chipping cobblestones on the pillar in front of me. I blink, and the light from the ceiling and the sun reenters my world. My hands fall into my lap. *Fuck*. No phone.

I spring up from the bench, abandoning my belongings as I bound back onto the train, my feet moving faster than my thoughts. I turn left. Two children sit in a family section with a tired father across from them. A twenty something woman with mocha skin and a maroon hijab bobs her head to her music across the aisle. *Not familiar*.

I swing around and jump through the small open room between the train cars. Two men. They look surprisingly alike. They didn't say a word to each other on the two-hour ride from London. I swing around again to face the man who replaced me in the corner window seat at the back of the car.

"Is there a phone here?" I get out between rapid inhales and exhales. The man wordlessly pats the crease between his seat and the wall, finds my phone, and hands it up to me. "Oh God thank you." A robotic voice comes over the train intercom, and I brace for the train to start moving.

I turn back and stumble into the exit car. "Can I still get off the train?" I ask to no one in particular. I start clawing at the door, but the button I find just causes a slight release of air, like a short sigh, and the door doesn't budge.

The man who took my seat appears behind me. "It's on the other side," he says as he reaches through the small window in the door and pulls the latch on side of the door facing my luggage. The door springs open, and I jump out. I can't even thank the man before the train lurches and starts rumbling toward Bristol.

My heart is pounding its way out of my chest like a drummer stomping on a bass drum. I walk the few paces back to my luggage and sink to the floor. The sound of my breathing drowns out the rush of the River Avon around the corner.

A few hours later, my knee taps as I sit and look at my luggage now piled on the twin bed in my new bedroom. The bed sits in the back corner of the lofted half of the room across from the three stairs that lead up to the elevated section. The mismatched tan nightstand and chocolate-colored dresser, both of synthetic wood, angle out, and the black, three-layered desk sits angled awkwardly away from the bed. *They couldn't have bought matching furniture?* My other knee starts bouncing up and down.

A vision of throwing my luggage on the ground and hiding beneath the yellowing comforter flashes into my mind, but it isn't even noon, and the jet lag will only be worse if I give in now. I grit my teeth and feel pres-

sure surge from my jaw up my cheeks to my temples. *I need coffee.* My college instincts kick in.

Alice, the assistant who helped me to my flat, made sure to point out the hole-in-the-wall coffee shop we passed on the way from the train station. Although the abroad program I'm doing in Bath is just a short summer session, apparently it's demanding enough that Alice needed to make sure I knew where to get a good caffeine fix.

On my way out of the flat, I pass the two bathrooms, the short hallway that leads to the kitchen and dining room, and the bedroom where two of my roommates will stay. The rooms spin haphazardly off of the cramped hallway like twisted, broken spokes on a bicycle tire. I check my pockets twice. *Phone, keys, wallet. No more fuck-ups today.* I tumble down the two flights to the lobby and walk into the midday sun.

Every corner looks unfamiliar to me, but I eventually find the long street that leads back to the train station and start down it. The chaotic sea of differently sized buildings is dizzying. I crack my knuckles one at a time as I glance up at the sand-colored buildings, all marked with patches of dark gray stains along their stone gutters. The buildings used to be so white that the sun reflecting off of them would hurt your eyes. When the city was just built, Bath must have looked like a shimmering pearl in a nest of green countryside. Now, the city is like a brown and beige jigsaw puzzle of all slightly misshapen pieces that someone glued together carelessly. *Where is this damn coffee shop?*

Each alley I look down bends in a different direction at a different angle, leaking and spilling into the city center and the looming abbey. The abbey's tower peaks over the rooftops, its brown spikes like the wings of a bat hanging lopsidedly on with twisting, crooked talons. I grind my teeth and continue down the street.

The smell of coffee hits my nostrils, and I stop. The coffee shop, in a building wedged perfectly between two others, is on my left. The Golden Spiral. *An odd name for a coffee shop.* I climb the four steps and enter the shop.

The smell and the warmth embrace me, and I let out a sigh. The shop is empty, except for the lone barista behind the counter. A thin, fraying hemp carpet is rolled out from the entrance to the counter. The barista is a tall, lean teenager with a strong jaw and a pronounced Adam's apple. He stands in the middle of the counter, in front of the till. A chalkboard runs the length of the wall behind him. The board is split into three even sections, a grid of coffees, teas, and treats, at least twenty options in each category, and before the barista can ask to help, I tell him I am going to need a minute.



On my right, a faded, red couch sits against the far wall. A long glass coffee table with white birch trunks for legs rests in front of the sofa. A few armchairs sit with small tables in a little circle around the couch. The left side of the room has the exact same furniture in the exact same alignment. Two displays of Golden Spiral ground beans in bright, metallic packages stand like suits of armor guarding the front of the store. If you had a picture of the inside of the shop and you folded it right down the middle, along the blue and red carpet, the two halves would be identical.

“Take your time,” the barista says. I look back up at the heavenly menu. *Tea would be the appropriate choice.* Too tired to be adventurous, I order a large black coffee. I barely have my wallet back in my pocket before my coffee is ready. I take it, head directly to the sofa on my right and collapse into its leathery middle cushion. I sip my too-hot coffee and close my eyes.

The little bell on the coffee shop door jingles, and I look up to see a girl my age walk into the shop. She is skinny, maybe five and half feet tall, with long, dark hair. She takes one step and bends to tie the laces of one of her worn, black boots. Her acid-wash skinny jeans are tucked into her boots, and her baggy, battleship gray sweater hangs inches past her waist. She pulls her right hand away from her shoe to slide a section of her hair behind her ear. It hangs only a few inches off the ground, and it reunites with the perfect current of hair that reaches down her back.

She gets up, walks to the counter and orders her drink. The barista, again with impressive speed, takes her money and makes her drink. With her cup in hand, she walks to the left side of the room and glides into the middle cushion of the sofa that parallels mine. Realizing that I have been staring, I return to my coffee, but after just an instant I look back up.

She is looking at me. I’ve never seen a more symmetrical face. I freeze and can’t help myself from smiling. She smiles back. I stare down into the warm well of my coffee and wonder about my time in this new city. My coffee is the same color as her hair. Her eyes are waiting for mine when I look back at her, and she is still smiling.



# Funereal

Alexandra Casella

They don't tell you that graveyards feel like home,  
how the only time you'll get a monument to your name is when you die  
because your words are hysteric and your scars will fade,  
and they won't believe you until it's etched in stone.

They don't tell you that when you've decided to dig a hole six feet deep,  
you'll feel like you're already at five and a half.  
How you just have to scrape out the last six inches  
with bleeding hands,  
clawing your way to apparent victory.

They don't tell you that you spend most of your days  
just sitting in the hole, that instead of digging  
you play in the dirt  
building castles,  
thinking of a time when feeling low was just an idiom.

They don't mention how you build a little home  
out of dirt walls five feet deep;  
how you spend your nights staring at the stars  
because you have nothing better to do  
than to dream of the heroes etched into the sky,  
wishing simultaneously that you could become one of them  
and that you were strong enough to climb out of the hole  
to meet them on flat ground.

# Dance ‘til Six

Jenna Seyer

Is it possible to imagine  
what we dropped in the fire,  
what we lost in red flames?  
Those things we carry,  
bits of discarded memories,  
diaries, good-luck charms,  
forgotten in blue-jean pockets—  
of all the pieces we don’t dare to forget,  
held in our arms, placed in lockets,  
but cannot bear to remember;  
And,  
that feeling:  
that when it’s 3AM and raining and there’s no one else awake,  
maybe someone else is up too,  
dreaming of something more.  
And, together, you’re not quite as alone,  
not quite as tired, not quite like you sounded on the phone.

2AMs that dance ‘til six,  
ballerina pirouettes, step-by-step tricks  
minutes of our lives that never stop  
running from our heartbeats  
out of breath,  
unfit for sprinting,  
and unable to accept defeat—  
the spilled paint colors,  
smeared sunsets of a blurry world  
we’re always jogging past,  
never looking up to the mosaic to see  
if something ever lasts,  
that at times the world is ugly,  
but sometimes it is beautiful.

And, for a moment,  
beyond the shuffle and the scuffle

and the drone of the day,  
we lapse into rare instances with our  
thoughts pleasantly empty;  
the hands of the clock rest in their rotation;  
flakes of snow wait mid-freefall,  
boughs of elm trees halt mid-sway,  
for the hustle and bustle, daily routines,  
concerns and worries  
no longer exist.

Like a Ferris wheel that pauses in its turning,  
5AM, candles burning,  
with the sun inching over  
the horizon, over the tree-line,  
over and through my bedroom drapes,  
I open one eyelid,  
crinkle both brows,  
with last night's dreams tucked safely  
in ripped-jean pockets,  
with no rush to experience anything  
other than the glory of the day,  
however it happens  
in any possible way.

Once more,  
past 7AM, with thawed branches  
and defrosted flower petals  
and harvest moons,  
the Ferris wheel circles 'round its axis—  
not quite as hesitant, not quite as automatic.  
And, what was lost in the fire,  
what was burned in flames,  
clinks now in winter-coat pouches,  
recovered trinkets of long ago,  
with 2AMs that dance 'til six which  
slowly  
fade  
away.

# It Was Raining in Oranmore

Brendan Raleigh

Mary Ellen had lived in Oranmore for her entire life and her fondness for the small, Irish village had never faltered for as long as I had known her. It rained often but lightly there, and she was fond of that, too. The rain even strengthened that fondness when it fed the grass to an emerald green and made small puddles for the children to play in and let her to wear her favorite rain boots. The rain also gave me reason to fish along the coast in the morning while she stayed home, affording us the time apart that retirement so often demanded.

And it was raining that day, as well, so I insisted that we hold the funeral outside. I knew she would not know, but it was a small and fine way to honor her and I did not mind using an umbrella. The path was soft from the rain and, as I left it, beads of dew leapt like ticks from the grass and clung to my socks and the cuffs of my pants.

Raindrops tumbled onto the canopy of pines above me, creating a soft, impassable, and persistent wall of *tapping*. The cemetery was not far from the village, but the rain managed to drown out whatever effects of the mundane might have otherwise carried over. In spite of this, it was still a bright morning through the trees and clouds.

Around the burial site, a few seats were placed and Jack Adamson was already there rehearsing his sermon, lips mouthing the words and eyes nearly closed as they scanned the soggy, holy pages.

He greeted me with a faraway nod and I sat beside Mary Ellen's sister, Isabelle, whose face was already wet from the weather, thus saving her the hassle of working up any tears. She was the only one who I considered inviting, and it seemed that she had not invited anyone, either. Or she did and none of them showed, because, aside from the two of us, only Mary Ellen's parents were in attendance, uninvited and resting in the pair of plots beside hers.

Jack began to speak a minute or two after I was seated. He recited the small passage from Second Corinthians that I had suggested earlier in the morning.

With his face buried in the soaking book, he began, "Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of compassion and the God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our troubles, so that we can comfort those in any trouble with the comfort we ourselves receive from

God.”

As he closed the book to wander down a path paved with near-heretical theories on the afterlife, I noticed that the headstone was smaller than I would have liked and looked like a gray Ghirardelli chocolate near the middle of the cemetery, where it did not stand out. The coffin was a fine piece of work though, built using thick, lacquered oak and a band of cherry wood around the center. It was simple, but I was very proud of it.

On the casket, there was a photograph of Mary Ellen in her 20s before we were married. It was a posed photo, like a school picture, but the smile in it was genuine.

And it was Mary Ellen’s, but it was not my wife’s. The curve of the smile and the glint in her eyes proved as much. Seeing her like that was like reliving a long-forgotten dream. She was another person when she smiled – one who I had not known for many years.

Jack finished his speech and I placed some of the Bernhardt peonies from her garden on the casket, knowing that, because the rain was still light, they would not be damaged. At least until the burial.

I left the site before they lowered the coffin, though, since Isabelle would have tried to talk to me if I had stayed, and I did not have the rest of the afternoon to spare.

Saint Mary Cemetery had fewer than 400 graves and, while wandering through it, I noticed how many of the names I recognized. I could hardly go a step without finding a Burke or a Carr; both families had lived in Oranmore for generations and their loyalties to it had been rewarded with half a dozen more stone blocks than anyone else.

Families like mine, which had left for America in the past hundred years, were still buried there, but most of the lettering on our graves had faded away. My father’s paternal grandparents were the closest relatives I had there and their grave, a companion memorial, was the only one that I was able to read.

“Martin and Kathleen Quinn,” I read aloud, tracing the knotwork motif of the tall, marble cross that sat between and unified their two square headstones.

The rain slowed to a trickle as I leaned against the memorial and, soon, the hum of a car engine managed to crawl through the sound of the rain. I looked back toward Mary Ellen’s grave and discovered a vast and interminable emptiness stretching out between us.

All that stood between my view from the cottage and the ocean was the looming silhouette of Oranmore Castle. Its rectangular tower houses split the sky where the marshy turf met the cresting waters of Galway Bay. The waves rose and fell, reaching out and grasping at a moon that had

drifted out of view. Slivers of silver shone down onto the expanse of green and blue and broke through my window, which was opaque and alight with a film of evening frost.

I wrapped my hands around the lingering heat of a cup of Earl Grey tea.

Several minutes passed before Jack crushed the remains of his cigarette into the ashtray, breaking the silence with a soft, papery crackle and the creak of his chair as he lurched forward.

“So... will I see you at O’Donovan’s tonight?”

“You that eager to start up another tab?”

He smirked. “No. Just trying to gauge where you are.”

“Well, at the moment I’m trying to decide what to do with all of her things.”

He arched his eyebrows. “Well, you sure are moving through it quickly, then.”

The house was filled with cardboard boxes now and not much else – just tables, chairs, a bed, and so on. It looked like I was moving away. “I think I’ll keep most of it in the attic.”

Jack leaned back in his chair and sighed.

“I’m expecting a visit from the in-law soon. Don’t want to reward the vultures for being vultures.”

“If that’s really all that’s on your mind,” Jack said, standing up and grabbing his coat from the back of his chair. “I don’t know why I even bothered.” He stopped halfway across the room. “You know that *not one of us* knew that she was dying? Not one. And if your handling of that is any indication as to how your marriage was going, then you were *damn* lucky to have had anyone who was willing to put up with your bullshit for so many years.”

I wrapped my fingers tighter around the cup and saw that, outside, the moon had drifted so that its beams drew a thin, silvery outline along the castle’s western side.

“She wanted to see the castle.”

Jack paused again as his hand reached the doorknob.

“Toward the end there, I didn’t think there was anything I could do. But she always wanted me to take her to the castle, and I never did.”

He sat down beside me again. “Then I think that you should, Arthur.”

It was early and the morning sunlight filtered through a grey, misty haze before falling down onto the castle and the bay. The fifteenth century castle was still in remarkable condition, considering that it had not been renovated or restored in my lifetime.

A long, narrow, low-lying path led up to the entrance causeway. I followed it as small waves beached themselves over and over, occasionally tumbling over the small hills and brushing against my feet. The waves combed through the tall grasses like fingers through hair, carrying small fish and clumps of dirt over with them. Mounted on both sides of the small trail, the green grew taller as I progressed and soon all that was in site was the tall, stone, still grandeur of the castle. From the entrance's garden, vines and patches of moss climbed up the sides of the walls, coloring half the grey castle green.

I took my first step into the courtyard and felt, on my bare arm, a single drop of cool rain. As I continued my journey upward, ascending the stairs of the tower house, I smiled at our last rain together in Oranmore.

# Under the Deck

Brendan Raleigh

In my backyard there is a hill  
and on top of that hill my father  
used to grow gooseberries—  
little grape-sized, watermelon-looking,  
sour berries which grow  
in clumps on small, thin bushes.

He planned to use them  
for pies my mother said she hated  
(without having tried one),  
but he never managed to harvest them  
because, before they could ripen,  
the damned rabbits had already eaten them.

And every time the gooseberries returned,  
so did the rabbits. No amount of brick edging  
or wire fence or run-out-and-yell  
could halt their heists.

The neighborhood cats,  
my father's only allies in his holy war,  
would occasionally swoop in  
to chase off the smaller intruders.

And once, an orange tabby shot out  
and drove one of the smaller rabbits  
beneath the deck.

It must have grown a bit  
as it sat down there, chomping grass,  
because it did not leave,  
and we knew it did not leave  
because a window in our basement  
looked straight up, pointlessly,  
beneath the deck.



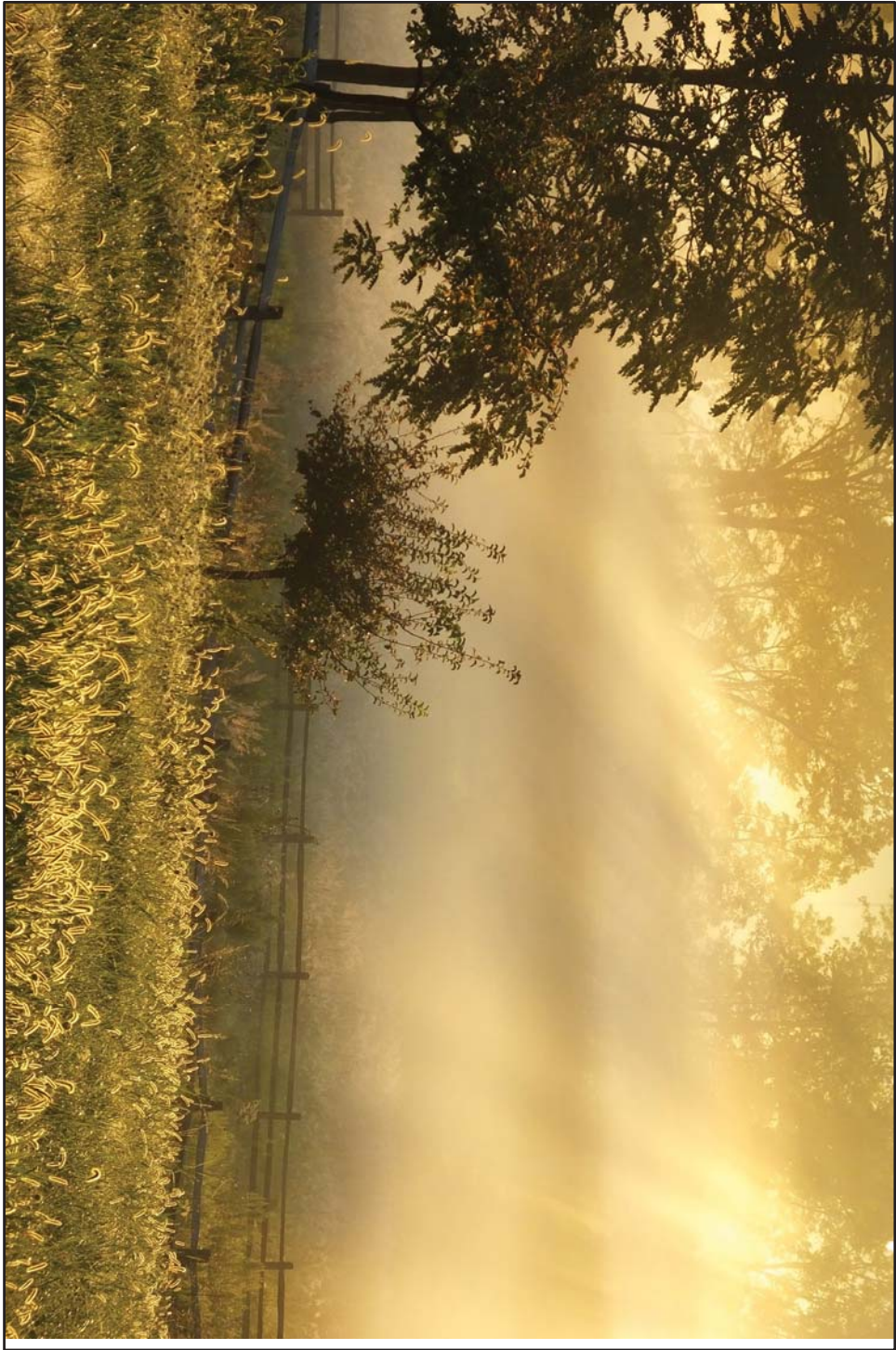
It was too dark to see it,  
but, whenever we sat in the basement  
to watch TV or eat dinner,  
we could hear the soft, subtle sound  
of feet padding around  
and, after a few days,  
what always sounded like a baby crying.

The window did not open  
and there may have been something we could have done  
but, if there was, we did not think of it  
or could not afford it  
or simply did not value life  
as much as we liked to think we did.

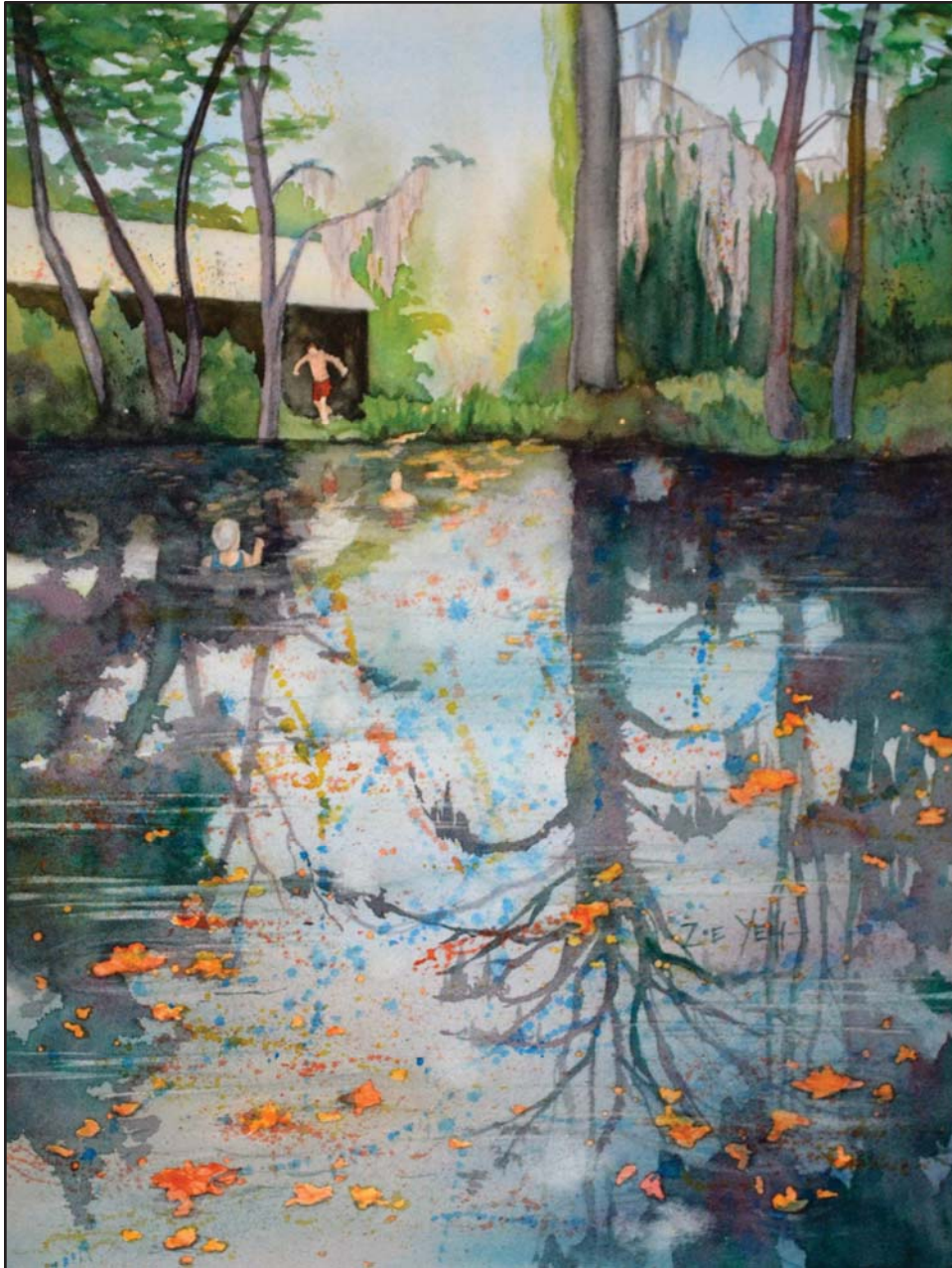
The sounds were soon replaced  
with a sharp, piercing, biting odor—  
as if someone had doused a hunk of rotten meat  
in cheap, too-sweet department store perfume.

A few years later, we pried open that old deck—  
ripped off rotting strips of Red Balau  
and found, beneath it,  
a hole into which the animal (and many others) had fallen:  
a sunken, grassless boneyard of little mammals.









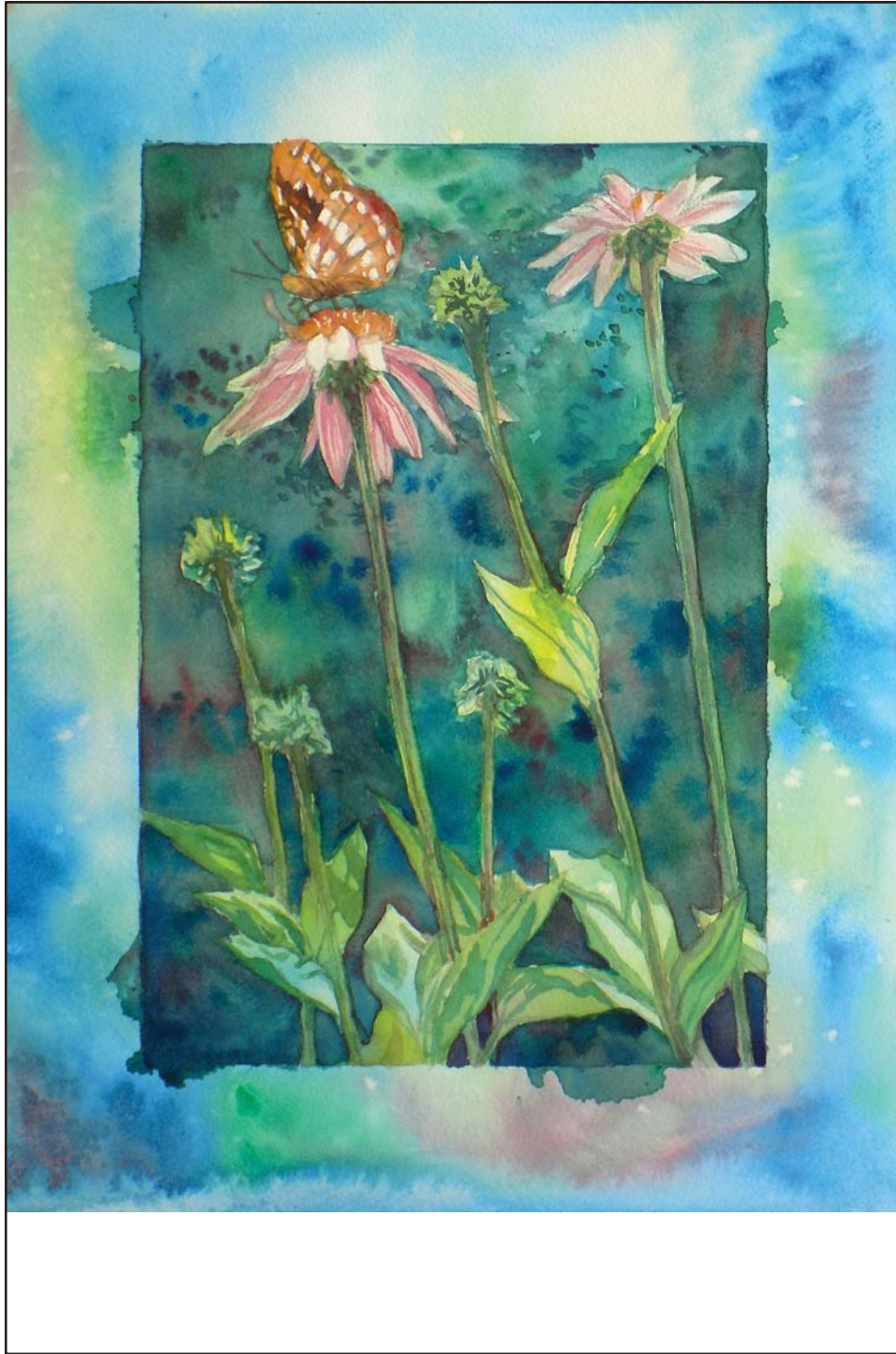
















# Sunrise at Damariscotta Lake

Photography

Jessie Martin



Sunset at Pemaquid Point



King of the River  
Photography

Megan Zagorski



Morning View - Oslo, Norway  
Photography

Daniella Snyder





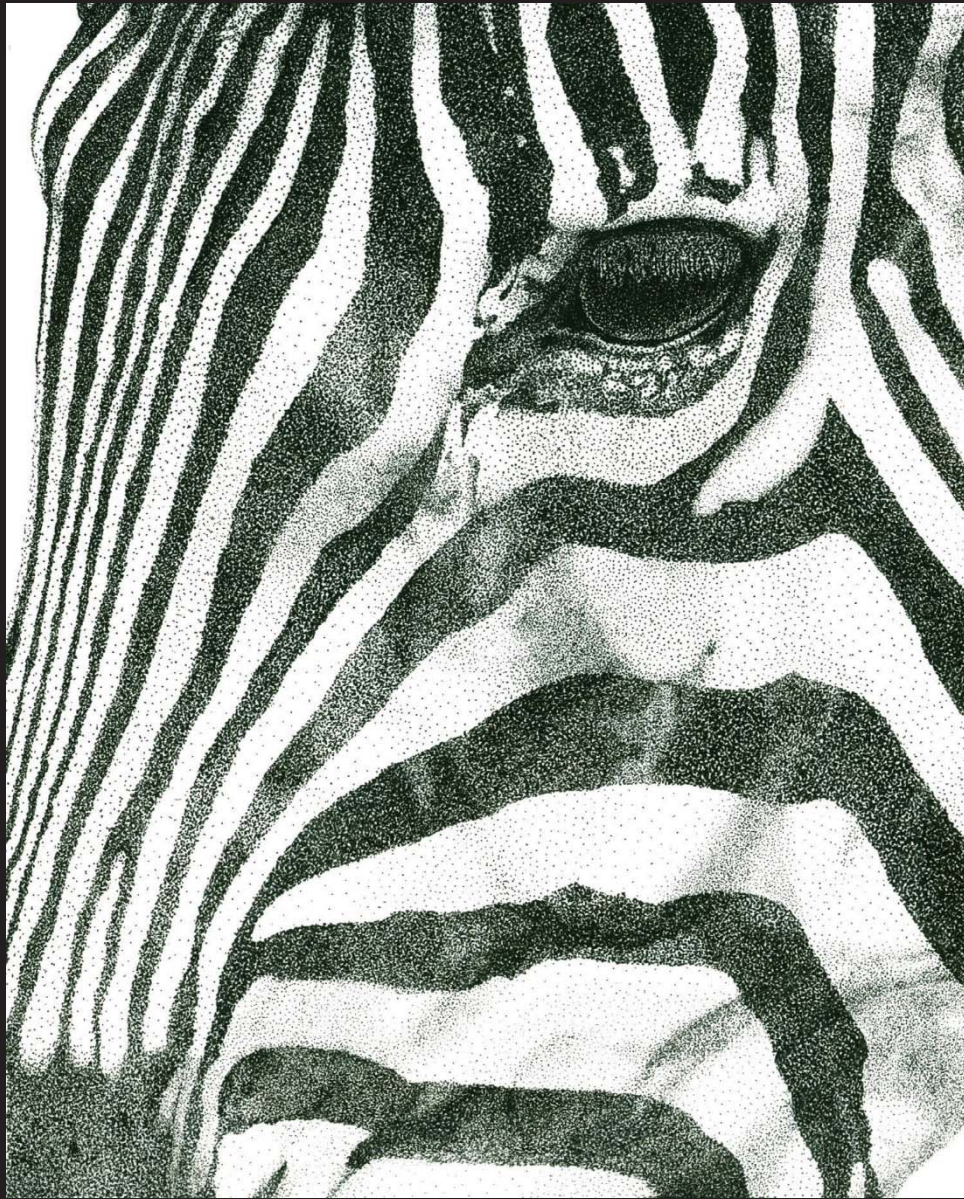
Beyond Color  
Photography

Erica Schaumberg



On the Tracks





# A Horse of Many Stripes

Pen and Ink Stipple

Megan Zagorski



Gettysburg  
Photography

Sydney Braat





Radiant  
Photography

Megan Zagorski

# The Moment of Blue Skies, Golden Eyes, and a Rolling Green Valley

Andrew Nosti

“Hey! You are not allowed to do that!” you said as you pushed your index finger lightly into my chest, your caramel eyes dancing with a smile.

“A simple ‘thank you’ would suffice,” I replied, grinning crookedly, pulling my hands from your hips. “I did just save your life, you know.”

You squinted at me, trying to act tough while regaining your balance. “Oh, hardly.”

“Maybe if you didn’t almost trip every ten steps, I wouldn’t have to do this.” I placed my hand back on your hip for a second, knowing you’d smack it away. You did, but not hard.

“You are so ridiculous,” you mocked, rolling your eyes at me. I noticed the smile that played around the corner of your mouth, your coral lips twitching as you tried to hold them straight.

“You’re one to talk. You yelled at me for rescuing you. That’s what I call ridiculous, and I think most people would agree.”

You ignored my retort and turned to continue our trek up the forest path, but I could see your still-present grin through the back of your head as you moved through the shadows of the trees, carefully stepping from rock to rock along the trail. Secretly, a part of me hoped you’d trip up again so I could “save” you and dish out a snickering “I told you so.” Maybe that second time you’d let my hand linger there, the tips of my fingers ever-so-lightly gracing your hip bone. Or, more likely, I’d just draw out another smile and a gentle, joking slap on the hand. You made your way fine on your own, so I never found out which it would be.

The weather was fair, another September day that tried its best to hold onto the last vestiges of an almost-forgotten summer. Birds chirped from their hidden perches, and the treetops swayed with the wind that their boughs kept from touching us, a couple prematurely-turned leaves detaching and tumbling to the ground. The smell of dirt wafted through the air, mixing in with the slight hint of your perfume that floated back to me.

After a few minutes of hiking in a silence broken only by the bird songs, footsteps, and labored breathing, we stepped out of the woods and into a dazzling sunlight, finally arriving at the clearing we were searching for. Spray-painted onto a small boulder stood out the name of the place: Bake Oven Knob.

We moved past the boulder-sign and took a few steps closer to the ledge. A sea of trees spread out below us, breaking off to give way to rolling farmlands dotted with the occasional weathered, off-white house. A puzzle pattern of trees, grassland, and dashes of macadam moved off as far as the eye could see – on and on until the clouds drooped down to touch the gray silhouettes of the distant mountains. A lone hawk swooped across the sky, its red tail feathers reflecting the sunlight.

We simultaneously stopped to take in the picture before us. It felt like we stepped into some museum painting, an image that an artist marked down to share with future generations. The entire world stopped moving as we breathed in the beauty. A strange serenity coursed through me, erasing my senses and ejecting all thoughts from my mind, leaving behind only the knowledge of the scene before me and the tingling sense of your presence just inches from my side.

Regaining reality, we sauntered over to the edge of the mountain we had just climbed, finding a safe but still jutting-out place to sit. I sat down first, my legs dangling over the edge, covering up the evidence of a distant love affair graffitied on the smooth gray surface. You lowered your body next to mine, so close that our feet bumped against each other's over the precipice.

I glanced over at you, examining the stretch of black eyelashes, almost too long to believe, that bobbed as you blinked. The slight breeze that the trees shielded us from fluttered through your chestnut hair, pushing some stray strands across your pale forehead. Your face was a portrait of perfection, every inch of it worthy of a Renaissance masterpiece. But your eyes! They stood out from everything else – two captivating orbs that made me forget any hint of beauty that could lay in the land stretching out below me.

The rays of the sun came in and melted the caramel of your eyes, setting them ablaze in a fire of wonderment. They turned from a light, sweet brown into a dazzling gold. For the first time, I understood why millions of men dedicated their entire lives in search of that wondrous metal. El Dorado sat in the sea of your eyes, not in the jungles of Central America. I couldn't move, I couldn't speak – I just sat there, silently mesmerized, basking in the warm liquid of your irises.

I always knew you were beautiful, but in that moment, you were inhuman, otherworldly. No woman, no human being could be so stunning.

But you were a woman – the woman I loved – and you sat only inches away from me, close enough to feel the heat radiating from your body.

That moment felt like ecstasy, some limbo between dream and reality. I could have sat on that rock and stared into your eyes for an eternity and have never missed anything worth experiencing. But I knew that moment was temporary, fleeting, a moment that would one day put a painful smile on my face while I described it to my children, who wouldn't have your golden eyes. I knew that you would never be with me, not in the way I wanted, and that you could only ever feel what I felt in that moment for other men. But it didn't matter. The pain was worth it – it always would be.

Your eyes brought back memories that crashed over me in a wave of nostalgia. A quick, solitary moment of young, hesitant lips brushing against each other. Dozens of whispered phone conversations that lasted until the sun peaked out over the horizon, your voice fading into that far-away song of a murmur as you fell asleep and I fell in love. Thunderous, violent arguments that would cause us to ignore each other for a day or two before the loneliness crept up our spines and forced our fingers to type out "I'm sorry." Memories of tears and laughs and the thumping of a bursting heart swam through my thoughts. A thousand promises drowned me in a sea of blissful remembrance, promises I always intended to keep.

Four years had passed since you broke it off with me, saying you "couldn't do it anymore." Four years had passed since he kissed you and you kissed back. Four years had passed since I screamed into my pillow and pounded my anger into my bed. But those years had changed nothing. I crawled back to you, like I always had, and you opened your arms just wide enough to let me in, then squeezed just tightly enough to hold me there.

You were all I wanted and all I needed, but you were, and always would be, someone else's. So I waited. I endured those spans of hopelessness, shouldered the burdens of my sorrows until you arrived at the last second, saving me from my plummet into my self-created abyss. I waited until your voice invariably beckoned me back from the edge of my sanity, showing me why life is worth living and dreams worth having.

You were both my strength and my weakness, my anchor to reality and my object of religion. You were both my pain and my relief, my torturer and my savior. You consumed my conscience day and night, awake or asleep. You comprised the memories of my past and the hopes for my future. You, you beautiful being, were my infinity.

I lived for you, through you, marking the days by how long had passed since we'd spoken. Our fights, our estrangements, your boyfriends and my attempts at replacement, none had nor ever could change what you meant to me. Time, and its consequences, had altered nothing.

Those thoughts reverberated through my mind for the span of a moment that covered a lifetime, a lifetime I would never share with you. Yes, I knew that that moment on that cliff, with the sun on your golden eyes and the wind in your chestnut hair, would pass, and many years of loneliness would come, but it didn't matter, because I loved you and always would. What is love but a collection of moments, anyway? Moments of euphoria and anguish, smiles and sobs, all rolled up into one big collection called love. This was just another moment to add to that collection: the moment of blue skies, golden eyes, and a rolling green valley.

"It's beautiful, isn't it?" you asked in a whisper, your voice as distant as my thoughts.

"Yes," I answered, knowing full well that we weren't thinking of the same thing.

I placed the edge of my hand over yours, looping my pinkie with your index finger. I expected you to pull away, brush off my not-so-subtle advance of affection like you usually did on the seldom occasion that we ever actually saw each other. But you didn't. Instead, you wove the rest of your hand into mine, giving a small squeeze as you did so.

Our hands clenched together, our feet bumping over the ledge, you watched the sun cross the sky, and I watched you watch it. Another man held your heart, and others would follow, but your hold on mine would endure, as unbreakable as the sun's path across that clear blue dome above us.

The moment passed, as I knew it would, but that doesn't mean that the moment is gone. Whenever I feel desperate, whenever the air thickens and bows my shoulders with the sheer weight of its magnitude, I think back to that day, back to your golden eyes, and the world becomes a little lighter.

Yes, the moment passed, but its memory lives on in the deep chambers of my heart, catalogued within the only collection of love I'll ever have, the collection with your name on it: Annelise.

# Ragnarok

Emily Pierce

I first felt the tremors  
after a week dressed all in black,  
the snow peppering our shoulders  
like the chalk of our candy hearts,  
standing in the kitchen with you  
as we disobeyed the fast songs  
that told us to dance;  
that's exactly when I knew  
I'd have to tell my therapist  
about you.

# Water Wheel

Frank Arbogast

I carefully guided the quarter inch piece of plywood along the whirring blade of the table saw, sawdust flying in every direction, bringing the sweet, slightly burnt smell of freshly cut wood along with it. My father watched over my shoulder as I finished the cut, turned off the saw, and examined the newly formed edge. There was a small nick in one corner, likely from sideways movement at the end of the cut. I pulled the plywood back and lined it up for another pass.

Every time the table saw started up, the lights in the basement flickered. I'm not sure exactly why, something to do with the circuit board, my dad said. The saw also made a terrific noise when you flipped the switch: a roar, a buzz, and a metallic grinding all wrapped in one--you could feel it vibrating through the concrete floor. I guided the wood through, careful to keep my hand steady through to the end. More confident about this piece, I turned and handed it to my dad.

"Not bad," he said, holding up the piece to the fluorescent light overhead, nodding slowly. *Not bad* is actually his way of saying *pretty good*, although sometimes it can be hard to tell since, depending on the circumstances, it could range from *not so great* to *excellent, I'm proud*.

The sweet smell of sawdust reminded me of other projects that had passed over the table saw in our basement: the Pinewood Derby cars that finished in second place three consecutive years, each designed, cut, sanded, and painted to perfection. The flower box built as a Mother's Day gift that only just recently fell off the front of the shed after withstanding ten years of wind, rain, and snow. Or the recipe box with dovetailed joints and a rich mahogany stain made for my high school girlfriend.

This time around, saw dust hung in the air as we cut away the pieces to a model water wheel, the centerpiece of an exhibit for my National History Day project on the Lowell Mills. I had been working on it for months, researching, writing, and designing the exhibit, even visiting museums and the mills themselves to take pictures and notes. The deadline was the next day, and it was going to be a long night.

Right there along with me, just like with all the other projects, was my father, making sure I sanded every edge, measured precisely, and didn't nick the tips of my fingers on the table saw, as he had warned me about so many times before, just as he had been warned by his father before him.



My middle name is Carroll, given to me by my dad, whose first name is Carroll. His middle name is McNeil, given to him by his dad, whose first name was McNeil (although everyone called him Arby). After his second stroke, Arby was barely able to walk and spent most of his time in his armchair in the living room, the only room that was air-conditioned in the small ranch-style home that my father grew up in in Miami. I never saw my grandfather walk, but I sat in wonder hearing stories about how he used to fly.

Arby flew bombers over the Pacific in World War II, navigating massive rigs of riveted steel over hostile waters. After the war, he signed on with American Airlines, traversing the country several times a week. On family visits to Miami, I would sit on the white carpet, chewing sticks of Juicy Fruit that he kept in a jar on his desk while he told me about flying. In between his brief stories and anecdotes, my grandpa would chew on a cigar, wearing it down to a brown nub that he would carefully set down on the edge of the desk.

Years later, my father told me more about my grandpa's life, like how he helped to invent the first curb side check-in and fought to keep the airline's first African American from being fired during the turbulent 60's. It was rare to see my dad get so excited, to sound so proud as when he told me about Arby, about their fishing trips in the old metal canoe, with his strong paddling stroke and long, graceful cast. Even about chopping fresh mangos off the tree in their backyard, slicing them up and eating them with vanilla ice cream. These stories were usually saved for special nights between the two of us, when he deemed it the right time for me to learn more about where I came from.

"Boys, time for dinner!" my mom called from the top of the stairs down to us in the basement. We were at a good stopping point, having made all the cuts we needed, leaving the assembly of the water wheel and the cutting and gluing of the poster that went along with it for after dinner.

Every night, our family congregated in the yellow-tiled kitchen with its red and white apple wallpaper (a relic of 1980's interior decorating) for family dinner. I sat facing the stainless steel stove and brick-covered part of the wall, where hand-stitched pot holders hung, my back to the sink. My mother sat right in front of the fogged-glass window, the sill underneath scratched raw from dog claws gripping the wood to get a view of the turkey that would roam around our backyard in the autumn months. Across the table from me were my two older sisters, Jane and Maggie. Jane looks just



like my mother, and Maggie looks more like my father. My father always sat to my left, at the head of the table, where he still sits today even though all the kids have moved out.

My family ate pasta often when I was younger. It's not because we're Italian; we're not. We're a blend of Irish and French and Polish. So, we're American. We ate a lot of pasta because it was easy to make and we all liked it. Pasta with red sauce, salad, and bread was a staple in each of our weeks. I learned a great deal about eating spaghetti by observing my father eating there at the head of the table. The round soup spoon held firmly in the left hand like gripping a pen, fork in the right twirling the spaghetti into tight coils. Lean over the plate so no sauce splashes onto your shirt (but if it does, rub it down with cold water immediately). But most importantly, bread shouldn't simply be buttered and eaten. Bread is key to the process. Rip it into small pieces and wipe the plate down in circular passes to soak up the excess red sauce. Once the few remaining pieces of ground beef are cornered, lift them up onto the bread crust with your fork. And only then is your plate clean.

When I was younger, this was a very important technique to master. Up until when we were in junior high, each of us three kids had to ask permission to be excused from the dinner table. Generally, this meant that we had contributed something to conversation (as the youngest, I usually had very little to contribute) and had made an honest effort at finishing our food, whether it was something new or familiar. We could usually get up after a brief argument of how we tried to finish everything but were just full. I always wanted my plate to be clean, however. My parents would believe me if I said I was full, but my father wouldn't look too impressed, and wouldn't let me get up from the table without a comment or two about the remaining food. If he deemed it an honest effort on my part to clean my plate, then he would take it and scrape the remaining bits of pasta with his fork onto his own.

On this night, I was especially hungry and finished two servings of pasta, salad, and a piece of bread to take care of the excess sauce in a matter of minutes.

"Back to work, then?" my dad asked. He had finished right after me. Neither of us talked too much at the table, seeing that eating was the primary objective. While I would usually get up from the table and go to watch TV, my father would instead sit and drink wine, moving each sip carefully over his tongue to savor all of its flavors and notes, listening to my sisters and my mother talk. I think I learned the habit of eating quickly from him, but not drinking slowly; I have yet to learn to do that. That night, however, we both got up together and went to the living room to fit the pieces of the wheel together.

The work went slower than we had anticipated. The wheel was designed to fit together without the aid of any glue. Notches were carefully measured and cut so the whole structure could be slid into place, piece by piece, but this turned out to be more difficult than it had sounded at first. One AM rolled around, and the girls had gone to bed. The TV had been on before, probably showing a Red Sox game, maybe even a Revolution game, I can't remember. We always watched soccer together; it was the one sport we had both played. My dad played on his high school's first soccer team in the '70s and had been teaching me the game since I was five years old. But now, hours after the game, the only light shone through lamp shades in each corner of the room, tinted yellow and orange. The only sounds were of wood creaking as we knocked pieces into place with a rubber mallet, or the occasional *Oh, come on*, or *Damn* when something slipped out of place. That was, until the phone rang.

My dad slowly put down the mallet he was working with and looked towards the kitchen, where the phone was. The ringing pierced through the quiet stillness that settles over our house at night, which is nestled at the edge of the town forest, the trees muffling the far off traffic, leaving only the rustling of leaves in an evening breeze. In the warmer months, the light, high-pitched croaks of the frogs could be heard from the swamp at the east end of our property, nicknamed "spring peepers." He got up and walked to the kitchen, and I listened as he held the receiver to his ear.

It was a call that we had been expecting for some time, but didn't know for sure when it would come. We tried our best not to think about it, and it didn't come up in conversation since my dad was so tight-lipped about anything that might be bothering him.

"Hi, Ivan," he said in a low voice, greeting his sister who, was at the hospital in Miami. There was a minute of silence while we both listened, silence so thick that I was afraid to breathe. "Oh, right," he said, barely above a whisper. "Well, I guess we've been expecting it for a while now. Thanks for letting me know." A deep sigh and the light beep of the phone hanging up. He came back into the room, walking slowly and carefully around the floorboards that always creaked, looking down at his feet.

We waited in silence, neither of us sure what to do. He looked up at me after a minute, and I saw a face that I had never seen before. The face that was always so steady, so sure of what was going on and what needed to be done, was lost. His eyes were soft, and his eye lids wilted. The corners of his mouth hung low, weighed down by the news that had just come in from Miami.

"Arby just passed away."

I kept watching him, seeing for the first time not my father, who

always knew what to do, but instead a son who was remembering the fishing trips and the fresh mangos, remembering looking up at a strong man who flew half way across the world and back. I saw, quite simply, a son who missed his father.

“Dad, I’m so sorry,” I said, shaking my head and searching for the right words. “I’m so sorry.” But nothing else needed to be said. I got up and gave him a hug, and we didn’t speak for a long time, letting the weight of the air hang down on us, feeling what needed to be felt. Then, with a deep breath, he straightened up, brought his shoulders back, and looked me straight in the eye.

“Let’s finish this wheel,” he said. And so we got back to working at the last few pieces until they snapped in place and the wheel was able to spin smoothly and silently.

# Grounding

Brynn Hambley

The day is choked with oven heat against the dullness of my skin.  
The lids close to my soul and I let my dirt-streaked toes swish through  
    emerald Earth,  
sunny, electric, shivering as it reaches up to hold me,  
my ankles like tree roots.  
I cannot escape the grey of the coming clouds,  
sky-water the only blue I could drown in,  
liquid coursing through and around me  
deeper than my deepest roots,  
louder than the song that old Pittsburgh theater sang to me on her stage  
    notes  
that echo in my veins even though the winds of Gettysburg enfold me.

(Maybe I will grow here and maybe I will wither.)

The clouds dissipate and  
I am drinking in the prospects of surviving the winter.  
The thoughts ground me deeper in the war-torn soil,  
earth that I understand,  
earth that empathizes with the pain of separation.  
This ground tells me “I will hold you when everyone else will not,  
I will grasp your hands and pull you close,  
though the rain and snow enfold you.”  
I understand now when they call her Mother,  
though I have neglected her embrace since the summer.

(Maybe I have rooted here and maybe I’m just tethered.)

I am softer than the peach of a child’s head,  
malleable and melting slightly in the sun.  
My eyes gaze over the dew-lit ground through this smoky morning light,  
painting me almost glowing and not quite blue.  
The wind blows raised blooms across my rough and tumble skin  
and I feel like the breeze through the willows at dawn.  
My lips are branches bending in the autumn breeze and

everything begins to settle,  
like an old tree trunk sighing with the winter wind.

(Maybe I am temporary but I think I can stay.)

# Elegy to First Love

Ela Thompson

The first girl I ever knew I loved was odd-eyed. She had one shining briste brown eye and one that was lazy and green. It was india green and vibrant, like full summer foliage, with flecks of gold hidden deep within the iris. It never fully looked at you; indeed, it seemed to see beyond you. To me, Marcelle was the most beautiful girl. Odd-eyes aside, her front teeth were crooked so that one tooth was slightly pushed out and crossed over the other. Her face was round, her cheeks full and pink, so that something about her looked vaguely Korean, although she wasn't. Her nose was broad, with a distinct bump mid-bridge. Her eyebrows were dark and thick, and, if she let them grow, they'd meet in the middle of her brow. Her skin was always sun-kissed, a deliKate brown, and soft like damp earth.

Loving girls did not come easily to me. I'd always been afraid of girls, not knowing why. I made better friends with boys, who were rough and not afraid to dirty their clothes in the woods or steal through abandoned buildings. This isn't to say I didn't have girl friends; I did, but it seemed much harder to keep them. Perhaps this was because I never felt like a girl, more vehemently than I ever felt I wasn't a boy, and I was told I was supposed to be one over and over. It's hard to say why, but when I met Marcelle, I knew I loved her and would not let myself give up easily. I won't say this girl, the first one I knew I loved, was different from other girls. She was soft, gentle, nurturing, like I was taught a girl should be. She had a voice that was quiet, but carried, and she sang pretty bird melodies when she knew someone was listening. She had a way of moving that made you want to reach out and hold her hand or brush the hair from her face. She let me, often, walk to class with her, our fingers knitted tightly by pressure and sweat. It kills a heart to be honest, but I've never held a hand that fit so well since. She used to kiss my cheeks, daintily, as you would a buttercup, when we parted, as if to remind me of something I was trying to forget. I was so afraid to love her, or maybe I was afraid she already knew I did.

When I first realized my own feelings, I ran, crying to Marcelle's roommate, my good friend, Kat. Kat was a 4'11" strawberry shortcake goth, "mother to us all" type, who had not one, but three moms she went home to over breaks. If anyone was going to be able to help me with this romantic awakening, it was her. I remember we sat on her bed, my head in her lap, as I sobbed about what I thought was the most unfortunate thing to ever happen to me. When I was thoroughly finished crying about being in love with a girl,

Kat told me that it was “normal” and “not to worry my pretty little head”. She even asked me if I wanted help in wooing Marcelle. I politely declined. I have always been resolute in love, unwavering, but unable to act. When I am in love, I make handmade cards, cookies, cakes, and anonymously give them to my beloved, so I can watch their delight (and often confusion) from afar. But Marcelle knew this about me; it was the kind of thing we laughed and whispered about together, so my affections could never be expressed with one of my trademark secret gifts.

To make matters worse, Marcelle had a girlfriend, Greta Unger. Greta was a tall, willowy, classic beauty. Everything about her face and body were perfect, except maybe she was a bit too tall for insecure boys to like her. Her hair was deep chestnut brown and cropped short around her face. But Greta was a mean girl. She was in love with someone else, a boy, and was only dating Marcelle for attention. Looking back, I think it hurt me more than it ever hurt Marcelle. I was jealous, indeed, I was a fury, and I let that jealous fire rule me. Although they were dating, Marcelle still allowed me to hold hands with her. She still kissed my cheeks and forehead; she still let me change for the required Monday night formal dinners in her room. I could feel her eyes lingering over me as hid my body in the corner of her room and hastily covered my skin; it was as if she were simultaneously laughing at me and taking comfort in my unwavering affection.

I didn’t know which it really was until after Greta broke up with Marcelle and left school altogether (the demands of boarding school were too much for her apparently). One afternoon in spring as we were walking along the path lined with full, pink magnolia trees to the dining hall for lunch, Marcelle let go of my hand and took my arm hard in hers. She pulled me so close to her that my ear was just centimeters from her mouth. I thought for a moment that she would kiss it. “Do you like me?” she whispered. The feeling of her warm breath on my face and neck filled me with bone rotting anxiety, I could only look at her in wide eyed shock and nod a single sharp yes. “I thought so,” she giggled and let go of my arm. “I was thinking about asking you out, but I think we make better friends.”

Ninth grade science class, Mr. L says something about radioactivity. I am doodling in my notebook, even though it’s made of graph paper. I am drawing eyes, realistic eyes, over and over. I want to perfect the human face. I don’t realize that I’m drawing Marcelle’s eyes, remembering, even subconsciously, every curve and shadow. Mr. L has taken out a Geiger counter and is talking about background radiation. I shift my gaze to the rest of the classroom and accidentally meet eyes with Emma from across the table. She glares at me and raises her hand. Emma hates me, although I don’t know why. She thinks I’m weird, and she’s right. I am strange. I don’t flirt back with Peter Flanagan, the undisputed king of school, when he teases me about my

name or pulls playfully at my hair or sits too close to me in our shared classes. I don't go to school dances with boys--I go with my friends. I hold hands with Marcelle everywhere. Emma has spread a rumor about me being a lesbian, although I haven't heard it myself yet.

Mr. L calls on her and she says, "Put the Geiger counter next to Ela. Put it next to her, I bet she's radioactive."

My heart sinks to my chest. She's right, I feel it. I am different, I am weird, I am radioactive. Maybe, maybe I am. Mr. L shrugs, and the whole class holds their breath as he turns and points the Geiger counter directly at me. I squeeze my eyes shut, waiting for a storm of beeps to erupt from the machine.

The device, which was beeping erratically, goes dead silent. Mr. L holds it in front of me for a few more seconds, but there is no change. The class tension defuses into laughter; it's almost funny how anticlimactic the situation is. I am anti-radioactive. I breathe a sigh of relief, but I see a look of shock and disgust spread across Emma's face. Emma is wrong. I am not radioactive, I am not a lesbian.

Although it would take me two more years to know it, I am asexual. The love I feel in my heart is romantic only. I have been more than satisfied with my close friendship with Marcelle and could see myself doing nothing more. My love feels uncorrupted, pure. Although I know that all love should feel this way, to me, the crushes and romances occurring all around me seem strange and unappealing. My peers all seem to want sex, to intertwine in fields and bushes and locker rooms. I saw such figures many times on my walks from the art center to my dormitory late at night and was horrified that this was to be the ultimate expression of love. I wanted nothing more than to be able to tell Marcelle that she has the most beautiful and kind spirit I have ever known, to hold her hand, and to kiss her cheeks. I wanted her to feel that same pure hearted love with me, but she didn't.

"Happy Valentine's Day!" Lydia said as she handed me a single red rose, her shining brown eyes nearly closed in half moons as she smiled. It was Valentine's Day, the most dreaded holiday for me at the time, an awkward sixth grader. I had been certain that I would not receive any token of affection from anyone.

Bewildered by joy, I took the rose carefully from her hand and brought it up to my nose, inhaling the delicate scent that reminded me cooking biryani with my parents. "Thank you so much!" I beamed, my 108 cheeks turning red with embarrassment. We stood together in the cafeteria during the time before homeroom, where everyone waited for class to begin. The entirety of Greencastle Antrim Middle School was staring at us with jaws ajar.

It is only looking back that I realize why; this was possibly the first time those middle schoolers had ever seen two female bodied people exchange



romantic gifts. Plus, Lydia and I were in the middle of southwestern, rural Pennsylvania, where homosexuality was a cardinal sin. For me, in that moment, I was more concerned with the beautiful flower my dearest friend had given to me.

Lydia looked at me expectantly as I put the rose in my backpack so it stuck out. I wanted the whole school to see this perfect symbol of our friendship. I saw her face drop as I said, "You're my best friend." I spent rest of the day proudly showing off the rose and telling my other friends about how happy I was to receive it, and they all looked at me as if I were completely insane.

My friendship with Lydia declined after that day; I had no idea that she was in love with me. I didn't know I'd broken her heart. I didn't even know that I was allowed to be in love with girls, so I wasn't able to comprehend her gesture. It wasn't until eighth grade, when Lydia and my friend Alisa started dating, that I fully understood what I had missed that cold February day. And even then, I didn't know if I had loved her.

Before I met Marcelle, I used to wear one brown-colored contact and one green over my cornflower blue eyes to imitate the heterochromia I'd only ever seen before in dogs and Kats. The phenomenon had fascinated me to the point of imitation, and I wished desperately that I too could have those magic eyes. I felt afterward, in the pit of my stomach, that I had appropriated something sacred.

Indeed, the very image of my false eyes is how we met. Marcelle had never met another person with heterochromia, so when she saw me from across the room of crowded first year high schoolers with my colored contacts, she bounded over to me. I'll never forget the look of shock on her face as she moved closer and peered into my eyes, and noticed the blue irises hidden under brown and green rings. I think she said only, with the softest sigh, Oh. I apologized hastily to her, a stranger, for my deception.

Not long ago, I was driving. I wasn't really going anywhere, just driving, when I found myself going past it. Not that there was much left of it to go past or see, except in memory. If you were to drive there, today, tomorrow, next month, you wouldn't see anything, you wouldn't notice it. 109 There isn't a scrap of metal or magic left there, just grass. Not that grass isn't something. I love grass, I do. But what is now a vacant lot next to a Sprint store was once Play Land: a house of fun, an after school treat, a universe, a kingdom.

Play Land. Looking back on it, it was nothing more than a building with rectangular white walls that had that could've-been-made-of-cardboard look. But I loved it for its neon lights and colors, for whack-a-mole and every other too bright, anger relieving game. I loved the other kids, the way my

mother would pay attention to everything I said, the greasy pizza, the prizes. The prizes. Plastic ponies, silver crowns, speedy race cars, rubber bugs, glow in the dark slime--I always loved the dinosaurs. I almost always chose dinosaurs at the prize counter. To this day a T- Rex remains, frozen, in my closet, ready to claw and bite, despite his missing tail. His eyes still glow red fire, I'm sure.

I was nearly six when I had my first kiss. It was Friday afternoon and Micah's birthday. Micah, who was fast and clever, who waited for me in line and was always my partner. He was my best friend. The whole of my kindergarten class was packed into the back room at Play Land. We were crowded around a single table, screaming, the joy falling out of our eyes and excitement sweating out of our fingers. Under the table, Micah and I held hands; we never cared what this was supposed to mean, or at least, I never much did. Suddenly, everyone was singing, all around and off key. "Make a wish, Micah," I said, beaming, whispering close in his ear. One breath. Blow! In the instant after he blew out the candles, Micah turned and kissed me full on the lips. I was shocked, unable to think or act, confused.

Junior prom. I went with my roommate, Adele. She was dressed as the sun, in a gold dress, and I was the moon in silver, purple, and blue. I didn't want to go with anyone as a date, so we went as art, as a conversation piece. Marcelle went with her latest crush, Trent. They looked like a bride and groom because Marcelle wore a long, all-white lace dress and Trent wore a traditional black tuxedo. We took pictures with them and posed as their wedding party. We called this prom "M 's wedding", although she wouldn't be engaged to Trent for another year.

At dinner, dates sat across from each other in pairs along a narrow table. Marcelle and I sat next to each other, our shoulders and arms touching, bumping, as we ate. It really did feel like I was at Marcelle 's wedding. There was laughter and music, a meal, dancing, and two lovers at the center of it all. When the school photographer came around to take pictures of our table, Marcelle reached her arm around me, and held me close so that my head nearly rested on her shoulder. She cupped her hand on my face, on my chin, and held our faces together so that they touched, her cheek to my forehead. In this photograph, I look happy, but shy, or coy perhaps, bewildered by this display of affection, perhaps wondering what the others at the table are thinking. Marcelle 's face is warm and glowing and in motion. It is only her hand, which is cupped so precisely on my jawline that tells a different story. It looks as if, Marcelle is turning towards me, moving to turn my head and pull me into a kiss. It is a hand angled with possession, with purpose. She does not, however, kiss me, I know this. Instead, after the picture was taken, she gently released my face, letting her fingers linger over my neck for a few spare seconds, and returned to dinner, to Trent, and left me alone the

rest of the evening.

I was drawn to Marcelle. I followed her everywhere. I pressed my feet close to her on sidewalks, pushing her into the grass because I wanted us to be nearer. When we weren't holding hands, I would take up her arm and hold it against my chest with the hopes that she would hear how my heart beat. We would never be closer.

Junior year she met her fiancé. They were far from perfect for each other; at first, Trent wanted nothing to do with Marcelle, but she wormed her way into his heart, as she did with everyone around her. Trent was a Mensa member, a one-year senior, and all around a good guy, but he only started dating Marcelle as a favor to a friend. I was sure they would break up senior year when Trent went to college in California, Cal Poly to be precise, but they stayed together through it all. I was there, through it all too. Marcelle would cry on my shoulder about not wanting to say, "I love you" for the first time via Skype, and we would still hold hands with fingers interlocked everywhere we walked together as, according to Marcelle, Trent preferred to hold hands with open palms, which made it "not cheating".

I wanted to forget about Marcelle, to put my affections onto someone else, as I knew it was a hopeless love. During junior year, I half heartedly pursued a Czech exchange student named Selena. I made her pink heart sugar cookies for Valentine's Day and hid them in her student mailbox. She never found out it was me and instead thought they were made by a creepy boy who was stalking her. My senior year, I decided to give in and date the boy who had been in love with me since his freshman year. I won't say I didn't care for him; I did, but it was more out of pity than it was out of love. Nothing made me forget Marcelle. Even now, part of me longs to be with her, if only to see her smile at me with those rosebud lips and crooked teeth I've loved so well.

# Paradox

Kathleen Bolger

I'm sorry that we are completely the same  
and nothing alike:  
same green eyes that look best with brown mascara,  
same looped handwriting,  
same wrinkle of worry etched into our foreheads.  
We each take the weight of the world onto our shoulders  
and climb mountains every day,  
neither of us complaining about the pain in our backs.  
But I'm sorry that you're scaling Everest  
while I'm struggling with my anthill.

We are not a mirror image because I know  
that if you held up your right hand,  
I wouldn't meet it with my left  
but defiantly contrast it with my own right.  
And I hate that about myself,  
hate that I'd rather grow a forest on my own  
and then burn it down  
instead of saying, "I'm sorry."

I'm sorry that I don't talk to you anymore,  
but all of my inane excitements and fears die on my lips  
at the sight of that worried crease between your brows.  
All I can think of is your full plate:  
How could I give you my mashed potatoes  
when you're struggling to get through your steak  
with a butter knife?  
I'm sorry that I'm asking you to fill a bathtub with water  
while you're still trying to unfreeze the pipes.  
I'm sorry that you hold out your palms each day  
allowing me to pick off every last bit of skin.

I'm sorry that when you broke off a piece of your hot soul  
and tried to place it in my cold hands,  
I shuddered away because I was afraid of melting.

# On Romance and Self-Image: The Fear that Still Exists

Brynn Hambley

The feeling of his breath on the back of my neck is like the first warm breeze of spring. I melt into his arms and we mix like the root beer float we shared the night before, our six month anniversary. This bed is only meant for one but we don't mind sharing-- it just means we get to hold each other closer. I am happy, I am in love, he is in love with me, and I still have trouble believing that he is not a dream. Before we go to sleep, I have to extinguish a small flame of fear in my chest that I will wake in a different place, without him, realizing that none of this was real. He makes it easy. But the fear still exists.

I never truly believed anyone would find me worthy to be by their side. From the age of eleven I have felt the crushing weight of wanting, wanting someone who was just mine, who would always choose me first, who would love me even though I didn't. After being turned away by multiple boys, in multiple fashions both kind and cruel, I started to think that maybe love was something I would never get. There was nothing else on the television, in the numerous books I read, that said a person could be happy, was worth something, if someone didn't love them romantically. And I took this to heart.

I was always asked these strange and invasive questions at family reunions: "Do you have a boyfriend?" "I bet you're a real heartbreaker!" "You like any boys?" "The boys in your class probably fall all over you!" My answer to (most) of these questions was "no". And I felt alright about that. I didn't see why it mattered, or why anyone cared. My aunts and uncles would always giggle when asking these questions, like it was a joke or a secret. I remember my mother trying to help me deflect the questions, smiling her tight smile at my various relatives, informing them that it was "none of their business". She knew how strange it made me feel, and I suspect she knew what it would eventually make me think. But still, I felt trapped. Even my family felt like it was about

time I started dating. But I couldn't seem to get the attention of any boy. I worried and cried and felt generally depressed and anxious about it. My small preteen body was full of confusion and the beginnings of self-loathing that I'd still be working through in college. I knew I wasn't alone, but I felt like I was anyways, because all the adults around me seemed to have a lot of preconceived notions about where I should have been in my love life. I felt the fear that still exists.

I wasn't wrong about the adults having these notions. According to chemistry.com, nearly two in three adults feel that a long-term romantic relationship is essential to living a happy, fulfilling life. I too felt this way at the time, possibly because a lot of the adults in my life, consciously or unconsciously, pushed this upon me. The emphasis on marriage in our society is fading, but it is still heavily believed that to be happy, one needs to be in a committed, romantic relationship. I disagree, vehemently, now. But that, obviously, didn't stop me from agreeing as a younger woman.

It is the first day of eighth grade, and I'm excited for school for the first time since elementary school. My middle school is in a very rural area, and I have always felt strange going there, as it has a very different feeling from my elementary school down the street. Half of the kids are the children of farmers, the other half the children of the professors who teach at Slippery Rock University, right across the street. I fit into neither of these groups, and it only serves to make me feel even more like an outcast. I am frequently called "freak" behind my back, giggled about in passing as the "weird music girl". But today, I don't let it get to me. I wake up and put on my favorite dress, and when I look in the mirror I don't mind how I look. This is pretty big for me, and I am very happy about it. I have just started acne medication, and my skin is clear for the first time since I was nine, around four or five years ago. I still put on makeup, just to be safe; the fear still exists.

"Wow, your skin is really clearing up!" My mother tells me.

I beam at her.

"Thanks! I don't even have to wear much makeup!"

My mother smiles at me, relaxed for the first time in a while. I know that what she calls my "angst" worries her a lot. She has recently asked me if I want to see a therapist, and I have declined. I have just started feeling better. I am doing musical theater classes and shows down in Pittsburgh, and have made a lot of friends who seem to accept me. I am beginning to think that maybe I'm not as bad as I thought. I figure I'll pull through.

I have science first thing that morning. Let me tell you, science at 7:45 in the morning is not a fun time, especially for someone who sucks at

it (i.e. me). I take a seat in the back, next to a boy from the football team that I vaguely recognize.

“Hey, you’re Brynn, right?” he asks.

“Uh...yeah,” I say, “Andrew?”

“Yeah,” he says, and smiles at me.

From that day, we talk every morning, and eventually exchange numbers. I feel amazing. My confidence is higher than ever and I feel pretty for the first time. A popular boy likes me! I tell my mother and brother all about it, how much I like the fact that a boy has interest in me.

One day when we’re texting, Andrew calls me ‘babe’. I feel very uncomfortable for some strange reason, and tell him so. “Well, I’m going to call you whatever I want, babe,” he replies. I get a sinking feeling, a rock in my stomach, as I message him “I am uncomfortable with this. Stop it or I won’t talk to you anymore.” I wait, knots in my stomach and chest, for his reply. The gist of his answer was this: “I’m high as hell and I don’t care enough to keep this up anymore. It was a joke. Me and the boys made a bet to see if I could get into your pants. Guess not.” The sinking feeling drops to my feet, and I find myself reverting back to how I felt just a few months before. Reluctantly, I tell myself that I should have expected this. Why would anyone like the freak, the “weird music girl”?

It didn’t help that I was always told “you’re too pretty to be single!” I always replied “well if that were true, I’d have a boyfriend!”, which never failed to shut people up. I cried almost every night, feeling like I was worthless, for years. I felt I needed a male to find me attractive, nice, and good to be those things.

Nobody can deny that in our society, we value romantic love and relationships above all other types of relationships. Everyone expects you to have crushes, date, and to eventually get married. In a lot of media we see people who have not dated, or who show no interest in it, as sad, and usually ugly or too serious. It is difficult to find stories--whether they are books, movies, or tv shows--that do not have some heterosexual romantic relationship as the focus at some point. We are conditioned from birth to believe that one day we will date, get married, and have children. People will say things about babies, like, “Oh, he’s such a ladies man!”, when this child isn’t even old enough to talk. In my experience, and in what I have observed, this effects others negatively. In a study done by Kristen Myers and Laura Raymond on elementary school girls, it was discovered that girls as young as first grade see having a crush as normal, and that it actually gives a girl more social status in the other girls’ eyes. These girls fed off of each other’s crushes and would sometimes make up a crush to fit in. Basically, from a very young age, girls are viewing themselves through how



males see them, and seeing romance and dating as an inevitable thing that will happen to them. Because of this, we women seem to place all of our self esteem in the hands of the people that we want to find us attractive. If nobody finds us attractive, we assume that “logically” this means that we are ugly, or undesirable in some way. This happens more once a girl hits adolescence. Many girls experience something called “the fall” where they begin to “define themselves primarily through the eyes of boys”. This is what I, and almost all my friends, experienced as young women. I can only assume that people of other genders have this issue as well.

I remember the first time a boy who I deemed “normal” confessed he had a crush on me. I was so ecstatic, because I had convinced myself that this would never happen to me (the fear still exists). I lied and told him I liked him back, solely because I wanted to show myself, and the world, that look! I must be attractive, cool, desirable in some fashion because someone who isn’t a stalker likes me! I felt so awful about lying that I ended the “relationship” after two days. The boy chastised me for leading him on, and I deserved that, but it didn’t help. I went, as they say, “two steps forward then three steps back”. Yet again, I felt like an awful person, but now I had a “legit” reason for feeling so.

All of these experiences piled up. Crush after crush, I was turned down, or lead on only to be turned away. My mother and friends tried so hard to convince me that I didn’t need a boy’s affection to be attractive, or to be the best version of me that I could. For some reason I didn’t believe them. I only believed them once I managed to wrangle myself a boyfriend, a relationship that lasted two years and shaped a lot of who I am today.

My first love put a lot of things in perspective for me, and showed me some things about myself that I otherwise never would have guessed (like my sexuality-- but that’s another story). I don’t regret it as a whole. But there are parts of it that I do, things I wish I had said something about, things I let myself believe for no other reason other than that I wanted to-- the fear still existed. I wanted to believe that I had found someone I would be with forever, that I would never again have to go through the pain and struggle of finding someone I liked who liked me back again. I wanted to believe that our relationship was healthy and perfect. And, as I usually do, I learned the hard way that I was wrong.

It felt like fate. From the first moment he stepped on the school bus in tenth grade I could feel myself pulled to him. I told myself, this is how it’s supposed to feel. You should feel this connection with someone. And I still believe that; that’s chemistry. I let it take me in, even though I wasn’t even sure I liked him as a person, at first. That should have been my first clue. But I had never felt anything like it before, and I didn’t want it to stop.

When we first started dating, I felt happier than I could ever remember being. I had renewed confidence in everything that I did, and I felt good about my appearance. Everyone told me how cute we were together and how lucky I was. I sure felt lucky, at least those first few months. My life felt like a dream, and for once I stopped daydreaming about having a ‘better life’ because I finally loved my own. I didn’t notice when I was being taken advantage of, because I wanted to be dating him so badly. I stuck with him through the strange episodes of isolation, depression, and “I don’t know if I want to date anymore” that he started to go through every few months. He had me wrapped around his little finger and I couldn’t be bothered to change that, even though he had started to make me feel like I needed to do everything right and be the perfect girlfriend so that he wouldn’t leave me; the fear still existed.

I let him ditch me for his friends so he wouldn’t get mad; I let him say things to me that occasionally made me feel bad because ‘hey, maybe he’s right, and I don’t want him to get upset,’ and I let myself believe that if I was the best girlfriend I could be that he wouldn’t ever want to leave me. But he did. Three weeks into college, not too long before our two year anniversary, he drove down to tell me he didn’t want to see me anymore. At least he drove down. At least he didn’t do it over the phone, or through text. But that didn’t make it hurt any less, and I spent the rest of the semester in a thick depression, wondering if I would ever find someone else to love me ever again. I felt like I had taken a huge leap backwards. But this time, I had good friends and quite a few more years on me, and I discovered why I had such low self esteem all these years; because I put it in the hands of the people I wanted to date. And I was sick of it, so I decided to focus on myself, school, and having fun with my friends. I realized soon that I actually enjoyed being single, and my self image began to get better. Once I began to love myself more I found myself looking at people in a more sympathetic and realistic fashion.

Now, I’ve never been one to say “you have to love yourself before someone else can love you”, because, frankly, that’s bullshit. What I will say is that it’s easier to see through manipulation tactics and lying when you believe you deserve better. It’s easier to find a healthy relationship when you believe you deserve the best, and that’s how I found my current boyfriend, who respects me and treats me well. When society throws things at us like *Twilight* and *Fifty Shades of Grey* that glorify abusive relationships, it gives young people the wrong impression about love. I know that’s what I experienced. But even now I can look across the bed and see a smiling face that loves me. And he loves me because I am who I am, even in the worst of times. Do those fears still exist, and do I occasionally doubt the fact that someone loves me without strings attached? Yes; it is difficult to find your

way from absolute loneliness to something that looks like love. But I'm unlearning the harmful things society has taught me about love and relationships. And I'm doing just fine.

# AUTHOR BIOGRAPHIES

**Frank Arbogast** is a senior English major with a Writing Concentration and a Film minor. He is an intern with the college's Department of Communications & Marketing and will begin working for the Eisenhower Institute's Communications team as a journalist and photographer next semester. He says, "Writing is my passion, and I hope to pursue it in any fashion I can for a career."

**Kathleen Bolger** is a sophomore English major with a Writing Concentration and a Spanish minor from West Caldwell, New Jersey. She is the Event Coordinator of *The Mercury*, a member of the Catholic Campus Ministry, a tutor at the Writing Center, and a Resident Assistant. When all of that's done, she enjoys attending Broadway shows and extensively quoting *The Office* over text message.

**Sydney Braat** is a sophomore from Westhampton Beach, New York. She is studying English with a Writing Concentration and has enjoyed being a part of *The Mercury* magazine since the beginning of her first year at Gettysburg College. Last year she served as *The Mercury*'s Event Coordinator and jumped to the Co-Editor-in-Chief position of *The Mercury* this year. Some of her favorite parts of being involved with the magazine is the challenge of learning how to publish a magazine from start to finish and being inspired by talented staff members. She is thankful for the experiences over the past two years and is excited to see where the future will take the magazine.

**Alexandra Casella** is a current junior at Gettysburg College. This is her first time submitting work to *The Mercury*.

**Jenna Fleming** is a senior History and English major.

**Carley Grow** is a junior majoring in English with a Writing Concentration and minoring in Women, Gender, and Sexuality studies. She is from Horsham, Pennsylvania, and served as the Fiction Editor for *The Mercury* in 2015. After a semester abroad in Bath, England, she is currently enjoying another semester abroad in Copenhagen, Denmark, as she continues to lay down her roots all over the Earth.

**Brynn Hambley** is a sophomore Theater Arts major with minors in Music and Writing. When she isn't working on a show, practicing, or writing, Brynn enjoys reading, binge watching shows on Netflix, and annoying the crap out of her friends and boyfriend (she's so thankful they put up with her). Brynn is so grateful for the wonderful opportunity *The Mercury* gives students like herself to be

published and would like to thank everyone involved for making this possible.

**Jessica Hubert** and is an English major and a Women, Gender, and Sexuality Studies minor at Gettysburg College. She says, “I’m not very good at writing bios about myself. Reading is one my favorite activities since it allows me to travel wherever I want. I also enjoy editing and dissecting other texts to see how they were constructed and why. As a creative writing author, I haven’t written that much, but as a student, I’m sure I could fill a lengthy book with essays. I consider analytical writing to be my forte as well as my favorite.”

**Annika Jensen**, class of 2018, is an English major with a Writing Concentration and a CWES/MEIS double minor. Some of her favorite things include feminism, yoga, and goats. She also goes by the name John Cena.

**Aubrey Link** is a first-year student attending Gettysburg College. She is an intended English major with a Writing Concentration. She also plans to complete minors in Philosophy and Business. At this point in time she is considering a future career in law.

**Jessie Martin** is a sophomore Chemistry major at Gettysburg College. She is exploring photography as a hobby, and she enjoys nature photography, especially sunrises, sunsets, and silhouette photographs.

**James Murphy** is a Gettysburg College Student, yo.

**Andrew Nosti** studies History and English with a Writing Concentration at Gettysburg College.

**Emily Pierce** is a writer by choice and a dreamer by design. She is a sophomore Theatre Arts major. In the words of Lin-Manuel Miranda, “I wanna build something that’s gonna outlive me.”

**Claudia Pomponi** is a senior at Gettysburg College studying English with a Writing Concentration and minoring in Education Studies. She hopes to go on to grad school and obtain a Masters of Education and MFA in Creative Writing.

**Brendan Raleigh** is a senior English major. He is a tutor at the Writing Center and the editor of *The Gettysburgian*, Gettysburg College’s student newspaper.

**Peter Rosenberger** is a senior English and Philosophy double major with a Writing minor from Huntingdon, Pennsylvania. Peter works as an RA and a tour guide on campus. He sings in the Gettysburg College Choir and performs in

GBurg SMuT shows. He is a lover of rap, film, video games, the NFL, and bland food.

**Erica Schaumberg** is an Art History major from the class of 2018. From an early age, she has always believed it is important to capture moments that will never exist again through photography.

**Daniel Speca** is a junior Psychology major at Gettysburg College. He plays defensive tackle for the football team, is a brother of Sigma Alpha Epsilon, and is a member of Gettysburg's all-male a cappella group, Drop the Octave.

**Jenna Seyer** is a first-year student. She is a member of *The Mercury's* Nonfiction and Poetry staffs and is a Staff Writer of *The Gettysburgian* newspaper.

**Daniella Snyder** is a sophomore English and Art History double major. "I took these photos while on a vacation in Norway and Sweden with my mom over the summer. It was a 'Celebration of Life,' really, because my mom was diagnosed with cancer last year, and finished her last chemotherapy treatment a few weeks before we left. It was a really great way to honor her health and life."

**Ela Thompson** is a senior at Gettysburg College. They are an English major with a Writing Concentration, a Classics minor, and a WGS minor.

**Zoe Yeoh '18** is a Biochemistry-Molecular Biology major and a Studio Art minor. She is the co-president of Biosphere, the PR Assistant for the Art Department, and a research assistant in Dr. Jennifer Powell's lab. She enjoys many art mediums and styles but is particularly interested in botanical illustration, watercolor painting, and the chemistry of art.

**Megan Zagorski** is a junior Environmental Studies and Spanish-Latin American Studies double major.

Frank Arbogast | Kathleen Bolger | Sydney Braat  
Alexandra Cassella | Jenna Fleming | Carley Grow  
Brynn Hambley | Jessica Hubert | Annika Jensen  
Aubrey Link | Jessie Martin | James Murphy | Andrew Nosti  
Emily Pierce | Claudia Pomponi | Brendan Raleigh  
Peter Rosenberger | Erica Schaumberg | Jenna Seyer  
Daniella Snyder | Ela Thompson | Zoe Yeoh | Megan Zagorski