The Mercury
The Student Art & Literary Magazine of Gettysburg College

Year 2012

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The Mercury 2012

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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 fall and early spring semesters and are reviewed and chosen anonymously by the staff.

EVENTS
The Mercury holds a reception for staff, advisors, and contributors in honor of the magazine’s release. Throughout the year, The Mercury staff participates in several campus events such as the Activities Fair, Get Acquainted Day, and co-sponsored events with Sigma Tau Delta, the English Honor Society. The Mercury also sponsors production and proofreading workshops for students.

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 2012: Colleen Hubbard ’01 (Fiction), Alison McCabe ’08 (Nonfiction), Eric Kozlik ’11 (Poetry), and Claire Charlesworth ’07 (Art). The Mercury Prize-winning titles are bolded in the Table of Contents. This year’s winners are Rachel Wynn ’12 (Fiction), Erin Gallagher ’15 (Nonfiction), Liz Williams ’13 (Poetry), and Sara Tower ’12 (Art).

PUBLISHING
The Mercury was printed this year by The Sheridan Press in Hanover, Pennsylvania. We would like to thank The Sheridan Press, especially Kelly Freeburger, for their support this year. The production staff is also indebted to Linda Miller for all her help and advice and IKON for assistance with pre-production printing. This is the fourth environmentally-friendly edition of The Mercury, and it has been printed on paper from sustainable-harvest forests with soy-based inks.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS
The Mercury would like to pay special recognition to the President’s Office, the Provost’s Office, Student Senate, and the English Department for their contributions to The Mercury. Another note of gratitude goes to the magazine’s advisor, Kathryn Rhett, for her continual support and guidance throughout the entire 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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He stared at the credit card, numbers blurring in front of his eyes, wondering if this was the day he’d get caught.

“Sir, please let go of the card.” The pudgy woman looked up at him, blinking rapidly. Her white-collared shirt was just tight enough to form rolls of fat that descended down to her sturdy thighs in waves. He could practically see the visceral fat squeezing her internal organs. “I have a message on my screen that says I need to confiscate the card. Please let go.” But Tom pulled back, clenching the card between his fingers. He couldn’t give it up. It was his favorite one: A shiny Gold American Express card. Sometimes he pretended it was actually made up of little flakes of gold that had bound together to create the perfect plastic shopping companion. He’d taken it two months ago.

It was the longest he’d had one of his special cards.

“Sir, if you won’t let me have this card I’ll have to call my manager…” Tom released the card, took the shoe box off the counter, and mumbled, “Fine, I’ll put this back.” He stared over his shoulder at her as he tossed the shoes onto a shelf near the door. Tom’s swift eyes calculated twelve, maybe thirteen, years tops before her heart failed on the way to McDonald’s.

He ran his fingers through his short, coarse black hair as he walked to the car. The cycle was off now, although maybe it was his own fault for keeping it over a month. He’d broken his own rule and now it had blown up in his pockmarked face. The door to his exhausted Subaru creaked open angrily and he nestled his head on the wheel. Who had reported it stolen? Edward Klein, who was he again? He racked his brains but all he could remember was Greg pointing out the odd birthmark on Klein’s left shoulder, right above the bullet wound.

Why did it have to be his favorite card?

The engine whined to life and on the way back to the hospital he mused about his loss. He’d have to take another one today, if he was lucky. He always liked to have five cards.

Five was his favorite number.

Tom pulled into the dreary parking lot. “They could at least plant some fucking flowers,” he murmured to himself. “Liven the damn place up.” Through the bustling building he went, ignoring the overly enthusi-
astic nurses and frazzled doctors. He went straight to the door at the end of the ground level hall, and his large frame thudded down the dimly lit basement steps. He ducked, as usual, on the last step where the ceiling always brushed the crown of his head. The musty smell of death and sterilized chemicals filled his nostrils. Excellent, someone had been dropped off while he was gone and already placed on the body block too.

Tom tied his apron and Tom pulled on blue latex gloves, letting the rubber slap each wrist. The familiar perfume of death hit him as he unzipped the black body bag and read the tag. Female, Caucasian, age forty, hair brown, eyes dark brown, freckles form Orion's belt near inner thigh. He rolled his eyes at Greg's last note.

Examining her neck carefully, Tom didn't have to finish reading the chart to know the cause of death was strangling. The bruising was faded, but still visible, yellow sickly splotches. She was a smoker, he could tell just by looking at the lines around her mouth. Her breasts were wrinkled and pale, nipples defiantly puckered inward. He snaked his meaty hand into the plastic pouch that was fixed to the outside of the body bag. A tube of mauve lipstick, down to the last few applications, a pack of Pall Malls, white lighter, and...there it was, pink with tiny gemstones all over it. He grimaced at the tackiness and unfastened the little hook on top of the wallet. Nothing much, just a postage stamp, couple dollar bills, extra lubricated condom, and one cherry red debit card.

Grinning, Tom held it up to the lamp, where gnats happily buzzed around the light bulb. He glanced at them and made a mental note to toss out the rotting banana on his desk. Back to the card. Marilyn Cross, and wait, was it? He squinted at the back of the card. Idiot, her pin number was scribbled underneath the electronic strip. Four numbers to free money. When would people learn? He leaned back in his chair; it groaned under his weight and rolled backward slightly. The next purchase would be a new hamster wheel for Dilbert, his little friend.

The elevator in the back corner dinged and the doors opened as Tom quickly tucked the card into his pocket.

“Hey, how's the afternoon goin'?” Sid, Greg's gadfly intern, ambled over to the table and looked down at the woman in disgust. “Prostitute today?”

“Dunno, she just came in, no family this time. She's been dead for a while now, look, you can tell by how the skin—”

Sid cut him off. “Well, if nobody’s gonna come get her, do your thing, eh?” He sat on the stool across from Tom and looked at him expectantly, hands clasped around his knee.

Tom stood up and frowned at him. “Don’t you have a project to work on? Or something to file?”
Sid shrugged. “Nope, finished all that busy work earlier this morn-
ing, I’m bored now. And besides, last time I was here, when that blood
spurted out, I almost spewed my lunch.” He barked laughter, and it echoed
around the chilled room.

“You’re a freak,” Tom said and picked up his sharpest scalpel. “And
that doesn’t usually happen, blood typically—”

“Whatever, just do it.”

Tom paused. “Why are you interested in this? I thought you were
studying to do external work with Greg.” He surveyed Sid suspiciously.

Sid rolled his eyes. “Just cut her open. Do it.”

Tom put down his tool. “No. I think I’d like you to leave.”

Sid raised an eyebrow. “Do it, or I tell everyone you’re stealing.”

Tom’s eyes widened involuntarily, but he quickly forced his face to a blank
slate. “What the hell are you talking about? Steal what?” He crossed his
arms, then promptly released them, remembering what he’d researched
about body language.

“You know, the credit cards…” Shit. Sid grinned at him imperiously.

“Now cut open this hooker. I wanna see the lung damage. Maybe I’ll snap
a picture and show it to my punk niece; maybe then she’ll stop sneaking
cigarettes off of the back porch.” He laughed again; his annoying nasally
cackle made Tom cringe.

“You gonna tell anyone?” Tom grunted as he picked up the scalpel.

“Not if you let me watch.” Sid scooted his stool closer to the table.

“I could get you fired,” Tom said coolly, looking him straight in the
eyes.

“And I could get you arrested.”

Tom gnashed his teeth. “Fine, then you have to assist; get an apron
on.” Sid hustled over to the supply shelf and Tom sat down on his stool.
With Sid over his shoulder Tom made the first cut. An incision in the shape
of a Y from her shoulders down through her chest to her pubic area.

“Wow, she hasn’t shaved in a while.” Sid stuck out a finger to touch
her graying mound. Tom froze, bile rising in his throat. He swallowed it
down and stood up, his burly frame towering over Sid.

“Don’t fucking touch her.”

Sid drew his hand back and rolled his eyes. Tom clenched the
scalpel and a thought flitted through his head. Sid was scumbag, he didn’t
respect the dead; he’d surely be the type to fuck the lifeless women when
nobody was watching. Tom looked down at Sid, who was brushing lint off
his tie.

Sid met his eyes and the maddening grin vanished. Unease washed
over his brow and he stepped back, away from Tom. “You know, I think I’ll
go back up now. I’m sure Greg is looking for me. Have fun with the lady,
you know, I bet when she was fresh and warm she screwed like a—"

Tom advanced and pushed Sid to the floor with one hand as the other rose in the air, scalpel gleaming. Sid shouted in surprise, closed his eyes, and flailed his limbs, knocking the instrument out of Tom's hand. A mad scramble ensued but Tom took a strong hold on his foot and pulled Sid toward him easily; but he didn't notice the scalpel in Sid's fist. There was a moment when they stared into each other's livid eyes, Sid gazing up at him with the tool shaking in his extended arm. Tom pulled him up by his feet and Sid, upside down and breathless, swiped at his thick ankles. His head impacted the cement floor and he moaned and rolled over in time to see the scalpel descend upon his neck.

The sliced jugular released a waterfall of blood and the diener watched in horrified fascination as Sid gurgled. A few seconds later his limbs relaxed; the silence burned in Tom's ears and his brain quickly began to fire off panic signals. Tom collapsed to the floor to hold down the wound in order to slow the bleeding, so as not to make a mess. The blood was tepid, almost the consistency of whole milk. He'd never touched blood this fresh before; it was typically dried and crusted when the dead met him. Tom gazed at the glistening puddle that was inching its way toward the stool. Trembling hands pressed in place until it stopped and he stood up and looked around wildly, crimson droplets falling from his hands.

What the fuck just happened.

His brain felt the same as when he had been jolted by a stun gun in college; a messy prank that left him with a heavy, tingling, and empty orb on his seized shoulders. Tom closed his eyes, and his heavy head immediately fell backward. They flew open at once and rested on a black body bag on the ground next to the desk. Tranquility rushed through his body and he hastily stuffed Sid inside the bag, squashing his arm in so roughly it snapped. Tom pressed his palms together and thought hard, and then it came to him. He grabbed a crematorium label, taped it to the bag, and lifted the body onto an empty silver gurney. The sink turned a rusty brown as he washed the intern off of him, out from under his nails, the water swirling gracefully into the depths of the pipes. Tom had just finished mopping up the blood when Greg came down the stairs.

“Hey, Tommy, you seen Sid around? The idiot's been away from his desk for a while now; he's probably in the maternity ward looking up hospital gowns.” They laughed together, Tom's pitch huskier than normal. Tom cleared his throat. “Nope, haven't seen him since yesterday. Maybe he took off, couldn't handle the pressure.”

Greg rubbed his prickly chin with his knuckles. “Yeah probably. There was something weird about him. You want me to take this body up?” He pointed to Sid.
“Sure, it’s been there a while, should be cremated soon. And I wouldn’t open it, the body’s a mess and it stinks like you wouldn’t believe.” Greg pushed it toward the elevator.

“Going out to the bar tonight? Matt and even Dr. Duncan are coming, you in?”

“Sure. I’ll buy a round of drinks,” Tom said, forcing what he hoped was a grin. Greg saluted him and the doors closed. Tom exhaled, closed his eyes, and turned back to the woman’s body on the table as he fingered Sid’s wallet in his pocket.
“Erin Gallagher, 45 pounds,” I said to my father, checking in at the end table bisecting the family room couches.

My mother sighed from the kitchen. She hated when my dad hosted these wrestling tournaments.

“Come on, Kendra,” he’d argue. “It’s good for them. Do you want them to turn out to be babies?”

“Tim,” she’d chide. “Little girls shouldn’t know the difference between a headlock and a crossface. They’re not boys!”

My mother was the first to see Dad’s wrestling matches for what they really were: ruthless contests that pitted sister-against-sister, with the winner receiving the grand prize of Dad’s affection. Seeing past the immediate outcomes of each match, scraped knees or bruised egos, she foresaw the emotional rift that would ultimately be driven between my sister and I, a fissure that would only lessen with time and age, once we both became too old to wrestle.

But Dad didn’t care. I could see how the evergreen carpet of our family room transformed into the wrestling mat of South Plainfield High for him, the way he became that freckled, floppy-haired boy again, his green singlet loose on his 119-pound frame.

We’d wait for him. At exactly 5:00 each evening, Ashley and I would sit expectantly on the suede couch, waiting for the headlights of his Crown Victoria to seep through the bay windows and dance across the ceiling, to hear the groan of the garage door opening underneath. At last, when his footsteps pounded the floorboards of the stairs, we’d run to the doorway, where he’d greet us both with a kiss and get on his hands and knees in his New Jersey State Police uniform, ready to wrestle.

Although she was two years older, my seven-year-older sister, Ashley, was still no match for me. She was, as my mother would say proudly to anyone who’d listen, a peanut. “When she was born, she only weighed six pounds, eleven ounces. At a year, she only weighed fifteen pounds. Teeny, tiny little thing,” she’d say, the corners of her mouth lifting into a reminiscent smile.

We couldn’t have been more different. Ashley’s pale, porcelain complexion and blonde hair clashed strikingly with my heavily freckled skin and dark locks, inherited from my mother. Her slight frame and stature
caused strangers to smile knowingly at me and say, “And you must be the big sister!”

When it came to wrestling, I didn’t mind being the pudgy one. Size was an advantage. And today, I could really use it. To start the match, Dad gave Ashley top position, much to her satisfaction. Everyone knew bottom was the worse option of the two. On bottom, you are under the complete control of your opponent, blind to any of her moves, left only to counteract each one two seconds too late. Even under Ashley’s light weight, I knew wriggling out from underneath would be a challenge. As I reluctantly knelt on the ground, both hands planted on the carpet, she smirked and stuck out her tongue.

I waited as she planted her left knee just to the side of my left foot, grabbed my elbow with her left hand, and reached around my waist with the other. Her breath felt hot and sticky on my ear.

Dad surveyed our stances. “Good,” he said. “Ready, set…go!”

Immediately, Ashley pressed all fifty pounds of herself onto my back, pulling my left arm out from under me. Surprised, I collapsed brusquely onto the floor.

“What’s going on in there?” Mom asked, her voice distant and muffled by the sound of a crackling skillet.

Dad ignored her. “Control the hips, Ash! Ride your toes!” he hollered traitorously. Always eager to please, Ashley crushed me even harder into the floor, paralyzing the bottom half of my body. The carpet callously scraped my cheek, leaving it raw and stinging. Tears sprang into my eyes, and I struggled to control them from streaming unmercifully down my face.

Dad pounded the floor in warning. “Stalling on the bottom,” he said. “Let’s go, Er. Hips up! Go for the reversal!”

Stalling? That couldn’t be possible. I was Dad’s greatest student: a role, I later realized, I could never shake. Mindful of his every tip, I prided myself on remembering to always remain confident during a match, to remember that technique wins over strength every time, and to never let my opponent know I was tired. Every time I had remembered these things, I was rewarded with a win by my father, and my hand thrust into the air as a champion. And afterwards, when the mat transfigured back into the family room carpet, my father would say to no one in particular, “She may be younger, but she’s scrappy.”
Ashley’s fingernails dug into my shoulder, forcefully trying to unpeel me from the floor as if I were a wad of gum stuck to her shoe. She was off-balance; I could feel it. “Nice try, baby,” she sneered into my ear. Suddenly, I was exploding upward, elevating my weight through the curvature of my back, springing to my feet with a familiar ease.

“Two points! Plus two!” Dad said excitedly. I met Ashley’s eyes for the first time, their bizarre shade of gray-blue, and they instantly gave her away. Crouching on her too-skinny legs, her arms outstretched as if in an embrace. She looked comical, a caricature of a wrestler. For a second, I almost felt sorry for her. But then I remembered what we were fighting for, what we would always be fighting for.

Without breaking eye contact, I shot for her leg. Mercilessly, I grabbed at her ankle, completely exposed and unprotected, and pulled it out from beneath her. Like an animal snagged in a bear trap, Ashley whimpered on the floor helplessly, losing any advantage she had.

“Go for the pin! Go for the pin!” Dad hollered.

“Tim!” my mom shouted from the kitchen. “If one of these girls comes crying to me afterwards, I swear—”

I didn’t hear the rest. I flipped Ashley onto her back, smothering her with my weight. Surprisingly, she hadn’t given up yet.

“Lift your shoulder blade up off the ground, Ash! Hurry!” Dad said, always the double-sided coach. Struggling underneath my weight, she lifted her shoulder off the carpet in a last-ditch effort at victory. Swiftly, I came down on her, digging my chin into the soft spot under her shoulder.

“Ouch!” she cried, her voice quavering from the pain.

Dad scrambled to the ground, frantically looking at the move from each angle, before pounding the floor and crying triumphantly, “Pin! Pin!” He pulled me to my feet and grabbed my hand, raising it into the air. “Winner!” he exclaimed. Ashley’s lip quivered, her eyes pooling with tears. “Come on now, shake hands,” Dad said. Contorting her face grotesquely, Ashley began to cry uncontrollably, hiccups violently shaking her tiny frame.

“Mommaaaa!” she cried as she ran into the kitchen.

“Aw, c’mon. Don’t be a baby!” Dad called after her.

He patted me on the back. “Come on, now, Scrappy. Time to go eat.”

As we walked to the kitchen table, Mom shot Dad a glare from the stovetop, brushing away pieces of hair stuck to Ashley’s tear-stained cheeks. “I hope you’re happy, Tim,” she said. “What are you teaching your kids?”

Dad’s mouth opened, as if about to say something, and then it shut. To be a winner, I answered for him. To always come out on top.
Dinosaur Sheets

To my brother

Liz Williams

It’s no one’s fault I found the sheets today, crumpled into the back corner of the closet, into a crevice your ever-typing fingers have not graced in five, ten, thirteen years. I won’t blame you that I found them there, the once-bright stamps of dinosaurs now wilted into mauves and grays and wrinkled like the furry lines on baseballs that the garden ate.

You were, to me, clothed in gold—your verses and equations hung above my upturned head, strung like glittered stars plucked from nameless galaxies and sequestered just for me.

Do you remember how we doused the stage in those silly clothes and sang the songs in our mother tongue, clung to the syllables of an ingrown sound, and worshiped every chorus loud?

I should have known from storybooks that one day all the castled walls will fall and crumble to the sea, bringing with them every beam; but standing in their sandy mist, with doorways guaranteeing green, will be two kingdoms of word and thought, one for you, and one for me.
One of Us
Tommy Bender

Removed by the Request of the Author
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Even before I knew it, I’ve always had a special relationship with death. From an early age, I always had questions regarding mortality. I wondered where one went after dying, when I would die, how I would die, whether or not I should be scared, and whether or not it would be a sweet release from life. I’ve known I am an atheist from a young age, so I’m positive that death is the end of it all, yet my fear of dying has diminished throughout the years because of how helpless we are when facing the Reaper.

Life's but a walking shadow, a poor player,
That struts and frets his hour upon the stage,
And then is heard no more. It is a tale
Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury,
Signifying nothing.

-From “Macbeth” Act V Scene V by William Shakespeare

Some of my earlier memories in life are very foggy, yet the emotions that overwhelmed my life in certain moments are as vivid as any moment I have experienced in the last two minutes. One day, when I was six years old, my neck really started to hurt. I felt a throbbing pain on the left side of my neck which manifested itself in the form of a hard, swollen ball. I didn’t think much of it until I talked to my mom about it. She decided that the rational thing to do was to take me to the doctor to get it checked out. All of a sudden, fear and anxiety took control of my entire existence like a horde of hellhounds surrounding and taunting me, showing off their sharp set of teeth.

I found out what was wrong with me only a couple of nights later, but it felt like an eon and a half. A wave of insomnia crept up inside of me during those dark nights in the form of tall, loud wooden drums in a cold, desolate wasteland where no light shone from the sky. The day finally came; I was probably going to be fine according to the doctor. I had a swollen lymph node that might require surgery in order to excise it, and this scared my mother, but for some reason, it didn’t sound that bad to me. I felt a sense of comfort knowing that I could get that small beast out of my life.
and move on. And then it got even better—after running some more tests, 
the doctor realized that it wasn’t as bad as he had thought. I would need no 
surgery, only antibiotics. It didn’t even seem like a threat anymore, simply 
a part of my body that was swollen. My older brother had a cast at the time 
because he had broken his arm, and I saw what I had as something simi-
lar. Yes, that’s what I had, it was simply a broken bone that needed some 
time to heal. Those thoughts of death were nothing but mind games I had 
played upon myself by obsessing over absolutely nothing. I was going to be 
fine, right?

And I, tiny being, 
drunk with the great starry 
void, 
likeness, image of 
mystery, 
felt myself a pure pure part 
of the abyss, 
I wheeled with the stars, 
My heart broke loose with the wind

-From “Poetry” by Pablo Neruda.

Even though I would be fine with antibiotics, I had to go to the 
hospital for a few days so my doctor could monitor my progress and make 
sure that nothing went wrong. I was hooked up to an IV, and I was getting 
a steady dose of antibiotics to treat my illness, as well as some relatively 
harmless drugs in order to fight any side effects that the antibiotics might 
have. I felt great. I was well on my path to recovery, and I had a staff of 
urses and both of my parents tending to my every need. I did not feel the 
banging of the wooden drums anymore—instead I felt a light, cool breeze 
relaxing my tense muscles, and all I could hear was a steady, unchanging 
stream in the distance that filled me with absolute peace and tranquility. 
My serene voyage would soon be disturbed by one small pill. I woke up 
with a really bad migraine the next day, so one of the nurses gave me some 
aspirin to relieve my pain. I had never tried anything but Tylenol to com-
bat headaches until this moment, and I never had any side effects from it. I 
thought I was leaving that hospital that day, but instead I took an Advil and 
signed my death sentence.

Never in a million years would I have imagined that people could 
be allergic to aspirin. I was a young boy with his entire life ahead of him, 
but then I saw a scythe. My lips started to feel puffy, and my doctor im-
mediatedly picked up on the fact that I was having an allergic reaction to the Advil, but it didn’t stop there. My lips were not only swollen, they were huge. In what was probably only ten minutes, my face was bloated, and I was having a harder time breathing. This was no mere allergic reaction, this was my immune system completely failing to control the swelling. My doctor realized this, and he ran out to find a cortisone shot as fast as was humanly possible. I was having a harder time breathing and I was completely aware of what was going on - my throat was closing in on itself. If I had spent another half hour without some medicine to combat the reaction that the aspirin had provoked in my body, my throat was going to be sealed shut and I would have choked to death. All of a sudden, everything was in slow motion, like in the movies. I was super conscious of everything that was going on around me. I could hear my mother yelling at the nurses to do something about my situation as they tried to contact the doctor who had left in order to see what was taking so long. I knew this was it, my time had come, and I wasn’t even old enough to fully realize what this meant. Nevertheless, I felt at peace with myself. The fear I had felt was overtaken by complete peace. I closed my eyes and decided to wait it out without freaking out. About fifteen minutes later, the doctor walked in with a needle full of a clear liquid that would save my life. He applied the cortisone shot in me, and I was completely fine within five minutes. I felt the greatest sense of relief I have ever felt in my entire life, and this too-vivid experience somehow became over time a distant memory...or so I thought.

By the time I was finishing my sophomore year of college, I had long forgotten the Advil incident that almost claimed my life. Nevertheless, my mortality was a topic I always thought about for some reason. I didn't think harm would come my way, but I couldn't help thinking about what it would be like to experience death.

The Reaper is ugly and menacing. He stares directly at us, and with an outstretched bony finger, he beckons us to come to him. He is patient. If we escape today, surely he will have us tomorrow. He is democratic. He takes all; high and low alike will be ‘harvested’ when the time comes. He is unforgiving. Once we are in his grasp, there is no return.

-From “Confrontations with the Reaper” by Fred Feldman (3).

Spring of 2010 was one of the happiest semesters of my life, but it ended on a somewhat bitter note. I made a ton of friends, I was doing well in class, and I finally knew what I wanted to do with my life. However, in mid-April of that year, only two weeks before the semester ended, I did some philanthropy yard work with my fraternity on a hot Saturday after-
noon for about five hours. Needless to say, I was pretty sore after all that
daily work. The next day I woke up with a horrible pain in the left side
of my neck, but I thought it was muscular soreness from Saturday’s yard
work. Throughout the next couple of days, the pain got worse and a ball
started to form and grow where the pain was. I went to the health center
to get it checked out, and they said it was probably some throat infection
or maybe mono. I asked the chief nurse to give me a worst case scenario,
and she said that there was a very rare chance it could be Hodgkin’s Lymphoma, a common type of cancer with a cure rate of over 90%.

They gave me antibiotics for a week, but nothing changed. The ball
had stopped growing and the pain was not as bad after a few days, but that
was simply my immune system’s reaction to whatever that was. I went to
see a doctor about two weeks after I first experienced that pain, and he
examined the infection inside my throat. He performed a needle biopsy on
me, which basically consisted of him sticking a needle inside my mouth,
down to my throat where he pierced the chunky, painful mass in order
to numb it with local anesthesia; he followed this up by going inside my
mouth with some sort of steel, plucking device in order to take a piece of
the mass on which he would later run tests. I went back to my dorm with
my mouth half-numb, hopeful that everything would be fine.

Possibly, something is alive at one time, and dead at another time.

- From “Confrontations with the Reaper” by Fred Feldman (110)

I had just finished my last final exam in the morning before I went
to the hospital to find out what I had. One of the school nurses decided to
go with me in case I heard unpleasant news. When I got there, the doc-
tor didn’t waste any time. He told me I had cancer. I wasn’t angry or sad
or shocked or anything really. I’m not sure why, but I reacted to it with a
completely stoic expression according to the nurse. Not only did I have
cancer, but I had Diffuse Large B-Cell Lymphoma, which is a type of Non-
Hodgkin’s Lymphoma, a variety of cancer that is far more aggressive and
deadly than Hodgkin’s Lymphoma, worse than the “worst case scenario” I
previously talked about with the school nurse. The doctor told me I would
have to get chemotherapy, radiotherapy, or some combination of the two,
but he wasn’t entirely sure since he didn’t specialize in cancer. I appreciated
the fact that he decided to not charge me anything for that appointment
after telling me I had cancer—it’s a policy of his. After having a very sur-
real conversation with my mother in which I told her I had cancer in a very
matter-of-fact manner, we decided I would spend as long as it took receiv-
ing treatment until I was cured, which I was confident I would be.
Let the flowing create
A new inner being
As the source in the mountains
Gives water in pulses,
These can be felt at
The heart of the current
And here it is only
One wandering step
Forth, to the sea.
Your freed hair floating
Out of your brain.

-From “Inside the River” by James Dickey

Chemotherapy is, by far, the toughest thing I have ever experienced on a physical, emotional, and psychological level. I started treatment in early June, at Memorial Sloan-Kettering Cancer Center in New York City, which is not even remotely close to home. My oncologist, Dr. G, told me before I started treatment that I should be aware of the fact that the treatment might not work and I could die. I think he has to say that for legal reasons. Right before I started treatment, I learned how long and complicated this process was going to be. A lot of chemotherapies last six or more months, but mine was scheduled to only last a little over three months due to the fact that my cancer was very aggressive, which could only be combated with an aggressive form of chemotherapy. That basically meant that every cycle of chemotherapy would be separated by two weeks (three is the standard), giving my body less time to recuperate between cycles. It also meant that I would need to take about ten pills a day in order to help my body achieve some sort of equilibrium (and that's excluding the six or seven pills I had to take before each cycle). Nevertheless, I was ready to get rid of that cancer that had formed in my body for inexplicable reasons, so I went into the hospital for my first session of chemo, and endured six long hours of different chemicals searing into my veins through an IV which made me feel over-saturated. One of Dr. G’s co-workers got cancer after dealing with cancer patients for seventeen years and she said that it's impossible to explain how chemotherapy feels because it is unlike any other feeling in the world. Besides, every person’s cancer is different, and every person’s body reacts to chemotherapy in a different manner. I’ve never been able to successfully describe how chemo feels but it's something along these lines: imagine stuffing yourself to the point where, not only your stomach, but your entire body cannot handle any more liquid or food
or anything. Then imagine poisoning your entire bloodstream with toxic chemicals: your body does not function normally because every organ in your body is dependent on your blood and all of it is corrupted, weakened, invaded, violated. Then add extreme exhaustion, nausea, headaches, stomachaches, and an undying sense of helplessness.

As I danced with the dead
My free spirit was laughing and howling down at me
Below my undead body
Just danced the circle of dead

Until the time came to reunite us both
My spirit came back down to me
I didn’t know if I was alive or dead
As the others all joined in with me

-From Iron Maiden’s “Dance of Death,” written by Steve Harris.

A three-month cycle of chemotherapy takes quite a toll on your body. In fact, before my last cycle of chemo, in early September of that year, there were serious concerns about my body’s health and whether or not it could endure another cycle without waiting a few more days. A little over halfway through my treatment, I got a CAT and a PET scan, and my cancer was in full remission, but my doctor said that it is very unorthodox to finish treatment halfway through since there were still probably traces of the disease inside of me. I was so weakened right before my last cycle that some doctors and my mother were questioning whether or not we should wait until my body recovered a little bit. My doctor and I were both unwilling to take this chance because waiting a few days might give the cancer a chance to resurface and we were all about overkill. My body was so abused by the treatment that my hemoglobin levels (hemoglobin are responsible for pumping oxygen into your blood) were at 52,000 and a healthy level is between 160,000 and 400,000; they don’t even consider giving treatment to someone whose hemoglobin levels are under 50 thousand because it lowers the person’s immune system and deprives their body of oxygen too much. Even though for the first half of treatment I could come in for six hours and then leave, the second half was in-patient treatment so I had to stay there for three days (Wednesday through Friday), and it was a lot rougher for me. During the last cycle, I felt like I was slowly withering away in that hospital bed. I had no energy to do anything except force myself to go to the bathroom often because of the high amount of liquid that was being poured into me from four different IVs: the chemo, with a saline solution
to water it down, and an anti-nausea medicine with the same solution to water it down. Nurses checked in on me every couple of hours but that was not what kept me from sleeping; it was the fact that I felt like absolute shit and couldn’t fall asleep despite how weak I was. The dark and fluorescent environment of the hospital, mixed with my disturbed and hazy state of mind, played some pretty twisted mind games on me, and I saw random shapes and objects that weren’t there. Along with these hallucinations, there was the fact that my body kept feeling like it was steadily disconnecting itself from my mind, or maybe the other way around. I needed a cure for my cure, or else I would surely perish there.

_During chemo, you’re more tired than you’ve ever been. It’s like a cloud passing over the sun, and suddenly you’re out. But you also find that you’re stronger than you’ve ever been. You’re clear. Your mortality is at optimal distance, not up so close that it obscures everything else, but close enough to give you depth perception. Previously, it has taken you weeks, months, or years to discover the meaning of an experience. Now it’s instantaneous._

-Melissa Bank

There I was, once again, gasping for air. The first time, my direct source of oxygen was cut off. The second time, my blood had been deprived of its ability to breathe, to co-exist with life; it only knew death. As I lay there, awaiting a third lease on life, the on-call doctor ordered the nurse to get some blood for me stat. This was no easy task considering the fact that my blood type is O negative, and that means that I can only receive blood from a donor with the same type (which is not necessarily the case for every single blood type), but they found enough for me. They tested a pint of blood for possible diseases and it was healthy and ready to go at 4 AM. The blood transfusion took about an hour, and it was the most revitalizing feeling in the world. I felt like I just had a Red Bull with steroids, nutrients, and cocaine. Twenty-four hours later, I got another blood transfusion, and I felt amazing. The truth is I was actually still extremely weak and fragile (my hemoglobin was at 53,000 after both of those), but I truly received a breath of life thanks to whoever donated that blood. The next day, I left the hospital feeling like a little boy who had just destroyed a beast from a Norse epic. I was alive again, and three weeks later I had CAT/PET scans and found out that I was completely cancer free. It has been just over a year since I stepped away from the Reaper once again, and that entire summer makes me see life in a different light.

_After my first checkup, my doctor very sarcastically asked me_
whether I had a newfound appreciation for life. At first I thought I didn’t, but whenever I see people complain or get really upset about the tiniest things, it angers me, but it also makes me realize how lucky I am. The fact that I’m still alive and healthy is great, but that’s not why I’m lucky—I have experienced death. Some say death is ugly, unforgiving, relentless, cruel, unjust. Although these things may be true, it is also wise, inspiring, revealing, and peaceful on a level most will never understand.
I wonder if she remembers
the long nights curled in her basement,
afraid of getting caught,
listening for the footsteps that made the old floorboards
squeal above our heads.
It wasn’t love,
though that’s what we called it for awhile.
It was the way her hair fell down
past her silk shoulders and how
the sweat dripped from her temple
over her soft, crimson cheeks
and down her neck.
I wonder if she remembers the way her heart would beat
faster and faster
and how I would rest my head on her chest
and listen to her breathe
deeper and deeper
as if each breath were her last.
We weren’t thinking of what was to come—
we glued the pedal to the floor
of the red Corvette and took our hands off the wheel.
We were young,
we will always be young.
We threw ourselves at each other like lonely dreamers
but only after she told me,
I think they’re asleep.
Like almost every night, I headed toward my father’s workshop in our basement, a realm my mother rarely entered. Against the solid, deep brown door, my eight-year-old hand offered a rather pathetic-sounding knock, like the sound raindrops make when they plop into a thick pile of mud. While the gesture of the knock was there, I never waited for my father’s response, knowing that he expected my appearance after my brothers and I had finished cleaning up the assortment of dinner dishes he left behind on the floor above. The door had never quite fit the frame it rests in, so I always had to use a considerable amount of my body weight – what little force my miniscule muscles and tiny frame of my own had to offer – to open the door, tumbling over the threshold like a police officer busting in on a crime scene. Like every other night, my nose was immediately met with the stench of stale cigarettes and the rising aroma of one freshly lit. The smoke that was drifting off the tips of the recently-deceased embers embraced my nostrils, replacing the fresh, clean air that had filled my lungs on the floor above.

I did not need to be able to see through the cloudy smoke to know every inch of the room that was before me. To the left was a disheveled shelf, splattered with paintbrushes, wash pans, and rollers that held up the spare electrical wires and sunspot-colored wire nuts that were at some point carefully placed on top. Under the shelf, a pile of useless tools avalanched toward the center of the floor, barricaded by only a large plastic black case that I assume contained a powerful drill; I never had the desire to check. Standing idly by was the bright red gumball machine, filled to the brim with a polka-dotted rainbow that always felt out of place in the man’s man atmosphere of my father’s domain. To the right, the workbench stood strong, made of common wood and level two-by-fours, with a thick and muddled slab of some unidentifiable wood on top. Halfway down the bench, part of the cracked and splintering surface was gouged away to reveal the softest and silkiest wood I had ever felt, smoother than the piano keys on a polished Steinway. The wood also glowed a dimly bright yellow from the highlighter I used to color the spot where I had scratched the hard surface away. My seat, with a wicker top and torn cushion matching the burnt sienna crayon in my Crayola collection, sat vacant in front of my impromptu art project and next to the identical, though less wobbly, chair.
that was my father’s throne.

As my father effortlessly shuffled the blue Royal card deck, I klutzily climbed onto my seat: the squeaky old barstool. As I settled in, so did the cards. Four piles of six were positioned face down in a cockeyed square that took up the surface of the workbench, resting between the edge where my father and I sat and his hand-painted miniature mystical figurines against the wall. I remember being captivated by those tiny men when I was even younger, amazed the day my father gave me a woman warrior of my own to paint, allowing me to slash her outfit with blues and purples as she prepared to slay the dragon my father crafted. The magical creatures watched intently as I picked up my hand and my father his, and the game of high-low-jack began.

With only two physical players, a bystander would gaze curiously at the other two piles left untouched, with the faces of their cards still staring into the shadowy abyss that would be their view of the workbench. High-low-jack is a game of strategy and luck, and having a blind partner adds greatly to the luck element. Since my dad was the dealer, I had to call the first bet, and I hesitantly went with Diamonds for two. My father quickly countered with Spades for three, and with no spades in my hand, I was compelled to make the highest bet possible, four with Diamonds as trump. While my father had the upper hand of wisdom and years of card playing experience on his side, I seemed to always have the better partner on my side. I liked to believe it was because I named my partner while my father left his as unidentified as a backcountry road in the middle of Massachusetts. The score was currently 10-8 in his favor, leaving him with one point to win and me needing all four points available in this round. To my nonstrategic surprise and my father’s dismay, with the final game point on the line, my partner flipped the Queen of Spades, followed by my father’s partner throwing a four of Clubs. I collected the ten and, with it, the fourth and final point of the round, leaving the notepad in front of me with more bars than a jail cell, ten on my father’s side and the victorious twelve on mine.

Each night, my father and I would play three or four games of high-low-jack, most of them ending the same as that round. Hours every night, I would be down in that basement with him, my partner and I kicking his butt, while he lit up another cigarette to calm his easily wavering nerves. Truth be told, my father is as good at losing as Mike Tyson is at not eating his opponent’s ears. Depending on the season, one sports game or another would be on in the background, and touchdowns and homeruns would cause a pause in the game and a surge of celebrations, while interceptions and errors would lead to another flick of the lighter and sparkle of flames in the tip of those Marlboro Reds. Every night he had multiple excuses to
take another drag from the cigarette that dangled from his lips, and every night he lit up; I never once worried about the side effects laying their eggs for the future. Health class said smoking was bad, but nothing ever felt wrong about the time I spent with my dad in the basement. It was our playground and where our father-daughter bond really sprouted, out of the ashes and flames, into something pure and beautiful.

Unfortunately, my health teacher was not all wrong with the pamphlets she handed out to me in my third grade class. Two months ago, I was at Buffalo Wild Wings in Malvern, Pennsylvania, with my friend Matt. It was just about 8:30 p.m. when The Office theme song sang from my pocket, lighting up my jeans like E.T.’s finger through a blanket fort. Parent’s Cell glowed across the screen and as soon as I answered, my father’s voice came apprehensively across the sound waves. “Are you sitting down?” I immediately froze, feeling nothing but the beating of my own heart, pounding against the thoughts afraid to race across my mind. For a moment, I was lost in my simple response of “yes.” I know my father, and I know it is not a good sign if that is how he chooses to start a conversation. In the silence, I could hear him trying to find the words to tell me what my thoughts couldn’t quite put together. I knew something had to be wrong, but I couldn’t imagine what. All three of my living grandparents have been fine. My older brother’s lungs collapsed five years ago, but there haven’t been any relapses since, and my younger brother’s Crohn’s disease hasn’t been a great life-altering issue since he was diagnosed two years ago. My father had a heart attack a few months back, but if that were the issue, it would be my mother’s voice on the other side of this conversation, not his.

When my dad’s voice came back over the phone, he told me that my mom was in an ambulance being rushed to the hospital while he trailed behind in his charcoal, manual Mitsubishi. Unknown to me, my mother had had a bad cough for about a month, and on that night, it turned into a searing red cough, with blood spewing from her mouth. No one was home with my mom when this was happening, and she hasn’t gone into detail about that day yet, so I still don’t know exactly how much blood came gushing up with her hacking cough. At about two a.m. that night, my father called me from the hospital with what little information he had: my mom was resting comfortably and the blood had been at least temporarily stopped. With what little he knew, he still managed to keep some facts from me, not telling me until a week later that she was in the ICU and had been admitted in critical condition. That night, I was already concerned for my mother’s life, and even now, I can only imagine how much more terrified I would have been if my father had trusted me to handle the truth.

For days, my father sat by her in the hospital, like a dog loyally guarding his post, playing liaison between the doctors and friends and
family members. When he would find time to call, his voice would sound lost in the distance as he muttered one wrong diagnosis or another, never remembering the twelve-letter scientific words that kept sailing into one ear and floating out the other on the hot air coming from the mouths cloaked in white jackets. I would get one story from him and another from my mom's friend, who he had just called minutes before me. Every time I would ask a question, hope for some clarification, frustration would cut across the phone lines. He didn’t have the answers, he wasn't sure of the situation, he could only guess at the severity, and I felt guilty for making him recognize this. I was always the one he could talk to about anything, and now we failed at any attempt at a real conversation. While we both relied on each other for friendship and understanding, I never realized how much we both relied on my mother for support and stability. While he never admitted it, I could hear the fear and uncertainty in his voice, and I could feel the fear and uncertainty growing in me with the absence of my mother's voice.

A biopsy is when surgeons stick microscopic tools down my mother’s throat to remove cells from the unidentified floating object in my mother’s right lung. They saw it on an X-ray and looked closer during a CAT scan. According to my mother, the first two sounds that buzz in your ear are almost indifferent, barely intruding on the Beatles album playing through her MP3 player. The third sound during the final scan, however, is worse than sitting inside the siren on the fire truck, or holding the fire alarm they are responding to next to your ear. When the biopsy came back after the CAT scan, the results were inconclusive, and my father and I were left in the dark for another three days until they could schedule another biopsy.

Sometimes people are just unlucky, which was the new diagnosis after the second biopsy. As of 2004, lung cancer caused the most cancer-related deaths worldwide, 1.3 million. Out of those diagnosed with lung cancer, 85% of the patients developed cancer from years of smoking. Of the remaining 15%, a good portion is still caused from secondhand smoke. There is a rare genetic malfunction in some peoples’ immune system, almost like an allergy, when mold or fungus cannot be properly handled and broken down by the lungs when it has been inhaled. This is so uncommon that it hasn’t even been named yet, and the results suggested my mom had such a condition. Three out of the four new samples also came back inconclusive, but there was mold residue in the final sample. There was a slight relief in my father’s voice when he explained this diagnosis to me. The solution was simple, a quick operation to remove the lump, and no more composting and gardening for my mother. After two days, however, my mom was one of the few people who are even more rarely unlucky.
Out of all forms of lung cancer, a carcinoid makes up 0.8% of the diagnoses, and that is what my mother had, a neuroendocrine neoplasm carcinoid that appeared to be four centimeters large in the middle lobe of her right lung. By this point, the artery that flowed into my mother’s lung was cauterized to prevent any further bloody coughing episodes. The leak of the artery still hasn’t been explained, but the doctors, in their vast wisdom, have guessed that the mass simply irritated the interior of her lung, which tore part of the artery. With the lump identified and an attempt at explaining the bleeding, my family and I were just left wondering what a neuroendocrine neoplasm carcinoid was and where that came from. If you break down the three-word mouthful, neuroendocrine cells receive messages from nerves and release hormones into the bloodstream. Neoplasm is a fancy word for tumor, and carcinoid is a redundant word that means a tumor made from neuroendocrine cells and provides a little bit of hope that the tumor is benign, since carcinoma tumors are the ones usually carrying the evil malignant nametag. The odds of my mother developing this rare form of lung cancer, the gathering of her neuroendocrine cells that is in no way related to exposure to cigarette smoke, are so minuscule I don’t think I could make up a number to give you. It’s the odds of you walking into a restaurant in China and finding your long lost twin brother at one table, and the puppy that ran away when you were three sitting at the table across from him. Add to that the probability of my mother getting lung cancer over me and my father: the two who sat surrounded by a Marlboro smokestack every night for almost 15 years.

I could hear the guilt in my father’s voice when the tumor was confirmed, and it was paralleled by the amazement and astonishment in my hesitant questions that received wavering answers. My mother was finally diagnosed on August 6, 2011, with the neuroendocrine neoplasm carcinoid, and I went back to Massachusetts on August 8 to prepare for her surgery, which we thought would be on my brother’s birthday, August 12. The odds of me being in the hospital for most of my week home was already pretty good with my mother going in for a consultation on the tenth, but to my surprise, I went to the hospital before I even got home since my dad was admitted the Saturday before because of a second heart attack scare. Like with my mother’s condition when first admitted to the hospital, my father’s current residence in the hospital was also kept from me. His smoking didn’t cause my mom’s lung cancer, but by mixing that pasttime with drinking and sports rage, he suffered from a heart attack in May 2011. The stress of my mother’s condition led to what he believed was another attack. My family finally caught a lucky break; it was just a case of an open esophagus flap that led to an extreme case of acid reflux and heartburn. After everything going on with my mom, I wasn’t sure I could
handle my father being in the hospital as well. I already worked as hard as I could to be the glue that held my crippling family together, but one more wrong thing would probably have broken me past the point of repair. With so much already going on, getting the simple and easy diagnosis for my father was the smallest blessing we could have hoped for.

We got my dad out of the hospital in time for my mother's consultation, which gave us the news that her surgery was pushed back five days, meaning I wouldn't be at home to help out anymore. I left three days before the surgery; my father was restored enough to be my mother's crutch, as the fear was apparent more in her eyes than her voice, which was already weak from the tubes that had previously invaded her. As I packed up the car and drove away, I thought about the past week I had spent with my family, watching my mother through the rearview mirror waving with what little strength she had. All week she pretended to be strong, never acting like something was mutating and growing inside her, invading her body. It was as if I was home for a normal visit, with nothing wrong. The closest she ever came to a visible crumbling was the night my brother told her he was going to hang out with his friends instead of spending what could be our last night together as a family. It was only then that I saw how much she needed all of us to support her, just as much as my father and I unknowingly needed her to support us. It was only then that I knew she was afraid this invasive surgery could end her life. To remove the tumor, the doctors were planning on cracking open her chest and dissecting part of her lung. With her mother being a retired physical therapist, she knew how medical mistakes could cause permanent damage and end a life. In my family, we don't talk about emotions; we don't show fear. It is all considered weak. That one moment with my brother was the only glimpse my mother showed of breaking this cardinal law, the only moment in this entire experience that she showed me how terrifying this was for her, and for all of us.

The right lung is bigger than the left lung because of the position of the human heart. The right lung consists of an upper, middle, and lower lobe, while the left lung only has an upper and lower lobe. My mother's tumor was on the middle lobe, but the doctors were optimistic that they could maneuver around and remove the tumor with minimal removal of her actual lung. Surgery day came and went while I sat in my Gettysburg dorm room waiting for the call. It turned out the mass was much bigger than the surgeons anticipated, invading the entire middle lobe, as well as portions of the upper and lower lobe. It turned out they had to remove her entire right lung to ensure they got all parts of the tumor removed.

My father smoked cigarettes for almost three-quarters of his life, and in my efforts to spend as much time as possible with him, I second-
hand smoked for almost ninety percent of my life, and today, because of the luck of human genetics and the twisted fate of nature, my mom is walking around with one lung while my father and I can live fully-functional lives. We can both walk up and down stairs without exasperated breath, we can lift heavy objects without feeling faint, and neither of us had to drive down to North Carolina for two weeks to live with my grandmother, who was a medical assistant and physical therapist before she had grandchildren. According to the medical world, there isn’t even an answer for the tempting question: what are the odds?
Addiction for Dummies

Tony McComiskey

Hi, my name is Tony, and I’m an alcoholic. If you have seen me stumbling around campus on the weekends, you may find this statement easy to swallow, but I am not the Tony that I’m referring to. My father, also named Tony, is whom this sentence is referencing to. My father is a 53 year old retired NYPD officer who has enjoyed drinking since his teenage years. Since I’ve been around, I’ve always seen him enjoy two or three casual beers in an evening, but nothing too fratty. So what changed? This long, sad story begins on the most romantically charged day of the year: February 14th, 2010—Valentine’s Day.

I’m running through the woods at full speed, seconds away from solving an ancient mystery thousands of years old, but, as I’m racing towards the final clue, I see an obstacle: it’s fucking Batman. Batman, why are you placing detonators on the final clue? Wait, are those zombies behind you? Before he could answer, I was forcefully jerked out of dream world and plopped into a reality that would never be the same again. Actually, writing this all down makes me kind of happy that the final piece of reality as I knew it was Batman attempting to blow up zombies.

Anyway...

I was suddenly shaken from sleep by the sound of my father repeatedly screaming one word:

“NOOOOOOO! …NOOOO0000OOO!!!”

Have you ever seen “Shutter Island?” There’s this scene where Leonardo DiCaprio finds his children dead in a lake and he lets out this agonizing scream of “no” that was literally identical to the way my dad did it. Everyone in the theaters started crying, but I was tearing up for a different reason.

Again, I digress. Did I mention I have ADD?

Anyway...

My heart was on an instant adrenaline kick that got me to my parents’ bedside faster than a little girl who thinks there is a monster under her bed. As I entered the room, half expecting to see my mother dead, I quickly discovered that it was not her, but my Aunt Annie who had passed away. My father was sitting upright in bed next to my mother. His blue eyes were glazed with moisture as he listened to the EMT’s report over the phone. My Aunt Annie is my father’s older sister and my godmother. She lived a tremendously difficult life due to the early and unexpected death of
my Uncle Tommy, who had passed away 18 years earlier. Before my uncle’s untimely death, they had three children together: Tim, Katie, and Patrick. Although I’d like to divulge the secrets of their unfortunate tale, this story is going to be about me for a change.

*****

“Ay buddy, you’re from New York, so you may understand my subtlety. If you’re making a lot of money, and you’re not doing anything on the books, and you aren’t selling drugs, what are you doing?”

I was seriously confused at this point. And honestly, I didn’t want to shoot the shit with this creepy cab driver.

“Err, the mob?” I unenthusiastically blurted out.

“BINGO!” said the driver.

Okay, my comfort level was seriously diminishing here. A few minutes of silence calmed me down, but as we whizzed by the Gettysburg exit, my heart began to race again. Where the fuck is this mob boss taking me? Before I had the chance to inquire, he asked if it was cool that we make a detour to pick up a certain lady friend. Okay, so the dude is trying to get laid. I can appreciate that. Plus I really have no say in the matter, so I might as well play along.

We pulled up to a complex, and a woman emerged from the shadows wearing a tight black top with matching booty shorts. Okay, so this “lady friend” of his is a hooker. Well that’s just great. As she opened the door, a rush of cool October wind slapped me in the face. She plopped down next to me in the back seat and instantly started talking my ear off. The driver warned me that she likes to talk, but she seriously wouldn’t shut the fuck up. Then started the touching and uncomfortably honest remarks.

“You know, you seem really different from most guys my age. I really like your personality, and your eyes are sooo blue. Let me see your phone, I want to give you my number.”

One hand reached for my phone and the other for my thigh.

“Maybe I could come by sometime now that I know where you live. I bet we could have a real good time in that tiny room of yours.”

Fuck, I don’t need this right now. If only they knew what had happened only twenty-four hours ago. I politely nodded sporadically at the hooker as my mind drifted back to the memory of the night before…

“Tony, you’re now the man of this family.”

That right there is a direct quote from my father. If you’re wondering why my father, the clear head of my family, would be transitioning the power over to an eighteen-year-old, then you are in the same boat that I was when he said it to me. As he ascended the stairs, a horrifying thought ran through my head faster than a speeding bullet, but I refused to believe such an unthinkable thought. He repeated those words three more times as
he crept into his dark room. When he emerged from the darkness, he was holding one hand behind his back, and at that moment, my unthinkable thought became reality.

There it was: my dad had his gun.

Without even thinking, I instantly reacted. After over two months in college, I had had my fair share of blackouts, but this one was different. It wasn’t a jovial experience filled with reckless fun that my friends and I would never remember. Nope. This was a dark, cold emptiness that filled my entire being.

I can remember it in flashes. First came the struggle: in my attempt to wrestle him to the ground, he had managed to slam my right shoulder up against the wall in his drunken stupor. Next comes the screaming: I found myself on top of my father holding both of his hands down yelling in his face. Next to me were my furious mother and my hysterical older sister. My sister was crying uncontrollably in her doorway while my mother was kicking my downed father in a blind fury.

How could you leave the three of us behind, Dad? What about your friends and your grieving mother? And you’re suicidal because your sister passed away?

Really?!

Do we mean nothing to you then? I know it’s absolutely devastating, but she wouldn’t want this for you, she wouldn’t want this for us. You’re justifying your immature actions based upon the death of your sister, and I know for a fact she’d kick your ass if she knew what has become of you; this is a complete fuck you to her memory. Never in my life had I witnessed a more selfish act.

The strong foundation of our family had been shaking for a while due to my father’s decisions, but the floor finally crumbled beneath all of us in that moment. We were free falling, and there was no parachute in sight.

“Go fuck yourself; I don’t want to talk to you.” The line goes dead. Those were the last words I said to my father, and now he’s on his death bed. This is a joke, right? This is straight up out of a movie.

It was pouring out, but that wasn’t going to stop me from going to Servo’s turkey dinner, even if the line was practically past the health center. As I was gearing up to brave the rain, I got a call from my mom. “It’s your father, Tony… Something has happened. You’re going to want to head over to the hospital. The school is sending a shuttle to your dorm now.”

“If I lay here, if I just lay here, would you lie with me and just forget the world.”
These words from that lame Snow Patrol song were playing in my ears as I walked away from the hospital that rainy, dark Thursday morning when I was told that there was a 90% chance that my father would be brain dead within twenty-four hours. How did it get to this point? Why didn't I do anything to stop this? What the fuck is wrong with me?! I saw all the signs and did NOTHING.

My face was splattered with a combination of never-ending tears and a slow drizzle. I played this song on repeat as some fucked-up form of subjective torture; it was my punishment for doing nothing to halt this entire catastrophe. This wasn’t an arbitrary song either. This song meant something to my father. Whenever it came on, he would always tear up by the end, and say the same line every time: “If this song was around when my father died, I would play it on repeat.”

So that’s just what I did. I played it on repeat until my ears begged me to stop and my eyes no longer produced tears, a phenomenon that I had never experienced before that day.

I slowly entered the room where my father was barely clinging to life. He was hooked up to at least ten different tubes, including one that was filled with his feces. That’s something no human should ever have to witness: your father shitting into a tube. The alpha male of my family and my male role model was nothing more than a shell of a man at this point. He was a shade of deep yellow due to the rising ammonia levels in his body that his failing liver could no longer process, and he was uncontrollably shaking and sweating due to his triple threat withdrawals from Vicodin, alcohol, and nicotine.

God, what the fuck is wrong with this guy? The day that he was being transported to rehab, he popped around twelve to fifteen Vicodin at once, a.k.a. suicide attempt number two. Miraculously, he defied all medical expectations and survived. Looking back, it may have been easier on all of us if he had just died that day. It’s horrible to think, and even worse to type, but I can’t help thinking it. What’s even worse is that I think my mother feels the same exact way.

Mid- March and I’m home for the weekend. You know what that means-- my dad’s going to do something stupid. Hoorah! I just don’t know what I’d do with my life if I wasn’t worried about what he’s doing with his. We really hit a new record with this visit, though; I had been home for under an hour when I was told that my father was found nursing a water bottle of vodka the night before.

Perfect.

I had just started to get comfortable with him again, but there goes that. That’s it-- if he doesn’t go to rehab, then I’m done with him. I figured
calmly approaching him about this was the best move, so I made my way
to the kitchen where he was sitting.

“Dad, this has to stop. Do you have any idea what you have been
putting this family through for the past year? You have no option here,
you're going to rehab.”

He was quiet for a moment. After twenty seconds of silence with his
head down, he stared me in the eye and said almost angrily,

“No. No I will not. I will do this my own way. I will fight my own
battles.”

“You’ve got to be kidding me, Dad. How can you even argue at this
point?! Do you realize that we all feel the affliction of this battle that you’re
clearly losing?”

Twenty more seconds of silence passed.

“Dad, I’m not doing this with you. I will leave you with this: if you
do not go to rehab, you will be declaring war with this family.”

As I turned my back and exited the kitchen, I heard him mutter
under his breath, “I will not go to rehab.”

*****

So it’s been six months. Wow, he was actually right. He said he'd be
able to beat it on his own, and despite my disbelief, he really did it. Finally,
after almost two years, my relationship with my father was finally back to
normal. It was August 4th, the day after my birthday, and we were head-
ing to Brooklyn to celebrate. My father and I were in the car a minute away
from my Aunt Millie’s house when something oh too familiar occurred.

“Dad, what did you just put in your mouth?”

There they were-- the panic eyes. His face began to drain in color as
my heart sunk into my stomach. Fuck. I fell for this fucked-up game once
again.

Again, I repeated the question, “Dad, what the fuck is in your
mouth?!”

“Nut-ting” he muttered, clearly unable to speak because of the pills
he had blatantly popped.

“Do you think I'm a fucking idiot? Spit them out,” I demanded.

“It's just asp-in,” he slurred.

“If it's just aspirin, then why won't you spit it out for me?”

We had pulled over outside my aunt’s house at this point. There was
a tap at the back door. I quickly swung my head around to motion that we
needed a minute, and my dad took full advantage of the distraction. As I
turned my head, his hand lunged for the water bottle next to me. With the
bottle now in hand, he turned his head away from me and tried to swallow
the pills. He always seems to underestimate me, which has been his larg-
est flaw in all of this. Why would you pop them in front of me? Before the
water could touch his lips, I grabbed his face and squeezed it tight. Ta-da! There they were.

Underneath his tongue were two large oval pills, exactly what Vico-din looks like. I released his face from my grip and he began chewing like a mad dog as I turned away in disgust. Before exiting the car, I took one last look at him. His lips were covered in a thin white coating, his eyes were wild, and he wasn't my father.
Christmas Parade

Liz Williams

My dad takes me to the parade again,
to the same patch of snowy grass
where we’ve stood for decades now,
our feet the living, moving extremities
of roots beneath the ground.

In front of us, a tiny body floats
atop his father’s shoulders
and screams in primitive delight
as blaring red lights slice the nickeled sky.

He lifts a miniature fist to the air
and calls out “firetruck!”
the chaotic bliss of seeing his dreams
embodied, alive, in motion,
tickling his tender soul.

Swollen cheeks peek from fur-trimmed hoods,
and I cannot help but wonder—
how did I get used to this?
How did I ever get used to life?
I am thinking about how my blood is O positive, how clear some humors look puddled on my skin, how many new alabaster scars I’ll have on my arms by tonight. I am thinking about these things on a Thursday and wondering just how many more puckered mouths can rise on my arms, how much more flaking skin I can peel off my arms before I become more reminiscent of a sycamore tree than of a girl.

Sometimes the blotches are big.

The ric-rac currents of spots on my arms, from my elbows to my shoulders, are my penance, my humility, and my shame. They are my brands, like seals on my dented skin, forever marking my doubt and hatred of myself. They are my passive remarks on my worth. They are choppy dissertations on my paranoia.

I am thinking about the blood drive coming next Wednesday and how I’ll have to roll up my sleeves or take off a jacket and unveil these unhappy, scabby arms to some young girl, fresh out of nursing school maybe, with her hair pulled back and closely fitting plastic gloves and I can see the wince forming at her face—the epicenters her slightly agape mouth and widened brown eyes. She’ll pretend she doesn’t see those little hunchback scars and she’ll look down and away. She will have to touch my marks, my splotches, my skin. But I have seen that nurse’s face before—in my friends, people in the frozen food section, and the mirror face of my mother.

These convex-concave spots are worries, and they are what I will be thinking about tomorrow and the next day and my wedding day.

* * *

My mother saw them all the time—maybe even more so than me. I could never help but notice her disgust, or concern, or annoyance.

“Baby, that looks like it hurts—why don’t you stop honey. Please stop. You’re such a pretty girl. It’s just—it looks so sore.”

She wanted me to be pretty.

She wanted me to be pretty so much.

She wanted to dress me up in black and green and red and gold plaid Christmas dresses and go to those fancy tea parties with the sugar cubes and teach me how to smudge on eyeliner and straighten my hair and
show me that when painting nails you always go bottom to tip and never
start half-way up—that’s what her grandmother Dot taught her. I met my
great grandmother Dot in the picture on our dining room buffet service.
She wore a blue jacket. Powder blue.

My mother was not calling me pretty now.
She’d seen the marks—like rain drops on the windshield, like litter on the
turnpike—scattered and messy.
I knew what she was saying.

She was telling me that I was ugly.
She was telling me that I had ruined myself; some kind of temple, some
kind of prettiness was gone. She didn’t want to take me to any more sugar
cube tea parties.

She tried to reach across the table and touch me, but I just slid
away, recoiling as if touched by something hot, like a slug when you pour
salt on it.

We used to live by a marsh. My younger brother and I would tor-
ture those slugs—those nasty orange pus-sacks that lay swollen under step-
ping stones. “When it rains, it pours, buddies!” They’d shrivel and ooze and
sometimes you could hear them hiss— their skin crackling and liquefying
as my brother and I clinked salt shakers.

Was I the slug now?
More or less. She was disappointed.
She didn’t want her pretty daughter to have big welt scars. Irides-
cent spots and discolored skin weren’t what she was hoping for her first
born daughter. Her daughter named for purity.

But I couldn’t stop them.

I tried to compensate. I avoided t-shirts. I wrapped myself in two
towels after showers—one for me and one for my arms. I would shift and
cover these arms any time I caught my mom looking. I took to wearing
sweatshirts all the time. You see, Mom, it’s okay if I’m not pretty.

Then I got my hair cut short. I started wearing skirts every day. I
fostered a shoe infatuation. It got me some compliments and some bor-
rowed time to fix myself. You see mom, I can try—I can be pretty if you
want.

But I couldn’t stop me either.

I once had a friend; I wondered about her a lot. She was an elusive
person who had painted herself over so many times, trying to hide, never
realizing that the paint was actually eating away at those precious walls
she’d built around herself. Or maybe she did and that’s why she kept paint-
ing. She told me once that she had a condition—it was rare. More psycho-
logical than anything else, she’d said. When she was a kid, she pulled out all
her eyelashes, both of her eyebrows. She told me she couldn’t stop herself—
she'd see her eyelashes and eyebrows growing back in and she had to pull them out. Her face was completely smooth. Very pretty though, I thought.

But my arms…

My mother, she couldn’t forgive me for my Sanskrit arms, coarse like gravel with the scabs. She’d never plucked her eyelashes out—she didn’t know what it was like. She didn’t know that some things weren’t about choices. That if there were no choices, there were no answers. There weren’t any answers.

And believe me, I tried to find them.

I wore long sleeves to bed. I tried to do my homework when other people were around. It has been my New Year’s resolution four years running. I talked to myself, I talked to God, I talked to my mother as if she were on the other side of my bedroom mirror. But my arms…

When I was little, I wrote a poem that my mother thought was good. It was about stars. I remember it was short, scrawled out on a piece of notebook paper in my wiry hand. My a’s always looked like u’s. My teacher told me that “only liars don’t connect their a’s at the tops”, so the a’s in my poem were dark and deliberate, forced attempts this time. The stars, I said, were the dots and dashes of some heavenly Morse code, a language only God could read and understand. In the sky, He told us everything—all the truths we could ever want. But we just didn’t have the technology or the will power, or the purity or something to decipher His twinkling binary. We weren’t good enough. I wasn’t good enough. My mother thought the poem was good. She noticed the darkened a’s.

Sometimes, the blotches were big.

Big swollen mouths glistening on my arms, corrupting my skin, making me nervous. The ones on my shoulders didn’t hurt as much—the skin was tauter there. The ones on the undersides of my arms hurt a lot, though.

She didn’t have to say anything. At least not with words. My mother’s face was the mirror, and I was the terrible fish. Sanskrit arms—what a cheery euphemism!

Little stamps of Elephant man visages on my shoulders.
Ring around the rosie, a pocket full of posies…
Caked-on concealer, the ashes.
Inadequacy, what a thoughtful word.
But not enough to decipher Sanskrit, I’m afraid.

* * *

I am thinking about how my blood is O positive and about the blood drive coming next Wednesday. The lady will have on her white rub-
ber gloves. She will have on a blue uniform and have her hair pulled back. She will be pale and young, right out of nursing school maybe. She will say “Don’t be afraid; it doesn’t hurt that bad at all. Just a little prick.” And the truth is that the prick, the slow insertion of that needle into my arm will hardly hurt at all. It won’t hurt my tough, stiff, battle-torn skin enough to make me wince. I’ll feel the pricking needle—I’ll feel it moving into my vein, easily slicing through the thin walls ready to catch my blood, but I won’t think it hurts very much at all. I’ll even reach out and touch the clear plastic bag hanging from my arm, heavy with my salty, irony 98.6° blood.

It won’t even bother me when the pale, hair-pulled-back girl comes back and warns me to “close my eyes a little, some people don’t like to see the needle come out.”

But I will. I will watch it.

I will feel the release of the pressure from that metallic finger in my vein and I will smirk a little when it finally slides out. It won’t hurt me at all. I’ve been through it so many times before by my own penance-seeking hand. Pricks on my arms are just inaudible sounds.

But then she will have to touch me with her own fingers. I’m sorry I’m so ugly to touch, really I am. She will have to touch my arm with a little cloth and sponge—a little white cloth and a little blue sponge and she will touch my skin from behind her white gloves and my arms will hurt. They will hurt so much. I’ll want to pick open the scabs on my arms and I’ll silently ask to donate more and my arms will be throbbing with nerves and I’ll wince at her plastic touch—a touch that will so easily draw a wince from my face. Foreign fingers touching my leper skin, I can feel the bumps burning hot under her finger prints, the nerves billowing out of my pores.

My mother will say it is so sad, but I will ignore it.

She’ll tell me I am a masochist and I’ll say, no, I’m not.

I’m your daughter, your ugly daughter—I’m sorry for wincing at the eyeliner. She will reach out to touch me and I’ll recoil as if touched by something hot, slinking away as a slug gagging on salt. She’ll look at my arm and comment on my picked-at scabs, some of them infected, some of them morphing into gleaming white scars. To match my wedding dress, of course. She’ll see them; I’ll simply stand up and move away, thinking about the darkened a’s in that poem I wrote so long ago in a wiry hand that has since been forcibly changed and imprinted on my arm. It seems to be in some kind of Morse-coded, Sanskrit, malfunctioned binary kind of font—spotted as the eye of a lily, stripped as the skin of a sycamore.
I walked back into the living room and turned on the TV to see what they were hiding from me. There was that one thing my parents did not want me to see on every news channel. Why couldn't I have been satisfied with the Disney Channel, like usual? My face scrunched up but no tears dropped.

* * *

Ten a.m. meant that it was time for gym. It was my second day of fifth grade and my first gym class of the year. This was the one class where I did not have homework and where I could play games until the bell told me it was time to move on with my life. Tuesdays were special. On Tuesdays we went to Chelsea Piers for two hours instead of remaining at school for the usual twenty minutes. I raced downstairs to the locker room holding my aqua green music folder.  

Upon entering the gym, we were greeted by the Phys. Ed. teachers, always wearing their windbreaker pants and T-shirts sporting the names of their respective colleges. The entire class of ten- and eleven-year-olds sat on the end line of the basketball court as we had been taught to do since kindergarten. I placed myself directly under the basketball hoop, staring up at the worn-out net that was starting to fall off one of its hooks.

“Hello grade five!” Ms. Quirk said. Mr. Passos stood beside her with his hands in his pockets.

“Hello Ms. Quirk,” we replied in an exaggerated unison.

As you all know we usually go to Chelsea for our gym class,” she said as a few students cheered. I thought she was about to announce that we were going to the rock wall or the basketball courts.

“However, we have to cancel our trip today,” Mr. Passos continued. The cheering stopped, and a few smiles turned to frowns. “Instead we’ll stay here. There’ll be a game of knockout on the far hoop, a three-on-three game at this one, box ball on the side of the court, jump ropes and stilts in the corner, and we’ll open Room 111 if you want to take a break.”

Sam E. raised his hand to ask the question that everyone was thinking. “But why can’t we go?” he asked.

“Mr. Davidson has asked all the students to remain in the building today,” Ms. Quirk answered. Everyone was disappointed that we were not leaving the school, but even the principal must have had a reason. I figured
he forgot to reserve the school bus to get all forty-two of us across town to the field house.

All the students separated themselves according to which games they wanted to play while the adults brought the equipment out of the closet. Three rounds of knockout and one win later, I decided to change games and realized that some of my classmates were no longer in the gymnasium. Three more parents were standing in the doorway.

*Why are they leaving early?* I wondered, but that was a fleeting thought as I quickly ran to see what was happening in Room 111. Ms. Quirk had brought out a TV cart and was playing Shrek for all those students who cared to watch. I sat down beside the other girls and relaxed for the first time in forty-five minutes.

No sooner had I sat down than I saw my own parents walk through the main doors of the gym. They were searching through the cluster of athletic pre-teens when I ran up to them to say hello.

“What are you doing here?” It was rare for my father to come to my school, and my mother never picked me up before five in the afternoon.

“We have the rest of the day off work,” Daddy answered, “so we came to pick you up early.”

“But won’t my teachers be mad that I’m leaving before the rest of my classes are over?” I asked.

“Don’t worry about that. We talked to Mr. Davidson and he said you could leave,” Mama told me as I noticed that she did not have her New York tote bag with her. She took that bag to work every day, carrying all her papers that I could never understand.

“Come on Teeny, let’s go,” my father summoned as he grabbed my hand and started to walk away.

“Wait!” I yelled as I leaned back with all my weight, “I don’t have any of my homework; I need to go back upstairs and get it.

“No Amanda. It’s OK; we’re just going to go home today,” Mama consoled me. That’s strange I thought to myself.

“What about my music folder? It’s on the floor over there. Ms. Abrams will be mad if I lose my music,” I said.

“Alright,” my father said, “grab it quickly.” So I ran to the corner of the gym to pick up my aqua green folder, which remained right where I had left it. I returned to my parents and we left my school before even having lunch. We exited through the orange doors that led away from the gym and out onto the gray sidewalks of Fourth Avenue.

“Take my hand,” Daddy instructed as we came to the crosswalk at 14th Street.

“I don’t need to,” I replied, but he took hold of my empty hand before I even finished my statement.
It was still a beautiful day outside. Of course it was still a beautiful day. It was barely three hours since I’d last been outside walking in the opposite direction, going to school. The end-of-summer blue sky was broken only by a single cloud passing to the north. I had to squint because the sun was so bright. I must have taken my eyes off Mama because she was not next to me when Daddy and I reached the other side of the street, the corner in front of Walgreens drug store. I looked back, and as a crowd of what looked like hundreds of people separated, I saw my mother emerge.

“I never knew this many people went shopping on Tuesday mornings,” I said to my mother. I was always in class at this time, but I guess it would be silly of me to think the world stopped while I was stuck in school.

“Yes, I suppose they do,” Mama responded. She seemed like she was not even paying attention. She kept walking, looking straight ahead as she continued, right foot after left.

“What’s wrong?” I asked.

“Oh, nothing,” Mama said as she shook her head. “I just left my bag in the office.” She did not know that I had already noticed that. The city smelled funny. I guess that I had not noticed it before, but it smelled like the stove, right after Mama finished cooking meatloaf. Like when some of the meat burns onto the metal pan.

The shade cast from the fifteen-story-building began to clear as we approached the next intersection. The “walk” sign appeared in my direction so I looked to my right to make sure the cars were stopping, just as my parents taught me. Way downtown, at the very end of the avenue, the late summer day looked as dark as a winter night.

“What’s that?!?” I asked. My parents hurried me across the street. “Something really is wrong,” I thought. My question was not answered. We continued walking in silence. We finally reached First Avenue and turned left to walk the remaining four blocks to my family’s apartment. There were no cars except for those ones stopped at the parking meters. Mobs of people were walking in the street, perfectly divided between those walking uptown, and those walking downtown.

“Water! Get some water here! Take a seat and drink some water!” I heard from my left. I looked toward where I heard the announcement and saw two men passing out water bottles to any and all passers-by. Another woman was giving a water bottle to a crying girl who was sitting down on one of the folding chairs. Why was she crying? And why was it free? Nothing is free in New York. We kept walking. Five minutes more and the three members of my family were back home.

“Go play in your room, Amanda,” my mother told me. I was tired of asking questions and not getting answers so I did as I was told. The lilac purple walls of my room were comforting. They created my own little cave
of books, dolls, and board games. Mama soon brought me some lunch. It was my favorite: salami roll arms, carrots stick legs, cheese body, cucumber head, and cherry eyes, put together so that it looked like a lady.

Hours passed and I grew tired of playing alone in my room. I ran through the apartment to the kitchen where my parents had made their own hideout. As I walked in, they changed the TV channel. I could not tell what had been on before I entered the room, but after it was Oprah. My parents never watched Oprah. I grabbed a piece of American cheese from the refrigerator and walked out of the kitchen. Ten minutes later I went back to the kitchen to once again attempt to uncover my parents’ secret and again they changed the TV channel. I took one more piece of cheese and went into the living room. Usually I was not allowed to watch TV before I finished my homework, but I figured today was different. After all, I did not have any homework today. It felt safe to turn on the TV to see what my parents were hiding from me, since the wall that separated the two rooms kept them from seeing what I was up to.

I saw the planes crash. One right after the other, into the top of two very tall buildings. Buildings I knew. I changed the channel only to find that I was watching the same image again and again. I finally found a new image. This time, one of the silver twins, surrounded by a billowing cloud of black smoke emerging from a thin ring of red, orange, and yellow flames, fell. It looked like a house of cards falling down into itself. Simple. Fast. Another image, this one looked like a replay, but it was not. This time, the other of the silver giants fell to the ground in a mushroom cloud of black debris.

I did not understand. It was like first grade all over again when I could not tell the difference between d’s and b’s. “Mama!” I called. She walked into the living room and saw what I was watching. I turned to her. “Why didn’t you tell me?” I asked.
The crushed pine needles produce
a scent
That mingles with the perfume
of the girl in front of me.
It is fresh fresh like color

The air is crisp—
snap of a fresh apple.
My fingers share this story,
White-tipped and numb and

I think of you
Wish for the warmth of your hands.

The wet leaves and unsteady stones
make my steps careful,
my heart alert.
You are not here to catch me
in case I slip when I slip

The season is changing—
“Goodbye, summer!” cry
the birds, the insects.

Autumn, autumn
Muttered; like a song.

She slips on the path,
Slick are the decaying leaves.
The trees stand sentinel and
They watch her They watch me

What do they see?
A love-sick child;
(I am a child;
immense is their wisdom)
A young one who
misses the warmth of another.

The trees are unconcerned,
accustomed to the cycle
of beginnings and endings.

Pieces of leaves—
Earth
Stick to the back of her shoes
Travelling back to school.
A year ago to the day, I was in a real shitty wreck. I mean, ten car pile-up. I was going sixty-five at the most through the traffic on 91. Dumbass trucker, no blinker, clipped me. They said it wasn’t my fault,. Maybe it was, but in any case I got fucked. I lost my rear end immediately as it slipped out, spun across three lanes, flipped. At least I had my belt on. I guess that’s what saved me, the doctors were way too fuckin’ confusing to understand. Technical shit, whatever.

So I spent a long-ass time in the hospital, then the rehab, surgery, then rehab again. They said I split my legs in half on both sides, my back got twisted up, and I still get crazy headaches, and I can’t really see too well. They cut me open pretty good, ladies love the scars, especially the one running from my neck to my right temple. You can see it from a mile away, baddiddaaasss. Ugly as hell, but, like I said, the ladies love it.

That might have something to do with how I managed to snag the hottest girl at school when I got back. Jess Machi. Damn, damn, damn that shit’s hot. People are mad jealous. No shit, I get stared at when I walk with her in the hallway every day. It made me develop this little “pimp walk.” My best friend is always tryna copy it. He sucks at it though, always grabbin’ onto me when he tries, like he needs my help. Mark Joseph, real cool dude. Chill as hell, just wants to make sure my life’s easy all the time, like a real good friend. Kinda strange, they both moved here right as I came back to school, so I guess I was one of the first people they met, and there ya have it: I’m too fuckin cool haha. Na but really.

Aight, so to today. Today’s the day. The superintendent asked me to give this little pep speech I guess at the Homecoming Rally after school today. Said my story was “inspirational” or some shit like that. I acted surprised when he asked, but honestly I knew I was gonna get the job. I’m popular as hell, the former star athlete before the accident, and I’ve never been one too shy to talk. I’m even better about talking about myself, if you can’t tell.
This little speech I’m gonna give is gonna make everyone realize what it means to really bounce back. I had such a quick turnaround and recovery, I was in a whole lot of trouble for a while there but I got outta the mess, and look at me now.

Ch. 2.
My Special Son

A year ago to the day, my son, Trent Young, was traveling down I-91 just outside of Hartford, Connecticut, on his way home from a concert with his best friend and girlfriend at the Comcast Theater. They had not been drinking at all, as the toxicology and autopsies reported, and were not traveling at a high rate of speed either, according to the police report. As he attempted to make the Bloomfield Avenue Exit, he made contact with the front end of a mini-van, sending him spinning into the outside lanes of traffic. The car was struck, and flipped subsequently. The damage to the car was unimaginable, but the damage to my son and his friends was worse.

Ellen Paige, eighteen, my son’s girlfriend, passed away from extreme loss of blood. Eli James, seventeen, my son’s best friend, passed away from blunt force trauma to the head and spinal cord. My son, seventeen, sustained massive injuries to his spine and brain, as well as fracturing the tibia and fibula in both legs, puncturing his lung, dislocating his retina in both eyes, and breaking six ribs. He was found unconscious on the scene, and was taken to Hartford Hospital where he slipped into a two-week-long coma. When he awoke, the doctors warned me that the effects of the crash were far worse than physical scars. They said he might lose the ability to speak forever, experience extremely poor vision, and walk only with the assistance of a cane or a wheelchair and nurses. His massive brain injuries impaired his cognitive function. To this day, we don’t quite know what he is and isn’t capable of.

And that is what we struggle with the most. As his father, I want nothing more than to be able to help him, and, because of his injuries, we may never know if he is still in pain, if he can see anything clearly, if his life is too difficult at times, or if he even understands what the world is like any longer. We know he recognizes us, but we don’t know if he has the ability to recollect the accident or the time close before it. He has never mentioned or showed signs of remembering his friends who he killed in the accident. He has taken well to his nurses, and that’s something we’re grateful for.
I walked up there with my Will Smith swagger, with Mark holding onto me, and Jess right by my side. I found the podium, balanced myself, and looked out into the crowd. Couple hundred kids, nothing but blue and gold jerseys everywhere. I remembered what it was like to be sitting on those bleachers, praying to hear something that would fire me up enough to wanna kick Glastonbury’s ass… again and again and again.

This time, I was the one people were looking to. So I was confident, I knew what I had to do. I started slowly.

“My situation is rare. I am one of very few people who are able to say they failed miserably, and came back stronger and better than they were before, maybe not physically, but mentally. I see the world differently now. I know that there are bigger things that we must face than Glastonbury’s offensive fattass linemen, or their abnormally large center backs on the girls’ varsity soccer team. But no matter how big or small the task may seem, you have to go at it head first. You might come out with a scar like mine, but you know at the end of the day, you’ll be standing tall like I am today, confident that you can overcome any challenge handed to you, including kicking Glastonbury’s chubby little asses. Go Trojans.”

I nailed it, I know I did. Everyone stood up and cheered me. I walked off beaming ear to ear, man I was so pumped up. I knew if I could get myself that pumped up, the crowd musta been even more hyped. Shit, we killed Glastonbury, and I like to take a little credit for it.

He worked his way up to the stage, slowly and deliberately. Marcus Jessen, his male nurse, held his arms as he found the podium, with his female nurse, Jennifer Make, close behind. He found his balance, took a couple of deep, beleaguered breaths, and stared out into the crowd. As he looked down at the speech I had written for him in thirty-point font, so he could read it clearly, I could see a look in his eyes I hadn’t seen since before the accident.

“Meye dituasien nis rare. I em wonenoff bury dew peaple doar abbi dosay dey fayed mis-mis-misarebly…”

And the rest of the speech was something similar. Struggling on every word. He isn’t what he used to be–it breaks my heart. My son had such a promising future, and now a few words reduce him to a weak, broken, hurt soul and body.
I do not know if he will ever be the same, but I hope and pray every day that he isn’t suffering inside. I trust that whatever he sees or believes is real to him, that his life is still all ahead of him. He may not be able to understand or cope with what is going on around him, but I’d rather have him in his own place than in ours, where the scars are more than just visible to the eye. Wherever he is, whatever he sees, I hope he’s happy.
Lessons Learned from the World’s Oldest Dad

Rebecca Johnson

My father has always described himself as the “oldest dad in the world.” When I, his oldest child, graduated from high school, he was two months away from his sixtieth birthday. At an internship one summer, my boss told me about her father and how she couldn’t believe that he was approaching fifty.

“It’s unreal to me that my daddy’s going to be fifty next week and that he’s a grandfather. Time just moves so quickly,” she said.

I nodded in agreement, but realized that when my dad turned fifty, his daughter gave him not a grandchild, but a bright yellow tie with an eyeball, a heart, and the letter ‘u’ scrawled down the front of it – the perfect gift in the eyes of a third-grader.

To me, my father was always the tallest and strongest man alive. In reality, he is maybe five feet ten, but he seems so much taller than most men. He lifted huge weights in our basement, and he went running every other day. His hair had been a dirty blonde when I was very young, but after the birth and infancy of my younger brother, Eric, his hairline receded and what was left turned to a regal-looking gray. My father may be older than many dads, but you would never know it by looking at him; people regularly think of him as a decade or more younger than he actually is. More importantly though, he is smart, funny, hard-working, and the epitome of everything I wanted to someday be. A natural leader—he leads by example, and it always seemed as if nothing could affect him. I admired how he cherished the simple things in life, like daily cans of Pepsi (instead of coffee), and listening to music on our back deck at night.

My dad once told me that he wanted to live to be 125 because life is so wonderful, and that he always wants to be here to see what will happen next; there is so much beauty which makes life worth living. This outlook is apparent in his everyday life—he works out as hard today as when he was twenty-one. While my dad was on his quest to see the year 2075, his older brother, and best friend, was not so lucky.

Over Memorial Day weekend of 2005, I was sitting on the couch doing a crossword puzzle while my mom watched a crime show on televi-
sion. My mother is on the short side, not quite reaching five foot three, and she looks nearly the same as a forty-something mother of two as she did in her high school senior picture. She is louder than my father, and nearly thirteen years his junior. Like him, she holds a degree in business, but she gave up her place in the Mine Safety Appliances Company to raise Eric and me.

One day, my mother was cleaning up the dinner that she had prepared earlier. It was late on a Sunday, so it was unusual for the phone to ring. Not surprisingly, my father’s sister was not calling with good news. We almost never heard from her unless something was wrong. My mom and I could hear only my father’s muffled end of the brief conversation. When it was over, he stormed into the room.

“Herby’s filled with cancer.”

He looked at us for a second, then abruptly left the room and went out onto the back deck. I had never received news like that before, and my mother had never seen my father react like that before. Though no words were said between us, we knew that this wasn’t going to have a happy outcome. My dad is rarely angry, and it is even rarer that he says anything that isn’t a calm, well-thought out statement or a silly joke. We could practically feel his sharp declaration hanging in the air, creating a tension in the room that was nearly breathtaking. My parents had been married for sixteen years and had been together even longer, but my mom looked as if she had no idea how to handle this situation. She eventually went back to watching her show, though I don’t think she was really paying attention. I left the TV guide with the crossword puzzle open in my lap even though I had no intention of finishing it. It was only a few minutes after nine, but we both soon went to bed. Later, while I lay in my room and considered the shocking news, I could hear my father outside playing music late into the night.

My dad and his older brother Herby were total opposites, but the best of friends. My uncle, four years my father’s senior, had been a Marine who voluntarily served in Vietnam and spent the rest of his life driving trucks and drinking whiskey. My father was the first in his family to go to college, earning a degree in Business Administration from the University of Akron. He narrowly avoided the draft and spent his life working his way up at Mine Safety Appliances.

By July of 2005, my uncle had deteriorated from a lean former Marine into the shell of a grown man. Before the cancer, he had been approximately my father’s height with dark hair and, like my father, a mustache. He was very skinny compared to my dad’s methodically built muscle. He rarely laughed but instead had a trademark smirk that was unique to him. He had two children—the cousins which sandwich me in the family line-up. David was seventeen and Mike was nine when their father fell ill.
His cancer had been caused by Agent Orange, sprayed in Vietnam to defoliate the jungle, and had been growing in him for decades. The oncologists couldn’t say where it started, but the fatal doctor’s visit was prompted by severe back pain. By the time doctors discovered the cancer, it had spread through his whole body. Nearly all of his vital organs were affected, and it caused his teeth to fall out. Even though he was on the strongest pain medications available, he would cry out in his delirium anytime he was moved or touched.

He was my favorite uncle, though I only saw him a few times a year. I was twelve when he was sick and I was never allowed to go and visit him. My grandmother, an independent eighty-one-year-old at the time, stepped in and said that I should instead remember him as he was.

“The way the world is now, you’re going to see plenty of suffering and death in your lifetime. You’re too young. Do not start now,” she said.

So it was settled.

While I didn’t watch the physical deterioration of my uncle, I instead watched what I thought was the emotional deterioration of my father. In spite of his grief, he remained composed when it came to eight-year-old Eric and me, though I often noticed him walking around the house in a haze. Even though he was physically healthy, he too was becoming a shell of his former self. The man who had such an enthusiasm for the little things in life seemed to have turned to stone. In the two months of my uncle’s rapid decline, I saw many of my family members cry, but I never saw my dad shed a tear.

The sun wasn’t scorching on the day of the funeral, July 23, 2005, nor were there any signs of a midsummer western Pennsylvania thunderstorm. The day was warm and sunny, and it felt as if, when you walked outside, you were covered in a protective bubble of yellow light and comfortable heat. By all definitions, it was a perfect summer day. The green, perfectly manicured cemetery grass stuck out from under my new high heels. No breeze blew, but the heat wasn’t sticky so it was more pleasant without one. I stood with my brother and mother in the first row of mourners. My father, his sister, my grandmother, Dave, and Mike had stepped forward on the other side and were standing a few feet away from the flag-draped casket. The service proceeded in a blur, and I couldn’t tell you what was done or said; I couldn’t tear my eyes from the casket. Uncle Herby was the first relative that I lost, and it was a struggle to comprehend that he was lifeless in that box and that the spot of ground where we were gathered was to be his new and final home. Only one moment from the day sticks out clearly to me. Taps was being played in honor of the Marine who lay before us, one who had the unique fate of not dying in the war but still because of it. The sky was clear and blue, and the notes seemed to play over
the whole earth and up into the heavens. The song is so simple, concise and heartbreaking, if only by association. For a moment, the whole world was still and silent except for that single bugle.

I tried to stand up straight, as my father always did. I wanted to look composed, as I knew he did. My light eyes were shielded from the sun by black sunglasses, just as his were. Eventually, I raised my eyes from the stripes and gazed across the plot. Dad’s face was red and scrunched up like an infant’s. I could see the tears streaming silently down his face from behind his dark sunglasses. He was fighting not to sob or make noise, but it was clear that in that single moment, his heart had completely broken. The wall of strength he had built up in an attempt to protect his nephews, children, mother, and baby sister had fallen down. His shoulders shook, but he never made a sound. The song seemed to drag on and on, and suddenly I hated the sun for shining. The world was happy as my family grieved. In the distance, cars drove down the highway, people moving on with life. Our painful moment, frozen in time for my family, had no value to the world. Time was going to keep moving, and my uncle would always be dead in that spot. My cousins were always going to be fatherless, and my grandmother will spend the rest of her life knowing that she once buried one of her babies. More than anything, I grieved in that moment for my father. It was so unfair that a man who worked so hard had lost his best friend. A man who never complained and always tried to do the right thing had to suffer like this. I was angry that a man who was so strong had been driven to sobbing.

I was angry that a fifty-eight-year-old veteran with a wife and two kids had suffered and died, a casualty from a meaningless war. I was angry that a woman who had been a widow for over a decade was now standing beside a flag-covered casket again, this time for one of her children. I was angry that David and Michael wouldn’t have their father present at varsity wrestling matches, graduations, and weddings. I was angry that Mike was so young, and, as they often do, his memories would fade and there would almost certainly come a day when he could not picture his father’s face clearly in his mind’s eye. Most of all, though, I was angry that my father had to suffer.

The rest of that day and the weeks that followed don’t stand out in my memory. I never saw my father cry again, even though he mourns the loss of his brother to this day. He still runs and lifts weights that I will never physically be able to hold. While I will never carry his physical burdens, I now realize that the grief and mental stress he carried during that time will someday be mine too. Whether it is a brother, parent, or child, someday I will be the one standing by that graveside mourning an unspeakable loss.

Looking back, I see that his tears were not a demonstration of
weakness, but rather of the strength that I so admired. He showed me how to handle adversity and that it is acceptable to cry. I stand by my stance that my father leads by example and is the person I hope to be like. I hope that when it becomes my turn to stand beside that casket, I can handle it as gracefully as he did.

While his brother is irreplaceable, my dad has since found new friends to watch football and drink beer with. For me, it is one of the beauties of life, that he so often describes, to see him sitting at the bar at our local fire hall with friends on either side of him. I love to see him laughing and enjoying his friends’ company and whatever sporting event is on that day, whether it’s the Steelers pursuing a seventh Super Bowl, the Pirates pursuing two straight decades of losing, or Sid the Kid leading his beloved Penguins back to the top.

The summer before my sophomore year of college, six years after Uncle Herby’s death, my dad finally mentioned him. We were sitting on that deck, in white high-backed chairs with green floral cushions. It was a little past dusk on an August night in a suburb of Pittsburgh, and the moon and stars were newly visible in the sky. From over the stained deck railing, we could see a large, sturdy tree, at least a century old, standing in the side yard. Some nights, a giant hawk would make an appearance in either that tree or one of the ones behind our property. My dad and I sat lost in our separate thoughts about the hawk, the events of the waning summer, and my approaching return to Gettysburg. Then, out of nowhere, my dad said, “I wish you would’ve really gotten to know my brother. And that he could’ve seen the person you’ve become.”

With that, I concur. Not because I think I am an especially impressive person, but because I would want Uncle Herby to see what my father has done. I want to know if, in the opinion of someone who was so close to him, I succeeded in my quest to learn from his example.
a little boy lived down the street.
what was his name?
I was never quite sure.

every evening as the sun set
in the west and the shadows
crept in closer, he would start running.

there wasn’t anything special
about this little boy
running down the street every night,

but I remember
all of the neighbors
stopping to look.

we laughed and hollered,
“keep on running, boy!
you’ll never catch the sun!”

he kept his head up
and kept running,
kept trying.

“What a silly little boy
trying to catch the sun!
he’ll never be able to do it!”

no, it’s true.
he’ll never catch
the sun.
but at least he was trying, which is more than I can say for me or them.

he might still be running, racing the sun with all his might. I hope so anyway

because, at this point, nothing depends on that little boy chasing the sun.

nothing except for my happiness.
Looking Through
Digital Photography

Sara Tower
A Reverie Reality
Digital Photography
AnnaMarie Houlis
Bare Worth
Digital Photography
AnnaMarie Houlis
Descent
Pastel

Emily Francisco
Dreamscape
Watercolor
Emily Francisco
Not a Dead Horse

Hannah Knowles, Lisa Del Padre, Daniel Perez
Tombstone
Digital Photography

Jessica Lee
Bee
Digital Photography

Madeline Price
Heart Rock
Digital Photography

Madeline Price
Embrace
Oil Painting
Gabriella Schiro
Juliet
Digital Photography

Hannah Sawyer
Water
Digital Photography
Hannah Sawyer
Giraffe Trophy
Glazed Porcelain

Francesco Siciliano
Mugs
Glazed Stoneware
Francesco Siciliano
Madonna of Cobalt
Ceramic

Josiah Adlon
The Lightning Strike

Katie Quirin

Alice could see that damn tree as soon as her car began to crunch the gravel of the long drive leading to the plantation. It stood just behind the big brick house, on the same side as the pathway her rental car was now on. The aged look of her home tore her attention away from the tree. The once pristine home had changed in the ten or so years since she’d been back to Colbert County, Alabama. The white paint of the pillars that supported the overhang of the two-story house had begun to peel, having not been maintained since her father became sick three years ago. The blue shutters that framed the tall windows begged for a repainting as well. Some of the wooden boards that formed the wide, shaded porch that ran the length of the front of the house appeared to be a bit askew. The wide lawn was still cut crisply, but the flower gardens that lined the porch lacked the zest they had in her childhood. Momma was where she always was, though, always smiling in the wicker rocking chair on the front porch, a glass of sweet tea always within arm’s reach.

“Well hi there, Suga!” Momma said as soon as Alice left her car.

“Hello Momma,” Alice said with a smile. While she may have hated being back in this godforsaken town, Alice could never resist the love that radiated from her mother; she exuded the sweetness of the typical southern lady.

Beyond that, she didn’t fit the stereotype. Momma never had the plump, soft, warm figure most others did. She had always had a tiny frame: her waist perfectly small, her fingers delicate, and her wrists small enough that Alice could put her fist around them since she was 11. Alice could remember her bones poking her in the hugs she gave every day with barely anything but skin covering them. Momma used to complain that she could never get a real figure, as she put it. Alice believed this was because, despite being raised by a woman that made hearty southern food like no other, Momma couldn’t cook. She tried for many years to make her mother’s recipes work, until around the time Alice was a teenager and she gave up. Thanksgiving and other family get-togethers were now at aunts’ houses as Momma accepted her fate as a chef and Alice’s daily meals consisted of the basic meals she could make without setting the smoke detector off: Kraft macaroni and cheese, spaghetti, soup and grilled cheese, and chicken breasts, among a few others.
“I’m just so happy you’re back to your home, Darlin’. Now let’s get you out of this dreadful heat. Where’s your things?” Momma was headed straight for the trunk of the car. She seemed to have lost an inch in height since the last time Alice saw her. Her skin seemed looser, her limbs more fragile. Alice was suddenly very aware of her mom’s sixty plus years.

“No, I got it, Momma.” Alice rushed to get there first. She pulled out her unassuming black, sturdy suitcase. The monotony of the suitcase reflected Alice’s appearance. Her thick, black-framed glasses hid her gray eyes. She continuously struggled to keep her frizzy, reddish-brown hair under control, especially in this southern humidity. She kept her clothing always neat, serious. Her jeans and white blouse reflected little originality.

Despite the age of the outside of the house, Alice saw that the home was exactly as it always had been as soon as she stepped inside. The framed pictures of her family were everywhere, on the mantle of the fireplace in the living room, covering the wall along the staircase. They dated back to her ancestors, who built the house in 1837. Alice glanced at the pictures that had surrounded her upbringing: her mother in her big, white, debutante dress, Alice hanging from one of the low-lying branches of the tree, her great-grandfather looking down from the large, gold frame over the fireplace, and the photographs of the house being built with the then young tree noticeable behind the not-finished walls. Pictures were added every year of the kids her two sisters kept having. Alice was the only one who didn’t jump right into baby-making after college. She wasn’t even close to being married yet at age thirty-two, a virtual sin in her family.

“It is so sweet of you to come back to live with me.” Momma’s smile consumed most of her face, almost jumping up and down with her excitement, like a small child on a birthday. “It would be too much for your sisters, them having families of their own and all. This big ol’ house needs some life in it.” Alice’s mother had been living alone for the past four months, ever since her father died. After pleading from her siblings, who lived relatively near and received frequent invasions from the lonely old women, Alice caved. She took a leave of absence from her journalist position in Philadelphia to spend two months with her mom. She was not thrilled to be back.

When Alice chose where to go to college, she left the South and never looked back. She tried to lose her thick southern accent as soon as possible, remove any reminders she could of her birth state. She felt that it was not where she belonged or who she was.

Time moved extraordinarily slowly during the first few weeks of Alice’s stay. Every minute seemed to take hours as Alice did whatever it
was her mother asked: to run her errands, take her to the movies, visit the youngest of the grandchildren, sit on the porch with her. She felt like she was fifteen again, no car and therefore no way to leave the plantation without being subject to Momma's every endearingly asked wish.

On the start of the second and final month in Alabama, Alice sat curled in a loveseat in the living room, reading one of the many books she had brought with her. She screamed as Momma suddenly opened the window directly behind her.

“Jesus, Momma!” she cried, trying to catch her startled breath.

“Oh hush. Why are you sitting inside when there is a perfectly good rocking chair right next to me out on this porch?”

“Because it’s a million degrees out, that’s why.” It was noon on that July day, and already the temperature was past the 100 degree mark.

“You have let that northern chill get the best of you, I see. When you were young, we could never get you back inside. Where do you think all your freckles came from, Darlin’?” Alice’s hand flew to her nose instinctively. She tried to keep the dots of discoloration splashed across the brim of her nose and her now flushing cheeks hidden under concealer. They were also sprawled across her shoulders, a result of spending entirely too much time in the southern sun as a child.

“Well I don’t understand how you can handle it, Momma. It’s not good for you, all that heat.”

“Yes it is, and if you came back to your real home once in a while maybe you wouldn’t be so silly!” Momma’s eyebrows rose with each huffed phrase. She took any chance she could to remind Alice how very infrequent her visits were. “Hiding indoors on a fine day like this,” Momma shook her head at Alice, hands on her tiny hips.

Alice rolled her eyes. “That porch roof is barely even providing any shade. I would much prefer to read my book in this lovely little thing called air conditioning, thank you very much.”

“Well if shade is all you need,” Momma said, ignoring the AC comment, “then go out back to your tree. Why, you haven’t been out there once since you’ve been here. That was more your home than the house was when you were little. Climb up into the branches and read there, like you always used to. Enjoy the day,” Momma commanded.

The big oak that stood just behind the house was huge. Its branches reached far across the yard and above the house, twisting through the air as it provided shade for much of the property. Alice’s favorite limb protruded across the right side of the lawn. Its rough bark had scratched her child hands as she swung from the end of it, which curved toward the ground to a level that she could reach if she jumped. The thick base bore a large knot that mesmerized Alice as a child. The deformation was in a round
shape with a smooth thick band encircling a dark, gnarled inlet. She used to think that it was the tree’s eye, glaring down at her as she played in its shadow. She would stare back at it, mostly confused because there was only one. Alice’s father had nailed two-by-fours to the trunk after much pleading by a ten-year-old Alice so she could touch this strange part of the bark and explore the thick branches above.

“First of all, I’m not a child anymore, Momma, and I don’t climb trees. Secondly, I can tell from looking out the windows that that tree is no good. The branches are completely overgrown and scratching the windows in the kitchen. It’s probably decaying inside, and, if a big storm came, it could fall on the house.” Alice now matched Momma’s stance, her hands placed firmly on her own hips as she tried to use Momma’s protective nature toward the house against the tree.

“Are you suggesting that I have it cut down? That tree is as old as this house! Your initials are still carved into the bark out there! It is as much a part of our family as all those picture frames.” Momma hated being told that something about her precious family plantation was imperfect. She saw her family’s history here as nothing but good, glossing over the bad in her mind, like the fact that slaves helped her great-great-grandfather build it.

“Well, maybe it shouldn’t be.” Alice stormed off, leaving Momma glaring at her through the still open window.

Alice first found out how deep her family’s connection to the tree was when she was seventeen. She was in the local library going through microfilms of old newspapers when she found it. Her journalism teacher in high school had assigned a project to look into the history of a specific topic in local media. Proud of her family’s long history in the area, Alice searched for old articles about the plantation. She expected to find information about the cotton grown there, or how it was one of the first in the area to use freed laborers. She was sadly mistaken.

Alice placed the microfilm into the reader like she had the others and scanned through the pages of the newspaper, one that the librarian had said pertained to her house. When the picture rolled onto the screen, she looked it at, confused by what exactly she was seeing. The headline contained the words “Bloomer Plantation” but what the hell is this picture, Alice thought.

It was of a man being lynched, a crowd of white men surrounding the tree, smiling for the camera. At first she thought it was some mistake and that the article about her home was further on in the paper, this picture connected to a different piece. When she finally registered where they
were, her stomach turned over in disgust.

The man hung from the tree that stood in her backyard. It wasn’t as tall as she knew it, the branches not as thick, but she could see the knot. It was visible through a small part in the crowd, though lower on the tree than it was now. This was the tree that she spent hours playing around and in during the majority of her life. The one with her initials carved into the abrasive bark, next to that knot. She considered it her tree.

This isn’t possible, she thought. Alice had heard of the lynchings that occurred in Alabama and throughout the South, but her kind, gentle family could not be connected to any of that horribleness, could they?

She forced herself to read the article. Alice learned that it happened in 1906, and that the African American man had refused to let a white man in the community skip out on a bill at his small convenience store. He was accused of breaking some portion of the Jim Crow laws. He had a wife and three kids.

Alice closed her eyes, refusing to continue, after learning that Charles Bloomer, her great-grandfather and owner of the plantation home in the early 1900s, had been a part of the lynch mob. He proposed his tree as a perfect setting. This was the man whose picture she saw every day hanging above the living room mantle. The one that always smiled down as her family opened presents on Christmas morning or sat up late talking. She had always thought of him as someone to watch over her, not as someone who would do this, offer up her tree for this. Alice turned away from the screen—the revulsion at her family’s connection to this act and the involvement of her tree building inside her. How could I be a part of something so awful?

That’s when her idea of her future changed. She didn’t want this southern heritage, this family connection. Alice decided she would not go to her parents’ alma mater, the University of Alabama, like she always planned. She was going to get the hell away from this town.

After the fight through the window, Alice stepped quietly through the house. Her frustrations with her family may be many, but she hated upsetting her mother, who, after all, probably had no idea about the murder. Alice had never even told her family what she had found, wanting to spare them from the knowledge she now held.

As the evening continued, the sky began to darken, but not because the sun was setting. Alice was in the kitchen making mac and cheese, a peace offering, when she heard the front door slam. Momma must be mad still, Alice thought. It’s rare for her to slam the door.

“Goodness, that wind has sure picked up,” Momma said as she
walked into the kitchen.

“Oh, is that what slammed the door?”

“Yes, Dear, there seems to be a storm brewin.’”

Alice glanced out of the window above the kitchen sink. She could see dark clouds gathering overhead, the wind causing that tree’s branches to smash against the side of the house.

“Well, maybe you were right about the tree. We could trim the branches a bit,” Momma sighed.

Alice nodded, not really listening. She was staring at the spot of the tree, just below the knot, where she had carved her initials when she was thirteen. That life seemed so far away. She watched Momma as she sat down at the kitchen table, worrying about Momma all alone in this big house. Maybe it wouldn’t kill me to spend more time here, while she has it, Alice thought.

As Alice served their usual dinner, she could hear the grumbling thunder grow louder and closer. She could see the lightning flashes out of the corner of her eye. Why isn’t it raining yet, she wondered. The storm seems so close. At a lull in their conversation about what to do tomorrow, Alice glanced out the kitchen window just in time to see it happen.

Lightning struck the top of the tree. Alice watched as the branches slowly began to catch fire. She was frozen in place, staring out the window, horror-struck. Momma’s high-pitched scream brought her back to reality. She watched as her mom moved faster than she thought possible, running out the back door, phone in hand, screaming at the 9-1-1 operator. Alice moved from the table too, but slower, not truly processing what was happening. She followed Momma out the kitchen door, left ajar with her mother’s exit.

Alice didn’t make it far into the backyard when she stopped, captivated by what was in front of her. She stood still and watched as the crackling flames slowly began engulfing the highest branches, the fire moving down the tree. She felt like she couldn’t move even if she tried. Momma, however, was running in circles like she was the one on fire.

What if the fire reaches the house? Alice thought. What if the whole tree burns to the ground? No, it can’t just be gone. She was surprised at how she felt; her desire to somehow save the tree became overwhelming. At the thought of losing an object whose history had caused her repugnance at her southern heritage, she could only think of the day she carved her initials into the trunk. The small letters, AMB, sat adjacent to that dark eye that distinguished the tree. Her thirteen-year-old self had made a promise with the tree that one day she would live in the big, old house and her daughter could carve her initials into the tree too.

She began to feel the heat of the flames reflected on her skin. For a second
she enjoyed the warmth; it tingled as it took away the chill of the wind. She couldn’t focus on the tree or the destruction that was occurring. Instead, her thoughts flashed to Momma and this summer month spent with her. It’s still mine—the tree, the family—Alice decided to herself, no matter what. That’s when the sky finally opened. The rain came pouring down, washing over Alice and her tree, extinguishing the fire as it released the past.
I can feel you in the middle of my stomach. It's that feeling which arises on the edge of my skin as I remember you. Pain, twisted in my pancreas, knotted in my spleen. Pain, crawling out of the pores of my arms, hands, shoulders. It claws its way out of the base of my spine, pushing organs aside until the memory of you resurfaces. The memory that's vivid, pulsating, alive.

I remember you alive. In the back of my mind there are the faintest memories of you: your soft hands, rubbing my back when I was upset. I can see your long, curly mess of hair forming a wreath around my head as you bend down to hug me. I even remember your high, lilting voice as you sing me to sleep. But what I remember more is you cold, dying gradually.

First, your hair died, slowly falling in clusters into the awaiting pearl-colored trash bin. Then, your breast was swiftly killed, chopped off so that you might live. Finally, your flesh left you — your womanly curves disappearing, the disease making you into a lovely shadow of a skeleton.

That last night is what I remember. You looked like a golden queen, bald and regal lying in your ruby bed. The room was a kaleidoscope; emerald highlights in the curtains, amber on the floor, sapphires in your eyes. My young legs tiptoed along the floor: a feeble attempt to be quiet, as I peered in to witness this cave of jewels. The soft lamplight made you look almost at peace, as if you were still alive and warm, and not just a husk of the woman you really were.

The next morning, you lay under the comforter, and you were so thin, it was as if you weren't even there. Summoned to your room, I waited at the edge of the bed to hear your words.

You said, “I am dying.”

My lungs could not get enough air to scream out the wretched knowledge I had received. I wanted to expel it. My reality was filled with fairies and clean laundry; this knowledge did not belong there. The truth seared me out of that realm, and I never went back. As I watched you close your eyes for the last time, the snow falling through the windows blinded me, so your image was embedded on the inside of my eyelids.

I cannot remember a thing, until I am at the church, dressed all in black, walking beside you. But you are not walking. You are being carried in an oak coffin, your no longer beating heart next to my head. How many
times did I lay my head against that heart, hearing it beat like a drum in my ear? A drum, that when silenced, silenced a part of me.

After you were buried, the night terrors followed. I couldn’t bear to imagine the thought of you underneath the ground, not being able to see the sun or the moon or the stars. I had the most realistic dreams. Your hair fell out and your breasts fell off, until the doctors thought you were dead. Your skin was so taut around your skull you appeared to be dead, and so they buried you… alive. I dug and dug until I woke up, screaming with my fingers aching. I cried until I felt like my stomach had dropped to my knees. My will to save you was strong, but in this dream, I couldn’t win.

Dad thought it would be a good idea to send me to a shrink. I didn’t want to talk to a shrink about what happened to you, to our family. What I liked to talk about was my dreams about you. One afternoon, I told Dad I dreamt about you. That you were happy, in this dream, and that you had a glow about you.

He whispered, “When you see her, Tor, tell her I miss her.”

“Why can’t you dream about her yourself?”

“I don’t dream anymore. I go to bed, everything goes black, and then I wake up again.”

I thought about that for a long time what it would be like to go to sleep and not see you in my dreams. I glanced up in the mirror, and thought I saw you, but it was just my curls, framing the eyes that were the same color as yours, the lips that were the same shape. I immediately thought to the funeral, and how they cried, “You look just like her, Victoria…” I wanted to make them cry then, and I still hate it now. I guess there is a price for everything.

Years later, it was a warm summer afternoon, the last summer home before college, and I practiced “Für Elise” on the piano. It was the only thing that could really bring back the memories of you: your name embedded in the title and your spirit wrapped up in the notes. Dad walked in, looking somber and burnt from a day in the blazing sun. He dropped his keys and hat onto the counter and poured himself a glass of lemonade. As I watched him, a question I had held back for years slipped out.

I said, “Would you do it all again?”

He met my gaze and never had to ask what I meant. With a quick nod, his blue eyes flashed in a blaze of memory.

“Yes,” he murmured, “I would love her again and again, even if it was the same each time.”
Thoughts of a Child

Emily Francisco

If I hung on the monkey bars
just like this,
with my head dangling on a string
and my arms falling like spaghetti,
what would happen?

Would my head fall off?
Would it drop to the ground
with a clunk?
Would it sit in the sandbox
hollow neck towards the sky
like an adobe water vessel?
Would it catch starlight
and sunbeams?

What would happen
if I hung upside down
just like this?
Marquis de le Renard

Brian Engelsma

The gooey sardines sat delicately in the middle of the table, their stench slowly rising above and smacking everyone’s nostrils like a slap in the face. My stomach begins to ache, I can feel it rumbling up and down like the saltiest sea in the depths of a storm. Sardines? Again? This was my family’s idea of a meal: all five of us, myself, Mom, Dad, Louis and Marie gathered around the table, mechanically shoveling those sardines, floating in a puddle of mustard, onto our plates like we’re lunch ladies. I couldn’t take it anymore, that tangy twinge in my mouth, the salty aftertaste, it’s too much for a kid to handle.

Looking over at my brother and sister I can see they have the same idea I do. Every Sunday we pour in around this oak table, force feeding ourselves these strange little critters. It was about a year ago that we, that is my brother, sister and I, started a few experiments on getting out of our predicament. There was, of course, the famous dog caper of June, when we let Max, our black-and-white rambunctious little pup, with his dalmatian spots and thirst for attention, out of his cage, letting him distract our parents long enough to toss our sardines in the trash.

Then there was Louis’s tragic glass half full trick, where he discreetly dropped as many sardines as he could into his glass of milk. That worked for a good 15, maybe 20 minutes until my mother went to pour his half glass out into the sink. Now thanks to him there are no more drinks at dinner.

The rest of our tricks have always been fairly pedestrian-stuff like feigning illness and spitting out as many of those sardines as you can into the toilet, or pretending to wipe your face off with a napkin, all while you’re jettisoning out lumpy globs of fish and mustard from your mouth. But all of those tricks were minor league at best, and for the last few days I’ve been working up a real major league plan to bring us one less night of sardines.

Glancing out of the corner of my eye I see my brother, he was the only one I could trust, and waited for him to give me the signal to know he’s ready. Taking a bite of sardines, I see him wheeze and cough up a deep hack of a cough. He raises his pale fingers up to his face and cups his mouth in his hand. He’s ready, and so am I. Taking a moment to get pumped up and convince myself that this will work, I set it all in motion.

Pushing my plate of sardines and mustard aside with one swoop of
my right hand, I look at my father and tell him defiantly that no more, no more will I sit in silence as Bumblebees Sardines in Mustard is foisted before us for our dining displeasure, that those deep yellow and rustic orange cans will no longer define mealtime for the Dumont family.

The look on his face is one that no kid ever wants to see on their parents. He was shocked, he was devastated, he was completely and in all ways dumbfounded that this could be happening. His emerald green eyes opened up real wide like little dessert plates or a lace snowflake, his nostrils flared up like a sail flapping in the wind, and all life and emotion seemed to disappear from his face in the time it took his fork to come crashing down on the table with a solitary clack. For a couple of moments everyone stood still, eyes parked on my father waiting to see what he would do next. After what felt like an eternity of an awkward stare-down between the two of us, he began to quickly shutter his eyes open and shut as fast as a hummingbird’s wings.

Then Louis follows through perfectly with his part. Resting in the chair he brushes his thick brown hair from his eyes, looks toward my father and tells him in the high-pitched whiny tone of a child who perceives injustice, “If he doesn’t have to eat them I don’t see why I have to! You guys always do this, it isn’t fair at all.” Louis begins to slump back in his chair and cross his lanky arms, trying his best to scrunch up his face and force a frown. With any luck we’ve done it now, the stakes are so high that my father will have to go big to stop this mutiny on his hands.

Slowly, my father raises his handkerchief to his face and wipes a few drops of mustard off of his thick, Magnum P.I. moustache. Turning his head away he takes in a deep breath, and then refocuses his attention squarely on me.

“Sons,” he says to the two of us now, “do you remember why we eat sardines with mustard sauce?”

“Well,” I answer, “I was just thinking it might be nice to try something new for once, like maybe anchovies or pickled herring. Shoot, maybe we could try something that isn't even seafood.”

Sluggishly my father looks down and shakes his head, and with a subdued voice he looks back up at me and says, “I didn’t ask about what you thought, I asked if you remembered why we eat sardines with mustard.”

I know full well why we eat this devilish concoction, but now I need to really sell it, make him believe I have no clue at all. “Ummm, well, no not exactly. I remember you saying something about it before but to be perfectly honest I don’t really remember why we always eat sardines with mustard sauce.”

Almost relieved my father pushes back his chair, “Very well then,
we shall go over this again, and soon enough you all will see why this family eats mustard with its sardines.”

Standing up, my father beckons us to come with him as he walks through the kitchen and toward his study. As my mother stays behind to clear the dishes, the three of us walk through the door leading from the kitchen to my father’s study, following him like a gaggle of baby geese. Looking over at my brother and sister, I give them a little nod, we've done it. If we can get him distracted with another story we can waste the entire night, and by the time we're done, it will be so late that there won’t be any time for sardines, or so we hope.

My father's study was an oddly imposing place. We kids never go in there, it was understood that this was his place. Obscure books about failed French revolutions and European aristocracies line the bookshelves, while a bizarre statue of a green winged frog, with warts like a bubbled-in Scant-ron, sits on the floor next to the door. Moving in, we all grab a seat, Marie and Louis on my father's brown leather couch off to the side and me on a black studded armchair opposite his desk.

Sitting next to me is a peculiar side table, well it isn't really a side table at all. It's more of an old wooden statue of a short, bald man with bushy gray eyebrows, dressed in a butler's outfit and hunched over like a scurvy-riddled henchman. The statue is as tall as the chair, but this decrepit man is politely holding a platter with a smattering lump of something, what exactly I could not tell, nestled right in the middle.

My father takes a seat behind his desk, flashing on his old lamp with a long and skinny green lamp cover. Reaching into his drawer he snatched a cigar and promptly lights it up with strike anywhere match.

“Listen children,” he puffs as he lets some cigar smoke come flowing out of his mouth like an upside down waterfall, “do any of you remember me talking about your great-great-great-grandfather Jacques Dumont?”

Softly my younger brother Louis speaks up. “I think I remember you saying something about him before, didn't he live in Cleveland?”

This was another part of the game now. Getting him to start a story is one thing, but getting it to drag on is an entirely different challenge. We need to come up with as many stupid answers, and even stupider questions, as we can to drag this out.

“What, no, that's a terrible answer,” my father responds, blinking heavily, almost startled by the reply, “he lived in France, not Cleveland, why would you ever think we came from Cleveland?”

“Well what was he doing in France?” I ask my father, trying my best to put on a puzzled face.

“That’s where he lived. He was born there, he died there.”

“Why didn’t he move to like England? Or if he liked French he
could of gone to Quebec, I think either of those places would be better than France.”

Getting flustered, my father puts down his cigar and begins to gesture wildly with his hands, “it doesn't really matter where he lived, just remember he lived in France. Now can any of you guess what he did for a living.”

My sister Marie begins to realize the game we are playing, and joins in herself. “Was he an electrician?”
“Why would you ever think he raised gerbils;” my father chirps out in a high-pitched squeal.
“I thought you said he raised gerbils to sell on the black gerbil market.”

“No, I never said that;” my father retorts defensively, closing his eyes and shaking his head back and forth, “you can't talk anymore, your talking privileges have been revoked for the rest of the evening.”

Marie starts to protest, but my father hunches up in his chair, raising one finger and cutting her off immediately. I look toward my brother and he makes a motion like he is rolling something in the air, letting me know that we need to slow down, spread this out slowly.

“Now that your sister is no longer distracting us we can get on with the story. You see your great, great, great grandfather worked as a cook for the most powerful man in town, the Marquis de le Renard.”

“The what?” I ask my father squinting my eyes, pretending like I don’t understand what he said.

“The Marquis, it's an aristocratic title like a count or a baron or a duke, so if that confuses you just think of him as the Duke de le Renard. Anyways, so he worked for the Marquis de le Renard as a cook. Now the marquis, he was well known throughout all of France, from Brittany on down to Burgundy, and even worse he was known for his insatiable appetite and a demanding palate, that is he was very picky about what kind of food he would and would not eat.”

Alright, so our great, great, great grandfather worked for a fussy duke and had to make him food, now what does that have to do with us eating sardines with mustard?” I ask as I bend my head down forward and look at him through the top of my eyes.

“I'm getting there, hold your horses,” my father responds as he
taps his cigar on a stained glass ashtray, causing a cascading tower of black ash to come falling off the tip of his cigar, “so day in and day out Jacques worked to find something new to present to the marquis.”

My father delicately leans back in his chair, puffing his cigar and letting the smoke slowly ebb out of his mouth and up towards the ceiling.

“The marquis, he was a man of a certain, je ne sais pas, vanity I guess. So one day the marquis calls Jacques into his chambers. The marquis always stayed in the same room all day, this foreboding room in the center of his estate, with damp stone walls that seemed to sweat for no reason, and a dozen torches lining the walls to provide some light, although the lack of windows certainly made things dim.”

You can tell my father was starting to get impressed by the sound of his voice. He just loves giving these talks, where he can spend countless moments dwelling on such trivial minutiae. That’s how we knew this plan would work, get him distracted and this can go on for hours. I notice that Louis and Marie haven’t said anything in a while, and looking back I notice that Marie has fallen asleep, tilting her head back and letting her mouth hang slightly ajar. Next to her my brother is only slightly more sentient, he appears to be running his bony fingers around my father’s couch, pretending to be drawing something. I’m all that’s left, I need to try and keep my guard up or else he could end the story at any moment.

“Anyways, I’m getting sidetracked, so the marquis calls Jacques into this almost dungeon-like room, has him walk right up where he is sitting, and tells him that he needs something bold, something fresh, some type of new dish that he can name after himself. He tells him that the Earl of Sandwich got some food named after him, some droll creation called a ‘sandwich,’ and that he wanted Jacques to create a ‘le renard’ to rival the sandwich.”

Interrupting my father I lean forward in his oversized leather chair and ask him, “Why did the marquis care so much about getting a food named after him?”

“Well son,” my father responds, tilting his head to the side, putting a little smirk on his face and arching up his bushy brown eyebrows, “the marquis wasn’t exactly a modest man, he wanted everyone to know his name. It didn’t help that the Earl of Sandwich had something named after him, their families had been notorious rivals back in those days.”

I nod along as my father faithfully answers my question, occasionally squinting to give off the impression I was lost in some deep thought.

“Alright then, so Jacques was tasked with finding a new recipe to present to the marquis,” continues my father, jumping right back into the story. “Jacques put all of his cooking prowess into giving the marquis a suitable dish. He made a paste combining olive oil, mayonnaise and a sweet
mustard, which could then be put on different meats like pheasant or duck, but the marquis sent the 'renard sauce' back and called it unfit even for his dog. So next Jacques prepared a dish where he stuffed artichokes and cauliflower, some of the best in all of France, into a herring and served it over strawberry jam, and once again the marquis sent it back, saying it resembled the foul stench of a horse barn in June. So finally your great, great, great grandfather came up with one last creation, a new dish the likes of which the world had never seen. He took some fine blue cheese, some hard boiled eggs, radishes, and oysters, cut them up and wrapped bread dough around them, creating a cheese, egg and oyster infused bread.

As my father reads off the last ingredients I can feel my stomach get restless, it was like someone had shaken up a soda can, and I was just waiting to pop open the lid. Whether it was the remnants of yet another mustard and sardines dinner, or the ongoing list of putrid dishes my ancestor had created, something triggered this sea change in my belly. I bring my right hand up to my face and clutch my mouth between my thumb and forefinger, trying to make sure I can keep it shut if something tragic were to happen.

While this was happening my father takes his almost completely smoked cigar and stamps it out in his ashtray. He leans forward, dropping his elbows onto his desk and nestling his interlaced fingers beneath his chin.

As my stomach starts to settle some he continues his story. "So there Jacques was, with what he felt was the best dish of his career. Just as soon as it was done baking he brought it out to the marquis personally to see the pleasure on his face. Unfortunately the marquis took one bite of it and erupted into a fit of coughs and deep hacks, throwing the bread back at Jacques. Needless to say your great, great, great grandfather was entirely defeated at this point. Retreating back to the kitchen he decided to calm himself with one of his favorite treats, sardines in mustard, an old family recipe passed down to him. Walking from the kitchen to his quarters, Jacques quickly passed the marquis. When the marquis saw that his cook had a new food he beckoned him closer, asking to see what he had worked up. Jacques tried to refuse, insisting it was just a little treat and nothing more, that it is not even on the same field as the sandwich. The moment those sardines hit the marquis's mouth his face underwent a metamorphosis, his eyes grew as large as biscuits, and his face struck a grin as wide as the English Channel. He knew that this was something special."

Somewhat confused I stare at my father with questioning eyes, asking him, "So we eat sardines and mustard because our great grandfather..."

"Great-great-great-grandfather," he interrupts me, raising his eyebrows and striking a grin.
“Alright, so we eat sardines and mustard because our great, great, great grandfather made some marquis happy with them?”

“Well not exactly, there's more. After the marquis told him to run back to the kitchen and make more of these delicious little slimy fish Jacques realized he had a million franc idea here, so instead of going back to the kitchen he ran away, hopping the tall wooden fence that lined the estate, and making his way to the city to start a restaurant. Before long sardines in mustard were the talk of Paris, and everyone wanted to go to Chez Jacques, home of the original Dumont sardines. He was making so much money he didn't know what to do with it all. Eventually he tired of managing his own restaurant, so he sold off his recipe to the highest bidder, a canning company by the name of Bumblebees, with the stipulation that every year his descendents get one big case of the tasty treat.”

“So we eat sardines in mustard because you and mom are too cheap to buy other food and would rather take the free sardines,” I ask my father in a cutting tone, shifting my eyes from left to right and back again.

“Well that’s part of it, but I mean once we’ve got all of these sardines, what else are we going to do with them,” he asks us. As I glance back I see that my sister has woken up, but is still not paying full attention. My brother, well, by the glazed over look in his eyes I can tell he's not all here either.

“Alright, I think that's enough of a history lesson for one night, why don't you guys head to bed.” I feel a weight lift up off my shoulders, we've done it, one less evening filled with sardines and mustard. As we walk toward the door there is a slight hop in my step. I make eye contact with my siblings, biting my lower lip, raising my eyebrows and I bob my head up and down slowly, letting them know that victory is ours. Just as we are about to leave my father's study he calls back to us, “Hey kids, wait up for a second.”

We can see him reaching into the drawer of his desk for something, “Don't tell your mother I'm doing this,” he tells us, tossing some indeterminable objects towards us, “she'd never forgive me for giving you food this late.” Looking down we see the old, dusty cans of those familiar sardines. “It'll be our little secret.”
The Trouble with Empathy

Morgan Marianelli

The first time I set foot in my grandmother’s house after it had been stripped of its soul, I felt like a voodoo doll as a thousand pins pricked my skin. Where was the piano music to greet me as I walked through the door? My senses searched for the melodic notes wafting through the windows and front door, the silhouette of my grandmother rushing to her piano at the sound of our car pulling up, and the shuffling of her music to delve into an intoxicating swirl of notes. I poked my head into the family room, half expecting to see her swaying to the piano’s sonorous voice, with her eyes closed as her hands danced over the keys. Then she would jerk back to reality only after she had finished her piece. She would look up from the keys, and greet me with glittering eyes and a beaming smile. My hands tingled as I conjured up the childhood memories of all those times we would sit side by side on the piano bench. She would place her gentle hands over mine as she taught me to play “Chopsticks.” Instead, a dark shadow of a room met my eyes. A few pieces of forlorn furniture were awkwardly strewn about with the piano sitting in its usual spot, like a dormant figure yearning to be revived.

I walked next into the dining room where I willed myself to remember the heavenly aroma of a Christmas feast. I could see every family member seated around the expansive table in conversation. My grandmother was seated at the head with a contented grin on her face as she took in the moment.

I silently glided into the living room next, stepping into a hazy cloud of twinkling Christmas decorations, blissful laughter, and eager children tearing through wrapping paper. The adults were perched on the long sofa and the various armchairs. The women were balancing china cups of coffee in their hands as they leaned forward to watch their children hold up their gifts with triumphant grins. The men—especially my dad—were snapping away with their cameras to capture every cherished moment, shouting, “Look over here, honey! Hold up your present so I can see! That’s it! Smile for the camera!” My grandmother smiled proudly at the scene unraveling before her eyes from her chair in the corner. As the cloud faded away and I fell back to Earth, I was left with the image of a cold, lifeless room, devoid of personality.

The cheery sun-soaked porch could no longer be a place of blithe
summer days without my grandmother’s rich laughter ricocheting off the walls like a pinball. Where were the detailed memories she would share with me that rolled through my mind like filmstrips as we sat side by side on her creaky old rocking bench? I could almost see our silhouettes on that bench from where I stood, on the step down from the dining room, onto the porch. We had our heads turned to the right, gazing out the floor-length screen windows to the street beyond. We were playing “the car game.” We would try to guess what color the next car that drove by would be. When I was really little and naïve, I would always choose pink because that was my favorite color, and my grandma would pick something practical like silver or blue, even though her favorite color was green. As I matured, I started to realize why I always lost the game, so I usually tended to choose red, the next closest thing to pink. Other times my grandma, my sister, and I would pretend to be firemen on that bench, which served as our fire truck for the time being. We would frantically rock the glider bench back and forth as we rushed to the scene of the fire. Or on lazy summer afternoons, my mom, sister, grandma, and I would sit around the table out there and play school, where I was always the teacher, and my grandma played the annoying student Jasmine, who would raise her hand, and interrupt my lessons by chanting, “Teacher, teacher! I have to go to the bathroom!” We would also eat pizza around that table from Grotto’s, my grandma’s favorite.

In the kitchen, I stared at the wooden table. Cleared of its chairs, it now looked so small. We would sit there just to talk or to eat meals together. We would often play board games at that table; the best was a children’s version of Bingo that used pictures instead of numbers. Every time we played, my grandma would mix up the “chicken” with the “bird”. And every time, it was as if she made the mix-up for the first time, because we would all explode with laughter, doubled over trying to catch our breaths between giggles that wouldn’t stop until our stomachs started to hurt.

After I perused the shell of every room downstairs, I returned to the dark foyer, and made my way up the creaky staircase. Rooms that once had so many items to characterize them seemed to be confused spaces stripped of their identities. I looked into my grandma’s empty bedroom and conjured up the memories of when we would sit on her huge bed and play dress-up with the silky “babushkas” from her dresser drawer, or say prayers on the rosaries she kept in her nightstand drawer. The best part of her room was the dolls she kept on shelves: beautiful handmade rag dolls given to her as gifts over the years. They had yarn hair and rosy felt cheeks, dexterously stitched dresses and dainty little shoes. I would point to the one I wanted to hold, and my grandma would take it down and tell me the doll’s name—my grandma named everything, not just dolls, but pretty
much every object she owned—and the story behind it.

The room right next to my grandma’s certainly couldn’t be called a playroom anymore without all its toys; it was just a room. As kids, my sister and I would spend hours in that room playing with the tiny dolls in the ornate wooden doll house, tossing a ball back and forth, riding Playskool tricycles out of the room and racing them down the long wooden floor of the hallway, or playing school with the huge blackboard built into the wall.

I proceeded to stumble, drift, and pace through every room of the house, knowing that every doorway led to a foreign encounter, but hoping that somewhere along the way I would be greeted with a familiar embrace.

The whole time I took this final walking tour through my grandma’s large home, I tried to drown out the smashing and crunching sounds coming in through the open windows from the driveway. I wanted to avoid going outside at all costs, because I knew what the adults were doing out there. The huge dumpster they had rented was being fed with the discarded remains of objects that had made up a life. Chairs, tables, old documents, books, clothes stained with age, random knick-knacks, all being smashed, shredded, and shattered into unrecognizable bits and pieces and piled into the belly of the great iron monster. The rest of the things were either bagged up for Goodwill or claimed by my mom or one of her siblings to take back to their homes. Only a very small fraction of the items that were sucked out of Grandma’s house were set aside to go to her, simply because she wouldn’t have much space for anything in her new apartment at the assisted living center.

No, my grandma didn’t die, but it certainly felt like she had as I walked through the barren rooms and hallways of the spacious house that played such a pivotal role in my childhood. My grandma lived on her own in her big house, as my grandfather had died before I was born. She eventually only occupied the downstairs rooms as she got older and feebler. She was rushed to the hospital after getting really sick one night, and almost died. Miraculously, defying everyone’s bleak expectations, my grandma pulled through, and gradually started to recover. Nevertheless, she was still too weak to ever be able to return to her home and take care of herself. Everyone seemed overjoyed that she had pulled through and could still be a part of our lives. However, my mom later admitted to me that while she monotonously helped smash up items to feed to the dumpster, fighting back tears, she had the horrible thought that it would have been easier having to get rid of so many of her mom’s possessions if she had died. At least then there wouldn’t be all the guilt. I was initially shocked when my mom told me this for the first time, but looking at the situation from my mom’s perspective, I think I know what she means. My grandma, disoriented and heartbroken over being forced to leave her home of over 40 years
and part with her possessions, continuously asked where things were. My mom had to lie to her own mother and assure her that everything was safe, even though she knew that some of the items my grandma asked about were given away or smashed up for the dumpster. What my mom had to do was, in a sense, killing her mother’s spirit. Feeling responsible for the horrific transition in her mother’s demeanor was far worse to her than being free of guilt if sickness or old age had been responsible. Most of the time, a person’s house isn’t cleared out until after their death. So every time my grandma asked where something was or asked to go home, my mom felt a sickening wave of guilt wash over her. None of that would have been there if her mom had died, she told me.

Eventually, lonely and bored, I braced myself and ventured out to where my parents, aunts, and uncles were at work around the dumpster. What I saw there made my breath catch in my throat and I wanted to scream for everyone to stop. What? How could they get rid of that chair? I used to sit on that chair! That’s such a nice desk! Why are they smashing it up? Thoughts like that ran through my head as the incessant destruction of items that were once so customary to my life bore on. The worst part was seeing the smaller items that used to have so much meaning bagged up, or worse yet, thrown in among the splintered pieces of wood and shards of glass in the dumpster. My mom held out a garbage bag to my sister and me and had us sort through what was inside. I peeled back the folds of plastic and felt like someone had punched me in the stomach when I saw what was there. In the bag were all my grandma’s special dolls, each with her own story that my grandma had so joyfully enlightened me with, thrown across each other like limp rags, looking up at me with their unwavering smiles, completely unaware that they were about to be snatched from their home forever, never to return to their cozy shelves. Some would be boxed up in a closet, too special to be given away. The others would go to Goodwill, where they would either sit lonely and neglected collecting dust, or if they were lucky, maybe they would be adopted by someone who would cherish them as my grandma had. My sister and I convinced my mom to let us keep most of them, but a few had to be given away, as there were just too many.

As I sorted through the plethora of objects that were thrown my way and watched the adults move like unfeeling machines as they continued to feed the dumpster, I paid particular attention to my mom. I wondered how she could do it, how she could remain so stoic as she watched her mom’s things being chopped to bits and disposed of. Important pieces of my mom’s childhood were vanishing before her eyes as well. Her sky blue eyes welled over with tears and her hand went up to wipe them away, but she kept her composure. She didn’t break down and become a sobbing,
hysterical mess, as I think I probably would have if I were in my mom’s place.

When I talked to my mom recently about what this day was like for her, her voice cracked with sorrow several times as she tried to explain to me what she felt as she sorted through her mom’s things and had to get rid of most of them. My mom may have kept her composure for the most part that day, but that’s only because if she had let all her emotions spill out, she may not have been able to pull herself back together. My mom told me she was a wreck inside. She felt like she was throwing parts of her mom away. It was not just objects she was getting rid of, but things with real sentimental value—things that had become synonymous with the person who owned them. In my mom’s words, her heart “bled” as she watched objects that were such crucial pieces of her life and her memories being broken and tossed aside, pushed out of reality, and existing only in her memories. She told me her brother felt like he couldn’t part with his parents’ things because it had their DNA all over it.

I can see now that, like an onion with layers that must be pulled back only to reveal more layers, vacating my grandma’s house before we sold it affected the people to whom it meant something in multiple ways. It created layers of emotion in everyone who was affected. My grandma herself was the most obvious victim, as the sparkle left her eyes and the excitement went out of her voice for a while. Her vitality for life came back very gradually, in tiny increments, though never all the way. But then there was everyone else whose suffering was not so obvious. My mom tried to keep her grief bottled away most of the time so that she could be happy for everyone else and get on with her life. My mom’s sister and two brothers reacted in much the same way. I could tell they were making an effort to remain calm, composed, and cheerful when I saw them, but it was obvious that what they had to do had taken a toll on them as well. The only person’s grief that I will ever be able to understand all the way is my own. I am acutely present for every memory that pops into my head of the times spent in my grandma’s house, and the tight little ball of grief in my stomach that always ensues. Sometimes, I try to put myself in my grandma’s place. Like my mom, I feel so terrible that so much was taken away from her. To cheer her up when I visited and she was so somber, I would try to tell her that she still had a family who loved her and that she should try to make the best of her situation. But I know that I can’t ever really understand anyone’s feelings but my own. I can hear what they have to say, but I can never experience it. Who was I to tell her that everything would be okay? Gradually, things did start to get better. I think the jumble of emotions that accompanied the clearing all her things out of her house started to fade as my grandma became more adjusted to her new residence, although she
continued to emphasize that it would never be her home.

My grandmother has now grown even less capable of dealing with her pain, and has been moved out of the assisted living center to a nursing home. We are all reliving a pain we thought had finally started to chip away when my grandma’s spirits started to recover. My grandma seems to be more depressed now than she has ever been before, and her once agile mind is starting to deteriorate. Her short-term memory has become very weak, as she often needs things repeated to her multiple times. I know that just because my mom tries to put on a happy face most of the time doesn’t mean she isn’t suffering immensely. I can hear the pain in her voice when she talks about her mom. I can tell her that everything will be okay, and hopefully it will, but I have found that what a person feels can ultimately only be controlled by that person.
Because I was young
and my love wasn’t real

Kathryn Bucolo

The lady in the dark grey skirt suit
gave me a red construction paper heart
with blunt edges, frank and crisp,
in the basement of a small brick church
and told me to, when I wrote his
name down next to mine, all thoughtfully and
careful-like, all pretty and dark and in loose white sheets,
in cursive, with hearts, all pretty and dark
that I had to tear a piece off. Every time. When I thought
about him kissing me and our big red house we’d have together
with azalea bushes and black-eyed susans and maybe a front porch swing,
imagined him stroking my face with heavy brass hands,
his fingers like stakes in morning-glory-hair, twisted,
that every time I wished to be his bride
with a lily bouquet and shaking stocking-ed knees,
I would have to tear a piece off.
Every time?
So I peeled off tiny chunks, about a hundred a week,
pinching the
limp little organ between guilty fingernails,
slowly prying a baby-moth’s-wing-
shred of red paper from it,
listening to the raspy ripping
(sad sad sad)
of the dark red fibers
from the soft little
pinkish-red fibers
(minute, matted
Velcro)
very
slowly
to save it,
to save it,
before
I tore it all up anyway.
I broke a plate and decided not to tell anyone. I cleaned up the mess it made. It was easy enough only took a few minutes before it was gone and in the garbage with the rest of our used and broken things. I broke a plate and no one noticed. Not my mother, not my father, not my sister, or my dog, or my priest, or my teacher, or my girlfriend, or my doctor, or the waitress at the diner. None of the other plates seemed to notice either. They didn’t seem scared of me when I walked into the kitchen the next day or the day after that. The sun kept shining, the moon kept glowing. I kept my secret.

And then I broke a cup. It was a tea cup, a tiny little thing. It was not really my fault—it was so thin, and I so thick. I didn’t tell anyone about this tiny cup either. And once again, no one noticed. It was gone. The cup had been nicer than the plate and yet no one noticed either of the two were gone. All the pieces look the same when something breaks. It doesn’t matter how nice the thing was when it was whole.

I broke a plate because I wanted to. Because I was sad, because I was lonely, because I was mad and wanted revenge. I broke a plate because I could. And no one ever knew. I broke them because it was easy and any guilt I had slipped from me into the garbage with the pieces of all those broken plates.

And then one afternoon I walked in on my mother breaking a plate. It was the most disturbing thing I ever saw. Maybe it was the jerking motion with which she dashed it all to pieces, maybe it was the sounds of a thousand tiny little explosions. Loud smacks of anger, or was it pain? Or was it… pleasure? Strange. From where I was standing, I could not tell the difference.

She said she was angry at my father. She had caught him breaking the fine china dishes we kept in the living room. Such smooth plates, so smooth they looked soft. Soft shiny pale surfaces. He was just throwing them in the garbage and loving the way they shattered. He told her he was tired of looking at them; they had been there in the living room so long. He was tired of them, sacred delicate little forgotten china dishes. Looking at them, he said he thought the dust that collected on them was the beginning fuzz of an old man’s beard. He didn’t want them anymore. So he broke them, dust and all, in the garbage pail in the kitchen where my mother
found him.

I had no idea what to say. I did not know how to clean up this broken plate. So I ran. I ran away to my sister’s room. But when I burst through the door I saw that she had already heard. She was breaking cups and plates too, her little toy tea set, it flung from her window like a bird without wings and all I could think was how could such a young girl, my little sister, know how to break so much?

I heard my father come through the front door, and I heard my mother toss the garbage with all the broken plates out of the back door. I ran down the hall with its wood floors and descended the stairs quite recklessly with nothing on my feet but quick slippery socks. I met him in the parlor and told him everything. Every little plate and cup I had broken, the plates mother had broken, my little sister’s tea set, I told him about all the broken things. But he didn’t care. He just shrugged and said he knew, he had known for some time, but it was ok because we were all still living together, and we all still slept together, and we all still ate together, so therefore we were still a family and you know what? It’s ok. Before I could answer my mother told us dinner was ready.

So we sat down to dinner. My sister across from me and my parents on either ends, but when I went to the cupboard to set the table, I realized there were no plates. There were no cups either. And strangely enough all the silverware was gone too. My father burped. What do we do? We sat around for maybe a moment but we couldn’t go hungry. So we dug in, with our hands. We didn’t mind the food in our teeth, or the mush in our fingernails, or the stains on our faces, the moist crumbs on our lips. We ate dinner as a family, with our hands, like the animals we really were.

Outside the kitchen window, a man rode a bike down the sidewalk weaving around all of the garbage left out for pickup in the morning.

Down the block and onto the next he passed by every house and their plastic cans and bags, finding a way to get around each one. He looked up and smiled—smiled at the thought of all the warm people sitting inside, eating dinner with their families. He kept riding down the street past all the yellow windows glowing like Christmas lights in the blue night.
Flipped

Mariah Wirth

Winter in Ohio is a particularly bleak season. Especially a winter in Ohio spent watching someone who is ill. Especially when that person is your father. If someone were to ask me now what he was sick with, I would not be able to remember. That is not the important part, you see. It is only the background information, the stage directions.

It was Christmas break of my sophomore year of high school in 2007. I was living with my mother in Georgia at the time, and we had driven to Ohio, where my father still lived because of his illness. I love my dad, don’t get me wrong, but we had never been particularly close. Rather, we had been distant in the way that a few visits a year and twelve hours driving distance can make two people. So the fact that I was spending Christmas in a hospital room did not sit too well with me. The fact that there was snow on the ground and I was freezing sat even worse.

I have never been fond of Ohio, and I think it is because my mother and I basically fled from there when I was three years old. We moved to Florida with promises that my dad would follow, but he never did. That is when it all began in my eyes. If you asked my mom, I’m sure she would have a different response. If you asked my father, he might say it never started. The “it” I am referring to is when we began the farce of calling ourselves a family.

My father was living over twelve hours away in a different state. How can three people be a family in that situation? They couldn’t, not in my eyes. So I guess I was relieved when the farce ended over my Christmas break. At least we weren’t pretending anymore.

There was nothing particularly striking or significant about the day this happened. It was completely ordinary, and that was almost worse. If there had been something different about that day, perhaps I would have been on guard. As it was, both my mother and I were taken completely by surprise.

Our house in Ohio—I say “our” only in the sense that my family owns it—has two living rooms. The front living room, which opens into the kitchen, is where I found myself that night. It was filled to the brim with furniture, boxes, and an odd assortment of various items that had somehow made their home in that space. Most of the stuff was from my dad’s law office, which had just recently been cleared out—his furniture
moved to his home instead. After a day of visiting my father, my mom and I had gone over to the house to clean up this room and organize the various papers from the law office. I remember it was extremely late at night, and I honestly don't remember why we decided to clean then, but we did. I believe it was my mother's idea.

Before I go any farther, it is important that you understand the relationship between my father and mother. They loved each other, of that I am sure. They still love each other, but as far back as I can remember, they have fought. And since we didn't all live together, for me it already felt like they were divorced. But the thing was, they weren't. I held onto this in part because I was ashamed at the thought of my parents being divorced. So many of my friends' parents were divorced, and I held onto the fact that mine weren't, like it was some sort of life vest. Even if they fought all the time, at least they weren't divorced. Even if we didn't all live together, at least they weren't divorced. At least they weren't divorced. That was my mantra. But that night, everything changed.

I was looking through the drawers of my father's desk, which had come to reside in the living room, when I found it. The paper was a regular eight and a half by eleven page, but the information printed on it was far from normal. I read the words, trying to decipher what I was seeing. I had never seen a power of attorney before. I knew what it was, but this was the first time I had ever been confronted with identifying one. One particular word stuck out to me above all the other legal gibberish. Or rather, one particular name. Margeret Wirth. My father's ex-wife. It was then I knew things were bad.

Once I realized what this document was, I immediately took it to my mother. I didn't even think; I didn't even pause to reflect. My first thought was just, "I have to show Mom!"

Slowly I made my way across the room to where she sat on the floor, going through a box of knick-knacks. It felt like it took forever to get to her, each step heavy. When I finally stood in front of her, I held out the paper to her with shaky fingers.

"Look," I said. Mom gently took the paper from my hands and scanned the page. Then she scanned it again. I just wanted her to tell me that this wasn't what I thought it was; that it was an old document and didn't mean anything, that nothing had to change. But I could tell by the expression on her face that this was a big deal, and that things were going to change. She read that power of attorney for what seemed like forever but was probably just a few minutes.

She was speechless at first, just standing up and walking around the room aimlessly, the document loosely clutched in her right hand. Then she looked me in the eye.
“We have to get a divorce,” she said softly. It was then that I began sobbing. The tears tore out of me like they had been dammed up. I choked and cried, and Mom cried too. “I’m sorry,” she cried. “I’m so sorry.” She tried to hold me, but I didn’t want comfort. Instead I walked over to my dad’s big desk: the same desk that had just produced the document that had sealed my fate. I leaned my arms against it, gripping it for the stability I so desperately wanted and would not receive from a piece of furniture. I looked up and into the mirror above the couch on the opposite wall. The scene was reflected back to me: we had just started cleaning, but the only things in the room that seemed to have changed were the people in it.

I stood at that desk going through the truth of the situation, over and over. Of course my parents had to get divorced. The paper told the whole story. My father had made Margie, his first ex-wife, his power of attorney. She was able to access all his funds in case he wasn’t able to; i.e., in extreme illness. At this point, my father was getting better, but the fact that he had done this and not told my mother, or, better yet, that he would make someone besides his wife his power of attorney, was the straw that broke the camel’s back. I think what really did it for my mom was the fact that this not only endangered her future, but that it endangered mine. I still had two and a half years of high school left at the time, not to mention college. If Margie got ahold of the money, we would have nothing. My mother had to break ties now in order to secure our futures.

“I’m so sorry, Honey,” Mom said. She was still crying. “You understand why though, don’t you? It’s for you.” And I did. I realized the importance of this step. I honestly did. In fact, I agreed with her. Maybe that’s why I cried so hard. Maybe that’s why I was so mad. I was mad at myself for understanding. A fifteen-year-old girl shouldn’t have to understand why her parents had to get divorced. They shouldn’t know such things of their parents’ world yet. At least, I didn’t want to know. I felt like at that moment I had been thrust into adulthood without my permission. From then on my mom and I would be in it together, taking care of each other; but I wasn’t done being taken care of myself. How was I supposed to treat my father? I loved him, but at that moment I was so mad at him. He knew what he was doing when he wrote up that document. He was a lawyer! “How could he do this to me?” I thought. “Doesn’t he love me?” This was too much. I had been betrayed by my father. I thought I was daddy’s little girl, but apparently not.

I go back to this moment often. What if I hadn’t found that piece of paper? Did I rush to give it to my mother like a tattletale because I subconsciously wanted my parents to get divorced? Was it my fault? I realize
now that it wasn’t my fault; it was my father’s. I didn’t make his ex-wife his power of attorney; he did. And if the paper hadn’t ended the charade we were living, something else would have. As I said, they argued a lot and things were beginning to come to an end. Something would have precipitated this. I was only one factor among many.

At that moment in time, I knew the entire trajectory of my life had changed, and I was not convinced it was for the better. When one of your parents betrays you, it flips your entire outlook on life. It distorts your memories. It changes everything. But almost stronger than the feeling of betrayal was the relief I felt.

I was relieved that the fighting between my parents might finally stop. Even the possibility of peace was better than none at all. I was relieved that my parents would finally be calling their situation what it was: not a marriage, but a farce of one. I was relieved none of us would have to pretend anymore about our family dynamics. But most of all, I was relieved that even though I had been the one to find the power of attorney that caused my mother to divorce my father, it wasn’t my fault. My mother was the one divorcing him. I could blame her and be free to still love my father. Maybe I could still be daddy’s little girl.

I didn’t really want to feel relieved; I wanted to feel angry and jaded and betrayed. I wanted to hate my parents and what they had done to me. But I couldn’t do any of these things because the relief was so strong. I felt like I deserved a whole family, not some chopped up makeshift version, but I realized that this was the best I was going to get, and I seized control of that knowledge. I was so relieved and so close to happiness that I scared myself, so I cried tears not of grief, but of something more akin to acceptance.
“If you color outside the lines, you’ll go to jail,”
she said. Her wide cerulean eyes stared at me, unblinking.
I tiptoed around the black line, afraid to touch
the almond space outside it.

Childish envy of my 8-year-old coloring aptitude surged
from her apricot face as she swung her dandelion hair, hiding
her own page from my aquamarine gaze.

2 a.m. in the library, fighting against
caffeine withdrawal and periwinkle sleep, I sit
with my head bent over my anatomical coloring book,
attempting to keep my macaroni and cheese childhood alive
through the grueling college nights.

If you color outside the lines, you’ll go to jail.
Brick red blood shouldn’t ooze out
of the paper heart. The jumble of mango tango knowledge
shouldn’t ooze out of my brain.

A deep inhalation of the soothing waxy aroma,
and a wisteria calm settles my frazzled sympathetic nervous system.
I can achieve perfection with colors.
I can achieve perfection.
I’ve never really been one for parties. Why? I’m an intellectual. It’s tough to find people on my level at parties—only stumbling, shrieking, stupid multitudes. Just try bringing up, for example, Max Ernst. I have on multiple occasions. Most recently I brought him up at Cynthia’s party. Afterwards she told me I had made people uncomfortable. I replied, “Uncomfortable by what? Knowledge?” Well, I actually thought of that a couple of minutes later after she had already walked away, but I still said it out loud to make a point. In any case, I have stopped communicating with her until she pays me back those two dollars.

I’m getting off track. I apologize. This happens sometimes when your brain works faster than your mouth. It’s the price for being intelligent. It’s the cross I carry. Anyway, it can get rather lonely being an intellectual in today’s world of reality TV, Facebook and watered-down electronica made not for headphones in dark bedrooms, but for top 40 listeners and the troughs they eat out of. So I try to educate people. Here’s an example: I was eating at a restaurant with a few people from work, when I heard a couple at the next table over talking.

“I just saw “The 400 Blows” for the first time,” the man said. “You know, I’d heard about the ending, but wow.” I couldn’t help but lean over and start talking; here was a guy who needed my help.

“That’s entry level French New Wave,” I said, as friendly as I could.

“I—I’m sorry?”

“It’s, you know, kind of for beginners in a sense. You want some real French New Wave? Check out “2 or 3 Things I Know About Her”. Classic late sixties Godard.”

“I’m sorry if I offended you in some way. You know, I actually wasn’t even talking to you.” This always happens. They start to get defensive for some reason.

“Well, when you make a statement like that.”

“Look, I’m really just trying to eat here,” he responded.

“I was just trying to help—”

“Alright?”

“Well, I—”

“Alright?”

“OK.”
As you can see here, I did nothing wrong in that situation, and for my efforts to raise awareness, I was treated with inexplicable rudeness and hostility. Again, this happens often.

Anyway, a couple of days ago, I got invited to a party at my friend Colin's house. Well, I guess I wasn't actually invited per se, but I overheard him talking about it and just kind of showed up, and he was totally cool with it. He actually didn't really say anything; he just kind of sputtered a bit when I showed up. He let me inside is what I'm getting at. I was a bit late because I had to go back home and get my iPod. I bring my own so people can hear some actual good music. I have a special Krautrock mix all made up, Neu! and Can and Amon Düül II (no Kraftwerk though because they've become a bit too overplayed for me.) But I'm digressing again.

I was at the party and was keeping my distance from the debauchery elsewhere. I found a bookshelf and was silently critiquing the choices when Colin and his girlfriend Ann came walking over. We got to talking and joking around. I made a comment about how Ann was looking particularly hot tonight. Colin didn't laugh but I'm pretty sure he thought it was really funny. There was a bit of silence and then Colin looked down and—Oh! I forgot to mention that in the hallway where I was standing there was a recorder on a shelf. I'm not really sure why it was there. Anyway, Colin picked it up. It was one of those cheaper classroom type ones that teachers used to make you play insipid pieces on.

"Here's what I think of that last comment," he said, laughing. He threw it at me, and it hit me in the stomach. I believe it is possible to be both an intellectual and a bit of a practical joker, so I decided to prank Colin. I picked the recorder up and threw it as hard as I could. What happens next, I have replayed in my mind so many times I have trouble not imagining it as some sort of pseudo-Zapruder film. So I will present it as such.

Frame 14: The hand clutches the recorder. The arm begins to wind back.

Frame 37: The recorder is released. The arm is fully extended.
Frame 54: The recorder is flying through the air, approaching Colin, whose arm is momentarily raised to scratch his head.
Frame 60: The recorder passes underneath Colin's upraised arm.
Frame 62: The recorder makes contact with Ann's left eyeball. The eye is open.
Frame 65: The head begins to jerk backwards. Ann's arm begins to rise to the eyeball.
Frame 80: Ann's mouth opens in a scream.

I didn't feel like I had thrown it that hard, but it was apparently hard enough to knock the eyeball out of the socket. Traumatic avulsion of the globe, they call it. I only saw it for a split second, but the eyeball was
clearly dangling halfway down her face. It was kind of strange. Then people started yelling.

I left the party pretty hastily after that. Even I was prepared to admit that things hadn’t gone quite as well as I had hoped. I tried to go visit her in the hospital, but Colin said she didn’t want to see me. I chuckled inwardly at that unfortunate use of such a phrase. I guess I chuckled outwardly too because I received some rude looks shortly thereafter.

Then there was Jenny’s party. This one went pretty well compared to the one at Colin’s house. I heard about this one through my friend Craig. Craig and I used to hang out in the record store before the incident. Craig’s not allowed back on the premises still, which is bullshit, but in a way he deserves it because he still thinks, get this, in 2011, the year 2011, that The Stooges were the first proto-punk band: therefore totally ignoring all those kickass Pacific Northwest bands like The Sonics and The Wailers and The Monks—well, OK, the Monks were in Germany but they were American. Craig is an idiot. He is still my friend, though, despite his ignorance. Occasionally people will tell me that I’m not the most pleasant person to be around. I disagree and find that opinion rather stupid.

Anyway, I went to Jenny’s party with Craig. As soon as we got there, Craig started playing one of his jokes on me and kept telling people he didn’t know who I was and kept trying to avoid me and wincing when I tried talking to him when other people were around. Craig is a real jokester. I was about to leave the party because “Won’t Get Fooled Again” started playing and even though I scoffed multiple times, and increasingly louder, this guy refused to change the song. I explained to him that “Who’s Next” is really overplayed and that he should put on “The Who Sell Out” or “A Quick One” or even some Small Faces. He didn’t respond but I knew he could hear me, so I just kind of stared at him for a while with real intensity. I then kind of did this thing where I walked backwards still staring at him out of the room. Unfortunately I didn’t really know my way around the house and I fell down a staircase and broke one of my arms, a couple ribs and my shoulder. I found out later about the punctured lung when I kept vomiting blood. Turns out a rib poked right through it. I don’t really have any regrets because now, whenever that guy hears “Won’t Get Fooled Again,” he will think of me getting injured because he was an ass. It was then that I decided I was never going to go to another party.

The next party I went to was at this club where Craig was the DJ. I got kicked out after I threw a drink at Craig, and it landed on the turntable of one of his Liquid Liquid 7’s. The next party was at Mark’s apartment. Mark was one of my new neighbors. I helped him carry in a box of books and there was a bunch of Ionesco plays on the top. I had a feeling that Mark and I were going to be friends. Mark was a really cool guy. His party
was even pretty fun—to my surprise, there were people who knew how to have a good time there. We watched projected Brakhage films on the wall and a girl named Catherine stopped talking to me after I mispronounced Jean Genet. Apparently it doesn't sound just like that David Bowie song. She was my kind of person.

Somehow the idea of playing William Tell came up. Everyone else was pretty drunk at the party, but I was completely sober. I had abstained because I got in a fight with Mark over his mugs. Even so, I knew what had happened to Burroughs' wife when he tried it. The difference was that I wasn't on whatever the hell Burroughs was on during that party. OK, I took some children's Tylenol beforehand but that was because I got a paper cut and couldn't find the real stuff so I had an actual reason. Well, long story short, it turns out it doesn't matter if you're drunk or not.

What happened next sounds really bad out of context, so let me explain. A lot of people were yelling really loud when Ann put the glass on her head. I don't have any objections to yelling and having fun, but there is a time and place for that type of thing. Anyway, she was standing there and she told me to throw the something or other. I couldn't really hear, so I guessed. In retrospect, I guessed wrong because I picked up a knife and Ann ended up getting really hurt. I was hoping she would find the whole situation funny in hindsight, but I don't think she did because later she died. Mark said I wasn't welcome at his apartment anymore. In the end, I was relieved that nothing more unfortunate could happen to me or anyone else. Then I got sent to jail, so I turned out to be wrong about that as well.
[Knock knock] The heavy door opens. Where are we? You’re blonde. They are going to sell you. [Slam] The car door shuts. There is no escape now. You’re blonde. They are going to sell you.

Salamanca, Spain- November 29, 2010

“Jajaja. Eres rubia. Van a venderte.” Hahaha. You’re blonde. They are going to sell you. She laughed, like she was joking. The entire table laughed. I laughed too, but the sound was distant, merely a buzz in the background as my imagination had raced off at breakneck speed. They calmly returned to the lentils on their plates, but I no longer had an appetite. I was completing my semester abroad in Salamanca, Spain, and was excited for one final trip with my friends, Brenda and Jill, a grand adventure exploring the exotic streets of Morocco. We had planned meticulously and being sold was not on the itinerary. After living with this family for three months, I should have been able to tell if my host mother was actually joking or not. I compiled a mental list of every reason why this statement should not alarm me. If she was actually concerned, she would have said so. The Spanish were always making politically incorrect statements. Everything would be just fine. There was no need to worry. I was going to Morocco: the chance of a lifetime. A few days later, I opened the front door to embark on my journey, bubbling with anticipation, backpack stuffed with the traveling essentials. “Raquel,” she said, “Ten cuidado.” Be careful. There was no laughter this time, no smile on her face. You’re blonde. They are going to sell you.

Marrakesh, Morocco- December 2, 2010

Stepping out of the airport doors, we were greeted by the warm Moroccan breeze. Still in disbelief that I was in this foreign country, I was startled by the shouts of the aggressive taxi drivers herding visitors into their caravan of tan cabs. Brenda negotiated with a driver to bring us to our hostel, and soon we were cruising through the dimly lit streets, passing one palm tree after another. Before long, the car stopped at a café and the driver insisted that he could go no further. Apparently, our hostel was located in the Medina, the part of Marrakesh surrounded by the old city walls. Cars were not permitted in this area, so we slung our bags over our shoulders and began to walk.
“Where are you going? I will take you there! Follow me! Come! Come!” The taxi had barely pulled away before a man spotted the blonde and red heads of three American tourists and pounced. He was such a friendly man and would take us anywhere we wanted to go. Fortunately, Brenda had also studied in Morocco and knew the man would demand a fee for his kindness once we reached our destination. As we began to weave through the crowded roads, my senses were overloaded. Clusters of men in linen shirts chatted in white, plastic lawn chairs outside the shops as women, colored scarves covering their dark hair, led cheerful little children through the crowds. Strains of sultry music drifted from every crevice, interrupted by the horns of impatient motorcycles trying to speed past us. We walked down the small streets, both trying to find our hostel and lose our acquaintance, who was growing increasingly aggravated that we did not accept his offer; my heart raced excitedly. I was overwhelmed trying to soak up every new sight and sound. Following the cryptic directions given to us by the cabdriver, we found the center of the Medina, where we were greeted by a haze soaked with music and the chatter of the people gathered at white stands. Each stand was stocked with bags of colored spices, pyramids of oranges ready to be squeezed into a sweet juice, and other Moroccan delicacies. Men in traditional cotton outfits and colored turbans enticed passersby to stop and marvel at their dancing monkeys and charmed snakes. Walking through the square, I felt like I had been transported to a storybook. After only half an hour in the country, I was enraptured. We were snapped out of our enchantment by the ‘friendly’ men in the city, each offering to help us, out of sheer kindness (and a hungry wallet), to find our hostel. After ignoring each of them and again trekking past the displays of colorful shoes and tea sets, we realized that our hostel was not so easily found. Each corner we turned onto led us to more crowded streets but no hostel. Eventually, we asked a shopkeeper for directions, but he merely stared back at us, his face twisted in misunderstanding. Instead, he summoned a child of around ten years old to help us. He eagerly urged us to follow him, insisting that he would help us and would do so for no money. Lost and desperate to find our lodging, we followed.

The boy began to weave through the crowd as Jill, Brenda and I trotted behind him, desperately scanning the surroundings for landmarks we would remember later. Every yellow, stone storefront lined with colorful merchandise and fruit was the same. The child swiftly rounded corner after corner, leading us deeper into the labyrinth of the city. At first, the streets were full of people, but steadily the crowds thinned and the doors led not only into stores but also homes. Soon, we were the only people in the small alleyway. My friends and I exchanged nervous glances, all silently wondering if following this child was a good idea. Slowing out of ear-shot
of the boy, we considered turning back. Then we heard it. Frozen, I began to panic.

It was an ornate, mahogany door, straight out of a movie. The door loomed over the dark alley, ominous, yet majestic against the yellow, stone wall. It was at this door that the boy began to knock. There was no number over the door, no sign on the wall. “This is your hostel,” the boy informed us. That was impossible. Hostels have signs, they advertise their presence. Hostels do not hide undercover in dark alleys. You’re blonde. They are going to sell you. I wanted to push her voice out of my head, to pretend that I was safe, but the pounding in my chest and the blood racing through my veins told me that she had been right. That was it. Twenty years of stranger danger lectures, of taking special precautions to be safe, of insisting to my mother that she had no reason to worry about me because I was street-smart, and here I was, about to be sold. What was behind that door? I did not want to know. In my last second of freedom, all I could do was stand there, immobile with fear, wishing desperately that I could run.

I could have escaped. I would have been halfway to the square when that door opened. I missed my chance. The door opened and another ‘friendly’ Moroccan man stepped out to greet us. He looked perfectly harmless and normal in a white T-shirt and jeans, but the greedy smile that spread across his face as he spoke with the boy in rapid Arabic said otherwise. “This is your hostel. Come in, come in!” he said, his cool, slick voice sliding toward us, awakening our panic-stricken muscles. Against our better judgment, the three of us stepped out of the alley and over the threshold. Our eyes immediately fell upon the writing on the purple wall in front of us: the name of our hostel painted next to a display of tourist brochures. The man chuckled at our simultaneous sigh of relief. We were in our hostel after all, once again carefree.

Essaouira, Morocco- December 3 and 4, 2010

Marrakesh was a fascinating city; however we opted to spend the majority of our trip in the warm, coastal city of Essaouira. A bus ride through the sandy desert brought us to our destination. Unlike exotic and enchanting Marrakesh, Essaouira had a calm atmosphere that reflected the neighboring sea. Inside the white city walls of the Medina, men and women still gathered around storefronts and carts piled with sweet tangerines, but there was no rush, no music, and no angry motorcycles. Our hostel in this city was easily located, and we were soon settled in a vibrant purple room. Now relaxed from our previous adventures the night before, Jill, Brenda, and I took a leisurely stroll around the city streets. Although storekeepers still identified us as Americans and called out in broken English for us to stop and admire their merchandise, we were no longer intimidated as
we had been in Marrakesh.

At this point, I was beginning to understand the Moroccan culture. The shopkeepers took the time to talk to all potential customers and truly sold their product by establishing trust through friendship. One man invited us in for tea, in which he poured a mixture of various herbs and rosebuds. Watching the rosebuds blossom in the golden liquid, I realized how much I was enjoying the culture. My fear of being sold began to dissolve. After our tea, the man introduced us to his friend, with whom we bartered for Berber jewelry. I began to see that the Moroccans all seemed to work together. They all had a friend or relative who could help us in our travels. Being passed from one vendor to another was not uncommon and was actually pretty enjoyable.

After shopping and exploring, we sat down to plan out the next day. Jill and I had been determined to ride camels since the trip planning was in its earliest stages, so the two of us decided that we would go while Brenda stayed behind. Of course, the hostel owner had a friend who could take us to ride camels. This seemed culturally normal so we decided to go with this friend. He arrived early that morning and instructed us to follow him. Without question, since he was the friend of our hostel owner, we followed him through the city until we reached a car parked outside the Medina walls. He opened the doors for us, and we slid in. This man did not get into the car, however, but stood outside as an older man, who spoke no English, stepped into the driver's seat. “My car is broken, so my friend here will drive you,” our leader told us, as he slammed the car door. Jill and I glanced at each other. Why didn’t he tell us this before? It’s just the culture. There is nothing to worry about. *You’re blonde. They are going to sell you.*

The car rattled along the outskirts of the city. The number of buildings we passed dwindled, and all that could be seen was red sand and brush. The ocean appeared outside my window, an ideal spot to ride a camel, but we kept going. Five minutes passed. Ten minutes. Every spiky bush looked the same. Clearly, we were going far out of the city, and it did not seem likely that camel riding, which was designed for tourists, would be in the middle of nowhere. Again, my body began to tense and my imagination flew off. What if he wasn’t taking us to ride camels? Both Jill and I were blonde. If they were going to sell us, locking us up outside the city was ideal; no one would look for us out there. After 15 minutes, the car turned up onto a hill, finally stopping at the top. *You’re blonde. They are going to sell you.* To my surprise the driver simply held out his hand to snatch our colorful Moroccan dirhams, and we shakily got out of the car. Standing alone in front of an iron gate, Jill and I watched as the car drove away in a cloud of dust, leaving us miles from the city without a way back.

Stepping through the gate, we realized that we had been left at a
ranch and were standing in the courtyard. Men were constructing something in the center of the courtyard as the sun gleamed off their sweaty backs. Nobody noticed us as we wandered around, looking for some indication that we were, in fact, in the right place. Finally, we found a woman sitting in what appeared to be an office. She led us out to meet our guide at a fenced-in area that contained two tall, ugly creatures. We had found our camels, which our guide later informed us were both named Obama. My fear quickly melted as I sat upon the woven blanket that covered Obama’s wiry hair. Our guide led our camels through the brush and sand to the ruins of the castle that had inspired Jimi Hendrix’s song, “Castle Made of Sand.” Jagged edges of the castle jutted through the sand, still majestic despite their condition. Rocking past the castle, I was greeted by the cool breeze as we approached the ocean. The gentle jerking motion calmed my nerves and allowed my heightened senses to relax. Upon returning to the ranch, Jill and I were brought back to the reality that we still did not have a ride back to Essaouira. We hoped to call for a cab, but the woman in the office instead ushered us into a van parked outside the gate. A man assured us that he would drive us back then shut the door. Instead of stepping into the driver’s seat, he walked away, leaving us trapped inside. The vehicle must have been made in the 1970s. It was a pea-green color with shabby curtains hanging in the window. This van looked strikingly similar to kidnapper vans in Hollywood movies. You’re blonde. They are going to sell you. After a few moments of trying to hide my panic from Jill, I was both alarmed and relieved to see the driver return. We heard the roar of the engine, and off we drove toward the sandy horizon. We sat in silence, praying that the driver’s final destination matched ours. As the Medina walls entered into sight through the dirty windows of the van, Jill and I both let out a sigh of relief. We had made it safely back to the city, laughing at the places our imaginations had taken us, but the trip was not over yet.
The deer's corpse drove by
in the back of a green
pickup truck. Its antlers
were marked with yellow tape,
and its still-moist mouth
slipped open, a tiny
cavern of black, dripping
cold saliva on dusty fur.
I watched its legs splayed
on the metal bed,
flanks once full of
fervor and movement
lying there, silent.
The car sped past, yet
a single thread connected
me to it, an iridescent vein,
linking my pulse
to the empty body.
Speak to me, I begged
through the windshield.
Tell me your secret,
your long-forgotten story.
The beeping of the machines that were keeping her alive seemed to rip into Shelby’s soul. Her eyes fluttered back and forth in the darkness as she tried to gather the energy to open her eyelids. She heard her mother’s voice calling to her.

“Good morning, baby. We’re right here beside you. We love you, Shelby girl.”

She wanted to acknowledge her parents so desperately, but all she could manage to do was open her eyes and nod slightly in their general direction. The lights were off in the room and she could hear the deep, even breathing of her hospital roommate, a young girl with leukemia, coming from the other side of the curtain. A nurse came into the room to give Shelby some water and to adjust the machines.

She had been in the hospital since her diagnosis in January, a few days after her seventeenth birthday. When the tumor was first discovered, deep in her brain, the doctors were cautiously optimistic. The treatments were risky, but Shelby was young and strong-willed. The first two surgeries were unsuccessful, and it was after the second failed attempt that doctors realized that interfering with that part of her brain would turn her into a vegetable. Moreover, the cancer had spread and was attacking her lungs, liver, and kidneys. Her body was slowly shutting down. The past week had seen an especially sharp decline. The nurse added something to her I.V. and Shelby blissfully fell back to sleep.

In her dream world, she was standing in a long line of teenagers. She had on bright white heels that peeked out from under her deep green graduation robe. She stood tall and focused intently on the swinging tassel on the mortarboard of the girl in front of her. The class of 2009 was just beginning their procession to the football field where they would graduate, and Shelby could already see the 376 chairs arranged neatly in long rows. The sun was shining, but there were dark clouds on the horizon, and everyone was praying that the ceremony would be completed before the storm came.

Once the seniors had taken their places, the superintendent and principal both spoke. The clouds were now directly overhead. Rumbling thunder seemed to come from somewhere in the distance. At the end of
his speech, the principal told everyone to move inside from the high metal bleachers before the storm started. Because of this, student speeches would not be given. Several teachers read quickly through the names, and when Shelby Romano was called, she walked proudly down the fifty-yard line, ignoring the slight drizzle which had started. She felt the rough binding of her diploma in her hand and felt the truest sense of accomplishment she had ever experienced. Eighteen years had come to this. She was no longer a child and was officially a high school graduate. By the time the last of the graduates were announced, the winds were swirling in the valley in which the field sat, and it was raining heavily. The ceremony ended, and instead of lingering on the field in celebration like classes of the past, the class of 2009 ran for cover.

Shelby’s legs jerked, as if she were trying to run in her hospital bed. Her mother, who had taken to sleeping in a chair in the corner of the tiny room, awoke to the sound. Shelby was also awakened by the sudden movement, and she let out a low groan of pain. A searing agony tore through her small frame and brought her back to reality. She had once been an athlete, a strong basketball player with a slender build. The cancer had taken almost everything she had, and it wasn’t done robbing her yet. The doctors were doing everything they could to manage her pain, but over the last few days, they had nearly run out of options. She was on the strongest medicines on the market, but she was often shaken awake by fits of agony which took her to peaks of delirium. On top of the pain, she was also really tired. She opened her eyes for a second and gazed at the white swirls of paint on the ceiling. She could feel her eyes rolling back into her head and she lost consciousness again.

“Shit,” she said, stumbling in the darkness of her tiny dorm room. She had walked in the door and straight into something, probably a book, which she had left lying on the ground. Her boyfriend of the last two months entered the room behind her. He was already furiously fumbling with the zipper of his jeans and by the time he collapsed onto her bed, he was only in his boxers.

“Are you sure you want to do this?” he asked.

“Yeah, yeah, I’m ready,” she replied, her words slurring slightly. He was more experienced than her, and he tried to keep her from drinking too much, insisting that her first time had to be special and memorable. Still though, Shelby was afraid that it was going to hurt, so she had kept a steady flow of vodka in her system.

She carefully took off her black dress and threw it on the floor. She lay down in her bed and watched as her boyfriend carefully unwrapped
the condom and disposed of the wrapper in the trash can beside her bed. He positioned himself on top of her, kissed her gently, and his dark brown eyes gazed softly into hers. She bent her legs back as if by instinct she knew exactly what to do and took a deep breath. As she went to exhale, she felt a searing pain. It was worse than she could’ve imagined.

“Jesus Christ, what the fuck was that?” she gasped.

“I told you it was going to hurt, babe,” he said. “I promise I’ll be as gentle as I can.”

Before she knew it, he was inside her again, and the pain was so intense that she just wanted to get away from it. But there was nowhere she could go. She was stuck, and the pain was literally coming from the inside out. Her legs ached from being bent uncomfortably, and the pain seemed to be taking over her body. She just wanted to burst into tears. After the first couple minutes, it dulled a little and she felt herself opening up to him. It didn’t exactly feel good, but it wasn’t quite so painful either. She opened her eyes, which had been squeezed tightly shut, and looked into his eyes. He wrapped his big strong arm under the arch in her back, and she felt completely safe for the first time all wrapped up in a man. Anytime it started to hurt, she focused on his broad shoulders and all their intricacies and curves. His mouth gently pried her lips open, and he gave her a deep kiss. When it was all over, she rolled over and lay in the curve of his body, and he wrapped his arms tightly around her as they both fell asleep.

When Shelby awoke, the first thing she felt was the gnawing emptiness. She felt as if she were drowning in a sea of darkness and beeping machines. The memory of her dream was fresh in her mind and she cried out for her boyfriend hoping against hope that for once it wasn’t a dream. Why was everything only just a dream? It wasn’t fair. In a second, the emptiness was replaced with a pain which seemed to radiate from her very center and out into all of her limbs. All she wanted was to be back in the tiny room wrapped in the arms of the boy she loved. She wanted to be far away, and she wanted to be safe. She opened her eyes and cried out to him again. She felt nauseated looking at the tacky beach scene on the painting on the wall. She vomited all over herself, and she could faintly hear her mother calling for the nurse as she fell back to sleep.

The organ music reverberated through the 200-year-old chapel. Her white dress was pressed and clung tightly to her torso before dropping off into a big poof. Her hands were shaking as she prepared to walk down the aisle. Her father stood next to her.

“You look so beautiful honey,” he said.
“Oh my God, Dad, I’m so nervous. I can’t believe this is it. I can’t believe this is here,” she stuttered.

“Don’t be nervous,” he smiled, “but it’s time to go.”

With a deep breath, she linked arms with him. Even in her heels, she was still four inches shorter than him. Shelby started taking small strides down the aisle, feeling everyone’s eyes on her. She kept her gaze straight ahead, focusing on the man who awaited her at the altar. His name was Mark, and he was tall with blue eyes and wavy brown hair, and she couldn’t wait to spend the rest of her life with him. He was a lawyer, and by far the most intelligent person she had ever met. The ceremony began flawlessly with the priest administering the vows. When it came time to exchange rings, Mark reached back to take Shelby’s ring from the best man. He coughed nervously and began frantically searching his pockets. A nervous laugh went through the pews and all of a sudden, he leapt from the stage and sprinted down the aisle. When he returned a minute later, he ran back down the aisle, and triumphantly held up the ring for all to see. The priest smiled brightly and announced:

“I now pronounce you husband and wife. You may kiss the bride.”

Mark leaned in to kiss her and the crowd erupted.

It sounded like the priest was still speaking. His part was supposed to be over, but Shelby swore she could still hear his voice. It was quieter now. And it sounded like it was coming from directly above her. She could hear words: Unintelligible words, deep male noises, and beeping. She couldn’t be back in the hospital, she had just gotten married. She had been there, it had really happened. It hadn’t been a dream. The priest was still talking.

“And as I walk through the valley of the shadow of death…”

She tried to speak and she tried to open her eyes, but she was paralyzed. A searing pain shot through her limbs and this time an audible groan escaped her lips. She started seizing, and suddenly the taste of blood filled her mouth. She could sense people running into the room, and soon she was falling back into a dark unconsciousness.

When she came to, she was sitting around a dining room table, surrounded by young couples and small children.

“How are you feeling, Mom?” her oldest daughter Elaina asked.

“Much better, sweetie,” Shelby replied. She had been bedridden on and off for the last several months. It wasn’t one specific illness; she had had several severe head colds, one of which ended with an intense bout of pneumonia. She was up and moving again, albeit a little slower, and she was noticeably weaker and more unstable on her feet. She and her husband of fifty-five years, Mark, had been lucky to have a large, healthy family
and to have long, healthy lives themselves. Shelby was seventy-eight, and Mark was a few weeks away from his September birthday—his seventy-ninth.

“I’m glad to hear that,” Elaina said. “I don’t know what this family would do without you.”

The microwave began to beep incessantly, and Shelby jumped up to remove the pie which had been warming in there. She took it out and began to serve her family.

Suddenly, there was a slight clinking noise, and her son-in-law Mike gruffly cleared his throat. His wife, Shelby’s youngest daughter Natalie, stood up, with Mike quietly following her lead.

“Everyone, we, um, have an announcement to make,” she said, a smile slowly taking over her face. She glanced quickly around the table and then to Mike standing beside her. When he nodded slightly, she blurted out:

“We’re pregnant!”

The table exploded with well-wishes and excitement. Elaina’s daughter, three-year-old Lauren, banged her spoon on the table, overturning her plastic cup of milk. Elaina and Shelby each raced to the other side of the table and embraced Natalie, whispering their words of congratulations in her ear.

When the excitement died down, the questions started:

“When are you due?”
“How long have you known?”
“Do you want a boy or a girl? Are you going to find out ahead of time?”
“What about names?”

Everyone was eagerly talking over each other before tiny Lauren piped up to ask, “How did you get a baby inside you?”

The teenagers broke out in laughter and the adults exchanged nervous chuckles.

“When two people love each other very much,” Elaina replied calmly, “God will often give them a child to raise to complete their life together.”

Lauren pondered this new information before nodding understandingly and deciding it was more interesting to eat her pie than ask more questions about babies.

“Now to answer everyone else’s questions, we’ve known for a couple months, but we wanted to make absolutely sure before we told everyone. Plus, we had to make our travel plans. And we’re due May 23rd. We’re planning on finding out the gender, but I don’t think either of us have a preference,” she said quickly, glancing at her husband.

“We just feel so blessed to be having a child after trying and waiting
for so long. We’re so excited to be able to contribute to this happy bunch,” Mike added.

Shelby was ecstatic. Another grandbaby to spoil and another person to sit at the family table. As she looked around the room she couldn’t help but smile at the life she and Mark had built. She took a sip of her coffee as Mark leaned in and kissed her on the cheek.

“You are so beautiful, my dear. I love you,” he whispered, brushing a strand of her silky white hair off her face.

She smiled brightly.

“I love you too. But I’m not feeling too well. I’m going to take a little nap. Don’t worry about the dishes or the table, I’ll get them later.”

She stood up shakily from the table and retired to the master bedroom in the back of the house. Slipping off just her pink slippers, she crawled under the covers on the left side. She was suddenly so tired. She reflected on the events of the day and thought happily of the wonderful people who filled her home. She could hear the microwave beeping again in the kitchen. Mark must be reheating his cup of coffee, she thought. Her breathing became deep and even as she shut her eyes and drifted into the blessed darkness. She felt an overwhelming warmth fill her as her breathing slowed.

The machines in the hospital went from periodic beeping to a long piercing scream, then fell silent.
The last time I saw you,
you were constrained to a chair,
and your body was shriveled
like a worm stuck to the road by our beach house,
withered by the midday’s sun that cooked its skin.
And I was told not to stare at the growths
that formed ragged mountain ranges on your body.
And your veins like branches were visible
through skin as thin as your favorite old t-shirt
that you swore you’d never throw away.
And you looked at me blankly with eyes glazed with mucus,
and I stared blankly back.
And I couldn’t tell whether it was your eyesight or memory
that had failed you this time.
You knew neither my face nor my touch,
and your hands remained cold and still
as a bath that was drawn but never taken.
And the robot in your ear
failed to relay the sound of my voice.
I knew you no longer knew me,
so I sat on the ground by your chair
and played with the dog,
who, if in fact did not remember me,
was happy to pretend.
Swallowed Glass

Chandra Kirkland

Do you even know I’m here? I have been here a long time, but I forgot a long time ago why I stay. When you dream, I dream with you, and when you remember, I watch through your eyes, which have become weak and perpetually teary. You are going blind. Sometimes, on cold days when our life seems meaningless and an unexplainable hatred builds in my chest, I torment you with what little strength I have. I throw your cruelty in your face as you walk on the street, just to see your reaction; and your eyes may fill with barely suppressed tears, or your mouth may make an “o”. You may wonder why you suddenly remember those terribly unkind things you said to your mother-in-law during New Year’s two winters ago, or the blind eye you turned toward that annoyingly cheerful woman who used to greet you with a smile on her fat face everyday at work.

Why should you care? Everyone does such things, after all. But not everyone smashes their wife over the head with a lamp because she won’t stop talking, and the news is on the old battery radio, and the beer is warm because the electricity bills have not been paid. I’ll throw that in your face too. When this memory assaults us, I want to smash something on your head. But I can’t, and your pain would hold me back even if I could.

Without your guilt, I would have faded long ago. The memories feed my existence, in a way. The worst ones seem to come on those bad days, the days when I want to hurt you. Remember how you left your daughter on the side of the road, holding her bruised face, wearing those little white-and-gray-striped tights and the blue dress, her eyes pleading? You came back for her, of course, but that’s not the point. You left.

You are quite old now, you know. I’ve seen you staring at your creased face and touching those wispy tufts of hair that sprout from your ears, nose and chin. It’s everywhere but on the gleaming peak, and the gray is all gone now because everything about you is pale, white. You cover your baldness with an old felt hat every day, even on the hot ones when it soaks up the sweat from your scalp, and you go to work with it pulled low so no one sees your muddy little eyes that are always squinting. You hate working where you do, but it’s the only job you could get. That tiny retirement fund didn’t get you far. I watch you fading every day, and I don’t know how to feel.

The smile you give is so forced, but your coworkers buy it every time. Perhaps they find your fragility endearing. “Hello,” you say with false cheer. “Welcome to Walmart!” Do you notice they don’t really look when
they pass by? Only the weirdos get this job. I tend to watch from somewhere near the shopping carts: the furthest I can get from you. I am always by your side, and maybe I will be until you die. It cannot be too long now. Your walk to work is slower each day, and you rarely move once you get there. Wide unpleasant women drag their screaming children past, totting twenty-four packs of soda and microwavable dinners. Stick-like men in faded plaid button-downs with rolled up sleeves hobble by, and I know you're hoping you aren't just like them. Sometimes, young men and women from the university three miles away smile encouragingly at you. They read about people like you in their sociology textbooks, and they are almost proud of themselves for recognizing another victim of inequality. Their plucked eyebrows are turned up at the corners with pity. I watch it all with you, and I know that each day you retreat further, drawing away from this world in which you are almost as invisible as I am.

Every day, you try to eat lunch alone. But the frail blonde girl who attached herself to you three months ago always finds you.

“Hi, Mr. Kentz! Wanna have lunch with me?”
She always asks and then sits down without waiting for permission. You barely spare Kate a glance, stirring your lukewarm minestrone soup with a cheap plastic spoon.

“Can you believe how busy it was earlier? You'd think people would have better things to do than go to Walmart!” She giggles.

“Wasting their meaningless lives away,” you grunt.

“Well, we do work here, Mr. Kentz.”

“Not by choice. If it weren't for the system, screwing me over, taking my life away...”

“What do you mean by that?”

“Threw me in jail for nothing. I tell you. Assholes.”

“You went to jail?” Her eyes are wide.

My attention drifts from your conversation. You always have these vague ideas about how “the system” has ruined your life, but I'm not sure you even believe in the words coming out of your mouth. We both know you did something terrible, but it remains locked away so deep that neither of us can see it.

“Well, what was your life like before that?” It's hard to say what it is about you that catches her interest. Perhaps pity drives her dogged attempts to befriend you.

“It was perfect.” You say the words bluntly, with no real feeling. “I had a beautiful wife, a daughter...” you trail off at this, staring blankly at the dimly lit gray walls of the lunch room. “We were very happy,” you conclude. And your mind is drifting to a moment that may very well be perfect, if you ignore the rot surrounding it. So simple: a walk back from the grocery
store.

*Her hand is in yours, something beautiful and fragile nestled inside the calloused, familiar warmth. The sun is just edging from behind a cloud and the rays bursting through set the light drizzle of rain aglow. I am running ahead of you both, happy that your hand is not raised, but lowered and protective. I'm carrying the bag of bread, and I can't stop thinking about the French toast you might make for me in the morning if I am very, very good...*

You snap back into focus as Kate’s hand falls on your shoulder and something hard flashes across your eyes. She draws away slightly.

“C’mon, we have to get back to work.”

You crumple the soup-stained napkins and squash them into your cup, bending the spoon inside before you cast it into the trashcan with too much force. Your knees shake as you stand.

You called in sick to work today. You woke with a fever, twitching in that ugly chair you slump in each night. The night was thick with the blurred shards of your life before this. I floated in the dark, torn between pity and disgust. How could you cause so much harm? You knocked your own small daughter from her chair because she made a mess, and she struck her head on the cold floor with a scream that brought your wife running. Now what little joy they brought has been gone for more years than you can remember, and the guilt eats at your gut until you become ill.

I’m disappointed that you roused yourself to make overpoweringly strong coffee with too much sugar and no milk – don’t you know sleep is good for you? I almost wanted you to drown in those memories. I try to throw some more at you, try to make you hear me. But see, you’re still not listening, you think you’re crazy and maybe you are, but I want you to listen! Why won’t you look at me? I want you to see me and tell me why I must follow you, but you sip your coffee like it’s not poison, reading the news as if you can really see those tiny words, and your narrow shoulders are all slumped and weak.

The phone rings, and you move with groans and pops, placing the paper on that scarred plastic table that you took from the dumpster behind Walmart; why must you live like such a dirty old rat? I remember how the kitchen of the old house used to gleam softly in the afternoon sun, and in the spring there were often small, purple flowers in the old China vase above the sink.

Feeble, wide-eyed Kate is on the phone. She is asking if everything is okay, asking if you need anything, if you would like her to come over and help you with anything. Will you be coming to work tomorrow? Do you still have a fever? Maybe you should go to the doctor.

“I just wanted to check in on you; you’ve never missed work be-
You hang up with short replies, assuring her that everything is fine. But you aren't fine. Are your shoulders even smaller than before? Now your eyes are narrower than ever, as if you're squinting through a storm. But that's not saltwater because you “don't do that sentimental shit,” remember? I would know better than anyone. You always yelled at me when I cried. But sometimes, when your wife locked you out in the rain to escape your drunken slurring, you would look just like this, like a very large, hurt child. Sometimes, I climbed out that window in the corner of the kitchen that never closed completely, and you let me sit next to you on the grimy cement that was our front porch. Now I am by your shoulder, just watching. I am always here. Your mind is drifting to that day, when they took you away with metal cutting into your wrists. I am sucked into the memory; I cannot escape the truly powerful ones, the ones that make you feel when we both believed you were past feeling.

The day they took you, I was still aching and confused, convinced I was dreaming. I trailed you like a dog on the verge of terror and panic. The invisible binds holding me to you hurt when I tried to escape, and your pain hurts me too. You cried a lot. You drank bourbon until you passed out on the front steps and the neighbors came out to stare. When she came home, you had managed to crawl into the kitchen. Her face held disgust, but I knew she had forgiven you already because her brown eyes were soft.

“Get up, please.” Her black, pointy-toed flats nudged against your side. You don't move, but your hands tighten around the smooth, cold bottle. You are afraid she will take it. Something like hatred begins to rise in a hot mass in the pit of my stomach. I know you did something, something for which you cannot be forgiven. But you are hiding from it, hiding in the liquor. You are so selfish. I want her to go into the living room, to see what you've done. The details slip away, but I know you've never made such a terrible mess before. It was all your fault.

She goes. Her feet leave slight dimples in the thick green carpet, and then she fades from sight around the corner. She is crunching over the shattered glass, skirting around the things you threw in a fit of drunken despair; a lamp, foam-green seat cushions, your tattered leather loafers, some damp clothes and cleaning solution that you could not bring yourself to use. Now she has reached the stairs. A thump. Scrambling in the splintered wood and glass. Then she is screaming, the worst sound I have ever heard. She comes rushing back in, and her face is a mess of emotions and smeared make-up. You have clamored to your feet, and your worn hands stretch toward her, quivering, begging for some shred of mercy. She has none. The phone is clutched to her
cheek, and in a second she is screaming into it, warding you off with aimless
strikes of her delicate, blood-stained fists.

They come for you in minutes, sirens screeching as the lights reflect off
of the cheap white siding of the neighbors' houses. The neighbors shake their
heads and cluck their tongues, all the while creeping closer. Their eyes drown
in hastily-summoned pity as the wailing from the house moves toward the
front door. I slide into the police car with you, a little spot of scared nothing-
ness hovering by your shaking shoulders. You stop feeling, so I stop watching,
and everything blurs as we return.

At noon, you venture out of the hole you dwell in and walk with wa-
ering steps to the park a mile away. Your bald head is bare today; it is cool
out, and the gentle mist of lingering spring rain dimples the sluggish river
and turns your folded gray skin sleek and bright. You creak onto a soggy
bench, hands clasped, those ugly leather shoes resting on grass and pebbles
and snapped twigs from the oak tree looming over you with broad arms.

If I were not bound to you, I would not be here. This park reminds
me of the one we all went to on that spring day, when the sunlight pushing
through the thick canopy of sweetly flowering trees made your lines fade
away. You were so young then, too. And she was smiling, not cringing away
but holding your arm fondly. Pinky the cat was only a kitten then, and you
let me bring her along, a ball of fluff cradled in tiny arms. Only the falling
night drove us away, and I still remember the deep, calm silence of the drive
home. This park is all gray, and the huge oaks drip sullenly.

You seem to be drifting off, as men your age do. I draw closer, feel-
ing the familiar pull of your consciousness slipping away as mine heightens.
Your white, almost-invisible lashes flutter, and the half-eaten bagel in the
wax-coated paper that you picked up en route seems at risk of tumbling
away. I am sucked into the memory swiftly, a leaf spiraling into the tiny
vortex of a stream. You are back in prison. It took ten years of your life,
but only a sliver remains to make you feel. You dream of it so much. The
stench of men; piss, sweat, shit, and despair. Iron embedded in cement. Tat-
toed arms and bloodied knuckles. You fought like the rest, and maybe you
welcomed the beatings as a twisted kind of justice against your own crimes.

They leave you there in the crowded yard, against the wall where
everyone knows to find you. No one looks your way; they don't care. Many
have tried to beat the bitterness out of you, to no avail. The inmates move in
a shifting mass of muddled shapes and colors; orange cloth, unwashed skin,
distorted and fading tattoos down grizzled arms and cheeks and necks. Their
blank faces are given expression by the rain-blurred light and the shadows
that fill those sharp spaces beneath brows and jutting chins. Only one person
seems to care about your return. His face it tilted up, as if he were a German Shepherd on a leash who has sensed a hapless jogger. He smiles, and his abnormally thick tongue seems to fill up his mouth in the way that teeth are supposed to. Why are you watching him? You don’t look people like him in the eye. Now he’s coming out from the mass of squirming bodies.

He crouches down to eye-level, and his thick thighs strain against the gaudy, threadbare cloth like expanding ice in a plastic bottle. His long fingers are splayed on the wall as he leans forward, and his thick tongue, filled with bars of metal, slows the words to a menacing drawl.

“People don’t do what you did to me. I’m going to break your back with my bare hands and tear out your spine in little fucking pieces."

“Right now?” You are so ignorant.

“Are you trying to be fucking funny?” His hand hooks your ankle, and he spins you onto your back so that you look even more like a turtle. His foot goes into your gut, in a silent and unobtrusive way somehow, so that no one seems to notice he’s driven every breath from the smoke-scarred sacks and into the tight November air. I can feel it. Why is this all so vivid? You have lived it so many times and the pain is still the same. It’s as if you have purposefully kept it fresh.

You never will remember what you did to him, will you? As he was beating you with his foot, as fast as he could before the guards came, you still didn’t remember. The rubber sole struck your skull again and again, struck your ribs and hips, cracking a couple bones and leaving a smattering of boot-shaped bruises. Your skin is so breakable. I watch every blow; I feel no pity or glee, I simply must watch. I don’t like the next part.

You really aren’t that strong, and he has arms as thick as a car tire (you only won because you cheated, which is nothing more than I would expect from you). I don’t know where you got that rock from. It just appeared from beneath your ass; I hate the way you cling to it now with white knuckles and that desperate glint in your eyes – they look like rabbit eyes, wide and popping against white. He only stopped beating you for a second, but you manage to move like someone who isn’t entirely pathetic. You’re up and ramming your bleeding skull into his crotch, and he’s surprised enough to stumble back with a howl. Now the rock is spattering red against your arm and face, and he’s falling back, tongue out as he screams. I don’t think you meant to hit him in the eye, but it just exploded. You didn’t notice the guards coming, but they’ve reached you with their sticks and Tasers and you’re falling too. Will you even remember this with that concussion and those broken ribs that are swamping you with a thick pain? Yes. Now you are resurfacing, dragged into consciousness by some outward disturbance, and I am pulled along like a child on a parent’s hand.

A police officer is grasping your shoulder with his hair-covered fingers, and kind, brown eyes peer from beneath the folded, bushy brow.
“Everything alright, sir? It’s a nasty day for a nap; you’ll catch cold out here.”

You struggle up, pushing his hand away in favor of the damp bench arm. Squinting up at him, you grimace fearsomely with extensive use of those battered teeth of yours.

“Do I look like a fucking grandpa?”

Oh yes, finally someone will really see you. The poor officer is taken aback, and he draws away as if struck by a snake. Yes, of course you look like a fucking grandpa. He still can’t see past that.

“Sir, you don’t look well. Would you like me to walk you home?”

“No.” You turn abruptly, teetering a little, and begin to stomp toward the cracked and moss-covered footpath. “Fucking filth.”

“What was that, sir?” The officer is touching your shoulder again. You spin and nearly fall, but that doesn’t faze you. You are spitting and your eyes are livid as you haul yourself up by his crisp, white shirt, which strains under your grip.

“I said fucking filth! People like you made my life hell!”

You throw yourself against him, dribbling spit. But you move like your age, and he has whipped out a pair of handcuffs and a baton by the time your fists strike with weak thumps on his sizable gut. Catching your wrists in his beefy pink mitts, he snaps the cuffs on and lowers you with surprising care to the ground. He is panting and red in the face even from this. I wonder if you have passed out. The muffled static of a walkie-talkie interrupts the breathing that fills the moisture-thick air of the park. Something like panic fills me, and I can’t tell if it’s yours or mine. We have been here before.

A younger, trim police officer emerges from the dripping park to take your other arm firmly in his fist. They haul you away, toward the cars parked in ruler-straight parallels to the glistening curb.

The town is speeding by through the glass, and I can see the white glints of watchful eyes from the pedestrians moving purposefully down the street with their high-chinned expressions of self-importance. Crusty, groaning buildings are stacked towards the sullenly-weeping sky like molding wedding cakes. The gleaming windows of the sizable bank built three years ago smother the streaked facades of Frank’s Used Parts and Bargain Books. An airplane is cruising by high above, a mere glimpse through the dribbling gray that engulfs the town. The police station, which employs a grand total of twelve of the town’s citizens, is located six miles from the park on Cherry Street. We round the corner with a deliberate click of the yellow left blinker, easing into a freshly-painted space.

You sulked during the entire drive, and they had to pry your clawing grip from the cold white metal of the passenger-side door. I grow tired
of your stubborn self-righteousness. Your anger brought us here, just as it did before. You let it destroy everything dear to you, and it is eating away your freedom. Now the same anger is gnawing at me, and I can’t escape it. Is this familiar? Are you pleased with yourself now? Do you feel justified? Three slabs of cold rock and a wall of rounded metal bars – you got off easy this time. There’s even clean toilet paper lying partially unraveled in the corner. You can watch the large police officer and his fit friend converse grimly over stacks of untouched paperwork as they shoot furtive glances in your direction and take turns snatching up the phone for breathless, thirty-second conversations. It’s doubtful that you’ll be here long, but you are pacing like an old wolf, throwing your bulk against the stone and making your arthritis worse. Each time you do this, your watchers grimace and wince with guilt in their eyes. Yes, you won’t be here long. But perhaps you will really hit the wall a little too hard, and then you’ll never leave this cell. I always wondered why you survived the last one. Death in a cage suits you.

The last light flickers and fades to nothing, a snuffed-out spark of life that leaves you and me alone. Here we are. You sit with your knees pulled to your chest, running your hands over your shiny crown with agitated motions. I watch you as I always do, buckling under your guilt and my own growing anger. This is the second time you landed yourself in a cell, and by default I am confined to the same imprisonment. Why must I follow you? Why am I here? I have put up with you for so long, and now it is clear that you have not changed. You are trapped, and I am trapped, and it is your fault.

The memories are crashing down on you, and the undertow sucks me in. I’m almost tired, but that hot mass of bottled, frustrated rage is exploding from me as scene after scene unfolds. I watch the terror that was my fleeting life. I want to hurt you, as you hurt me, as you hurt my Mommy each time you beat her. I always watched, compelled by a grim terror and fascination. You hurt us so much, and I want you to drown in the memories. Here, take this pain, take this memory of your absence from my life and your simultaneous domination of it. Remember the time you stuffed a cloth in my mouth to stop my crying? Remember Pinky the cat, my cat, which you threw from the window of the moving car because she shat on your bed? Do you remember Mommy, the way she cried in the corner as you screamed in her face and pummeled her with your fists, which were large and strong way back then? I can see that you do, I can see you remember. You are sinking onto the floor, a quivering, pitiful heap, and your eyes hide behind those lumpy, vein-covered and spotted knuckles.

You’re so tired, and somehow so am I. My rage is nearly spent, but you’re dragging me into another of the strong ones, the ones that make you feel again. This is the strongest, the one you pushed away and locked
in a dark corner in the back of your mind, the one you have denied every day and night for decades. You drowned it out in the alcohol-induced blackness, and the slightest mention of it has always sent you into a fit of rage. Prison made you push it away more; you could pile the hazy bouts of semi-consciousness one top of it, using the beatings to numb your mind and push away the last memory left from your dysfunctional but somehow whole life. What you did shattered that life. I was shattered with it. I have been hiding too, but I can't anymore.

This memory is familiar and alien at once. I know this is the same day they took you, but you have somehow kept this part from me until now. Perhaps the alcohol nearly erased it; perhaps you are just discovering it yourself. I'm sitting in the rocking chair I always loved, wearing the tattered pajamas that Mommy had to talk you into buying for me. The plastic soles with little dots on the bottoms don't come close to touching the ugly, army green carpet. What are you doing? Don't come near me. I'm rocking by myself and I like it that way. I don't like you much when you're drunk, and Mom has already left in a storm of tears. She took the car again. You couldn't keep up with her as she dashed into the bedroom and wrenched the keys from the nail on the heavy oak door. You couldn't even stop her on the stairs like you did that other time: the time she broke her hip. Now she is gone, and the neighbors are shaking their heads and debating calling the police, but they are too used to it to really take this consideration seriously.

It hasn't taken long for you to finish that fifth of bourbon; as you told the guys from work, you can “handle liquor like a real fucking man!” I'm watching you stumble toward me, wishing Mom would come back. You're stretching your arms out like you want a hug. There's something in your eyes that I've never seen, something that dispels my usual aversion. You're my daddy and I love you, so I'm going to make you feel better just this once. You reek. Your clothes feel grimy under my sweaty palms. I don't care; you're warm. Your arms are strong as you pick me up, spinning around as I laugh with surprised delight. The bottle lies forgotten on the stained carpet; am I more important?

“C'mon Lacey, we can have fun without your mom!”
You rush around with swaying motions, zig-zagging around some obstacles and stumbling over others.
“Is she gonna give me a bath tonight?” I pant a little, struggling to cling to the folds of your clothing with my peach-sized fists.
“No, honey, you don’t need a bath tonight.”
“Can I get down now, please, Daddy?”
You're laughing, but it's not the sarcastic laugh you use for Mom, or the spiteful grunt that you sometimes emit while watching the news. You
sound more like the Joker this time.

I think I’d like to go back to my rocking chair now. But we’re surging up the stairs, and my hands are damp and slipping. We’re going so fast, this doesn’t even look like our boring, old house anymore. The unpolished wooden banister glides beneath your hair-covered hands, and I can feel the vibrations from your heavy footfalls reverberating up to your arms. Mommy put my hair in white ribbons this morning, and the bouncing is making them come loose. I never knew you were so strong; strong enough to move up the stairs in great bounds as if it were the easiest thing in the world. I almost laugh, but the bouncing is starting to hurt my arms. I wish you weren’t so sweaty, and I wish I were stronger, strong enough to hold on forever. We’re close to the top – we just climbed a mountain, just us two, and now you can tuck me into bed. It’s too bad you slipped on the second-to-last step.

We didn’t fall in slow motion like they always say you do. We fell so fast that I barely felt my neck snap before I was floating, screaming with pain that was already gone. I didn’t recognize the twisted body at first: the little girl in those hand-me-down pajamas bought for a dollar at a yard sale. You rolled off me too late, and the blood from my mouth was on the elbow of your shirt. As I stared down at you, struggling to leave this place that no longer resembled anything I would call home, I knew that you were broken forever. Everything went from your eyes, life sucked up in a giant vacuum. And I couldn’t bring myself to leave you.

They only kept Mr. Kentz for one night, but he was drooping alarmingly by the next morning, his small eyes fixed on the floor. He touched his bald, dully gleaming head more than was necessary, mumbling to himself as he shuffled out onto the chilly street; and as he climbed into the battered red Jetta driven by that wide-eyed girl from work, he thought of his empty house with dread. The fresh memory that had plagued his night with countless sweating nightmares was still raw, aching. Something had pulled it from the depths, tearing it from under the alcohol-induced haze. That night had always been a black spot in his mind, a mere blur of movement and panic. Now it was fresh and piercing, a constant pain that was all the worse because it was so belated. He felt more utterly alone then he ever had before.

He returned home at 11 a.m., and it was only after Kate drove away with a slight wave that he noticed his front door was ajar. Inside, a grizzled man with one eye was sitting at the kitchen table. His grin was like that of a panting dog: mouth wide open, teeth bared, tongue out. Pink flesh punctured by thick metal bars was the last thing Mr. Kentz saw before the mouth snapped shut.
The Hour Glass
Kristyn Turner

Slowly passing through the narrow gateway made of glass, the microscopic grains of sand count the seconds that tick by. Each moment is measured, no matter its magnitude, by the handfuls of dirt dripping from the top of the translucent cage to the shallow, unwavering bottom. The instant your eyes blink, the quicker it is all gone. The sand’s pace appears to hasten as the quantity of pieces diminishes. As the particles add themselves to the growing mound of the lower orb, the hollowness of the sand spent is reflected in the empty one above. The sand falls faster and faster as the pile cultivates higher and higher. The heap swells, steepens as the top drains. Time’s up.
AUTHOR BIOGRAPHIES

Josiah Adlon has spent the last four years here at Gettysburg expanding his artistic talent. He has come to know who he is as an artist and will take the lessons he has learned with him as he pursues a career in the art world, whether that be teaching or illustrating.

Tommy Bender is from Flourtown, PA, and is a senior studying English with Writing and Religion minors. He is the co-editor-in-chief of The Gettysburgian, and plans to attend graduate school for his MFA in fiction. “One of Us” was written for English 301.

Kathryn Bucolo is a sophomore majoring in English with a concentration in writing. She loves old black-and-white movies, stress-baking at midnight, puddle-jumping after rainstorms, and Jesus. With her English major she intends to live in a cardboard box across the street from other friends with similar job-market-less, humanities-based majors, perhaps someday becoming an expatriate, learning to appreciate the stupid, sublime, serendipitous world she inhabits.

Rachel Ciniewicz is a senior Health Sciences and Spanish major from New Jersey. She enjoys playing music with Bullets Marching Band and Sigma Alpha Iota, serving the campus and community with Alpha Phi Omega, and worshiping God with Disciple-makers Christian Fellowship. She has also recently discovered that she enjoys expressing her crazy life through writing.

Vanessa Curran is currently a junior studying abroad in Panama. An Environmental Studies major, she has been writing poetry for fun since she was little.

Lisa Del Padre (class of 2014) is a double major in Studio Art and Theatre Art: “Here’s to recognition and respect for the men and women who have and who still are fighting for what they believe is right–on or off horseback.”

Brian Engelsma is a Political Science and Philosophy double major from Orono, Minnesota. He has also written for The Gettysburgian and The Gettysburg Forum. In addition to writing, Brian enjoys long walks on the beach and male fashion.

Emily Francisco is a sophomore English Major with a Writing Concentration and is minoring in Studio Art and Art History. Hailing from Chelmsford, Massachusetts, Emily currently runs the Playwright’s Circle workshop for the Owl and Nightingale Players and was a founding member of the college’s first Poetry Circle. She also is a regular writer for The Forum (Gettysburg’s Only Independent News Source). Despite her busy schedule as a (hopeful) writer and artist, Emily is a member of both the Owl & Nightingale Players and SMuT (“Student Musical Theatre”). In her spare time she works on her portfolio for Emagine Design, her freelance graphic design business.

Erin Gallagher is a first-year student from Frenchtown, New Jersey. On campus, she is a staff writer for the Features Section of The Gettysburgian and a brother of Alpha Phi Omega.
Jamie Garrett is a junior English and Philosophy double major from New Berlin, PA. The details of his life are rather inconsequential but there is one incontrovertible fact of his being: he is just here to party. The most important lesson that he has learned as a writer is the boundlessness of his own stupidity. He also maintains that anyone who believes in the disbanding of the Oxford comma, the profound importance of never splitting infinitives, and the idea that different citation methods are worth giving any f***s about should be beaten with copies of *Finnegan’s Wake* until said person is uglier than Charles Bukowski.

AnnaMarie Houlis is a Journalism & New Media and Women, Gender & Sexuality Studies double major with a writing minor, who is committed to vigilant work. Photography opened her eyes to a visual form of discourse, which has only further developed her communicative dexterity and hence facilitates her journey to a career in media.

Rebecca Johnson is a sophomore English with a writing concentration and Philosophy double major from Pittsburgh, PA. She currently serves as the Money, Science, and Technology editor of *The Gettysburgian* and Delta Gamma’s Director of Scholarship. She loves volleyball and Sidney Crosby.

Chandra Kirkland is a writing minor at Gettysburg College. She is continuing her long-time infatuation with story-telling, which began during the evenings filled with various tales from her older sister (a Gettysburg graduate). A common theme that focuses her work is the concept of “grayness” - the uncomfortable area between right and wrong, and the struggles imposed on people by this inescapable gray area. She draws inspiration from her own experiences, and although the connections may not always be clear, fragments of her own life have been incorporated into the fiction stories she writes.

Hannah Knowles is a senior Studio Art major and Art History minor.

Amanda C. Kreuter is currently a junior who was born and raised in New York City, New York. The inspiration for her short story was living in this wonderful city. She is a Mathematics major, but while not in class she enjoys participating in Tri Sigma Sorority, Gettysburg College Dance Ensemble, B.O.M.B. Squad, and Colleges Against Cancer.

Jessica Lee is a junior studying Environmental Science and Biology. She took this photo while on a research trip with Professor Randy Wilson and student Sara Cawley in the Fall of 2010. They were studying Collaborative Land Management in the Southern Rocky Mountains. This photo was taken in Tombstone, Arizona, an American Old West town.

Morgan Marianelli is a freshman at Gettysburg College. She plans on declaring an English major with a writing concentration and film minor, so that she can incorporate all of her interests. She has loved to write for many years, and she hopes to write for a career after college. During her senior year of high school, she had the opportunity to write a teen column for her local newspaper and that experience not only gave her a taste of a career in journalism but reaffirmed her love of writing and reminded her why she wants
to be a professional writer someday. In addition to writing, she also loves to read, watch films, and spend time with family and friends.

**Tony McComiskey** is from Staten Island, New York. He is a Political Science major with a triple minor in Writing, Philosophy, and Peace and Justice Studies. On campus, he works as a tour guide and a lifeguard. He is the manager of the Swim Team, the current Parliamentarian of the Student Senate, and the Recruitment Chair for Phi Delta Theta Fraternity. After college, he plans on trading campus life for any city with a decent law school and hopes to one day work for the government.

**Chris Moore** is a History major, class of 2013 from Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. He is currently studying abroad in Spain.

**Thomas Neufeld** was born in Canada but is not there anymore. He writes sometimes and likes to read and watch things too. He likes to play jazz with his friends and enjoys guitar feedback. His favorite album by The Fall is Dragnet.

**Daniel E. Perez** is a senior English major from Camden, New Jersey.

**Michael Plunkett** is currently in his junior year at Gettysburg College. He writes fiction, and his work has been published in The Blue Route Online Literary Magazine and Dirty Laundry Lit.

**Tucker Roulx Pope** is currently a Sophomore studying Political Science and English. Hailing from conservative Simsbury, Connecticut, he hopes his writing style doesn’t offend his mother too much. He serves as the Chief Justice of the Inter-Fraternity Council and as Rush Chair of Alpha Chi Rho Fraternity. He someday hopes to join the military and eventually work in for political campaigns or become president, whichever comes first.

**Maddie Price** is a first-year Environmental Studies major and is honored to be contributing to this year’s issue of *The Mercury*. Photography has been one of her favorite hobbies for about four years now, and she enjoys it as a medium for publicity and social awareness as well as artistic expression. On campus she is also involved with Gettysburg Environmental Concerns Organization, Owl & Nightingale Players, Jazz Appreciation Society, and Biosphere.

**Katie Quirin** is a sophomore with a double major in History and English. She hopes to someday actually be able to do something with her Humanities degrees, but that probably means eight more years of school. She loves books and writing of almost any kind and is very excited to not only be an editor but also a featured writer in *The Mercury* this year.

**Victoria Reynolds** is a first-year student at Gettysburg College.

**Hannah Sawyer** is planning to write the next great American novel... in crayon.

**Gabriella Schiro** is a senior and a Studio Art major at Gettysburg College. She enjoys
working in many forms of visual arts media, but is primarily devoted to oil painting. In her artwork, she explores the nature of sacred space and spirituality, and the style of her paintings may be described as “heightened reality.”

**Francesco Siciliano** has focused on structure and discipline throughout most of his life, declaring a psychology major early in his college career. During his sophomore year, he took a risk and enrolled in Introduction to Drawing. He fell in love and declared a second major in studio art within a year. Working mainly with photography and ceramics, he is always pleasantly surprised at the places he goes and the freedom he feels when he is creating works that speak to his individuality.

**Sara Tower** is senior from Northfield, MA, graduating with a double major in Globalization and Environmental Studies. She also recently saw the light and added a Philosophy minor just in time. When not frolicking in her compost pile or groking sunsets, you will often find her peregrinating between thought-worlds and life-worlds, reveling in incommensurable truths. Her photograph was taken near Dharamsala, India, during her semester abroad in Fall 2010.

**Kristyn Turner** graduated from Gettysburg College in Fall 2011 with a BA in Music and English with a Writing concentration. Originally from Massachusetts, she also interned with *The Gettysburg Review*.

**Karl Utermohlen** is an English major with a Writing concentration from the Dominican Republic. He interned for *The Gettysburg Review* last fall and has been part of *The Mercury* staff for the last three years. He hopes to pursue an MFA in Creative Writing in the future.

**Lauren Welles** was born and raised in New Fairfield, Connecticut, and graduated from Kent School in 2010. Currently a sophomore, she will graduate in 2014 with a major in Interdisciplinary Studies that combines her three academic passions: Writing, Studio Art, and Sociology.

**Liz Williams** is a junior currently studying abroad in Bath, England. An English major with a writing concentration, she enjoys New York bagels, the Red Sox, and Musselman Library.

**Mariah Wirth** is a sophomore at Gettysburg College, majoring in English with a concentration in writing. She is from Atlanta, Georgia and loves travelling, reading, and hanging with friends in her spare time—especially if those three things can be combined.

**Rachel Whittlesey Wynn** is a senior IDS Business, Media, and Communications major who grew up on the sandy shores of Miami and migrated to the green mountains of Vermont in 2003. She immensely enjoys reading, writing stories, yoga, and baking treats. Her beloved book of the moment is *The Night Circus* by Erin Morgenstern. Ahead is a journey to Washington, D.C., where she will eventually publish her six-year-old novel and earn an MFA in Creative Writing.
Claire Charlesworth is a Gettysburg College alum who currently works at The Museum of Modern Art in Membership Marketing. She graduated in 2007 with a degree in Art History and a minor in Anthropology. While at Gettysburg she studied off-campus in Aix-en-Provence, France and Washington, D.C, where she found and pursued her interest in the arts. As a G-burg student, she was also a member of Alpha Delta Pi and Alpha Phi Omega.

Eric Kozlik is pursuing his MFA in poetry at the University of Maryland. A 2011 graduate of Gettysburg College with a major in Psychology and a minor in writing, his interests lie in exploring the gray area between experience and communication. He currently teaches English 101 to students in the College Park Scholars program at the University of Maryland and is slated to teach more composition courses and creative writing workshops over the course of his final two years as an MFA candidate. Kozlik feels that poetry and other forms of creative writing can be linguistic solutions to the issues of time, space, and forgetting, such that language is an adaptive invention of our own cognition. It has the power to fill in gaps or create them as our lives and our memories demand. For him, the construction of a poetic line is not merely an empty act of augury—it is an effort to literally re-member something, to piece together the often-fragmentary aspects of the human experience.

Colleen Hubbard graduated from Gettysburg College in 2001 with a BA in English and minors in Classics and Writing. She was a Henry Hoyns Fellow at the University of Virginia and now lives and writes in San Francisco.

Alison McCabe graduated from Gettysburg College, class of 2008, with an Individualized Major in Creative Writing and a BA in Psychology. In 2010, she received her MFA in fiction from the University of Arizona. She is currently at work on a story collection, On Display, and a novel, Poster Children. In her stories, she chronicles roadside America, rituals forgotten by modern life, and the afterglow of the American dream. In 2009, Alison was the recipient of the Milton O. Riepe Fellowship, an award that funded research for the project and travel to various roadside attractions. Her novel, Poster Children, concerns a missing person, a child imposter, our underlying duplicity, and decency. Her stories have been honored as a top-25 finalist in Glimmer Train’s Short Story Award for New Writers, the New Short Fiction Series Emerging Voices, and twice as a Unified Literary Contest finalist for the Summer Literary Seminar. Born and raised in New Jersey, Alison lives in Tucson where she remains a part of the writing community; in 2010, she formed a Writers Group workshop comprised of local post-MFA students, and she currently teaches English at the University of Arizona.